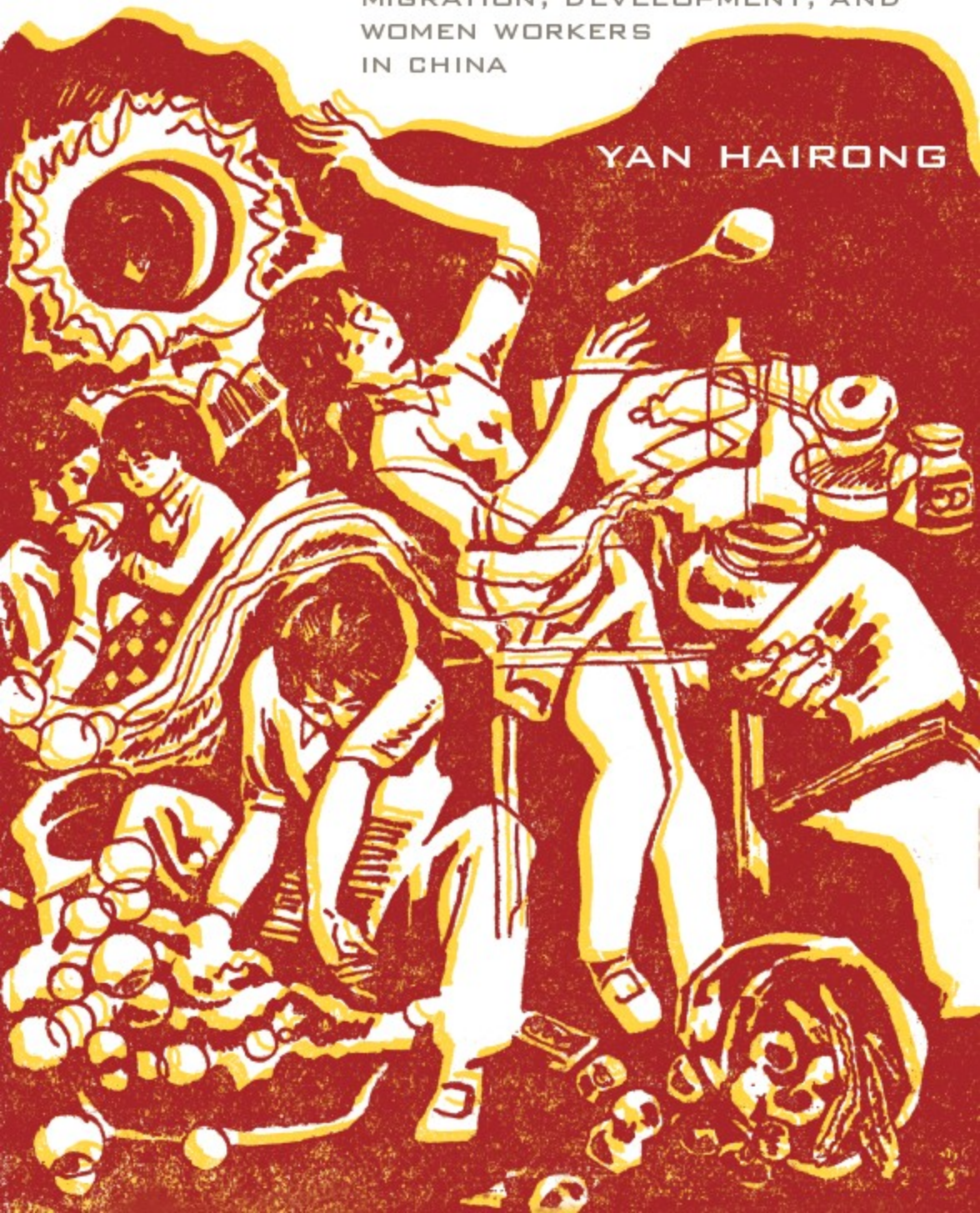


# NEW MASTERS, NEW SERVANTS

MIGRATION, DEVELOPMENT, AND  
WOMEN WORKERS  
IN CHINA

YAN HAIRONG



**New Masters,  
New Servants**



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New Servants**

*Migration, Development, and Women Workers in China*

Yan Hairong

Duke University Press   Durham and London   2008

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Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper ∞

Designed by Heather Hensley

Typeset in Adobe Garamond Pro by Tseng Information Systems, Inc.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication data and republication acknowledgments appear on the last printed pages of this book.

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Duke University Press gratefully acknowledges the support of the Chiang Ching-Kuo Foundation, which provided support toward the production of this book.

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## PREFACE

In this book I focus on rural-to-urban migration of young women serving as domestic workers for urban families in China, examining and challenging some of the keywords—such as development, modernity, *suzhi* (quality), human capital, self-development, and consumer citizenship—that are constitutive of the process of post-Mao reform. Enabled by “reform and opening up,” rural-to-urban labor migration is a crucial site where these keywords are mobilized to produce truth-effects. Why? Because migrant labor is vital to the continuation of flexible accumulation and growth, which, on the one hand, allows the state and elite groups to claim legitimacy for the reform and, on the other hand, enhances their resources to negotiate and manage discontented urban laid-off workers and rural residents.

I carried out my main field research, which involved following migrant women from villages in Anhui Province to the city of Beijing, between fall 1998 and spring 2000. I also conducted some interviews in Nanjing, Tianjin, Hefei, and Shanghai during fifteen months of fieldwork. Since then, I have kept in touch with some migrants through reunions, letter writing, and phone calls. The struggles, aspirations, and subjection of these young migrant women articulate the power of the central story as it is structured by keywords, but also mark its limit as a “proper” story. The postsocialist reform has enabled the process of migrant subject constitution and self-representation, and haunted their struggles with its own discursive conditions and contradictions. On the whole, it is unable to produce their lives as proper referents for its keywords.

In chapter 1 I ask how the post-Mao project of modernity has instituted



a climatic shift in rural-urban relations that makes migration a compelling experience for rural youth. When the rural becomes the urban's devalored Other, how do young women respond to the questions of modernity and personhood? In chapter 2 I propose that the rise of domestic service was associated with the outcry about "the burdens of intellectuals" in the early post-Mao reform. The bodies of migrant women, coming through the labor market, were recruited to relieve the bodies of intellectuals, or anyone else who could afford to hire domestic workers, of their domestic burdens. But how do the minds of employers mobilize and govern the bodies of migrant women? Given the constant and numerous complaints from employers about their domestic workers, what kind of sociality do they desire and how do they try to achieve it? In chapter 3 I explore the links between the neoliberal discourse of development and the labor-recruitment process in which migration is represented as pedagogical. How can one describe China as neoliberal when the State is actively involved in what some people have called the new *sihua* (four "-izations")—privatization, liberalization, marketization, globalization—which have displaced the four modernizations (of agriculture, industry, national defense, and science and technology) that were proposed in the late 1970s? How are the population and individuals coded and measured as subjects of development? When consumption increasingly defines identity and status in post-Mao China, I ask in chapter 4, what is its relationship with migrant women whose bodies are locked within manual labor? How does consumption and production form a particular pair of contradictions in the process of women's migration? In chapter 5 I turn to questions of class. When self-development becomes the discourse of individual mobility, and the term *class* (*jieji*) has been disavowed in the official ideology, do migrant women encounter and express "class" experiences? In chapter 6 I explore the subject of self-representation. As the laws of economic development appear to be the laws of nature, what kinds of self-representations are possible? Why do some migrant women negotiate a self-representation aligned with the hegemonic discourse of development when such a self-representation includes poverty, illness, and misery? How do other migrants critique such self-representation and articulate what might be considered a liminal politics of resistance?

