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Social reproduction with socialist characteristics in Shanghai: destitute and disadvantaged women (*pinkun funü)* and their affective lives in the Workers' New Villages during the COVID-19 pandemic

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ABSTRACT

Since the 1970s, Marxist feminists have extensively discussed social reproduction to argue that women's unwaged domestic labour is a form of exploitation deriving from capitalism. This article focuses on the socialist socio-historical context to explore the social reproduction performed by lower working-class women in Shanghai during the COVID-19 outbreaks. To probe the pandemic interruptions to social reproduction, a COVID-19 Diary-Writing Workshop was conducted in 2020 to collect diaries written by destitute and disadvantaged women (*pinkun funü)* living in the Workers' New Villages. By delving into the women's affective lives, the article shows that women not only contributed to community through their volunteerism in social reproductive labour but also sacrificed for their families in a time of crisis. Moreover, women endured mental stress as the main performers of social reproductive work, and communal services provided by neighbourhood committees helped relieve the stress of household chores and resolved tensions related to food shortage. Our findings confirm scholars' longstanding argument that communal support policies can alleviate the gendered exploitative nature of social reproductive labour, and shed light on the roles of the remaining structures of socialist communal organization and infrastructure.

Introduction

The outbreak of COVID-19 influenced billions of lives across the globe, especially lower working-class women (Murtola & Vallelly, 2023; Power, 2020). As a United Nations (UN) Women policy brief, *COVID-19 and Ending Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG)*, had outlined the transformation of women's lives globally (United Nations, 2020). Data provided by the VAWG brief concerns us as it shows how women's work in domestic and family care has increased drastically due to the pandemic. Focusing on these gendered impacts, this article studies destitute and disadvantaged women (*pinkun funü)* to examine the ways women struggled to secure a bearable life for themselves and their families in the face of new challenges. Following a qualitative research approach, the article investigates the gendered ramifications of the pandemic to explore the changing everyday life and lived experiences of lower working-class women living in the socialist Workers' New Villages in Shanghai. In what follows, we will expound on the theorization of social reproduction, linking it to

Marxist feminist debates on the gendered division of labour and how the lower working class women manoeuvre crises (Bakker, 2007; Caffentzis, 2002; Katz, 2001; Murphy et al., 2023).

Social reproduction and the COVID-19 crisis

This article adopts the theorization of social reproduction developed in the mid-18th century by Quesnay ([1758] 1894 in *Tableau économique* (*Economic Table*). In Quesnay's table, social reproduction depicts how the social classes, the 'proprietary' class (landowners), the 'productive' class (agricultural labourers), and the 'sterile' class (artisans and merchants), reproduce themselves through a cycle of production and circulation of commodities to maintain everyday life (Quesnay, [1758] 1894). Although manufacturing production replaced the significant role of the agricultural economic model in Quesnay's study, the notion of social reproduction has been developed to capture the cycle of everyday production. Isabella Bakker (2007) built her social-reproduction theory on Marxist theoretical approaches to work and labour to argue for the dialectical relation between 'the necessities of the "lower levels" of economic activity (material life, the market economy) and the imperatives of capitalism' (p. 552; see also Braudel, 1980). Similar to Bakker's approach to social reproduction, George Caffentzis (2002) wrote: 'the invisibility of housework hides the secret of all capitalist life: the source of social surplus – unwaged labor – must be degraded, naturalized, made into a marginal aspect of the system, so that its producers can be more easily controlled and exploited' (p. 14). For Cindi Katz, social reproduction can be examined as the 'fleshy, messy, indeterminate stuff of everyday life' (Katz, p. 711). Building on previous scholarships, this article approaches social reproduction as a cycle of the everyday, reflecting the cycle of household work that reappears and requires repetition to keep lives going, for instance, tidying up the house, cooking, grocery shopping, washing clothes, and other trivial but necessary chores. As Mitchell et al. (2004) proposed, social reproduction is a form of 'life's work'. Social reproductive labour has been researched extensively in the Global North in the last three decades because of the transformation of the division of labour in nuclear families as women began to join the workforce (Abramovitz, 1992; Ferber, 1987; Ferguson, 2020; Hochschild, 1983). Moving from these discussions of the Global North, this study applies the concept of social reproduction to Shanghai during the pandemic to contribute to gender studies by providing a more nuanced reading of women's life's work in a special socio-historical context.

