Tactical Bodies and Appropriated Styles:
The Fashion Scene of the Dagongmei in Post-Socialist China

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A Thesis

in

The Department

of

Communication Studies

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree of Master of Arts (Media Studies) at

Concordia University

Montreal, Quebec, Canada

February 2019

CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY

School of Graduate Studies

This is to certify that the thesis prepared

By Chengcheng Shi

Entitled: Tactical Bodies and Appropriated Styles:

The Fashion Scene of the Dagongmei in Post-Socialist China

and submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts (Media Studies)

complies with the regulations of the University and meets the accepted standards with respect to originality and quality.

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis explores how the Dagongmei (young, single rural women who migrate to large cities for lowly paid work), a specifically Chinese subaltern, are "making do" with fashion as a discourse imposed by the dominant socio-economic order. My point of departure is to interrogate how fashion is used by the Dagongmei as a means of survival, as a tactic of social mobility, and as a tool for self-fulfillment. To do this, I track the origin and history of Chinese fashion as well as Chinese peasant's subject position from the 19th century to the present, analyse the construction of the Dagong worker and the Dagongmei in post-socialist Chinese urban discourse, and briefly describe the relationship between the Dagongmei and the urban-dominated discourse of fashion. I examine representations of the Dagongmei in official discourse and popular media, as well as the lived experience of the Dagongmei and their relationship to fashion. Overall, this thesis demonstrates the signifying practices that the Dagongmei adopt within the dominant discourse of fashion in order to adapt it to their own interpretations of subjectivity, modernity, and self-development.

Acknowledgement

I am extremely grateful to the support of my supervisor, Dr. Yasmin Jiwani. I would not have been able to finish this research without her continuous guidance, and I can't thank her enough for her advices, support, and inspirations. I would like to express my gratitude to Dr. Monika Kin Gagnon and Dr. Lian Duan, who provided many insightful and critical comments for this thesis. Also special thanks to all my classmates and the colleagues at Concordia University's Department of Communication Studies for their unwavering support during the last two years. To my parents Chuanxia Liu and Wanpeng Shi, everything that I have accomplished is because of your love, support, and encouragements. Finally, this thesis is dedicated to the Dagongmei. As a young Chinese woman, I share a significant amount of pressure, anxiety and confusion with them, and I hope this work will make more people pay attention to the roles and needs of rural migrant women in transitional China.

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INTRODUCTION

Over the past few months, I have been bombarded by news, images, and gossip about trainees from *Produce 101* China, an online idol-making survival reality show co-produced by Chinese tech giant Tencent and CJ Entertainment & Media Corporation in Korea. Aimed at creating "the best girl group in China", this large-scale web project invites its "citizen producers" (viewers) to "produce" a girl group unit by selecting 11 female idols from a pool of 101 trainees (Tencent, 2018a). After its official release on April 21, 2018, *Produce 101* quickly sparked strong interest from Chinese netizens and became the latest buzzword on social media. Until the end of the program, the hashtag #*Produce 101* had gained over 10 billion reads and 90 million posts on the Chinese microblogging site Weibo (Sina, 2018a).

Figure 1: *Produce 101* China. Courtesy of *Sohu*.

With very few exceptions, a girl group idol in China conforms to a rigid standard of femininity: young, slim, innocent, and sweet-mannered with soft, dewy makeup. The Chinese public sets lofty standards on a female idol's behaviour and physical appearance and uses social media to pass instant and often ruthless judgment. In fact, it did not take long for viewers of *Produce 101* to figure out two of the most "unfit" trainees for a girl group: 25-year-old Wang Ju and 19-year-old Yang Chaoyue.

Tanned, curved, extravagantly dressed, and being frank about her passions, Wang was initially identified by most audiences as the joke of *Produce 101*. Between late April and early May, she was pummelled with body shaming talk on social media and was once on the verge of being eliminated from the contest. If Wang Ju was mostly criticised for her unorthodox look, then Yang Chaoyue was criticized for her inappropriate behaviours. Despite her youthful age and doll-like figure, Yang has been blamed for her rustic manner, absence of taste and failure in implementing effective emotional management on the stage.

Figure 2: Wang Ju in *Produce 101*. Courtesy of *Visual China*.

However, public views on Wang and Yang changed dramatically within a few weeks. Wang's reputation was salvaged after she spoke out about her frustrations during Saturday's show: "Some people say that I don't fit in girl idol groups. But what should girl idol groups be like? When it comes to me, I've swallowed the standards along with the wrapper" (Wang, as cited in Yin, 2018). Being pleasantly surprised, urban middle-class audiences on Chinese social media expressed strong admirations for the high degree of articulateness, persuasiveness and frankness of Wang's public talk.

