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**Transactions and Transformations: Internal Migrant Women in Beijing's Silk  
Street Market**

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## **Introduction**

The Silk Street Market in Beijing acts as a space of negotiation between multiple actors. Sprung originally in 1982 as a fruit and vegetable market, the space transformed gradually from a quotidian experience for buyers to a specialized area of negotiation, selling items ranging from its namesake, silk, to knock-off products. The development of the space from a relatively small area into a five-story mega-shopping center, which replaced the original market in 2005, reveals the mutable nature of markets, and the transference of representation when talking about the Silk Street Market as a commercial center. The relationships between consumers and vendors have inevitably changed over the course of time, as the types of consumption and background of both groups have shifted due to the physical transformation of both the building itself and the development of the market's reputation. Migration and new vendors and consumers shifted the dynamic of the market organically, with the new urban vendors interacting with customers primarily of foreign origin. The tension between authenticity and knockoffs is manifested through the creation of the "Silk Street" brand, transforming the market from a space of consumption into a good to be consumed.

While markets have been a facet of Chinese cultural landscapes for more than a millennium, the conflagration of vendors and consumers in the context of urban migration trends in China and a more receptive socio-political scheme on the part of the government have transformed the nature of consumption and of the Silk Street as a brand. Interactions, demonstrated by Watson's (2009) 'sociality' concept, form the basis of the market itself, and the market place as a space for social interaction amongst a variety of groups, ranging from language-learners to migrant-laborer vendors, is central to its popularity and economic success. The vendors in the market consist primarily of internal migrants from other provinces in China, who, through their interactions with a wide range of customers, undergo a form of transformation that leads to their newfound cosmopolitan identities. This paper will explore both the physical transformation of the marketplace as well as the transformative process that occurs as internal female migrant vendors spend time in the market, with all of its concurrent negotiations and tensions.

## **Historical Development of the Silk Street Market in Beijing**

The Silk Street Market or Xiu Shui Jie is located in Beijing's Chaoyang district, which is populated with various expats and contains various embassies. The market, as previously mentioned, had humble beginnings as a produce market, yet physical location facilitated organic growth, and began in 1985 to sell products targeted to the foreign clientele instead of local Beijingers. This development marked the first substantial transformation in the market place, as the shift from everyday essentials to specialized, foreign-oriented goods marked the Silk Street as a place that targeted its neighborhood expats, as well as a limited number of foreign tourists in Beijing.

The second major shift that completely reconstructed the market was the demolition of the old physical space of the Silk Street, which was previously an actual street market, where vendors rented stalls along a limited outdoor street area. The old market was completely destroyed, and in its place, a five-story mega shopping center was constructed, also bearing the name "Silk Street Market". Vendors from the "Old Silk Street" moved into the new complex, but as the space was significantly larger, new vendors were recruited to sell their goods, and thus the market became a compelling site for salespeople and small-scale entrepreneurs from all provinces in China. Before the construction of the market's current locale, the management and suppliers had already shifted in the late 1980s from locals to Guangdong-based businessmen, and this pattern has continued with the evolution of the new market.

The 1990s and 2000s marked the beginning of large-scale migration within China from rural to urban areas, as the demand for work in the rapidly developing cities was high, and rural inhabitants were compelled by various factors to migrate to urban areas as they were perceived as areas of opportunity for financial gain. In the current Silk Street Market, there are approximately 1500 stalls, as opposed to four hundred in the original locale, so the demand for new laborers was high. The physical structure of the market consists of a basement, which sells luggage, handbags (mostly counterfeit, or knock-offs of famous Western brand names), and shoes, the first and second floors, which sell clothing, most of which is also knock-offs of famous brands, the third floor, which sells silk products, tailor-made clothing, and carpets, the fourth floor, selling jewelry and traditional souvenirs, and the fifth floor, which as of 2011 is set to be opened as a traditional Beijing-duck restaurant.