This article primarily asks how destitute and disadvantaged women's social reproductive labour was interrupted by the pandemic and how they coped with the crisis socially. It also examines the relationship between women's social reproductive labour in tandem with the socialist social fabrics, and the roles played by the remaining structures of socialist communities in this process. By exploring how the pandemic disturbed the repetition of life's work, the article links social reproduction to crisis theory (Caffentzis, 2002). Caffentzis (2002) mobilized the concept of social reproduction to study how large-scale crises such as wars, plagues, floods, and earthquakes can cause famines, genocides, and catastrophes in society, generating interruptions in social reproduction in individual families. Since the outbreak of COVID-19, feminist researchers across disciplines have studied the impact of the pandemic on women (Carli, 2020; Connor et al., 2020; Murtola & Vallelly, 2023; Power, 2020; Sánchez et al., 2020; Thibaut & van Wijngaarden Cremers, 2020). Linda L. Carli (2020) threw light on the gender-unequal implications of the COVID-19 pandemic as more women lost their jobs than men. Jade Connor et al. (2020) explored how the pandemic worsened health risks affecting women and pointed out its implications for gender differences, particularly concerning health risks. Similarly, Thibaut and van Wijngaarden Cremers (2020) raised concerns over women's mental health during the pandemic. In addition, some researchers focused on care labour and care economies, such as Kate Power (2020), who argued that the pandemic increased women's burden of care even as disruptions of the 'care economy' (i.e. the reproduction of everyday life) can constitute the direct downfall of a country's economy. Murtola and Vallelly (2023) investigated how essential workers, whose work involves social reproductive labour such as care work, became more visible to the public

during the pandemic. Other researchers called attention to violence against women because intimate partner violence might be triggered by household stress (Roesch et al., 2020, p. 1). In particular, Odette R. Sánchez et al. (2020) studied violence against women (VAW) during the pandemic and reported that women's vulnerability to violence intensified during the social distancing and lockdown period. Lastly, feminist scholars argued that essential workers, who had always worked in the shadows, were made visible at the height of the pandemic particularly, in cities of the Global North (Murtola & Vallelly, 2023). The present research is valuable and distinctive because of the socio-cultural context in which the Shanghai women under study are situated: they are the dwellers of the Workers' New Villages, a type of housing built between the 1950s and 1990s, which instils socialist ideals to support social reproductive labour.

Socialist Workers' New Villages

The socialist Workers' New Villages (*gongren xincun*) in Shanghai were selected for a site-specific study because they were built with a socialist agenda and under the men-and-women equality policy (see Figure 1). First, as Shanghai is a socialist city (*shehuizhuyi chengshi*) according to the official position of the People's Republic of China (PRC), this article traces how some socialist infrastructures persist in the socialist workers' neighbourhoods. In 1951, the newly established PRC government began constructing Workers' New Villages in Shanghai to accommodate workers labouring in nearby state-owned enterprises (SOEs; Luo & Li, 2014). The construction of workers' housing was infused with the goal of creating a 'socialist city' where the working class would be the

Figure 1. Photograph of a Workers' New Village in Shanghai, with residents drying their clothes during a sunny day, an essential activity of social reproduction (taken by Penn Tsz Ting Ip).

new masters and resolving housing problems as 3 million people lived in Shanghai's slums in the 1950s (Yang, 2019). Workers from SOEs were assigned to live in the Workers' New Villages through the housing allocation system from their work unit (*danwei fenfang*). These three- to six-story brick houses were first located in the suburbs of Shanghai to promote a communist collective lifestyle (Figure 2). The specific physical and spatial planning of these villages was closely linked to the ideal of a collectivist way of living: each household contained a small private space, while a communal space with facilities such as a kitchen and washroom was shared with other families. Within each community, the government constructed cultural activity centres, childcare centres, playgrounds, libraries, police stations, and a legal centre (Yang, 2019). This article illustrates how such infrastructural constructions can act as an integral part of the socialist social-reproduction system.

