
Hannah Schling

Gender, Temporality, and the Reproduction of Labour Power

Women Migrant Workers in South China

“Value efficiency every minute, every second [重视效率分分秒秒].”
– poster at Foxconn’s Shenzhen campus¹

In its factories across China, electronics manufacturer Foxconn deploys a production timetable calculated in seconds. Repetitive tasks representing minute segments of the production process demand the strict regulation of workers’ bodily movements on the shop floor. One female assembly line worker at the Shenzhen Longhua plant described this minute regulation: “I take a motherboard from the line, scan the logo, put it in an antistatic electricity bag, stick on a label, and place it on the line. Each of these tasks takes two seconds. Every ten seconds I finish five tasks.”

Temporality is central to the experience of exploitation. Within the workplace, capital’s control over the temporality of production is a fundamental means of disciplining labour and extracting maximum surplus value. However, the disciplinary regulation of temporality by capital and the state is necessary off the shop floor as much as on it, within the sphere of ‘reproduction’ no less than in that of ‘production’.

To understand the exploitation of a workforce as ‘low-cost’ and ‘disciplinable’, we have to examine the characterisation of work as temporary, and of the labourer as disposable. This disciplinary deploy-

¹ Pun Ngai / Jenny Chan, *Global Capital, the State, and Chinese Workers: the Foxconn Experience*, *Modern China*, 38 (2012), 4, p. 401.

ment of temporality by capital is underpinned by the social and gendered organisation of labour power reproduction beyond the immediate site of the factory complex. In particular, gendered divisions of unwaged reproductive labour – i. e. women workers’ ‘double burden’ – are central to the regulation of the larger timetable of migrant women’s waged labour.

Feminist scholars have problematised the reduction of labour power reproduction to wage-based consumption and revealed hidden domestic and caring labour,² undertaken primarily by women, as a fundamental source of both daily and generational labour power reproduction. Women’s unwaged domestic and reproductive labour is concealed as an “extra-market mechanism”³ that capital and the state rely on to lower the costs of labour by displacing the costs of labour’s reproduction onto the ‘private’ sphere and extracting surplus value from the unwaged work undertaken by women.⁴ Feminist scholars have shown how the gendering of this labour as ‘women’s work’ naturalises and privatises it, entailing its analytical separation from the sphere of ‘production’.⁵

In this paper, a focus on social reproduction is used to investigate the gendered and temporal dynamics at play within the formation of an exploitable migrant labour force. ‘Reproduction’ is problematised as gendered work, and gendered divisions of this labour

² Diane Elson, *Male Bias in Macro-Economics: The Case of Structural Adjustment*, in: id. (ed.), *Male Bias in the Development Process*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1991; Silvia Federici, *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction, and Feminist Struggle*, Oakland: PM Press, 2012; Kathi Weeks, *The Problem With Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics, and Postwork Imaginaries*, London: Duke University Press, 2011.

³ Bob Jessop, *The Future of the Capitalist State*, London: Polity, 2002.

⁴ Mariarosa Dalla Costa / Selma James, *The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community*, Bristol: Falling Wall Press, 1973; Jim Glassman, *Primitive Accumulation, Accumulation by Dispossession, Accumulation by ‘Extra-Economic’ Means*, *Progress in Human Geography*, 30 (2006), 5; Elson *Male Bias* (as cited in footnote 2); Federici, *Revolution* (as cited in footnote 2).

⁵ Dalla Costa / James, *Power* (as cited in footnote 4); Federici, *Revolution* (as cited in footnote 2); Weeks, *Problem* (as cited in footnote 2).

are centred in analysis to reveal labour's 'disposability' as a gendered subject position. In this analysis, binary definitions of 'production' and 'reproduction' as 'separate spheres' are deconstructed. Emphasis is placed on how 'production' and 'reproduction' interrelate to facilitate exploitation and produce labouring subjects useful to capital. For women migrant workers, the organisation of their 'double burden' across the 'spatial separation' of urban production and rural reproduction⁶ instituted by the state's *hukou* system established them as 'doubly temporary' waged workers. This accorded with capital's demand for a youthful, disposable workforce. Gendered relations of reproduction, operating beyond the workplace, have been central to the creation of an exploitable labour force, and thus to capital accumulation.

These intersections of gender, spatiality and temporality are examined at two scales: that of 'daily' reproduction within the factory-dormitory system and that of 'generational' reproduction within the migrant household. The focus is, more specifically, on women migrant workers manufacturing electronics for export in South China's Pearl River Delta (PRD) between 1995 and 2005. I seek to understand the emergence of a temporary, feminised migrant workforce in the Pearl River Delta as a historically contingent development grounded within the dominant gendered social relations of the period.

