



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

Nana Zhang

Sociology, Social Policy, Criminology & Anthropology, University of Southampton, Southampton SO17 1BJ, United Kingdom



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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

E-mail address: Nana.Zhang@soton.ac.uk

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).¹ 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'.² 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.³ 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

² 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.

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

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

her study of female rural migrant workers in a factory in Shenzhen, Pun argues that although 'dagongmei' signifies 'an inferior working identity inscribed with capitalist labour relations and sexual relations', it is not necessarily a negative term for the young rural migrant women in her study; rather, the term provides new identities and new senses of the self that rural women can acquire once they work inside a global factory (Pun, 2005: 111). As a contested identity for rural migrant women, 'dagongmei' has also been undergoing various interpretations. Recent studies on rural migrant women for example, have extended its coverage to refer to rural migrant women in general (Beynon, 2004; Gaetano, 2004; Jacka, 2005; Sun, 2004; Yan, 2008; Zheng, 2009). Yan, on the other hand, argues that *dagongmei* are liminal subjects caught up 'between the city and the countryside, between disposable and necessary, between possibilities of absence and those of presence, and between disarticulation and articulation' (Yan, 2008: 248).

In *Gender Trouble*, Butler convincingly argues that gender identity is performatively constituted and is always a doing (Butler, 1990). The very process of rural migrant women's identity negotiation is key to our understanding of their everyday lived struggles and resistance as both women and migrants in the city. Whilst the afore-mentioned studies have challenged different aspects of rural migrant women's identity shaping and their lived experiences as migrant labour, to date, the situated, fluid nature of rural women's identity construction has not been sufficiently explored.

As a symbiosis of performed story and social relations, identity and experience are materially embedded: sex, class, race, ethnicity, sexuality, geography, religion, and so on (Langellier, 1999: 129). It is not an already accomplished fact, but a 'production' that is always in process and always constituted within representation (Hall, 1990). Despite facing multiple constraints in negotiating their identity, rural women migrants are by no means passive recipients in the process. Rather, they 'accept, resist, choose, specify, invent, redefine, reject, actively defend...' their identities (Cornell and Hartmann, 1998: 77). For migrant women, identity is not so much a static label but a threshold, a transition, which always produces itself through 'the combined processes of being and becoming' (Fortier, 2000: 2). Their agency lies in the very act of their identity construction and deconstruction, albeit the subversion itself is conditioned and constrained by discourse (Butler, 1990).

To understand more fully the reactions and resistance of rural women as new entrants of the global capitalist system in transforming China, it is necessary to consider rural migrant women's 'alternative interpretations' in their everyday lives and in their daily negation of the 'hegemonic definitions' of their identity in ever changing material circumstances during their migration process (Ong, 1991). This article presents such an attempt.

Description of research

The data used for this paper are drawn from a study of women in rural–urban migration in China, carried out between 2003 and 2005. A qualitative approach, which combines in-depth interviews, direct observations and participatory observations, is used to collect data. Sixty in-depth interviews with rural women migrants, their family members, fellow villagers and employers were conducted in four field sites: two popular destination cities with different social, economic and geographical characteristics—Beijing and Shantou, and two of the biggest rural migrant labour sending provinces—Henan and Hebei.

Shantou and Beijing offer very different employment opportunities to rural migrants. Established as one of the very first coastal cities in the SEZ (Special Economic Zone), Shantou hosts a significant number of labour-intensive factories and attracts a large volume of rural migrants, especially women migrants, from all over the country (Zhang, 2000: 2), whereas in Beijing, the capital city, rural

migrant women dominate the services sectors (Fafo, 2000). As for the selection of sending areas, Henan is the most populated province and has been 'China's no. 1 labour exporting province' for more than a decade, having 2.2 million of its agricultural labour force in migration by the end of 2009 (Liang, 2010). Hebei migrants, on the other hand, constitute greater proportion of rural migrants in Beijing than migrants from any other province (Fafo, 2000). Both provinces are representative source areas in rural outmigration.

Rural migrants rely heavily on their *guanxi* to obtain employment in the city. *Guanxi* could be understood as social ties of various strengths that are cultivated and maintained through the continued exchange of favours between different parties to achieve instrumental purposes in Chinese society (Bian and Ang, 1997; Lin, 2001; Yan, 1996a, 1996b; Yang, 2000). Channelled through *guanxi*, women migrants from the same sending area via the same *guanxi* network tend to cluster in the same work place. This is especially the case among rural migrant factory workers. Therefore in the SEZ, informants were first located within several factories. This enabled me to trace their journey back to their home villages and carry out further interviews with their family members and fellow villagers. Unlike in SEZ, most women migrants in Beijing hold jobs in the private service sectors which are difficult to locate. It was even more difficult to locate interviewees who come from the same village. The starting point of the fieldwork was therefore located in the sending area—a township in Hebei, which was recorded as having a high volume of rural women migrating to work in Beijing in the local government's birth control data. Interviews were first conducted in the villages with families who had migrants working in Beijing. Using the information gathered from these families, I then traced the migrants back to Beijing to carry out further interviews with women migrants.