Second, the villages were built in the Mao era, when equality between men and women (*nannü pingdeng*) was promoted for state industrialization. Thus, the study explores how the socialist vision of gender equality in the distribution of labour persisted in these villages. The Workers' New Villages adopted a dual organizational and managerial model of work units (*danwei*) and neighbourhood committees (*juweihui*). Representatives of residents formed neighbourhood committees to help organize villagers' everyday lives (Wang, 1999). In 1954, resident committees emerged in the Workers' New Villages as a kind of mass self-governance organization, establishing several 'collective organizations' to provide daily services to the residents and promoting the integration of grassroots communities to develop a collective lifestyle (Yang, 2019). Neighbourhood committees served as a working-class social-management mechanism and were established to ensure that top-down policies were transmitted to every local household (Wang, 1999). With the implementation of

Figure 2. Photograph of a Workers' New Village in Shanghai, showing that the village's everyday lives were interrupted not only by the global pandemic but also by the massive renovation programme (taken by Penn Tsz Ting Ip).

'mass mobilization' policies, the government succeeded in creating a mutual support network between the Communist Party and the masses. Notably, a plethora of women joined the committees, offering help in childcare centres, laundry/sewing teams, and other family issues, while some of them also worked as socialist workers in state-owned factories (Ip et al., 2023; Wang, 1999; Yang, 2019).

Tellingly, the socialist aura of these villages faded away significantly under market reforms. In the 1990s, the government initiated the marketization of housing to replace the socialist model of workers' housing, which led to the retrenchment of SOEs (Yang, 2019). Accommodating 80% of the laid-off workers, the villages had become 'low-income' communities. Most laid-off residents, who could not afford to move out, stayed in the villages (Yang, 2019). During the 10th Five-Year Plan (2001–2005), the neighbourhood committees were assigned the functions of allocating social benefits and subsidies, providing re-employment training, and caring for elderly people who live alone (*duju laoren*), aiming at poverty alleviation. The article focuses on these villages, considering how urban poverty and the COVID-19 outbreak interrupted the affective lives of the women inhabiting them.

Methods

The article examines a cluster of Workers' New Villages located on the west side of Shanghai and referred to as Community X to protect the informants' privacy. The housing blocks in Community X have undergone tremendous social transformation in the past three decades since the urban development project was launched in the 1990s (Ip et al., 2021, 2023). The research participants were a group of women living in the Workers' New Villages in Community X. According to government categories, all (*n* = 20) were considered 'destitute and disadvantaged women' (*pinkun funü*) in need of social welfare and financial support. Some of these women had been experiencing severe illness (*n* = 17), for instance, cancer or heart disease. Some required financial aid (*n* = 5), two women suffered the death of a child, one woman endured domestic violence, and two were mothers of people with mental-health issues. Most had received the Shanghai urban household registration (*hukou*) by birth (*n* = 16); the others were from rural China and had obtained the urban *hukou* by marrying men with a Shanghai *hukou* (*n* = 4). Between 2018 and 2020, the first author conducted 20 in-depth interviews with this group of women, then she further carried out oral-history interviews with 13 women in this group. The qualitative data collected from these interviews are utilized as supplementary sources to capture personal information, including age, health conditions, life challenges, and place of origin.

The study is part of a feminist collaborative project involving research teams across the globe, including in Cochabamba, Delhi, and Shanghai. The teams organized different workshops to document the immediate effects of the pandemic on lower working-class women in these global South cities (see Razavi et al., 2023). In Shanghai, six women partook in the COVID-19 Diary-Writing Workshop organized by the Shanghai research team in 2020 (see Table 1). These diaries were meant to reflect individual affective experiences to get a sense of how people lived through the pandemic time rather than constituting a quantitative approach of reflecting a generalized experience (Bolger et al., 2003; Crouch & McKenzie, 2006). More importantly, the Shanghai research team used diaries because diary design can offer a glimpse into the temporary dynamics of the everyday (Bolger et al., p. 586). Held between 14 June 2020, and 11 July 2020, the 28-day diary-writing workshop comprised four discussion sessions arranged by the first and second authors each weekend to facilitate and provide tips to the research participants for writing their diaries at home. The discussion sessions were organized based on the focus-group method (Ogunbameru, 2003), wherein the researchers invited participants to share their experiences, thoughts, and feelings on four preselected themes: 'masks' (*kouzhao*), 'grocery shopping' (*maicai*), 'caring for oneself and others' (*zhaogu*), and 'feeling reassured' (*fangxin*). The weekly online workshop was conducted via WeChat for women who had smartphones (*n* = 4) and offline for two women (a mother and

Table 1. List of COVID-19 diary-writing workshop participants.