This article draws on contemporary research into Foxconn to examine 'daily' reproduction within the dormitory labour regime.⁷ However, gendered gaps in the available primary sources mean that in examining 'generational' reproduction, the focus is on the older generation of women working in the PRD between 1995 and 2005, rather than on women working there today. The intention of this article is to raise questions and highlight avenues for future research

⁶ Pun Ngai / Jenny Chan, *The Spatial Politics of Labor in China: Life, Labor, and a New Generation of Migrant Workers*, *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, 112 (2013), 1, p. 181.

⁷ SACOM, *Workers as Machines: Military Management in Foxconn*, Hong Kong: SACOM, 2010; SACOM, *i-Slave Behind the iPhone*, Hong Kong: SACOM, 2011.

into the new generation of migrant workers whilst demonstrating the importance of a materialist feminist analysis to such research. What forms of social reproduction have emerged from the new generation's aspirations towards permanent urban residence? How is this gendered? And how does it relate to both exploitation within waged work and the forms of resistance adopted by migrant workers?

The migrant labour system in the Pearl River Delta

In the PRD, the spatial and gendered organisation of social reproduction produces a migrant labour force meeting the temporal demands of the just-in-time production model deployed in export-producing factories. For China's migrant workers, a "spatial separation" between urban production and rural reproduction,⁸ instituted by the state's household registration system (*hukou*), facilitates the organisation of both daily and generational labour power reproduction to capital's advantage.

Categorising persons as 'rural' or 'urban,' with children inheriting the 'rural' or 'urban' status of their parents, the *hukou* has provided local governments with the means to exclude migrant workers from state-subsidised reproduction at their urban destinations, including healthcare, education, housing and social welfare, whilst simultaneously depending on their labour for urban accumulation.⁹ By denying labour migrants access to state-funded reproduction and permanent urban citizenship, the *hukou* renders them 'permanently temporary' inhabitants of the cities in which they work, and reproduces them generationally as migrant.¹⁰ The employment

⁸ Pun / Chan, *Spatial Politics* (as cited in note 6), p. 181.

⁹ Li Zhang, *Marginalisation of Rural Migrants in China's Transitional Cities*, in: Tai-Chee Wong / Jonathan Rigg (eds.), *Asian Cities, Migrant Labour and Contested Spaces*, London: Routledge, 2011.

¹⁰ Pun Ngai / Chris King-Chi Chan / Jenny Chan, *The Role of the State, Labour Policy and Migrant Workers' Struggles in Globalized China*, *Global Labour Journal*, 1 (2010), p. 1.

of migrants as ‘disposable’ labour within informalised, temporary work is predicated upon their existence as liminal urban subjects caught within a spatial bifurcation between urban production and rural reproduction. A form of internal border, the *hukou* echoes Mezzadra and Neilson’s (2008) analysis of borders not only as “devices of exclusion” but also as “technologies of differential inclusion.”

Foxconn operates within a highly competitive market of electronics manufacturers bidding for production contracts on the basis of cost and speed of delivery.¹¹ Despite Foxconn’s position as the world’s largest contract manufacturer of electronics,¹² capturing nearly 50 percent of global electronics manufacturing services revenue in 2010,¹³ the company’s profit margins have fallen dramatically over the past decade.¹⁴ Foxconn is in the least profitable segment of the supply chain,¹⁵ whilst competition over contracts from global brands is intense. Foxconn’s business strategy is consequently predicated upon low costs and short delivery times.¹⁶ In September 2010, Foxconn’s Longhua factory in Shenzhen was producing 137,000 iPhones every 24 hours.¹⁷

This translates into a need for low wages, maximised labour productivity and an exhausting pace of work. Production for rush or-

¹¹ Pun Ngai / Jenny Chan, Suicide as Protest for the New Generation of Chinese Migrant Workers: Foxconn, Global Capital, and the State, in: *The Asia-Pacific Journal*, 13 September 2010, [<http://japanfocus.org/-jenny-chan/3408>].

¹² Pun / Chan, *Global Capital* (as cited in note 1).

¹³ Thomas Dinges, Foxconn Rides Partnership with Apple to Take 50 Percent of EMS Market in 2011, *iSuppli*, 27 July 2010, [<http://www.isuppli.com/Teardowns-Manufacturing-and-Pricing/News/Pages/Foxconn-Rides-Partnership-with-Apple-to-Take-50-Percent-of-EMS-Market-in-2011.aspx>].

¹⁴ When Workers Dream of a Life Beyond the Factory Gates, *The Economist*, 15 December 2012, [<http://www.economist.com/news/business/21568384-can-foxconn-worlds-largest-contract-manufacturer-keep-growing-and-improve-its-margins-now>]

¹⁵ David Barboza, Supply Chain for iPhone Highlights Costs in China, *New York Times*, 5 July 2010, [www.nytimes.com/2010/07/06/technology/06iphone.html].

¹⁶ Pun / Chan, *Global Capital* (as cited in note 1), p. 387.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, p. 400.

ders demands a 'flexible' workforce.¹⁸ This has contributed to high levels of labour turnover,¹⁹ creating a system whereby capital accumulation is based on maximised exploitation of workers for a limited period of time.