Among the 60 informants, 33 were rural women migrants. 12 of the 33 informants came from the SEZ and 21 informants worked in Beijing. The remaining interviews were carried out with rural migrant women's parents, husbands, fellow villagers (from villages in Henan and Hebei) and employers (three from Shantou, two from Beijing). The youngest woman migrant in the sample was 16 years old, with the oldest being 56 years at the time of the interview. The duration of these women's migration experience ranged from one month to 14 years. Most informants from the SEZ were factory workers producing footwear, garments, hair ornaments, etc. mainly for the domestic market. Three factories also accepted outsourcing orders from bigger companies that targeted the international market. The sizes of the factories ranged from 1000 workers to fewer than 10. Most informants in Beijing came from sales and service, working as shop assistants, book keepers, nannies, street vendors or running small corner shops/shop counters.

Unlike conventional migration research, which is often narrowly circumscribed in time and space and tends to focus on either the sending or receiving area at one point in the migration chain, the present study researched both ends of the migration chain from both directions. In the fieldwork, I acted as a 'tracer', following the same cohort of migrants through their migrant journey from their home villages to the receiving city, and from the city back to their home villages. Data were collected throughout the whole migration circle, in order to capture the dynamic nature of rural women's migration.

In addition to researching women migrants, I also conducted in-depth interviews with women migrants' family and fellow villagers in the countryside, as well as their friends, co-workers and employers in the city, so as to map rural women migrants in relation to others. This approach enabled me to examine the migrant community that rural migrant women inhabited and the context that conditions the negotiation of women's identity, as well as to capture the fluidity of the negotiation, construction and performance of their very identity. This method was also vital in aiding data triangulation.



Map of China Available from http://d-maps.com/carte.php?num_car=17501&lang=en Assessed 01/03/14.



Map of China Available from http://d-maps.com/carte.php?num_car=11573&lang=en Assessed 01/03/14.

Despite the relatively small sample size, the study successfully captured the different patterns and characteristics of the female migrant population, both through the way in which informants were located and selected and the choice of sending and receiving areas to focus upon.⁴

Performing identities and searching for belonging – Chinese rural women in the internal migration circuit

Migration involves more than a shift in physical location (Mills, 1997). It influences all stages of the life course of rural women regardless of whether they are migrants, migrant returnees or non-migrants (Murphy, 2002). On the one hand, rural migrant women may experience a series of transformations when they change from being invisible labourers in rural households to being urban wage earners. Conversely, by taking on this ‘modernity project’, rural women also have to face new modes of control and power relations. Rural migrant women are far from being a homogenous group. Indeed, their transformations and struggles, which intersect with gender and class, amongst other factors, are shaped by every aspect of women’s identity negotiation, construction and performance. As was noted by a young migrant woman in this study, ‘[After all these years of migration⁵] there is one thing I understand most clearly: when your circumstances change, your views also change. My experience of migration forced me to change greatly.’⁶ In the following section I will explore the shifting identities negotiated and performed by rural migrant women at different stages in the migration circle, in order to illustrate the fluidity and plurality of their identity construction and performance.

Discarding peasant identity?

Based on her study of rural migrant women in Beijing, Gaetano (2008) concludes that upon migration, rural women reject rural identity and all that it signifies, preferring instead to embrace ‘a more sexualized, urban femininity’ through a discourse of ‘eating spring rice’ (*chi qingchunfan*)⁷ (Gaetano, 2008: 641–642). Whilst it is undeniable that the impact of their experience of the ‘modern, outside world’ upon rural migrant women is not only immediate but also profound, and that many rural women are at the forefront in performing such impacts and changes, it is worth pointing out that embracing an ‘urban lifestyle’ or having a desire to be modern does not necessarily mean that migrant women can easily discard their peasant identity or the low quality (*di suzhi*) that is linked to it. Their rural *hukou* registration, their temporary and secondary status in the urban labour market and their gender specific waged work, along with the disparity between rural and urban space, invariably differentiate migrant women from an ‘urban, modern identity’ that is connected to high quality (*gao suzhi*). Such alienation and other institutional barriers that rural migrant women have to face in the city force them to rely heavily on their family and kinship *guanxi* networks for support, which may further push women to reconcile themselves to peasant identity.

