

Original Paper

Under Three Heavy Mountains—Identity Construction and Subjectivity Struggle of Chinese Women Workers

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Received: July 29, 2024

Accepted: August 27, 2024

Online Published: September 20, 2024

doi:10.22158/assc.v6n5p21

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22158/assc.v6n5p21>

Abstract

This paper examines contemporary Chinese women workers, whose experiences have gained increasing attention as rural labor forces migrate to urban areas and China's status as the "factory of the world" evolves. It utilizes Pun Ngai's ethnography "Made in China" as the primary text, alongside supporting texts such as "Rural Women in Urban China" (Jacka, 2006), "The change of factory regime in China and its impacts on workers" (Zhao, 2010). This paper provides a detailed analysis of the construction of these workers' identities and their struggle for subjectivity. Confronted with triple oppression, female workers navigate and reshape their identities amidst the tensions between urban and rural settings.

Keywords

Chinese women workers, Pun Ngai, triple oppression, factory Girls

1. Introduction

As the vast labor force from rural China transitions to urban centers and China continues to solidify its role as the "factory of the world," the experiences of contemporary Chinese women workers are receiving heightened scrutiny. This paper delves into their identity construction and struggle for subjectivity by analyzing Pun Ngai's "Made in China" along with "Rural Women in Urban China", "Workers in the Reconstruction of the Factory System". It explores how these women confront and negotiate their identities in the complex interplay between city and countryside, recognizing the unique challenges they face compared to workers in state-owned enterprises. They build their identities in a heterogeneous, fractured, and fluid manner, incorporating both their femininity and rural backgrounds. Unlike their counterparts in state-owned enterprises, they face the dual challenge of their working-class identity and the reinforcement of their peasant and regional-community identities, ultimately resisting through various "possibilities."

2. Triple Oppression and the Subject's Call

In mainland China, the women workers (Dagongmei)'s subject is created by the interaction of being questioned and self-formed. They are subject to a patriarchal society for the reason that they are women. The patriarchy, the state, and the capital have all oppressed them in three specific ways. They live in a patriarchal society as women who are responsible for carrying tradition and maintaining a predetermined course for their lives. Through the pervasive everyday domestication, patriarchal power forces women to adopt the virtue of submissiveness. "Obedience" is deftly packaged and injected into the impressionable girls, and when they grow up, it ultimately turns into a control mechanism ingrained in their marrow. This due to historical inertia, the training of "obedience" continues today. Patriarchal authority thus forms the earliest oppression of women, and tame women are the "products" born under this tyranny. Their first subjectivity is the "tame". But with the dream of the city, they made the decision to work as female industrial employees. When the rural girls moved to the city to work, they underwent identity transformation, becoming female factory employees, and the production subject started to take shape. They start working in factories as women, and the topic of production starts to be formed. The power of global capital and the technology of power surrounding them begin to refract. The "microphysical theory of power" of Foucault is referenced by Pun in order to examine how capital controls labor. (Pun, 2005, pp. 106-107)

The subjectivity of women workers is again evoked under the regulation of capital. The peasant body in the socialist context is not adapted to capitalist production, and the regulation of their bodies by capital is necessary and the techniques of regulation are justified, i.e. the "hegemonic discourse". (Tao, 2011, pp. 228-230) By fixing women workers on the production line, capital demonstrates its spatial art, thus reuniting the divided individuals into a coherent operation of the whole. They are then required to follow a uniform command and produce in accordance with the conveyor belt's speed, producing most like a machine and maintaining a constant speed. Moreover, the schedule is the art of time for the disciplinary power, which, within a seemingly simple framework of the schedule, quickly transforms the rural girl with no sense of time, as imagined by the disciplinary power, into a worker in the capitalist global economy, who observes industrial time. The external mechanism of capitalism is also "internalized" in these women workers, most of whom work hard to get more pay, and "time is money". The modern subject is formed by the "inquisition" of the self in the discipline. (Althusser, 2008, pp. 84) Although they have transformed from being country girls to productive subjects who are generally subdued but not lacking in agility, women workers nonetheless feel deficient, uneasy, and dissatisfied in the face of the pervasive dominance. What capital needs is not only the tamed working bodies under the power of regulation, but also the "willing" workers. Therefore, the process of self-constitution of working girls is an important area of control by capital.

Taming is a valuable texture of "material" for capital, which only needs a pair of hands to work mechanically. They are attracted by capital and begin the process of being shaped by industrial capital. For a variety of reasons, they are drawn to the city, but because there hasn't been much accumulation of

human capital, they essentially have to decide to become factory girls. This constitutes a second layer of oppression. The Leviathan/State, in its need for development, creates a de facto collusion with capital, providing more “convenient conditions” for shaping a “working machine” that is perfectly suited to production. *“With the shelter of the hukou system, capital’s temporary use of Chinese labor gained institutional legitimacy. Thus, exploitation and plunder are further branded as local and cultural, so that the temporary use of labor, which is prevalent in Shenzhen and other globalized factories in economic development zones, is permanently fixed.”* (Pun, 2005, pp. 48) This constitutes the third layer of oppression, which also makes factory girls fall into a completely passive and powerless subject.

