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## BECOMING *DAGONGMEI* (WORKING GIRLS): THE POLITICS OF IDENTITY AND DIFFERENCE IN REFORM CHINA

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Pun Ngai

The majority of the work-force in China's special economic zones and in other newly industrialized districts are *dagongmei* (working girls), coming mainly from rural areas.<sup>1</sup> This article focuses on these female peasant-workers and on a shift in their identities in light of China's attempt to enter the capitalist world economy. As women, as peasants and as migrant workers, the ambiguous and overlapping identities of the *dagongmei* illustrate how the party-state, the capitalist market and China's patriarchal culture work hand in hand to produce new relations of power and domination.

My central argument is that new social identities are created for these women, taking advantage of rural-urban disparities, and regional and gender inequalities.<sup>2</sup> These distinctions are manipulated by enterprise managers and

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<sup>1</sup> Among the few relevant studies, Phillis Andors' research on women workers in the Shenzhen economic zone in the mid-1980s points to the feminization of labour as China started to adopt export industrialization: women workers, mainly single and under 35, composed 70 per cent of the work-force in most of the light industries like textiles and electronics. See Phillis Andors, "Women and Work in Shenzhen", *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars*, vol.20, no.3 (1988), pp.22-41. Maria Tam records interesting stories of women workers in a joint-venture corporation in Shekou Industrial Zone in *The Structuration of Chinese Modernization: Women Workers of Shekou Industrial Zone* (PhD Dissertation, University of Hawaii, 1992). Lee Ching Kwan deploys Michael Burawoy's theory of production politics in a comparative study of two factory regimes, one in Hong Kong and one in Shenzhen. Ching Kwan Lee, *Gender and the South China Miracle: Two Worlds of Factory Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

<sup>2</sup> For a comparable situation, see Dorinne K. Kondo, *Crafting Selves: Power, Gender and Discourse of Identity in a Japanese Work-place* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990).

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supervisors in their efforts to create malleable workers. I will probe the regulatory practices and symbolic representations which shape the women's new social identities inside and outside the work-place, and will examine this from both the side of those possessing power and the side of those acted upon. One of the examples that will be analysed is the politics of dialects as a system of deliberately contrived distinctions marking social difference and hierarchy.

### **The Work-place as Field Site**

During a year-long ethnographic study in 1995-1996, I worked for more than five months in an electronics factory as a full-time woman worker on an assembly line. The Meteor Electronics Company<sup>3</sup> is owned by a Hong Kong firm headed by a Mr Chou, and is located in one of the industrial parks in Nanshan District, within the confines of the Shenzhen Special Economic Zone in Guangdong province. More than 80 per cent of the foreign-invested factories in Shenzhen are similarly owned by Hong Kong capital.

The factory contained over five hundred workers, ranging from 520 to 580 during my stay. Nearly 75 per cent were female, coming from rural areas all over the country. Though I tried to present myself to them as a "student trainee" who had come to learn the operation of the factory system and to study the lives of women workers, most of the production-line workers did not at first trust me. But after a month or two, as I worked on the line and lived alongside them in the workers' dormitory, mistrust evaporated as we chatted, ate, read and listened to popular songs together. Most of my co-workers and room-mates did not know what research meant, but they assumed that my role was to write stories about the lives of "real" workers and poor people. "Bitter" stories and female grievances, somewhat exaggerated or invented, started to bombard me. Some Hakka *dagongmei* talked to me with great passion for a long time about their difficulties, while I understood almost nothing of their dialect. I do speak fluent Mandarin, Cantonese and Chaozhou dialect.

### **What is a *Dagongmei***

*Dagongmei* is a newly coined term, denoting a new kind of labour relationship fundamentally different from those of Mao's period. A Cantonese term imported from Hong Kong, its meanings are multi-layered. *Dagong* means "working for the boss", or "selling labour", connoting commodification and a capitalist exchange of labour for wages. *Mei* means younger sister. It denotes not merely gender, but also marital status — *mei* is single, unmarried and younger (and thus of a lower status). In contrast to the term "worker" (*gongren*), which carried the highest status in the socialist rhetoric of Mao's day, the new word *dagong* signifies a lesser identity — that of a hired hand — in a new context shaped by the rise of market factors in labour relations and hierarchy.

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<sup>3</sup> This name is fictitious, to maintain anonymity.

The manufacture of identity involves the politics of difference and the politics of language. One can observe how, inside the work-place, the production of the identity of *dagongmei* deploys a play of *difference*, establishing a hierarchy between the rural and the urban, the northerner and the southerner, and male and female.

### To be a Worker: The Politics of Rural-Urban Difference

The politics of labour identity in China has been linked not only to industrialization but also to a distinctive urban-rural dichotomy.<sup>4</sup> Three decades of Chinese socialist history erected an iron curtain between rural and urban areas. With few exceptions, the rural areas could only nurture *peasants* and the urban areas *workers*, a rigid life-long division enforced by China's so-called *hukou* (household registration) system.<sup>5</sup> Mao's industrialization required an extraction of rural resources to support the urban establishment, rigid plans for rural and urban development, and thus a strict control on individuals' status and identity. The art of naming and classification was central to Mao's politics; *hukou* registration was one such creation. Deng's industrial development and ways of realizing the market economy, on the other hand, demanded not only raw materials but labour power from the rural areas as well.<sup>6</sup>

Among the 412 women workers in the Meteor factory in January 1996, only two held an urban *hukou* and only eighteen were married. All the rest were single, aged around 16 to 24, and from rural villages or rural towns. Although these young women were listed as peasants in the official registry classification, they were now needed as an urban industrial labour force. Thus a new identity needed to be attached to them.