By interpreting migration as a ‘troubled process of subject formation’ particularly for rural young women, Yan concludes that

in the post-Maoist discourse of modernity, the countryside is produced as ‘a wasteland’ both materially and ideologically (Yan, 2008: 37). Yet subject formation is not only a troubled process for rural youth, but in fact, for all rural people. Despite the government’s effort to reduce the rural–urban disparity, the income gap between rural and urban areas continues to widen, and agricultural work is still considered to be ‘unprofitable, unattractive and even redundant economic activity’ by both rural and urban people (Croll and Huang, 1997: 129). Given that they endure a living standard that is far below that of the urban sector, are labelled as an underclass having low quality (*di suzhi*), and linked with feudal backwardness and the possession of a limited outlook, rural people do not readily accept such a peasant identity without complaint. Many, indeed, find ways to counter the negative discourses of peasant labels. One such strategy is to disassociate themselves from land and farming altogether. Many migrant women’s parents interviewed in this study took pride in the fact that their children never worked in the fields and had no knowledge of agricultural work. Rural migrant women also told me proudly that they did not have arable land at home, and that they were not involved in any work in the field, like ‘other’ peasants. Such a strong denunciation of farming and peasant label seems to occur well before rural women embark on their migration journey.

Once in the process of migration, rural women became active performers of ‘modernity’ from many points of view. Their fellow villagers can readily list the ‘big changes’ in women after their migration: ‘The way they talk is different from people in the village. They speak in a civilized way. They also eat and dress differently.’⁸ A villager in Hebei province also described in detail the fashionable pointy heels worn by migrant girls when they visited home: ‘The tips of the shoes are like screw drivers... Those migrant girls all have a pair of that kind of shoes and they all wear them when they come home.’ Through their ‘urbanized’ appearance and lifestyle, migrant women send out a clear message that they are different from their fellow villagers, and have renounced their relationship with land, agricultural work and peasantry. However, women’s performances of such changes are not always well received by their families or fellow villagers. Migrant women themselves are also sensitive in observing boundaries, which exactly reflects their careful preservation of aspects of peasant identity.

Twenty-three year old Ping migrated to work in Beijing in 1999 at the age of 19. In talking about her fashionable outfits, she admitted that she had to make compromises with her parents back in her home village. Even though her parents had loosened their control over her as Ping grew older and became more experienced in migration, Ping still carefully observed the boundary, making every effort to have a ‘proper’ appearance when visiting home:

Sometimes even my mum cannot accept the way I wear. I have a pair of European style shoes with very narrow tips. She said she would cut the tips of my shoes off if she saw me wearing them once more. ... If I was young, in my 18, 19, or 20, they would definitely not allow me to wear what I liked. They would forbid me to wear this or that. But now they don’t say anything about it as long I don’t wear something too fashionable.

Fully aware of their own changes, rural migrant women generally identify themselves as different from their fellow villagers. Some also try to distance themselves from their fellow villagers. Although Ping was not able to wear her fashionable heels in her home village, she was happy that unlike most of the girls of her age in her home village who had already got married and had children, she was still in migration. For Ping, they were from ‘disparate worlds’.

⁸ Villager from Hebei.

⁴ While most studies on Chinese rural migrant women can only reach migrant women from one profession, i.e. factory workers (Lee, 1998; Pun, 2005) and domestic workers (Yan, 2008), this study manages to reach and research migrant women from all walks of life, i.e. factory workers, domestic workers, sex workers, shop assistants, street vendors, entrepreneurs as well as those who are unemployed. Furthermore, I also managed to follow migrant women through the whole migration circle. It offers a most thorough insight into the lives of migrant women.

⁵ Words in brackets were added by the author.

⁶ Interview with 25-year-old Shan, who migrated from Henan in 1996.

⁷ A popular saying during the 1990s which implies young women live off their youth and youthful beauty. The ‘rice of the youth’ does not last forever, just as one’s youth fades.

I feel that those of my playmates who grew up with me... we are from totally different worlds. They cannot accept me, while I can't accept them, either. They don't like the way I dress, and they don't like my clothes and my shoes. I don't like what they wear. Their clothes are very old-fashioned and out of date. They look like village girls, but I wear very fashionable clothes. They gossip a lot about me behind my back after they meet me, talking about this and that. They feel I look strange (*kanbuguan*) and I feel they are very conservative and very feudal-minded (*fengjian*).

Such changes do not only happen among young, single women migrants. Married women migrants also experience the transformation and feel they can no longer fit into the 'old' circle of friends and fellow villagers in their home villages. They also identify themselves as different from their 'left-behind' fellow villagers. Fen had been selling eggs in a local market in Beijing for nearly ten years when I met her. Talking about her fellow villagers, she commented: 'They stay in the villages and talk about the things that happen in the village, about which I have no idea at all. We do not have anything in common to talk about, and I am not interested in that kind of talk anymore.' Fen also managed to stay away from her fellow villagers by making fewer visits to her home village.