Name	Age (birthyear)	Employment status	Case type	Marital status
C Ayi	54 (1970)	• Part-time domestic helper	• Migrant wife • Case: poverty	• Married
H Ayi	74 (1950)	• Retiree	• Local Shanghainese • Illness: cancer • Cases: cancer patient; loss of only child	• Married
H Jiejie	56 (1968)	• Retiree	• Migrant wife • Case: poverty	• Remarried
W Ayi	69 (1955)	• Retiree	• Migrant wife • Illness: heart and stomach diseases • Cases: poverty and domestic violence	• Remarried
Y Ayi	80 (1944)	• Retiree	• Local Shanghainese • Y's mother • Case: poverty	• Widow
Y	40 (1984)	• Unemployed	• Local ShanghaineseY Ayi's daughter • Illness: heart disease • Cases: socially challenged and reported as unable to work	• Single

daughter) who did not have smartphones. The women wrote their diaries during the weekdays, which were uploaded daily for the research team to record the participants' everyday experiences, such as emotional moments, social engagements, and thoughts about the government's pandemic policies. The COVID-19 diaries contain 53,847 words. The diaries were written in simplified Chinese, and the team translated selections of the texts into English. The research team coded the diaries and the discussions using the 33 codes that emerged during the coding process (Benaquisto, 2012). The codes were categorized based on the discussion topics preset in the research design, which will be discussed in the analytical section. In addition, because informal conversations allowed the participants to share their thoughts more freely (Jamshed, 2014), the research team organized one-on-one online informal conversations with the women to check whether they needed help with their diaries or any support in their lives.

Pandemic affective lives (Re)organized

In *Encountering Affect*, Ben Anderson (2014) suggests that affective lives can reflect the impact of national policies on individuals, thereby shaping individual lives collectively. To examine how COVID-19 situations shaped lower working-class women's lives affectively and collectively, this section analyzes women's diaries and the workshop discussions. As one of the financial centres of China, Shanghai plays a crucial role in the country's economic and urban development, making it the model for how other Chinese cities should fight against COVID-19 (Zhao et al., 2020). On 20 January 2020, the first case of COVID-19 was recorded in Shanghai. Four days later, the Shanghai Municipal Government announced the 'Level 1 Response for Significant Public Health Emergency' and requested that all government departments and citizens adopt the most stringent measures with a highly responsible attitude to cope with the COVID-19 situation. To prevent the spread of the highly transmissible SARS-CoV-2 virus, the government announced a 14-day quarantine period and medical observation for Hubei arrivals a day after the announcement of the Level 1 Response. Tension amongst the citizens of Shanghai intensified, and people began stocking up on masks, causing a shortage. Masks were therefore chosen as the first theme of the workshop.

After the outbreak of the pandemic, acquiring masks became one of the biggest challenges for lower working-class families given that they possessed fewer financial and social resources. As the women's COVID-19 diaries documented, the most prominent impact of the pandemic was the growing tension caused by family conflicts connected to the new demand for masks. H Jiejie, for instance, wrote that she used her mobile phone to purchase masks by downloading different

applications. Digital technology is available to some women, but not all women had smartphones; therefore, some stayed at home most of the time to avoid using masks. In H Jiejie's case, she successfully purchased some masks, but she found buying masks at five times the original market price to be unreasonable and a financial burden for her family. For her part, C Ayi reported serious conflicts over masks in her family. Her daughter, who was in her last year of high school, learned about the pandemic through the Internet and asked her father to purchase medical masks; however, her father did not feel the need to buy masks, considering it unnecessary and believing that the situation would be controlled by the government. This tension intensified when they had to take the subway to a relative's home and her father refused to wear a mask. When C Ayi's daughter explained the contagiousness of the SARS-CoV-2 virus to her father, C Ayi's husband rejected such knowledge and became violent against them. Thus, C Ayi's family story involved a patriarchal power relation: the father could turn violent to assert his power over his wife and daughter when he had less knowledge on the health risk and failed to accept the reality of crisis.

The second theme of the workshop was 'grocery shopping' because it is an essential part of social reproductive labour. Unlike authorities in Wuhan, the Shanghai Municipal Government did not implement a lockdown policy. Instead, the government opted for 'closed management' in residential areas to control mobility, starting from 10 February 2020. The Shanghai Municipal Government assigned the neighbourhood committees (*juweihui*) of each residential area responsibility for the mobility of their registered residents. In Shanghai, residents could leave their homes for grocery shopping, with strict entrance and exit management measures monitored by the neighbourhood committees and the local police. In the present study, women reported experiencing pressure related to grocery shopping because of the increase in food prices and the desire to provide 'fresh food' to boost the health of their families, especially their children and/or grandchildren. For instance, C Ayi wrote that she needed to provide fresh food to her daughter, who was in her third year of high school and taking online classes during the pandemic. C Ayi would go to the grocery stores in 'full gear', that is, wearing gloves, a mask, and a hat, at the peak of the pandemic in 2020 to purchase fresh food.