At first, rural newcomers were not considered qualified workers, but "workers-to-be". Even after they had worked for a few months in the factory, young women were still often taken to be from the country. They were easily identifiable not because of their lack of skill or speed at work, but because of their appearance and their inappropriate behaviour in the industrial space. The newcomers looked comparatively fresh and quiet. They were rustic; though they wore T-shirts and jeans they did not put on face powder and lipstick, and their jeans were often a little bit out of fashion. Their pastime — knitting — imparted a distinctly rural image. The production regime and they themselves shared in a common desire to transform them into *dagongmei*, modern "working girls".

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<sup>4</sup> Deborah Davis, Richard Kraus, Barry Naughton and Elizabeth Perry (eds), *Urban Spaces in Contemporary China* (Cambridge and Washington: Cambridge University Press and Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 1995); Lisa Rofel, "Rethinking Modernity: Space and Factory Discipline in China", *Cultural Anthropology*, vol.7, no.1 (1992), pp.93-114.

<sup>5</sup> See Tiejun Cheng and Mark Selden, "The Origins and Social Consequences of China's *Hukou* System", *The China Quarterly*, no.139 (September 1994).

<sup>6</sup> Dorothy J. Solinger, *China's Transients and the State: A Form of Civil Society?* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Institute of Asia-Pacific Studies, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, 1991).

Meifang was a newcomer employed two days after I arrived. Aged 18, she was a fresh junior secondary school graduate from a village in Hunan province. We were both assigned to the task of screwing together an electronic part called a route-finder for a European car company. I always kept my work pace slow to ensure that every piece I produced was of good quality. I was afraid that any defect would cause my co-workers to be reprimanded. But late one afternoon I was drowsy. Our production-line supervisor, He Chuan, holding a route-finder, suddenly showed up in front of Meifang and yelled, "What the hell are you doing? You're going to spoil this casing. Such a big scratch here. (He pointed to the case of the route-finder.) You know you're not *ploughing a furrow*, don't you? These products are very expensive, you couldn't pay for it even if you worked in the fields for a year. *Cushou cujiao!* [Rough hands, rough feet]". Then he turned his eyes to me, and showing a sense of embarrassment, added, "These village girls are always like that, difficult to teach".

I saw Meifang's face blush and her eyes fill with tears. He Chuan had not looked into who had caused the scratch before he shouted at Meifang. He just came to the most likely target, shouting so that all of us doing the same task could hear and share the responsibility. But in shouting to express his authority, He Chuan was also showing he could not totally control the labour process.

The same metaphors were invoked time and time again on the shop-floor; to scratch a case was like ploughing a furrow on the land. You were a peasant, not a worker. But you should be a worker. By juxtaposing farming and industrial work in this way, a hierarchy of values was reinforced, in which factory work occupied a higher rank. A gap was produced, a void which allowed those in supervisory roles to produce malleable subjects.

Meifang was not the only one subjected to this kind of reprimand and the power of language. Every day on the shop-floor I heard discriminatory language directed toward my co-workers. A Cantonese term, *xiangxiamei*, village girl, was often used to depreciate the status of the women from rural areas. "*Xiangxiamei*, you know nothing except farming"; "*xiangxiamei*, what else can you understand? Learn the rules and behave in a civilized way"; "a *xiangxiamei* is always a *xiangxiamei*, *cushou cujiao*", and "a *xiangxiamei* can never be taught! Foolish and stupid" were regularly heard in the work-place, especially when the male supervisor or line leader came to criticize or scold the workers. The discursive meanings hidden in this daily usage underscored the notion of unfit *xiangxiamei* living incompatibly in the industrial world. On the one hand, there were stupid, uneducated and uncivilized *rustic* women whose labour was cheap and despised. On the other hand was the *modern* technology of a factory, whose products were valuable and exported internationally. Intense anxiety was aroused, making some people feel "deficient", "unfit" or "not properly suited" to the place they lived and worked. Women like Meifang felt frustrated for not living up to the demands of a modern world and for not themselves being modern.

Shop-floor conversations, arguments and reprimands always served to remind Meifang and other newly-arrived workers of their past identity as peasants. "*Cushou cujiao*" was the physical stigma of the person as a peasant, whereas *xiangxiamei* was the abject identity that had to be polished and

upgraded. To avoid being discriminated against or depreciated, one had to try hard to change oneself. Self-technologizing, as Foucault said, is the core of power.<sup>7</sup> To make war with one's past identity was for the sake of founding a new identity, to cut the umbilical cord of one's past life. Industrial work was desired not only because of the higher wages, but for the new identity and the new sense of life that it created. The imagined peasantness of "*cushou cujiao*" was the constitutive outside, or the negative otherness of the new identity. Without negating one's past identity, it was difficult to construct a new life.

### At Precept Time: Depreciating Village Life

Our production line had "precept" time — a time when the managerial staff gave speeches and admonitions to workers — every Wednesday at half past four. A few minutes before it started, Bailan, the production-line leader, would stop the line in preparation for a speech by members of the Personnel and Production Departments. At the first that I attended, we were addressed by Ying, a staff member from the Personnel Department. She wore a three-piece outfit with a skirt and looked like an urban career woman. In our company she was classified as clerical staff. Her status, wage, fringe benefits and living conditions were all different from the line operators. In a managerial tone, she said,

"This week a worker was caught helping another worker by punching her time card in her absence. It was a serious violation and we reserve the right to dismiss her at once. There is no excuse for anybody to clock on for best friends or co-villagers. The helper will be punished more seriously than the one who asked for help. In the factory one should be responsible for oneself only. You may be used to helping each other in the village, but remember that now you are in the factory....

