Engendering Chinese Modernity: The Sexual Politics of Dagongmei in a Dormitory Labour Regime

PUN NGAI*

Hong Kong University of Science and Technology

Dagongmei, the migrant working daughter, is a new embodied social identity emerging in contemporary China, produced to meet an epochal calling for Chinese modernity and postsocialist transformation in the age of globalisation. Conjured up for an imagined modernity project, which means wealth and national strength for a China capable of “joining tracks with global society” [yu shijie jiegui], a new identity is crafted, accompanied by a new ethics of self that is inscribed on young rural female bodies when they enter into a particular set of production relations.¹ This construct, at first glance, seems inevitably to be a disciplinary project that works with homogeneous and reactive forces to interpellate the self with a modern worker identity. As a disciplinary project on identity, it implies unity and fusion, but nevertheless often goes together with a project of the self that is inherently fragmentary and heterogeneous (Kondo, 1990). The process of constituting an identity is imbued with a politics of gender and sex that offers us a vivid configuration of self in everyday life struggles situated in particular moments and occasions. It highlights a heterogeneous, incoherent, fluid and conflict-laden process of identity-making on specific gendered bodies in distinct situations.

As a newly coined term, dagongmei embraces multi-layered meanings and denotes a new kind of labour relationship fundamentally different from that of the Maoist period (Pun, 1999). Da-gong means “working for the boss” or “selling labour”, connoting commodification and capitalist exchange of labour for wages (Lee, 1998). In contrast to the term gongren [worker], which carried the highest status in the socialist rhetoric of Mao’s day, the new word dagong signifies a lesser identity – that of a hired hand – in a new context shaped by the rise of market factors in labour relations and hierarchy. Mei means younger sister. It denotes not merely gender, but also marital status – mei is often single, unmarried and younger, in contrast to jie, older sister, and thus mei often signifies a lower status. Dagong-mei, as a hegemonic construct, therefore unfolds an inferior working identity inscribed within capitalist labour relations and sexual relations.

The term dagongmei, paradoxically, does not necessarily carry a negative connotation for young women from rural areas; rather, it provides new identities and new senses of the self that they acquire once they work in the city (Jacka, 1998). Self-subjectivisation is crucial to power and to capital that needs willing labour. As Foucault has said, the project of political technology or governmentality is at the same time a project of self-subjectivisation (1994, pp. 81–82). It is fascinating to see how these two forces – governmentality and self-subjectivisation – converge and contrast in manufac-
turing consent and identity in the workplace, and how these contestations can be understood within the larger dynamics of Chinese society in the postsocialist period.

In this paper, I analyse this subject-making process. Dagongmei is a specific ethics of self, construed at the particular moment when private and transnational capital engulfed contemporary China. As a new social identity, it reveals the story of how a state socialist system is giving way to the capitalist global economy and how capitalist practices depend entirely on a complex web of regulations, on class, rural-urban differences, and sexual relations. In this paper I will look, in particular, at the play of sexual politics apparent in the process of producing the subject dagongmei in the workplace and urban environment. Beginning with Foucault’s understanding that subjects are themselves the effects of disciplinary actions, fully embedded in, and produced by, matrices of power and discourse, I then seek a feminist critique, which questions “sex” and “gender” in postsocialist China at the conjuncture of its self-incorporation into global production, and trace and reveal the political operations that produce and conceal who qualifies as a proper Chinese dagongmei. I will also look at how heterogeneous social subjects are constructed as a unified social body in the workplace and how the gender identity of dagongmei is construed in contrast to the Maoist term, gongren, which was an asexual subject. As a project of capital, the process of sexualisation of dagongmei (and of their male equivalent: dagongzai, or working sons) mirrors the earlier process of de-sexualisation of gongren, which was a project of the Chinese state in the socialist period. The contestation of gender identity is further caught up with urban consumerist desires and a yearning to become a modern “cultured” self, a vital part of the passage to becoming a modern Chinese dagongmei. In this context I also explore how dagongmei struggle to be modern selves, especially by participating in everyday life and politics in a workers’ dormitory in an urban industrialised space.

**Locating the Subject**

On a usual day, everybody rushes for breakfast in the canteen at 7 am, and work starts at 8 am. It is a ten-minute walk from our dormitory to the factory. It is a mid-autumn morning and the air is fresh and chilly. Dagongmei and dagongzai, like morning birds, flock together, talking and laughing on the way to the factory. We pass the workers’ dormitory zone, market streets, shops, clinics and a large playground on the way to our factory premises. There is a great contrast between these old buildings and our modern factory premises, which were built less than five years ago. Like other big companies in Shenzhen, the five-storey building is furnished with large glass windows and air conditioners, is surrounded by a wall and guarded by a huge iron-barred gate. The premises look modern, elegant and distinctive, signifying the coming of a new industrial world on the socialist land. They are the bedrock for nurturing a new workers’ identity. Inside the gate of the company, which I will call Meteor Electronics Limited, there are over 500 workers. Most are from rural areas all over the country, especially places in Southern China such as Guangdong, Hunnan and Jiangxi. Nearly 75 per cent are women.

