

## Becoming *Dagongmei*: Subject, Gender and Power in a Global Workplace

Pun Ngai 潘毅 [sonpun@ust.hk](mailto:sonpun@ust.hk)  
Division of Social Science, HKUST

I don't know how I survived, but I am the only one who can be alive. All the women from my village died in the fire. I still can't believe that I'm lucky enough to have escaped the gates of hell....

--- A survivor of a factory fire in China

### *A Minor Journey*

On 19 November 1993, a blaze had engulfed a plant in Shenzhen run by Hong Kong subcontractor to a European toy maker, a brand famous in U.S. and European markets. It killed over eighty workers. Twenty others were seriously burned and another sixty injured. Chance had brought me to meet Xiaoming who, alone all of the migrant women from her village, had survived the factory fire. It was Xiaoming, the survivor, and the blaze, which caused the collapse of the factory building, but never dashed the dreams of the young Chinese *dagongmei*, the migrant working daughters, that drove me to this present book project.<sup>1</sup> Assembling this inescapable social violence inflicted on women's lives, I start the long journey to search for a Chinese worker-subject at the trajectory of China's state socialist system incorporating into global capitalism. I also strive to articulate a possible *minor* genre of social resistance in contemporary China, which, is rapidly transforming itself into a "world factory" for the global production. Fire, pain, and memory flashed into Xiaoming's life story, highlighting an epochal trauma and hence the social resistance that runs through the lives of *dagongmei* in this

time of restructuring for the Chinese society.

Almost ten years have passed since the blaze. Xiaoming's life was still shimmering, offering shadows and lights to glimpse the birth and struggle of a new social body-*dagongmei* in a rapidly globalizing China. I met Xiaoming in the hospital. Her body was completely burned, all her skin seared and charred; left behind were a pretty face and glinting, innocent eyes. She looked weak but calm, very calm.

*Kids liked to fight, to jump, to sing. But I liked to dance, so I figured I could be a dancer someday...*

*It's not easy to get to my village. It's in a mountainous area that no train or bus can reach. You have to walk about an hour to reach home....*

*I have no idea of how to go back home now. ...*

*People there are poor, but very simple... there is almost no trust in the city. I don't like the city person.*

*For a couple of years, I helped my parents doing farm work and housework. Young people nowadays no longer like tilling the fields. I didn't either. Everybody said working "on the outside" was fun and I could earn a lot more money that way.*

*In 1990, I left with some co-villagers and took a job in a garment plant in Shenzhen. That was my first time of looking for a job. I was very scared when I was given an interview and tested by the management. Many people competed for jobs to get in the factory, and I felt I was alone to fight for it.*

*I told myself to be grown-up, as I had to take care myself with or without co-villagers in the same plant. I was placed on a tiny bunk in the factory dorm and I knew nobody. At that time, I understood the often said "taste", *ziwei*, of leaving home, that means you had to depend nobody but your own.*

*But getting out the first time was still exciting- the big city, the skyscrapers, the*

*shops, and so many people. ... It was like watching a film, and I was there. Everything was interesting to me, and I found myself very rustic and innocent. ...*

*But I wasn't happy with my first job. The factory, which was owned by a Taiwanese boss, often put off paying our wages. We were supposed to get paid on the first day of each month, but they were often late, sometimes a month, sometimes two months.... At least the pay wasn't lower than in the other factories. I could make about 300 yuan each month.*

*I left the factory in May 1991, and was introduced by my cousin to the toy company. It was a big plant.... We worked very hard, from sunrise to midnight, twelve hours a day. Every day I would be worn out, all my energy gone.... But I felt happy there. I had dozens of relatives and friends; we chatted a lot and helped each other.*

*From that point on, I never thought of working in another factory.... Every three months I could send about 600 yuan back to my hometown to my father as well as keep a few hundreds for my own. I thought I could at least work there for another two or three years.*

*But then the fire happened, the fire...*

I never expected to meet Xiao-ming, a young woman of twenty-one and a migrant worker fresh from a village in Hubei, a relatively poor region in China. Worried that recalling memories of the fire would be too hard for her, we chatted about her childhood, her family and her work experience in Shenzhen. Many years later, after I had returned to the field site, I still could not forget Xiao-ming's face and voice.

*I was satisfied with my job in the toy plant. It was terribly hard work, but we had fun, too.*

*We had a plan. Before we went back home for marriage, we were going to*

*save money to go to Beijing. It was such a big dream.*

The social traumas foretells the social violence in general, as well as the specific triple oppressions - global capitalism, state socialism and patriarchal family - on the Chinese *dagongmei*, and how they work hand and in hand to produce specific labour exploitations along lines of class, gender and rural-urban disparity. These triple oppressions, politically, economically and socio-culturally reinforcing each other, are new configurations specific to the Chinese society at this time of opening the socialist system to global production. While these oppressions are still attached to their own cultural and social conditionings, they are rapid shifting and re-making, and eagerly looking for new matrixes of power and practices to regulate the society. Repositioning China as a “world factory” in the new international division of labour is no doubt a project of global capital, and hence provides the bedrock for nurturing a new Chinese working class in general, and a new worker- subject of Chinese *dagongmei* in particular (Lee 1995, 1998; Jacka 1998; Pun 1999; Xu 2000). Cheap labour and low land cost are not the only causes for the current relocation of the transnational capital in China, diligent, well-educated and docile Chinese women workers who are willing to toil for twelve hours each day, who are fitting to the just-in-time production, and who are the potential consumers for the global products are all the must and the most tempting.

