
Cultural Representation and Self-Representation of *Dagongmei* in Contemporary China

by

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Abstract: In the 1980s, working women migrant labourers, known as the *dagongmei* or “working sisters,” emerged as an object of interest in popular films and television dramas. These initial visual representations have since been reiterated in sequels adjusted to fit best the current rhetoric of the party-state. Concurrent to the mass media is the less-widespread phenomenon of labourer’s literature (*dagong wenxue*), through which we can read the *dagongmei*’s own (self-) representations. Eventually, after the Millennium the number of scientific publications on the *dagongmei* topic has also increased significantly. Bringing these different media together, this paper thematizes the aporias of *dagongmei*’s (self-) representations and scrutinizes various acts of utterance, asking what they mean in terms of class and gender subjectivity. I argue that for blue-collar women, becoming part of the popular media culture does not necessarily lead to the emergence of novel mass subject identifications. It can be regarded much more as a strategy of appeasement of the rural “other” based upon the idea of a high modern, highly flexible subjectivity that does not really offer much more agency than the possibility of smoother adjustment to the logic of global capitalism.

“The scream was too powerful, and with its boundless referential power, it shrieked into the symbolic world and nullified any of the claims of that world. It came, furthermore, directly from the body of a subaltern [...], from a specific human being struggling to live out her life: from a *dagongmei*, a displaced yet resistant subject living in contemporary China” (Pun 2000, p. 534).

Thus wrote the anthropologist Ngai Pun¹ about the process of tracing the trajectory of Yan’s repetitive nightmarish dreams, climaxing in a piercing scream. Yan is conventionally understood to be a *dagongmei*²; in Ngai Pun’s own

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¹ The article was originally published in Chinese in the year 1999 (Pun 1999a).

² The term *dagongmei* refers to women migrant laborers from the countryside, mostly translated into English as “working sisters” (Jacka 1998, p. 44; Pun 1999b, p. 2).

translation, a “working daughter” (Pun 2000, p. 2). Departing from Gayatri Spivak’s reinterpretation of the term “subaltern” (Spivak 1988, pp. 271-313) in the influential essay *Can the subaltern speak?* in her search for the possibility of working women’s minor genre of resistance, Pun tried to get to grips with a feasible politics of articulation and self-representation of the subaltern working sister’s corporeality.

More than ten years later, my intent is to question the aesthetics and politics of cultural representation of *dagongmei* in contemporary mainland China. In this paper, besides brushing the surface of current discourses in social sciences or literary criticism, and recent China Central Television (CCTV) productions, I focus on a popular talk show’s *Xinli fangtan* (Psychological interview), a special edition dedicated to migrant workers’ daily dilemmas. Thematizing the aporias of subaltern representation and self-representation, I will view these various acts of utterance and silence with deeper scrutiny, asking what they mean in terms of gender.

***Dagongmei* goes pop**

It was in the middle of the 1980s that the working sisters emerged on television screens as main protagonists and as a grouped object of interests in popular films and television dramas³. Since their very first visual representations delivered by a few plots, they have been reiterated or replayed in sequels adjusted to fit best the current discourses and rhetoric. However, considering filmic representations of *dagongmei*, we can generally point to two relatively unchanged prototypical characters – that of a *xiao baomu* (young nursemaid) and of a *nü dagongzhe* (temporary female factory worker). They belong to different settings that background two great mutually entangled narrations of contemporary China – that of urbanization and industrialization.

Internal conflicts in urban tales originate from the tension existing between binary oppositions upon which the stereotypical plot is constructed: rural space (*xiangcun*) versus urban space (*chengshi*), accompanied by being ignorant (*yumei*) versus being cultivated and civilized (*wenming*).

The young maid portrayed in these dramas is most likely a secondary school graduate in her early twenties, pure and innocent, willing to work hard in order to climb up the social ladder and support her family in the countryside. Coming from a backward remote village, she is ignorant of the social etiquette taken for granted by the wealthy city families by whom she is employed. Ways of overcoming mutual misunderstandings and various conflicts emerging between the worker and metropolitan families are an important part of the story’s foreseeable development toward a harmonious happy ending, as granted for those who accept the codes of proper behavior inscribed into their social roles. Such was the case in *Ezi* (1988) and its various reenactments are still to be traced until the present.

³ See, for example, the movies *Huangshan laide guniang* (A girl from Huangshan Mountains) 1983, *Ezi* (Ezi) 1988, and the TV drama *Wailaimei* (Outsider sisters: Young women from elsewhere working temporary in the city) 1991.

An emblematic example of a novel variation of this genre might be the latest *xiao baomu* drama *Wo meili de rensheng* (My beautiful life)⁴ aired in July and August 2010 on CCTV Channel 1 in the evening primetime. The noticeable modification in the main plot line is the appearance of a generational conflict between the main protagonist Wang Xiaozao and her prospective mother-in-law, the elderly Wu Qiaobao. In this way, the TV drama highlights the fact that the continuing economic reforms in China have already nourished a second generation of migrants that differs somewhat from the older one in terms of their shared values and desires⁵.