I study this new engendered worker-subject, dagongmei, in a particular city in Southern China: Shenzhen, the first Special Economic Zone (SEZ), which was established in May 1980. With the launch of the open-door policy in the early 1980s, Shenzhen became the pioneer reformed city, erected as a test case of an economic development zone open to global capital. I chose Shenzhen for my study because it was the place where global capital and the socialist state first encountered each other and worked hand in hand, although not always in harmony, to transform Chinese society. Shenzhen is on the east of the Pearl River Delta. In the north it is connected to Dongguan, Weiyuan, in the
south to Hong Kong, and in the east it faces Daya Bay. The Shenzhen SEZ is only part of Shenzhen city. It occupies one-sixth of the whole city, with an area of 327.5 square miles. The SEZ is shaped like a triangle; one can travel by bus across the whole zone in less than two hours. It is special not only in its economic features but also in its political and social aspects. There is a long iron curtain from east to west that separates the SEZ from the non-special zone that constitutes the whole country, with a Customer Gate set up at the western end of Nantou district. Those who want to enter the SEZ require special permission from their local branch of the Public Security Bureau (the police).

Before the establishment of the SEZ, Shenzhen was only a small town with 310,000 residents and fewer than 30,000 workers. In 1995 its total population was 3.45 million and its total labour force 2.45 million. Five years later, at the end of 2000, the total population had climbed to 4.33 million and the labour force to 3.09 million. Around 30 per cent of the population are categorised as permanent residents who have come from major cities and become state officials, entrepreneurs, technicians and skilled workers. The other 70 per cent or so are temporary residents, which means they do not have the official household registration that entitles them to recognised citizenship in Shenzhen. In 2000 the total number of temporary residents was 3.08 million, which is equal to the total labour force of Shenzhen (Shenzhen Statistical Yearbook, 2001).

It is clear that the expansion of Shenzhen and its SEZ is based on the mobility of migrants as temporary residents (Andors, 1988). Temporary residents from rural areas undertake most of the manual labour in the SEZ. In Shenzhen, as soon as one becomes a legal temporary worker, one is entitled to be a temporary resident. Labour appropriation in Shenzhen as well as in other economic development zones is unique in its use of temporary labour from rural areas. The mobilisation of migrant labour, which in China is termed temporary labour, is one of the most distinctive elements of capitalist development in both developed countries in the nineteenth century and newly developing countries in the 1960s and 1970s. Reform China, like other developing countries, depends on the mobilisation of rural labour as its cheapest labour supply, as part of the process of primitive accumulation in economic development. Hence the extensive use of temporary labour was not found in Mao’s socialist period, but is rather a specific characteristic of the SEZs and a significant developmental strategy in the reform period. The economic “take-off” of Shenzhen and the advancement of its position in the global economy are not only dependent on the extraction of labour from the rural areas but, more specifically, on the use of female labour. The process of “globalising” Shenzhen depends on female labour, which is the cheapest and most compliant form of labour, in the development of export-processing industries (Andors, 1988; Lee, 1998). Phyllis Andors (1988) estimates that in 1988 over 70 per cent of the temporary labour force in Shenzhen was female, and Josephine Smart believes that in 1989 around 90 per cent of the total labour force in the light manufacturing industries run by Hong Kong capital consisted of female workers under 25 years of age (Smart, 1993, p. 10). In my study of manufacturing industries in the late 1990s, I found that more than 95 per cent of women workers were classified as temporary.

This gives rise to a distinctive use of labour in China, which seeks to employ a “dormitory labour regime” in order to contain the persistent use of internal migrant labour in SEZs, economic and technological development zones and most of China’s big cities (Smith and Pun, 2003). With the opening up of production for the global market in contemporary China, the use of dormitories to accommodate migrant labour has become a systemic feature of global production. Irrespective of industry, location, or nature of capital, Chinese migrant workers – male and female, single and married – are accommodated in dormitories within or close to factory compounds. The recurrence of this old form of dormitory housing of workers is the hybrid outcome of global capitalism and state
socialism, reinvigorated through foreign-invested firms, local authorities and the central
government in a globalising economic context. Virtually all foreign-invested companies
utilise dormitories, whether rented from local authorities or, increasingly, provided
privately within the enterprise. All of these aim to capture youthful migrant labour for
short sojourns to the factory. Accounts of life in such factories by researchers, journalists
and social activists indicate that dormitories increase dependence, help extend the working
day, trap labourers, and lower wages by opening access to rural migrant workers from
internal Chinese provinces (Chan, 2001; Lee, 1998; Pun, 1999; Solinger, 1999). Neverthe-
less, I would like to highlight here not simply the poor conditions in these places, such as
overcrowding and inadequate fire exits, but the implications of dormitories for the women
workers in situating their daily lives and their everyday resistance. Dormitory space, as a
terrain for women’s solidarity and resistance, particularly deserves in-depth study, as it
embodies both the domination and resistance of new worker-subjects at the micro level
and in daily conflicts and struggles.