The lives of Chinese *dagongmei* have to be understood against this larger movement that made up two reactionary forces undergoing in China: one, the changing modes of technologizing or political engineering of the party-state over the society; two, the increasing *capitalization* or *marketization* of the socialist society, embroidered with a hegemonic eulogy, the “search for modernity” or “quest for globality”, and branded under a slogan, *yu quanqiu jiegui*, “setting (China) on the track of globalization”. Once the central component in understanding the Chinese society was the

party-state-planning nexus. Now it is the party-state-market complex- with its enlarged power blocs and blurred boundaries among political and business elites- that drives the on-going conflicts and tensions in the society, generating inevitably new social forces and social resistances. The rapid changes of China in the past two decades - the opening of the country to global capital and the introduction of market mechanisms to rescue the declining legitimacy of the party-state, and thus the contractual engineering of the society by both market and state inflicted double wounds and triple oppressions on the Chinese society. The hybrid marriage of the state power and the global capital technologized both the society and the individual. This time, land and labor, nature and human life are all “marketized” as commodities for sale, not merely by the “capitalist” market, but by the “socialist” party-state. The decentering of the central power, and the weakening of ideological apparatus, are far from a “retreat of state” in regulating social life in reform China.<sup>2</sup> Rather, the worn-out yet still existing hukou system, the parochial nature of urban governments with expanding administrative power, the strict control of population and economic development, and the suppressive measures on independent labor organizations all dictate a specific process of proletarianization and its struggle in China.

Transience is the major characteristic of the lives of Chinese *dagongmei* - whose staying in the urban factories is often short-term, averagely four to five years. Transient working life is certainly not a choice of the women migrant workers, but an outgrowth of the legacy of socialist control and the residue of Chinese patriarchal family. Structurally bounded by the state *hukou* system, the registry system tied one’s fate to the origin of birth either as urban or rural population, the Chinese migrant workers, often named as *mingong*, peasant- workers, are deprived of basic rights to stay in the cities, to form their families and to enjoy proper education, medical care and other social welfares entitled to urban residents.<sup>3</sup> This resulted in the widespread utilization of

dormitory labor in the industrial or developing zones in the China urban areas, by which both foreign and local enterprises can maximize the working time and extracting labour power, without worrying of reproduction of labour in the long run. Hence, temporary use of Chinese labour is institutionally legitimated by the Chinese state whose *hukou* system, albeit changing, provided population and labour control that are in favor of global and private capital.

Exploitative features are further inscribed with local social and cultural configurations for Chinese women workers that further perpetuated the temporary use of labour for global workplaces in Shenzhen as well as in other economic developing zones. The Chinese patriarchal family, though rapidly changing in the reform period,<sup>4</sup> is still seriously constraining the life- course of Chinese rural women, especially in terms of education, household division of labour, wage work and the timing for marriage. For most of the women migrant workers, often young and single,<sup>5</sup> they still have to struggle for their own decision-making over waged work and their marriage. Mid or late twenties of women are usually their family bottom line for allowing them to work in the urban areas, and the delay for marrying out will be too high a cost to pay. Short-term waged work hence is expecting in the pre-marital life cycle for most of the village girls. Not without resistance to this common fate, quitting work for marriage and returning to the village life again are still the most sharing features of the migrant working daughters. Golden period of youth life, around age of eighteen to twenty-five, are thus subsumed to the expropriation of global capitalism and the state socialist system which is continuously in favor of urban and industrial development.

Taking a path different from western proletarianization, the Chinese migrant workers did not launch open confrontations, nor yet able to form significant political force, as any formal organizing or attempt to form independent trade union would be seriously suppressed by the Chinese government (Chan 2001; Lau 2001). The formation

of an organized working class force was truncated, but if opportunities provided, these migrant workers would not hesitate to initiate spontaneous strikes and collective actions that, though often short-lived, were generally unrecorded. Transience and liminality as the characteristics of migrant working life also caused barriers for nurturing collective class force over a period of time in the cities. However, in a situation that confrontational collective actions were severely contained and politically suppressed, a motley collection of transgressed actions ranging from common workplace defiance to everyday tactics was sprouting and spreading in China (see Zhou 1993; Liu 1996; Lee 1998b; Blecher 2002; Perry 2002).

For the individual migrant workers like Xiaoming, they seemed to understand well their situation. While Xiaoming knew that she would encounter the same impasse as other working daughters: a choice between single life as worker in the city or married life in the village, she and her friends, nevertheless, had other thoughts. They knew that after marriage they would be forced to stay in their husband's village for the rest of their lives and probably get no more chances to work in the city. Around the time of the 1992 New Year holiday, a wish became a plan: save money for a tour of Beijing, the capital, before they were married out. The everyday tactics of *dagongmei*, always lively, situationally and collectively, are venturing to a minor journey of transgression in the contemporary China.<sup>6</sup>

Xiaoming began to save money for herself. By late autumn of 1993, after sending money to her family, she had 500 *yuan*. One chill night, the fire burned the money and the dream....

*Social Actor or Class Subject?*

We are all embarked on the adventure of modernity; the question is whether we are galley slaves or passengers with luggage who travel in hope, as well as being aware of the breaks we will have to make.