The company inspected the workers' dormitory on Monday. Production tools, such as scissors and adhesive tape, were found in two workers' bunks. Though they are not expensive things, these are acts of theft. In accordance with the factory regulations, these two workers were each fined fifty *yuan*. Again, we consider these serious offences. If they violate the rule again, these two workers will be dismissed immediately.

During the inspection, I found cartons that had been brought out by the workers to make benches in their rooms. I emphasize that workers are not permitted to take any production materials outside the factory gate, even if they are waste. Waste is not your property, it belongs to the company. You have no right to use it. I can treat that as stealing too. Your habit of taking waste back home should be changed. Let me repeat, you are working now in the factory, and the bad habits you bring from the countryside should be given up. No spitting on the floor, and keep your bunk and room clean."

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<sup>7</sup> Michel Foucault, "Technologies of the Self", in L. Martin, H. Gutman and P. Hutton (eds), *Technologies of the Self* (London: Tavistock, 1988).



Ying's speech did not surprise anybody. It was the usual stuff. My co-workers simply stood quietly, some showing no interest in listening. Information circulated among workers through gossip and rumours, not through this kind of formal address. All my co-workers already knew who had been caught clocking on for another worker and who had been fined for possession of company materials. The common feeling towards the workers who were caught was that they were "unlucky". But Ying's words had their function. If in the end she could not safeguard the factory regulations and impose them on the workers, she nevertheless could put into words the *nature of peasantness*. *Huxiang bangzhu* — helping each other — was perceived to be an attribute of village life that had to be given up to live in an industrial world. People should be responsible for themselves alone. The production regime wanted only individuals. Industrial women should learn to compete with each other but not to help each other.

Stealing, too, was often taken to be a bad habit of country people. Ying and other staff of urban origin often warned me not to leave valuable things in the dormitory. Workers were not allowed to bring bags into the work-place. They were inspected going in or out the gate. Every worker was thought of as a potential thief. Bad characteristics of human nature, like a tendency to steal, were thought to be nurtured in the rural areas. The notion of private property was thus a serious problem to these peasant-workers. They were told to give up sharing resources and were even taught to despise the practice. Sharing was then connected to the notion of stealing, as in the repeated emphasis that factory waste products were company property which workers must not take away to reuse. The logic of capitalist practice needed to win out against any non-capitalist reasoning in order to assert its hegemony. To make this point, the other lifestyles had to be evoked and then destroyed.

### Inventing Local, Kin-ethnic Identity and Inequality

Women workers in the work-place are identified not merely as urban or rural people, but more specifically by region and ethnic groups. In the Meteor factory, one-third of the women were from villages or towns in Guangdong province. These Guangdong women were linguistically and regionally divided according to whether they came from Cantonese-dialect areas (42 per cent of the Guangdong female workers), Chaozhou-dialect areas (35 per cent) or Hakka areas (23 per cent). (Only two of the women workers were Shenzhen locals.) The other two-thirds of the total female labour force came from other provinces across China. Within the factory all these latter women are called *waisheng ren*, "provincial outsiders". They are also commonly referred to in the factory by their province of origin, as Sichuan *mei*, Hunan *mei*, Hubei *mei* or simply *Bei mei* (northern girl); whereas women from Guangdong province are called Chaozhou *mei*, Canton *mei* and Hakka *mei*. This identification of a person according to region or ethnicity embodies a sense of spatial inequality far more subtle than the rural-urban disparity. Where you are from and which dialect you speak gives an idea of your status and wealth, and thus your bargaining power and your position in the work-place hierarchy. The rural-urban distinction, as a bedrock for nurturing

differences, is deliberately divided into finely stratified hierarchies through its intersection with locality and kin-ethnic identities.

There is an epistemological problem with the concepts of locality and ethnicity. The boundaries of regional and ethnic groups in the factory were flexible and ever-changing. Individuals negotiated or identified themselves with a group of fellow workers according to situational needs in determinate settings.<sup>8</sup> A regional term like Sichuan *mei* or an ethnic term like Hakka *mei* could be expanded to include people from very different backgrounds, or narrowed to exclude quite similar individuals.

Moreover, locality groups often overlapped with ethnic groups. Geographical, genealogical and cultural elements all worked together to weave group identity and classify individuals. “*Ni shi shenme difang ren?*” (Where are you from?) was the most common question in the work-place. It was often used to start a conversation or to make friends with strangers. The question asks not only where you are from, but also what your kin-ethnic identity is and which local dialect you use. In daily conversations, to know “*ni shi shenme difang ren?*” was far more important than “what is your name?” or “how old are you?” Workers in the Meteor factory seldom directly asked each other their names, but rather asked about their affiliation to localistic and kin-ethnic groups. With few exceptions, workers were grouped into different locality or kin-ethnic enclaves, and fitted into different networks of obligation and authority in the work-place.<sup>9</sup>

Regional and kin-ethnic differences among workers were further exaggerated and manipulated to divide and rank the work-force. A work hierarchy was developed along the lines of the imagined cultural traits of each individual. Mr Chou, the director, said that in ten years’ work experience in Shenzhen, he had developed a particular knowledge about each kin-ethnic and locality group. He believed that different groups had different sorts of personalities and work capacities suitable for different kinds of jobs. His imagination, or invention, of their peculiarities shaped the hierarchy of the labour force inside the factory. He viewed the Chaozhou *mei* as submissive, attentive and clever, and thus suitable for accounting and personnel work. The Hakka *mei* were shy, reticent but industrious. They were good listeners and good followers, so you could rely on them, and after training they were fit for mid-level management such as work supervisors or production-line leaders. Chou said the Hakka *mei* were often seen by other employers in Shenzhen to be inferior to the Cantonese. But he himself thought they were better, because the Cantonese had more choices of upward mobility and so were not as loyal as Hakkas. In the Meteor factory, most of the supervisor and production-line leader positions were filled by Hakka and Chaozhou people, while almost all the *waisheng ren* were on the production line.