Rural women may, in fact, be able to give up their peasant identity more readily than rural men as they are less attached to the villages due to their 'temporary' status in the family as daughters and their role of an 'outsider and stranger' as wives when they move into their husbands' villages upon marriage. However, it might be too soon to conclude that rural migrant women actually discard their peasant identity. Due to women's transient status as a rural migrants in the city, they have limited *guanxi* networks in the urban area. By drawing boundaries against their fellow villagers in the countryside, rural women migrants thus further confine their *guanxi* networks to only family members, relatives and a handful of home fellows. Paradoxically, this strengthens their village-based family and kinship networks. Deeply embedded in their village kinship networks⁹ throughout the migration circle, rural migrant women are required to strike a balance between their desire to be modern and non-rural and villagers' conventional moral codes for peasant women, even though urban waged work may provide them with the ability to resist to some extent the dominant patriarchal control over their lives.

Embracing urban modernity?

Just as they carefully preserve some aspects of peasant identity, rural migrant women do not 'embrace urban modernity' and pursue an urban identity blindly, either. Instead, they consciously evaluate different circumstances and make choices. Whether embracing urban modernity or not, migration opens up the arena for rural migrant women to contemplate and to perform the identities that are appropriate for them.

Rural migrant women, especially young women, may make an effort to look 'urban' by wearing fashionable clothes and using make-up, yet they are fully aware of the inequality between urban and rural areas and the superior status of the urban locals. In consequence, they generally identify themselves as different from urbanites, especially in terms of their *hukou* status, job security, pension and welfare and education. Rural migrant women might be able to achieve with ease a modern, urban look, yet to *feel* modern and urban is not easily achievable for many.

Zheng was among the very few informants who had managed to enter the urbanites' world in her migration – with the help of her

parents' network, she had secured a job as a bookkeeper in a local trade union office at the Beijing Railway Bureau at the age of 21, where she could sit in the office along with local Beijingers and enjoy a stable salary and fixed working hours. However, just before she turned 25 years old, she resigned and returned home to Hebei province. Working along with local Beijingers day in and day out for nearly four years did not draw her closer to Beijing; rather, it pushed her further away from the city. As Zheng recounted:

I am not saying that all of them (Beijing locals) are bad. I mean that everyone has his own living circle and his own friends and acquaintances. I don't fit into their circle at all. ... People are sophisticated in Beijing... That's their nature because they grow up in a different environment. The people from the countryside are different. They also quarrel with me sometimes but they will forget immediately... They will not make up something about me to report to the boss behind my back...

Zheng's narrative shows a rather complicated picture of the boundaries and connections she built up through contact with those that surrounded her. She identifies herself as different from local Beijingers – 'they' (Beijingers) grow up in a *different* environment and she does not fit in 'their' circle. She also draws a boundary between local Beijingers and people from the countryside – Beijingers are sophisticated, whereas rural people are *different*. However, although she finds connections with 'people from the countryside' and she values their innocence, she does not consider herself as one of 'them' – rural people are described as 'they' and there is a clear boundary between her and rural people in her narrative. For Zheng, leaving Beijing was no easy decision. Besides her feeling of alienation among the Beijing locals, the lack of a Beijing *hukou* status and work contract, the lack of *guanxi* networks and difficulties in finding a marriage partner were all listed as reasons that contributed to her return in her narratives.

The majority of the rural women migrants interviewed held similar attitudes towards urban locals and people from the villages. Rural migrant women's transiency and status as both an underclass and a stranger and outsider in the city alienate them from urban local residents. This alienation, nonetheless, pushes rural women to re-evaluate 'those villagers' they once wanted to be distant from. This engenders a sense of belonging to their home villages and a way of reconnecting to their fellow villagers from whom they once tried to disassociate themselves. However, this reconnection is not sufficient for rural migrant women to reposition themselves back among their fellow villagers due to the profound impact of their exposure to the urban world, at least not in a short period of time. Even for those women migrant returnees who do muck in with farm work eventually, the return to the home village is seen as a temporary interruption to their migration project, rather than a long term settlement. They manage to reconstruct an imagined identity as 'a migrant in the city' by differentiating themselves from their 'fellow peasants', reiterating memories about their life in the city and planning migration for the future.¹⁰

Would rural migrant women identify themselves with urban locals who have similar economic circumstances? Some migrant women in this study did express awareness of the growing poverty and inequality within urbanites. This awareness brought doubts to rural migrant women over the hegemonic discourse of the superior position of urbanites and the differentiation between rural migrants and urbanites.

Twenty-two-year-old Nan migrated from a village in Hebei to work in Beijing in 1998 when she was 17. Working as a shop assistant selling second hand mobile phones in a local market, she

¹⁰ Please see Zhang (2013) for a more detailed discussion on rural women migrant returnees in China.