-- Alain Touraine, *Critique to Modernity*

Xiaoming's passage to becoming a *dagongmei* coincided with the social transformation that began in the early 1980s, as the state socialist regime of contemporary China launched the shift from a rigid planned economy to a market economy. The quest for modernity, or globality in the new language, in China's post-socialist period, has meant the opening of the Chinese society to private and global capital and the advent of the capitalist apparatus and relations in regulating not only economic life, but also social and cultural life. The first broad question that encompasses this book is that of the change of individual lives in the wake of China's search for modernity and globality in the reform period. In a society in transition, what does the hybrid mixture of state socialist and capitalist relations ask individual bodies to live up to? What sort of new subjects, new identities and new relationships of power and resistance emerge?

As an overwhelming project of globality, Alain Touraine highlights its paradox, by arguing that “the contemporary world accepts modernity by an overwhelming majority”; “almost all societies have been penetrated by new forms of production, consumption and communication”; and in some cases, “even when leaders denounce their country’s penetration by the market economy, the people welcome it”, especially among the poor or unemployed workers.<sup>7</sup> The eagerness to articulate a modern imagination is shown as much by the Chinese state as by the Chinese migrant workers- as we will look deep into their lives and struggles in this dilemma. This process of globalizing “modernity” is by no means a simple process of universalizing new forms of production, consumption and communication, and no doubt requires more sophisticated studies which should

seriously take the two forces- of *universalization*, and of *disjunction* and cultural differences- into consideration (Appadurai 1996). Theorizing these two forces not as oppositional, but as multi-layered, crisscrossing and overlapping, sometimes cooperating, sometimes confrontational, and sometimes retreating, is more helpful. And if “modernity at large” is a project too big for any single national or individual imagination to contain, then the argument for an “alternative version of Chinese modernity” based on a conventional nation-state as a unit of analysis is also very problematic (Ong and Nonini, eds 1997; Rofel 1999).

Becoming *dagongmei*, a journey of subject- making in this project of “modernity at large”, conjured a new dialogic space where the force of universalism and the force of historical specificity and cultural difference can meet and collude into new forms of configuration. The genealogy of the new subject, the *dagongmei*, derives insights from Foucault’s “techniques of self”, in which he clearly argues for discerning “the procedures, which no doubt exist in every single society, suggested or prescribed to individuals in order to determine their identity, maintain it, or transform it in terms of a certain number of ends, through relations of self-mastery or self-knowledge.”<sup>8</sup> Foucault suggests a kind of project that can articulate an intersection of two themes: a history of subjectivity and an analysis of the forms of “governmentality”.<sup>9</sup> On the issue of subjectivity, what we have to ask is: How was the subject established, at different moments and in different institutional contexts, as a possible, desirable, or even indispensable object of knowledge?<sup>10</sup> For the analysis of governmentality, what is at stake is not only performing the necessary critique of the common conceptions of “power”, or analyzing these as a domain of strategic relations focusing on the behavior of the other or others, but rather as “the government of the self by oneself in its articulation with relations with others”.<sup>11</sup> Foucault’s genealogical projects on the technologies of self, nevertheless, are inclined to highlight the detailed techniques of

individualizing the subject, which somehow overshadow what he has argued concerning the “articulation of relations with others”. If individuation is indeed the central “technique” of making a modern self, as many others would like us to believe, it is high time to review this process not in dichotomized western or eastern contexts, but as to show how this process of subjectivization involves a project of both atomic individuation and relational or communal subject- making.

I would not intend to suggest that the Chinese subject would be more relational and thus the western-oriented model of the individualized self is irrelevant to the understanding of the Chinese modernity and its subject. On the issue of constituting the modern Chinese self as part of the modernity project in general, and turning Chinese rural migrant bodies into industrial workers in particular, there is always a complex dual process: an intensity of market forces geared towards an increasing atomization of Chinese individual life, and a recurrence of social force entangled in the meshes of *guanxi* (social network), *tongxiang* (native-place relationship), kinship, family, gender, age, marital status and so on (Honig 1986; Hershatter 1986; Perry; 1993; Yang 1994). When Xiaoming was placed on the production line in the garment plant, facing the multiple examinations and controls by management, she was no doubt *displaced*-separated from her family and *tongxiang* who were also striving for jobs - and was alone to face the imperative of capital, whose techniques were that of individuation. The process of entering the factory at the very beginning was a process of individualizing the self, letting the individual realize that she had recourse to nobody, but herself. This was a social struggle, a struggle to become *dagongmei*, but its passage was that of a loner. Aloneness was an overwhelming theme repeatedly articulated by the *dagongmei* in their diaries, letters and various genres of literature.

While individualizing the subject is undoubtedly a project of capital, practicing forms of collectivity embedded in social relations or enacted from cultural resources are

also persistent “everyday tactics” of workers working against market forces, either in early modern China or contemporary period. In the early twentieth century China, the formation of *tongxiang* enclaves in the Shanghai or Tianjin workplaces was an important way of generating social identities (albeit fragmented, fluid and changing), and thus overt or covert social actions (Honig 1986; Hershatter 1986; Perry 1993).<sup>12</sup> In the contemporary China, women in the foreign-owned workplaces or elsewhere are still very much encircled by *tongxiang* and kin networks which, albeit, re-imagined and constructed, often provide the most intimate and trustful supports to them. The distinctions between the Cantonese, Chaozhou, and Hakka workers, or the outside province workers like Sichuan, Hunan or Hubei still matter most among the women workers themselves (Tam 1992; Lee 1998a; Pun 1999). The articulation of *tongxiang* identity is very much a cultural performance project in which the Chinese migrant workers live up as a counter tactic to the individuation project of capital in the process of Chinese proletarianization. The process of subjectivization- the making of *dagongmei*- thus involves a multiple process of atomic individuation and certain forms of collectivity specific to the Chinese society.