My beautiful life follows the organizational patterns of its prototypes with the binary conflicts of the urban-rural axes and it similarly belongs to “genres of integration”⁶ (Schatz 1981, p. 29). It is an appealing combination of strategies for success that merge to form the figure of the young migrant woman. On the personal level, she eventually manages to win over the old, bad tempered and sometimes tyrannical Wu Qiaobao by means of conforming to the rules of the traditional virtue *xiao* (filial piety). It is her flawless performance as a filial daughter serving the old lady to the utmost of her abilities and swallowing bitterness (*ku*) every day without uttering a word which eventually enables the happy ending; the exogamic marriage in terms of social stratification as her fiancé is a university graduate. Moreover, she climbs up the social ladder and manages to change her status to that of an entrepreneur by establishing a small maid agency in the city of Shanghai. Metamorphosis into a fulfilled, self-made urban citizen is completed. Interestingly, the heroine of the urbanization tale manages to combine the traditional Confucian female virtues of being a filial daughter-in-law and diligent wife at home with those of a modern woman engaged in an ongoing process of professional education and self-development. She carries this double burden with a happy smile on her face⁷.

As such, Wang Xiaozao is not to be seen as a high modern figure of transgression of the traditional female virtues enforced by the Confucian canon. Again, similarly to the criticized Maoist model of women’s liberation, the

⁴ The TV drama was directed by Wang Jun, and produced by the Beijing Hualu Baina Film & TV Co.

⁵ These younger cohorts of China’s so called floating population (*liudong renkou*) are referred to in Chinese social sciences as *xin shengdai nongmingong* (new generation of migrant workers) who are supposed to be between 16 and 30 years old. Recent sociological works published in mainland China emphasize the younger generation’s inclination to enhanced consumption and to investments in various self-development strategies such as education services offered in the cities. Nor is it less important that most of them have never engaged in agricultural work at home (Pun 2003, pp. 469-492; Tang 2009, pp. 102-107).

⁶ The “genre of integration” is defined through an ideologically stable, civilized setting, a couple or collective hero (e.g. family)’s internalized conflict is expressed through emotions, the resolution through embrace (love), thematically it typically deals with a couple’s or family’s integration into the wider community and with the process of resolving their personal antagonisms, it stresses community co-operation (Schatz 1981, pp. 29-36).

⁷ As a role model she is contrasted with the urban better-off daughters, a group portrayed with an ironic, slightly critical touch and blamed for being spoiled and not able to deal with difficulties. The discursive production of the migrant and middle class-ness as staged in TV productions is an intertwined process of reinventing and renaming the social structure.

contemporary proposed one is no less full of tension. Traditional expectations according to true female virtues still value chastity, filial piety, carrying for others or engagement in self-cultivation. From a narrow perspective, *My Beautiful Life* might be regarded as nothing more than a contemporary reenactment of the practice of taking a young girl as a bride-servant by the prospective mother-in-law. The woman's presence in the family structure is subjected to the cultural imperatives of filial piety and continuity of lineage, but it varies from the traditional narrative as it is enriched by the concept of free, platonic, love. Today although she has her own name and sometimes a business of her own, marriage and children remain the definitive markers of womanhood. Her task in society is to maintain proper relations with significant others – mother-in-law, husband, followed by her own parents, and by urban strangers – who all occupy higher status position than the rural newcomer. Otherwise she is in danger of remaining spiritually homeless, displaced from her rural homeland and never recognized at home by the urbanite.

Being prototypical for the second type of the *dagongmei* medial representation, the tales of industrialization, the early TV drama, *Sisters from Outside* (1991)⁸, deals with only one focal construction sight of China's emerging modern capitalistic order; an electronics factory within the confines of the Shenzhen Economic Zone in Guangdong province. In the first episode, a group of women accompanied by two young men leaves the northern countryside setting off for a long exhausting journey to the newly created industrial holy land in the South. Standing behind the fence of a modern, Hong Kong-managed toy factory, wearing their once blue, now worn out jackets, these rustic "workers-to-be" (Pun 1999b, p. 3) are confronted with the view of a group of young women marching out from the factory in bright sunlight. All of them wear light blue, spick-and-span working uniforms and carry colorful parasols. The contrast of the two group's appearance fuels the desires of the rural newcomers to transform themselves into *dagongmei* and *dagongzai*⁹.

Not everyone, however, will make it in this drama. As the cynical young Hong Kong supervisor proudly announces, laboratory tests proved that for this kind of advanced technology and automatic assembly line, female workers are preferred. Laborers are recruited due to the gender criterion and women are favored for their inborn essential skills and abilities¹⁰. In the factory boss's own words:

⁸ Directed by Cheng Hao, produced by the local Guangzhou Television, and showed nationwide by CCTV in 1992 the TV drama gained great popularity becoming a widely discussed issue. On 15th March 1992 the Guangdong Province section of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences together with the literary journal *Dangdai Wentan Bao* (Journal of Contemporary Literary Circles) organized a symposium on the topic "*Sisters from Outside*" and *Labor's Literary Phenomenon*. Director Cheng Hao was one of the invited key speakers.

⁹ The male equivalent of *dagongmei*, *zai* means "son".

¹⁰ This quotation corresponds well with Aihwa Ong's remarks regarding the international creation of "natural" attributes of the female workforce: "Bureaucrats in developing countries were quick to appeal to biology to woo foreign investments while gaining acceptance at home for the creation of a female industrial force" (Ong 1991, p. 290).