Tamara Jacka (2006) has written about how power relations can be articulated through one's ability to talk in public in Chinese society. She says that in China "'knowing how to talk' (*neng jianghua*) is generally understood to be an attitude of formal education, worldliness, and a key marker of superior social status" (Jacka, 2006, p. 19). In this case, Wang Ju's self-confidence and articulateness were regarded by the public as attribute of her urban background. Born in Shanghai—one of the world's most modernised cosmopolitan cities, Wang received her secondary education in Shanghai's No.3 Girls' High School (SSNZ), whose predecessors were two Christian schools set up by two US churches at the end of 19th century (SSNZ, 2018). After graduating from university and working as a primary school teacher and then a recruiter, Wang joined the talent agency Esee Model and became a senior modelling agent before joining *Produce 101*.

As we have learnt from Marx (as cited in Hebdige, 1979, p. 80) "men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please, they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past". In this sense, Wang Ju's style is rooted in "a specific ideological field which gives it a particular life and particular meanings" (Hebdige, 1979, pp. 80-81). Initially, Wang's tanned skin, curvy figure, and high self-esteem dislodged the authorized codes of femininity through which the social context of girl pop idol was organised and experienced. Among a group of slim girls with big eyes, sweet smiles and innocent expressions, Wang and her extravagant fashion became "an actual mechanism of semantic disorder: a kind of temporary blockage in the system of representation" (Hebdige, 1979, p. 90).

When Wang Ju's identity as an urban elite and a fashion insider became increasingly eminent, a new referential context to which her rebellious image on-stage could be assigned became apparent. In the eyes of urban middle-class viewers, as a Shanghainese with a successful career and international prospects, Wang Ju is situated in the proper subject position to claim her superiority in fashion. Under a metropolitan context, Wang's diva-look and her insistence on

"independence, ability, care and elegance"—which is the motto of her prestigious all-female high school SSNZ—are now all perceived as crucial to articulating "an ideal cosmopolitan femininity" based on "material success, cultural and economic capital, and integration with the world" (Chen, 2013, p. 553). As such, her sartorial practices and strong personality can be incorporated, brought back into line with cosmopolitan femininity and reflective of urban modernisation. Rather than a rebellious "other" who "swallowed the standards along with the wrapper", Wang Ju is now seen as a representation of "China's modern-day young generation" (Kuo & Wang, 2018). As one audience member quipped: "We vote for Wang Ju, but we are also voting for ourselves. We are not idolizing her, rather, we are creating a spokesperson for ourselves" (Zhang, 2018).

In the meantime, Yang Chaoyue's earlier life as a rural-to-urban female migrant worker—or the Dagongmei in Chinese—was also made known to the public. In China, the term Dagongmei stands for young, unmarried rural girls who depart from their village hometown to the city and live temporarily as lowly paid migrant workers. Born in a small village in the Yangtze River Delta, Yang was only able to finish her junior stage education in a local middle school that is notorious for its low teaching quality (Sina, 2018b). At the age of 17, she left her village and started to work in the city as a Dagongmei. In the first two years, Yang could not find any other paid job except as a waiter and textile worker, and then by happenstance she was chosen by an entertainment company as a trainee in 2017.

Figure 3: Yang Chaoyue in *Produce 101*. Courtesy of *Sina*.

As with Wang Ju, the audiences of *Produce 101* also tried to understand Yang Chaoyue's unsatisfactory performance on-stage by linking it to the socio-cultural position that Yang

occupies offstage. According to some urban middle-class bloggers, Yang's lack of eloquence is, at least in part, the reflection of some socio-cultural stereotypes about rural women in dominant discourse (Tencent, 2018b). In China, peasants are usually perceived as "dumb" in both senses of the word "because they lack formal education and because their lives are confined to the farm and village and they have little contact with strangers" (Jacka, 2006, p. 19). Rural women, especially unmarried young rural women, are socially not expected to know "how to talk" because "they are supposed to be confined to the domestic sphere and to be subject to the control of the men and elders" (p. 19).