Embedded in specific familial relations in the Chinese society, the lives of *dagongmei* are still very much constrained while at the same time rendered supports from the rapidly changing Chinese patriarchal family in the reform period. The patriarchal relations, as Stacey (1983), Andors (1983) and Wolf (1985) have argued, were never undermined by the socialist revolution in China. The patriarchal family was persistent throughout the Mao’s period by the patrilocal marriage practices and the unequal sexual division of labour in the realm of work and household. The post-Mao family, especially in rural areas, repeated and reenacted the patriarchal relations by openly discriminating the female babies as inferior sex, and continuing to pressurize daughters for marrying out at the age of mid twenties (Davis and Harrell, eds 1993;

Croll 1995). For the Chinese women, the fate as daughters and wives to men were seriously confronted and if no collective resistance to the Chinese patriarchal family was recorded (Sheridan and Salaff, eds 1984; Judd 1994), painful individual acts to challenge the family decisions between work and marriage were numerous and mounting in the workplace. Touching women stories of escaping to work in the factory, either from their father's or husband's home, were often heard and shared among the women workers.<sup>13</sup> Teasing between life in the industrial work and the rural family, most of the *dagongmei* nevertheless opted for the first and dreamed to stay in the city as long as possible. However, when conflicts between these two realms were not overt, family and kin supports are still the last resort for the Chinese rural migrant workers who have no where to rely when problems or difficulties arisen from their urban industrial work.

In addition to drawing on the insights of Foucault's ideas on technologies of self, the Marxian analysis of class struggle, or women studies on gender and labour, I turn to the work of Alain Touraine and his concept of "social actors" as I embark on this *dagongmei* project. *Dagongmei* like Xiaoming, working in foreign-invested factories, are the one of the pioneers to experience the deep and rapid social transformation of Chinese society - the change of an agricultural and state socialist mode of production to an industrial and capitalist mode of production. As women, as peasants and as migrant workers, *dagongmei* are liminal subjects living in a shifting society. They can never be easily co-opted by any canonized language, whether intellectually or politically. Ann Anagnost puts it succinctly: "making subaltern speak" as a revolutionary project in Chinese literary realism in the early twentieth century was paradoxically subsumed into a party-state parlance making use of an alienated category of Marxist class analysis.<sup>14</sup> While the category of class no longer looks alien in reformed China, the making of the new worker- subject is still far more complicated than a conventional, or worst, reified

Marxist notion of “class” can discern.

Maoism, in contrast, placed great emphasis on human agency and creativity and thus was an antithesis to the orthodox Marxist analysis of class and society. The notion of “class” was no doubt alien to the Chinese peasantry who formed the base of the Chinese communist revolution, and yet the communist party persistently proclaimed itself the vanguard of the Chinese proletariat. The arbitrary relationships between political symbolism and class subjects were too conspicuous, making the Chinese communist revolution look like a “post-modern project” long before post-modernism came into play in the field of social analysis. There was too great a gap between the signified and the signifier, and the discrepancy sustained and yet at the same time defeated the language of “class” as a meaningful signification, while the language persistently and seriously affected the constellation of the Chinese subject- status. The political signification of socialist China was not a make-up, but instead required mass mobilization from time to time to fill up its inevitable discrepancy. The Chinese subject in terms of “class” identity thus was not understood as a distortion, but the interpellation of subject positions demanded a force if anything greater than the economic or material. The dialectics of class relations, Mao believed, required a cultural revolution.

The formation of the new social body, Chinese *dagongmei*, with all their struggles, rich, heterogeneous and multi-sited, could no longer be canonized or politicized as mere “class struggles” as the subjects experience, make sense, react and project their life-paths in the contemporary China. It does not mean that the class analysis is simply outdated as the language of class is now diluted by the hegemonic discourses of state and capital in the search for a global China. It is not that simple. Restructuring the class structures and relationships is a timely project for capital and the newly emerged elites in the Chinese society. And yet subsumption of class analysis is their political strategy to hide their class positions and social privileges. The class language is subsumed so as

to clear the way for a neo-liberal economic discourse which emphasizes individualism, professionalism, equal opportunities and the open market. Thus the history of “class” in China is doubly displaced, first by the Chinese state-party, and second by the market. The hallucination of the class as a “signifier” is very political to truncate the signification chain of the class experience.

As a weapon of social struggle, class analysis, if useful, can only be re-activated by rooting the class experience from below, from the everyday infrapolitics of the Chinese workers themselves in confronting with the capital and the market.<sup>15</sup> For the Chinese *dagongmei*, caught in the impasse of triple oppressions, they have to live out their own class experience as part of their life struggles. And if the Chinese subject has once been traumatically interpellated by an alien language of class from above, then *dagongmei*, as one of the new subjects which has emerged at the intersection between global capitalism and the Chinese modernity project, conjures a desire for a return to “class analysis”, which is paradoxically slipped into a dead language because of its hegemonic nature. I take care to note that it was not the “class analysis” as such that grafted the Chinese subject as the effects of the hegemonic discourse, but instead the very nature of political arbitrariness from above. If “class analysis” is already a dead language in today’s China, the re-articulation of the new “*dagong*” subjectivity in post-socialist China is, nevertheless, a timely project.