<sup>8</sup> On this, see Richard Fardon, “‘African Ethnogenesis’: Limits to the Comparability of Ethnic Phenomena”, in Ladislav Holy (ed.), *Comparative Anthropology* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987).

<sup>9</sup> Emily Honig, *Sisters and Strangers: Women in the Shanghai Cotton Mills, 1919-1949* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1986).



These latter women from outside the province were, Chou said, eager to show off their capabilities, given that the local government and local people discriminated against them in job hirings, promotions and rights of residence. Chou thought the Hubei *mei* were better than the Hunan *mei* since the poorer the region, the harder working the workers. Hubei *mei* were considered good operatives — they were more dextrous and more willing to work hard. Certainly, it was obvious that they had less bargaining power, especially since they were only a small group in the work-place.

The manipulation of regional and ethnic groups was further tangled by the production regime's use of them against each other to prevent labour resistance. Mr Wu, the Production Manager, said that although local groups seemed to dominate in certain positions, he would not let them totally control any part of the work process. Locality groups placed on the same production line were easier to control and train, but he would insert somebody from another dialect group as a counterweight. Wu said he did not trust these groups. They had so many tricks and could resist at any time through collective illness and slowdowns. In Production Line B, where I worked, there were twenty-two workers including eight from Chaozhou, five Hakka, three from Sichuan, three from Hunan and one from Guizhou. Our line leader, Bailan, was from Chaozhou. Bailan tried to keep a balance between each group and rarely showed preferences to any particular group, but in times of difficulty or rush orders, she still needed to rely on her own locals, the Chaozhou *mei*, to help her. In daily conversations, Cantonese and Mandarin were the two dialects most often used in our line as *official* languages, but when Bailan asked for help from her locals, she would turn to the Chaozhou dialect. Distrust among groups was serious. Communication was not only hindered by dialect differences, but also by the factory management's constructed biases and discrimination. A divided work-force was created as locality and kin-ethnic relationships were mapped out and reinforced to shape a hierarchy of jobs and to facilitate labour control.

### Language and Identity: Cantonization of the Work-place

The struggle over regional, rural/urban, and ethnic identities leads us to investigate the politics of dialects in the work-place. Language is a system of differences,<sup>10</sup> produced and reproduced in a web of social differences, hierarchies and distinctions which construe social reality. Struggle over legitimate language, as Bourdieu notes, is highly political, as it encompasses a struggle over identity, status and power.<sup>11</sup> It matters what dialect one speaks, and with what accent. In the factory, a hierarchy of dialects was deployed in a “language war” linked to the struggle over work position, resources and power.

<sup>10</sup> I will not discuss the Saussurian perspective in which language is viewed as an internal linguistic structure based on a system of difference. Rather I follow Bourdieu's line that the difference is social.

<sup>11</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power* (London: Polity Press, 1991), pp.52-4.

This language war was launched in the work-place in different arenas and aimed at different goals. First, it involved the rivalry between Mandarin and Cantonese. Mandarin is the official language in China, and politically superior. But in much of Guangdong it has lost its legitimacy to Cantonese speakers. The subordination of the national official language to the local dialect is due in part to the fact that the importance of state power in regulating social life has given way to local market forces. In the work-place Mandarin is still commonly used, but is no longer endowed with power, superiority or a hegemonic position. Cantonese, on the other hand, is the commercial language, and has got the upper hand in shaping the work-place hierarchy. The factory's upper management are Hong Kong people, while the middle management are mostly Cantonese speakers from cities like Guangzhou, Zhongshan and Shunde. The managerial language, therefore, is Cantonese, which was normally used in managerial meetings, passing orders from a higher level to a lower level, and in daily encounters among those in positions of management and supervision.

The command of Cantonese, then, was a must for climbing the hierarchical ladder. It improved the chance of promotion because one could not only converse better with superiors, but also possessed the same *habitus*, the same expressive style, assimilated into the same managerial culture. Mr Chou, the director, and the four Hong Kong managers never uttered a word in Mandarin. Even when they knew that the other person had poor Cantonese, they still insisted on using it. For them Cantonese was cultural capital. It was a symbol of superior status and identity, helping them to exercise their authority more effectively. This power of language was not invisible or silently exerted on individuals, but was, rather, explicitly demonstrated. Subordinates who were not native speakers but learned to speak Cantonese fluently were appreciated and had a better chance of promotion. Those who did not know Cantonese had to bear the cost in misunderstandings with superiors or others, and the anxiety which this created. If one did not want to remain at the bottom of the work hierarchy, one was induced to learn Cantonese, or at least to understand enough to survive in the work-place.

