

MADE IN CHINA



WOMEN FACTORY WORKERS IN A GLOBAL WORKPLACE

PUN NGAI

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*To my mother,
Wong Wai Leung
and the
Chinese women
workers*

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INTRODUCTION

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

On 19 November 1993, a fire engulfed a factory in Shenzhen, China, run by a Hong Kong subcontractor to a European toy maker, a brand famous in both U.S. and European markets. The blaze killed over eighty workers, all but two of them female. Fifty others were seriously burned and another twenty were injured. The tragedy shocked Chinese society as well as the international community, as if it were the first trauma inflicted by global capital in reform-era China and as if the mass media had suddenly awakened to acknowledge the great costs to rural migrant workers that had been paid as the price of rapid economic development.¹ However, the dream of modernity in Chinese society—the great belief in capital and the market, especially after the illusory promises of the Chinese state and the Communist Party—is permanently inscribed with factory fires, which burn with the hopes and desires, as well as the evils of postsocialist development, and in which the sacrifice of ordinary people and subaltern classes are seen as a must for development. Chance had brought me to meet one of the factory's workers, Xiaoming, who of all the migrant women workers from her village was the only one to survive the fire.

It was both the survivor, Xiaoming, 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 write this volume. I am still not sure, however, whether it is those survivors who lived on with dreams and desires, or the fire and the deaths that most moved me toward the present book.

In assembling this inescapable social violence on women's lives, I started the long journey in search of a Chinese worker-subject within the trajectory of China's state socialist system's incorporation into global capitalism. I also wanted to articulate a possible minor genre of social resistance in contemporary China, a country that is rapidly transforming itself into a "world factory" for global production by providing to investors a great quantity of cheap labor and natural resources. Fire, pain, and memory flash across Xiaoming's life story, highlighting an epochal trauma and the social resistance that runs through the lives of dagongmei in this time of restructuring Chinese society.

More than ten years have passed since the blaze. Xiaoming's life still shimmers in my mind, offering both shadow and light as I try to glimpse the birth and struggle of a new social body—the dagongmei in a rapidly globalizing China. I met Xiaoming in a hospital. Her body was completely burned—all of her skin was seared and charred—but left behind was a pretty face with glinting, innocent eyes. She looked weak but very calm. During my visits, she told me about herself and her life in her village at home:

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 my 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 city people.

For a couple of years, I helped my parents by 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 fellow villagers and took a job in a garment plant in Shenzhen. That was my first time looking for a job. I was very scared when I was given an interview and tested by the management. Many people competed for jobs in the factory, and I felt I was alone fighting for it.

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

But getting out for 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 to be 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 [US\$38] 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 hundred for myself. I thought I could work there for at least another few years.

But then the fire happened, the fire.²

I never expected to meet Xiaoming, a twenty-one-year-old migrant worker fresh from a village in Hubei, a relatively poor region of China. Because I was worried that recalling memories of the fire would be too difficult 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 in Shenzhen, I still could not forget Xiaoming'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.

Social traumas such as factory fires adumbrate social violence in general, as well as the specific triple oppressions of the Chinese dagongmei by global capitalism, state socialism, and familial patriarchy that work hand in hand to produce particular labor exploitations along lines of class, gender, and rural-urban disparity. These triple oppressions—political, economic, and sociocultural—reinforce one another as they present new configurations specific to Chinese society at the opening of the socialist system to global production. While these oppressions are still attached to their own cultural and social conditions, they are rapidly shifting and being remade, eagerly looking for new matrices of power and practices to regulate society. The repositioning of China as a “world factory” in the new international division of labor is without doubt a project of global capital, which provides the bedrock for nurturing a new Chinese working class in general, and a new worker-subject, the Chinese dagongmei, in particular (Lee 1995, 1998; Jacka 1998; Pun 1999; Xu 2000). Cheap labor and low prices for land are not the only reasons for the current relocation of transnational capital to China. Diligent, well-educated Chinese women workers who are willing to toil for twelve hours each day, who are suitable for just-in-time global production, and who are potential consumers for global products are all factors that contribute to tempting transnational capital to relocate to China (Croll 1995; Davis 2000; Chen et al. 2001; Pun 2003; Yan 2003).