### *Becoming Dagong Subject*

*Dagong* denotes a process of turning individuals into working subjects, particularly for a capitalist boss. *Mei* further registers the working subjects with a gendered identity in a specific context. Imported from the Cantonese in Hong Kong where labor relations are mainly regulated by the market and solely capitalist, *dagong*

simply means “working for the boss”, a term which powerfully connotes commodification of labor, or the exchange of labor for a wage (Lee 1998a). The terms *dagongmei*, the working girls, and *dagongzai*, the working boys, used extensively over the past two decades, contrasts with term *gongren*, the proletariat, a far more popular usage in Mao’s period, and one that denoted a highly privileged class status in Chinese society, out of the reach of the Chinese peasantry. The state propaganda stated that *gongren*, the proletariat class, were the masters of the country; they were not the alienated labor that Marx said existed in the capitalist society. The *gongren* as an ideal type was a new kind of subject produced by the Chinese socialist state to liberate labor from alienation and fully actualize itself in the process of production. In actuality, in the past three decades of state socialist experiences, the Chinese *gongren* virtually worked for the state, with the state as a *socialist boss* providing not only wages, but permanent employment, housing, medical care and education for the younger generation (Walder 1986). It was nevertheless a special type of state socialist labor relations that struggled to change capitalist labor relations.

*Dagong* means not merely a departure from the “socialist boss”, but also the coming of new bosses from global capitalist societies. No longer under the protection of the state, *dagong* also refers to casual labor, labor that can be dismissed at will, that can be replaced by anyone who is willing to sell his or her labor for a lower price. The value of *dagong*, if any, is determined by market forces and its surplus value is extracted as a component of capitalist profit. In a word, the term *dagong* signifies the change to capitalist labor relations and the *dagongzai/mei* is a new configuration imbued with awareness of labor exploitation and class consciousness.

How can this new “*dagong* subject” develop its subjectivities and identities in a way that can be completely differentiated from its previous “class subject” - the *gongren* of the state socialist period? And how can the making of this new Chinese worker-

subject derive its dynamics and “life tactics” from below which can hardly be subsumed into any single political agenda? And what modalities of transgression, individually or collectively, can be formulated without anchoring any “teleologist vision” of proletarianization? These are the most urgent questions that are going to center this book.

Stripped of an essentialized connotation of class, *dagongmei* is a specific worker-subject not only embodied with production relations, but also social and cultural discourses, consumption relations, social networks, familial relations, gender trope, and social resistances. If class subject is a project of othering, an inclination of externalizing into others, an abstraction that renders access to political manoeuvres, then the *dagong subject* is a “return to actor” who, as Alan Touraine argues, is “a call to transform the self in to a social actor”, and as such, the subject strives to resist both the state power and market forces.<sup>16</sup> It is a return to one’s experience, and the realization of one’s position in relation to others. From that realization, one decides to take action, either individually or collectively. It is the firm return to oneself, and the mastery of the subject’s right that can be safeguarded against political arbitrariness. And if *dagongmei* is a female worker- subject, the social resistance generated by the subject should not be reduced to “class struggle” only, for it is a workers’ struggle not defined in traditional sense, where workers’ autonomy and dignity against state and capital, and women’s rights against patriarchal culture are defended. As such, this collective resistance is at once a social conflict and a cultural project.

### *Subject, Desire and Transgression*

The episode of the factory blaze that opens the book contains nearly all the crucial plotlines that need to be disentangled in the following chapters. First of all, the great force

of rural to urban migration meets with the advent of global production in contemporary China- that the industrial capitalism simultaneously manipulates wants, lacks and desires and enshrines them into the Chinese peasantry who not only dreams of becoming industrial producers, but also modern consumers. The creation of desire and lack is the art of the market economy that “involves deliberately organizing wants and needs (*manque*) amid an abundance of production; making all of desire teeter and fall victim to the great fear of not having one’s needs satisfied.”<sup>17</sup> The desire to be *dagongmei*, shown by the great flux of mobility to the urban industrial zones, traces the politics of the capitalist production in manipulating the social lack and generating the desire of Chinese rural workers to fill the void. This void, nevertheless, as the *record impossible* of the genealogy of the rural- urban disparities, regional and gender inequalities, is historically and institutionally fixated by the Chinese socialist system (Perry and Wong eds. 1985; Seldon 1993; Solinger 1993; 1999; Stacey 1983; Wolf 1985; Croll 1985; 1994). The urge and eagerness of the young women to leave their rural hometowns depicts a picture far more complicated than the simple explanation that current migration flows in the reform China was dictated by the logic of poverty or the rural surplus labour (West and Zhao, eds 2000; Zhang 2001a). Poverty, or on the other hand abundance (surplus labour), as the crystallised form of social lack is produced and organized by the power of state and capital. Poverty, especially the huge gap between the urban and rural societies, is not unreal, but artificial and historically made, and, most important of all, is something that needed to be consumed and refilled.

