

EXPLOITING WOMEN'S AESTHETIC LABOUR TO FLY HIGH IN THE CHINESE AIRLINE INDUSTRY

Abstract

Purpose – Drawing upon the existing theoretical and empirical sourced knowledge of aesthetic labour and gender, this research aims to explore the exploitation of women's aesthetic labour in the Chinese airline industry and the underlying causes from contextual point of view.

Design/methodology/approach – This qualitative study has emerged from a broader research project which aimed to explore women's experiences of work-family conflict and their career aspirations in the Chinese airline industry in which aesthetic labour was prevalent as a significant issue during semi-structured interviews with female employees and HR/line management. Thus, the study draws upon interview data focusing on recruitment and selection of flight attendants in three Chinese airlines. This is complemented by secondary sources of data from Chinese television programmes and job advertisements.

Findings - This study reveals that aesthetics is both gendered and context-bound. It exposes that aesthetic labour in Chinese airlines is demanded for women but not men. It highlights that gendered aesthetic labour is continuously shaped by four influential contextual issues – namely, legislation, labour market practices, national culture and airline management practices.

Originality/Value – By uncovering the dynamic interconnectedness of gender and aesthetics and illustrating the exploitation of women's aesthetic labour for commercial gains in Chinese airlines, this paper contributes to the understanding of the gendered aesthetics in the airline industry. It also offers new insights into the theory of aesthetic labour by locating it in a context that differs significantly from other socio-cultural contexts.

Key words – Aesthetic labour, Chinese airlines, China, Flight attendants, Gender, Woman

Paper type – Research paper

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Introduction

While embracing commercialisation and internationalisation, the Chinese airline industry is subject to fierce competition resulting from an unstable global economy, high fuel prices, new competitors globally and passengers increasingly demanding to be treated as individuals (Ren and Foster, 2011; Taylor and Tyler, 2000). In an effort to gain competitive advantage, Chinese airlines have adopted some of the most retrogressive gendered employment practices with which many Western counterparts have been associated historically (Foster and Ren, 2015). For decades Western airlines hired only young, attractive, unmarried white women who were fabulous and charming, and provided comfort to passengers (Barry, 2007). Aesthetic labour was part of workplace regulation (Sangster and Smith, 2016). Stewarding involved both sensory engagement and social interaction, and such visual and aural displays were crucial in the performance of aesthetic labour (Warhurst and Nickson, 2007). Nevertheless, over time, societal norms in the West have challenged gender stereotypes in airlines, and carriers such as British Airways have responded by placing a greater emphasis on maturity and experience in the service encounter (Foster and Ren, 2015). Western airlines have altered the criteria for selecting and recruiting flight attendants who should be acknowledged safety experts instead of beautiful stewards (Williams, 2003). By contrast, in the newly commercialised Chinese airline industry, instead of the gendered service encounter declining in value, the reverse seems to be true (Ren and Foster, 2011). This illustrates the importance of context (Tsui, 2004) which this paper will explore in-depth in the discussion section.

As glamorous icons of femininity, Chinese flight attendants have contributed significantly to the booming airline industry through their aesthetics. However, the question as to why women's aesthetic labour has been appropriated and transmuted for commercial benefit in this fastest growing aviation industry in the world has yet to be answered. It appears that most studies of aesthetic labour have been confined to the service sectors (e.g. retail, hospitality, call centres, airline services) in the West or developed nations. By contrast, little research has been undertaken in the Chinese context with the exception of Otis's (2008) empirical study providing an extensive analysis of gendered service labour in two luxury hotels in China. Her study will be reviewed in the following section.

This study aims to make two contributions to the field. Firstly, to fill an important gap by examining women's aesthetic labour and its commodification in the Chinese airline industry and by discussing its underlying causes. Secondly, to offer new insights into the theory of aesthetic labour by exploring the role of four significant contextual issues - including legislation, labour market practices, national culture and airline management practices - in the continuously dynamic interconnected arena between gender and aesthetics.

This paper is structured as follows. Firstly, it provides a critical literature review of aesthetic labour and its application in airlines. Secondly, the research methods are summarised as well as the background of the Chinese airline industry and the three airlines studied. Thirdly, by focusing on areas of recruitment and selection practices, the findings section uncovers the dynamic interconnectedness of gender and aesthetics and illustrates the exploitation of women's aesthetic labour for commercial gains in three Chinese airlines. This is followed by the discussion section organised around the four significant contextual issues of legislation, labour market practices, national culture and employer practices contributing to the seemingly legitimised exploitation of women's aesthetics. Finally, key themes of the study are drawn out to

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highlight that aesthetics is both gendered and context-bound. Two concluding observations are outlined which have wider implications.

