

Lockdown leaves a blind spot in the income of many Shanghai masseurs

Li Qian and Zhou Anna

As dusk falls, masseur Huang Fujian and his workmates link arms and make their way to the intersection of Fengxian and Nanhui roads, only a few minutes' walk from their massage parlor.

They walk briskly down narrow alleyways, and from outward appearances, it would be difficult to believe they are blind or otherwise visually impaired.

With folding chairs placed in a line against a tall flowerbed and disinfectant sprayed all around, their pop-up, open-air massage parlor is ready for business.

"Only 29.9 yuan (US\$4.50) for a half-hour massage," they call out to passers-by.

"Business was slack today," Huang told Shanghai Daily while waiting for customers last Thursday. "We were busy the previous days; there was even a queue for massage."

That night, however, it was a full 15 minutes before the first customer came.

Huang blamed the heat. Fair enough. That afternoon, the high temperature exceeded 37 degrees Celsius, triggering this year's first orange heat alert. But that didn't deter loyal customers like a man surnamed Gu.

"I live nearby and I always come here for a walk after dinner," the retiree explained. "I saw them on the street once and tried a massage. It felt good. They are quite professional."

His favorite is Tang Hui, who has since given him massage three or four times.

"I enjoy giving customers massage in the open air," she said, noting that it also provides free advertising for the service.

Like so many businesses in



Masseurs attend to clients at a roadside corner in Shanghai's downtown Jing'an District. — Zhou Anna

Shanghai, the masseurs are trying to recoup losses after the city's two-month COVID-19 pandemic lockdown.

It's no secret that the recent resurgence of coronavirus left many businesses at a standstill. Shanghai's industrial output nosedived by 61.5 percent in April from a year earlier, the sharpest slump in more than a decade. Retail sales posted a decline of 48.3 percent.

Though the city has broadly reopened since June 1, many businesses are still struggling to regain their footing. Huang and his colleagues work at the Ganzhi Blind Massage parlor.

Blind massage is popular in China, amid a belief that the loss of eye sight endows masseurs with heightened other senses.

Ganzhi, one of Shanghai's most reputable blind massage parlors, has been in operation for nearly 20 years. It has 27 addresses listed on Dazhong Dianping, China's version of Yelp.

Despite that sprawling network, the business has been overwhelmed by financial

pressures and personnel loss, according to Chen Liang, manager of Huang's parlor.

The outlet closed on March 17 and reopened early this month. It formerly employed 32 masseurs, 26 of whom had partial sight or were completely blind. Most of them were migrant workers like Huang and Tang. But since the city allowed out-of-towners to leave in late April, 20 have returned to their hometowns, Chen said.

"They never made it back," he said, noting that his working staff has been whittled to only 12 working masseurs.

"We used to be open from 10:30am to 11pm, but we've had to pare operations by three hours," Chen explained. "The lockdown has had a huge impact on brick-and-mortar businesses."

His massage parlor is tucked away in office buildings around Nanjing Road W. According to Chen, it used to service about 100 customers a day, especially busy during the lunch break period. That daily number has dropped to only about 30 to 40. Many people remain wary

about any close personal contact, he explained.

Trying to keep afloat, the parlor has turned to streetside services. "We allow our masseurs to provide massages on the streetside after we close every night," Chen said. "All of the income goes straight into their own pockets. They charge half our normal rates."

So far, the strategy seems to be working. According to Huang, he now gives massage to about three to four customers a day at the store, and another three to four on the roadside. He admits it makes for an exhausting day.

"It hasn't been easy for them," Gu said of the masseurs, who earned nothing during the lockdown.

Accommodation costs, however, are not one of their worries. Chen said the massage parlor provides free dorm facilities. Local people have also pitched in to help.

"We spent just 400 yuan on food during the lockdown," Tang said. "The local neighborhood committee, our neighbors, the disabled

foundation and other kind people have provided us meat, vegetables and rice."

However, finances still weigh heavily.

"I haven't sent money to my parents for about two months," said Huang, who hasn't decided whether to stay or return to his hometown in south China's Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region.

Huang, 36, came to Shanghai about a year ago after a friend told him about the city's prosperity. He had been working in massage for more than a decade at home, but moving to Shanghai was a whole new experience.

"I miss my family so much. I'm so eager to reunite with them, but I'm afraid of taking the virus back with me."

He reckons he will stay in Shanghai for at least another two to three months, when he thinks the current pandemic situation will have finally ended.

Fellow masseuse Tang is also a migrant worker. The 45-year-old, who has partial sight, came in March from Xi'an, capital of northern Shaanxi Province. Just a week after her arrival, the massage parlor was forced to close due to the lockdown.

"I had thought it would be over quickly," she said, "but that turned out not to be the case."

But Tang is resolved to stay and carve a career for herself in Shanghai.

"Back in my hometown, I earned about 6,000 yuan a month. My husband works for chicken feed," she said. "It wasn't enough to support my child and parents, so I came to Shanghai to make more money."

According to Chen, his masseurs once earned nearly 10,000 yuan a month. Hitting that level again isn't likely in the near term, he said.