Desiring Sexual Subjects
Stories of sex, love and erotica spread frequently and quickly in the workers’ dormitories.
The feminisation of labour in industrial export-processing zones in Shenzhen, as else-
where in China and other developing countries, is often linked to a project of renegotiating
women’s space and power (Rofel, 1992), as well as a broader politics of re-imagining sex
and gender. These larger discourses and politics can provide new elements for subverting
conventional norms and values, but can simultaneously leave submerged women’s agency
in the new matrix of power and subjugation. The contemporary Chinese scene is charac-
terised by a proliferation of sex talk, sexual discourse and consumerised female images
(Croll, 1995; Evans, 1997). Signs of sex are everywhere, and we seem to be invited to
a world in which female bodies are commodified and fetishised to such an extent that
only a mass grave of signs remains (Baudrillard, 1993). Nudes, erotica and all kinds of
sexy, seduced female bodies, both Western and Chinese, are found in magazines,
posters, newspapers, and on the covers of novels, calendars and even serious academic
books and periodicals. On every street corner in Shenzhen, as in other Chinese cities,
advertisements on lamp-posts tell passers-by of the secret, local knowledge of particular
families of an operation to heal sexual diseases. Stories of sex and violence, uncontrollable
sex drives and sex outside marriage are voiced in novels, video shows, TV programs and
films. Painting, other visual arts, and avant-garde dance performances all focus on the
theme of the “sexualised body”.

The all-pervasive interest in female bodies in reform China is conjured up by all-powerful
consumer desires, whose gazes are not only sexy but further sexualised. The technology of
consumption power, in contrast to production power, is not interested in producing disci-
plined bodies, but libidinous, lascivious and lustful female bodies. The presumption of
the female Chinese body as docile and gentle is turned upside down for consumption
capital. Now the Chinese body has to be vibrant, sexualised, seductive and liberated
enough to release all forces of libido. Shenzhen night life – nightclubs, karaoke, wine
bars and hair salons – has flourished since the mid-1980s and is marked by its extravagant
sexual appetites, especially for female bodies. Even workplaces in which women predomi-
nate, such as garment, electronics, shoe and toy factories, are often called “peach orchards”
in popular magazines and stories. These “peach orchards” imaginatively evoke and signify
female places of sex, love and joy. It is nevertheless a male-oriented, if not sexist, metaphor
that creates dreams for men to pursue erotic objects. While a workplace full of young
women might be an orchard of peaches for men, it is definitely not a world of joy and happi-
ness for women, at least not for the women workers themselves. Here Foucault is particularly
correct in saying that the body is never pre-given, but is “sexed” within a discourse of sex to produce a monotonous modality of sexuality, which is itself an effect of an historically specific organisation of power, discourse and pleasure (Foucault, 1978, p. 154). It is not because one has a body that one has a sex, but rather that one has a particular notion of sex, so one obtains a certain type of body. The modality of the body is of course the effect, but not the origin of the sex, which is constructed in a specific set of social regulations and power relations (Foucault, 1978, p. 154).

Sex talk thrived in the community in which I worked and conducted research, and many women warned me not to go to hair salons or hotels, especially small ones, because they were often places for exchanging “illicit” sex. In the factory workers’ eyes, beimei, the girls of the North, were prostituting bodies whose world was highly differentiated from working bodies, dagongmei. Young and beautiful girls from North China (the place they were from was highly emphasised and then degraded) were told to wait in hotels and search for men alone. The phone would ring late at night and the caller would ask for “lonely heart” services. In contrast to a pure and productive dagongmei who worked in the factories, the beimei, the term denoting perverted Chinese female bodies, was invested with more abject and yet rebellious meanings. Beimei were younger, fresher, more lush and virginal, and they were therefore more sexually arousing and desirable, easily disrupting the patriarchal order of society. Dagongmei in the workplace set themselves apart from these prostituting bodies, and even though the beimei were trapped in a worse situation of oppression, the unity of “sisterhood” was highly segregated and exclusive.

Among beimei, and in the process of trading sex, regional disparity between the north and the south was again produced and reproduced. Sex was not only inscribed with inequalities between male and female but also marked with economic discrimination between the north and the south. Prostitutes were themselves hierarchically differentiated: those who came from richer areas were worth much more than those from poorer areas. These differences between and within women again spoke of a self-defeating project in arguing for a universal category of women. The politics of identity is always the politics of differences. These subjects should be seen as the effects of power and as discursively constructed through a process of signification, differentiation and exclusion (Butler, 1990).

These “sexy” scenes in open-door China push me to ask: Does global capital particularly need sexualised subjects? It seems clear that where transnational capital goes there is a proliferation of the urban sex trade and sex discourses. Time after time the central Chinese government has launched anti-pornography movements in the cities since the early 1990s. The official discourse still promotes a regulatory mode of sexuality and, as Harriet Evans says, state discourses on sexual issues are largely a response to changing popular beliefs and practices. Although no longer effective, never has the state lost its interest in regulating individual sexual conduct and marital behaviour (Evans, 1997, p. 156). The “sex boom” is seen by the central state as a moral attack on Chinese society by the Western wind. The local state, however, is far more tolerant, since it sees the sex industry as closely linked to local economic development. One local cadre in a southern Chinese town openly told me: “No sex, no video shows, no clubs, no hair salons, no restaurants, no hotels, no money!” Sex links the whole chain of economic activities in China. No sex, no money. In contemporary China discourses on sex – official and civil, and at odds with one another – fight hard to grasp and produce a reality in which the real, though impossible, becomes more and more artificial.