My field research was funded by the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthro-

pological Research and the International Dissertation Research Fellowship provided by the Social Science Research Council. Many people have contributed to the development and completion of this project. I owe a deep debt of gratitude to my mentors Ann Anagnost, Tani Barlow, Madeleine Yue Dong, Kaushik Ghosh, Stevan Harrell, and Katharyne Mitchell, who played important roles in my graduate training at the University of Washington. Tamara Jacka kindly pointed me to the magazine *Rural Women Knowing All* when I began my field research. Li Zhang generously offered fieldwork advice. Zhongdong Ma provided me with the first important connection to my fieldsite. My friends and colleagues Joel Andreas, Alana Boland, Chris Brown, Beth Drexler, Brian Hammer, Helen Schneider, and Wang Danyu have read and commented on various chapters in the dissertation phase. I must also thank Wang Hui and Huang Ping for encouraging me to publish in *Dushu* and Chen Kuan-Hsing and Ding Naifei for inviting my contribution to *Taiwan: A Radical Quarterly in Social Studies*.

I began to work on the book manuscript while I was a fellow at the Princeton University Society of Fellows (sof). I thank sof for its institutional support and am indebted to senior sof fellows Susan Naquin and Carol Greenhouse for their intellectual generosity. My sof colleagues Sujatha Fernandes, Anne-Maria Makhulu, Sunil Agnani, and I formed a reading group that provided critical intellectual stimulation and companionship. I am also grateful to Louisa Schein for making me part of the memorable reading-meal group that she organized, and I am thankful to other members of this group—Chen Jin, Li Jin, and Wang Hailing—for both their food and their thoughts. During the years of its development, this project has greatly benefited from discussions with Pun Ngai, Dorothy Solinger, Eileen Otis, Eric Thompson, Tang Can, Liu Huiying, Han Jialing, Joshua Goldstein, Ren Hai, Fan Ke, and Arianne Gaetano. I am also grateful for friends who have inspired me with their support and concern: Nancy Abelman, Karen Kelsky, Ravi A. Palat, Behrooz Ghamari, Han Yuhai, Zhang Xiaodan, Dai Fang, Pun Ngai, Hsia Hsiao-Chuan, Ku Hok Bun, and Wang Penghui. This book project has followed me to the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, University of Hong Kong, and Hong Kong Polytechnic University. I thank my supportive colleagues at these universities. Two anonymous readers provided invaluable comments that helped refine and reshape the structure of the book. Matthew A. Hale

thoughtfully edited the manuscript. Barry Sautman must be credited for his suggestion of the book title.

This project would not have been possible without villagers in Wuwei showing me kindness and migrant workers in the cities sharing their experiences. This book is dedicated to Chinese migrant women workers.

## INTRODUCTION

The marginality of her story is what maintains the other's centrality; there is no kind of narrative that can hold the two together (though perhaps history can): an outsider's tale, held in oscillation by the relationships of class.

CAROLYN KAY STEEDMAN, *LANDSCAPE FOR A GOOD WOMAN*

In spring 2001 I served as an interpreter in a meeting between ministry-level cadres from China and U.S.-based economists who consult with the World Bank. I witnessed a remarkable result of two decades of reform in China: the two parties shared the same conceptual language. Many of their keywords lined up quite literally. In table after table, in chart after chart, the universal language of economic development successfully coded the social landscape of post-Mao China as a “transitional economy.”

In the process of globalization the peripheries are increasingly coded, evaluated, and disciplined by regulative keywords: development, growth, efficiency, market, structural adjustment, consumer choice, optimal assemblage of resources, global governance, and so on. This occurs through the rapid and dense circulation of capital, knowledge, and technology, and through the uneasy traffic between the universality of global standards and the particularity of “Chinese characteristics.” I borrow the term *keyword* from Raymond Williams, who identifies a set of lexical changes since the eighteenth century as a guide to the intellectual transformation that accompanied England's industrialization: “I called these words keywords in two connected senses: they are

significant, binding words in certain activities and their interpretation; they are significant, indicative words in certain forms of thought” (1976: 13). While Williams approaches keywords in literary sources through a combination of social history and the history of ideas, I annotate some of the post-1989 keywords in China by locating them in ethnographic instances and examining their discursive functions in shaping everyday experiences. With the ebbing of revolutionary movements, the new global circulation of these keywords bespeaks the force of newly unlimited capital accumulation in the post-Cold War world. This army of keywords collaborates to form a semiotic matrix. Once one takes issue with any particular keyword, the rest come rushing to its aid. They are networked. Intertwined with this sign chain are a series of networked and continually networking local, national, and transnational institutions. Everyday the net is being managed, challenged, negotiated, mended, disrupted, reinforced.

During the meeting for which I interpreted, Chinese delegates, acting like area specialists, periodically reminded their U.S. counterparts of “Chinese characteristics” or “historical constraints.” But this did not prevent them from upholding the same transcendental laws preached by their American counterparts. The acknowledgment of Chinese characteristics or historical constraints, which render China a problematic referent for the term *market economy*, makes the keywords not less compelling, but more. A Chinese official keyword at the end of the twentieth century was “advancing with the times” (*yu shi ju jin*). With the passing of socialism, the time of the global capitalist market, expressed through developmental policies, has come to dominate both city and countryside. It commands through transnational organizations and national governments that peoples and areas advance (*jin*), catch up (*gan*), and get on track (*jie gui*). Pheng Cheah, writing on U.S. area studies, urges one to see “how much the discursive formation of Asian studies inhabits the folds of G. W. F. Hegel’s text” (2000: 49). In his *Philosophy of World History* Hegel issues a prognostic death certificate to areas or nations (often conflated in area studies) that live automatically, like clocks running on natural time, rather than participating in the time of History (1980: 59–60).