The depreciation of agricultural work and its contrast with industrial production hinted that the politics of *différance*, hierarchy and othering are involved in the process of producing new industrial subjects of *dagongmei* (Kondo 1990; Pun 1999). Rural bodies, often imagined as rough, dirty, rustic or lazy, are contrasted with the sharpness and dextrousness of the industrial bodies who are often said to be young, female, single, and particularly fitting into the new international division of labour, as showed by many

previous studies on women workers and industrial capitalism (Nash and Fernandez-Kelly, eds 1983; Kung 1983; Leacock and Safa, eds 1986; Ong 1987; Lamphere 1987; Rosen 1987; Hsiung 1996). The constitution of new selves and identities is an act of power,<sup>18</sup> and a process of self-subjectivization, exclusion and displacement<sup>19</sup> that involves the deployment of institutional controls, disciplinary techniques, the art of naming and the power of language. To construct new industrial subjects in the workplace, the old socialist and rural beings are constantly devalued, downgraded and forsaken. Rural bodies, especially non-Cantonese speakers, are imaged as abject subjects - i.e. the dark flip side of the new, modern and desirable identity. Existing social differences such as that between the rural and the urban, the north and the south, male and female, the married and the single are all manipulated to maintain, extend or modify the new power of domination and hierarchies. *Dagongmei*, as a new identity, as a cultural artefact, is produced at the particular moment when the global capitalist machine comes to fruition in post-Mao China; it marks the beginning of the new phrase of proletarianization regulated by all market, state and social forces.

If Karl Marx has already pointed out that the division between town and country is the basis of the accumulation of capital, I echo to argue that sexual difference is another *must*, especially in the age of global manufacturing (Nash and Safa, eds. 1976; Ong 1987; Stitcher and Parpart, eds. 1990) Mao's China highlighted class whilst negating sexual differentiation; reform China, on the other hand, is marked by the proliferation of sexual discourses and female bodily images (Croll 1995; Evans 1997). Capitalist production and consumption rely on a sexual discourse as the basic constitution of the system of difference and hierarchy. Xiaoming was recruited not only because she was a rural migrant worker, but also because she was a female who was imaged as cheaper and easier to regulate and control. Foreign-owned electronic compounds in China are metaphorically depicted as peach orchards, where female adolescents wait for men to pursue them. The bio-power of

the production machine has no interest in modelling a general body; it is interested only in a particular body, a feminine body, which is imagined as more obedient, tolerant and conforming to the factory machine.

But *dagongmei* is far from a simple cultural artefact, an effect of power and discourse, or a gender construct. As a worker- subject, *dagongmei* is a subject upon which the process of subjectivation fights with the process of subject- making and the struggle for a “return to the actor”. The political technology over rural bodies meets with the tremendous desire of Chinese peasants to liberate their long segregated lives, and hence acts as agents to change their lives. *Dagongmei*, as a specifically Chinese subaltern, embodies the dual process of domination and resistance as marked by various forms of collaboration, transgression and defiance which together come to make up its complex, dissident and heterogeneous subjects.<sup>20</sup> *Dagongmei* are complex, dissenting and tactical subjects who are up against a system of inherently incomplete domination, and who know how to locate the fissures for transgression within the grids of discipline and power. Before the disciplinary regime, no matter how powerless they are, *dagongmei* are more than simply “docile bodies”, but “tactical and resistant bodies” who sometimes covertly or overtly confront the domination, and sometimes successfully subvert or break down the disciplinary power. I am not going to romanticise these “everyday life practices”,<sup>21</sup> or “cultural struggles”,<sup>22</sup> but the stories and the experiences, the pains and the suffering, the screams and dreams of the women workers on the shop floor reveals the intriguing portrait of “the politics and poetics of transgression” that I am going to tell.

### *Field site and Field worker*

The field is a labyrinth for most ethnographers, and the attraction of the labyrinth often comes from temptation, often culturally and spatially specific. My urge to work in

a factory and to act as a *dagongmei* is definitely subjective and loaded with ideological burdens. The search for an identity of the female worker helps to shore up my intellectual and “radical” fantasy to resist the irresistible advent of global capitalism. The workplace, I believe, is the “right” space in which the female bodies of *dagongmei*, myself, and this project will be properly situated. The blooming of foreign invested factories in Shenzhen SEZ demonstrates the rapid transformation of Chinese society in the last decade. These factories provide the best places to see how the microphysics of capitalist forces and the existing state socialist relations produce the new subjects of *dagongmei*. I then decided to intrude into one of them and start my nomadic ethnographic journey. The failure of Mayfair Yang’s attempt to get into a factory in China by using introductions from state bureaucratic agents warned me against contacting any state organs. My identity as a Hong Kong person, rather, helped me to make connections with these foreign invested factories, since more than 80% of these factories in Shenzhen are owned by Hong Kong capital. The factory where I worked in Shenzhen during 1995 and 1996 was an electronics company owned by Hong Kong capital. For anonymous and aesthetic reasons, I named it Meteor Electronics Company Limited (Meteor). Meteor, a kind of shooting star, evoked the rapid change and the epic shifting of contemporary Chinese society. Owned by a good friend of my family, Mr Chou, as the major shareholder and the company director, approved of my research project.

My enthusiasm for work in a factory somewhat cooled down, not due to the difficulty of getting access to the field, but by the postmodern critique of the fieldwork experience, and by the daily negotiation in the field site later. The critique says that there is no “field” as such, and thus there should be no “reality” of Chinese society “out there” waiting for me to know and understand. The knowing subject is not value-free but is complicitous in creating known objects. Foucauldian insights tell me that the

making of “truth” and knowledge is about power, resistance and social practice.<sup>23</sup> Yet for me, it is clear that the “field” in China is neither “out there”, nor can it be freely and arbitrarily constructed by one’s own will; rather, it is always historical, political and locally embedded and located. The field as a living text, as an orchestration of moving signs is definitely not an arbitrary construct, but rather is instantaneously negotiated and enacted by: a) the political situation of China; b) the agency of the field informants; and c) my experience and representation as a novice ethnographer.