Invoking Sexual Subjects

It seems that for private and global capital “sexualising the subject” is a key modernity project. The political technology of capital involves a series of manoeuvres
of hierarchisation and division of society, in which sexual difference is one of the major regulatory targets. As noted, dagongmei stands in contrast to gongren, a non-sexualised subject in Mao’s era, and entails a process of sexualisation within labouring bodies. Mei explicitly means a young woman and a sister. The feminisation of labour has proceeded rapidly in Shenzhen and other economic development zones, clearly illustrating that basic industrial labourers, especially cheap and unskilled workers, are mostly females. Male workers [dagongzai] are not excluded, but are given different positions in the sexual division of labour in the workplace. Labour is thus no longer taken as an unsexed body, but as a gendered subject that exhibits itself more as a “sexual being” than a “class being” in postsocialist China.

Sexualising labouring bodies in this manner is a project of capital rather than the state. This can be seen if we compare the two social subjects: the gongren of Mao’s period and the dagongmei/zai of today. With gongren, sexual difference was submerged and made redundant in socialist labour relations. Women were introduced into the “world of men”, be it light, heavy or military industry. The official rhetoric proclaimed that women could hold up half the sky in socialist China and could do whatever men could do. In official regulatory practices sexual difference was diluted and made meaningless through propaganda and institutionalised arrangements. With the dissolution of socialist practices in general, and the bankruptcy of state and collective enterprises in particular, the subject gongren began to disappear and the term became an outdated mode of everyday discourse, especially in South China. The disembodied world of industrial labour was to be sexualised; its sex was not to be veiled, but had to be reinvented and regulated.

In the workplace in which I was based it was not difficult to find that the regulation of a sexed body was fundamental to the control of labour. Given that the workplace was a world of young women who predominated in almost all areas of the assembly operation, it was always a headache for the upper management, the foremen, and the line leaders – often male – to manage the workers. None of the foremen or line leaders, male or female, assumed that dagongmei were submissive females waiting to be regulated. Complaints about the discipline of dagongmei were frequent when I talked to any supervisor. Submissiveness, often with an imaginary feminine identity pinned on the workers, needed to be articulated and re-articulated in the everyday language of management to facilitate labour control. What is especially interesting is that, in the eyes of management, workers’ identities as labourers were less important than their identities as females. The regulation of gender was invoked when labour control was at stake. The workers were often reminded of their femaleness – “You are a girl”. As a girl in the process of becoming a woman, one should behave as the culture required: submissive, obedient, industrious, tender, and so on. The underlying implications were:

You are a girl, you should be obedient enough to do what the management tells you to do. You are a girl, you should not be defiant to your superior by speaking in loud voice. You are a girl, you are going to marry someone, serve someone, so you had better train yourself to behave properly. You should take care of the job you do as you one day will take care of your family. As a girl you are going to be a woman, a wife and a mother of men.

(Pun, 1999, pp. 14–15)

The ascription of these feminine attributes to a woman and the regulation of that woman’s behaviour, of course, was not aimed at her future life in general. Rather, her future life as a wife and mother was deployed for the present technologising of bodies as docile labour. As Judith Butler puts it, “sex/gender” not only functions as a norm but is part of a regulatory practice that produces the bodies it governs – that is, whose regulatory force is
made clear as a kind of productive power, the power to produce the bodies it controls (Butler, 1993, p. 1).

Also of interest is that maleness was posited as a degraded opposite in warnings to the workers: “You should not act like a boy who is lazy and troublesome, careless and rough. Otherwise, you won’t be able to marry yourself out”. That is, maleness was articulated as an oppositional and inferior sexual attribute that a woman should not have, if she wanted to become a good female and thus a good worker. The subject was thus “constituted through the force of exclusion and abjection, one which produces a constitutive outside to the subject, an abject outside, which is, after all, ‘inside’ the subject as its own founding repudiation” (Butler, 1993, p. 3). Despite the implication that maleness was contradictory to their self-esteem and self-identity, it always seemed that those who possessed the power to speak were free of gender constraints. Further, those who held regulatory power tried hard to create anxieties among the targets of their condemnation – they would be shamed if they, as girls, behaved like boys. “Dividuals”, as Marilyn Strathern (1988) said, were often taken as individual wholes, and one could only choose or be forced to choose, either as a female or as a male. No internal ambivalence inside the individual was allowed; femaleness and maleness were created as a fundamental binary opposition in human beings. The women workers cared less about being unable to get married than about not living up to the imaginary feminine. They could seldom fight back if their foremen or line leaders attacked them for being too male. They were induced to fear any evidence of their own gender ambiguity or perversity. Gender became a means of discipline and self-discipline, invoked so that they would learn to police themselves. The feminine was not only imagined and inscribed but also self-desired, and its mirroring other was the opposite sex – male (Irigaray, 1977, p. 25). Objectifying and self-subjectivising were the same process. Dagongmei was never only a subject of power but an object of one’s own desire as well.