Aesthetic labour and its application in airlines

Hochschild's (1983) study on flight attendants reveals that an integral part to their job is direct involvement with passengers on board through duties such as serving meals and drinks and dealing with passengers' requests, to be endlessly smiling, polite, caring and attractive. She also introduced the concept of emotional labour which is defined as managing own feelings to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display. Her work highlights not only a critical link between emotion and service work, but also the embodied aspect of interactive service work. Since then the field has witnessed abundant research focusing on gender, bodies and work. Some of the key studies focus on service workers' personal characteristics such as 'looking good, sounding right' and how management manages the way their employees feel, look and behave so that the work is both emotional and aesthetic (Grugulis et al., 2004; Macdonald and Sirianni, 1996; Nickson et al., 2001; Warhurst and Nickson, 2001). Other studies have a particular focus on women, including ways that women are required to look aesthetically good and act in a feminine way as part of their work in femininised occupations (Jones, 2006). The notion of aesthetic labour has emerged from these studies.

Aesthetic labour is defined as the 'mobilisation, development and commodification of embodied dispositions' and it highlights the embodied character of service work (Witz et al., 2003, p.37). Williams and Connell (2010, p.353) observe that 'every interactive service job has an aesthetic component, that is a set of normative expectations regarding appropriate appearance and demeanor'. Further, its discriminatory aspects are identified (Nickson and Warhurst, 2007; Spiess and Waring, 2005; Williams and Connell, 2010) and whether such potential discrimination can be prevented by legislation are evaluated (Warhurst et al., 2009; Waring, 2011). In the Chinese labour market, Woodhams et al. (2009, p.2098) found that a large number of recruitment advertisements demanded applicants to be of 'pleasing appearance' or 'physically attractive' and female-only job adverts usually included requirements for height, appearance, and even 'sweet voice'. This suggests discriminatory practices in the recruitment process are not unusual in China.

Otis's (2008)'s work on gendered labour in the Chinese context is illuminating. It sheds light on the relationship between new gender norms and new forms of labour control in two luxury hotels belonging to the same American hotel group each located in two different places geographically. Her research findings are similar to those of this study in many aspects, as is shown in the findings section. For instance, customers' interactions with service workers affect their impressions of organisations significantly. Managers recruit and select service workers on the grounds of their appearance, and then through continual training mold them into servers with 'emphasized femininity' (Connell, 1987) to target preferred customers. Specifically, Otis (2008, p.20) has taken the concept of aesthetic labour to the next level by labelling such practice as 'market-embedded labour' which is defined as 'a sort of labour designed to enact a firm's aesthetic construct of consumer markets in a particular locality'. Her central argument is that labour dynamics are embedded in localised consumer markets which has been overlooked by previous research. Her findings suggest that the interactive labour of women differs largely in these hotels as

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the result of being embedded in the local consumer market. Although consumer markets play a vital role in the labour process in service sectors, whether local consumer markets would be the key reason for firm-specific strategies of labour control in Chinese airline companies in different locations, because they are competing fiercely in national and even global markets, remains an unanswered question.

The utilisation of aesthetic and/or emotional labour for commercial gains is not a new phenomenon in the worldwide airline industry (e.g. Biswas, 2009; Bolton and Boyd, 2003; Hochschild, 1983; Spiess and Waring, 2005; Taylor, 1998; Taylor and Tyler, 2000; Williams, 2003; Witz et al., 2003). For example, between the 1950s and the 1970s the Canadian airline industry regulated women's appearance and bodies directly and unselfconsciously to improve service image (Sangster and Smith, 2016). In the early 1970s, the 'stewardess-as-sex-object' marketing and advertising slogans, such as 'I'm Cheryl, Fly Me', had peaked (Lessor, 1984). It clearly revealed airlines' desire to attract predominantly male customers on board particularly in the first and business classes with gently erotic evocations (Noon and Blyton, 1997). Whilst such provocative practice has ceased among airlines in the West, it remains prevalent in Asian airlines in which cabin crew members are encouraged to utilise their appearance and feminised gender performance to gain customer loyalty (Spiess and Warning, 2005). For instance, Singapore Airlines has its world-known Singapore Girl icon, and Thai Airways and Vietnam Airlines are associated with an image of doting, attractive female flight attendants. Beauty is seen to be productive for companies as it raises sales and revenues because customers are willing to pay more to buy products and services provided by beautiful workers (Hamermesh, 2011). The deployment of cabin crew members' physical characteristics occurs through corporate production and control of the selection and training processes (Spiess and Waring, 2005). Those who do not have 'the looks' are excluded from the job. Physical dispositions of cabin crew have then been mobilised to embody the organisational aesthetic and strengthen the appeal of airline brands (Heng, 1997).

Aesthetic labour can hardly be viewed and analysed on its own in any practical settings. Macdonald and Merrill (2009) argue that the concept of aesthetic labour has been used insufficiently in conceptualising how race, class, gender and age serve as signifiers in the service sector. Employers use characteristics such as gender and age as indicators for certain cultural and aesthetic displays that they believe employees can signify to customers in respect of the type of service they are about to consume (Ibid). Similarly, Witz et al. (2003) suggest that aesthetic labour is not equally distributed socially but is fractured by class, gender, age and positions or locations. Otis (2008) concludes that aesthetic labour is a social construct in relation to class, cultural and ethnic understandings. One implication in Hochschild's (1983) work is that the interplay among gender, age, sexuality and appearance influences how passenger services are perceived. The work of cabin crew is associated with femininity and domesticity as stewarding has traditionally been regarded as an occupation that suits women better than men (Simpson, 2014).