The media also played a crucial role in shaping and maintaining Yang Chaoyue's "otherness". They stressed Yang's clumsy dance moves (Tencent, 2018b), her awkward speech (Sohu, 2018a), and her T-shirt as a 5 USD "Taobao hit"—a synonym for a cheap and tasteless style in Chinese popular discourse (Sohu, 2018b). During the broadcast of the program, a video clip showing Yang being verbally harassed by two young men in a Comic Con was discovered by online self-media and gained million hits. As such, the media assured their spectators with the preferred reading of Yang Chaoyue as a subservient "country bumpkin." Without cultural and aesthetic knowledge of taste and fashion, this rural girl lacked the ability for individual expression and the articulation of autonomy. As a result, her vulnerable beauty could only be salvaged in the civilised urban space, and her passive body needed to be remedied with the help of urbanites.

However, the urban public's benevolent though condescending attitude quickly turned sour when Yang refused embrace her imposed identity as a vulnerable subordinate. In episode 7, Yang Chaoyue, who, by that time ranked 2 out of 101 competitors, publicly refuted the criticism of her as being a misfit who lagged behind the field of contestants: "I stand here because of the continuous support from my fans. For those haters, I am here to tell you that I am not afraid of, nor do I care about your judgments" (Sina, 2018c). Like Wang Ju, through her call out speech Yang Chaoyue tried to push back against the standards by which she was being judged; she

rejected her positioning as a country bumpkin and attempted to reflect instead a more fashionable, modernised subjectivity. But this time her resistance invoked negative reactions. On Chinese social media Yang Chaoyue's speech caused instant outrage, prompting many netizens to call her out for being pretentious and devious. After the release of episode 7, the tag #*Yang Chaoyue Disastrous Performance* instantly occupied the top 1 position on Weibo Trends. On social media, haters flooded the site with harsh messages directed at Yang, in which they called her a "manipulative bitch" and accused her of winning an elevated position by skilfully performing the image of an innocent and subservient "flower of the village" (*cunhua*). In the eyes of furious urban audiences, Yang Chaoyue had taken too much advantage of her attractive appearance, a "faked purity" (*zhuangchun*), and her "underclass" background. They believed that there was a huge dissonance between Yang's *suzhi* (quality) and her desired identity as a modernised and upwardly mobile woman. Under Yang's personal account, one angry Weibo user wrote: "As a responsible 'citizen producer' I would never let a low-*suzhi* Dagongmei like you ruin the future of *our* girl group. Why not go back to your village if you are so indulgent in flaunting your miserableness (*maican*)?" (Sina, 2018c).

The opposite reactions that Wang Ju and Yang Chaoyue faced in *Produce 101* incorporate many key questions that are relevant to my research. How can we define the Dagongmei as an identity in today's Chinese society? In what ways are discourses relating to gender difference and rural/urban divide involved and reproduced in the language and knowledge about urbanity, the peasantry, and femininity in modern China? Why is fashion supposed to be an urban-exclusive phenomenon? Why are the sartorial practices of the Dagongmei always stigmatised within the contradictory discourse of sexual purity and promiscuity? Seeing the rural/urban divide, fashion, and the Dagongmei represented in the media, as they were in *Produce 101*, inspired this study. The purpose of this thesis is to problematize the discourses behind these representations and then explore how gender, modernity and fashion are identified and practiced by the Dagongmei themselves.

Chapter Breakdown

This thesis is divided into six chapters including an introduction and a conclusion. In this introduction, I began with an illustrative example outlining some of the fundamental issues that inform my point of departure. In chapter one, I trace the origin and history of both Chinese fashion and Chinese peasant's subject position from the 19th century to the present and examine the construction the Dagong worker and the Dagongmei in post-socialist Chinese urban discourse. Towards the end of this chapter, I briefly describe the representations of the Dagongmei in the urban-dominated discourse of fashion. The second chapter introduces the fundamental theories that I adopt in analysing the experience of the Dagongmei in discourses of modernity, consumption, and fashion. These include Roland Barthes's study on fashion system and Michel de Certeau's theory on strategy and tactic. Chapter three interrogates the discursive formation of the Dagongmei as an abject subject in the discourse of modernity, commodity consumption, and fashion. I argue that in post-socialist China the legitimacy of the state has been maintained not only through administrative regulations or economic reforms but also through a set of neoliberal cultural discourses, including those relating to consumption, rural/urban divide, and body culture. In these discourses, the state constructs and consolidates its hegemony through its alliance with the modern, prosperous, and "highly civilised" (*gao suzhi*) urban population. Through the strategic site of fashion, the mainstream media confines, marginalises, and stigmatises the Dagongmei in the cities, representing their bodies as either rustic and/or promiscuous. Chapter four focuses on the lived experience of the Dagongmei and their relationship to fashion. This is where I locate the tactics that the Dagongmei employ in their fashion consumption and sartorial practice. Finally, the last chapter offers the conclusion to this study. I revisit the starting point of this thesis, outline the route the research took, and identify the areas that deserve further examination.