**Defiant Bodies**

Nevertheless, *dagongmei* as an obedient and submissive social body was merely a hegemonic imaginary: though powerful enough, it was often contradicted in real life struggles. The technology of power over female bodies was often self-defeating or sometimes even impotent. This impotence of the “all-powerful” matrix of power and language was acutely unfolded when the factory disciplinary machine repeatedly failed to co-opt a woman who was called “Fatso”. Fatso refused to feminise herself and openly acted butch. She was quick to air grievances and express her opinion when she saw unreasonable arrangements or unfairness. But she was loved as well as loathed by the line leader and foreman. She often worked more quickly than anyone else on the line and was able to help the others when their work was piling up. She rarely asked for sick leave; rather, she often helped take women suffering from menstrual pains or other bodily discomfort to the rest room or the hospital. It was considered inappropriate for male supervisors to touch the female body, especially when the woman was menstruating. Everybody knew Fatso’s important role on the line. Thus, the regulation of sex did not work on her. That is not to say that the disciplinary machine completely failed to regulate her behaviour, but that it needed to resort to other strategies.

Faced with gossip and innuendo about her, Fatso insisted on having her own way: “I don’t mind that people say that I’m mannish. I don’t like girls to be timid, screaming and fussing all the time”. Fatso liked to make friends with men rather than women in the factory. She often went out with male workers to see films or videos with violent and heroic plots. Women’s talk at night, the most common entertainment after working,
did not attract her much, as she often thought women gossiped and whispered too much. Young women in the workplace, on the other hand, accepted her as butch and treated her as a boy. They came to her when they needed help. Here, body, sex and identity had no one-to-one correspondence; and neither body nor sex could provide legitimacy for sexual identity to Fatso. Her sexual identity was not yet split, but ambivalent and somewhat different (Moore, 1994).

The ideal construct of dagongmei as a docile feminised body was further disrupted and shattered in my mind when I witnessed the following scene.

**Girls’ Fight**

It was a winter night, windy and cold. At ten, after overtime, I dragged my extremely tired body back to the dormitory with Fatso. Fatso told me she would queue up for hot water for me to bathe, and told me to have a few minutes’ rest in bed. Every night we would struggle over whether to bathe or not, especially on cold nights; if we did, we needed to queue up for hot water, sometimes for more than half an hour. At the end of our dorm rooms, a big stove heated water between ten and twelve at night. Since hot water was provided within limited hours, women frequently helped relatives, co-villagers, and good friends to wait for hot water. Sometimes one person would bring four or five buckets from the long queue. Queue-jumping happened from time to time and squabbles and arguments followed. It was a site of contestation.

When we entered the dormitory gate, approaching the stove room, I heard loud noises and thought it was another argument. Fatso screamed, “There’s a fight! There’s a fight on!” We ran to the spot; two groups of women were wrestling. In a rage, one woman hit the other woman’s face with great strength. The other woman fought back by pulling her opponent’s hair. As Fatso tried hard to stop the fighting, she was forcefully pushed away by a thin young woman. I stood still, frightened by the violence.

Violence is often believed to be a male attribute in Chinese culture; that is, it belongs only to men and, therefore, should not happen except among men. But this fierce women’s fight disrupted my thoughts again. It seemed foolish to ask why these young women were as brutal and aggressive as boys sometimes were. It was also senseless to ask about “human nature” as such. These women were forced to live in an inhuman, harsh and intolerable environment. No one knew how long they could stand it. Suspicion, quarrelling, and even fighting were ways of releasing grievances, especially those suppressed for a long time. It was the outside environment that acted upon the subject. What was the point if I retreated back to the “inside” of a subject, the “nature” of a human being, male or female? Violence is a performance of social relationships, embedded in specific historical and social contexts, and often gendered in nature. Yet it is never sexually prescribed.

The fighting women were all dismissed on the second morning. There was no investigation of who was right or wrong. These workers all confronted factory discipline, and all were told to learn this fact: they had not behaved like girls. They were like unruly boys or animals. Defiant bodies were punished, and again, they were disciplined through the discourse of sex and gender.

**Women’s Talk**

For a few nights women’s talk in the dormitory centred on the fight. After bathing, about half past ten at night, was often a time when women talked. Talking was important in factory life, since everybody was kept silent all day while working. Women congregated
together based on ethno-kin lines and, when the time came, chatting would start everywhere. I often heard men complain that when several women came together you could never stop them talking. “Qi zui ba she” [seven mouths and eight tongues] was a saying about talkative women who were eager to speak out. “Qi zui ba she”, of course, was term of denigration; its meaning showed overtly the desire and power of men to silence women. Women’s talk had long been seen as a threat to both the patriarchal order and the managerial order. At night the women gossiped about management, and exchanged information on personnel policies, who had been punished by confronting the factory rules, who had succeeded in finding a boyfriend, and who was disgusting and always flirting with women. They chatted about sex, childbirth and family, and sometimes complained about the food.

Since I could speak Chaozhou dialect, sometimes I joined in the talk among the Chaozhou women. Two Chaozhou cooks aged over forty, encircled by several other women, were the targets of complaint:

“Aunt, do you think the food in our canteen is too poor?” Lan, a young girl from Chaoyang, asked.


“But, aunt, the food is really rotten, not even my family’s pigs would eat it,” another woman called Jin interrupted.

“Oh girls, don’t say something bad that will spoil your fortune. You are all young; none of you have swallowed bitterness and gone through hard times. At the time of the famine in the sixties, we all ate wild vegetables and tree bark.” The older woman spoke in a rather sentimental way, recalling her memories of hard times to convince the young women.

