



## Performing identities: Women in rural–urban migration in contemporary China

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### ABSTRACT

This paper is centred on the process of identity and belonging negotiation of rural women in their migration to urban employment in contemporary China. Employing a unique mobile method, the author follows rural women's migration by gathering data from both sending and receiving areas, and captures the dynamic and situated, fluid nature of rural migrant women's identity deconstruction and reconstruction processes. The study reveals that rural migrant women readily depart from peasant identity, rejecting the identity of 'dagongmei', and at the same time draw up boundaries against other rural migrants in different contexts. The boundaries they draw, however, are not static, but are fluid and ever changing in different circumstances and contexts. Paradoxically, such boundaries serve to reinforce the differentiation among rural migrant women and undermine their solidarity.

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### Introduction

Since the market oriented reforms of 1979, China has undergone rapid industrialization and urbanization. Accompanying these dramatic social and economic transformations is one of the world's largest internal migrations, with an estimated 158 million people from rural areas have migrated to China's urban centres searching for waged employment by 2011, of whom, around 36% are women (NBSC, 2012).

In its search for 'nimble fingers' and 'disposable labour' (Elson and Pearson, 1981; Wright, 2006), global capital has created a new international division of labour, which has transformed China into a 'world factory' (Pun, 2005). Not only this, but it has made the sexual and class exploitation of women and the working population more mobile, more extensive, and more complex (Ong, 1991). Yet global capital has also opened up the possibility of new forms of power and politics, as well as new sites of resistance and action (Sassen, 2007). As argued by Silver, '...there is no reason to expect that just because capital finds it profitable to treat all workers as interchangeable equivalents, workers would themselves find it in their interest to accept this' (Silver, 2003: 177).

Despite their relatively new encounter with capitalism, Chinese rural women have been engaged in negotiating and contesting different subject positions in the migration process, like their counterparts in other parts of Asia and South America (Mills, 1997; Moore, 1994; Silvey and Elmhirst, 2003; Tiano, 1994). They are,

indeed, exposed to the 'vicissitudes of every day symbolic struggle' (Bourdieu, 1997: 242). Taking employment in low-paid, gender specific jobs, mainly in the textile and manufacturing industries and the service sector (Davin, 1996; Fan, 2003; Gaetano, 2004; Lee, 1998; Pun, 1999; Solinger, 1999, 1995; Zhang, 2006), rural women migrants are said to 'occupy a liminal position in space and time' (Gaetano, 2008: 629). Some researchers suggest that rural migrant women are 'the most oppressed' (Au and Nan, 2007) and the 'victims of exploitation' under a triple oppression of 'global capitalism, state socialism, and familial patriarchy... along lines of class, gender and rural–urban disparity' (Pun, 2005: 4).

In addition to the 'official naming' of rural migrant women by the state using terms such as 'blind migrant', 'floating population', 'peasant workers', the rhetoric of 'maiden workers', 'dagongmei' and 'disposable labour' also appears in recent research in the area (Gaetano, 2004; Pun, 2005; Wright, 2006; Yan, 2008). 'Dagongmei' is a Cantonese word and is commonly translated as 'working sisters' in recent research literature. According to Pun, 'Dagong means "working for the boss", or "selling labour", connoting commodification and a capitalist exchange of labour for wages. Mei means younger sister. It denotes not merely gender, but also marital status. "mei" is single, unmarried and younger (and thus of a lower status)' (Pun, 1999: 3). In documenting rural women's lived experience of new forms of control generated by the combination of state power and global capital, these discourses, conversely, not only engender 'hegemonic effects' that 'limit what individuals perceive as the subject positions available to them' (Mills, 1997: 38) but also institute an almost homogeneous representation of rural migrant women, caught up in binary identity categories such as

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rural/urban and traditional/modern, leaving no room to re-examine the fluidity of women's negotiation of identity.

The present paper draws on a qualitative study of rural migrant women in two popular destination cities in China – Beijing and Shantou, and two sending provinces, Hebei and Henan. It seeks to investigate how rural women negotiate, construct and perform identities in their gendered migration process. It also explores the situatedness of their identity negotiation, construction and performance, and how they draw on different resources to establish a sense of selfhood and belonging. By tracing the same cohort of rural women through their migration and return journeys from receiving cities to home villages I have been able to capture the fluidity of the negotiation, construction and performance of women's identity, and to look at a combination of factors that influence the process, and the intertwined power relations that condition the process.

### 'Suzhi', 'hukou', 'dagongmei' and rural migrant women's identity negotiation in contemporary China

Seen as a 'new Chinese working class' in the making, rural migrant workers have been at the forefront of encounter with global capital and the new international division of labour (Pun, 2005: 4). The politics of their identity negotiation is intrinsically linked to China's fast economic reform and development, modernization and urbanization, the dichotomy between rural and urban space, as well as to the disparity between regions and genders (Davin, 1999; Jacka, 2006; Lee, 1998; Pun, 1999, 2005; Solinger, 1995).