In summary, existing studies of aesthetic labour have been centered around identifying and conceptualising aesthetic labour in interactive service work as well as questioning its acceptability in some organisational practices such as recruitment and selection. In particular, a few studies conducted in airline service sectors illustrate how airline management organise aesthetic labour to promote their brands with a view to generating sales and revenue. Whilst there is a lack of such research on aesthetic labour in the Chinese context, Otis's (2008) work on embodied labour in two Chinese

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hotels provides some interesting insights. There is a consensus amongst researchers that the notions of gender, femininity and aesthetic labour have been formulated interactively, culturally and institutionally.

The Chinese airline industry and research context

China's airline industry operates within the fastest growing aviation and passenger transportation market in the world. As Chairman of the Central Advisory Commission of the Communist Party of China, Deng Xiaoping initiated this growth when – as part of his momentous wider economic reforms in the 1980s – he declared that the airlines would be made independent of military control and commercialised. Consequently, state-owned airlines became profit-driven businesses and by 2002 they had become consolidated into three big airline groups in an industry increasingly characterised by market deregulation, passenger growth and prosperity (CAAC, 2004, 2007; Jin et al., 2004). Increasing global economic integration and the trend towards airline alliances have spurred the Chinese airline industry to actively engage in merging and re-organising nationally aiming to upgrade its services and resources to internationally recognised standards (CAAC, 2007; Huang, 2002). Contrasting domestic flight operations in China with airlines in the West, the product and value concept is still much higher in China with a greater dedication to offering high quality services through young beautiful cabin crew across short haul routes (Miller, 2012). The Chinese airline industry has evolved from state military control to occupy a buoyant position in the commercial sector (Foster and Ren, 2015) and, therefore, usefully highlights the interrelationship between commercialisation and gendered processes in employment.

To protect the identity of participants and the confidentiality of the statements they offered, the level of detail provided has been constrained and the real names of three organisations referred to in this paper have been replaced with Airline A, Airline B and Airline C. Airline A is a large state-owned airline operating 190 international, regional and domestic routes. The company prides itself on its reputation for high quality cabin and ground services. Its international standard on-board service once gained them the top prize of 'Excellent Women Group' awarded by China's Women's Committee. Airline B is a medium-sized joint stock airline in which the local government is one of the key shareholders. It operates both domestic and international flights, and is well known for high punctuality rates and efficient customer services. It has taken the lead in offering customers a 'seamless' service. Airline C is a small regional airline operating domestic routes only and the local government is the major shareholder. It remains state controlled, but shareholders include other airlines and private owned enterprises.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research approach as the issue of aesthetic labour indicates a multi-dimensional nature which 'makes investigation through qualitative methods seem both natural and necessary' (Shields, 2008, p.306). A semi-structured interviewing approach was adopted to allow for focused, open and two-way communication on what, why and how things happened. A total of 55 interviews were conducted during 2008 and 2010 as part of the wider research project upon

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which this study draws. The initial project focused on women's work-family conflict and their career inspirations in the Chinese airline industry. There are two important rationales for the female only sample. Firstly, international research suggests that balancing work and family appears to be more of a woman's concern than a man's (Chandra, 2012; Hassan, 2010; Lewis et al., 2007), and women are more affected by work-family conflict than men (Chou et al., 2005). Secondly, rooted values in Chinese society see family as a woman's domain and the public sphere of paid work as predominantly male although China has one of the highest rates of female labour market participation in the world (Cooke 2005; Woodhams et al., 2009). With women still dominant in lower-level positions and/or feminised service roles (Ren and Foster, 2011; Cooke, 2005), discrimination against women in the Chinese labour market is a greater concern (Woodhams et al., 2009).

Interviewees, including 46 female flight attendants and 9 managers from the three Chinese airlines, were selected using a purposive sampling technique which is often adopted when researchers wish to select samples that are particularly informative (Saunders et al., 2012). The chosen flight attendants were diverse in terms of their length of tenure, marital status, availability of childcare, and family background. Their individual experiences and perspectives enabled the observation of key themes and uniqueness. The chosen managers were either senior HR officers or department managers who were knowledgeable of the norms and features, and challenges in airline service work. The sample was configured to reflect the characteristics of the population from which it was drawn. All interviews took place in the workplace lasting from 30 to 60 minutes each. The interviewees were asked for permission to contact them by email which proved to be a useful additional data resource. The use of semi-structured interviews enabled the exploration of issues as they emerged and enabled establishment of a rapport which facilitated later email conversations (Foster and Ren, 2015). Aesthetic labour was not an initial focus for the project, but it emerged as a significant issue to understand the work of female flight attendants.