Age and gender are routinely stipulated as conditions of entry to the labour force, and the PRD's electronics industry has historically been highly feminised – with young, single migrant women the subjectivity of choice for capital.²⁰ The emergence of the *dagongmei*²¹ labouring subjectivity signals capital's utilisation of age and gender to structure a low-cost and disciplinable workforce. The gendered, social and politico-economic organisation of labour power reproduction has facilitated this use of age and gender as features structuring the labour force.

Temporality and the daily reproduction of labour power

As a result of their being denied permanent urban residence, labour migrants have historically had highly circular migration patterns. Factory dormitories have emerged as a major mode of accommodation, one that lowers the costs of daily labour power reproduction for capital but also facilitates capital's control over the temporality of labour.

The dormitory system is a spatial mechanism by which capital absorbs the daily reproduction of labour power into itself, so as to

¹⁸ Pun / Chan, *Suicide* (as cited in note 11).

¹⁹ SACOM, *Workers*; SACOM, *i-Slave* (both as cited in note 7).

²⁰ Pun Ngai, *Made in China: Women Factory Workers in a Global Workplace*, London: Duke University Press, 2005; Ching Kwan Lee, *Gender and the South China Miracle: Two Worlds of Factory Women*, London: University of California Press, 1998.

²¹ *Dagongmei* translates literally as 'working girl', denoting migrant workers as gendered and aged. Pun, *Made in China* (as cited in note 20), pp. 12, 110, defines 'dagong' as 'selling one's labour to a boss', and denoting working for the new capitalist bosses of China's reform period.

gain fuller control over the temporality of the labour process.²² Daily reproduction is directly organised as a disciplinary mechanism oriented towards extension of the working day and regulation of ‘flexible’ working patterns to meet the short delivery times demanded by buyers. ‘Just-in-time’ production has its counterpart in the ‘just-in-time’ reproduction of the dormitory system.

Utilising ‘continuous shift’ production, Foxconn operates a 24-hour working day.²³ Disciplinary bodily control on the shop floor has its counterpart in the dormitories’ control of the body clock off the shop floor. This reflects Pun’s observation that in the Shenzhen electronics factory she researched, “the biological clock was completely socialised and reset to industrial time.”²⁴ SACOM report the use of curfews and ‘lights out’ at Foxconn dormitories in Hangzhou, amounting to a direct attempt to regulate sleep patterns, presumably enforced by the 24-hour security at dormitory gates.²⁵ The necessity for capital of such micro-management of workers’ lives is revealed by one Hangzhou worker’s complaint that “day and night shifts are sometimes changed two to three times a month. The change of shift is unbearable. It is difficult to adjust our body clock.”

By controlling workers’ daily reproduction, the time of ‘life’ is regulated and streamlined to meet the timetable of production.²⁶ For example, Foxconn employees in Shenzhen reported that the Trade Union had been engaged to do workers’ laundry, with many viewing this as a means to “divert their energy from miscellaneous daily

²² Pun Ngai / Chris Smith, *The Dormitory Labour Regime in China as a Site for Control and Resistance*, *International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 17 (2006), p. 8; Pun Ngai / Chris Smith, *Putting Transnational Labour Process in its Place: the Dormitory Labour Regime in Post-Socialist China*, *Work, Employment & Society*, 21 (2007), p. 1.

²³ SACOM, *i-Slave* (as cited in note 7); Pun / Chan, *Global Capital* (as cited in note 1).

²⁴ Pun, *Made in China* (as cited in note 20), p. 96.

²⁵ SACOM, *Workers* (as cited in note 7), p. 18.

²⁶ Weeks, *Problem* (as cited in note 2); Pun / Smith, *Transnational Labour Process* (as cited in note 22); Pun, *Made in China* (as cited in note 20), p. 246.

tasks [...] so that they can work more.”²⁷ With this near-total subsumption of ‘life’ under ‘work’, ‘life’ time is transformed more completely into the time of reproduction of workers’ labour for capital.

Dormitories typically do not cater to labour power reproduction beyond the immediate, daily needs of an individual worker. They do not provide accommodation for couples and do not accommodate women with immediate care responsibilities: their labour does not meet the temporal requirements of the production regime. Recruitment practices at Foxconn Longhua and Kunshan campuses exclude workers over 30. Whilst Longhua hires male and female workers, Kunshan hires female workers only.²⁸ Dormitories do not cater to women with immediate childcare responsibilities because they are designed to grant capital 24-hour access to labour-time.

The dormitory system does not aim at the reproduction of a long-term and stable workforce. Rather, as Pun and Smith note, the dormitory labour regime functions towards “the continual reproduction of a young, transient working class.”²⁹ By providing a form of daily labour power reproduction that is undesirable for workers in the long-term, dormitories facilitate characterisation of the labourer as temporary and migrant. In this sense, the dormitory labour regime seeks to disrupt the longer-term emergence of workers’ collective power.

