The majority of the work-force in China’s special economic zones and in other newly industrialized districts are dagongmei (working girls), coming mainly from rural areas. This article focuses on these female peasant-workers and on a shift in their identities in light of China’s attempt to enter the capitalist world economy. As women, as peasants and as migrant workers, the ambiguous and overlapping identities of the dagongmei illustrate how the party-state, the capitalist market and China’s patriarchal culture work hand in hand to produce new relations of power and domination.

My central argument is that new social identities are created for these women, taking advantage of rural-urban disparities, and regional and gender inequalities. These distinctions are manipulated by enterprise managers and among the few relevant studies, Phillis Andors’ research on women workers in the Shenzhen economic zone in the mid-1980s points to the feminization of labour as China started to adopt export industrialization: women workers, mainly single and under 35, composed 70 per cent of the work-force in most of the light industries like textiles and electronics. See Phillis Andors, “Women and Work in Shenzhen”, Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars, vol.20, no.3 (1988), pp.22-41. Maria Tam records interesting stories of women workers in a joint-venture corporation in Shekou Industrial Zone in The Structuration of Chinese Modernization: Women Workers of Shekou Industrial Zone (PhD Dissertation, University of Hawaii, 1992). Lee Ching Kwan deploys Michael Burawoy’s theory of production politics in a comparative study of two factory regimes, one in Hong Kong and one in Shenzhen. Ching Kwan Lee, Gender and the South China Miracle: Two Worlds of Factory Women (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).