The market itself is now a commodity, as the “Silk Street” brand is one promoted by the Chinese government and tourist guides as a top destination for visitors in Beijing, alongside the Great Wall and Forbidden City. The contrast between Silk Street and the other two historical destinations is representative of China’s drive towards a market-based economy, as it would have seemed unimaginable twenty years prior to promote a shopping center as a unique Beijing experience. The branding of Silk Street as a Beijing tourist destination has had repercussions not just for those tourists who make up its customer base, but also for potential workers in other Chinese provinces, who hear from friends and relatives of its prospects for employment in the capital.

### **Internal Migrant Women in China: Crossing Boundaries and Imageries**

There has been much literature recently on the phenomenon of internal migration in China, and particularly about female migrants, whose migration challenges traditional Chinese values and gender roles, but also reflects Chinese modernity and changing socio-economic roles. While authors such as Ma (2005) argue that there is a sense of embodied empowerment entailed in the process of migration for women workers, even those who work in seemingly constricting and repressive factory settings, others (Pun 2004, Zhang 2000) emphasize the demoralization and exploitation of migrant women, as their lives are seemingly controlled by their long hours and rigidly structured social lives. Fu (2009) writes that there is “no precise count of the number of migrant workers who have come to the cities” (533), as a large number of these migrants are unregistered, and do not gain *hukou*, or resident status, in their new places of employment.

Jacka (2005) observes the distinction between macro- and micro-levels of the internal migrant phenomenon, writing firstly that “...rural to urban migration is a key outcome of strategies of flexible accumulation of both domestic and international capitalists, enabled by a state that has tried to promote rapid economic growth and integration and social mobility on and individual level while at the same time maintaining key institutions of social differentiation and control such as the household registration system” (54). At this level, we can see internal migrant women as part of a large-scale, global and globalizing process that is not necessarily self-determined. At the individual level, Jacka continues: “Movement across the rural/urban

divide in China results in experiences of dislocation and the multiplication of different, often clashing subject positions that are typical of the experience of modernization and globalization (54). We can thus see that migration within China is multi-layered for its practitioners, as the rural-urban shift enables those engaged in new daily practices with a variety of actors to develop skills and position themselves as necessary.

The idea of the city as a place where one could realize one's potential, on the level of the individual, family, and even nation, began to flourish as a result of national reforms that allowed a growing number of rural-urban migrants within Chinese borders. Yan (2006) writes: "the new generation of youth shifted to seeking temporary work in cities and earning money for basic needs to exploring the world beyond the village and experiencing a different life" (117). In terms of the family structure, while China has traditionally been a patriarchal society, with men dominant as providers financially, but in the current era, traditional filial boundaries are constantly blurring, as young females create new social spaces in urban areas, and in turn, in their conceptual framing of family life and what a good or suitable position in society should entail.

Working in diverse areas of employment, ranging from the factory-workers who live on-site to domestic workers to vendors in the marketplace, female migrants in Beijing and other rapidly developing urban spaces are confronted with new spatial identities, as they position themselves within the city. The rural-urban dichotomy is no longer emblematic of their bodily space as female migrants transition into a space of liminality, gaining knowledge and navigating their way through modern urban spaces but never forgetting the familiarity and small-scale village lifestyle. The dual knowledge becomes a resource as women are often acquainted with others from their place of provenance, or even home-town, through social networking in their new environments.

In addition to new spaces, female migrants in Beijing, in the Silk Market as well as in other service-sector jobs are confronted with urban Chinese notions of femininity, in which gender roles are utilized as a part of one's employment identity. Hanser (2005) describes this 'ideal' female worker as "rice bowl of youth imagery", in contrast to Mao-era images of the ideal worker as a strong physical worker, focused on the labor itself, instead of the image promoted while undertaking labor tasks (593). In her study of department-store workers in Harbin, she