What every girl is asked for are the qualities (*suzhi*) of being an attentive careful worker. There is no demand for physical strength and courage. You just need to perform the same moves for thousands of times every day. Laboratory tests prove that these skills are the ones of the female sex.

What might have previously been regarded as standing for women's inferiority, transforms into characteristics welcomed and favored in the process of modernization. The femininity of the newcomers will be made visible by their adaptation to the urban style, as after spending merely a short time in the factory, their unfashionable appearance is displaced by face powder and lipstick.

Temporality is ascribed to the *dagongmei*'s working experience, which may be perceived as a rite of passage, as it influences their social status in the two communities they are related to – the rural homeland and the urban, manufacturing environment. In the former, they move from adolescence to a more independent semi-adult status, which can only be fully attained by marriage, and as paid workers supporting their families back home. In the latter, they function as underprivileged, vulnerable migrants, as subalterns. In this TV drama, four main female protagonists stand for different possible options for dealing with burdensome factory chores. However, finally all of them leave the surrounding narrative space of the factory, which serves as a temporary whereabouts for the young rural female. Interestingly, only one of them returns to the countryside for good, and in the case of the other ones, prospective migration decisions ensue¹¹. This might be the reason for the ongoing popularity of this TV drama, as it takes account of the indefinite character of migration, regardless of being forced or intended or caught somewhere between these two. The statement seems to be gaining in importance in contemporary China, where migrations appear in various forms from economic to “autonomic” (Boutang 1986, p. 38) ones.

These are few of numerous examples of filmic representations of the *dagongmei* produced for a wide national audience. In terms of gender, an affirmation of traditional female virtues, such as being submissive, obedient, tender, loyal, and filial, contrast with the stress of high modern virtues internal to the self-development paradigm of Giddens's “high modernity” (Giddens 1991, pp. 10-35). The figure of the *dagongmei* represents an identity-project, a desire for maturity in enigmatic, gargantuan terms and a laborious evolution for which the woman herself is solely responsible. If she fails, there is no one to blame but herself for not being eager enough to raise her law rural *suzhi*/quality¹² through learning, self-investment, and eventually adjusting herself to the codes of urban behavior. Those who are ambitious and patient enough to incorporate the ready-made success strategies and master the transgression of their rural heritage will be finally

¹¹ Striking tension is noticeable between the rural and urban communities expectations towards the *dagongmei* and their own life projects: “The new arrivals to the city [...] commonly believed that they would be there for only a few years at most, after which they would return to the countryside to marry and to work either in agriculture, local industry, or, ideally, at their own business. This was not necessarily what they actively wished for, but something that they saw as more or less inevitable or unavoidable” (Jacka 1998, pp. 68-69).

¹² For more on *suzhi* as a significant motive of the floating population discourse see Yan (2003, pp. 493-523), Anagnost (2004, pp. 189-208) and Jacka (2006, pp. 64-67).

rewarded with the gesture of an urban citizen giving them a helpful hand. Those who go astray must necessarily return uncivilized, or they are shown as developing a deviant self by enhancing their law *suzhi*/quality and ultimately transforming themselves into desperate, spectral beings left alone in the hunting ground of the city and the urban imaginary – robbers, plunderers, and sex workers.

The working woman's script

Until now, the most widely accessible channel for speaking with their own voices has been provided for “working sisters”, and indeed brothers, by the printed media. With the rapid development of the Internet, another important space for vocalization and spectacularity has recently emerged. The aforementioned TV dramas proposed representations of *dagongmei* invented for the needs of the most popular and still most strategic actor in the Chinese media industry, videlicet television and its audience.

In the popular press, the floating population remains one of the “hot topics”. Various regional and national newspapers build a cacophonous arena in which migrant groups are the subject of discussion, but moreover any displaced individuals are sporadically invited to deliver their own acts of utterance. An important platform for migrant women's self-articulation, the journal “Nongjianü baishitong” (Rural Women Knowing All), emerged in 1993. Since its inception, nearly every issue has included a number of letters and articles devoted to the experiences of rural women working in urban areas, mainly Beijing. Typical tactics for the portrayal of working sisters including their autobiographical narratives have been described at length by Tamara Jacka (1998, 2000, 2006). She pointed to the victimization of rural migrant women as a most common mode of representation shared by the mainstream media (Jacka 2000, p. 4). Today, alongside a growing community of netizens in China, an important shift of focus to the Internet agora is taking place. In this virtual space of articulation and visualization, an ongoing sexualization of the *dagongmei*'s body exposed to the anonymous voyeuristic gaze of the internaut, can be observed¹³.

“Nongjia baishitong”, apace with other papers and magazines dedicated to the *dagongmei* topic, are most commonly published with the support of non-governmental organizations and foreign funds¹⁴. They provide a valuable forum for rural women to speak for themselves, even if they cannot yet reach a public comparable to that of the nationwide media. Nevertheless, they counterbalance the mainstream narrative of rural women as passive, helpless victims¹⁵.

¹³ A quick search on *dagongmei* using China's most popular search engine Baidu returns article headlines referring to “rape”, “abortion”, “mistresses” (*ernai*), and “escorts” (*sanpeiniü* – these women entertain men in restaurants, bars and nightclubs, and sometimes provide sexual services).