The “reform and opening up,” launched in the late 1970s in post-Mao China, created among intellectual elites in the 1980s a powerful sense of crisis about China’s time-place in the global order and initiated a process of yearning

for the Chinese nation-state to seek valorization in the time-space of capital. Welcoming a big-time opening of the Chinese media market to Hollywood films in 1995, a Chinese film critic described the pedagogical agency of Hollywood blockbusters in China: “A commercial society demands governance by transcendental rules and globally acknowledged ethical behavior. Commercial films thrive precisely on the basis of such ethical values. . . . *Pretty Woman* is . . . revolutionary because it recognizes a business ethic with rational egoism being the cardinal principle of such ethics. . . . It celebrates a love earned with the capital of morality as well as the morality of capital whereby money making has the virtue of subsidizing education and industrial development.”<sup>1</sup> In the process of China’s embracing the logic of global capital, globe-trotting keywords such as *development* and *growth* have woven a master narrative of market realism that represents unceasing pain, injury, disaster, collateral damage, anomalies, and unrest as the transitional costs of the lofty telos of development, or as historical constraints, implicating the socialist past. Even on a global scale, economies may prosper or crash, but the truth-effects of these keywords remain when they manage to mask the interests they represent and the “interpretive schizophrenia” they suffer (Liu 1999: 770). This was demonstrated in the case of the Asian Tigers, whose government-business cooperation, once credited for creating miracle economies, was attacked as crony capitalism after the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis. The keywords and their global institutional mastermind retain their discursive power, even as they increasingly face challenges outside the five-star conference rooms of their summit meetings.

### **Catachrestic Keywords and Postsocialism**

What vast subterranean reality lies beneath the discursive power of these keywords? Let me introduce the migrant worker Xiang and her letters, which serve as a gateway to her subaltern subjectivity and to a hidden reality that cannot be fully claimed or subsumed by the keywords. I met Xiang in Beijing in 1999, when she was in her second year as a live-in domestic worker employed by a couple, both of whom taught at a university. Xiang, who had a junior-high-school education, loved to read and spent most of her spare time in Beijing perusing literary books and journals from her employers’ collection. After she had worked for them for two years, she decided to go to Lhasa, Tibet,

thinking that a new place might give her a new sense of being and new life opportunities. During the year that she spent there, she worked as a telephone operator, as a salesperson for a tea company, and as a waitress at a restaurant, with her savings being reduced to pennies between jobs. In 2001 she migrated to Shanghai, where she now works as a shop assistant.

Xiang and I have maintained a correspondence since she left Beijing. In a letter dated April 2001 she relates in detail how she registers and interprets her own life's reality.

[My friends and I] often talk about our individual gains and losses, happiness and sadness. We also chat about our ennui [*wuliao*]. Nobody is able to cast her gaze [*yanguang*] wider to understand the contour of our bigger environment. As human beings, we accept our parents, family, native place, society, culture—all of which are structures [*kuangjia*] that came before us. And all we have to do is adapt and comply.

People have the inclination to pursue happiness and avoid the companionship of suffering, injustice, oppression, and darkness. The audience in front of the screen might shed tears for the handicapped, the abandoned, lone resisters, and the impoverished lower classes. But they only do so to congratulate their own superiority and comfort. There are also sensationalized [*chaozuo*] tragedies for consumption. But people can never really understand the much more enormous real reality [*geng pangda de zhenshi de zhenxiang*]. They turn a blind eye to its hazy darkness [*kongmang de hei'an*].

Myself included. I consciously forget those hardest days I experienced. The small restaurant where I had my first job as a dishwasher in Shanghai is close to the prosperous Huaihai Road. Later I had another job in the area. But no matter how much I like that area, I have never set foot in that restaurant again. There is also an agency for recruiting domestic workers. I slept on its floor for three nights, paying three yuan [forty cents] a night. I seldom even think about that place. All the letters to friends and parents were written after I found the job as a shop assistant. Those other days were thus edited out [*jianji diao*] and forgotten.

What are the “much more enormous real reality” and its “hazy darkness” that “people can never really understand” or “turn a blind eye to”? This “much

more enormous reality” lurks beneath the keywords, but it eludes and exceeds their normative symbolic order. While the keywords reign as transcendental laws and mediate for the dominant political and economic interests, this “much more enormous real reality,” its darkness, has to be overlooked or kept out of consciousness in order for business and work to go on as usual. Drawing on Jacques Derrida, I adopt the term *catachresis* (literally, the improper or strained use of a word) to describe the violent production of meanings by keywords and their abusive relationship with the “much more enormous real reality.”<sup>2</sup>

With “myself included,” Xiang hints that her hardest experiences are part of this enormous reality and its hazy darkness, on which she dare not reflect. What is at stake for Xiang’s self-consciousness when the hardest days must be “edited out and forgotten” from memory? Is it so that she can struggle on as usual and so that she will not feel her life being consigned to that hazy darkness? Is it because a certain kind of self-representation—how she represents herself to herself and to others—can be enabled and sustained only by conscious self-editing and forgetting? In this sense, is her self-representation a catachresis that mirrors and allegorizes the “much more enormous” catachresis?

Can forgetting be conscious? And what is consciousness if it is conscious of its own forgetting and editing? With the hint of self-critical reflection ushered in by “myself included,” Xiang commemorates her forgetting of the hardest days and deconstructs her own self-consciousness and self-representation. This should caution against any representation that takes voice, by way of direct quotation, as unmediated self-evidence and self-representation of subjectivity. If memory is constitutive of identity and self-representation, this kind of conscious forgetting may be an act of leaving memory and identity open to future *re-membling*, a refashioning of self-representation and membership by rearticulating one’s memory. The communist-led mass movement of “speaking bitterness” in the 1940s and 1950s exemplifies the rearticulation of difficult experiences of the past in terms of a new vocabulary of class oppression.<sup>3</sup> Peasants, encouraged to speak in public of the past injustice they had suffered, learned to reinterpret their suffering in terms of class rather than of fate as they were mobilized for land reform and social revolution. This enabled the speaker to self-represent as a member belonging to a class collective. In this



sense, remembering, or memory opened up to rearticulation, is also a potential process of “re-membering,” or forging a new membership.

It is indeed a question of membership that is at stake for Xiang as she tries to forget. In an earlier letter, dated January 2002, she writes, “You see, what I desire forever deviates from the status and role where I’m positioned. I cannot be incorporated into a collective as a *dagongmei*, but I have no way of possessing a knowledge system as intellectuals do. For a long time, I have felt that my two feet are in the air and my heart is empty [*ben xinxu*].” The term *dagongmei*, most typically referring to young, single rural women working in the city, is often thought to be a neologism invented in post-Mao China. In fact, the term was already in use in the late nineteenth century; it was recorded in 1889 in the journal of the late Qing writer Xu Ke (1869–1928), who used it in reference to the news from Guangdong that over 17,000 men and women there were employed by 167 silk factories (Xu Ke 1997: 313).<sup>4</sup> However, the term *dagongmei* might not have had much circulation beyond Guangdong because, during the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth, news reports about women entering industrial-labor relations in Shanghai, Jiangsu, and Chongqing used other terms, such as *nügong*, *nügongren* (both meaning woman worker), or *funü* (women).<sup>5</sup> The word *dagongmei* emerged anew with a nationwide circulation through the expanding market in the post-Mao era, against the backdrop of the Mao-era industrial-labor relations that guaranteed lifelong employment and various benefits. *Dagong* means “‘working for the boss’, or ‘selling labor,’ connoting commodification and a capitalist exchange of labor for wages” (Pun Ngai 1999: 3). *Mei* is a term for sister, girl, and young woman. Although Xiang would call herself a *dagongmei*, being a member of the *dagongmei* collectivity presents an existential problem for her, as she explains in response to a letter I wrote to her asking why she could not identify with this category.