Temporality and the generational reproduction of labour power

It is clear that the *hukou* system’s maintenance of the rural as the space of generational labour-power reproduction lowers the cost of labour for capital and the state. This must be understood in gendered terms, as it transfers the burden of generational labour power reproduction to women’s unwaged domestic and care labour. This

²⁷ SACOM, *Workers* (as cited in note 7), p. 19.

²⁸ China Labour Watch, *Tragedies of Globalization: The Truth Behind Electronics Sweatshops*, New York: China Labour Watch, 2012, pp. 76, 70.

²⁹ Pun / Smith, *Transnational Labour Process* (as cited in note 22), p. 33.

care labour needs to be made visible as facilitating migrants' treatment as temporary at urban destinations, and analysed as part of the formation of capitalist social relations in China. Essentially, the unwaged work of 'left-behind' and 'returned' women is required within this vast 'semi-proletarianisation' of rural-to-urban migrant workers.³⁰

This organisation of migrant workers' social reproduction is also productive for capital in another sense: as a temporal mode of disciplining women as waged workers. Migrant women's 'double burden', organised across the spatial separation of urban production and rural reproduction, has constructed them as 'doubly temporary' waged workers, legitimising and normalising their 'disposability' as waged workers.

Split households that adapt to the *hukou* system's sidelining of migrants in the city (particularly in terms of the public provision of childcare and children's education) and seek to gain advantages from inhabiting both the rural and the urban spheres have been very common amongst migrant workers.³¹ A 2007 All China Women's Federation report based on the 2005 census estimated that, of the 58 million 'left-behind' children in rural China, 47 percent lived with one parent, typically the mother, whilst 26 percent lived with grandparents.³² This shows that almost half the 'left-behind children' continued to be cared for by their mothers.³³ The 1995 Sichuan and Anhui survey found that in 69.4 percent of surveyed migrant households, a spouse stayed behind to care for children; how-

³⁰ Pun Ngai / Lu Huilin, *Unfinished Proletarianisation: Self, Anger, and Class Action among the Second Generation of Peasant-Workers in Present-Day China*, *Modern China*, 36 (2010), p. 5.

³¹ C. Cindy Fan, *Flexible Work, Flexible Household: Labour Migration and Rural Families in China*, in: Lisa Keister (ed.), *Work and Organizations in China after Thirty Years of Transition*, Durham: Emerald Books, 2009.

³² Aris Chan / Geoffrey Crothall, *Paying the Price for Economic Development: The Children of Migrant Workers in China*, *China Labour Bulletin*, 2009, pp. 7–8.

³³ More research is required to determine how many of these women migrated before and after undertaking childcare in rural households.

ever, only in 5 percent of split households was it the husband who stayed behind.³⁴

With the rural maintained as the base for generational labour power reproduction, the gendered division of this caring labour has been a central factor determining migrant women's mobility and the temporality of their participation in urban waged labour.³⁵ Female migrants experienced particularly circular migration patterns that intersected with major moments of transition in their lives: particularly marriage, childcare and eldercare. Rural demand for women's unwaged reproductive and caring labour recalled women migrants from the city, and marriage often signalled the end of labour migration. Returned women surveyed in four counties in Anhui and Sichuan provinces in 2000 found that 33.8 percent (the largest segment) stated "family need" as the reason for their return to the rural hometown.³⁶ Of this group of returnees, only 38 percent migrated out again.³⁷ This is a fundamental factor explaining the predomi-

³⁴ C. Cindy Fan, *China on the Move: Migration, the State, and the Household*, London: Routledge, 2008, p. 89. The survey was conducted by the Ministry of Agriculture during the Spring Festival, when many migrants returned to their rural homes, and comprises a questionnaire survey of 2,820 households and in-depth interviews with 191 migrants in 300 households. Sichuan and Anhui are both large migrant-sending provinces.

³⁵ C. Cindy Fan, *Rural-Urban Migration and Gender Division of Labour in Transitional China*, *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 27.1 (March 2003); Fan, *Flexible Work* (as cited in note 31); Rachel Murphy, *The Impact of Labour Migration on the Well-Being and Agency of Rural Chinese Women: Cultural and Economic Contexts and the Life Course*, in: Arianne M. Gaetano / Tamara Jacka (eds.), *On The Move: Women in Rural-to-Urban Migration in Contemporary China*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2004; Binbin Lou / Zhenzhen Zheng / Rachel Connelly / Kenneth Roberts, *The Migration Experiences of Young Women from Four Counties in Sichuan and Anhui*, in: Gaetano / Jacka, *On the Move* (as cited in this footnote).

³⁶ Lou et al., *Migration Experiences* (as cited in footnote 35), pp. 228, 232.