¹⁴ Another example was *Sweet Words among Sisters*, a magazine of stories written mainly by migrant workers from Shenzhen and the Pearl River Delta, distributed to factory workers free of charge by the Chinese Working Women Network. Two issues of the journal are available online from: <http://www.cwwn.org/eng/main.html>.

¹⁵ I do not intend to argue for an “authentic” self-representation of the migrant women that could be juxtaposed in opposition to the “fabricated” representation present in mass media. Representation has

Not as widespread as texts delivered by the mass media, but nonetheless important for the topic of self-representation, is the laborer's literary phenomenon (*dagong wenxue*), which is also discussed by literary critics under the label of *diceng wenxue* (blue-collar literature). Since the publication of the very first workers novel in the year 1984¹⁶, works classified as laborer's literature (Yang 2009, p. 378) appeared in literary journals, especially those edited in the Pearl River Delta. It was not before 2005 that it became a hot and controversial issue widely discussed in literary and academic circles¹⁷.

One of the most famous working poets, *dagongmei* Zheng Xiaoqiong has made herself a name publishing lyrics, short stories and essays in such renowned literary journals as "Renmin Wenxue" (People's Literature) and "Shikan" (Poetry Periodical). Belonging to the post-eighties migrant generation, she left Sichuan in 2001 to start her working sister career at the Guangdong Province's assembly lines. In 2007, she won the "Liqun Literature Award" from the authoritative "People's Literature". That fact coupled with her refusal to participate in the Dongguang Literature Association attracted unprecedented media attention. Zheng Xiaoqiong, however, escaped celebrity status by narrating herself as a Pearl River Delta *dagongmei*¹⁸. The plain laconic language of her lyrics in which she refers to two familiar landscapes of hers – that of a rural origin and that of an industrial everyday – might be compared to the disturbing scream pitching itself in the darkness of the night elaborated on in Pun's essay, as they both raise questions about these parts of *dagongmei*'s life that are hidden from view behind the factory and dormitory walls. These two acts of speech, the unconscious nightmarish vocalization and lyrical expression, might be reflected on in terms of the rhetoric of human pain:

Pain reigns in her dried throat, reins under her white bandage, pain reigns
 over her truncated finger, pain controls her eyesight, pain controls
 her perspectives, pain suppresses her silent sobering

a mediated character, the evaluation of its meaning and truth cannot be reduced to a simple identification of the speaker's location (Alcoff 1991, p. 17). Insofar I agree with Jacka (2000) that "[...] migrant women's representation of their own experiences and desires, and the messages that they incorporate in their stories, are far from being unaffected by dominant discourses. Rather [...] they challenge some aspects of dominant discourses and reproduce others".

¹⁶ Lin Jian's, *Shenye, Haibian you yi ge ren* (Dark night, there is somebody on the seaside) appeared in the third number of the magazine *Tequ Wenxue* (Literature of the Special Economic Zone).

¹⁷ Introduction into these debates is beyond the scope of this essay. The discussion is linked to the ongoing redefinition and problematization of the "class" term in contemporary China on the one hand (due to this reason I am not translating *diceng wenxue* as working-class or proletarian literature) and to the discussed attribution of "authenticity" and moral superiority of this genre above the intellectual writing. The controversy between Qian Wenliang and Zhang Qinghua provides a good example (Qian 2007; Zhang 2005, 2008).

¹⁸ In 2009 for the second time in her life she made her way to Beijing on the invitation of a popular TV talk show *Lu Yu You Yue* (Lu Yu has an appointment). Her appearance could be seen as a suitable example of an honest and simple (*laoshi*), "not knowing how to talk" (Jacka 2006, p. 19) rural women. Available from <http://www.tudou.com/programs/view/glhs4IQoAGk/> (cited 21 Dec 2010).

pain reigns over her ...

There is nobody who could relieve her from physical, mental, actual, prospect

pain

The machinery cannot, the boss cannot, the newspaper cannot

Even that fragile 'Labor Law' cannot either (Zheng 2005)¹⁹

Although the poet seems to be overcome by a deep sense of fatality and their lyrics do not reflect an active desire to change existing relation, they explicitly deal with the unfairness of the relation between a *dagongmei* and the rest of the world. Even if she bears no hope for transgression of this globally sanctioned factory worker's lot, Zheng Xiaoqiong insists on her right to speak as a "witness": "The script is weak and feeble, but I'm telling myself that a testimony must be left, I'm the witness of these happenings [...]" (Zheng 2005, p. B 11).

In some characteristics, her writing seems to fulfill similar functions to that attributed to the women's script; it is a culturally accepted code for the expression of feminine endurance (McLaren 1996, pp. 400, 411). Furthermore, it is not only an individual act of speech as it stands for the *dagongmei*'s collectivity. Zheng Xiaoqiong documents the processes of annihilation of the self, dismemberment of the body, and the disassembling of the working sister(s)²⁰:

[...] what remains is a kind of harmed dignity, after being harmed for a long time we stay in our numbness, in this state of apathy we gradually conform to it, while getting used I little by little abandon the scream of resistance I once bared. I gradually become a part of the assembly line (Zheng 2007)²¹.

Her writing dangerously supplements and subverts two great mutually entangled narrations of "rising China" in the global world order – that of urbanization and industrialization.