My access to the field was made possible, nevertheless, by the Open-door policy adopted since 1979. Ethnographers from the outside are now for the first time allowed to stay in China to do intensive fieldwork, though under official supervision most of the time. My research proposal, written for the management in the summer of 1995, emphasized the understanding of labor relations and workers’ psychology and thus the need to work on the shop floor and sleep in the workers’ dormitory. I received a response in August 1995, confirming that I could start my fieldwork in two months’ time. I had visited the company twice before I formally became a full-time worker in November 1995. My proposal was modified by the company director, Mr Chou, who did so for health and safety reasons rather than because of political or sensitive issues. He suggested that I work in the general office as a clerk rather than as a worker on the line. For working hours, he suggested I go off work at 5:00 p.m. and do no overtime work at night. For accommodation and food arrangement, he suggested I eat and stay with the Hong Kong staff in a shared apartment rather than with the local workers in the dormitory. It took me a long time to convince him that his good intentions would spoil my research if I could not work and live directly with the production line workers. He simply took me for an idealist student who had no experience of working and thus did not understand the hardships of factory life. He allowed me to try out the first month and readjusted my demands afterwards.

My ambition to go directly to the heart of workers' lives, however, did me little good. I tried to present myself as a "student trainee" who came to learn the operation of the factory system and the lives of women workers, but most of the line workers still did not trust me at the beginning month. Instead, I was encircled by the supervisory ranks, such as department managers, forepersons and line leaders, who showed much curiosity and interest in me. These people were much more educated than the women workers and could imagine what a research meant. They often directed and delineated my research interest by their own imagination. Surprisingly, I was heartily helped by these people, as they enthusiastically showed me their work and explained to me in detail what they were doing. At first I found myself too exhausted to cope with the long working hours, as I was not yet used to them. I was forced to develop too many "friendships" that I did not know how to handle. The relationships that I had developed with the supervisory staff hindered my communication with the shop floor workers. I was always treated as a "special guest" in the workplace, which spoiled my dream of becoming a "real" *dagongmei*.

It took at least a month or two for the managerial staff's curiosity on me to wane. As days went by, I became "normal". Women on the line started to talk to me. They shared their hardships and feelings, hoping that I could understand them, since I was working on the line and was more willing to listen to them. My merging into the workplace community was much helped by staying in the workers' dormitory, where all private spaces were shared and one could hardly hide anything if one tried. Mistrust was clear, as every day we chatted, ate, read, and listened to popular songs together. While most of my co-workers or room mates could never make sense of what a social research meant, they nevertheless had their own understanding and imagination. Writing fiction about "real" workers' lives and poor people was the role they imagined and inscribed on me as an ethnographer. "Bitter" stories and female grievances, somewhat exaggerated or

invented, started to bombard me, the never failing good listener. On many occasions some Hakka women talked to me with great passion in local dialects for a long time, murmuring their hard experiences of life while I understood nothing. What I could speak fluently was Mandarin, Cantonese and Chaozhou dialects. So, except for those who could speak Cantonese, most of the workers talked to me in Mandarin, though with strong local accents. Cantonese was the official company language, while in daily life Mandarin was the most common language that workers of different origins used to communicate with each other.

My fieldwork in the company ended in June 1996, at a time when I already had a lot of good friends, and when I started to grasp a few dialects that could help to communicate with my co-workers with less difficulty. The scream of a woman worker at the dormitory finally brought to a standstill of my fieldwork as I was woken up to know the pain of ethnographic practice. In a situation where I had little time to drop down field notes, and most important of all, to make sense the daily shifting vignettes in the workplace, I found myself lost. Eleven to twelve hours' work each day sapped me of all my energy. And if there was still something left, I preferred chatting with my co-workers before we went to sleep. If there was a rest day on Sunday, everybody slept like "pigs" until noon time and then went out shopping in the afternoon. Most of the time I struggled to get up early in the morning to write down what I thought was particularly important and what should not be forgotten. Failure to do so was the normal case. Thus I wrote field notes based on memory and afterthought, which gave me an acute sense that ethnography, after all, is a written construct. Ethnographic reconstruction is an attempt, a never fulfilled attempt, to make sense, to order and reorder rich yet chaotic lived experiences which are inherently resistant to patterning and conceptualizing.

## *Conclusion*

The formation of the new worker- subject, *dagongmei*, is the central theme of the project. *Dagongmei* as a specific cultural-symbolic artifact as well as a worker-subject, constituted at the particular moment when transnational capital came to China in the post- socialist period. *Dagongmei* thus is a newly embodied social identity emergent in contemporary China to meet and resist the changing socio-economic relations of the country and the needs of capital. As a condensed identity, it tells the full story of how a state socialist system gives way to the capitalist world economy and how capitalist practices depend on the regulation of class and sexual relations. As a worker-subject, it foretells the new configurations of social resistance and the coming of a “silent social revolution” from below.