Both primary and secondary data sources are used to inform this study. The primary data are taken from some of the above-mentioned semi-structured interviews with female flight attendants and management – including HR and cabin crew department managers – in three Chinese airlines. The interview data were analysed thematically in line with the research aim. The main theme revolved around recruitment and selection practices implemented for choosing a desirable flight attendant in each of the three airlines. Because issues associated with the utilisation of aesthetic labour were not the primary focus of the research, the primary data collected are limited in scope. Nevertheless, more recent information obtained from media (i.e. newspaper, company magazines, television programmes, and advertisements) has been used as secondary sources to supplement the analysis.

Findings

Airline C strongly advocates its “Beautiful Enterprise Culture” within which beauty is a key principle in promoting its unique organisational aesthetic. The utilisation of aesthetic labour to support the organisational aesthetic has been evidenced in the airline through the displaying of its stunning cabin crew in in-flight magazines, advertisements, physical on-board presence, and through recruitment and selection policies. As a senior HR specialist in Airline C, Lee explained that the process for

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selecting candidates for cabin crew was strict and complex, and was arranged and organised by the airline itself to choose the most suitable candidates. He noted:

We pay more attention to women's appearance and figure. Their education background and foreign language skills are not the most important things as long as they hold high school diplomas or qualifications with the cabin attendant speciality and they can speak good mandarin. It will also be a bonus if they are specialised in singing and dancing. So you can see all of our flight attendants are pretty and versatile girls which to some extent represents the company's Beautiful Enterprise Culture.

The physical dispositions of its predominantly female cabin crew were thus consistent with the branded organisational aesthetics (Spiess and Warning, 2005). Interestingly, the airline also wanted to recruit women who were competent singers or dancers which was an unwritten rule governing the selection of female candidates. This prerequisite seemed inexplicable: the actual work that flight attendants do is to ensure passenger safety and serve food and drinks, while entertainment abilities like singing or dancing are irrelevant to their work. An interview with Juan – a beautiful stewardess (named by Lee) in Airline C – clarified the situation:

Airline C has established its own art society, members of which include our flight attendants and other staff members - majority of which are female. The Airline Art Society has delighted audiences by giving singing and dancing performances, and has already become an active literary and art community with considerable influence in this region.

In the Chinese business culture, an organisation's reputation and social standing can determine its success. The Art Society helped to promote the public image of Airline C. Juan had recently won an important prize in a national talent competition and was interviewed by popular media and the top air magazine in China. She was said by the airline management to 'win honour' for the company which led to many passengers subsequently choosing to fly with it. Juan was also proud of this honour. It is apparent that the organisation was seeking to create a fit between employees' appearances and corporate image, and only workers with the right physicality were employed (Warhurst and Nickson, 2007).

The preference for young and good looking cabin crew was more evident in Airline A which conducted a few high-profile recruitment and selection campaigns to identify suitable flight attendant candidates during the past ten years. The selection event was often long and competitive, but thousands of pretty young ladies applied and vied to be air stewardesses. As Ling, who was one of them selected eventually as a flight attendant in Airline A, described:

We girls attended the two-day initial selection process. Those who passed the initial selection then went through several other stringent screening processes and the final selection was aired on TV.

The selection criteria used advised that 'candidates must be aged between 18 and 25, slim and attractive with good skin, a height between 1.65 and 1.75 meters, with a pleasant personality and smile'. As Oaff (2003, p.7) argues, 'if your gender and race have not kept you off the shortlist, your physical appearance still might'. Such criteria

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clearly show the employment of flight attendants with certain embodied capacities and attributes favourably appeal to customers (Nickson et al., 2001). Although men were not excluded, men were recruited in the traditional way which involved systematically screening and assessing job candidates at a venue, and only women were featured in the television selection process. Female attendants were subject to a set of visualised criteria from which men were generally exempt. Consequently, aesthetic labour was experienced considerably more by women than by men.

When being asked the purpose of hosting such a nation-wide pageant-type fair to recruit flight attendants, Zhi, the head of the cabin crew department in Airline A, explained that such a grand recruitment event would be conducive to the airline's business development:

The extensive recruitment events will enable the maximum number of young women - including those from rural areas - to apply for a position. It also broadens our airline's search to recruit the best stewardesses. Believe it or not, the quality of the stewardesses is an important factor for passengers in China as well as in many other Asian regions to assess the quality of an airline service. On the other hand, the publicity and promotional activities will help broaden the airlines' recognition all over the nation.

Her explanation has two important implications. Firstly, it implies that the quality of air services actually relies upon flight attendants' physical appearances – the aesthetics of their bodies. Such aesthetics has been utilised by airlines to 'influence the senses of people as either customers or clients' (Witz et al., 2003, p.42) because aesthetics is perceived to be the power to 'affect the way people feel' (Olins, 1991, p.71). Secondly, aesthetic labour has been commercialised in order to add value to the airlines both financially and symbolically. In the increasingly competitive air passenger market in which there is little to differentiate the provision of customer services offered, the use of aesthetic labour is seen as a means of enabling an airline to stand out in a vivid and exciting way. According to Zhi, nearly all Chinese airlines are both look and youth orientated:

Many of our flight attendants stop flying in their 30s. At [name of Airline], 45 is the mandatory retirement age.