CHAPTER 1:
Historical and Literature Review

Fashion in China

Traditionally, clothing and dress have signified critical socio-political significance and often appear as a tool of control and hierarchisation. For example, throughout Chinese imperial history, sumptuary laws had been issued regulating the form, colour, and the permitted decorations of clothes and accessories. Such regulations were issued in the belief that the dress had to be appropriate to one's gender, class, and status in social hierarchy (Steele & Major, 1999). That clothing should be regulated stems from the belief that one's appearance is perceived as a signifier of class and gender, or as Veblen (1934, p. 167) argued, as "an indication of our pecuniary standing to all observers at first glance".

The symbolic value of fashion has become increasingly apparent with the advent of modernity, when the old hierarchical order collapses and the fashioning of one's appearance gradually replaces the ascribed social roles as the determining factor of one's public image (Chen, 2013). As a technology of the self, fashion serves not only "a socioeconomic function of classifying status", but also constitutes "a cultural-semiotic code of displaying or constructing individual identity" (Chen, 2013, p. 555). As Featherstone (1982/1991) points out, the modern consumer society has redefined the self as performer, which places great emphasis on one's appearance, sartorial display, and the management of self-image. In this sense, the self in today's society is identified "primarily in aesthetic terms—that is, in terms of how one looks rather than in terms of what one does" (Negrin, 2008, p. 9). Because of the increased importance placed on the aestheticization of the self, fashion is now seen as integral, rather than external to one's identity, and the dress and the self are mutually articulated. As such, clothing and fashion are "no longer just secondary to a more authentic self or body, nor are they passively mirroring or an overdetermined result of social change or personal identity" (Chen, 2013, p. 556). Rather, fashion

is a vital part of active self-construction, and both the self and fashion are produced and developed by their mutual integration. Far from "a natural, pre-given, or pure" entity, the self is always a culturally constructed "clothed self", situated in and interactive with the discourse and strategies of fashion, shaping and shaped by his/her sartorial practice (Chen, 2013, p. 556). As Craik (1994, p. 4) concludes, fashion is thus a means or a "face" that actively constructs one's subjectivity rather than disguises it.

In modern China, the consciousness of fashion has always been linked to the liberation of women from the control of the state and patriarchal hegemony. Traditionally, the life of Chinese women was confined within the patriarchal family, which was constructed "along male kinship lines and was patrilineal and patrilocal in nature" (Pun, 2005, p. 60). Patrilocality meant that women living in traditional Chinese family had no right to own or inherit land, house, or other means of production, and their identities were subordinated under male authority, namely that of their father, their husband, and their son (in case of widows). As Judith Butler points out, in the patriarchal-patrilocal-patrilineal configuration, the women are

> given as gifts from one patrilineal clan to another through the institution of marriage… The bride functions as a relational term between groups of men; she does not *have* an identity, and neither does she exchange one identity for another. She *reflects* masculine identity precisely through being the site of its absence. …As wives, women not only secure the reproduction of the *name* (the functional purpose), but effect a symbolic intercourse between clans of men. As the site of a patronymic exchange, women are and are not the patronymic sign, excluded from the signifier, the very patronym they bear. (Butler, 1990/2006, pp. 52-53, italics in original)

Chinese women, then, were born into a system that structurally and symbolically placed their bodies in a subordinate position where they were "essentially powerless" (Pun, 2005, p. 60).

During the Republican period (1912-1949), the bodies of Chinese women became sites for the formation of hegemonic norms of politics and gender. The consequence for women who

dared to challenge the norms and conventions of a docile and gendered body, as Lu Xun observed in 1927, was devastating:

> These seem to have been unlucky years for the young, especially for the fair sex. The newspapers described a district where short hair was encouraged; but another army came in, and whenever they found a bobbed haired woman they would slowly tear out her hair and cut off her breasts… (Such extreme reactions) prove that whereas it is generally recognised that men may wear their hair short, women may not follow suit. The breasts were cut off to make women look more like men, and to punish them for wanting to look like men. (Lu Xun, as cited in Huang, 1999, p. 135)