“Wow, aunt, you are talking about something terrible. But times have changed.” Tongtong, a young woman, stopped the words of the cook. The cook continued to murmur: “You are too lucky, and too happy in this generation. You’ve got no sense of women’s bitterness in the past. You now have pretty clothes, earn your own money and go where you want to go. Who could be like you when we were young? We never dreamed of leaving the family and the village. Women, always kept at home, did all the cooking and chores, waiting to get married and give birth to sons.”

All the women chuckled. The cook felt a little bit easier and continued to talk about “women’s bitter stories”, to the great interest of the others.

“You don’t understand women’s lives, do you? You won’t know what bitterness is before you taste it. Mei, there is still a long road ahead of you. In the future, when you think you can marry a husband and enjoy happiness, you will find yourself alone in a man’s family that is not your own, never. Your mother-in-law will keep a strict eye on you, and even your husband can’t help you. And within two years, if you still can’t lay eggs (give birth to sons), then you will know what kind of life will follow you. All the gossips in the village will target you... Then comes the big stomach, the ten months pain and the extraordinary pain at the moment of delivery. You are all young, you can’t even imagine the pain. It kills you, it kills you, but every woman will go through it. It is women’s destiny, you don’t know anything.”

“Oh, oh, aunts, your time is past. Nowadays, we can run away from our families and find a job in the factory.” Tongtong showed her optimism. Escaping to the workplace was often seen as an alternative to a coercive married life for the young women. But for the older women, escaping to work in the city was temporary and their gendered role as wife remained unchanged.

“You are telling children’s tales. How about when you get older and older? Will the factory still want you? Women’s place is in the family. You don’t believe me, do you?” the older cook said.
One of the main subjects of the women’s talk in the workplace was the articulation of a subaltern *herstory* of women’s lives, albeit often imagined, exaggerated and victimised, and narrated to the younger generation through the spoken word (Anagnost, 1997). It is not true that the subaltern cannot speak, and that women trapped in a patriarchal order can never express themselves, or can only have “a problem without a name” (Ardener, 1975). The issue at stake is: who can hear? Who is willing to hear carefully at the fissures of dominance and power wherein voices of subalternality can sneek out? Female histories in China constitute a long oral tradition, memmorisied, imagined, and passed on from generation to generation. It is these kinds of stories that have helped to construct women’s life worlds and helped women make sense of their own experiences. This women’s talk, a rich cultural capital, provides not only stories, examples and models but also a lively genealogy, from which women can learn about and negotiate themselves as female subjects.

**Gossip and Romance**

Another night I was invited to “eat sweet soup” with a Cantonese group. The women were all from Qingyuan, the poorest rural area in Guangdong Province, and they all worked in the Quality Control Department. Sharing food and gossip were the most enjoyable moments in our factory life. Gossip and rumour flowed naturally, wildly, and came to focus on Miss Tang, the manager of their Department, who was from Hong Kong.

Qing started gossiping about Miss Tang: “I saw *nanren tou* [butch manager] eating with her girlfriend in McDonald’s.”

“When? Did you see her girlfriend? Is she pretty?” all the other women asked.

“Last Sunday. I could only see the side of her face, you know, I dared not enter. I looked in through the glass wall. I guess she doesn’t look bad. Very well dressed and thick make-up. Dong told me that one day she saw them walking in the street. Her girlfriend was taller than her,” Qing answered.

“But our *nanren tou* looks quite handsome, doesn’t she?” Bin said.

“Wow, somebody is secretly in love with our *nanren tou*!” Qing teased, and all the women laughed.

Bin responded instantly. “What rubbish are you talking? Will I love a person who is so harsh to us? I think because she treats people so hard and so emotionlessly, that’s why she became abnormal. Can I love a pseudo-man who is in fact a woman? Can I?”

We continued to laugh despite Bin’s explanation. “Why not? She is rich, powerful and handsome. I bet if she chooses you, we can all get promoted. Please do sacrifice yourself!” another woman called Hua cackled.

“But how can a woman love a woman? Hm, I am asking seriously. How can two women have sex? Can they give birth?” Bin turned her head to me, expecting an answer from me and trying to divert attention from herself. Unwilling to intervene in their talk, I simply said: “They can have sex, but they can’t have a baby that way”.

Qing added: “I saw a magazine one day. It said that in Western countries they have a lot of gays and lesbians who don’t care about social and family pressure and insist on getting married to each other”.

“How strange! They can marry. But it’s good for them, isn’t it?” another woman named San said.

“But it’s still a pity they can’t give birth. I think a woman’s life can’t be complete without getting married and having babies,” Bin muttered.

“Oh, Bin, your thoughts are a little bit outdated. Nowadays, who cares about that stuff about delivering sons? Happiness is more important!” Qing responded.
“Yet finding a good man is still important, isn’t it?” Hua asked.

“Oh, Hua, you are dating somebody, aren’t you? When are you going to marry him?”

Bin asked her. All of us chuckled again and Hua blushed.

“I still have no idea. I don’t want to go back home too early. But last New Year when I was

back home, the man’s family already asked my father. Last month, my boyfriend came to

visit me. He tried to convince me to come back home too,” Hua said in an embarrassed tone.

“What a lucky woman! You must have done a lot of good things in your previous life. By

the way, will you have sex before your married life?” Qing teased again, and we all chuckled.