Through the periscope of Mr. Science

After the Millennium, an increase in the number of scientific publications elaborating on the *dagongmei* topic can be observed. Much qualitative and quantitative research has been conducted in the Chinese social sciences concerning this phenomenon. Here I choose to focus on two books²² recently edited under the

¹⁹ Translation mine.

²⁰ As such Zheng Xiaoqiong's writing corresponds well to the category of working-class literature rethought by Perera (2008, p. 4): "Women's texts of nonrevolutionary socialism, however, present us with new figures and concepts for thinking unorganized resistance, everyday experience, and the shape of ethical within globalization".

²¹ Translation mine.

²² Cai Li, Yuan Liping, eds., *Shenzhen Nü Laowugong Hunlian Zhuangkuang Yanjiu* (The Investigation of Migrant Workwomen's Love & Marriage Status in Shenzhen), Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe, Beijing 2008; Qian Minhui, Tian Yurong, eds., *Zhongguo Nüxing Xingwei de*

auspices of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences that complement and mirror some popular discourses on working sisters in an interesting manner. Both of them deliver valuable empirical material, as they include extensive fragments of in-depth interviews with migrant workers conducted in the area of Shenzhen Special Economic Zone. Nevertheless, this “raw material” has been selected by the editors who focus on the topics of dating, sexual behavior, marriage, childbearing, gender roles and problems of the living-apart-together migrant families.

Qian Minhui and Tian Yurong, in their publication *The Cultural Interpretation of Chinese Women's Destiny* first propose a brief statistical introduction of the *dagongmei* topic, to focus on only few selected problems – that of cross-border marriages with Hong Kong citizens, mistresses (*ernai*) and sexual workers. Central to their analysis are the *dagongmeis'* young and beautiful bodies, described as their only capital on which they can genuinely rely in the hostile city. This entrepreneurialization of the body might follow the above-mentioned different trajectories: that of marriage, informal relationship or prostitution. For forms not connected to marriage, the editors choose the classification *linglei shenhuo fangshi* (alternative, behind the mainstream lifestyles). In this publication, there is a noticeable shift from discourses extensively elaborating upon the victimization of the rural migrant (Jacka 2000, p. 4) towards a notion of agency, even if the so-called rational choices are condemned as immoral. This paradigmatic evolution makes itself visible when editors point out the fact that few of the interviewed women knew prior to leaving the countryside about the character of activities they would most probably be involved in the Pearl River Delta (Qian and Tian 2009, p. 212). Despite that fact that the migrant women in the city of Shenzhen are portrayed as having a low *suzhi* quality in terms of education, cultural and social background, as “subaltern” as they are, they are yet far from being silent. In their acts of speech, they similarly rely on the corporeal capital as in the example of a HIV-seropositive sex worker who infects her clients in an act of taking vengeance. These high modern Erinyes born on the “dumping site of globalization” (Bauman 2004, p. 63) haunt the mainstream society that is blamed by the authors of this publication for overseeing the structural causes of their condition that are the household registration system, economic disparities between rural and urban areas, or exploitation by global capital.

Without the intention of stripping this publication of its social importance, it is nonetheless to be mentioned that in concentrating mainly upon the sexualized, abject body (Butler 1993, pp. 188, 231, 240), it mirrors and empowers popular media coverings on the destabilizing, harassing effects of the floating population. Women are objectified and consumed by the urban audience and the moods of representation could be described in Rey Chow's words:

[t]he representation of subalterns shares a major characteristic with pornographic writing in the sense that it depends on a certain objectification and specularization of the ‘other’ [...] Both ‘subaltern’ writing and pornographic writing invest their fantasy in breaking the limits of propriety. [...] If the excitement of pornography can be described as something like ‘the

Wenhua Shiye (The Cultural Interpretation of Chinese Women's Destiny), Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe, Beijing 2009.

dirty, the better', then the excitement of subaltern-representation may be described as something like 'the more socially deprived, the better' (1994, pp. 243-244).

In the second publication, *The Investigation of Migrant Workwomen's Love & Marriage Status in Shenzhen*, broad fragments of interviews with working sisters are included. These have been strategically selected, assembled, and editorialized with a scientific commentary, or authoritative meta-narrative, promoting traditional values and female virtues. Premarital sexual intercourse is treated together with the topic of abortion, and cohabitation does not, as a rule, lead to a happy marriage. The best behavior and self-management as an example for migrant women to follow is to conform to moral codes that stress chastity and filial piety. At odds with the above-mentioned publication, these narratives are chains of individual choices made in a social vacuum.

Talk or show – gender and class erasure as politics of representation

In the final part of this paper, I would like to analyze a special edition of a popular talk show *Xinli fangtan* (Psychological interview) featuring *dagongmei* as guests in detail. The program was shown in summer 2009. Occasional references to the previously mentioned examples of *dagongmei's* representation and self-representation in order to reflect the scope and genuine complexity of the floating population discourse will be made.

The talk show as a television genre debuted in China in 1996 with *Shi hua shi shuo* (Tell it like it is) (Berry and Zhu 2009, p. 74). Together with the first daytime documentary news magazine show on CCTV in 1993 called *Dongfang shikong* (Oriental horizon), it marked the beginning of a new era in Chinese television – that of diversification and liberalization. CCTV Channel 12 had its premiere in the year 2005. As a part of the CCTV network, it was created as a channel focused on law and society. On the Chinese language web site, the mission statement of the channel consists of three key words: “citizens” (*gongmin*), “justice” (*gongzheng*), and “public good” (*gongyi*)²³.