Lu Xun's observation emphasised the disciplinary power behind women's fashion. In early 1930s the KMT (*Guomindang*) government launched the New Life Movement which linked women's apparel to the grand project of modernisation and nation-saving, in which the regulation of women's consumption and embodiment of clothing and adornments played a crucial part (Zhang, 2018). Basically, this campaign was set off to transform the "nasty, hedonistic, lazy, and decadent" (*wuhui, langman, landuo, tuitang*) lifestyle of Chinese people (Chiang, as cited in Xia, 2004, p. 116), and it attributed the latter to Chinese women's "indecent" (*youshangfenghua*) dress code and their sick obsession with Western fashion. In this sense, what women wear is believed to affect the morality of the society. In order to save China from its current state of decadence, women were required to give up revealing clothes and Western styles and adjusted their look to fit in with their assigned gender roles as wives and mothers. Far from a form of aesthetic play, in Republican China, the choice of fashion was closely imbricated with issues of nationalism, patriarchal morality, and the public display of gender norms.

In the newly established People's Republic of China, although no official directives were issued, it was understood that the simple proletarian style, or to be more specific the dress of the proletarian male, was the only appropriate style for both sexes (Steele & Major, 1999). Behind Mao's slogan "Everything male comrades can do, female comrades can do also", the ostensibly gender-neutral language of the state sartorial discourse actually defined Chinese woman as an

inferior sex. Under the Maoist gender discourse, only by rejecting her own femininity and doing "everything male comrades can do" was Chinese woman able to overcome her weakness of "being different", that is, being different to men. As a result, the proletarian dress code took masculinity as the standard to which female had to follow. As Zillah Eisenstein claims:

> Difference(s) is assumed to mean inequality because there is a silent referent: a woman's body is *not* like a man's; she is less than man. In order to be equal she must be the same. Homogeneity becomes the standard and individuality a problem… (Eisenstein, 1989, p. 335, italics in original)

Thus, by means of the seemingly androgynous dress code, the patriarchal state associated women with a relational negation or "lack", and at the same time "took away the language that could articulate the disappearance of women" (Yang, 1999, p. 46).

In Maoist China, women's fashion, especially fashion labelled "bourgeoisie" and "feminine", was regarded as opposite to proletarian virtue and thus subjected to elimination. During the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), fashion had been under radical attack at the hands of Red Guard, the fanatics of Mao's ideology. In her book *Life and Death in Shanghai*, Nien Cheng (1987) recalled seeing a woman seized by Red Guards who forcibly took off her trendy trousers and leather shoes in front of the crowd. At that time, members of Red Guard voluntarily formed the "purification team" (Steele & Major, 1999). They walked around the street looking for women who dressed fashionably, and once the victim was captured they would humiliate her in front of the public, cut off her hair or cut her clothes into pieces (Sun, 2010). A large number of similar accounts were recorded in retrospective archives and literature on the Cultural Revolution, which makes it clear that such radical oppression of women's freedom of sartorial practice commonly existed throughout the Mao era (Steele & Major, 1999).

During the first decade of Chinese market reform, in official discourse the dress remained a site of rigorous discipline. In 1983, the post-Mao government launched its first national campaign against crime (*yanda*). Such a national movement ended up being akin to fashion terrorism: those

who dismissed the warning of the authorities about their inappropriate sartorial practice and donned a "bizarre fashion" (*qizhuangyifu*) in public space were accused of sexual promiscuity and in a few extreme cases even sentenced to death (Wu, 2009). In terms of femininity and women's fashion, in the 1980s the idea that a woman should not overemphasise her gender difference and individuality was still prevalent. As an article titled "Fragmental Thoughts Regarding Beauty" published by the All-China Women's Federation (ACWF) in 1980 argued:

> Beauty is always objective, not subjective. Thus, the opinions of individuals could hardly count. Beauty reflects the spirit of the times. One cannot judge beauty without considering current historical conditions…Beauty is something one cannot live without. But we think real beauty lies in the beauty of aspiration, of morality, of painstaking study, and of the spirit of inquiry, which surpasses the beauty of adornment, of the body, and of the happy life of one's own small family. (*Women of China*, as cited in Wu, 2009, p. 40)

However, by the 1990s, the robust image of the well-educated, upwardly mobile, and fashion savvy urban white-collar woman replaced the "hard work and plain living" (*jiankupusu*) female model in the 1980s as the representation of "a fresh labour force, a model of social mobility, and the rise of a consumer culture endorsed by current official ideology" (Zhang, 2001, p. 132). Currently, for women in China, fashion is generally welcomed as a form in which they are able to manifest their bodies as their own wishes. As one older Chinese woman explained: "In those days (of socialism under Mao) you had to live the way people wanted you to live, but now young women are free to look pretty, attractive, and there is nothing wrong with that" (McWilliams, 2012, p. 168). In contrast to the monotonous uniform which inscribed Chinese women into "a monochromatic construction of an androgynous self", the introduction of heterogeneous styles and fashion offer women the opportunities to play with their identities and enjoy more freedom (McWilliams, 2012, p. 163). As Iris Marion Young argues, the consumption of fashionable ornament, cosmetics, and clothing provides women with