The lives of Chinese dagongmei have to be understood against this larger development, which consists of two reactionary forces in China. The first force is comprised of the changing modes of social regulation and political engineering of society by the party-state, and the second is the increasing capitalization or marketization of socialist society, embroidered with the hegemonic eulogy of the “search for modernity” or “quest for globality” and branded with the slogan *yu quanqiu jiegui* (“setting China on the track of globalization”). At one time the central component in understanding 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 ongoing conflicts and tensions in Chinese society, inevitably generating new social forces and social resistances. The rapid changes in 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 society by both market and state—inflict double wounds and triple oppressions on Chinese society. The hybrid marriage of state power and global capital generates new forms of control on both the

societal and individual levels. This time, land and labor, nature and human life, are all marketed as commodities for sale, not merely by the “capitalist” market but by the “socialist” party-state. However, the decentering of central power and the weakening of the ideological apparatus are far from representing a “retreat of the state” in regulating social life in reform China (Shue 1988). Rather, the worn-out yet still-existing *hukou* system (the population registry system); the parochial nature of urban governments with expanding administrative power; the strict control of the population and economic development; and repressive measures against independent labor organizations all dictate a specific process of proletarianization and struggle in contemporary China.

Transience is the dominant characteristic of the lives of Chinese *dagongmei*. Their stay in the urban factories is often short term—four to five years on average. This transient working life is not the choice of the women migrant workers but rather is a consequence of the legacy of socialist control and the residue of the Chinese patriarchal family. Structurally bound by the state, the *hukou* registry system ties the fate of the *dagongmei* to their rural place of birth. Thus Chinese migrant workers, often called *mingong* (peasant workers), are deprived of the basic right to stay in the cities, to establish families, and to enjoy proper education, medical care, and other social welfare systems to which urban residents are entitled.³ This results in the widespread utilization of dormitory labor in the industrial or developing zones in Chinese urban areas, by which both foreign and local enterprises maximize working time and extract labor power without worrying about the reproduction of labor in the long run. Hence the temporary use of Chinese labor is institutionally legitimated by the Chinese state, whose *hukou* system, albeit changing, provides population and labor control that favors global and private capital.

The exploitative features of the system are further inscribed with local social and cultural configurations that perpetuate the temporary use of labor in global workplaces in Shenzhen as well as in other economic development zones. The Chinese patriarchal family, although rapidly changing in the reform period,⁴ still seriously constrains the life course of Chinese rural women, especially in terms of education, household division of labor, wage labor, and the timing of marriage. The majority of the women migrant workers, who most often are young and single, still have to struggle to make their own decisions about wage work and marriage. A woman’s mid- to late twenties is typically the point at which the family decides whether to allow a woman to work in the urban areas (Pun 2000). Beyond this age the delay in

“marrying out” will be considered too high a cost to pay. Short-term wage work thus is expected in the premarital life cycle for most village girls. Quitting work for marriage and then returning to village life is still the shared feature of most migrant working daughters, although this common fate is not without resistance. The golden period of youth, between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five, is thus subsumed by 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 with capitalist management, nor were they able to become a significant political force, because any formal attempt to organize or form an independent trade union would have been vigorously suppressed by the Chinese government (Chan 2001; Lau 2001). However, although the formation of an organized working-class force was curtailed, if opportunities emerged the migrant workers did not hesitate to initiate short-lived, spontaneous strikes and collective actions that were generally unrecorded. Transience and liminality as the dominant characteristics of migrant working life also raised barriers to nurturing over time a collective class force in the cities. However, in a situation in which confrontational collective actions were severely contained and politically suppressed, a motley collection of transgressive actions, ranging from common workplace defiance to everyday tactics of resistance, sprouted and spread (see Liu 1996; Lee 1998b; Blecher 2002; Perry 2002).

Individual migrant workers like Xiaoming, the survivor of the fire, seemed to understand well their situation. Xiaoming knew that she would encounter the same impasse as other working daughters: a choice between a single life as a worker in the city and married life in the village. Nevertheless, she and her friends had other thoughts. They knew that after marriage they would be forced to stay in the village of their husband for the rest of their lives probably without another chance to work in the city.⁵ Therefore, around the time of the 1992 New Year holiday, their 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, situational, and collective, composed a new symphony of migrant workers’ transgression in contemporary China (Certeau 1984; Scott 1990). And thus Xiaoming began to save money for herself. By late autumn 1993, after sending money to her family, she had 500 yuan. One chilly day, however, the fire burned the money and the dream.