found that the “...associations with sexualized femininity and capitalist modernity have become powerful means for conveying class distinctions in China’s service sector” (586). While older women were not overly attentive to their appearance, the young saleswomen, particularly those in private, upscale stores, were to pay attention to every aspect of their physical body, from their demeanor to their hairstyles. Faced with the imagery of the white-skinned, fair, thin and gentle female depicted in the media, female migrants are confronted with ideas of femininity that they may not necessarily identify with, yet feel compelled to replicate, as is it becomes a tool for their marketability in employment. As will be demonstrated by the interviews with women in the Silk Street Market later in this paper, we will see that the notion of femininity and presenting a gentle image is not always a priority in the bustling marketplace in the same fashion as the upscale department store. Urban spaces of capitalism are not uniform in their approach, construction or image, and the ideal (female) worker in one area is not always represented across all spaces or marketplaces in Beijing or other large Chinese cities.

Expectations amongst migrant women are often dependent upon stories of other relatives and friends in the village who have also made the trek to the urban landscape, and many follow siblings, cousins or other older family members, also typically women, to their migration destinations (cf. Fan 2004). Gaetano (2004) highlighted in her study of migrant domestic workers in Beijing the significance of social networks not just in the pre-migration phase, but also lasting throughout the time spent in Beijing. As she writes, “by experiencing migration, work and urban life, these women begin to form new relationships in urban areas while strengthening ties to the village, accruing *guanxi* with employers, migrant peers, and co-villagers alike, and are never thus wholly social outsiders” (73). Although, as Gaetano writes, the ability re-connect and form new modes of connection with others through their provincial identities and social networks, the image of the modern, urban female is another facet of new urban life. Zheng (2004) writes: “Urban women’s connection to the city as the center of economic growth and commerce makes them an ideal symbol of China’s modernization” (87). The symbolic factor of being emblematic of Chinese modernity itself tied with the strong associations and ties with hometown peers and employers makes young female migrant workers truly part of the Chinese nationalistic modernity sensibility: closely attached to the motherland, yet willing and ready to face the new economic challenges of China in the twenty-first century.

## **Cosmopolitanism and Social Spaces: Relations and Tensions**

China's urban female internal migrant population, including those who work as vendors in the Silk Street Market, by their presence and transactions with an ever-changing client base, are enmeshed with growing cosmopolitan sensibilities. Beck's (2002) "everyday cosmopolitanism" is useful in grounding the conceptualization of cosmopolitan from its lofty theoretical and practical origins, namely the population of urban sophisticates and travelling elites to a more realistic connotation in the global twenty-first century. Landau and Freemantle (2009) further elaborate on this notion, with the term "tactical cosmopolitanism" stating that migrants "practically and freely draw on various, often competing, systems of cosmopolitan rights and rhetorics to insinuate themselves, however shallowly, in the networks and spaces needed to achieve specific practical goals" (380). With a burgeoning population mixed with locals, internal and international migrant as well as tourists interacting on a daily basis, the Silk Street Market can aptly be described as a social space in which cosmopolitanism occurs organically on a daily basis through the verbal, physical and financial transactions that take place within its stalls.

Cohen (2004) provides a succinct description of the new global cosmopolitanism occurring in everyday lives, describing the phenomenon and its practices as:

- (a) Transcending the seemingly exhausted nation-state model;
  - (b) Able to mediate actions and ideals oriented both to the universal and the particular, the global and the local;
  - (c) Culturally anti-essentialist; and
  - (d) Capable of representing variously complex repertoires of allegiance, identity, and interest
- (143)

While the above-mentioned components of cosmopolitanism are written about international migrants, they are also applicable in the case of young female migrants in the Silk Street Market. Although the Chinese nation-state looms large in promulgating the market itself as one of China's top capitalistic tourist destinations, the interactions occurring within the market are not controlled by the nation-state, and on the contrary, the market allows migrants to experiment with and confront cultural practices that are not centered on nationalistic sentiments. These women are simultaneously engaged in Chinese modernity and global capitalism, and the

transactions themselves between vendors and customers are inherently cosmopolitan by their nature, according to Cohen's definition.