Perhaps the emphasis [*zhongdian*] and referent [*suozhi*] in my original sentence is not the same as what you have in mind. What does it mean to be incorporated into a collectivity as a *dagongmei*?

First, *dagongmei* is defined here [in the city] as those who have low education, mainly do physical labor, and have rural household registrations. As carved out by society and the market, the scope of work choice is very narrow for *dagongmei*. What is the position of *dagongmei*? They are the

lowest tier of society, the most powerless, and the voiceless. Not only are their freedom and labor cheaply purchased, but they are also restricted in accessing education and rich and high-quality [*gao suzhi*] thinking.

To leave the bookish explanation, I can at least talk about my life as a typical dagongmei. Through some connections, I got a job washing dishes in a fast-food restaurant, earning 450 yuan a month. This wage was a rather good one for those waiting for jobs. Because I'm young, I was favored by the employer [for this job]. Every day [I] got up at 5:30 in the morning, washed vegetables, sterilized dishes, boiled water, and so on. The prep would go on until noon. When it was busy, [I] had to quickly collect the dishes, wash them, and carry them out. Plus [I] had to assist the cook, wash woks, boil water, and fetch groceries. There was one hour for lunch and rest between noon and afternoon. Then prep work started over again. After dinner and cleaning work, [I] could clock out after 8:30. But running around all day, carrying piles and piles of dishes, [my] shoulder and lower back really hurt. I just did not want to go out [in the evening]. There was a bookstore on Huaihai Road and it took five minutes to walk there. But I only visited it twice. I wrote about exhaustion in my diary. But actually for many people this is ordinary. By comparison, I made it seem extraordinary. But when I was exhausted sometimes, I really felt that I couldn't take it any more. This [I] had thought [I] would remember all my life. But now [I] have almost forgotten it. The last day at work [in this restaurant], [my] feet were scorched and blistered by boiling water. [They] were so swollen that I couldn't put on shoes. So [I] finished my last day working there in sandals. Exhaustion plus pain make this a little harder to forget. So busy, so tired, but still no way of asking why [*meiyou banfa wen weishenme*]. Working along with me was a seventeen-year-old girl who had just come to the city. She was full of vigor and joked back and forth with the cook. Some of them chat and laugh all day as if [they were] very accustomed to this kind of life. Being yoked [*tao shang le*] to this kind of life seems as natural as the existence of the sun, the moon, and the stars. . . .

Many times I want to forget my identity/status [*shenfen*] [as a dagongmei] and try to imagine myself as an orphan or a nomad. This might be literary romanticism, but it is vain and irresponsible. Not being willing to face reality is an [act of] escape. I know it very well, but still I cannot help being "naïve."

Thinking too much like this will lead to a sense of insecurity and uncertainty about things. We make a living by working, but we are not professional women. We are only dagongmei. This kind of independence is not secure.

Several days ago an old classmate, who had not been in touch for a long time, called me to complain about his failure to pass the exam for graduate school. I wanted to tell him my worries to keep him in balance. But after no more than a few sentences, he cut me off and said, “You just need a husband.” The implied meaning is that it’s hopeless for me to be anything and the only solution is marriage. Putting aside his teasing, actually many, including dagongmei themselves, have really thought that there is no way out other than marriage.

What can be done about the future? That is a question that forbids much thinking [*bu rong duo xiang*]. We can only focus on the things right in front of our eyes and live day to day. I don’t worry about the question of marriage. This question is close to being boring. But, frankly, sometimes I really want to put an end to this by getting married. What’s the point of struggling on? Don’t laugh at me. Just a thought to vent my frustration. Now, [I]’d like to talk about the question of love and marriage of dagongmei. Their choices do not exceed those of their professions. Forget it. I cannot continue on this topic.

Is the future in part claimed by this hazy darkness? It not only forbids hope but also “forbids much thinking,” because “thinking too much like this will lead to a sense of insecurity and uncertainty about things.” On dagongmei, Xiang speaks both “as a typical dagongmei” and as one who refuses to be incorporated into this group identity. After she defines what it means to be dagongmei both generally and specifically with regard to her own experiences, she expresses her wish to transcend and negate it. “You see, what I desire forever deviates from the status and role where I’m positioned. . . . I have felt that my two feet are in the air and my heart is empty.” But her ephemeral transcendence, leaving her neither here nor there and her feet in the air, is enabled by a forgetting and an imaginary flight away from the actual existence of dagongmei, the discursive and material social relations and conditions to which she is yoked.

When Xiang wrote about her refusal to be incorporated into the category

of dagongmei, it gave me a chance to query her. I had heard some migrant women critique Xiang's aloofness and distance from other dagongmei when she occasionally participated in activities at the Home for Rural Migrant Women (Dagongmei zhi jia), a Beijing-based nongovernmental organization. "In her mind she places herself above dagongmei. She still has dreams about the mainstream society and wishes to become a member of it. Actually she is quite petit-bourgeois [*xiao zi*]," criticized Hua Min, a migrant woman activist who knows Xiang. *Petit-bourgeois* (*xiao zichan jieji*), a term often used in the Mao era as a political critique reflecting the Marxian class analysis of relations of production, is nowadays shortened to *xiao zi* and used to mean something like "yuppie" or "posh," usually highlighting expensive taste and consumption. However, the "xiao zi" in Hua Min's commentary about Xiang is more akin to its original meaning and is meant to be a serious critique. At stake in the contention is not only what dagongmei is and means, but how it can mean and whether it has a potential transformative agency.

Unlike Xiang, some migrant women have strongly invoked the dagongmei collective and identified themselves as part of it. At the First National Forum on Issues about Women Migrant Workers' Rights and Interests, which took place in June 1999 in Beijing, dagongmei representatives from Beijing and Shenzhen narrated the discrimination and exploitation they had experienced and the pervasive derogatory meaning associated with the word *dagongmei*. One researcher then carefully asked how these women themselves felt about the word and whether an alternative should be used instead. One of the representatives replied, "We *are* [*jiu shi*] dagongmei and it is nothing to be ashamed of." As this representative implicitly critiqued, the politics must go beyond a reform of the signifier. At a casual gathering after the conference, the same representative reaffirmed, "We *are* dagongmei. Only when we are united will we have strength." This desire for affirmation and collective incorporation expresses hope for a politics that works with the social and material grounding of the subject position of dagongmei, and at the same time articulates it as an identity that carries within itself a potential transformative agency. A new dagongmei collective is beginning to be envisioned.