Though the language war had resulted in a victory for the commercial language, Cantonese, there was still defiance and transgression from time and time. Tensions were particularly acute when a Mandarin speaker in a high position in the work-place came into contact with a Cantonese speaker, notably in the case of communications between the Engineering and the Production Departments. The staff in the Production Department, both Cantonese speakers and non-Cantonese speakers, were totally assimilated to Cantonese. The engineers and technicians in the Engineering Department were mainly university graduates from northern cities and exhibited a rather unyielding attitude to Cantonese. For them, accurate Mandarin, with a Beijing accent, was still an emblem of their credentials, status and dignity. These young male professionals persisted in using Mandarin, even though they could all understand Cantonese. When the engineers spoke to the staff in the Production Department, one side spoke in Mandarin, consciously maintaining the superiority of the national language drawn from its political capital, and the other side persisted in talking in

Cantonese, as the *official* language in this work-place and in the local industrial world. Both sides understood each other well and neither was willing to give in.

Communication on the production lines was more complicated, though the tensions were somewhat less acute. When the line leaders reported to their supervisors, they usually spoke in Cantonese. But when they talked to the women on the line, they preferred Mandarin when speaking to *waisheng* workers. Most of the line leaders were not native speakers of Cantonese; some were from Chaozhou, some Hakka. For them both Mandarin and Cantonese were foreign languages and they used each in appropriate situations. There were exceptions, however. San, the leader of Line D, was from Hunan. She had been promoted to a production-line leadership position after working for more than four years on the production line. She seldom spoke in Cantonese to supervisors or to other line leaders. As a tough and capable figure in the work-place, she had been promoted to her position not because she could assimilate herself to the managerial culture or because of any particular relationship with the upper management, but solely because of her work capability and her rigid discipline. She was one of the most disliked people in the work-place. She was never soft to the women on the line and often reprimanded them loudly in Mandarin. They, in turn, often made fun of her, particularly the two Cantonese-speaking workers. They mimicked her Mandarin speech patterns and tones, drawing attention to her “unmanagerial” language to depreciate her status and authority.

The second dimension of the language war was the internal conflict within the Cantonese dialect. The Cantonese spoken in the work-place included different styles and accents, such as Hakka, and variants from Hong Kong, Guangzhou and Guangxi. Accents were the embodied stigmata of cultural capital, inscribed with hierarchical access not only to covert power, but also to overt institutionalized power. The more one could mimic Hong Kong and Guangzhou Cantonese, the more the status and authority granted in the work-place. It was clearly noticeable that as one looked higher in the managerial hierarchy, more Hong Kong or Guangzhou Cantonese was spoken. The assistant managers and the supervisors could command a fluent Hong Kong Cantonese because they were often in contact with the four Hong Kong managers, most of whom were native Guangzhou Cantonese. The forepersons and line leaders had learned Guangzhou Cantonese because they often communicated with their Cantonese superiors. Different accents of Cantonese endowed people with different cultural capital, and thus affected their bargaining power to fight for a higher work position and to negotiate a new identity. If workers did not make an effort to change accents and instead stuck to rural Cantonese, then no matter how superior they might feel to the Mandarin or other dialect speakers, they were still near the bottom of the internal hierarchy.

Yiping, a Guangdong Hakka, was the receptionist and phone operator when I started at the Meteor factory. She was friendly and pretty, and had been promoted from the production line to the counter. But after her one-month probation period she was moved back to the line again. “She can never pronounce Lin and Ling accurately, nor can she hear any difference between the sounds. She always connects the phone line to the wrong person”, Ling, the secretary in the general

office, grumbled to me. “She’s a Hakka from a rural area and she can’t speak Cantonese properly. What’s more, she doesn’t know how to handle unwelcome phone calls and people ...” Ling spoke a proper Hong Kong Cantonese, despite the fact that she was a Chaozhou *ren*.

One night I found Yiping in the dormitory, listening to Hong Kong popular music. She was still hurt and planned to leave for home: “I don’t want to work here, they made me feel inferior. If they don’t give me a chance, I’ll go elsewhere.” But in fact, knowing that her Hakka Cantonese accent counted against her, Yiping tried hard to change herself. She took every chance to talk to me, hoping that I could inculcate into her a more urbane and highly valued Cantonese. Listening to Cantonese songs was another favourite way to learn Cantonese, and she often sang them loudly.

In short, one had to change not only the “bad” *habitus* of one’s lifestyle, but also one’s dialect. The cost of symbolic power was great; you had no choice but to scramble to share in it. Language was, as Bourdieu has said, a hidden political mythology prophesying, coding and legitimating a system of social differences.<sup>12</sup> The play of difference is highly political. For rural people to take on an urban industrial persona, they had to be divided from the totality of their past life, *habitus*, disposition, accent and identity.

### Experiencing Discrimination

Young rural factory women, and especially those who spoke other dialects, were subjected to a sense of inferiority not merely on the factory premises, but also outside the factory. Each month we had a rest day on the Sunday following payday, and shopping downtown in Shenzhen was one of our favourite pastimes on that day. Quite often I would go with my co-workers to Dong Fang Market, where we could find Hong Kong products at relatively cheap prices. Fashion boutiques, department stores, supermarkets, fast-food stores and cafes, all owned by local people, were all symbols of the “western wind”, allowing people to “taste” the new way of life. One Sunday five Sichuan women, Yue, Ling, Hong, Qin and Ping, invited me to go out with them. We decided to go to Dong Fang Market and I suggested that I treat them to a coffee in a cafe there.