Psychological Interview has been shown daily on CCTV Channel 12 and it is advertised as the first nationwide program with a psychological profile in which psychological cases are replayed and discussed with invited experts. Its aim is introduced in terms of providing psychological services to the people plagued by high modern fears and anxieties, such as a lack of stability, social insecurity, changes in interpersonal relations and the loosening of family ties²⁴. The form of the talk show is nevertheless far from innovative. It conforms to the previously described conventional patterns (Zhong 1998, p. 98) shaping this format on CCTV: the host (TV journalist A Guo) is addressed as “*zhuchiren*” and she is the main person responsible for communicating the message to the audience. Three guest speakers are titled “experts”, being a lawyer, a psychologist and a journalist, and

²³ Official website of CCTV Channel 12 available from <http://www.cctv.com/homepage/profile/12/index.shtml> [cited 7 December 2010].

²⁴ More information can be found on the program's official website available from <http://news.cntv.cn/program/xinlifangtan/shouye/index.shtml> [cited 10 December 2010].

are invited to showcase their professional expertise and prestige. However, the chairperson remains the one controlling the utterances to be delivered and the judgments to be made. Invited *dagongmei* seem to play the role of pupils in a teacher-centered classroom.

Working sisters from the Beijing based Migrant Women's Club (*Dagongmei zhijia*) were the guests invited to appear in a special edition of the program showed on 10th July 2009²⁵. The title of this show was *Our Home – the Migrant Women's Club*²⁶, so the viewer's attention was supposed to focus primarily on a space created for women in the floating population. The Migrant Women's Club was established in 1996 by the staff of the periodical devoted to rural women "Nongjianü" (Rural Women). The club's director and chief editor of the magazine is Xie Lihua, a well-known activist and deputy editor of the All China Women's Federation²⁷ daily newspaper, "China Women's News". In the *Psychological Interview*, she is seated in one row with the working sisters on the side on the studio audience. However, she is also addressed as "laoshi" (teacher, professor) and asked to comment on one of the *dagongmei* personality and behavior. This staging marks her ambivalent status previously thematized by Jacka: "These individuals [Xie Lihua and Li Tao, a journalist] are outstanding in their dedication to women in the floating population, but both their socioeconomic status and their attitudes set them apart from the 'floaters' themselves" (2006, p. 60). The introduction of the character of the Beijing NGO in the talk show itself also seems ambivalent. On the one hand, it is repeatedly referred to as the home (*jia*) of the *dagongmei*, an almost Foucaultian "heterotopic" space that gives them a real sense of belonging. On the other hand, it is presented as an almost totalitarian institution, akin to a school or re-education establishment, in that rural women are trained in skills that are viewed from above as being necessarily inscribed into the project of a harmonious society.

The host of *Psychological Interview*, A Guo, is responsible for the narrative structure of the whole show and provides the form for the utterance to be delivered. This can be divided into stories (*gushi*) narrated by two *dagongmei* invited to the television studio. The third story of a male migrant worker, retold in a short documentary, contrasts sharply with the two women's emphatically modest appearance. Narratives delivered by the "authentic" *dagongmei* Gao Daohong and Fang Qingxia are supplemented with comments from the invited experts alongside the host's extensive remarks, as A Guo is also retelling the working sisters' stories in large fragments. The last format brought up in this show is what makes it exceptional on Chinese television; the psychodrama in which the conflict situations are recreated and analyzed by separating the involved person's emotions and

²⁵ It is available online from http://www.56.com/w32/play_album-aid-7603736_vid-NDQ4MzQ3ODU.html [cited 22 December 2010].

²⁶ This NGO and migrant subject positions constructed and promoted through the *Rural Women* in the decade 1993-2002 were examined in detail by Tamara Jacka (2006).

²⁷ All China Women's Federation, established in March 1949, is a mass organization supported by the Communist Party of China, dedicated to the objectives of representing and safeguarding rights and interests of women and promoting gender equality.

dispositions is quintessentially innovative. The most important part of this play is the process of naming the feelings of the participants involved.

At this place two short introductory remarks referring to the meaning of biographical tales in China and to the conceptualization of social change through language seem to be of importance. Examples delivered by migrant workers who appeared in *Psychological Interview* could be seen as a contemporary answer to the two-millennia-long tradition of female life-story narratives originating from famous *lienüzhuan* (biographies of exemplary women). According to Judge “[b]iography – both female and male – functioned in the Confucian cultural tradition not only as a means of commemoration but, more important, as a technology of the self” (2008, p. 11). Individuals were expected to improve themselves while following the outstanding examples of diverse paragons of virtue, and also contemporary – paragons of beauty or paragons of labor relations.