The marketplace, particularly one in which tactics of bargaining are commonplace, is a social space that utilized all of the aforementioned aspects of cosmopolitanism. It brings each participant onto the same mediated playing field, and places him into direct contact with another, both understanding the others' goals, and at the same time, using a form of language that is spontaneous and rehearsed, ritualized and improvisational simultaneously. Watson (2009) writes of the different forms of "sociality" that take place for different groups in her study of a marketplace in the UK, concluding: "what we see in markets is precisely their unrecognized role as a site of social association and inclusion, enacted through sharing a space not specifically designated for a social purpose, but which nevertheless functions as such" (1589). The Silk Street Market is not by any means designed intentionally to create social ties, but those ties are nevertheless created as an inevitable result of the mixture of salespeople, customers, and other workers and passers-by in the area. The "rubbing along" that Watson (2009: 1590) writes of can be seen firsthand in the bargaining process between customers of varying nationalities and linguistic backgrounds, as a social interaction is created in a casual space that would not typically occur outside the space of the market. Return customers who are familiar with the process of bargaining, and the personalities of different vendors create another level of social interaction, as they increase both their knowledge of the marketplace and techniques to obtain the highest price-quality possible, in addition to increasing small talk with Chinese vendors, thus creating a semi-personal transaction for both parties involved.

The personal connection created between vendors and customers as a result of bargaining and purchasing products at the Silk Street Market is one that relies upon various strategies, but language is essential in allowing for any social connection to take place. As many Western and other non-Chinese shoppers at the market are not familiar with the Mandarin Chinese language, the vendors use specific phrases in English, Russian, Japanese, Spanish and other languages to entice customers into their social space, the stall, and begin the negotiation process of selling, bargaining and buying. When non-Chinese customers participate in the exchange using Mandarin, the process is slightly altered, as vendors are automatically brought into a comfortable social zone, and the transaction becomes a form of language-practice. In both scenarios, the

unevenness of language and the balance between the two parties places them both in the realm of everyday cosmopolitanism, using strategic elements of language and cultural behavior to understand one another.

In Everts' (2010) study of "ethnic" cornershops in Germany, a similar relationship was found. As he writes, "shopkeepers act as mediators of trust in a complex system...while customers play a substantial role in improving the shopkeeper's language skills and understanding of 'German' politics'" (857-858). In the case of the Silk Street market, the vendors are not exactly mediators of trust to the same extent as the "ethnic" grocers in Everts' study, but they do provide information and guide the customer to assist in choosing the product most suited to their needs. In the case of return customers, the vendors are eager to show them the latest products that they know will be desirable to the client and in this sense act as providers of fashionable goods, and style mediators. As for the language exchange, the Silk Market, unlike the German cornershop, is a place for both customers and vendors to practice and improve their language skills. As will be demonstrated in the interviews in the second part of this paper, many of the young migrant workers in the Silk Street Market view their position in the market as a coveted one, as they get the opportunity to speak English on a daily basis with native speakers, thus creating symbolic capital for their current and future places of employment.

Cosmopolitanism is visible and widespread in the Silk Street Market, from the linguistic and cultural exchanges that take place, to the knowledge of brands, "authentic" or knock-off, and other commodities. Customers who come to buy famous brand-name goods are well aware of their "inauthentic" status, yet are eager to buy them in spite of, or perhaps, because of their "authentic inauthenticity", as they know that they are buying a fashionable product from which satisfaction is derived. Both vendors and customers are aware of the knock-off status of the goods available at the market, yet the closer the item appears to the "original", the higher the desirability of the item to the customer. The vendors who are able to convincingly create a feeling of reassurance in the quality of the knock-off are those who are the most successful in their sales techniques. Of course, not all of the products sold at the Silk Street Market are brand knock-offs, as it is also Beijing's largest pearl market, in addition to selling souvenirs and other clothing items. Still, the shared knowledge of product quality, not its "authenticity" in the European or Western sense, adds to the sense of cosmopolitanism in buying such goods. The

vendors are purveyors of fashion, to be consumed by the knowing customer, both of whom are concerned and involved with global fashion trends, and making an exchange in a capitalistic market. Deng Xiaopeng's famous description of the post-Open era economy in China as "Socialism with Chinese characteristics" seems out of place in the social space of the marketplace, with all of its' cosmopolitan sensibilities. As we will see in the next section, the young female migrants are representative of the post-post Deng era, where global-oriented capitalism and intermingling with foreigners' cultural practices and repertoires have become de rigueur.