From the time we got onto the minibus, and in every fashion shop we went into, I could feel a strong sense of discrimination against us. Because we were speaking Mandarin and my co-workers had strong village accents, we were told to hurry up onto the bus in a very impolite way. Because we were not dressed in modern urban styles, saleswomen in the boutiques showed indifference to our interest in their fashions. They did not bother with us even if we asked the price. Their attitudes seemed to say that we were too poor to buy their stock. We hung around the open market and then went into a supermarket. Supermarkets have only become popular in recent years. To show its difference from local family-owned grocery shops, this supermarket provided a variety of foreign goods and stressed its concern for high quality foods. It puzzled me that security was as

<sup>12</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, p.52.

strict as at the factory premises. Four or more security guards stood in front of the gate. We had to leave our handbags at the counter before we entered the gate. And because we looked like poor young rural women, a security guard followed us everywhere we went. One cup of Japanese instant noodles cost eleven *yuan*, our salary for one day. We discussed, muttered and chuckled, but never bought. Ping asked me how much the local people earned, to afford to buy such expensive stuff. Seeing that my friends felt awkward and out-of-place in this shop with its expensive out-of-reach foreign commodities and security guards, I suggested we go on to the cafe.

It was the first time my Sichuan sisters had gone to a cafe. They all had no idea what to order and the prices of the drinks were unacceptable to them, so they persuaded me to leave. But it was too late. A waitress was already standing at our table, looking at us with a strange smile.

Yue said, "A coke for eight *yuan*!"

Hong echoed, "A tea for ten *yuan*! For ten *yuan* I can make a hundred cups."

Ping whispered, "What is a drink for? It's just water. It doesn't fill your stomach. Should we go?"

Feeling embarrassed, I tried to calm them down, and ordered drinks for them. Two coffees, two lemon teas and two soft drinks. As the waitress left our table I noticed that the people at the other tables were all looking at us. I felt I had been unforgivably foolish to put my friends into such an awkward situation. A few minutes later, a waiter brought us one drink. It didn't look like anything we had ordered. I called back the waiter and he took it instead to the table in front of us. The man sitting there said loudly in Cantonese, "Their hands have touched the drink. Bring me another one. You don't know how dirty their hands are, those *waisheng mei*!". I was angry and burst out in Cantonese, "What's wrong with *waisheng mei*. A dog's eyes always despise a human being!" He didn't expect my sudden outburst, stood up and left the cafe, still with a disdainful look. Perhaps he was thinking of the Chinese proverbs, where a *good* man never fights with a woman. We all laughed, and while drinking we continued to make jokes about him.

I headed over to Yue's bunk that evening and found her writing a letter to her boyfriend, a recruit in the army in Beijing. In her letter she had written "Shen, why do the local people never treat us as human beings? — now that I'm out in the world, I find myself a hundred times more worthless than in the village".

### Daily Prejudice and Resistance

In short, individuals entering the factory were provided with a stereotyped regional or ethnic identity, a set of invented cultural traits and a pre-determined work capability, and were judged by their dialect and accent, both within the factory grounds and outside. At work, cultural traits were manipulated and mixed up with economic interests. Privileged groups such as Cantonese and Chaozhou *ren* internalized the management's favouritism toward them by mirroring a model image and living up to that invention. The provincial outsiders, the *waisheng ren*, resisted management's derogatory images of them either by adopting the



capitalist work ethic and working hard to show their industriousness, and by looking for chances to show their capabilities or, alternatively, by adopting the stereotype imposed on them. Everyday tactics were fluid and strategic, and on different occasions individuals would react differently. The following is taken from my field notes, recording a complaint by a Sichuan worker:

10th April 1996: Li Ting's anger

It's about 11 p.m. I've finished taking a bath and looked around to join in some women's chat before going to bed. I passed Li Ting's room, and noticed she was angry with her roommate Yue, a Cantonese woman. Li Ting shouted, "Don't think yourself extraordinary for being Cantonese! You always bully people."

Yue didn't argue back but ran away to the other room. I calmed down Li Ting and asked her what had happened. She said, still angry, "This woman always runs wild and does whatever she wants. She never considers others and she looks down on people. I can't stand her any longer. Because she's a Cantonese, she thinks she's big. She broke my bowl, and had no intention of buying me another. Instead she said my stuff blocked her way. ... She never cleans the room but always criticizes others for making the room dirty and always thinks that *waisheng ren* are much dirtier than any other species. ..."

Different locality or ethnic groups in the work-place seldom talked to each other, let alone made friends across the boundaries. Distrust was worsened by a lack of spare time to communicate with each other. Daily conflicts escalated due to tight space and rushed time, aggravated by the mutual creation of negative images toward each other. In the eyes of Cantonese or Chaozhou groups, *waisheng mei* were often portrayed as uncivilized and as much lazier and dirtier. *Waisheng mei*, who, though poorer, were often better educated than the Guangdong people, regarded the Cantonese as rude, too proud, crafty, and never to be trusted. "These are the people who tread on my feet and remind me daily that I am a lesser human", was the common feeling of *waisheng mei* towards the Cantonese. At work, *waisheng mei* were allocated work at the bottom of the job hierarchy. In daily life they were often excluded and bullied.

Nevertheless, the more mutual social exclusion there was in the work-place, the greater the need for the women in the factory to develop informal ties and forms of strategies to cope with the everyday pressures. These ties of assistance and resistance in the work-place were tied to regional, ethnic and kin relations. While locality and ethnicity could be manipulated for recruiting labourers and controlling the work-force, they also provided an arena for bloc formation in the work-place. By placing their own kin members in the same work division or assembly line, the women could exert some control over the work process, though with strict limitations. The line leaders in the Meteor factory would place their own group's members on their line so as to extend their influence over the labour process, while the supervisors would train their relatives as line leaders to facilitate control in the ever-present contest over the speed and the rates of pay.