The first television reality show regarding the selection of flight attendants for Airline A attracted huge attention in 2008. Funded partly by the airline, the show followed a six-month audition – including a swimsuit competition and a race involving luggage, makeup brushes and drink trays – through several major Chinese cities. Thousands of young women lined up for the chance to compete for 180 openings. The lengthy selection procedure emphasised the physicality of potential employees and the ways in which these women could 'present themselves through posture, gesture, use of personal space, facial characteristics and eye contact' (Witz et al., 2003, p.42). If they could impress the judges by mainly manipulating aesthetics to express and portray themselves, they would possibly get a job. Jing, one of those girls, had never flown before but insisted that it was her life's calling to work in the sky. During a television interview, she explained,

The job of a flight attendant means decent pay and more opportunities to travel to different places in China and even worldwide free of charge.

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Like many of the contestants, she was an only child and her mother was with her every step of the way. When being asked for her opinion about the contest, her mother replied:

I think this kind of contest is fair. This is a service industry. A lot of other Chinese airlines have flight attendants who are very attractive. People always talk about which airline has the best looking flight attendants.

As Chinese passengers increasingly judge the quality of airlines based on the aesthetic quality of their flight attendants, good appearance is becoming a commodity (Ni, 2007). This sort of selection campaign has been embraced by many Chinese people including parents who believe that being a flight attendant constitutes high job status and attractive pay for their daughters. This pageant-type recruitment event has, nonetheless, attracted criticism through recognition that the whole selection process is an old-fashioned beauty pageant rather than an equal-opportunity job interview. The head of the American Flight Attendant Union called the contest 'offensive' and 'a setback to our profession on a global scale'. Despite being criticised overseas, Chinese airlines continued to adopt a similar approach to selecting potential flight attendant candidates. They turned the interview process into an American idol-type reality television show which was so tough that 98% didn't make it past the first interview (Zeveloff, 2011).

Airline B has never launched such a television show. Instead, it has held recruitment events in more than 100 colleges and universities in China in which the airline targets graduates aged between 18 and 26. Zhang, the head of the cabin crew and ground services department, explained their selection criteria:

In addition to image, mixed abilities including working under pressure and coping with difficult customers are also part of our criteria. Young, nice-looking and capable girls are what we need and, you know, Chinese passengers seem to have more expectations on female than male cabin crew.

Despite some professional competencies demanded, women's image and age remains the first key criterion. Women have been thought to be inherently capable of carrying out this work by 'presenting their female bodies as feminine as aesthetically pleasing, not only by their employers, but also by customers' (Tyler and Taylor, 1998, p.168) and by being patient and caring. Zhang also indicated that there are reasons beyond issues of pay and travel opportunity that this job can bring to women:

This is an ideal job for many young ladies as they might meet their Mr Right, honestly speaking, to meet rich guys or even male celebrities. There are a few successful nation-wide stories... I mean some female flight attendants met their Mr Right through their stewarding services and their husbands were either successful entrepreneurs or famous sportsmen. Such success stories provide attractive prospects for unmarried material girls who hope to lead a high quality life by depending on rich husbands.

Thus, the role of women in airlines has been used to sell airlines' services, whereas employment for women was seen as a temporary goal – even a stepping-stone to

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marriage (Mills, 2002).

Discussion

This study exposes that aesthetic labour is a gendered phenomenon and that women's aesthetics have been exploited for commercial purpose in the Chinese airline industry. But why has such exploitation been accepted in China? It can be examined effectively through an in-depth analysis of four significant contextual issues – legislation, labour market practices, national culture and airline management practices – which co-construct each other, contributing to the seemingly legitimised exploitation of women's aesthetics.

Legislation

Biswas (2009) observes that the use of aesthetic characteristics to select candidates is discriminatory, but it remains untouched in China. Rigorous requirements for height, gender, age or physique have existed to screen job applicants for many years (All-China Women's Federation [ACWF], 2005). Height and weight specifications have been set, as numerous job advertisements illustrate. In this world's fastest-growing aviation market, prohibitive entry barriers are not only tolerated but are flaunted as symbols of excellence (Ni, 2007), whereas aesthetic labour is now less important to Western airlines and aesthetic requirements are deemed to be illegal in American airlines (Barry, 2007; Zereloff, 2011). Despite recognising that discrimination against women in China is very common, the ACWF has limited scope to act on behalf of women because it is run by the government (Women Watch China, 2013a). A new labour contract law launched in 2008 stresses that citizens have equal rights of employment and selection into jobs and that workers shall not be discriminated against in employment because of their nationality, sex, ethnicity or physical conditions. This new legal framework can be used to challenge any discriminatory behaviours practiced by employers, but a significant gap exists between the new legal requirements and employers' practice (Nolan, 2010). The empirical study on which this paper draws indicates that China has particularly weak law enforcement in this area. Low levels of awareness of regulations by both employers and employees mean that employers do not know how to manage legal disputes and employees do not realise that it is possible to raise grievances through legal channels (Cooke, 2005).