I try to elucidate how the newly formed “working class”, born under the light of the Chinese socialist economy integrating into the world economy, are subjected to both the workings of the market and state forces, and are *specific* to the form and process of its historical making. The specificity of the “new working class” lies in the paradoxical processes by which it is often deformed, or even killed, at the moment of its birth. *Dagongmei*, as a new social identity is crafted and then inscribed on the rural female bodies when the young women enter into a particular set of production relations, when they experience the process of proletarianization and alienation. As a process of subjectivation, I discuss how the production of identity deploys the art of metaphor, the power of language and the politics of othering and differentiating. I also show how the regional, kin and ethnic differences are imaged to shape identities in the workplace. The central argument in this paper is that the process of subject- making according to the principle of locality or ethnicity is political, embodying rural-urban disparity and spatial inequality. Rural-urban disparity, as the major social difference in China, is manipulated, invented and reinvented to create abject subjects in the urban industrial space. Local and

kin-ethnic identities will be seen as performative cultural artifacts and practical relationships which are produced at instantaneous moments in specific situations. Sexed subjects will be seen as the effects of power and themselves are constituted through a process of signification and re-signification, differentiation and exclusion in specific times and places. The contention here is that sexualising laboring bodies is another necessary project of capital in contemporary China. *Dagongmei* as a sexual working subject stands in great contrast to the asexual subject of *gongren* in Mao's era. *Dagongmei* highlights the sexual re-orientation to industrial work that is crucial to industrial capitalism. I finally end with a reflection on the work as a political project and the practice of a minor genre of resistance. The nature of social violence in a globalizing China is highlighted so as to open up a call for a new theorizing of resistance that can go beyond individual and collective actions, non-political and political engagements, local and global struggles, and the like. Turning China to be a world factory, with all products "made in China" by women will certainly meet its great force of resistance and social change. A brief concluding effort marks the (in)conclusiveness of the project and asks for an open and participatory reading.

---

<sup>1</sup> I am still not sure whether it is those survivors who lived with dream and desire, or the fire and those deaths that moved me towards the present book.

<sup>2</sup> Vivienne Shue, *The Reach of the State: Sketches of the Chinese Body Politics* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988).

<sup>3</sup> See a good description and analysis of the *hukou* system on constraining different life chances and rights of Chinese urban and rural population by Dorothy Solinger, *Contesting Citizenship in Urban China*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

<sup>4</sup> For the discussions on the changing forms of family in post-Mao China, see Deborah Davis and Stevan Harrell, eds. *Chinese families in the post-Mao era* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

<sup>5</sup> More and more married women are recorded working in the urban areas, but young and single women are still the dominant feature of the labour use in foreign-invested factories.

<sup>6</sup> Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California, 1984); James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1990).

<sup>7</sup> See Alan Touraine, *Critique to Modernity* (Oxford UK and Cambridge USA: Blackwell 1995), pp.201-202.

---

<sup>8</sup> See Paul Rabinow ed., *Ethics: The Essential Work of Michel Foucault 1954-1984, Volume One* (England: Allen Lane, the Penguin Press), p87.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p.87-88.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p.87.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p.88.

<sup>12</sup> Emily Honig (1986), Gail Hershatter (1986) and Elizabeth Perry (1993) all made very good contributions by arguing that *tongxiang* relationship was central to the making of the politics of Chinese labor in the early twentieth century.

<sup>13</sup> See also a reporting by Hung, Xiangfa. “Taohun de dagongmei” [“The Working Girl who Escaped Marriage”], *Shenzhenren* [Shenzhen People], No. 12 (August 1994): 26, Shenzhen: Shenzhen zhonggonghui.

<sup>14</sup> See Ann Anagnost, *National Past-Times: Narrative, Representation, and Power in Modern China* (Durham and London: Duke University Press 1997), pp17-44.

<sup>15</sup> Elizabeth Perry rightly puts it, “Labor politics begins with the laborers themselves: their geographical origins, gender, popular culture, education attainments, work experiences, and the like.” in *Shanghai on Strike: The Politics of Chinese Labor* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), pp.4-5.

<sup>16</sup> By articulating the concept of “social actor”, Alan Touraine tries to decentralize the idea of a class subject that could be too easily slipped into a state or totalitarian project. A social actor, he argues, is not someone whose action is structurally determined by the economic position he occupies, but “someone who modifies the material and, above all, social environment in which he finds himself by transforming the division of labor, modes of decision-making, relations of domination or cultural orientations.” See Alan Touraine, *Critique to Modernity* (Oxford UK and Cambridge USA: Blackwell 1995, p. 207.) A social actor is a subject struggling to free from individualism and collectivism, and is ready to take action for the sake of social transformation in the open-ending forms of social resistance.

<sup>17</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (London: The Athlone Press, 1984), p.28.

<sup>18</sup> Ernesto Laclau, *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time* (London: Verso, 1990).

<sup>19</sup> Michel Foucault, “Technologies of the Self” in Martin, L., Gutman, H. and Hutton, P. (eds) *Technologies of the Self* (London: Tavistock, 1988).

<sup>20</sup> Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University Of California, 1984); Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, eds. *Selected Subaltern Studies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988). James Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990). Paul Willis, *Learning to Labour* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981).

<sup>21</sup> Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 1984.

<sup>22</sup> Ahwai Ong, “The gender and labour politics of postmodernity”, *Annual Reviews in Anthropology* 20 (1991): 279-309.

<sup>23</sup> Paul Rabinow, “Representations are Social Facts: Modernity and Post-modernity in Anthropology” in *Writing Culture: the Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, James Clifford and George Marcus, eds. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).