³⁷ Whilst Lou et al. (*Migration Experiences*, as cited in footnote 35) note that Sichuan women tended to migrate to Guangdong factories, this survey includes migrant women working outside of the PRD's factories. However, the gendered pressures stemming from rural households were likely the same for both sets of women. The survey's significance here is in demonstrating that pressure, not the return rate

nance of young, single migrants in export-oriented electronics manufacturing; they were pulled into the labour-capital relation at a particular point in their lives, prior to their adoption of a 'double burden'.

Interview data from the Lou et al. (2004) survey reflects this. One 34-year-old married woman from Anhui explained: "I came back this year to start my own business in cloth making. In fact, I can earn more money working in a factory, but my family needs me. My husband works in the village in construction. I have to cook for him and take care of my child who is in primary school."³⁸

Another 34-year-old married woman from Sichuan highlighted the gendered norms of 'inside' and 'outside' labour: "My husband thought that if he stayed home and I worked outside to make money, he would lose face. The fellow villagers would laugh at him. He said that's a man's responsibility. I came back, and now he is working in Guangdong. [...] The major reason I agreed to come back was our child. The school fees are too high in the city; it is impossible to earn enough money to pay them. I stay home and take care of our child."³⁹

Similar narratives are cited in Murphy⁴⁰, and in Fan.⁴¹

A number of surveys and analysis of census data demonstrate that the migrant women under examination here were younger, and a higher proportion single, than their male counterparts. The 1995 Sichuan and Anhui survey, cited above, found that 22.6 percent of female migrants and 78.1 percent of male migrants were married; 75.9 percent of female migrants but only 25 percent of male mi-

of Guangdong factory workers.

³⁸ Ibid, p. 229.

³⁹ Ibid, p. 230.

⁴⁰ Murphy, *Impact* (as cited in footnote 35), pp. 263–4.

⁴¹ Fan, *Rural-Urban Migration* (as cited in footnote 35), p. 42 (from Fan's 1999 survey and interviews in two villages in Gaozhou, Western Guangdong); Fan, *Flexible Work* (as cited in footnote 31), p. 400 (from a 2005 Renmin University study re-interviewing households covered by the 1995 Sichuan and Anhui survey cited above).

grants were within the 14–24 age group.⁴² Similarly, the 2000 census shows significantly higher numbers of female migrants within the 15–24 age group compared to male migrants (53.2 and 35.1 percent respectively). This shows that female mobility concentrated in pre-childbirth years, and subsequently reduced significantly more than for migrant men.⁴³

The demographic data on female migrants correlates with global capital's rapidly rising demand for young, single female workers, evident in the special economic zones of the PRD during this period.⁴⁴ A 1993 survey in Shenzhen found 75 percent of female migrant workers to be between 15 and 19 years old.⁴⁵ Women over 30 tended to be turned away as "too old" for factory work.⁴⁶ Young single women overwhelmingly predominated within export-oriented electronics manufacturing,⁴⁷ their employment being favoured by the age-oriented and gendered recruitment specifications that were standard practice.⁴⁸ Pun's (2005) study of an electronics factory in

⁴² Fan, *China on the Move* (as cited in footnote 34), p. 89; Fan, *Rural-Urban Migration* (as cited in footnote 35), p. 31. This survey does not distinguish between economic sectors. An interesting question for future research concerns the age and gender structure of workforces in different sectors.

⁴³ Fan, *China on the Move* (as cited in footnote 34), p. 84.

⁴⁴ Tamara Jacka, *The Impact of Gender on Rural-to-urban Migration in China*, in: *Gender and Labour Migration in Asia*, Geneva: International Organisation for Migration, 2009; Gaetano / Jacka, *On the Move* (as cited in footnote 35).

⁴⁵ Gaetano / Jacka, *On the Move* (as cited in footnote 35), p. 23.

⁴⁶ For example, in Fan, *Rural-Urban Migration* (as cited in footnote 35), p. 33 (see the 1995 story of a 41-year-old Sichuan vegetable farm worker).

⁴⁷ Fan, *Rural-Urban Migration* (as cited in footnote 35); Fan, *China on the Move* (as cited in footnote 34); Jacka, *Impact of Gender* (as cited in footnote 44); Lee, *Gender* (as cited in footnote 20); Pun, *Made in China*, (as cited in footnote 20).

⁴⁸ These recruitment practices continue today, with supply chain leaders preferring young single women, despite the post-2004 labour shortage bringing more young men and older women into electronics assembly line work lower down the supply chain. On this see Hong Xue, *Local Strategies of Labour Control: A Case Study of Three Electronics Factories in China*, *International Labour and Working-Class History*, 73 (2008). A China Labour Watch (2012) investigation of ten electronics factories manufacturing for 'global brands' in Guangdong and Jiangsu provinces found eight specified age and five only recruited female workers.