Social Actor or Class Subject?

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," to use the new language) in China's postsocialist period opened Chinese society to private and global capital and allowed the capitalist apparatus and relations to regulate not only economic life but also social and cultural life. The first broad issue that runs through this book is that of the change in 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?

In *Critique to Modernity*, Alain Touraine remarks: "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" (1995, 201). Alain Touraine highlights the paradox of the hegemonic project of globality 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 (1995, 201–202). An eagerness to articulate a modern imagination is demonstrated as much by the Chinese state as by the Chinese migrant workers. This process of globalizing modernity is by no means a simple process of universalizing new forms of production, consumption, and communication, and no doubt it requires more sophisticated studies that should seriously take into consideration the force of universalization on the one hand and of disjunction and cultural differences on the other (Appadurai 1996). Theorizing these two forces not as oppositional but as multilayered, criss-crossing, and overlapping, sometimes cooperating, sometimes confrontational, and sometimes retreating, is more helpful in trying to disentangle the competing forces in this process of globalizing China. 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 or a political agenda of the state as a unit of analysis is also very problematic (Ong and Nonini 1997; Rofel 1999).

Becoming dagongmei, a journey of subject making in this project of modernity at large (Appadurai 1996), conjures up a new dialogic space where the force of universalism and the force of historical specificity and cultural difference can meet and collude in new configurations. The genealogy of the new subject, the dagongmei, derives insights from Foucault's "techniques of the self," in which he clearly argues for attending to "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" (1997, 87). Foucault suggests a kind of project that can articulate the intersection of two themes: a history of subjectivity and an analysis of forms of "governmentality" (87–88). On the issue of subjectivity, we have to ask how the subject was established at different moments and in different institutional contexts as a possible, desirable, or even indispensable object of knowledge (87). For the analysis of governmentality, what is at stake is not only performing the necessary critique of common conceptions of "power," or analyzing these as a domain of strategic relations focusing on the behavior of the other(s), but also as "the government of the self by oneself in its articulation with relations with others" (88). Nevertheless, Foucault's genealogical projects on the technologies of the self 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 would like us to believe, it is high time to review this process not in dichotomized Western or Eastern contexts but rather so as to show how this process of subjectivization involves a project of both atomized individuation and relational subject making.

I do not intend here to suggest that the Chinese subject is more relational and therefore that the Western-oriented model of the individualized self is irrelevant to understanding Chinese modernity and its subject. On the issue of constituting the modern Chinese self as part of the project of modernity in general, and of turning Chinese rural migrant bodies into industrial workers in particular, there is always a complex dual process: an intensity of market forces geared toward an increasing atomization of Chinese individual lives, and a recurrence of social forces 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 multiple examinations and controls by management, she was no doubt displaced—separated from her family and tongxiang, who were also striving for jobs, and alone in facing the imperative of capital, whose techniques were oriented to individuation. The process of entering the factory at the beginning was a process of individuating the self, letting the individual realize that it had recourse to nobody but itself. This struggle was a social one, a struggle to become dagongmei, but its passage was that of a loner. Xiaoming highlighted that learning to be grown-up was to take care of herself with or without fellow villagers in the workplace. Indeed, aloneness was an overwhelming theme repeatedly articulated by the dagongmei in their diaries, letters, and various genres of literature.

While individuating the subject is a project of capital, practicing forms of collectivity embedded in social relations or enacted from cultural resources are also persistent “everyday tactics” of women working against market forces, both in early modern China and in the contemporary period. In early-twentieth-century China the formation of tongxiang enclaves in the Shanghai or Tianjin workplaces was an important means of generating social identities (albeit fragmented, fluid, and changing), and thus overt or covert social actions (Honig 1986; Hershatter 1986; Perry 1993).⁶ In contemporary China, women in the foreign-owned workplaces and elsewhere are still very much encircled by tongxiang and kin networks that, although reimagined and reconstructed, often provide the most intimate and trustful supports. The distinctions between Cantonese, Chaozhou, and Hakka workers, or the outside workers of provinces like Sichuan, Hunan, or Hubei, still mattered most among the women workers themselves (Tam 1992; Lee 1998a; Pun 1999). The articulation of tongxiang identity is very much a project of cultural performance used by Chinese migrant workers 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 the multiple elements of atomized individuation and certain forms of collectivity specific to Chinese society.