Given the rising prices of grocery products, most women stated that they had to carefully rearrange their family's finances. C Ayi would go to the grocery store every morning at 7 a.m., when there were fewer people. She wrote that she had been spending more money on food and consequently had to work harder to earn more money. Expressing her mental and corporeal stress, feelings, and thoughts – which she said she did not share with her husband and daughter – C Ayi confided that she felt exhausted:

> After I finish the chores, I go to the wet market. On my way to the market, I have to plan what to buy and cook. I don't have time to walk slowly like those people who have nothing to do . . . I need to go to one house after another, over and over again [as a domestic helper], my heart is full of boredom and exhaustion. (C Ayi, diary, June 18, 2020)

The diaries also revealed that the changing material social practices around grocery shopping imposed more challenges on older women. A 72-year-old woman, H Ayi, spoke of the stress of buying food to ensure the health of her family members. H Ayi's daughter passed away at a young age, and her grandson had since been living with her and her husband. During the pandemic, H Ayi's 17-year-old grandson was at home every day taking online classes, a new routine for her family as H Ayi had to provide breakfast and lunch for him, while her husband cooked for dinner. H Ayi considered how to give him healthy meals under the pressure of increasing food prices and chose to walk farther to a grocery store offering meat at a lower cost.

Besides masks and grocery shopping, research participants were invited to share how they cared for themselves and others – the third theme of the workshop discussion. As the first author had been touching base with the women since 2018, she was aware that these lower working-class women neglected their own well-being and talked only about their families. Therefore, the theme was selected to allow these women to reconsider themselves. Through the workshop, W Ayi revealed

that she had endured life-threatening family tensions. W Ayi was a migrant wife of rural origin who remarried a low-income man from Shanghai living in her village. Before this marriage, she had a son, who is married and lives in the suburbs of Shanghai with his family, and a daughter who now lives with her and her new husband. At the beginning of the pandemic, W Ayi suffered from severe domestic violence because her husband refused to wear a mask. As he claimed, he was a strong macho man, and wearing a mask was unnecessary for him. His belief upset W Ayi desperately. As a woman with heart and stomach diseases and in poor health overall, she was worried about the virus and tried to convince him to wear a mask, but he beat her every time she mentioned it. To save her mother from further physical abuse, W Ayi's daughter bought her a train ticket and sent her back to her rural hometown in Shandong province. In her hometown, W Ayi joined a dancing group for older women. She also showed the researchers the fruits and *qipao* (a traditional Chinese dress) she bought. She told the researchers that she enjoyed her moments in her hometown. By learning to care for herself, W Ayi gained a new-found life and joy because of the pandemic and her daughter's wise decision. Nonetheless, not all women were fortunate enough to have an 'escape home'.

At the Workers' New Villages, housing units ranged in size from 16.8 to 32.2 square metres. C Ayi and her family lived in the smallest unit. C Ayi and her husband's beds, their dining table, TV, wardrobe, and a bunk bed that C Ayi's mother-in-law and daughter slept on were all in one living space, while the kitchen and bathroom were outside of their living space and shared with other families. Stuck with her husband and teenage daughter, C Ayi expressed her disappointment as they refused to help with household chores at a time when she was enduring physical pain from an old injury. As she wrote in her diary:

> I hope one of them, my husband, or my daughter, can help me to put the trash out rather than keeping silent. I asked my daughter to do it, then she said she could wash the dishes, but she did not want to help take the trash out. My husband pretended to be deaf. When I came back after throwing the trash, I found my daughter crying while washing the dishes, as if she had a deep grievance . . . Why can't I get a proper response or even a simple 'thanks'? They are used to my work all the time, of course. It makes me very angry! Very angry! (C Ayi, diary, June 27, 2020)

When every household was affected by the pandemic, women may have wanted their family members to support them by sharing the social reproductive work. Notably, during the COVID-19 outbreak in China, the divorce rate reached a new high compared to previous years as family conflicts happened more frequently during the pandemic-related lockdowns (Bloomberg, 2020). As reports have shown, Chinese men were criticized by their wives (or ex-wives) for not sharing the domestic labour even though they stayed at home; women were disappointed with their unhelpful spouses (Fan, 2020).