This issue leads to the need to analyse the role of the Chinese state as a large employer, legislator and labour market policy-maker. The Chinese government is 'seemingly unable or unwilling to enforce policies, decisions, regulations, and laws' (Lawrence and Martin, 2013, p.16). As China has a one-party autocratic government, the Chinese state and its extended agencies may have more scope than democratic regimes to intervene through industrial policies at various levels to shape business sectors (Cooke, 2008, 2011). Below the national-level, provincial governments are powerful players in the Chinese political system and they have the right to pass their own laws and regulations (Lawrence and Martin, 2013). They can resist state intervention as a famous Chinese saying goes 'there is policy from the top, there is strategy from the bottom (to avoid the impact of the policy)' (Cooke, 2011, p.3844). Furthermore, depending on the characteristics of an actor in the labour market and employment relations, the state's influence on different actors varies. In this study, in areas where Airlines B and C are the main stake of the local economies, local governments' ability and willingness to directly intervene in HRM practices at the

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organisation level may be reduced.

Labour market practices

The Chinese labour market has been shaped by growing competition resulting from a high demand for good jobs. Even when the economy is booming and creating more jobs, insufficient employment opportunities are provided for the dramatic increase of university graduates (Bezlova, 2009). An over-supply of skilled labour has made youngsters' career choices limited. This situation has placed employers in a powerful position when selecting workers, making it possible for them to operate discriminatory practices (Zhong, 2007) while hiring and promoting the most productive workers (Browne and Misra, 2003). A 'productive' flight attendant is seen to be the one who has, at least, the right aesthetics demanded by Chinese airlines in an attempt to stand out in the marketplace.

Labour market inequality which exists in access to employment, training and career advancement, and pay and reward, has grown in the process of China's economic reform (Sheldon et al., 2011). The gendered labour market has created different situations and job opportunities for women and for men. Among limited job opportunities, young women find it more difficult to find a good job than men as gendered stereotyping remains strong in many Chinese organisations (Cooke, 2005). Some growing service industries, often termed youth occupations, prefer female employees, but they are usually closed to the over 30s (Nolan, 2010). Extra requirements are often placed on female job applicants, and age and appearance are an invisible way of raising the bar for women (Woman Watch China, 2013a). A study of job advertisements in China showed a requirement for looks being mentioned nearly 10% of the time, with a much greater prevalence in lower-skilled female-dominated jobs (Kuhn and Shen, 2009). Women aiming to be successful in the Chinese labour market need to be young and good-looking. For jobs with 'rice bowls of youth', such as airline stewarding, beauty often becomes the first – if not the only criterion – in recruitment and selection. Certain employees will be excluded from this type of labour market because they are not considered to be aesthetically acceptable by employers (Nickson et al., 2003).

Becoming a flight attendant is perceived to be a significant achievement in China, and the job is often regarded as a young woman's job associated with high levels of glamour and style (Zeveloff, 2011). Flight attendants in Chinese airlines are paid about 1000 US\$ per month, a very high salary for young workers (Hays, 2012) which makes the role very attractive to women. Another attraction is that young women believe that their horizons will be broadened through meeting different people and travelling to different places worldwide. Therefore, as shown in this study, more young females were keen to pursue this career – despite the strong competition – and they did not feel embarrassed by being judged predominantly on their appearance and sexuality. Instead, they were keen to take advantage of these attributes and present themselves in a way which would maximise their employment prospects.

National culture

National culture subjects people to dominating ideas, beliefs and taken-for-granted assumptions, cultural values in terms of perceptions of marriage and family, and gender differences and gender roles to make sense of women's experiences (Venter, 2002). Images and descriptions of ideal women have pervaded Chinese culture and history for thousands of years. Since ancient times, Chinese women have been in the public 'gaze' and subjected to public judgement on their appearance and behaviour

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and - more particularly - men's sexual desires. For example, ancient Chinese women were usually imagined and defined (by males) as a 'vase', and a popular quote from a well-known ancient Chinese poem says 'a gentleman would like to woo a pretty and graceful girl'. Although women's images have changed due to on-going social and economic transformations, many traditional perceptions of femininity pervade modern life. When men consider their marital partners, women's physical attractiveness is often seen as more important than other things. The Confucian ideology that men are superior to women is still embedded in Chinese society and particularly organisational practices leading to stereotypical attitudes toward female employees (Foster and Ren, 2015; Cooke, 2005; Venter, 2002). Thus, progress on promoting women's equal status is hindered by culturally-ingrained views about the proper role of women in the family, in society and in relation to men (Peerenboom, 2007).