3. Urban and rural areas in between: Self-awareness and Identity of Women Workers

In the book *“Rural Women in Urban China”*, Tamara put his awareness on women’s self-consciousness and sought to find out the changing psychological roles of Chinese rural women in the process of modernization. In 2000, Tamara asked members of the “Working Girl’s Home” in Haidian, Beijing, about their reasons for leaving their hometown. The result was that “23.9% of the respondents cited backwardness or poverty in their hometowns as an important reason for moving away from home, and 23.9% said it was because ‘there was nothing to do at home’. However, the most frequently cited reason for moving out was ‘to develop myself (48.9%)’.” According to the data, Tamara argues that the impetus for young working girls to leave the countryside does not usually come from economic necessity or past experiences of deprivation or hardship, but from this clearly expressed desire to develop themselves, broaden their horizons and try their independence. (Jacka, 2006, p. 108)

Young, unmarried women generally do not do so at the behest of their parents or to contribute financially to their families; rather, these women make their own decisions and choices, primarily to improve their lives and to seek self-fulfillment as “modern” individuals. The women workers chose to “make their own decision”, not only because they awakened their individual subject consciousness and consciously chose to work in the city between “staying in the countryside” and working in the city, thus proving the value of their individual existence, but also because they were pushed by fate to go to the city without the space of choice. Additionally, fate forces them into the city because there are too many “things that can’t be done” in the countryside. Working-class identity is particularly important for women workers. Both the women workers who left their hometowns to make a living in the city and the former workers of state-owned enterprises who experienced unit reform and dictatorship face the problem of working-class identity, which they construct passively and actively in a series of factory politics, while being deprived of their own interests or infringed upon in the enterprises. Outside the production plant, the rights to lifelong employment and welfare guarantees that workers in both enterprises were supposed to enjoy, which the state had originally promised by means of implicit contracts, were gradually abolished with the dissolution of the unitary system, the introduction of the labor contract system, and the changes in the wage system and the social security system. In terms of

welfare, with the conversion of enterprises, the original complete welfare of the state-owned enterprise period -- Welfare housing, pensions and publicly funded medical care were transformed into a social security system that is shared by the state, the enterprise and the individual. Along with a series of reform measures in factories, the workers' own experience of being gradually deprived of their institutional identity and welfare benefits in the former state-owned enterprises made it easier for them to construct their own identity as workers in their former enterprises. Whereas during the planned economy, working-class identity was a kind of identification with their particular identity and unit, during the period of market transformation, this strong sense of contrast provided the basis for the group of SOE employees to identify themselves. (Zhao, 2010, pp. 88-93)

Similar to the workers of the former state-owned enterprises, the rural girls in Chinese Women Workers gradually establish their working-class identity in urban factory work, where they are reunited into an overall coherent operation, maintaining speed, on the conveyor belt preferably evenly, like a machine; the strict work schedule transforms the timeless rural girls into workers who observe industrial time, and the rural girls into disciplined and generally still tame workers in the face of omnipresent power. Although their identity is unclear, the logic of "migrant worker" is embedded in them, the term "migrant worker" blurs the line between peasant and worker identities. But as Thompson argues, class arises when a group of people conclude in a shared experience, sensing and articulating an interest among themselves that is different and often antagonistic to that of others. In fact, they identify themselves with their own working class identity, but they are not yet conscious of this class consciousness of themselves as working class. (Song, 2013, pp. 217-222) They will openly or covertly oppose the hegemony to recognize their bodies as more than "tame", realizing that the faster they work on the production line, the more profit the bosses make, while they still only receive a meager wage for their labor. Collective resistance highlights their self-contained working-class identity.

It can be noted that the identity construction process of women workers is heterogeneous, fragmented, fluid and full of conflicts. In addition to their own working-class identity, female migrant workers also face the strengthening of their original identity as "peasants" and the accompanying regional-ethnic identity. Once they enter the factory, their original identity as peasants is reinforced passively or actively. The anachronistic appearance and behavior of female workers make them look less like factory workers and more like the so-called rural people. The female workers express their dissatisfaction with this discrimination in their own unique way, sneering at the bosses who chastise them and call them by various nicknames after work, which strengthens their perception of themselves as "rural women" in the process. In this confrontation, their identity as "rural women" is reinforced. However, on the other hand, female workers are also fighting against their former identity as "peasants" in order to avoid or reduce discrimination. They attempt to gain a new identity and a new sense of life through a variety of efforts, such as listening to Hong Kong popular music together after work, going shopping together like city people, dressing more formally, and purchasing Hong Kong cosmetics.

Most of the working girls come from rural areas all over the country and speak Mandarin with different local accents. There is a great gap between their different personalities and the requirements of the capital, which needs a homogeneous group of working girls. Under these requirements, the very different working girls are forced but at the same time voluntarily terrain themselves and try to become a modern working subject. For example, in the factories where female workers work, Cantonese is a kind of cultural capital, and the bosses and top managers speak Cantonese, which represents their status. If female workers want to get the opportunity of upward mobility, speaking Cantonese is a necessary condition, and they must temporarily give up their original identity and complete the construction of a modern subject. (Pun, 2005, pp. 128-132) Occasionally, there is defection and struggle, but this does not prevent women workers from joining the performance of language politics dominated by capitalists. Language is entwined with town and country, region and ethnic group, which sometimes obey and sometimes resist capital's conspiracy to individualize women workers. The formation of the modern subject is thus a complex and divisive process.