The signification of *dagongmei* for Xiang, as she tries to clarify in the letter, is different. The migrants she writes about do not ask why "being yoked in this kind of life seems as natural as the existence of the sun, the moon, and

the stars.” They are incapable of querying their own predicament: “so busy, so tired, but still . . . no way of asking why.” Although Xiang occasionally finds hope, dagongmei often appears in her writing as a hopeless identity that is unable to break out of the yoke. It is, therefore, an identity that she wants to escape, even temporarily: “Many times I want to forget my status [as a dagongmei] and try to imagine myself as an orphan or a nomad.” When speaking of dagongmei, Xiang shifts between “we” and “they,” and between hope and hopelessness, which reflects a problem she has with self-representation, associated with her ability and inability to forget and to escape.

Xiang’s signification of *dagongmei* nevertheless problematizes the neoliberal meaning of *dagongmei*, which frames migrant workers as little more than *homo economicus*, rational agents of the market economy and self-development. The massive rural-to-urban labor migration is both a product of the liberalizing processes of the post-Mao “reform and opening,” and a condition for its continuation and expansion. In the policy struggles to expand the power of the market, mainstream liberal economists often boost their legitimacy and moral authority through humanistic gestures of celebrating and championing the freedom of migrants, at the expense of urban workers who struggle to make claims to state-owned enterprises.

The hegemony of catachrestic keywords and the contestations about the meaning of dagongmei necessarily raise the question of postsocialism in China today. Many Western academics, journalists, and politicians describe the global condition after the fall of the Eastern Bloc as “postsocialist.” Yet Chinese postsocialism seems ambiguous because post-Mao transformation is marked by both a radical reform in ideology and social relations, and by a continuity in the form of a party-state that still claims to be socialist. This ambiguity, sometimes reflected in the ambivalent construction “(post)socialism,” has given rise to a variety of enunciations. On the one hand, the Chinese Communist Party and some remaining Cold Warriors in the West appear to be similarly invested in the truth-value in the nomenclature itself, even though this investment serves two very different purposes: for the former, it serves to claim ongoing legitimacy for its rule despite the reform; for the latter, it serves, also despite China’s reform, to continually legitimize anticommunist politics against China. For the Chinese State, the strategic investment in the truth of nomenclature enables an ideological separation between the political

and economic spheres.<sup>6</sup> With this separation, those keywords that exercise hegemony in economic life can claim to be apolitical and non-interfering with the party-state's claim to socialism, even though they represent the interests of domestic and transnational capital. Writing on post-1989 Chinese politics, Xudong Zhang comments, "As long as the government's legitimacy comes exclusively from maintaining economic growth and social stability, its official ideology will remain a meaningless signifier awaiting appropriation by the newborn economic and class interests and positions in the differentiated social sphere" (2001: 5). For the Chinese State, postsocialism is an enforced separation of the political from the economic and an enforced depoliticization of "development," "productive forces," and "the market." The suspension of the political from the economic is reflected in the former Communist Party leader Deng Xiaoping's adamantly pragmatist "cat theory" of economic development, which discouraged political debate and encouraged cats to catch mice, regardless of their political color.

On the other hand, postsocialism, as Lydia Liu has noted in her criticism of a trend in cultural studies (1999), is taken by some to be a flattened transnationalism which has little place for historicity and for which socialism is irrelevant. Thus China is treated as continuous with the globe to be capitalized and is highly accessible by this form of transnationalism, as long as it knows how to negotiate the culture and the state. The capitalization approach also encourages a near-sighted temporal view in which China seems to have existed only for two or three decades, because in this transnational cognition, only the past two or three decades are relevant and worth considering. This is the explicit view held by transnational capital and by many elite members of Chinese society, but it is also an implicit assumption held by some new students of Western China studies programs who access China as a field only in its late reform period. Socialism is treated as "data" about prior modes of behavior that may have hangover effects, but which present little political or epistemological challenge to analysis.

Chinese postsocialism may have become more frequently invoked, but it has been much less often theorized. In the context of 1980s reform Arif Dirlik (1989) pioneered an examination of postsocialist conditions, conceiving postsocialism as an articulation and response of "actually existing socialism" to its own perceived deficiencies, as well as to the demands of capitalism in the

context of socialism's global abatement as a coherent political-theoretical alternative. Yet Dirlik also emphasizes that this process of articulation, premised on the structure of "actually existing socialism," is unlikely to restore capitalism. Dirlik wrote in the early phase of the reform, when more of the preceding socialist structure was still intact. But China's integration with the global market economy in the 1990s effected a much more radical transformation of the political-social landscape. Perhaps to stress the importance of the continuity of socialist legacies, Li Zhang (2002) calls the current conditions late socialist. On the other hand, Ralph Litzinger suggests the need to attend to "a different vision of the stakes of theorizing postsocialist realities" (2002: 34). Lydia Liu points to a "co-authorship of the ideology of business entrepreneurship between the postsocialist official discourse of China and that of the mainstream American media" (1999: 790).

Chinese postsocialism at the beginning of the twenty-first century includes some contradictory structural conditions which can be partially listed as follows: a continued official claim to socialism, coupled with mainstream neoliberal policies that transform China into a market economy integrated into the global capitalist system; rapid capitalization of enterprises (turning state and collective productive assets into private capital) and marketization of essential social services (people in China now refer to education, medical care, and housing as the new oppressive "three big mountains," echoing the "three big mountains" of imperialism, feudalism, and bureaucratic capitalism that oppressed the Chinese people before 1949); collective ownership of farm land, relatively equal but divided land-use rights among individual rural families, and de jure noncommodity status of farm land; large-scale unemployment and loss of benefits for aging urban workers due to the structural adjustment of state-owned enterprises; the new presence of a young army of rural-to-urban migrant workers; unprecedented rural-urban disparity in much of China, as well as drastic regional disparity between the coastal areas and interior areas, including many ethnic minority areas.

Within these sometimes contradictory conditions one finds similarly contradictory articulations of the politics of postsocialism. For example, within China, although the Left has leveled many severe critiques of the state's unsocialist policies and ideology, critics rarely use terms such as *postsocialism*, not so much because it is politically incorrect as because they consider it more strategic to call on the state to make good on its own claim to socialism. On

the other hand, as I illustrate in chapter 1, the postsocialist political economy of land ownership and use rights ironically becomes an enabling condition for capitalist accumulation by subsidizing the reproduction of migrant labor power.