Good appearance has become a commodity in a modern culture driven by consumption because of their importance for success (Warhurst and Nickson, 2009). In many occupations, better-looking people earn more than their colleagues (Hamermesh, 2011). This is the case in the process of China's economic and social modernisation during which consumption is a focal point for the nation's continued progression. Mainstream cultural values are usually disseminated through channels of both traditional and modern media (television, magazines, social media etc.) which, in turn, are leading Chinese women and shaping their views and experiences by, for example, pursuing beauty and young looks to attract men as well as good jobs. Chinese women are very concerned about their appearance, far more so than their Western counterparts, and there is incredible social pressure for them to be thin, pretty and to look young (Jackson and Chen, 2007). They are constantly reminded of such culturally-defined appearance standards by the media.

The pageant-type recruitment campaigns, as described in this study, grabbed close attention from different forms of media - including national and foreign television stations, mainstream newspapers and websites - which reported the whole selection processes by interviewing applicants and giving detailed accounts (China Air News, 2009). Audiences, readers and Internet users were also given the chance to participate in such activities by voting for their favourite candidates either via the Internet or text messages. Therefore, Chinese media have successfully mobilised and engaged the public whose attention on and interest in the flight attendant selection events has grown. This has in turn glamorised the job and lured even more young women to make applications to become a glamorous idol in the sky. It is also not surprising that some women choose the job partially for romance and, therefore, leading to a wanted marriage.

Airline management practices

Traditional patriarchal Confucian values and ideas have continued to influence employer practices. Although employers advertise education and experience requirements - responding to changing labour market conditions in China - their preferences for gender, age and beauty have remained (Kuhn and Shen, 2009). Employers seem to believe that they will be helped if they hire good-looking women and that they can profit from women's unequal status in the social and cultural context, and they may have participated in creating the conditions that allowed this inequality to occur (Elias, 2008).

The organisational culture of Chinese airlines which stems from their historically military background has created a culture that is predominantly male with masculine norms and values, and is identical to that of British airlines (Neal-Smith

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and Cockburn, 2009). Organisational culture, through formal and informal rules, often plays in shaping and sustaining gendered stereotypes and management practices which is highlighted in Western studies of airlines (Acker, 1990; Halford et al., 1997; Mills, 2006; Sangster and Smith, 2016). Historically, formal organisational rules excluded women from training as commercial airline pilots (Mills, 1988) which have now been changed and women are allowed to enter this exclusively male dominated occupation, but informal rules have continued to operate in a way that disadvantages women (Mills and Mills, 2000). As Hearn and Parkin (1987) argue, cultural and social norms and assumptions that make up the informal rules of everyday organisational life are often left unquestioned. This is particularly acute in the Chinese airline industry in which women are dominant in low-skilled, feminised, sometimes sexualised service roles, where both vertical and horizontal gendered occupational segregation exists in most job types (Ren and Foster, 2011; Foster and Ren, 2015). Female pilots account for just 1.12% of the total number of pilots in China (China Daily, 2015), and female members account for only 13.4% of the total number of senior executives in the Chinese national carrier (Air China, 2014). This suggests a strong gendered organisational culture.

Demand for women's aesthetic skills and competences are prevalent in the Chinese airlines studied here because of their perceived commercial utility. Thus, the traditional person-job fit approach has been replaced by selection based on acceptability (e.g. appearance, age, height and weight). The aesthetics possessed by young female flight attendants selected are aligned not only to organisational specific aesthetics but also to occupational discourses (e.g. the role and identity of a flight attendant) which operate in the industry (Tyler and Taylor, 1998). Chinese airlines' management and moulding of flight attendants' appearances replicates what has been practised by Western airlines historically. Sangster and Smith (2016) report that in the 1950s Canadian airlines designed similar recruitment processes to draw in women who would consent to, and even embrace, the aesthetic demands of the job. The airlines then regulated women's appearance through both formal (e.g. employee manuals and lectures) and informal organisational rules (e.g. weigh-ins). Training and monitoring in Western airlines then mobilised and commodified women's aesthetics, and transformed them into desirable physical and emotional displays to attract customers and repeat business (Warhurst et al., 2000; Witz et al., 2003). Interestingly, Otis's (2008) work highlights how expectations differed in the Chinese hotels in respect of appearance and expected behavior of female employees depending on whether the clientele was primarily Western or Chinese. This phenomenon is, however, not observed in this study. Moreover, a specific practice described by Otis (p.25) that 'each worker tailors her activity to individual guests' likes and dislikes' appears to be opposite to what has been found in this study. This may be explained by the industry-wide compliance with professional protocols as well as highly standardised service structures and management practices in airlines.

The term 'paraprofessional' is used to describe the role of flight attendants (Simpson, 2014) which indicates that they deliver stewarding services by complying with what management dictates. Chinese flight attendants encounter increasingly assertive and picky customers who have higher than ever expectations for both the appearance of cabin crew and the quality of their services (Ren and Foster, 2011). The airlines' management taught them to be very subservient to passengers. Hamermesh (2011, p. 121) argues that 'consumers' preferences for beauty discriminatorily appear to make bad-looking people less productive in the eyes of employers'. The airlines' management took customers' or public preferences into consideration by selecting

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flight attendant candidates who fitted these preferences or fulfilled their corporate brand image. Although selection criteria interact with gendered stereotypes, those participating in this research and selection procedures appeared to accept the fact that the airlines judged people by their appearance and accomplishments and used their aesthetics for commercial purposes.