Shenzhen reveals 75 percent of the 500 workers to be female, with an average age of 20. All but one of them were temporary production-line workers.⁴⁹

Temporality and gendered labouring subjectivities

It is fundamentally important to understand how gendered divisions of reproductive labour interplayed with women's subjective understandings of their working lives and identities. The construction of labouring subjectivities for and by the first generation of women migrating to work in the PRD involved subjective experiences of life cycles, including expectations of a woman's 'place' as rural or urban at different stages in her life. This shaped the temporality of labouring subjectivities emerging from the 1990s to the mid-2000s.

Patrilocal marriage patterns, coupled with a general devaluation of unmarried rural women's household labour, functioned to create a pre-marital window open to female labour migration.⁵⁰ The desire of many young women for this opportunity to "experience freedom" is well documented.⁵¹ However, expectations of future 're-absorption' into rural reproductive relations following this 'window' need also to be seen as playing a causal role in the construction of *dagongmei* subjectivity. Return for rural marriage in their mid-twenties was the normative pattern of behaviour expected from *dagongmei* working lives. Marriage signals a woman's adoption of the double burden, and it is a central means by which women secure

⁴⁹ Pun, *Made in China* (as cited in footnote 20).

⁵⁰ Tamara Jacka, *Rural Women in Urban China: Gender, Migration and Social Change*, Armonk: M. E. Sharpe, 2006; Pun, *Made in China* (as cited in footnote 20).

⁵¹ Pun, *Made in China* (as cited in footnote 20); Jacka, *Rural Women* (as cited in footnote 50); Louise Beynon, *Dilemmas of the Heart: Rural Working Women and Their Hopes for the Future*, in: Gaetano / Jacka, *On the Move* (as cited in footnote 35); Arianne Gaetano, *Sexuality in Diasporic Space: Rural-to-Urban Migrant Women Negotiating Gender and Marriage in Contemporary China*, in: *Gender, Place & Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography*, 15 (2008), p. 6; Hairong Yan, *Specialization of the Rural: Reinterpreting the Labour Mobility of Rural Young Women in Post-Mao China*, *American Ethnologist*, 30 (2003), p. 4.

their ‘future place’ in spatial, socio-economic and affective terms.⁵² Anticipation of marriage into a rural household, with its attendant demands for unwaged labour time, disciplined women migrants’ self-perceptions as temporary workers. This intermeshed with capital’s demands for a youthful, temporarily enclosed workforce.

Pun reports that most *dagongmei* in the Shenzhen electronics factory she researched during the mid-1990s left “automatically” in their mid-twenties.⁵³ Familial pressure to return was one cause. Lou et al. note that in Sichuan Province there were established notions on the correct “time” for marriage, and on the risk of women becoming “too old.”⁵⁴ For example, this 23-year-old Sichuan woman working in an electronics factory in Huizhou, Guangdong, stated: “My parents think that I am not young anymore and should be getting married”.⁵⁵

However, the difficulties rural migrants encountered in accessing the urban marriage ‘market’, difficulties that reflected and reinforced discrimination experienced as *waidiren* (outsiders), also prompted most *dagongmei* to marry into a rural household during this period.⁵⁶ A 22-year-old woman from Sichuan is a case in point:

“For sure I’ll return to the countryside to find a husband. It’s unrealistic to try to find a husband ‘outside’. [...] As for the urban natives, only the disabled are willing to marry migrant women; very few urbanites would marry migrant women based on affection.” Consequently: “[M]igrant work is not a long-term strategy. I’ll return when I am 24 or 25 years old.”⁵⁷

⁵² Beynon, Dilemmas (as cited in footnote 51).

⁵³ Pun, Made in China (as cited in footnote 20), p. 184.

⁵⁴ Lou et al., Migration Experiences (as cited in footnote 35), p. 232.

⁵⁵ From the 1995 Sichuan and Anhui interviews in Fan, Rural-Urban Migration (as cited in footnote 35), p. 33.

⁵⁶ Beynon, Dilemmas (as cited in footnote 51); Jacka, Rural Women (as cited in footnote 50); Gaetano, Sexuality (as cited in footnote 51); Pun, Made in China (as cited in footnote 20).

⁵⁷ From the 1995 Sichuan and Anhui interviews in Fan, China on the Move (footnote 34), p. 87.

Orientation towards marriage into a rural household made many *dagongmei* consciously approach work within electronics manufacturing as short-term. External pressure and internalised fear of becoming ‘too old’ and thus ‘undesirable’ on the rural marriage market intersected, in many migrant women’s narratives, with the knowledge that they would simultaneously become ‘too old’ for the urban labour market.⁵⁸ Aging and physical deterioration as feared future prospects merged with fears of social and economic exclusion as a result of remaining unmarried in the city. In essence, a potent, gendered, disciplinary pressure on young women legitimised their disposability for capital and entrenched the temporality of the migrant labour system in South China.