During the final section of the workshop discussion, the women spoke of moments when they finally felt reassured (*fangxin*) about the pandemic, the last theme of the workshop. As H Ayi wrote:

> Today's lesson is about 'feeling reassured'. When the epidemic first broke out, I was extremely worried! . . . When the epidemic situation in Wuhan improved and middle-school students resumed offline classes on May 18, and primary schools and kindergartens resumed classes on June 2, we can feel reassured. (H Ayi, diary, July 5, 2020)

In H Ayi's diary and discussions, feeling moments of peace and reassurance were closely related to the pandemic situation. Other women had different experiences of reassurance. For instance, C Ayi linked her emotional tensions and stress to her daughter's college entrance examination. C Ayi's husband stayed at home every day due to the pandemic, made noise, and watched TV loudly without considering that his daughter needed a quiet environment to study. With all family members stuck in the tiny home space, stress turned into endless fights. To resolve the situation, C Ayi rented a hotel room for five days for her daughter to prepare for the examination. It was a major decision for her family given the cost of the hotel room. Consequently, on the day when her daughter finished taking all her examinations, C Ayi wrote that she finally felt reassured.

In all, the destitute and disadvantaged women living in the Workers' New Villages became the emotional pillars of their families, and when they provided additional emotional support, they

tended to hide their stress without sharing their emotions with their families. At the workshop, the participants took the chance to express how they felt. As Bergeron (2015) argues, 'care activities are distinct because they require affective interactions, and the quality of care is at least in part determined by the quality of relationships between the givers and the receivers of care' (p. 183). Our study reveals that women experienced frustration and anger when affective interactions were interrupted, such as when their family members refused to help them, to cooperate, or to acknowledge their contribution. Chinese sociologists have focused on the impact of the pandemic on the working and living conditions of different social classes (Bian et al., 2020), while the gendered effects of the pandemic in China have received limited academic attention (Ding & Zhong, 2021). Our findings demonstrate that one of the gendered effects of the pandemic in China is the intensified stress and the worsening affective lives suffered by women who mainly undertook social reproductive labour. The next section will further address the issues revealed by our observations of lower working-class women's affective lives to contribute to the gender studies discussion of the pandemic's impact in a socialist socio-cultural context.

Women's volunteerism and sacrifices

In a capitalist patriarchal system, domestic labour and care work are criticized as gendered unpaid labour and, thus, women's devalued effort and labour in the family household (Bakker & Gill, 2003; Bergeron, 2015; Federici, 1975, Ferber, 1987; Hochschild, 1983; Malos, 1982). Drawing on the experience of the Global North, feminist studies have investigated social reproduction as the organization of individual families, communities, markets, and the state – that is, the organization of the triviality of the everyday through capitalism. Nevertheless, the maintenance of social relationships in a socialist society may be a different case, especially in the face of the pandemic. This section will delve into how the socialist social infrastructure offers a different story for the analysis of social reproduction.

First, based on the COVID-19 diaries, the research team discovered the existence of a community canteen and charity supermarket, which both served as communal support for the residents of the Workers' New Villages. Y Ayi, an elderly woman who did not know how to use applications for online shopping, was 'an expert' at searching for material help provided by the neighbourhood. In her diary, she excitedly shared that she had found the newly opened charity supermarket during the pandemic:

> I haven't been to a charity supermarket near my home since it moved, but during the pandemic, I found another one, which was operated by the Street Office and a private enterprise! The charity supermarket has all the goods we usually need, and it's very convenient to buy things. (Y Ayi, diary, June 20, 2020)

Y Ayi explained that the charity supermarket was established by the Street Office, which connected commercial business owners who wished to do charity work. They provided rice, oil, and other necessities at a low cost compared to other supermarkets, enabling the residents to have sufficient food. Besides the charity supermarket, Y Ayi also discovered the community canteen, where she could take her socially challenged daughter, who has social anxiety and cannot work, to have meals. Considering the large elderly population in the eastern part of the district and the relative shortage of dining facilities, the Street Office took the initiative to connect with a company to build a dining service for the elderly, creating a community canteen that offered daily meals to the elderly in the neighbourhood. During the pandemic, charity supermarkets and community canteens provided families with food at lower prices, countering the commercial logic of a market economy. Some feminist scholars have suggested that socializing domestic labour through collective arrangements, such as shared kitchens, may be a way out of the inequality embedded in the social reproductive division of labour in capitalist societies (Norten & Katz, 2017). Our research found that such social infrastructure in China can ease the economic and social pressure on lower working-class women, in particular during national crises.