### **The Silk Street Market's Female Internal Migrants: A Case Study**

Fieldwork for this study took place during the month of April 2011, during which time myself and my Chinese research partner travelled to the Silk Street Market approximately thrice weekly. A total of ten vendors were selected as informants, and we met with them on several occasions, many times acting firstly as customers, and later on, as they learned of our role as researchers, as interviewees and acquaintances. When the first interactions took place between myself, as an obviously non-Chinese, and the vendors, I was greeted with common English phrases, such as "Hello Miss, would you like to buy some silk? Do you need a silk kimono", and so forth. When, after being physically grabbed by the arm to look at a leather bag, and informing the vendor that I was not interested and only wanted to look, I was told, pleadingly, "Please, we have no customers today, no sales, you will break my heart". This phrase was repeated to me on several occasions, and as I later learned from one informant, it was popular amongst salespeople, as they shared English phrases that caught the customers' attention. My research partner, who is Chinese, was often greeted in Korean, or sometimes not spoken to as we walked together, particularly in the pre-made clothing areas and bag sections of the market, which are the most busy and have the highest costs per stall to account for, thus the most busy and aggressive in sales tactics. Physical appearance was not the only indicator of nationality; however, as most vendors guessed that I was either Swedish or Danish, in the words of one vendor, "definitely I didn't think that you were an American, because usually Americans are much louder in their talking!" The physical aspects of appearance and demeanor were important in how vendors

chose to interact with their customers, and revealed the close study of their customers that took place in the market.

We used both participant-observation in the market, namely as customers, and then, as mentioned above, acquaintances, so that the informants felt comfortable discussing their personal lives with us. Semi-structured interviews were used to gain information about the women’s lives, including topics ranging from their job satisfaction to difficulties in communication with foreigners. A breakdown of the informants’ basic biographical information is provided in the table below (all names are pseudonyms):

<b>Name</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Hometown or Province</b>	<b>Product sold</b>	<b>Years worked in Silk Street</b>	<b>Marriage/Children</b>
Cindy	20	Shanghai	Tailor-made clothing	2	Single
Heidi	20	Anhui	Small silk products	1	Single
Maggie	21	Chaohu city/Anhui	Silk scarves and ties	2.5	Single
Liang	22	Zhejiang	Shoes	1.5	Single
Gina	23	Hebei	Leather bags	6	Married
Yang Yang	23	Henan	Bags/Wallets	2	Single
Sally	23	Henan	Pearls/gemstones	5.5	Married, 1 child (9 months old)
Xiao Li	25	Anhui	Carpets/Rugs	5 (2 in carpet store, 3 in clothing)	Engaged
Jenny	28	Heilongjiang	Jewelry	5 (10 in Beijing)	Married, 1 child (3 yrs old)
Vivian	30	Heilongjiang	Pearls/Handmade Jewelry	5	Married, 1 child (1 yr. old)

Seven out of the ten informants used English names when speaking to us, and introduced themselves as such, and thus are given English pseudonyms, while the remaining three only used their Chinese names, and accordingly are given Chinese pseudonyms.