For the line workers, having their kin or fellow locals in supervisory positions was the only possible way to guarantee their job security. Kin or fellow locals in the work-place also helped you to get a “good job”, and in times of sickness and absence you could turn to your kin or fellow locals to finish your remaining work. Factory rules stated clearly that nobody could help others to punch their time card, but helping kin in this fashion was nonetheless common. Women continued to protect their relations or co-villagers even if that meant confronting and bending the rules.

### Invoking Sexual Difference

Locality, ethnicity and accent were not the only factors determining identities and status. It is illuminating to focus on the sexual orientation embedded in the term *dagongmei*. My argument here is that within the capitalist practices engendering hierarchy, sexual difference was one of the major regulatory projects.

As noted, *dagongmei* stands in contrast to *gongren*, a non-sexualized term — with *mei* explicitly a young woman and a sister. Feminization of labour has proceeded rapidly in Shenzhen and other economic development zones. Blue-collar male workers, *dagongzai*, are also employed in the zones, but they are given different positions, as revealed in the sexual division of labour in the work-place.

In South China, sexualizing labour in this manner is a project of capital, rather than the state. This can be seen if we compare the *gongren* of Mao’s period and the *dagongmei/zai* of today. With *gongren*, sexual difference was submerged. Women were introduced into the “world of men”, be it in light, heavy or military industries. The official rhetoric proclaimed that women could hold up half of the sky in socialist China and could do whatever men do. In the official regulatory practices sexual difference was diluted through propaganda and institutionalized arrangements. With the dissolution of socialist practices, the term *gongren* became an out-dated mode of everyday discourse, especially in South China. The disembodied world of industrial labour was to be gendered. The femaleness of the workers was not to be veiled, but had to be reinvented and regulated.

In the factory, it was always a headache for the upper management, the supervisors and the line leaders, often male, to manage the workers. None of the supervisors or line leaders, male or female, assumed that *dagongmei* were submissive females. Complaints about the discipline of *dagongmei* were frequent when I talked to any supervisor. Rather, submissiveness, often with a feminine identity pinned on the workers, needed to be articulated in the everyday language of management to facilitate labour control. Here are several examples that I recorded:

Shun (foreman of Line C): Mei, you’re a girl, how can you speak to me like this? Didn’t your parents teach you how to be a woman? Do you speak to your father like this?

Hong (assistant manager): Rough voice, rough *qi* [energy], don't you want to marry yourself out? Behave yourself, since you're still a young girl.

Li (foreman of Line A): Girl, do you have ears? You never follow exactly what I tell you to do. Where is your heart? Gone with your lover in the village?

He Chuan (foreman of Line B): Mei, do you know you are a girl? You should treat the work more tenderly. How many times do I have to remind you?

He Chuan (foreman of Line B): Look at yourself, like a *nanren po* [a butch woman] Can't you learn to be like a woman?

Such remarks were regularly heard in the work-place, particularly when workers' discipline had to be tightened. What is especially interesting is that their identity as labourers was less important than as females in the eyes of management. The regulation of gender was invoked when labour control was at stake. The workers were often reminded of their femaleness — "you are a girl". As a girl in the process of becoming a woman, one should behave as the culture required: be submissive, obedient, industrious, tender, and so on. The underlying implications were: "You are a girl, you should be obedient enough to do what the management tells you to do. You are a girl, you should not be defiant to your superior by speaking in a loud voice. You are a girl, you are going to marry and serve someone, so you had better train yourself to behave properly. You should take care of the job you do just as one day you will take care of your family. You are going to be a woman, a wife and a mother of men".

Also of interest is that maleness was posited as a degrading opposite in warnings to the workers: "You should not act like a boy, a boy is lazy and troublesome, careless and rough". Such remarks were often spoken by males, which might seem contradictory to their self-esteem and self-identity, but it always seemed that those who possessed enunciative power were free of gender constraints: nobody cast any doubt on the supposedly legitimate correspondence between being a female and a good worker. Further, those who controlled regulatory power tried hard to create anxieties among the targets of their condemnation — they would be shamed if they, as girls, behaved like boys. The women workers cared less about being unable to get married than about not living up to the feminine identity. They could seldom fight back if their supervisor or line leader attacked their sexual orientation for being too male. They were induced to fear any evidence of their own gender ambiguity or perversity. Gender became a means of discipline and self-discipline, invoked so that they would learn to police themselves. The feminine was not only imagined and inscribed but also self-desired. Objectifying and self-subjectivizing became the same process.

### Cultural Representation of *Dagongmei*

In Shenzhen and other economic development zones, stories about *dagongmei* appear in numerous popular magazines such as *Shenzhen ren* (Shenzhen People), *Nü bao* (Women's Magazine), *Dagongmei* (Working Girls) and *Wailaigong* (Migrant Workers).<sup>13</sup> The themes always stress the struggle of life and death in the modern industrial world, the changing attitudes towards sex, love and marriage and the desire to turn into a modern man or woman. The working girls are often portrayed as sexualized subjects who are prepared to leave their village to look not only for jobs, but also for love and men. Often cast in a sad mood, predicated upon the difficulties of pursuing "true" love, the stories nevertheless provide a new construction of female subjectivities, one in which *dagongmei* are active and bold in seeking love, in contrast to the traditional image of submissive Chinese women. One such short story is entitled "*One Male Line Leader and Ten Line Girls*":

On her first day working on the packaging line, Ping said: "the male line leader is so handsome!" After working for two years in six different factories, it was the first time she had met a handsome line leader. Ping's words threatened the other nine girls on the same line, for the line leader had become the little prince of ten hearts.