> the freedom to play with shape and colour on the body, to don various styles and looks, and through them exhibit and imagine unreal possibilities…Such female imagination has liberating possibilities because it subverts, unsettles the order of respectable, functional rationality in a world where that rationality supports domination. (Young, 1994, pp. 208-209)

Being consumers and producers of femininity, women now are active players in the life of the post-socialist Chinese cultural-economic agenda. Rather than inscribing a teleology of powerlessness onto women's fashion and the women who don them, we might read dress and adornments as "a woman's beauty arsenal—one that allowed for personal idiosyncrasies and self-expression" (Huang, 1999, p. 139).

Enter the Dagongmei

To understand the experience of the Dagongmei, we need to take a closer look at the formation of the subject position of rural female migrants in dominant discourse. As Jacka (2006, p. 31) argues, the Dagongmei are defined and represented as outsider "'others' against and around which" dominant discourse of modernity and citizenship are constructed and maintained. As an individual, the Dagongmei is an abject subject that "poses a threat to the project of national modernity" and "in so doing operates to give it shape"; she needs to be "included, worked upon, and eventually rejected, if the project of modernity is to succeed" (Jacka, 2006, p. 31).

Where, then, does the genealogy of this abject subject start? Recently scholars have done much work on how, in post-socialist China, the socio-cultural subordinate groups constituted of peasants, rural female migrants, and ethnic minorities emerge from and interact with the domination of neoliberal ideology and urban elitism (Rofel, 1999; Howell & Fan, 2011; Sun, 2019). Some researchers identify the exploitation and discrimination suffered by rural migrant workers in the cities as stemming from the stagnated, corrupted, yet omnipresent Maoist bureaucracy, most notably the household registration system (*hukou*) (Cheng and Selden, 1994; Zhang, 2010). Others attribute it to the conjunction of neoliberal economy and socialist

labour/population control system, which has produced "the specific modality of power that makes up the ambiguous identity of the rural migrant labour and deepens, but at the same time obscures, their exploitation" (Pun, 2005, p. 46). Scholars like Yan Hairong (2008), relate the Dagongmei's struggle to China's neoliberal transformation and the country's active self-engagement with and integration into the global capitalist order.

The subject positions of rural-to-urban migrant workers and the socio-cultural significance attached to these positions in post-socialist China should be understood from "the particular ways in which they are taken up by, and seen to function in, the post-Mao order" (Jacka, 2006, p. 32). As Jacka (2006, p. 32) has noted, the fundamental principles of identification and evaluation of village, peasant, and rural migrant worker did not appear "out of thin air" with the establishment of market reform in 1978. Nor can they be understood as the outcome of any single administrative order, like the household registration system. Rather, what we see in transitional China is the return to concepts and ideas that emerged in a much earlier period and the reformulation, re-explanation, and re-introduction of these terms in a new context, serving different functions (Jacka, 2006). As a result, any analysis relating to contemporary rural-to-urban migration in post-socialist China requires a thorough understanding of the historical context from which it arose.

In later sections, I explore how particular historical discourses and processes, especially those relating to rural/urban divide and gender division, have produced the subject position of the peasant, the rural-to-urban migrant worker, and the Dagongmei, and in the ways in which these discourses and processes embody particular power relations that exclude, constrain and stigmatise the rural space and its female inhabitants.

The Making of Rural/Urban Divide

In the Western context, the grand narratives of modernism were based on "a fundamental divide between traditional rural society and modern urban society, and an understanding that development and modernisation necessarily entail a process of rural-to-urban migration,

urbanisation, and the marginalisation of rural life" (Stockman, as cited in Gaetano & Jacka, 2004, p. 14). In traditional China, however, the distinction between city and countryside was less significant than those between occupations like scholar-officials (*shi*), merchants (*shang*), craftsmen (*gong*), and farmers (*nong*) (Jacka, 2006). Until the late 19th century, the differences between rural and urban society began to appear in China as the result of the establishment of colonial concessions and foreign "treaty ports" in coastal areas (Stockman, 2000). Administration, communication, commerce, and entertainment became increasingly concentrated in cities like Shanghai and Guangzhou. As a result, the gap in economic, social, and cultural capital between coastal towns and inland villages widened and urban dwellers started to show their willingness to distinguish themselves from rural people (Stockman, 2000). During this period, several classical terms pertaining to peasantry were reconstructed and reintroduced in modern Chinese context. These words include *nongmin* (peasant), which signifies a connotation of backwardness that had not been present in the previously used concept *nongfu* (farmer) (Jacka, 2006). It also included terms which are now adopted to describe the weak mentalities of rural inhabitants, for example *mixin* (superstition) and *fengjian* (feudal) (Cohen, 1993).