The majority of informants were under age twenty-five, as only two women were older than twenty-five. Three women had children, and four were married, with the rest still single,

and with no serious boyfriends. The women were divided in the number of years working at the market, as approximately half had worked there since the opening of the new market site in 2005, about five and a half years, and the rest averaged about two years in their current position. In terms of geographic provenance, all of the women hailed from the northeastern provinces of China, with three from Anhui, two from Henan, two from Heilongjiang, and the remaining three from Hebei, Shanghai, and Zhejiang. We did not interview any vendors in the pre-made clothing areas, as these were heavy in customer traffic, and it was nearly impossible to arrange free time in their hectic schedules to talk for more than a few minutes. Those women who worked with silk products, jewelry, and custom-made clothing had more time than those in the bag department, as their stalls were typically less crowded, and thus had down time to fold and do other small tasks while talking with us.

The Silk Street Market has gained a reputation in provinces all across China, as we were told by the vendors, as a good place to work, and a place where opportunity exists. Most of the women followed other relatives or friends to Beijing, and some lived at first in the residence of their boss with the other salesgirls, later moving to an apartment with family members or friends, as was the case with other internal migrant women in previously cited literature. Maggie, 21, a silk scarf vendor remarked:

“In July I will have been here three years. Before I came here I just finished my junior secondary school in my hometown. At that time my sister already worked in Beijing, so I followed her to work in Beijing. I have some relatives in Silk Street also. They told me the job here is good and also interesting. So I came here and began my career in Silk Street. After some time I felt that everything was going well, and I planned to stay here longer. From the beginning, I lived in my boss’s house with other girls who work in the same scarf shop. Our boss also has her own family here. We are like friends with each other....”

Maggie’s scenario is common for young female internal migrants in Beijing—she followed a relative, and heard via her hometown social network about the Silk Street, and on this advice, took the initiative to find a job in the marketplace, as it was a reputable job.

Daily life working in the market is arduous, yet considered satisfying work by all of the interviewees, all of whom are required to work from opening hours until closing time, from 9:30 am until 9 pm. Sally, 23, a pearl vendor, spoke about the long hours, telling us:

“I have one day off each month, it’s ok, you know, that’s Chinese life. If I’m working with a customer, and we are still selling something, I have to continue until the job is finished. I come every day two hours by bus—one hour in the morning, and one hour in the night to go home...”

Gina, 23, a leather bag vendor, also spoke on the subject, saying:

“Life in Beijing is tired. I work, work, work, work, work. Free time is only one day each month, because most of our customers are old customers, and they like to buy bags from the same seller. I’m not sure when they will come back so I have to be here.”

There was a consensus among the women that although the hours were long, the job was still better than similar jobs in Beijing, or in their hometowns, as they felt more satisfied with themselves, their perceived opportunities, and daily use of foreign languages.

The workers’ frequent use of multiple languages, the most prominent being English, with Russian in second place, was often cited as a job perk of working in the Silk Market as compared with other markets or jobs, as Silk Street is heavily promoted as a tourist destination by Chinese official propaganda. Cindy, 20, a worker in the tailor-made clothing shop spoke of some of her experience with language:

“At the beginning the boss wanted us to speak English with the foreigners. I still couldn’t speak English after one month. Because I didn’t understand what the foreigners were saying, I was afraid to speak. About two months later, I began to understand what they were saying, and everything became better. We need to speak more professional words for the business rather than what we studied in secondary school. The foreigners are our best teacher for speaking.”

Maggie also said that the language used in the market was different from than what she had learned in school, remarking:

“If I have any problem about language and skills, I just ask my boss or other experienced vendors. But especially talking with foreigners, we learn English very efficiently. They are very friendly and tell you how to pronounce some exact words.”

The use of foreign languages was not viewed entirely in a positive manner by all of the vendors, as we can see from YangYang, 23, who works as a leather bag and wallet vendor:

“In the past I did not like to speak English. Because I can’t understand why a Chinese needs to learn to speak English. After I started working here, I see that English is necessary and important for business. So I began to adapt to speaking some English...I can also speak a little of simple Russian, Japanese, Korean and Spanish. But the best language that I can speak is Chinese....”