To give one example, Pun Ngai’s *Made in China* (2005) includes an interview (conducted in the mid-1990s) with Yan, a 24-year-old migrant worker at the electronics factory in Shenzhen. She articulates anxiety about becoming ‘too old’ for a good marriage, combined with knowledge that she was simultaneously becoming less desirable for capital as she aged: “What can I do? Yet the problem is that I need to find a job to survive. I really don’t know how many years I can keep working with a worn-out body. Even if my health could support it, I don’t think the company wants an old woman.”⁵⁹

Louise Beynon’s 2004 ethnography of migrant women in Chengdu shows that Yan’s anxiety reflected a broader experience. Concluding that “most rural women in Chengdu are ‘playing with time’ by working in the city,” Beynon discovered a widespread recognition, on the part of migrant women, that urban work was available only whilst young. This recognition was coupled with fear of future economic insecurity and low social status if they remained unmarried in the city.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ Pun, *Made in China* (as cited in footnote 20); Beynon, *Dilemmas* (as cited in footnote 51); Jacka, *Rural Women* (as cited in footnote 50).

⁵⁹ Pun, *Made in China* (as cited in footnote 20), p. 184.

⁶⁰ Beynon, *Dilemmas* (as cited in footnote 51), p. 145.

Stigmatisation of older migrant women also had a disciplinary effect in regulating the temporality of young female factory workers. Perceived as less productive, older women's disposability was socially normalised via ostracism for their 'abandonment' of reproductive relations. Pun's ethnography includes Chun, one of the few married women working in the Shenzhen electronics factory.⁶¹ Like the few other married women, Chun worked as a cleaner, with a lower salary than the young, single production line workers. Stigmatised as a 'runaway woman', Chun was perceived negatively by the other factory workers as someone 'out of place' because 'neglectful' of her relationship to her husband and children in rural Sichuan. Rumours circulating about Chun in the factory seem to have served as a disciplinary warning to younger women about what futures they should consider 'possible'. Similarly, Tamara Jacka writes about how single women in their late twenties who worked in Beijing factories and lived in dormitories were labelled 'destitute' by the younger female workers. Lacking "a physical home of their own" because unmarried, they served as a warning to younger women not to mistake their waged employment and perceive urban 'freedom' as long-term.⁶²

It would certainly be inaccurate to present this internalisation as complete, universal or necessarily desirable for young women migrating during this period. Yan Hairong's 2003 analysis of the "spec-tralisation" of the rural within *dagongmei* identities reveals a strong desire not to return.⁶³ This is echoed in Rachel Murphy's interviews with returned married women who articulate boredom and unhappiness with their sequestration within rural households.⁶⁴ Furthermore, Jacka, Pun, and Beynon identify *dagongmei* struggles over and resistance to rural marriage.⁶⁵ They highlight migration as a means

⁶¹ Pun, *Made in China* (as cited in footnote 20), pp. 68–71.

⁶² Jacka, *Rural Women* (as cited in footnote 50), p. 108.

⁶³ Yan, *Specialization* (as cited in footnote 51).

⁶⁴ Murphy, *Impact* (as cited in footnote 35), pp. 263–4.

⁶⁵ Jacka, *Rural Women* (as cited in footnote 50); Pun, *Made in China* (as cited in footnote 20); Beynon, *Dilemmas* (as cited in footnote 51).

to escape and postpone undesired marriage or, as Beynon writes, to “secure a better marriage through such movement.”⁶⁶

As pointed out below, both women’s struggles and the gendered dynamics of employment and migration have shifted since the mid-2000s. This does not, however, straightforwardly problematise the thesis that throughout the 1990s and into the mid-2000s women were made doubly temporary by an expectation of return to rural areas for marriage and reproductive labour. As Beynon notes, “marriage choices eventually have to be made, but they are rarely made freely or according to ideals.”⁶⁷ Whilst Friedman is certainly correct to note the diversity of migrant women’s biographies, with some women successfully “[utilising] all the resources at their disposal” to achieve a permanent urban future, the demographic evidence available for this period suggests this was far from the majority of women.⁶⁸ Almost all women surveyed by Lou et al. married someone from their county.⁶⁹ What is important here is that at a critical moment of transition and labour force formation, capital was able to utilise the gendered experience of patriarchal expectations and the demand for women’s unwaged reproductive labour to normalise *dagongmei* labour as ‘short-term’.

Some conclusions and questions for future research

The temporality of migrant life cycles characterised by patriarchy encountered strategies of ‘just-in-time’ production. Utilising gendered mechanisms to characterise the labour-capital relation as a ‘short-term’ experience, capital obtained a disposable female labour force whose temporality as permanently migrant suited the timetable of production and seemed to curtail the formation of a permanently

⁶⁶ Beynon, *Dilemmas* (as cited in footnote 51), p. 132.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 148.