⁹ For a more detailed discussion, please see Zhang (2006, 2011).

met people from all walks of life. Commenting on local Beijingers' extreme hesitation (*moji*) in making an offer and excessive bargaining when buying, Nan concluded that 'It might be because some of the Beijingers couldn't earn even several hundred Yuan a month, so... but there are also Beijingers who can make big money although most of them can only make small money... The local residents here in this area, some of them can only earn 4~500 Yuan a month.'

Having a higher and relatively more stable income, Nan felt that she was in a better economic position than some Beijingers, which gave her a sense of achievement and confidence. While she felt sympathetic towards poor Beijing locals, she did not identify herself with the Beijingers. Nan was fully aware that a range of institutional and social barriers such as *hukou* status and its related welfares, *guanxi* networks, amongst others, differentiate Nan and her fellow rural migrants from urban locals. This certainly limits the solidarity among the growing urban poor.

Becoming dagongmei?

'Dagongmei', as a contested identity for rural migrant women, has been undergoing various interpretations in recent years. However, contrary to the findings of the studies by researchers such as Gaetano (2008), Lee (1998) and Pun (2005), this study shows that 'dagongmei' is not in the vocabulary that rural migrant women would normally use to express their subjectivities. Neither does 'dagongmei' appear to offer a positive subject position that rural migrant women can relate to. None of the interviewed migrant women in this study referred to themselves as 'dagongmei'. In fact, 'dagongmei' never appeared in our conversations and even 'dagong' was seldom used by rural migrant women when talking about their own work. Rather, 'dagongmei' as a label differentiates rural migrant women from both urban locals and rural migrant men. The implied low quality (*di suzhi*) that is connected to this label put migrant women off making any links with 'dagongmei'. Instead, rural migrant women actively drew different boundaries to exclude some rural migrants or to differentiate themselves from other migrants, and in so doing, constructing a positive *Self* in contrast to the negative *Other*.

Little solidarity has been demonstrated by rural migrant women who work on the assembly line in this study. A range of factors such as gendered hierarchical structures in the management and production systems in different factories, strong presence of home fellow based *guanxi* networks and temporalities of the relations between rural migrant women workers as well as women's age, education, marital status and so on all work together to differentiate rural migrant women in the work place, which has a great impact on their identity negotiation and construction. For example, factory workers can be differentiated into various categories such as handyman/woman, temporary workers, probationary workers, general workers and skilled workers, with different working time, work intensity and wages. For those who can get into the managerial system, they can work as reserve cadres (*chugan*),¹¹ line leaders, monitors, head of workshop, department managers and so on. Indeed, as argued by Ong (1991), 'Rather than a homogeneous spread of Fordist production and "despotic" labour regimes, we find local milieu constituted by the unexpected conjunctures of labour relations and cultural systems, high-tech operations and indigenous values' (Ong, 1991: 280). However, rural migrant women are by no means passive in these complicated power relations. They are creative performers, taking on various strategies in resisting different forms of control. Nevertheless, their acts and performances at times work towards further differentiation among women.

Twenty-year-old Dong migrated with her sister from a village in Guangdong province to work in Shenzhen in 2001. Without any previous work experiences or skills, they were unable to find any work for weeks. In the end, they crafted a CV and lied on the CV that they met all the prerequisites such as IT skills listed in factory work advertisements and both were recruited by an electronics factory as 'reserve cadres'. However, Dong and her sister had very different job prospects later on – as Dong had a diploma from a vocational college, she was assigned to help with recording stock, while her sister was assigned to the assembly line. Working in the same factory as her sister, Dong saw her own work as different from her sister's – 'Mine (work) was actually much better. *Pu gong's* work (those who work at the assembly line) was the hardest. It really was.' Different types of work led to very different life passages for the two sisters. While Dong gained the opportunity to become a technical staff later on, her sister became a real dagongmei. 'She worked (dagong) in the factory for a few years and then changed to another factory and several others...and couldn't make much money and has now gone back home and got married.'

Young, single migrant women also found it hard to identify with women who were older, married and had children, even if they all worked on the same assembly line. Age and marital status are salient factors in undermining gender solidarity among rural migrant women. Twenty-two-year-old Xia migrated from Jiangxi to Shantou when she was only 15 years old. Working as a seamstress in a garment factory, she differentiated herself from most other workers in the factory, especially the temporary workers who worked as handywomen. Xia told me,

'You see those nannies (handywomen) outside? They are married and have a lot of children. They need money and they just want to work here temporarily. They are very lazy. They don't think about the future and they don't want to make any progress any more. I am so young. Of course I want to do something (make achievements).'

For Xia, age, marital status, having children, being lazy, having no plan for the future and money driven are linked directly to the hegemonic discourse of poor rural migrants with low quality, which she wished to dissociate from. Although working in the same factory together day in and day out, Xia did not realize that the handywomen she referred to also had to work 19 h a day, with meagre wages. They had to leave their children behind in the villages to take on the hardest work in the factory. Although their mind and body had been stretched to an extreme, they, too, had a solid future at plan – supporting their family. Having four sons' tuition to pay and parents-in-law to support, one 37-year-old handywoman told me, 'I am exhausted. I am too tired... It is too much for me. If not for my sons... My children need to go to school. They need money.'