In the limited scope of this book I treat postsocialism as an unstable process in which the emerging hegemony of capitalism in China must deal with living socialist legacies, claims, and structures of feeling that surround the current relations of production and sociality. The enforced separation between the political and the economic spheres creates an ambiguous space in which words seem to lose their grounding in previous conditions and are being retooled and recycled for radically different and contradictory purposes. On the one hand, images of Mao are sometimes collected as kitsch, while on the other hand they are used as political symbols by discontented workers in their rallies and demonstrations. Capitalist market relations mobilize and retool keywords from the socialist revolutionary context. Practices such as “speaking bitterness” (*suku*) and words such as “big rear base” (*dahoufang*) are quite ingeniously re-oriented toward a different telos. These words and practices become national or local resources that feed and enrich the authority of the global keywords. At the same time, words are being retooled by migrant women workers for their collective self-expression. In chapter 5 I report on how the migrant worker Xiaohong retools Mao’s use of “stand up” to call on the collectivity of migrant women, rather than on the nation. In chapter 6 I describe how the migrant worker Hua Min asserts the political agency of migrant workers and cites the early-twentieth-century leftist writer Lu Xun: “If we do not break out of the silence, we will perish in this silence!” These are different and competing efforts to retool words and to appropriate the legacy of socialist revolution. This, too, is a postsocialist dynamic. To grasp what Litzinger calls “the stakes of theorizing postsocialist realities” is a vast but critical project that requires collective efforts. Some significant work has begun in the realm of culture and gender studies, but there is still much to be done to improve understanding of postsocialism in its multifaceted political-economic conditions and their articulation with old and new forms of collective politics.<sup>7</sup>

### **How Does Domestic Service Signify? The Master-Servant Allegory**

This book is about rural-to-urban migrant domestic workers in post-Mao China and the social relations and discursive power that they experience.



While domestic service signifies as an allegory articulating social relations and imaginaries in Chinese society today, the ability of domestic service to be a trope articulating larger social relations is not unique to postsocialist conditions in China. Therefore, one must first examine how the master-servant relationship serves as a trope in industrial societies.

Common sense might have one oppose the abstract, contractual, modern qualities of relations between capital and wage labor to the concrete, authoritarian, and pre-modern qualities associated with master-servant relations. But Karl Marx highlighted the despotic nature of capitalist relations: “In the factory code, the capitalist formulates his autocratic power over his workers like a private legislator, and purely as an emanation of his own will” (1977: 549–50). This despotism is the will of capital that abstracts and appropriates the worker’s living body through “technical subordination” and is, as stressed by Dipesh Chakrabarty, “structural to capital . . . not simply historical” (2000: 666). In this sense Marx saw the master-servant relationship as the essential trope of appropriation: “The presupposition of the *master-servant relationship* [*Herrschaftsverhältnis*] is the appropriation of an alien will. Whatever has no will, e.g. the animal, may well provide a service, but does not thereby make its owner into a *master*” (1973: 500–501). The notion of will here draws on the Hegelian notion of self-consciousness or Being-for-itself that is predicated on the recognition by the self and the other (alien will) of the self’s subjecthood. Land and animals thus have no will as such and cannot provide recognition. In the Hegelian master-slave dialectic “the Master’s certainty is therefore not purely subjective and ‘immediate,’ but objectivized and ‘mediated’ by another’s, the Slave’s recognition” (Kojève 1980: 16).

Hegel and his followers arguably thought that humanity had reached the end of history with the French Revolution, which proclaimed the universal, rational principles of the rights of Man (Kojève 1980: x–xi). When Francis Fukuyama declared the end of history after the fall of the Berlin Wall, his declaration fulfilled Hegel’s observation that history repeats itself. And one may add Marx’s further observation that it does so the second time as farce (Marx 1994: 15). Marx’s interesting move beyond Hegel is to see this appropriation of an alien will continued in mediated form in the capitalist realm of production relations: “The *master-servant relation* likewise belongs in this formula of the appropriation of the instruments of production. . . . [I]t is reproduced—in mediated form—in capital” (Marx 1973: 501). Beyond the formal political

equality of the rights of Man, the master-servant element is found in the capitalist factory, which “confiscates every atom of freedom, both in bodily and intellectual activity” (Marx 1973: 548) and where “the slave-driver’s lash” is replaced by “the overseer’s book of penalties” (Marx 1977: 550).

Marx, however, is not alone in using the master-servant trope to capture the nature of capitalist relations of production. In fact, by the time of his writing, a legal coding of the master-servant doctrine had already begun to define the modern meaning of “employment” in England. However, while Marx used the trope to criticize the bourgeois view of the rise of freedom and autonomy, the bourgeois legal coding of this allegory defined and legitimized an employment relationship to criminalize labor indiscipline. Daniel Defoe in *The Great Law of Subordination Consider’d* (1724) narrates the story of Edmund Pratt as an illustration of insubordination and insolence of the plebs in the eighteenth century. Pratt is a “journeyman weaver” hired by E——, a clothier, to fulfill an order that he, E——, has received from a third party. Midway through the job, Pratt stops working, preferring to lie “Drunk and sotting in the Alehouse.” E—— then approaches the magistrate to demand the arrest of Pratt, only to be told that because Pratt is “not an Apprentice, or a hir’d Covenant-Servant bargain’d with for the Year,” he cannot be so compelled to work, nor is his refusal to work punishable. Under the existing law, Pratt can only be sued for damages, which, as judged by Defoe, was “not worth [the clothier’s] while.” Defoe uses the case of Pratt to illustrate what he sees as appalling social relations in eighteenth-century England. He sounds an alarm in an epigraph: “The Poor will be Rulers over the Rich, and the Servants be Governours of their Masters, the Plebij have almost mobb’d the Patricij. . . . [I]n a Word, Order is inverted, Subordination ceases, and the world seems to stand with the Bottom upward” (quoted in Tomlins 1995: 56). With the Woolen Manufactures Act of 1725 and many acts that followed, the parliament put an end to what Defoe considered “this Deficiency of the Law.” Retelling the story, the critical legal scholar Christopher Tomlins states, “By a stroke of law, Parliament made Pratt’s employer what a year previously he had not been — Pratt’s master” (1995: 60–61). Contrary to the bourgeois celebration of the rule of law and the rise of freedom, Tomlins argues that the history of Anglo-American law in the eighteenth, nineteenth, and even twentieth centuries transformed employees such as Pratt into “servants,” not the other way around (*ibid.*).

Odd as it may seem, as the eighteenth century wore on, the rank of servants

saw unprecedented swelling in numbers in England, thanks to the efforts of courts and legal treatise writers. While Sir Matthew Hale, in his 1713 *Analysis of the Law*, categorized “Master and Servant” as one of the “Relations Oeconomical” and found little to say on the subject, in 1743 Richard Burns’s *Justice of the Peace and Parish Officer* included in the category of servants “Laborers, journeymen, artificers, and other workmen” (Burns 1757: 229–65). In 1765–69 Sir William Blackstone’s *Commentaries on the Laws of England* established “master and servant” as the legal categorization of all employment relations.