During the New Cultural Movement (1915-1923), the rural areas and the peasants became heated themes in mainstream discourse (Jacka, 2006). According to Cohen (1993), at that time, few Chinese cultural elites regarded peasants in a positive manner. In their perspective, the rural people were oppressed and alienated "others", submissive to "ugly and fundamentally useless customs", and desperately in need of enlightenment and modernisation (Cohen, 1993, p. 155). However, scholars like Jacka (2006, p. 35) believe that intellectuals' perceptions of the peasantry during this period may be more nuanced, and she points out that though known for their gloomy portrayal of the life in Chinese rural society, reformist writers like Lu Xun and Li Dazhao demonstrated a nostalgia for the pure and fresh air of countryside. In reality though, both the antipathy and the fondness for the countryside on the part of Chinese cultural elites may reflect what Johannes Fabian (1983, as cited in Jacka, p. 36) describes as the "denial of coevalness". In

both cases, the rural space and its inhabitants were strategically "othered" by "being denied temporal equivalence" with cities and urban dwellers (Jacka, 2006, p. 36). Whether they stood for the defects of the feudal Chinese society that had to be overcome, or whether they symbolised "the idyllic ideal uncontaminated by modernisation", the village and the rural people were always denied as an archaic "past" (Jacka, 2006, p. 36). In contrast, the present and the future of a strong and modernised China was perceived as being shaped by the educated elites who inhabited the cities.

When the Communist Party came into power in 1949, it inherited a considerable amount of the New Cultural Movement discourse on rural/urban divide and then reformulated it with its own interpretations (Gaetano & Jacka, 2004). The leaders of Chinese Communist Party rejected the denigration of peasant as a backward class, arguing in contrast that the peasant should be regarded as one of the most revolutionary class in Chinese society. However, during the 1950s the Communist party had launched two sets of categorisations that objectified and reproduced the rural/urban divide: the first was the assignation of class status (*hua chengfen*), in which people were divided into two, mutually exclusive categories -- either permanent urban residents or permanent rural residents; the second was the household registration system, or *hukou,* under which people were assigned based on their place of residence as either agricultural or non-agricultural households (Gaetano & Jacka, 2004). Both class status and *hukou* were inherited, and in Mao's era it was extremely difficult for someone to transfer his/her registration from rural/agricultural to urban/non-agricultural. Also, at that time any unauthorised rural-to-urban migration was extremely difficult to put into practice, because under a planned

Figure 4: *Gongren* in Mao era.

economy there was no access for people of rural *hukou* to purchase food or find housing in the city without the official proof of non-agricultural household registration (Chan & Zhang, 1999).

These two regulations, together with other Maoist socio-political policies, almost denied the possibility of movement between rural and urban areas and resulted in an overall inequality between the countryside and the cities. Facing the "dilemma of how to establish a modernised industrial country with a largely agrarian economy that scarce in capital" (Mao, as cited in Shi, 2016), from mid 1950s the Maoist government adopted the Soviet strategy of financing the city-based heavy industrial sector through diverting resources from both countryside and agriculture. As a result, the state guaranteed food subsidies, free housing, and lifelong employment to urban rather than rural inhabitants, and the *Gongren* (urban industrial worker) became one of the most privileged classes in Maoist China. Being "the masters of the People's Republic", the *Gongren* worked in state-owned enterprises, with the state as the "socialist boss" providing not only permanent employment but also urban *hukou* which is associated with a wide range of welfare and pension benefits (Harvey, 2005). While praised by Mao as "the surest allies of the proletariat" (Schram, as cited in Pun, 2005, p. 29), the rural residents in Maoist China had seen their interest subordinated to that of urbanites. They had to work in the field all day long with their bare hands, live with scarce social welfare, and were constantly under the threat of starvation.