Migrant women keep changing, constructing and reconstructing their identity boundaries in accordance with their migration experiences and different circumstances. Many do not have just one boundary; instead, they create several boundaries to exclude/include other migrants. Shu (26 years) migrated from a village in Hebei in 2000 because her father needed a helping hand for his rented counter in a local shop, where he sold construction workwear. Living in a migrant compound for more than four years, she could not identify with any of the rural migrant neighbours who were also working as shop assistants or bookkeepers in the neighbourhood. As she stated:

The migrant girls here have a very hard life. I can't bear it at all. They get up early and go to bed late and their pay is only 200 or 300 *yuan* a month. But they are very contented with the pay and they are very happy with it...

¹¹ Chunagan is a shortened term for Chubei ganbu in Chinese. It refers to enlisted personnel who, after training, will fill managerial roles. However, in reality, those who are recruited as 'chugan' work like handymen/women.

Shu clearly identified herself as different from young rural migrant girls with less migration experience because they looked rural, endured hardship, had poor wages and were easily contented with their life in the city. However, at the same time, Shu also drew up a clear boundary against those who had become 'too modern' when they had transgressed the patriarchal moral code set for women. Shu continued to relate:

There was once a girl who migrated from a village in Hebei and she also lived in this compound. She was very nice and moderate then. And she looked like a girl from the countryside. The clothes and the hair... She just worked like those girls here... She has changed a lot. Her hair has been dyed yellow and she also wears that kind of very short skirt. She sleeps with whoever has money... Those migrant girls don't care about anything at all, as long as they can get money! I try my best to stay away from them.

By trying to stay away from these two types of 'rural migrant girls', Shu is in fact attempting to refuse two dominant discourses pertaining to the identity of 'dagongmei' – one which depicts rural women as rustic, naïve but who could 'eat bitterness' (*chi ku*), working in harsh conditions; and the other which describes rural women migrants as the source of crime and immorality in the city. By setting boundaries against other rural migrants and by disassociating themselves from the dominant public discourses on 'dagongmei' identity, rural migrant women attempt to reject the identity labels pinned onto them, hence the low quality that is implied.

Furthermore, rural migrant women's transient status, diverse geographical origins and the temporalities of relations among rural migrant women workers also restrict them from identifying with each other, as related by one of the young women,

Although there were a lot of girls, they were not all from this part (of the country)... It was impossible to make real friends with them. They might be your friends when you lived and worked in the same yard but they might not recognize you once you stepped out of the gate. That is the reality... Besides we haven't met one another for a long time, there is no emotional links between us even if we meet.

Apathy and lack of trust towards fellow women migrant workers no doubt undermines the solidarity among rural migrant women, which reinforces women's sense of transiency and rootlessness in the city.

Self-employed women migrants who worked as street vendors or rented counters in local stores or markets differentiated themselves from other waged rural migrants, often with an emphasis on their freedom and profit, although most of them have to work as long and hard as other waged rural migrants. Twenty-four-year-old Jia migrated to Beijing from a village in Hebei. Renting a counter selling hardware with her husband in a department store, she was tied to the shop counter all day long. However, she was content with her life as compared to other migrant workers. As she emphasized, 'It is our own business and the time is ours... Those migrant workers definitely have no free time.'

Few rural migrant women identify themselves with rural migrant men. For rural migrant women, the 'peasant worker' identity, while appearing gender neutral, is used to refer to male rather than female rural migrants. Forty-eight-year-old Ning migrated to Beijing from a village in Hebei in 2001. Through the help of her son-in-law's uncle, who was a contractor of a building project in Beijing, she ran a canteen for rural migrant workers on the construction site. When I asked her in the interview whether she had ever had a chat with the rural construction workers she had been working with, she almost jumped up from her chair with disbelief that I had asked such a question and exploded in an outcry,

Those people! Who were they?! They were all peasant workers. How could I have something to talk to them about! They were all strangers and spoke in very, very strong dialects, and it was impossible to talk to them at all.

Despite the fact that Ning was a rural migrant and she had been working on the construction site along with other rural construction workers, she clearly refused to retain a peasant worker identity. In our interview, Ning continued to draw lines between herself and the rural construction workers on the same building site, and kept referring to them as 'those peasant workers', 'those labourers' and 'those strangers'. The boundaries were drawn on the basis of geographical origin (her home village was near Beijing), dialect (her dialect was closer to Mandarin), *guanxi* networks (her son-in-law's uncle was one of the contractors) as well as types of work (other workers did hard, manual work while her work, although equally hard, fell into the service sector). These boundaries invariably point to the implied low quality (*di suzhi*) that is connected to rural migrants and low value that is associated with them.