Having contributed 16% of China's GDP in the past twenty years (China Daily, 2006), rural migrant workers are said to be China's most valuable economic asset (Harney, 2008). However, their labour is devalued by the new conceptualization of value and a 'new logic of value coding' within the new context of rapid transformations in China (Anagnost, 2004). The devaluation is attained through the use of 'suzhi' as a measurement. 'Suzhi' first appeared during the early 1980s in the state documents on population quality (renkou suzhi). Roughly means 'quality' in English, the term encompasses the changing relationship between value and bodies. Rural people are believed to have low 'suzhi' and hence, low quality. In popular discourses, the low quality (di suzhi) of the population, especially rural population, became the impediments to China's modernization (Anagnost, 2004:190).<sup>1</sup> Due to their rural origin, rural migrants' labour is also devalued as having 'low quality' (Anagnost, 2004: 190). Their labour, therefore, can be purchased at a lower price, which allows for the extraction of surplus value that enables capital accumulation (Anagnost, 2004). Not only is the extraction of surplus value from rural migrant labour justified, but the new regimes of social differentiation and governmentality are also legitimised, through the value coding of 'suzhi' quality of the population, which has a direct impact on the identity negotiation of rural migrants – being a rural migrant itself implies having 'low quality' and less human capital (Anagnost, 2004).

Furthermore, the Chinese government also deploys different strategies and migratory apparatus to differentiate rural migrants from urban residents. In so doing, it manages to keep migrant labour cheap and flexible, and hence remain competitive within the global market. The *hukou* system (household registration system) is but one of the many institutions that label and maintain these divides and differentiation.

Being a peasant in China is not an occupation which one can easily change, but an identity or status that one is destined to carry and pass onto one's descendants. Under the *hukou* system, rural migrants are denied permanent settlement in the cities due to their 'agricultural' *hukou* status, which they inherit from birth. Rural migrant workers in China are thus referred to as '*nongmin gong*'

(peasant workers). Classified as peasants in the city, rural migrant workers are not only valued as having 'low quality' (*di suzhi*), but are also denied equal access to social welfare, such as state subsidized medical care, education and social benefits in the city that are guaranteed for people with urban *hukou*, even if have migrated to the city and worked there for a number of years. In Shenzhen, for example, among its 14 million taxpayers, only 14% have local Shenzhen *hukou* and therefore have access to public welfare (Hou, 2007). Although the *hukou* system has undergone a series of reforms, the conversion from 'agricultural' to 'non-agricultural' status remains problematic, and the distinction between 'agricultural' and 'non-agricultural' *hukou* and related social welfare distribution, which privileges urban *hukou* holders, remains intact. With the *hukou* system in place, rural migrants' 'low quality' (*di suzhi*) is clearly labelled, their transient and secondary status come to be legitimized, and the source of cheap, flexible labour is secured.

The influence of the *hukou* system in shaping Chinese people's socio-economic status is indeed profound. The fact that rural migrants work in the 'global factory' in the city and are transformed to wage-labourers through global capitalism cannot, in effect, change their peasant status – they are linked to 'low quality' and are seen as having 'a culturally distinct and alien "other", passive, helpless, unenlightened, in the grip of ugly and fundamentally useless customs, desperately in need of education and cultural reform...' by urban elites (Cohen, 1993: 155).

In addition to those policies that discriminate against both 'peasants' and 'peasant workers', the government often reinforces negative stereotypes of rural migrants through the way it creates and manipulates the use of collective identities such as 'floaters' (*liumin*), 'blind floaters' (*mangliu*) and 'peasant workers' (*nongmin gong*) in its policy making and propaganda, by which 'peasant workers' are depicted as a homogeneous mass, and a problematic 'other' with low quality (*di suzhi*) that needs to be 'fixed'.<sup>2</sup> The mass media merely reiterates the government's position with regard to rural migrants, and tends to create stereotypical representations of rural migrants as being ignorant, linking them to human trafficking, crime, violence and prostitution. Rural migrant women are often portrayed either as victims of crime or as offenders who should be disciplined and punished (Sun, 2004). They are said to be the least desirable in the urban marriage markets (Fan, 2003). Through these mediated representations, the images of 'peasant workers' as a problematic 'Other' become naturalized.<sup>3</sup> As such, they 'bear the brunt of urbanites' discrimination, frustration, and scapegoating' (Solinger, 1995: 130). Some scholars even consider the *hukou* system as a 'quasi-apartheid pass system' (Alexander and Chan, 2004).

Recent research on Chinese rural migrant women's identity and subjectivity has preferred to centre on the 'dagongmei' subject and the power of the state, institutions and media in shaping rural women migrants' identity (Au and Nan, 2007; Beynon, 2004; Fan, 2002; Gaetano, 2004; Jacka, 2006; Lee, 1998; Pun, 1999, 2005; Sun, 2004; Yan, 2008; Zhang, 2001; Zheng, 2009). Lee's study on rural migrant women working on the production lines in Shenzhen establishes an early picture of 'dagongmei', or in her words, 'maiden workers', as a contested identity for Chinese rural migrant women. She argues that while the factory management conceives maidens as docile, short-term, ignorant, but quiescent labourers, for rural migrant women, 'dagongmei' has a somewhat positive connotation – 'a relatively independent, modern, and romantic lifestyle in anticipation of marriage and adulthood' (Lee, 1998: 135, 136). Based on

<sup>2</sup> This is well reflected in the rhetoric deployed by the government in making its policies, regulations and campaigns, etc. relating to rural migrants, such as 'Several Suggestions for Solving Migrant Workers' Problem' promulgated by the State Council in 2006.

<sup>3</sup> Thobani made similar comments about 'bad' and 'good' Muslim women. Please see Thobani (2007: 217–247).

<sup>1</sup> For more discussion on suzhi, please see also Anagnost (2004) and Yan (2008).

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