4. How does Energetic Resistance Become Possible?

Pun believes that the resistance of Chinese women workers is a poetics of rebellion, and she repeatedly emphasizes that the resistance of women workers is a new kind of resistance. It emerges from the process of subjectification of women workers themselves and the process of shaping them by various power forces. It emerges from the process of subjectification of women workers and the process of shaping them by various power forces. This is a historical performance of control and resistance.

The female workers' form of resistance can be attributed to a daily life strategy and physical illness, where "resistance" and "taming" are intertextual. It is rare to see the emergence of mass strikes in factories, and it is only when the speed of the assembly line is set too fast or the bonus rate is too harsh that collective faking of illness becomes a regular occurrence. Slowing down on the assembly line, making deliberate mistakes, and even stopping work are all forms of resistance by women workers, while physical pain, nightmares, and screams are the physical resistance of women workers to the objective forms of industrial labor. Dysmenorrhea was a common chronic pain that women workers suffered from. In order to keep the assembly line running, supervisors would give the surprised women workers contraceptive-like drugs to alleviate the pain. The women workers' bodies could not be regulated and absorbed by the rhythm of industrial production -- they had their own clocks. The screams and nightmares are the ultimate human experience, a cry for human freedom at the limit of pain, and the female worker, Ying, is the subject of the screams depicted by the author. This form of physical resistance is seemingly imperceptible, but it is constantly embodied in the factory, in industrial time. The body of the working girl is always in conflict between being tamed by capital and becoming a body of resistance out of self-protection. The desire to escape from the former is an impossible dream, or at best a lesser degree of control; becoming an object of resistance in the full sense of the word seems even more impossible. After all, the former determines the fate of the latter. The resistance of

working girls can only be limited and moderate; beyond a certain limit, they have no choice but to lose their jobs, and even in the “resistance deconstruction” of the old protector itself using hegemonic discourses. (Pun, 2005, p. 78) Another “positive” expression of “domestication” is “cooperation”, where resistance and cooperation, two seemingly opposite strategies, are in every corner of the workshop at every moment. The two strategies of resistance and cooperation, which seem to be almost the exact opposite, are in every corner of the workshop every moment.

The resistance to patriarchy is an important motivation for many rural women to work outside the home, and Pun sees the limited autonomy and freedom of women workers, depicting a married woman, Chun, who leaves home alone without her husband’s permission. The purpose of “Chun” is still to pay off her family’s debts, and unmarried women are forced to struggle between the male-dominated marriage and family and the masculine capital system, unable to earn a way out. The paradoxes and contradictions were revealed in Pun’s books in the 1990s. In order to fight against the oppression of capital, the rural family and the various social relationships attached to it provide the most important material support and identity for the working girls. This support includes mutual care in daily life and collective action in the production sphere. (Pun, 2005, p. 77-78) But when women hope to escape the oppression and alienation of capital through marriage, they seek the refuge of patriarchy but have to accept the oppression of patriarchy.

In “*Working Girls*”, a best-selling book about the survival of China’s second generation of female workers, Zhang Tonghe places the individual freedom and autonomy of female workers in a higher place, even as the ultimate goal. In their rebellion against patriarchal power, both Lv Qingmin and her sister rebel against their parents’ arrangements for their marriage and strive to take control of their own destiny and lives, and because of their elevated economic status in the family, Qingmin “overturns the power structure of the family”. Capitalism’s demand for free labor gives young women a voice and freedom to fight against patriarchy. Pun’s Ying refuses to be her boss’s lover, but lives with the anxiety of choosing a spouse, but the urban-rural and class differences still deeply prevent her from finding a suitable marriage partner in a foreign country. In contrast to Pun’s Ying’s fugitive rebellion against male power, Zhang Tonghe’s Lv Qingmin and Wu Chunming share the same desire and anxiety for marriage and family, only that women of this generation appear to be more open and proactive in gender relations. However, neither Zhang Tonghe nor Pun tells the reader the final fate of these working women, as the family system continues unintentionally and intentionally, and more women protest in disguise against the oppression of capital and patriarchal power.

The idea of rebellion does not coalesce in one place in the spirit of the self, forming a clear sense of rebellion. Their attempts to clarify the chaotic ideas of resistance were interrupted by the heavy burden of daily life and plunged back into chaos. Their thoughts wavered and they were unable to accurately climb the three mountains, and their resistance could not find a direction -- only a sense of powerlessness that left them with empty punches, and finally they were lost in confusion and numbness and accepted a traditional arrangement. Are the screams of the female workers in Pun’s writing ignored

by our daily life? What is even more frightening is that not only is this neglected, but also people take it for granted, thinking that these sacrifices are inevitable or simply remain indifferent.

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