Embedded in specific familial relations, the lives of dagongmei in the reform period remain very much constrained while also supported by the rapidly changing Chinese patriarchal family. These 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 maintained throughout Mao’s period by patrilocal marriage practices and the unequal sexual division of labor in the realm of work and household.

The post-Mao family, especially in rural areas, repeated and reenacted patriarchal relations by openly discriminating against female babies as the inferior sex and by continuing to pressure daughters to marry out in their mid-twenties (Davis and Harrell 1993; Croll 1995). For Chinese women, their fates as daughters and wives of men were extensively renegotiated, and although little collective resistance to the Chinese patriarchal family was recorded (Sheridan and Salaff 1984; Judd 1994), painful individual acts challenging family decisions about work and marriage were numerous in the workplace. Touching stories of escape, either from a father's or a husband's home, to work in the factory were often shared among the women workers.⁷ Vacillating between industrial work and rural family, most of the dagongmei nevertheless opted for the former and dreamed of staying in the city as long as possible. However, when conflicts between these two realms were not overt, family and kin supports were still the last resort for the Chinese rural migrant workers who had nowhere to turn when problems or difficulties arose in their urban industrial work. Nevertheless, these familial relations and their cultural practices provisionally helped to keep the individuation process of capital in check and espoused a cultural difference in the process of subjectivization and modernity in China.

In addition to drawing on Foucault's insights on techniques of self, the Marxian analysis of class struggle, and women's studies of gender and labor, 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 pioneers in experiencing the deep and rapid social transformation of Chinese society—the change from 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 dominant language, whether intellectually or politically. As Ann Anagnost (1997, 17–44) puts it succinctly, "making the 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. While the category of class no longer seems alien in reformed China, the making of the new worker-subject is still far more complicated than a conventional, or worse reified, Marxist notion of "class" can discern.

Maoism, in contrast, placed great emphasis on human agency and creativity and thus was antithetical 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 postmodern project long before postmodernism 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 configuration of the Chinese subject status. It is no wonder that the political signification of socialist China required mass mobilization from time to time to cover up this 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 of their struggles—rich, heterogeneous, and multisited—can no longer be described or politicized as mere class struggles as the subjects experience, make sense, react, and project their life trajectories in contemporary China. It does not mean that 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. Indeed, it is not that simple. Restructuring class structures and relationships is a contemporary project for capital and the newly emerged elites in Chinese society. And yet the subsumption of class analysis in order to hide class positions and social privileges is their political strategy. The language of class is subsumed so as to clear the way for a neoliberal economic discourse that 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 double displacement of class is very political in the sense that it helps to truncate the signification of class experience in rapidly shifting contemporary Chinese society.

As a weapon of social struggle class analysis, if useful, can only be reactivated by rooting it in class experience from below—that is, in the everyday infrapolitics of the Chinese workers themselves in confrontation with capital and the market.⁸ Chinese *dagongmei*, caught in the impasse of triple oppressions, have to live out their own class experience as part of their life struggles. And if the Chinese subject has been traumatically interpellated by an alien language of class from above, then *dagongmei*, as one of the new subjects to

emerge at the intersection of global capitalism and the Chinese modernity project, invokes a desire for a return to class analysis, which paradoxically became a dead language because of its hegemonic nature. I take care here to note that it was not class analysis as such that grafted onto the Chinese subject the effects of a hegemonic discourse, but instead the very nature of its political arbitrariness from above. If class analysis is already a dead language in today's China, the rearticulation of the new subjectivity, which I will describe below as *dagong*, in postsocialist China is nevertheless a timely project.

Becoming the Dagong Subject

Dagong denotes a process of turning individuals into working subjects, particularly for a capitalist "boss." The term *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, dagong simply means "working for the boss," a term that powerfully connotes the commodification of labor, or the exchange of labor for a wage (Lee 1998a). The terms dagongmei (working girls) and *dagongzai* (working boys), used extensively over the past two decades, contrast with the 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 that was 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 capitalist societies. The gongren as an ideal type was a new kind of subject produced by the Chinese socialist state to liberate labor from alienation and to fully actualize itself in the process of production. In reality, in the past three decades of state socialist experience the Chinese gongren worked virtually 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 just 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