Hua instantly flushed and shouted: “I won’t, I won’t!”

“My father would beat me to death if he knew I had that type of relationship with a man

in the city,” the quiet San murmured.

“Oh, I don’t think it is wrong. If I really love a man, I don’t mind,” Qing raised her

voice, a naughty expression on her face.

“Alas, what a liberated woman!” All the girls turned to joke at Qing and the laughter

continued.

Gossip, jokes and laughter centring on the topics of sex and love were all “sweet soup”,

helping women to cope with their hard and boring factory life. Gossip and laughter
demonstrated the power of the female workers, however minimal, to tease the patriarchal
and capitalist orders. “Having a laff” was clearly a weapon of the weak in fighting against
the alienation of work and the subsumption of labour to capital (Willis, 1977). 

Dagongmei learned that sexuality was political, and something they could decide whether to
manipulate or not. Becoming sexually involved with someone in management, if one
was willing, was a way to get promotion and gain advantages. Like labour, sexuality
was something that belonged to the workers, but that could be manipulated and subsumed
into the logic of capital. Sexual relationships between male supervisors and female line
workers did occur at Meteor, but were frowned upon heavily by all those not involved.
Dating and sexual relations were often seen as advantageous and functional, but were
futile, if not evil, in the end.

Another focus of gossip was the love affair between Gen, one of the supervisors in the
Production Department, and Jing, now the secretary of the Department. People kept on
telling me that Jing had only been a line woman before she knew Gen, and that she had
been a nice and humble person before. But now she was proud and seldom talked
to even her ethnic-kin group. “You see the thick make-up, nobody is stronger than her.
I am sure I won’t want to learn from her, selling sex in exchange for a higher position.”

I have already forgotten who passed on this gossip to me.

Despite some bias, there were real social and cultural reasons for the workers to worry
about any love or sexual relationship they might have. First of all, if the man was an urban
citizen, his family would probably not accept a woman of rural origin. Second, if both
sides were rural but came from different provinces, the woman’s family might not
approve of the affair either. No family wanted their daughter to marry far away, unless
they were really poor. Third, there were many rumours in the workplace that once a
woman got pregnant the man would run away and there would be no hope of finding
him. It was an anonymous industrial world, not a communal village where everybody
knew one another. Tragedy ensued once the man ran away and the woman’s pregnancy
was noticed by her company. Losing her job and not daring to go back home, the
woman would be left alone to face her misfortune. Most women did not consider it was
worth exchanging sex for short-term interest, as in the end it could ruin one’s whole life.

Gossip and laughter, nevertheless, were more than a weapon that was deployed to poke
fun at management. Jokes, laughter and rumours were where the women workers played
out their gender subjectivities. Having a laugh was about having their views and ideas on sex, love and marriage voiced and exchanged, and it therefore helped to suture their female identities. Jokes and laughter thus had more importance than is usually assumed. When joking and laughing, women were more able to articulate their feelings and emotions, albeit conflicting and ambivalent, such as love and hatred, desire and fear, dreams and anxiety. There was Bin who thought “a woman could not be complete without getting married and giving birth”. Then there was Hua who saw marriage as an important life path for women. But there was also Qing who said sex for happiness should be acceptable. Feelings and emotions expressed through such talking and joking were all part of a process of sexualisation (Hearn and Parkin, 1987). They were how women colluded in performing themselves as sexualised subjects.

**Consumerist Desire and the Modern Self**

If “having a laff” in the workplace was not active enough for the women, going shopping and having fun was an alternative if time was available. In Shenzhen I would go with the women workers to Dong Fang Market, where a wide array of clothing, handbags, accessories and beauty products was available. Dong Fang Market was a shopping paradise for them, a place where they could look for suitable, alluring and inexpensive products. Fashion shops, department stores, supermarkets, fast-food stores and cafes, all owned by local people, were clustered on both sides of the street. These shops exemplified the “Western wind”, and offered the *dagongmei* a “taste” of a cosmopolitan lifestyle and, more importantly, self-affirmation as modern gendered subjects (Yan, 2001). In their search for “modernity” and in their hopes to improve their lives, the women workers possessed a great passion for consumption. Their desire to consume was driven by their urgent desire to reduce the disparity between themselves and city dwellers as well as an ambition to live up to the calling of a modern model of female beauty, increasingly imagined and imaged by the mass media.

The transition to being a modern woman, even if only in terms of appearance, conjured up the dreams and desires of *dagongmei* as they strived to transform themselves. Deploying a touch of fashion to highlight their appearance was the most common strategy used by the women as consuming subjects. In the urban industrial world the “lure of consumption” produced irresistible desires to consume, even for those who could not afford them. Not being able to consume was not a problem for them; what was important was the power of the desiring machine to incite them to dream and to produce promises and further desires. What this promise meant to the young workers became clear when I jotted down an episode from my earlier field research:

28 March 1996, evening

We still have to work at night. The radio is on. There is no mood for work, we wait and dream. Tomorrow is payday. The girls on our line are talking about where to go and what to buy. While Fatso suggests buying new jeans, Fuhui, a girl sitting in front of me, thinks of buying lipstick. She asks me to suggest some brand names of high quality and reasonable price. I am at sea and wondering.