In emphasizing their differences in having more free time, more income, a more stable job, higher moral standard and less hardship compared to 'those peasant workers', rural migrant women try to construct and perform a different kind of self in the urban world. In so doing, they attempt to disassociate themselves with the hegemonic discourse on rural migrants and rural migrant women, and the low value associated with these labels. Conversely, such differentiation further reinforces their secondary status in the city. Their identity construction does not challenge the traditional patriarchal moral code set for women. Differentiating 'self' from other rural migrant women also undermines the solidarity among women migrant workers.

In search of a sense of belonging?

Writing about women workers in Asia, Ong (1991) convincingly argues that the remaking of working women's identities is closely linked to their awareness of how their status as daughter/woman is linked to the domination by family, industry, and society and they are capable of constructing a sense of selfhood and belonging while manipulating, contesting, or rejecting different claims (Ong, 1991).

Waged work transforms rural women from an invisible labourer in the household to a visible cash earner in the city, enables them to be financially independent from their families, and gives women an opportunity to recognize their own value and ability and gain confidence in themselves. This may serve to assist rural women in increasing their bargaining position within the household. Working in the cities, rural migrant women are believed to have more experience and more information about the cities and the labour market, and their opinions are valued more by their family members, which allows them to have greater involvement in decision-making on various matters in the family. Nan had been working as a shop assistant in Beijing since 1998. Reflecting on her achievements in migration, she observed:

It may be because I have been in migration for such a long time – I now feel I am more mature than before in every aspect. In my family, when my parents have some problems, they all turn to me and ask for my opinion.

However, the new 'Self' women construct also has a clear gender imprint – it is closely linked to their being a better performer of the gender stereotypes of a devoted mother, a dutiful wife and a filial daughter. Xia's account of the happiest moment in her migration as a garment factory worker in Shantou represents every woman in this study:

Especially when I see my parents buying something with the money I earned and when I buy something for them with my own money, I feel really good. I have a sense of achievement. And I feel like I earned a lot of face (*hen you mianzi*).

Rural migrant women's sense of selfhood and achievement is always accompanied by an equally strong sense of temporariness. In her research on women factory workers, Pun concludes that 'Transience is the dominant characteristic of the lives of Chinese *dagongmei*. . . . This transient working life is not the choice of the women migrant workers, but rather, is a consequence of the legacy of socialist control and the residue of the Chinese patriarchal family' (Pun, 2005: 5). Further to Pun's conclusion, I would argue that transience not only characterizes the lives of Chinese *dagongmei*, but those of all rural migrant workers in China, and this transience was felt and clearly articulated by rural women migrants themselves regardless of their age, marital status or migration experience. Many rural women share the feeling of being a stranger in the city, rootless, isolated and inferior. Their departure from the peasant identity does not erase their rural origin, just as their attempt to embrace modernity does not grant them legitimate urban membership. This feeling was well illustrated by Fen, who migrated from a village in Hebei and had been selling eggs in a local food market in Beijing for nearly ten years:

When we are here, we always feel that what we are doing now is only temporary. We just work for today and we are not sure what is going to happen tomorrow. It is hard to say, isn't it? What if we cannot stay here any longer in the future? We still have to go back home. We live by day.

Fen's expression of 'live by the day' appeared repeatedly in rural women migrants' accounts of their life in the city in this study, especially when they talked about their plans for the future, which resonate with the transitory feeling of young migrant women in Beynon's (2004) study. However, women deal with such transience in various ways. While some women may endure more hardship during migration so as to maximize the migration return, some women, especially young, single women many translate their feeling of transience into increased consumption,¹² as related by twenty-two-year-old Nan who worked as a shop assistant in Beijing,

We don't know what we are going to do yet. Sometimes. . . I just want to live for this very day. I spend all the money I have today and I will let tomorrow take care of it itself. I do it this way. Sometimes I feel life is not interesting at all. It is boring (*meijin*), indeed very boring (*zhenmeijin*).

Rural women's 'temporary status', both as a rural migrant and a woman, and their sense of 'rootlessness' further strengthen women's sense of belonging and connection to 'home' – the home in the village. Although many women cannot afford frequent visits to their home villages, many maintain close ties to their home through performing filial piety and gendered moral codes – telephone calls, letters and messages, let alone remittances. When they do make a visit to their home in the village, the flow of money, gifts and information is inevitable. The flow is not in one direction only. Many women are also reported to have taken things such as food-stuff, seeds and flowers from home to the cities, as well as to channel new migrants to the city from their home villages. Through these flows and exchanges, their sense of belonging to their homeland is thus renewed. Yet such renewed belonging does not necessarily result in return migration for women. Despite the uncertainties they experience in the city, Nan, like many other women in this study, was still determined to continue to stay in

Beijing. As she stated: 'I like to stay here (Beijing) and don't want to go home. My mum said, "Our place (home village) is a treasure land!" I said, "What a damned place it is!"'