Yang Yang commented several times on her preference for customers that can speak Chinese, as she felt more comfortable using her own language, and compared with some of the other vendors,

was not as interested in learning English. For her it was instead a necessary tool for doing her job, and she appeared reluctant to speak it, using Chinese whenever possible. The multiple uses of languages was used as a sales technique for all vendors involved, while some also recognized the value of cultural difference through language as a tool for their personal and professional enhancement.

Global cultural exchange is visible throughout the Silk Street Market, and during the period leading to the 2008 Olympics, the Silk Market became part of the media spotlight in China, with famous athletes throughout the world pictured buying products and bargaining in the market. Several vendors remarked upon their famous clientele, and were proud of their business dealings with internationally-known celebrities. In one tailor shop, numerous photos of Charles Barkley, the NBA star were proudly displayed on the walls, as he was a repeat customer who regularly frequented the market for custom-made suits. Cindy, one of the tailor shop employees, was eager to show me a prized possession given to her by an NBA team manager: a 1200 Yuan ticket for a basketball game in which famous players were competing. She also showed me a variety of business cards from well-known customers from both China and the US, and asked if I was familiar with the names on the card, as they were considered to be famous in China. Cindy told me:

“One of my regular customers is a famous cello player from America. He made some suits here and felt very satisfied. He likes to learn about Chinese culture very much. When we sent his clothes to his hotel in the past, he made Chinese tea for us every time. This year he will come here again. We sent him an e-mail with Christmas greetings last year...Here we have also met a lot of famous people from different countries...We went to watch the basketball game and saw lots of super stars such as Ming Yao, a Chinese NBA superstar. The experience to communicate with foreigners gave me a lot that other workers can't have, such as the special tickets from the NBA star. I have learned about their culture, and still continue to know more in-depth during our conversation”.

While Cindy's experience with wealthy and well-known celebrities made her feel as if she was in a prestigious occupation, and proud of her job, not all vendors shared the same one-to-one relationships with this type of customer, as the everyday transactions that take place are with tourists, expats, and other shoppers, who are not well-known. Still, the exchanges that take place give vendors a sense of cultural awareness that is unique to their position—most internal migrant workers are not surrounded by a myriad of cultural practices and languages on a daily basis, as these women are, which gives them a cosmopolitan perspective that is ever-present.

The cultural awareness resulting from daily transactions with an international customer base can at times lead to friction and negative confrontations, as customers from different nations react to the noisy, bargain-based exchanges that often take place. The women working in all shops, independent of the product sold, all had opinions on which nationalities were considered to be the easiest, in terms of a smooth sales transaction, and which were considered to be difficult. The general consensus was that Americans were the easiest customers, due their perceived easy-going manner, and friendliness. Xiao Li, who worked in the carpet shop, catering mostly to upscale customers, remarked:

“I meet lots of different types of foreigners here, and I like to observe them a lot. It is so interesting, when some Americans want to find their friends in the Silk Street; they always stand there and look forward, but don’t look around. Russians are different from Americans....Now it is not so easy to do business. The foreigners can bargain harder and harder. But it is easier to do business with foreigners compared with Chinese. Some Russians have a really harsh way of talking with us though. They get angry very easily. But now more and more Chinese also want to spend money on carpets here...”

Just as this conversation was taking place, we could hear across the aisle in another stall a disagreement between a Russian customer and Chinese vendor, in which the Russian was yelling at the vendor for not giving her a good enough price, loudly enough so that the entire aisle could hear the conversation. Indeed, many of the vendors we spoke to made similar complaints regarding Russian customers.