⁶⁸ Sara L. Friedman, *Women, Marriage and the State in Contemporary China*, in: Elizabeth J. Perry / Mark Selden (eds.), *Chinese Society: Change, Conflict, Resistance*, London: Routledge, 2010, p. 161.

⁶⁹ Lou et al., *Migration Experiences* (as cited in footnote 35), p. 232.

urban working class, which would have been more costly, less intensely exploitable and less easily disciplined.

Women's 'double burden' has been central to the gendered construction of women migrants as 'doubly temporary' waged workers. Within migrant households, patriarchal divisions of reproductive and caring labour along gendered lines strongly conditioned the spatial allocation of married women's labour time. From the 1990s to the mid-2000s, the social and politico-economic pressures regulating the spatial allocation of women migrant workers' reproductive and productive life cycles prompted many to regard themselves as being only temporarily engaged in factory work. The gendered pressure of finding a 'place' through marriage merged with their exclusion from permanent urban settlement by the *hukou* and the discriminatory marriage market. This contributed to the construction of *dagongmei* as an identity denoting 'short-term' waged labour and provided a specifically gendered temporality that was then utilised by capital to establish disposable labour forces.

The resulting temporality of women's labour migration – providing 'flexible' labour across the spatially separated realms of urban 'production' and rural 'reproduction' – matched capital's demand for youthful, disposable bodies. Circular migration patterns were 'naturalised' via their association with a return for reproductive labour, normalising the *dagongmei* as particularly 'disposable' workers. In the context of a feminisation of manufacturing labour,⁷⁰ this must be viewed as central to understanding the emergence of a migrant workforce in the PRD, and hence to the operation of a just-in-time mode of production.

This analysis raises fundamental questions about how accumulation and exploitation intersect with the gendered and temporal dynamics of the reproductive strategies deployed by the new genera-

⁷⁰ Diane Elson / Ruth Pearson, *The Subordination of Women and the Internationalisation of Factory Production*, in: Kate Young / Roslyn MacCullagh / Carol Wolkowitz (eds.), *Of Marriage and the Market: Women's Subordination in International Perspective*, London: CSE Books, 1981.

tion of migrant workers attempting to 'build a life' for themselves within their destination cities. Whilst dramatically extended working days and correspondingly restricted time for life outside of work persist, the temporalities of migration and participation in urban life are changing.

An increasing sense amongst labour migrants that there is 'no going back' and an aspiration to permanent urban residence combine with ongoing exclusion from urban citizenship. The new generation of women migrants is less likely to 'automatically' return to rural areas in order to perform reproductive labour. This raises key questions about the struggles waged by women to determine their own futures. At the same time, the gendered dynamics of electronics manufacturing are changing, with growing numbers of young men in the workforce.⁷¹ A resulting 'crisis of futurity' has been raised as a potentially central cause of the increasingly endemic labour resistance undertaken by this new generation of migrant workers.⁷²

Scholarship has paid insufficient attention to how the strategies migrant workers deploy in order to remain within the city are gendered, particularly in terms of the gendered relations within reproductive labour and the gendered division of that labour. The gender-based analysis presented here, an analysis of how daily and generational labour power reproduction relates to migrant labour and its temporalities, has highlighted phenomena which need to be borne in mind when examining the contemporary dynamics of exploitation at work, capitalist accumulation and labour resistance.

As Eli Friedman highlights, a turning point in the development of migrant workers' resistance will be the connections, solidarities

⁷¹ Deng Yunxue, *The Making of Working Class Masculinities in Factory Life: An Ethnographic Study of Migrant Workers in South China*, 2013, p. 6 (online at [http://tao.wordpedia.com/pdf_down.aspx?filename=JO00001460_2013_946-979]).

⁷² Pun / Chan / Chan, *Role of the State* (footnote 10); Pun / Lu, *Unfinished Proletarianisation* (as cited in footnote 30); Frido Wenten, *Restructured Class-Relations since 1978*, in: Christoph Scherrer (ed.), *China's Labour Question*, Munich: Rainer Hampp, 2011.

and organisations that link struggles in the ‘productive’ and ‘reproductive’ realms.⁷³ What relationships might emerge between migrant factory workers and organising efforts around education, healthcare, and so on?

Just like the labour-capital relation within waged work, labour resistance needs to be examined with an eye to dismantling the dualistic separation of ‘production’ and ‘reproduction’ and tackling the patriarchal organisation of social reproduction facilitating exploitation. A feminist analysis connecting gendered divisions of reproductive labour and the struggles of migrant women within and outside of waged work is imperative for understanding the complex dynamics of exploitation and resistance in China’s manufacturing industries. Examination of women’s ‘double burden’ and gendered divisions of reproductive labour should not seem so remote from the question of China’s labour struggles.

⁷³ Eli Friedman, *Outside the New China*, *Jacobin Magazine*, 11/12 (2013), [<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2013/09/outside-the-new-china/>].