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

PUN NGAI*

*Corresponding address: E-mail: sonpun@ust.hk.

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-