Many workers also sensed the type of customer they would have to deal with as soon as they began the transaction, and dealt with different nationalities accordingly, revealing again the capacity to transform oneself for the purpose of the sale. Sally, who worked in the pearl market and spoke English at a remarkably high level, explained:

“Before the foreigners are richer than now—they spent more money on the same thing. Now the customers are smarter, and have less money in their pockets. We also have a lot of Chinese people, they buy more than ten thousand (Yuan), the foreigners buy things for a few hundred, or a thousand, maximum...I have many regular customers, because I’m good to them—downstairs they push you to buy things. I don’t like that—also I give them a good price. If you’re bad to one customer, maybe they will tell ten. If I’m good to you, you’ll tell 3 or 4, and more people will come...From people’s English I can tell if they’re from Europe, Australia, America, Canada, I can see it also in their face. (Pointing to a group of passersby): Them—they’re from Arabic countries. Asians—buying very simple, elegant things and Americans like big and chunky things. African people, honestly, are very difficult to do business with—not only they’re poor, but other things—even after they bargain, they still don’t buy. Indians, Russian, they’re ok...”

Although Sally remarked that she did not like to push people into buying things, it was evident that she knew how to adjust her mannerisms and speech in order to be more persuasive as a salesperson to different groups of customers. As she dealt with American customers, she had a smiling face, and would try to make the customer feel at ease, asking where he was from, and chatting about their time in Beijing, whereas with Asian customers, especially those from Japan or Korea, she was curter and to the point, talking only about the product, and negotiating the price. The adaptive nature of selling, and transforming oneself in order to suit the customer's needs is necessary in all sales jobs, but the Silk Street saleswomen were truly able to transform their sales practices, demeanor and even language as was necessary. Their understanding of the global through the practicality of the process of sales transactions was acute, and demonstrative of everyday cosmopolitanism in the marketplace.

### **Conclusion: Everyday Cosmopolitanism in the Silk Street Market**

The social interactions that take place in the Silk Street Market represent the constant transformation and negotiations that are part of dealing with cultural and linguistic differences in the neutral area of exchange. In reality, this exchange is not at all neutral, but forms the basis for the display of difference, as well as a medium for decreasing these differences. English is by far the most-commonly used language at the Silk Street market, similar to the use of global English in other marketplaces and centers of commerce throughout China and other non-English speaking countries. The form of English used is somewhat dictated at first by common phrases, as migrant women who begin their employment at Silk Street are given set phrases and expressions to use with all customers. After these women have spent more time at the market, their usage and understanding of English transforms, as they learn the language on a more practical level from colleagues as well as customers. Russian, Spanish, and other languages are also learned as necessary tools for communication, and the sales women's capacity to switch from one language to another at times occurs within a single transaction. After coming to Beijing from mostly small towns, and rural areas of North East China, with only a high-school level education, these women learn how to become both urban and cosmopolitan as they deal with their customers, colleagues and bosses at the Silk Street Market. The social networking aspect of the hometown is also one that keeps the women connected to hometown life, yet at the

same time allows them to build new relationships in the marketplace, as many of their friends in the market are from their home province, or even their hometown.

Uprooting themselves from the security of the small-town and moving to the capital of China, migrant women in the Silk Street market are transformed into part of the global capitalist enterprise, and at the same time, integrated into the project of Chinese modernity. While the Silk Street Market is emblematic of Chinese modernity on an economic level, growing and transforming, and catering to the needs of both the state and the local, the women themselves are emblematic of the rural-urban transformation that takes place for millions of migrants across the nation. In their position in the market, they become increasingly aware of and open to various cultural and linguistic practices, and are able to utilize this knowledge as part of a new skill set. Each vendor who works in the market is does not become an “urban” Chinese person, but instead, becomes part of an organically developed cosmopolitan group. The transactions and interactions are at the center of the market, and thus it is the knowledge of customers and salesmanship that are developed with uniquely-oriented sensibilities. The migrant women in this study truly embody the praxis and identity of the new cosmopolitan, and point to the flexibility of all migrants, not just those with wealth or “elite” status, to become culturally sensitive and gain knowledge of the inner-workings of their given field of expertise, as the quotidian becomes the global/cosmopolitan, and vice versa. As China further develops and transforms from a state-centered to a capitalist economy, it is clear that those at the grassroots level are also developing and transforming themselves, as they deal with the realities of consumer practices in the “new” China.

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