Subsumption or Consumption?
The Phantom of Consumer Revolution in “Globalizing” China

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The Subaltern Can Work and Consume

If subalterns cannot speak, they can still work and consume. Or to put it more accurately, they have no choice but to produce and consume as if they were driven to do so, as if production and consumption were the two necessary sides of their fate, as if these dual imperatives could guarantee their survival in the age of global capital. There are risks of attributing telos to capital as if, for subaltern subjects, the drive toward production and consumption was their destiny. Nevertheless, subalternity is never underestimated of its value nor is it seen as possessing no value. Its worth need not be transvaluated, because it lies exactly in its presence or willingness to keep silent and surrender its gains and prestige to those who consume its labor power (cf. Anagnost in press; Yan H. 2003). Its predication, with or without voice, multifaceted and transfiguring, highlights the intriguing relationship between production and consumption in the circuit of global capitalism. The subsumption of production allows consumption to appear as if it were a “democratic show”—a consumer “revolution” in which all could participate. By subsumption, I refer to the process whereby the extraction of the surplus value of labor is hidden and suppressed by the overvaluation of consumption and its neoliberal ideologies of self-transformation. The significance of production is displaced by consumption as representing the motive force in the drive to modernity. Developmentalism has been thereby colonized by consumerism in China as both the motive force and the measure of development. Thus the subaltern subject is not to be pitied but is to be instead dressed with a chimeric cloth, gorgeous enough to render her articulation as sweated labor invisible. In this article I contrast the experience of dagongmei (women migrant laborers from the countryside) with that of urban residents in the consumption showbiz that has emerged in China since the mid-1990s. The dagongmei, whose body is the site of both production and consumption in the circuit of global capital, offers a means through which to engage with the recent—yet already not-so-new—debates on global capital sans production.