Conclusion

Migration offers rural women both challenges and new spaces in negotiating their identity and sense of belonging. It may be seen as a gendered process, an on-going project through which rural women's identities are remade, maintained, transformed and sometimes rejected. Based on a qualitative study of rural migrant women in both sending and receiving areas in China, this paper has sought to demonstrate the fluidity of rural migrant women's identity and the complexity of their construction process, which has not been sufficiently addressed thus far in available research literature.

As individuals who encounter global capital, Chinese rural women migrants, like their counterparts in other parts of Asia and South America, are active producers and performers of their identities. However, their identity production is not without its restrictions. Rather, it is shaped by 'the intersection of state agencies, the local workings of capital, and already configured local power/culture realms' (Ong, 1991: 305). Rural migrant women's identity negotiation is directly influenced by the hegemonic discourse on '*suzhi*' (quality), which devalues rural migrant women's labour, and '*hukou*', which labels and differentiates rural (*di suzhi*, low quality) and urban (*gao suzhi*, high quality) and legitimizes the devaluation.

To distance from the low quality and hence the low value that is connected to peasant identity, rural migrant women attempt to depart from their 'peasant' identity. Many rural women, especially young women, disassociate themselves from agricultural work even before they migrate to the city. Once in migration, rural migrant women identify themselves as being different from their fellow villagers. However, their desire to leave behind their peasant identity does not automatically grant women membership of urban space. A range of institutional barriers, as well as their lesser status in the city, force women to rely on their family and kinship networks in the city, which paradoxically strengthen their link to their homeland, and to their 'peasant' identity.

In contrast to Lee (1995) and Pun's (2005) conclusion that '*dagongmei*' provides rural migrant women with a new, positive identity, this study shows that for rural migrant women, the identity of '*dagongmei*', like '*nongmingong*', represents a specific modality of the wretched victims of China's urbanization and a lower class in the city, characterized by insecurity. More importantly, it implies low quality hence low value of rural migrant women's labour. It is an identity label that rural migrant women reject. There can be many potential boundaries that women draw against other migrants, such as gender, age, marital status, types of work they do, their geographical origin, the dialect they speak and their *guanxi* networks in the city. In doing so, they attempt to live outside the identity of '*dagongmei*' as defined by dominant discourses, to negotiate and perform a series of alternative identities in different contexts, and to create different meanings of 'Self' and 'Other' in their gendered migration process. However, such attempts undermine the solidarity among migrant women, even when they work on the same assembly line. Paradoxically, it also confirms and reinforces the differentiation between rural and urban and the low value that is assigned to rural women migrants' labour which are legitimized by the state through different institutions that label and maintain these divides and differentiation (*i.e. hukou*).

Women migrants are fully aware of their status as transient and as an underclass in the city. Their efforts to negotiate new identities do not necessarily make women feel that they belong to the

¹² See Yu and Pun (2008).

city. Few women identify themselves with urban locals. Many migrant women, indeed, share the feeling of being transient in the city, rootless, isolated and inferior. Such alienating feelings reinforce women's attachment to their home villages. Through the flow and exchange of remittances, gifts and information, rural women's sense of belonging to their home in the countryside thus comes to be renewed, and their ties with the home are strengthened.

Rural migrant women keep constructing/reconstructing their gendered identities and drawing boundaries in accordance with their migration experiences throughout their migration project. The boundaries they draw are, however, not static, but are fluid and ever changing in different circumstances and contexts. Many women do not have just one boundary, but create several boundaries to exclude or include others, creating different layers of 'Self' and 'Other'. However, the processes of their identity negotiation are inevitably constrained because of their gender. In negotiating their identities, rural migrant women continue to uphold the patriarchal moral code set for women. These identities and boundaries have a clear gender imprint – they are always linked to women's role as a devoted mother, a dutiful wife and a filial daughter.

Rural women's everyday struggle as women peasant workers in contemporary China is reflected in this seemingly contradictory, negotiated passage of identity and belonging, characterized by fluidity – a dynamic, a 'reception place for differences at play' (Preis, 1997: 98). It is through this process of denouncing, recognizing and drawing on the boundaries of Self and Other that rural migrant women start to redefine the meaning of being a rural migrant woman. The processes of the construction and deconstruction of identities form the very scenes of agency. Although the process is conditioned by structural forces, they cannot determine it (Tiano, 1994: 212). Rather, the process is itself a significant force. As argued by Cornell and Hartmann, although identities are shaped by circumstances, they are also capable of reorganizing actions in ways that can transform the circumstances (Cornell and Hartmann, 1998).

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