In the workplace the women workers dreamed of consumption even as they laboured, as if the dreaming spurred them on despite their mood. The consuming practices of the *dagongmei* contested the assumption that consumption was an “individualising project” invested in by, and for, capital. In the dormitory, the women shared with equal enthusiasm the satisfaction and frustration of shopping as well as work. Instead of keeping them separate, consumption bound them into a collectivity through their shared dreams and desires to
become a new kind of gendered subject. “Dressing up” was perhaps the most common consumption practice. Returning to their dormitories after a day of shopping, they could not wait to display their transformed selves wearing newly purchased t-shirts and jeans. For those who had worked in the city for a year or two, the urban environment with its many shops was attractive. They spent their leisure time shopping for cosmetics: lipstick, nail polish, face cream, and so on. In the evenings they returned to their dormitories, where they talked excitedly about fashion and make-up and where they could find the best buys. The desire to transform themselves and have a new look was what drew them together.

Their change in appearance was pivotal to these women in the workplace. The managerial class mocked the *dagongmei* for her “coarse hands and feet”, considering her an abject subject bearing the stigma of rural backwardness. One could not help but notice how much time women workers spent fighting this image, painting their fingernails with shiny colours to make them look more glamorous. Another obsession was with products that promised to whiten their skin, darkened from long exposure to the sun while labouring in the fields back home. One had to be light-skinned to be a city dweller, and whitening lotions and creams were therefore among their favourite purchases. A new look and a fresh identity were not only desired by these women but could be realised by actively working on themselves. A rebirth could be achieved through a consumption practice that functioned as a technology of the self. Through this means they could realise for themselves “a great leap forward” out of rurality.

**Conclusion**

In contemporary China the search for modernity has resulted in opening the socialist economy to global capitalism. The persistent use of migrant labour by transnational capital in the newly industrialised zones has created a new labour regime in China: the dormitory labour regime. This labour regime helps to embody a workplace politics in which women workers live out their daily struggles. In this rapidly transforming period old cultural practices, new urban cosmopolitan models, pressures and norms from rural society, and desires and pursuits in a modern yet anonymous industrial world all combine and work together to invoke new female subjects and sexual bodies. There are no fixed boundaries and stable reference frames, no harbours in which new subjects can take refuge. We can say that Maoist China only aimed at producing an asexual subject: *tongzhi*, a unified subject embodied with the “same will” as the state socialist production. No class, no gender. However, reform China, within a global project of capital, shows interest in re-sexualising the subject, especially a new *dagong* subject tailored to meet the new international division of labour. The process of sexualisation of *dagongmei/zai*, as a project of capital, mirrors the de-sexualisation of *gongren*, which was a project of the Chinese state in the socialist period.

In the workplace, while a homogeneous construct of sexuality seems dominant, alternative models and new ideas from Hong Kong, Taiwan, Japan and the West penetrate the mass media and popular culture, and new, contradictory experiences of urban life, ideas and behaviours are nurtured and contribute to the constitution of fluid, shifting and de-centred female subjects. While some of the women escape from their rural families to work in the global factory, hoping to elevate themselves to being modern subjects by staying in the city, many soon realise that the toil of factory work is only an alienation from which there is no rescue. These Chinese *dagongmei*, however, are not only turned into efficient industrial producers, but desire to transform themselves as parts of the project of subject and of power. The desire to be rid of poverty and to become modern
gendered subjects is articulated along with the desire to consume commodities. Young female workers in the factory are seduced by their shared passion for purchasing lipsticks, whitening creams, trendy watches and fashionable clothes. These objects conjure up new desiring subjects, only for them to discover themselves to be still entrapped in a politics of identity and difference.

Notes
1 For a comparable situation in Japan, see Kondo, 1990. For other studies on female migrant workers in Asia, see Ong, 1987; O’ Sullivan, 1995; and Huong, 2003.
2 See historical studies on Chinese workers that highlight the importance of locality, ethnic-kin ties and gender in the process of making the Chinese working class in the early twentieth century. These include Honig, 1986; Hershatter, 1986; and Perry, 1993.
3 This research is based on an ethnographic study that I conducted in an electronics factory in Shenzhen during 1995 and 1996. I worked on the assembly line and stayed in a workers’ dormitory.
4 Research on women and work shows that the advent of multinational capital and the industrialisation of developing countries have led to the disintegration of traditional morality and the growth of pornographic culture. Aihwa Ong (1987) writes that morality and sexuality were highly contested in the Malay workplace both by those in power and by worker subjects. Living under the constraint of Islamic-Malay culture, the bodies of factory women were highly sexualised in order to further control their sexuality. On the other hand, Truong (1990) highlights the fact that the advent of tourism and capitalism in Southeast Asian societies “liberated” traditional morality that is simply a project for money and sex, serving rich Western men.
5 Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guatarri (1984): “Capitalism institutes or restores all sorts of residual and artificial, imaginary, or symbolic territorialities, thereby attempting, as best it can, to recode, to rechannel persons who have been defined in terms of abstract quantities . . . The real is not impossible; it is simply more and more artificial” (cited in Pun, 2003, p. 490).
6 Tongzhi [comrade] literally means “same will”.

References
Irigaray, Luce (1977) Ce sexe qui n’en est pas un (Paris: Editions de Minuit).