The line leader was from Guangdong. He had not completed his university studies but had gone off to work. ... He had light skin and a pair of glasses, and seemed mature and a little shy. ... The workers who were bold wrote love letters and sent gifts to him; those who were timid loved him secretly in their hearts. Among the line girls, a war of love was launched openly, seriously affecting production. The male line leader could not deal with the situation and was forced to leave the factory. Without a word to the line girls, he was gone.<sup>14</sup>

Popular culture favours the image of a modern young working woman who challenges traditional sexual relations and takes an active role. Young Chinese peasant women no longer stay at home, following their parents' arrangements or waiting for a matchmaker to decide their fate. Instead, they are encouraged in the magazines to go out, to leave their villages and to look for their own love and life. "Your body is your own", "Hold tight to love" and "Control your own fate" — all these hidden messages are conveyed through popular culture and have become mottoes for modern female life.

In this transitional period, old cultural practices, new urban cosmopolitan models, pressures and guidance from the communal rural society, desires and pursuits in the modern yet anonymous industrial world, are all mixed up and

<sup>13</sup> Also see the stories in An Zi, *Qingchun xuyu: Dagongzai dagongmei qingjian* (The Dialogue of Youth: Love Letters of Working Boys and Working Girls), (Shenzhen: Haitian Chubanshe, 1993).

<sup>14</sup> *Shenzhen ren* (November 1994 issue), no author given.

work together to form new femininities.<sup>15</sup> There are no fixed boundaries and stable reference frames. New ideas from Hong Kong, Taiwan, Japan and the West penetrate the mass media and popular culture, and new experiences in urban life, all kinds of contradictory ideas, behaviours and experiences are nurtured and contribute to fluid and changing images of femaleness. Women workers in contemporary China are induced to live with conflicting feelings, emotions and subjectivities, far from their own making. Thus, despite the fact that in most of the romantic literature young women wait for men to pursue them, *dagongmei* are sometimes also depicted, in the stories directed toward them, as active, romantically sexualized agents.

During my stay in the Meteor factory, there was a very popular song which one could not avoid hearing every day in the work-place, Sung by a Taiwanese male singer, it expresses well this confused image of yearning:

**Tomorrow I am going to marry you**

The second hand, minute hand ticks and ticks in my heart  
 My eyes glisten and glisten with emptiness  
 My heart goes pit-a-pat, pit-a-pat, throbbing all the time  
 I ask myself how much I love you  
 How eager I am to live with you and fly far way  
 My heart's throbbing up and down, up and down all the time  
 Wow.....

Tomorrow I am going to marry you  
 Tomorrow I am going to marry you  
 If the everyday traffic doesn't disturb my dream  
 (If not that at night the electricity stops, and I discover my loneliness  
 and emptiness)  
 Tomorrow I am going to marry you  
 Tomorrow I am *finally* going to marry you  
 If you do not ask me  
 If you do not persuade me  
 If you don't do it at the right time, you leave my heart throbbing  
 (But at this particular moment, I feel frightened and afraid)

## Conclusion

*Dagongmei*, as a new social identity and as a cultural artefact, embodies changing labour and gender relations at a time when China's economy is opening to the world economy and capitalist practices are beginning to predominate on the South China coast.

The constitution of new selves and new identities entails an act of power,<sup>16</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Elisabeth Croll, *Changing Identities of Chinese Women* (London, New Jersey, and Hong Kong: Zed Books and Hong Kong University Press, 1995).

<sup>16</sup> Ernesto Laclau, *The Making of Political Identities* (London: Verso, 1994) pp.2-4.

in a process of self-subjectivization, exclusion and displacement<sup>17</sup> which involves the deployment of institutional controls and a politics revolving around the power of language. To construct new capitalist industrial subjects in the work-place, the old socialist and rural identities are constantly devalued and downgraded. Rural women, especially non-Cantonese speakers, are portrayed to themselves as inferior, and are held instead to the standards of a desirable new modern identity. Divisions between rural and urban, north and south, and male and female are all manipulated to maintain and extend new forms of domination and hierarchy.

Mao's China highlighted the category of class while negating sexual differentiation. Deng's China, on the other hand, is marked by the proliferation of gender discourses and female bodily images.<sup>18</sup> Capitalist production in Shenzhen relies on gender as a basic constituent in developing a new system of work-place hierarchy. The rural women were recruited because they were not only migrant peasant-workers, but also females, considered to be cheaper and easier to regulate. They were imagined to be more obedient, tolerant and conforming to the factory regime.

The work-place is not to be conceived of as a microcosm of the society at large, but as part of the process of producing and reproducing the larger society. It is through the image of such a *socio-work-place* that we can understand the practices of identification and the politics of identity. The production regime, in making use of the existing social relations, reproduces itself as one part of the system yet at the same time reconfigures the system. The factory regime itself is not a pyramid of power hierarchies, but a kaleidoscope of power and hierarchies, created by weaving identities of gender, kinship, ethnicity and rural-urban disparities.

Hong Kong  
December 1998

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<sup>17</sup> Michel Foucault, "Technologies of the Self".

<sup>18</sup> Elisabeth Croll, *Changing Identities*, pp.151-152; Harriet Evans, *Women and Sexuality in China* (London: Polity Press, 1997); Angela Zito and Tani Barlow, *Body, Subject and Power in China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).