Conclusion

This paper has illustrated that aesthetic labour is both gendered and context-bound. As part of business strategy, aesthetic labour has been imposed on women (and not men) which can be evidenced through flight attendant recruitment and selection practices. Having female employees who look attractive to customers and who can deliver the 'right' behaviours to affect customers' feelings is seen to help produce a distinctive organisational image and improve market competitiveness. Being a female flight attendant in a Chinese airline implies that a number of regimes will be in operation: the gender regime underling the fact that organisations and society are gendered resulting in women dominating in feminised and/or sexualised service roles; the cultural regime in which gendered views of women have been forged through deeply-rooted traditional ideology despite its interaction with modern values; the organisational regime locating her in a position where she is expected to comply with corporate HR strategies and managerial ideologies prioritising qualities such as appearance and age; the labour market regime which is increasingly competitive and intersecting through gender and age which impede women's labour market prospects and financial returns; and, lastly, the legislative regime in which an ineffective role is played by the state as a legislator and a policy-maker affecting women's social positions and career opportunities. Together, they account for the continuously dynamic interconnectedness between gender and aesthetics which has resulted in women working in airline service work tolerating the utilisation of their aesthetic labour and enabling them to experience aesthetic labour differently from their counterparts in the West.

Two concluding observations that can be made from this study have wider implications. The first observation is that the demanded aesthetics for women creates both disadvantage and opportunity, which 'may be disadvantaged relative to one group, but advantaged relative to another' (Shields, 2008, p.302). Being on the advantaged side allows women to access relatively high status, decent jobs, good pay and ideal marriage unavailable to others. Those who are younger and better looking are often considered 'more equal' by airline employers. The requirement to conform to both airline managements' and passengers' expectations in terms of appearance and style, physical attainment attributes and specialist interests may act against the participation in the service sector of those who are 'older' and/or ordinary looking.

The second observation is that horizontal gender segregation is more resistant to change than vertical segregation is. Women in airlines are still clustered in, and only seen to be suitable for, traditionally feminine jobs (e.g. cabin crew and ground services) because feminine aesthetics are perceived to be useful in certain airline jobs and always utilised by management and as such have survived in Chinese airlines for many years. This concurs with the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) Committee's observation that Chinese women suffer from gender segregation in the labour market with an overconcentration of women in the service sector due to 'the persistence of prejudice and stereotypical

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attitudes concerning the role of women... constitutes a serious impediment to the full implementation of the Convention' (Peerenboom, 2007, p. 144).

Interestingly, since 2012 major Chinese airlines - including Airlines A and B – have been actively recruiting foreign female flight attendants on the increasing number of international routes to connect with the cultures of destination countries. Both selection criteria and employment terms for foreign flight attendants differ notably from those for domestic flight attendants. There are fewer requirements on physical appearance and, instead, there is an emphasis on attitude, flexibility, communication and experience. Even the upper age limit has been relaxed to 35 in a job advertisement issued on the official website of Airline B. Chinese carriers offer higher compensation and customised contracts to their foreign cabin crew members, in line with their home nations' labour laws. As discussed in this paper, much of the pressure to exploit aesthetic labour comes from management's and customers' demands which are rooted in wider cultural views about women. Yet, as China continues to integrate globally and Chinese airlines expand rapidly into international markets, these cultural views are likely to be eroded and the employment practices in Chinese airlines might well converge with international standards. Despite little attention having been so far given to potentially discriminatory employment practices in Chinese airlines, there is a possibility that employers will be looked upon unfavourably by various stakeholders for their discrimination based on gender, appearance, age, etc.

The state continues to play a significant role in the formation, regulation, and structuring of Chinese airlines. It has ratified some international conventions such as the Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) Convention which has a clear definition of what constitutes job discrimination. China's first law on gender equality, which defines a legal meaning of gender equality and establishes a complaints filing and remediation process for instances of gender discrimination, was initiated by the Shenzhen's Women Federation and passed by Shenzhen's People's Congress in 2012 (Woman Watch China, 2013b). Although this new provision is confined to Shenzhen, a special economic zone in the south of China, such legislative progress is particularly valuable against a background of no provision for dealing with cases of gender discrimination in China. Specifically, it sets out punitive measures for tackling gender discrimination in recruitment advertising and reinforces that it is an individual's professional abilities that should be the deciding factor in selection processes. It follows that the central government should take actions to address inappropriate forms of discrimination against individuals. Failure to do so will clearly, result in continued inequality of opportunities for women in the Chinese employment arena. Following the suggestion made by Woodhams et al. (2009), an important start would be actively preventing discrimination in recruitment advertisements in the wider labour market and – meanwhile – robustly enforcing legislation at the national, industrial and organisational levels is key to minimising gender discrimination. This paper has highlighted the key contextual issues causing exploitation of women's aesthetic labour and, therefore, provides a clear basis for focused action.

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