The emphasis placed on the process of acquiring the right names for one’s emotions and feelings recalls in the Chinese cultural context the powerful Confucian concept of *zhengming* – the rectification of names. According to this process, it is of great importance to have the right name and the right language, due to the fact that: “The performative force of language entails the consequence that to interpret the world through language is to impel it towards a certain realization, to make it known in a certain way” (Hall and Ames 1987, pp. 268-269). Naming, according to Confucius (Legge 1959, p. 298), is a way to make a certain reality proper – that is, to make it real. As the act of naming itself is not hierarchical, in *Psychological Interview* it becomes such due to the fact that it is first performed by the invited experts. Retelling of their life stories does not grant *dagongmei* a greater access to power as there are using the vocabulary coming from above; it is much more a tool of assuring the already established symbolical hegemony.

In all the above-mentioned TV formats, two significant strands of narration stand in opposition: that of violence *versus* nonviolent modes of communication, and that of naivety and immaturity *versus* adulthood. Consequently, the overall topic of program might be circumscribed as the teaching of proper communication strategies. In their narrations, the women retell their *dagongmei* experience of leaving the rural environment as a process of self-development in the course of which important skills have been achieved. They have been acquired due to their own efforts backed up by the professional training provided for them by the Working Women’s Club. A certain trajectory can be traced in these stories: from a sense of inferiority and a lack of confidence to eloquence and a sense of self-worth. What is stressed many times during the program is that, on the one hand, the one responsible for the process of self-education is the migrant herself, but on the other hand, this cannot be accomplished without an impulse coming from outside. That is what enables the rural woman to abandon her “dumbness”, something all guests invited to the program succeed in, as they express themselves fluently in flawless Mandarin. It seems that the long-term involvement in the Working Women’s Club’s activities genuinely helped these women to overcome their sense of inferiority and improve their abilities to speak out or talk back. They self-confidently talk not only about their individual experiences, but also sporadically refer to the whole collective of migrant workers, which they believe themselves to

represent. In their eyes, this collective is glued together by the shared experience of the hardship they face in the city (*dajia chulai dagong dou shi bu rongyide*).

Gao Daohong uses these words to criticize a male migrant worker boss introduced in this sort of documentary, for his improper violent behavior. A desperate migrant worker whose insistence on having his loan paid had been turned down by his boss, and who eventually seeing no way out, injured his employer in a violently escalating argument and is the one to be blamed for his lack of communication skills. Gao repeatedly reassures the host and the audience that this accident should not have happened. Again, the *dagongmei* represents here the “good” migrant worker. Jacka (1998) mentioned in her work that “working sisters” are constructed as the less violent, disturbing “other” and are more likely to be tolerated by the urban society than their “working brothers”. The visual representation of the male migrant in this television show sharply contrasts with that of the clean, neat *dagongmei*, as it is accompanied by aggressive loud music, the visual montage is hasty, and the former migrant worker is portrayed as an imprisoned criminal. It produces a feeling of anxiety, making visible the “dark” side and hidden dangers connected to the flow of immature, naive, aggressive and savage individuals into the urban area. This attitude towards the migrant other is not novel. It is enough to recall Dai Jinhua’s statements referring to erasure of the class struggle vocabulary from contemporary discourse in China that has taken place since the 1990s, simultaneous to the construction of the “rural” inimical “other”:

The abandonment of the actuality of the class phenomenon and of its discourse continuously stands for the cultural practice adapted by the Chinese intellectual and their historical choice of ‘saying farewell to the revolution’. On the contrary, in the course of the emergence of the bubble economy, the special development of the cities and the consecutive liquidation of barriers in the process of structural transformation in China, some of the acute social contradictions, and especially these threatening urban residents, like escalating metropolitan violence, have been articulated in a way similar to that of articulating class conflicts and stereotypes [but today] they are aimed at ‘non-urban outsiders’. They make the emergence of hostility public (Dai 1999, p. 22).

At this point, a question arises concerning these acts of speech and subject-positions. It is rather thought-provoking that in a television show dedicated to the topic of female migrant workers, no attention is paid to the significance of gender as an institutionalized basis for discrimination in rural and urban communities. The marginalization of *dagongmei* as women is not mentioned, it is understood as a weakness or inferiority within *dagongmei* and their male counterparts *dagongzai* themselves. Although the women left their hometowns ten or more years ago and subsequently belong to the older generation of *dagongmei*, not a word is uttered pertaining to problems connected with migrant families, children or women’s health and social care. Conflict situations analyzed and performed in the psychodramas without exception refer to the lack of ability to communicate smoothly with employers that originates from the migrant worker’s naivety and inferiority complex. The generous help from the Working Women’s Club is introduced as an act of rescuing and uplifting the willing to cooperate migrant being from the state immaturity into enlightened adulthood. The background of structural inequalities acting on the floating population phenomenon persists

unspoken and the *dagongmei* is presented in a social vacuum, in which the Working Women's Club is the only hope. The other might be the International Labor Organization, as is mentioned by one of the invited guests, the law professor Liu Minghui from Peking University. The problem of law protection of the *dagongmei* is discussed on the international level, a fact that might be connected to the latent conviction that it is the globalized capital that is in the first place responsible for injustice and exploitation at the working place in China. Former class struggle is reenacted in national or patriotic terms; the state-party (Wang 2009, pp. 9-10) is not the one to be blamed.