In the nineteenth-century United States as well, along with the disappearance of diverse forms of employment relations into a homogeneous wage labor, the master-servant trope emerged as a single legal paradigmatic expression of employment relations. The treatise writer Timothy Walker stated in 1837, “The title of master and servant, at the head of a lecture, does not sound very harmoniously to republican ears. . . . But the legal relation of master and servant *must* exist, to a greater or lesser extent, wherever civilization furnishes work to be done” (243; emphasis added). In 1877 H. G. Wood, a well-known lawyer and treatise writer, published the influential *A Treatise of the Law of Master and Servant*: “The word *servant*, in our legal *nomenclature*, has a broad significance, and embraces all persons of whatever rank or position who are in the employ, and subject to the direction or control of another in any department of labor or business” (2). Wood formulated the “employment-at-will” rule, holding that employment of indefinite duration can be terminated at any time, for any reason, with or without cause. “With us the rule is inflexible, that a general or indefinite hiring is *prima facie* a hiring at will, and if the servant seeks to make it out a yearly hiring, the burden is upon him to establish it by proof” (Wood 1877: 272, quoted in Feinman 1991: 735). Although the “servant” in the paradigmatic legal coding here is different from that of indentured servitude, the coding of employment relations as master and servant stressed that the employer-master has legally sanctioned property in the service of the servant-employee. The relationship between the master-employer and the servant-employee is one other than equality before the law. Rather, the contract has built-in legal relations of subjection that demand “fidelity, obedience, and sacrifice of control on the part of the employee” (Tomlins 1992: 90).

Since the 1920s, master-servant as the core doctrine of employment has not been dismantled, but many of its specifics have undergone revisions to

accommodate labor demands, including an erosion of the employment-at-will rule. However, the conventional master-servant relationship, as understood by common-law agency doctrine, still operates today as the standard by which an employment relation is tested. For example, to define their employee status, university teaching assistants, medical doctors, and many others must pass the employment test, a critical criteria of which is whether one is subject to control and authority by another in the work process, even though this control may not be exercised (Rowland 2001; Frazier 2004). But the National Labor Relations Act, passed by Congress in 1935 to promote industrial peace and stability, and subsequently amended many times, does not regard the “individual employed as an agricultural laborer, or in the domestic service of any family or person at his home” to be an employee for purposes of protection in unionization efforts.<sup>8</sup> The irony can hardly be missed: the domestic-service worker is excluded from the category of employee for unionization purposes even though the master-servant relationship serves as the core doctrine of labor employment.

The rise of neoliberalism in the last three decades has rolled back the progress achieved in twentieth-century common law (the law of contracts, torts, and property) and has instituted what Jay Feinman calls a “regressive . . . revival . . . of the classical law that reigned in the Gilded Age at the end of the 19th century” (2004). Included in this revival is a defense of the employment-at-will rule associated with the master-servant doctrine.<sup>9</sup> In the name of freedom and flexibility, the recent reforms of the Australian workplace-relations laws restore employment at will for businesses employing less than a hundred workers, provoking union leaders to criticize what they consider the regress of workers’ rights by a century.<sup>10</sup> In the context of these reversions I return to Marx and finish my quotation of his sentence: “The master-servant relation likewise belongs in this formula of the appropriation of the instruments of production. . . . [I]t is reproduced—in mediated form—in capital, *and thus . . . forms a ferment of its dissolution and is an emblem of its limitation*” (1973: 501; emphasis added).<sup>11</sup>

How does the master-servant relationship allegorize the changing morphology of social relations in China? During the many centuries of dynastic rule, bondservants, together with actors, prostitutes, and beggars, were classified as *jianmin* (inferior people), as opposed to *liangmin*, which included

literati, farmers, craftsmen, and merchants.<sup>12</sup> Among *jianmin*, servants alone were subsumed into their masters' households and thus were not entitled to land. On becoming a servant, one would also usually lose one's family name and have a new name assigned by the master. Neither servants nor their descendants could sit for imperial exams, and thus they could not enter the civil service. Legal codes not only distinguished between *jianmin* and *liangmin* but also stipulated more specific differentiations between masters and servants. Servants were severely punished for offenses against their masters and were also subjected to various rules, upheld by local gentries, to compel domestic discipline (*jiafa*) and clan conventions (*zugui*).

The formal, castelike bondservant system was officially abolished by the Qing Dynasty during the late nineteenth century, but it continued informally for several decades. Up to 1949 there existed a variety of domestic employments, including bondservants.<sup>13</sup> A study of labor conditions in 1920 Shanghai revealed the following division of labor in domestic service: *niangyi* (for general domestic chores), *dajie* (a teenage girl for tidying rooms and light chores), *nainiang* (wet nurse), *shutou niangyi* (hair-comber), *timian po* (for facial exfoliation). These women reportedly worked fifteen to sixteen hours a day, with intermittent breaks for rest (Li Cishan 1920: 700–702). A study of labor conditions in Nanjing also found a similar division of labor. Those who worked on miscellaneous chores were paid the lowest and could be dismissed by masters at any time. When there was a contract, the first contract was for three years, the agreement being between the master and the woman's husband, after which she was free to leave (Mo Ru 1920). Lu Xun, in his 1921 story "My Old Home" (Gu xiang), relates three types of domestic employment, measured by length of service: "In our district we divide servants into three classes: those who work all the year for one family are called full-timers [*chang gong*]; those who are hired by the day are called dailies [*duan gong*]; and those who farm their own land and only work for one family at New Year, during festivals or when rents are being collected, are called part-timers [*mang yue*]" (1956: 92).

After the founding of the People's Republic in 1949, paid domestic service largely disappeared. In the first seventeen years of the Mao era, only high-ranking cadres and intellectuals, who were presumably charged with great responsibility, employed domestic service and took it for granted. Ordinary

urban families could and did employ domestic labor on a short-term basis, but did not take it for granted as long-term everyday practice. After 1949 domestic workers were no longer called by any of the old terms for servants. The early classical terms *baomu* (literally, “protecting mother”) and, alternatively, *ayi* (literally, “auntie”) became categorical terms for all domestic helpers regardless of their specific responsibilities.<sup>14</sup> During the Cultural Revolution (1966–76), the presence of domestic servants in elite households came under criticism as a bourgeois privilege and the practice largely ceased. Following the post-Mao economic liberalization, the hiring of domestic workers reappeared in the cities in the early 1980s. In both the Mao and post-Mao eras, rural migrant women were the main source for domestic workers. Placement agencies, which emerged in the 1980s with the rapid expansion of domestic service, addressed domestic workers as *jiating fuwuyuan* (domestic-service personnel).

What does the long history of the servant system mean for most Chinese who grow up in the People’s Republic today? Most Chinese citizens may not be familiar with the specifics of the servant system, and many may not even know most of the common historical terms for servants.<sup>15</sup> Yet even in the waning socialist collective memory, representations of servants and their oppression are still among the most poignant hallmarks of the class injustice of the “old society,” and the liberation of servants remains the quintessential liberation story. This link was forged through widely known leftist literature of the 1930s and 1940s, such as Cao Yu’s literary debut *Lei yu* (Thunder) and Ba Jin’s *Jia* (Family), which featured women domestic servants as central characters. One of the classical figures of the oppressed in the national memory of the old society is the white-haired girl in the revolutionary play *Bai mao nü* (White-Haired Girl). This dramatic story of the liberation of the peasant servant girl Xi’er from the persecution of her master-landlord was widely popular in the communist-liberated areas in the 1940s and throughout the Mao era. In this play the experiences of exploitation and oppression were inscribed in the body of the servant girl, transforming her from a youthful woman into a white-haired “ghost.” It was in the figure and the body of the peasant servant girl—the lowest of the low—that liberation was most powerfully signified.

