



CLIPPINGS AND COLORS

Roadside Manicurists

By Sky Thomas Gidge

“Why would you ask a question like that?” Xue pauses, the nail polish brush in between the bottle and a customer’s hand. “Of course I like my job.”

Xue looks stylish, if a little tired, with brown highlights in her hair and a black face mask that matches her shirt and shoes.

The Guangdong native is one of about a dozen that sit beneath roadside tents every evening from about 5pm, buffing and decorating until customers dry up around 11pm to midnight. Six or so nail painting stations are set up beneath the tents, with two women working at each.

A UV nail drying light, a small table, a scattering of chairs and a tackle box full of nail polish and clippers is all these girls need to do business.

“We came here and rented the space ourselves. We have a lot of freedom, no one really manages us,” Xue says. “Before this, I did so

many different jobs. One time I even worked as a secretary.”

The street-side nail girls are chatty. So chatty, it’s one of the rare interviews that goes better if questions aren’t asked.

A rotating cast of well-dressed young women pull up seats beneath the open-sided tent before leaving minutes later. The self-sufficient manicurists joke, talk about which store has the best cakes, recite celebrity gossip or just vent about work.

A girl with pink hair and a pleather-banded wristwatch approaches and lets out a loud sigh. “The customer got angry when I was putting shapes on her nails! But it really takes so much time,” she says, before disappearing into the next tent.

They each take in about RMB250 a night, according to Xue, but it isn’t their only source of income.

“We also work on the fourth floor of a spa, where we” – she nods at the girl sitting next to her – “rent a studio for 20,000 yuan a

month.”

The only interruptions to business seem to be bad weather and the occasional street inspection. Despite being registered and paying RMB2,600 monthly to a local committee, it appears their tents might be considered an eyesore.

“Sometimes when the leaders are coming, the management will tell us we can’t be here, but that only happens once or twice a year,” says Xue, before turning her gaze to the street, looking for her next customer.

THE DIRTY DETAILS

Monthly salary: RMB6,200

Days per week: 7

Hours per day: 6

Man on the Street is a monthly feature where we talk to someone doing an everyday job, in order to get an insight into the lives of normal Chinese people.