Second, neighbourhood committees (*juweihui*), a socialist unit for social reproduction and urban governance, played a tremendous role in the Workers' New Villages, also receiving support from the women residents during the pandemic. Based on the concept of collective living, the neighbourhood committee enabled the formation of a specific social relationship with the residents, especially those in need of social care and financial aid. During the pandemic, the committee solicited the women residents for help with voluntary works for community safety. For instance, H Ayi stated:

> When the epidemic broke out, I thought, 'Although I am a cancer patient, I have to go out because I was a member of the Communist Party'. I did not think about that so much. I just went out. (H Ayi, workshop discussion)

Here, the words 'went out' indicate that she left her home and became a volunteer. H Ayi devoted her labour to helping check the temperature of the residents, maintain the social order of the community, and dispatch masks to the residents. She also worked at the communal kindergarten located inside the village to check the temperature of the children and their parents. However, when the neighbourhood committees finally found financial support for the volunteers and began paying them for their work, H Ayi said that she had to quit because she did not work for money.

The study unveiled the women's volunteerism: although they may have been at-risk members of society, they devoted their social reproductive labour to returning the material help offered by the local government. This 'volunteer work', in either paid or unpaid form, reflects a reciprocal logic, mutual support between the women and the neighbourhood committees, which can be read as part of the socialist culture of producing 'life's work' during the pandemic time. It is because the establishment of these neighbourhood committees was meant to mobilize women residents to partake in social reproductive work that the residents were used to help organize collective life in the Workers' New Villages. Scholars have analyzed pandemics from a context-specific perspective on urban governance with a focus on neighbourhood committees. Some examined the practices and problems of pandemic prevention and control and observed that the solidity of grassroots communities depends on the capacity of communities and women residents to mobilize (Yan & Zhang, 2021). Taking the Wuhan Lockdown as an example, some scholars have argued that the support of the neighbourhood committee, resident volunteers, and neighbours was crucial to channelling and mitigating the negative effects of the pandemic (Yan & Zhang, 2021). In China, women's participation in the Workers' New Villages has drawn media attention, making lower working-class women visible and women's volunteerism recognized by the public.

Lastly, this study sheds light on the sacrifices of women. As the participants reported, fresh meat is essential to Shanghai households, whereas frozen meat and vegetables are considered unhealthy or less healthy than fresh food. The women shared their growing stress related to shopping for fresh food because going to public spaces had become dangerous given the highly contagious nature of the virus. Despite the risk, they left their homes and shopped for fresh food in the hope of boosting the immune systems of their family members – a new material social practice of households. As recorded in the interviews, the women's husbands normally were the ones who would go grocery shopping, a cultural practice known as '*ma da sao*', meaning shopping for groceries, tidying up the house, and cooking, before the pandemic. Nonetheless, during the pandemic, women decided to take on the grocery-shopping responsibilities because they considered it risky and felt that they should not let their husbands take such risks. This form of sacrifice is reminiscent of how women tended to sacrifice during war times (Elshtain, 1991), and social reproduction during crises may require women to take on more responsibilities and risks.

In Lieu of Conclusion

This study used the diary method combined with focus-group discussions to interrogate how lower working-class women's affective lives could reflect social reproduction with socialist characteristics. The socialist communal system supported women in fighting the spread of COVID-19, and, in return, women volunteered their labour to help maintain the social order and governance of their neighbourhoods. By delving into the women's affective lives, the article shows that women not only

supported their community through their volunteerism in social reproductive labour but also sacrificed for their families in a time of crisis. Significantly, the article revealed the contributions of destitute and disadvantaged women within their families in the Workers' New Villages as they continuously served as the key caregivers, endured extra mental stress, dealt with serious family tensions, and manoeuvred to secure masks and fresh food to provide healthy meals for their families in harsh circumstances. Unlike many studies focused on the relationship between women's social reproduction and capitalism in the Global North, this article examined the relationship between women's social reproductive labour in tandem with the socialist social fabrics, arguing that the remaining structures of socialist communities, to a large extent, helped relieve women's stress and tensions related to social reproductive work.

Disclosure statement

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Notes on contributors

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