The reform of the past three decades in China has made domestic service a contentious allegory of social transformation. For some domestic workers in China today, the “old society” and its class and gender subjugation is a specter

that seems to have returned particularly through domestic service. If rural migrants at least initially find modern attraction in collective working and living experiences in Shenzhen factories (Ching Kuan Lee 1998), they have far more doubt about the prospect of working in urban homes and its implication for identity. This is reflected in some of the women's resistance to, or ambivalence about, terms such as *baomu*. For example, Xiang said, "[Baomu] is worse than *ayi*. I prefer to be called *dagongmei*." Still another found the term *baomu* "very ugly or shameful [*hao chou*], not as good as *fuwuyuan* [service personnel]." In 1996, when a young woman from Shanxi named Fang Lin was told of an opportunity to work as a *baomu* in Beijing, her first reaction was "Why? This is like going back to the old society!" But Fang Lin eventually persuaded herself and her parents that she could go to Beijing to work as a *baomu*. "I told my parents that this is nothing. Isn't it very common now? Newspapers report that even some college students today work as *baomu*." Fang Lin's doubt seems to have been confirmed by a migrant woman who complained that to be a *baomu* was to be a *yongren* (servant). The specter of the old society is more clearly manifested in the term *yongren*, which refers directly to pre-1949 arrangements. Although *dagongmei*, *baomu*, and *ayi* are all gendered terms for (migrant) women workers, *dagongmei* is preferred by some migrant domestic workers because, as I examine in chapter 1, *baomu* and *ayi* suggest a particular class humiliation and gender contamination specific to domestic service.<sup>16</sup>

In comparison, *fuwuyuan* was a neologism created in the Mao era to refer to workers in the service sector, such as restaurant servers, hotel workers, and so on. From the Mao-era context that everyone should *fuwu* (serve) the people (*wei renmin fuwu*), the term *fuwuyuan* for some migrant women today still offers the comfort of a discursive legitimacy or a basis for contesting class arrogance. For migrant domestic workers, to be addressed as *fuwuyuan* implies that they are symbolically placed in a discursive context linked to a modern egalitarian social relationship. *Yuan zai Beijing de jia* (A Home Far Away from Home) (Chen Xiaoqing 1993), a documentary about migrant domestic workers from Anhui Province, included a scene of a young woman, surrounded by her agitated colleagues, breaking down in tears in front of the camera and protesting, "Doesn't our work also serve the people?" The subtext of invoking their work as "serving the people" is to assert the Mao-era discourse of egalitarianism on the basis of the social value of their work.

Is there any need to pay attention to quibbles over the various terms used by migrant domestic workers? Liberalization since the late 1970s and the quick expansion of domestic service means that such service has become an everyday practice in urban China, bringing a significant number of first-generation employers and domestic employees into existence and social relations. At issue is how migrant domestic workers in postsocialist conditions struggle over the meaning of their labor, service, and identities. Both employers and domestic workers bring varied assumptions and locally and globally informed imaginaries into their struggles to define what constitutes “employment” and “service,” and to define what desirable and legitimate sociality is.

How domestic service is allegorized points directly to how sociality in general is conceived under “socialism with Chinese characteristics.” Employers’ mobilization of the bodies of domestic workers to work automatically and affectively constitutes a hegemonic, developmentalist class pedagogy that reflects larger concerns and anxieties about China’s ability to actualize the globally normative conditions of “market economy.” Contestations over the meanings of domestic service go beyond the specific context of domestic labor to raise questions about the nature of wage labor, market economy, sociality, and socialism. In the conditions of postsocialism, domestic service, far from being a particular, parochial, anachronistic field of its own, is a site where these issues are particularly poignant when the collective memory of liberation and egalitarianism is being submerged by the newly hegemonic ideology of market economy and developmentalism.

### Coda

In a letter dated 9 July 2001 Xiang, in a friendly but firm tone, nudged me with a question about my writing: “I have read your article. . . . You must know that I read it at least five times. This kind of academic language is very strange and difficult for me. But I do my best to figure out what you want to peel off and what issues you want to raise. I also speculate whether other readers would take an interest in this topic. . . . But I have thoughts that may be brusque. In my view, theoretical analysis by intellectuals can only be a kind of enlightenment; a greater force should be coming from those who are studied. They should be the number one *duxiang* of your [plural] conversation.” The essay that Xiang read and critiqued was a short one I published in the mainland Chinese aca-



demic magazine *Dushu* (2001) and on which I partially base chapter 5 herein. Xiang's acknowledgment of "enlightenment" as intellectuals' agency may be an act of courtesy, as intellectuals in China have long asserted this agency for themselves. And it is a qualified one that is humbled in its comparison with the greater social force lying in the transformative potential of "those who are studied." Hua Min, a migrant woman worker activist, issued a similar suggestion when she gave a talk in a research setting: "Please don't just treat us as research materials. We hope you can speak *to* us." Aspiring to social transformation, including that of their own, Xiang, Hua Min, and the dagongmei like them do not literally demand to be spoken to or written for. Contrary to Edward Said's motto of critical intellectuals "speaking truth to power," Xiang and Hua Min demand a reorientation of speaking. This assertion of the transformative power of the subaltern, as well as the urging of intellectuals to reorient their speaking, comes from the legacy of Chinese social revolution in the twentieth century.

In the context of Xiang's critique, the word *duixiang* strikes me. *Duixiang* means a goal or a destination toward which thinking and action is oriented and intended. *Duixiang* can be things or people and can refer (1) to something to be engaged, studied, or transformed; or (2) to an addressee of love, marriage, writing, conversation, and so on. Xiang's use of the word *duixiang* may at first seem quite ordinary for a Chinese reader, as it is often how the word is used. This word, joining thinking with action, interpretation with transformation, dialectics with affect, is discursively linked with Mao's stress on a dialectical relationship between theory and practice (Mao 1967 [1937]). Its flow into everyday vernacular, including Xiang's casting of it as "in my view," actually bears remarkable witness to a quiet legacy of this revolutionary worldview. In fact the three primary meanings of *duixiang* given by *Xiandai hanyu cidian* (2001; Modern Chinese Dictionary) are "revolution," "research," and "love" (320). Its multiple and interlaced meanings are embedded in an epistemology radically different from that based on dualist binaries of subject-object or mind-body. Xiang's critique challenges me to enter into a relationship with migrant women in which they are the *duixiang* of my writing. Contemplating Xiang's use of *duixiang*, I cannot fix it with any one of the meanings, but can only consider how the dynamic move from one meaning to another is the very urge that Xiang and Hua Min try to express.