Furthermore, it is interesting to analyze the separate acts of speech delivered in the course of the whole program to answer the question: who is the *dagongmei* talking to? Comments delivered by the host and guest leave no doubts that the audience is imagined as a middle-class collective. Surprisingly, the *dagongmei* are not the ones for whom the television show has been made. They are repeatedly referred to as "they", whereas guest and host talk about themselves using the personal pronoun "we". While the community of potential employees speaks, one of the experts utters that the responsibility of the "we"- group is to "help them to increase their professional pride" (*bangzhu tamen zengzhang zhiye zihaogan*). As *dagongmei* reflect themselves in their stories as of being extremely naive, uncertain and plagued by a deep sense of inferiority while coming to the city, the task of the more enlightened citizens is to assist and support them in the process of transformation of their almost raw corporeal and psychical material into a real, mature city *dagongmei*. The dangerous, lower class supplement (Chow 1994, p. 248) is to be pacified in a process of enlightening guidance, otherwise it might conclude in a violent explosion that is shown in the short documentary.

Conclusion

It is striking how many questions and doubts are raised by this short television program together with the aforementioned various cultural, self-representations of *dagongmei*. In *Psychological Interview* simple doubts about the featured guests' acts of utterance can be connected to the uncertainty concerning who the speaker is and to whom he/she speaks. "We", the audience, watch the *dagongmei* retell her life story and the mode of narration remains the one of a "Bildungsroman", as it follows a clear trajectory, that of maturation. It seems that the creation of a harmonious working environment is paramount, an interest that is analogically shared by the employer-to-be, who can learn more from this television show about the rural "syndrome" with its inherent symptoms embodied in the newcomer, such as an inferiority complex, not being able to talk and naivety, to mention but a few. The wealthy urban citizens are naturally interested in maintaining proper working relations, at least in order to protect themselves from the potentially violent 'other'. No other authority is mentioned, no "fragile Labor law", therefore citizens are left alone with the responsibility of shaping their mutual relationship in the big family (*da jiating*), as society is referred to.

Is the *dagongmei* nothing more than a token, an exotic or sometimes erotic supplement, as it could be argued? She does not very often seem to speak in "her

own words”, despite being part of the ongoing *dagongmei* discourse as well. Could her individual acts of speech be emancipatory, to quote Zygmunt Bauman:

Chat-shows are public lessons in an as-yet-unborn-but-about-to-be-born-language. They offer the words which may be used to ‘name the problem’ – to express, in publicly legible ways, what has been so far ineffable and would remain so if not for that offer. [...]

[Chat shows] render the unspeakable speakable, the shameful decent, and transform the ugly secret into a matter of pride. To an important degree, they are rites of exorcism – and very effective ones (2000, p. 69).

These individual acts of exorcising the former rural immature self do not, in my opinion, alter the fact that social injustice is being reproduced. Becoming part of the media and pop culture does not contribute to an increase and diversification of potential protest strategies. It can be regarded much more as a strategy of appeasement of the rural “other” based upon the idea of a high modern, more flexible subjectivity that does not really offer much more agency than the possibility of smoother adjustment to the flexible logic of global capitalism.

The cultural representation of *dagongmei* accompanies the process of transformation in contemporary China. To better understand the fascination with the female migrant worker, one might regard it as a continuation of previous tendencies, as “the fascination with characters from the lower class is as familiar one in modern Chinese literature” (Chow 1994, p. 245). Women invited to the special edition of the *Psychological Interview* fit very well into a scheme of representation described further by Rey Chow:

Where a lower-class person’s conduct may, in fact, threaten to overthrow the moral structure that holds a society together, literature often makes her part of the very support, the very boundary of that structure, by glorifying her. Central to such glorification in the case of lower-class women is a prohibition of their sexuality. We thus have countless women characters who are ‘admirable’ because they live their lives as self-sacrificing motherly servants with little sexuality and subjectivity (1994, p. 245).

The above-mentioned and analyzed cultural representations of *dagongmei* position her either as the sacred, asexual maid dedicated to her wealthy city family and employer, or as a sexually desired abject-body. That means that a familiar pattern of representing the feminine emerges anew from the surface of the contemporary discourses. In sentimental rhetoric, identified since Brecht as fitting the taste of the quasi middle-class, the “woman” is designed as a victim. Conversely, even if she seemingly transforms into a modern flexible subject with the sense of agency, as it is staged in some of the aforementioned examples, the newly constructed representation of the female laborer still remains a disciplining one, not powerful enough to jeopardize the traditional patriarchal world order. Rather the opposite happens, as Ngai Pun states: “Benefiting from ideas of the modern women movement capital won access to the free [female] laborers’ labor-power, coevally; taking advantages of the oppression of young unmarried women in patriarchy it reinforces its exploitation and control over the working sisters” (2008, p. 11). Thus, *dagongmei*’s body and psychology are presented on a personal level, while her specifically gendered and class-related problems remain relatively silent in the fissure between these two familiar modes of representation. The

“imagineering” (Pun 2003, p. 471) power of diverse ideological apparatus for creating new values, desires, and role models to follow offers a modern *dagongmei* representation and simultaneously expects the young displaced female worker to submit willingly to the project of reassembling themselves according to the demands of the flexible logic of global capitalism, expectations inscribed into the project of the harmonious society and last but not least, to commodified sexual images. The “working sister” equals a socially constructed projection surface, neither representing nor being represented, but rather damned to “embody” the representation itself. The same statement could be made about images of women attached to different discourses throughout the course of history.

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