The Making of Rural-to-Urban Migrants (the Dagong Worker)

With the establishment of market reform, from the late 1970s the state gradually loosened control over the flow of migration from the countryside to the city and no longer limited the distribution of goods and services exclusive to urban residents, thus enabling rural people to live in the cities (Pun, 2005). In the meantime, the state revised the household registration system by allowing rural people to work in the city as "temporary" residents. These rural migrants, often referred to as the Dagong workers, are not entitled to state-sponsored services like education, housing, medication, insurance and other welfare and pension benefits enjoyed by urbanites.

Figure 5: Migrant workers queue by gender for registration at the gate of Biel Crystal, 2013. Courtesy of *Chinese Youth*.

Imported from the Cantonese in capitalist Hong Kong, the word Dagong means "selling labour to the boss", which connotes the commodification of labour (Pun, 2005). Compared to Maoist *Gongren* who obtained the life-long formal contract, permanent urban residency, and the privileged subject position as the pioneer of Chinese proletariat, in post-socialist China the rural-based Dagong worker is treated as the disposable worker; a worker who can be dismissed at any time and replaced by anyone who is willing to sell one's labour for a lower price (Harvey, 2005; Pun, 2005). The value of the Dagong workers, if any, is determined by the amount of surplus value that can be extracted from their labour as a part of capitalist profit (Pun, 2005). In a word, as a capitalist labour relation, the Dagong worker is imbued with an awareness of labour commodification and labour exploitation.

With the emergence of a market economy in the late 1970s, the post-Mao Chinese government turned its focus on capital accumulation and launched a set of neoliberal measures towards that goal. These include marketization, de-collectivisation, fiscal decentralisation, and an open-door policy aiming at attracting foreign investments (Fan, 2003). Along with these administrative and economic restructurings, the cities have been constructed as "the privileged space of modern civilisation or civility, gesturing toward elusive capital and development"

(Anagnost, as cited in Yan, 2008, p. 40). The growth of urban economy contributed to an urgent need for unskilled and cost-effective labour, especially in labour-intensive industries like chip or garment production and service sectors (Gaetano & Jacka, 2004). These occupations are in most cases temporary, offering no job security or welfare benefits, physically exhausting, and often carried out in poor working conditions. Providers of these jobs know that their offers are not attractive to most urban residents, so they shifted their attentions to rural migrants who are more willing to accept low salaries and poor conditions.

For rural inhabitants living in transitional China, working in these urban-based sweatshops was probably "the best, perhaps the only, option to make ends meet" (Fan, 2003, p. 25). With the decline of the commune system and the establishment of household responsibility system in the late 1970s, Chinese peasants were able to make their own decisions about their work and in the field and the sale of their products (Gaetano & Jacka, 2004). Initially, the reform successfully stimulated agricultural production and provided surplus capital and population for the establishment of township enterprises (Yan, 2008). However, since late 1980s economies in rural areas have stagnated, while the income gap between rural and urban residences has been continuously increasing (Gaetano & Jacka, 2004). According to National Bureau of Statistics of China (NBSC), in 2017 the income ratio of urban to rural households was 2.71. The annual per capita disposable income of urban households in China reached 36,396 yuan, while the rural per capita income was 13,432 yuan (NBSC, 2018). The Gini coefficient for rural and urban incomes stood at 0.465 in 2016, slightly above the 0.4 danger level (*China Daily*, 2017). In the last three decades, rural households had suffered from falling prices of agricultural products, shortage of land, the lack of job opportunities resulting from the large-scale collapse of township enterprises, the rising price of seeds and fertilizer, and the intensified corruptions of local government (Gaetano & Jacka, 2004; Yan, 2008). All these factors have forced rural peasants to leave the countryside and migrate toward urban areas.

Although the capitalised cities desire a labour regime that minimises cost and maximises profitability, the flooding of rural migrants into the big cities has nonetheless aroused widespread anxiety and repulsion among urban residents. Rural migrants' identity as ambiguous, "temporal" urban inhabitants threaten the very distinction between "rural" and "urban" upon which the order maintaining urban material and cultural privilege has been based (Jacka, 2006). In order to sustain their superiority, the urbanites reemphasise the rural/urban divide by interpellating the rural into the urban discourse and reducing the rural migrant to an abject "other". In both state and popular media, rural migrants are portrayed as "dirty, stupid, lacking in breeding, and without any sense of shame", and their backward peasantness can only be improved by bringing them into their "right position" (as disposable Dagong workers) within the modern urban cultural sphere as well as the open market economy (Yu, as cited in Jacka, 2006, p. 42). In a few cases, individual migrants are praised by official and popular media for their ability to "eat bitterness" (*chiku*) and their strong willingness to adopt modern knowledge and values that were supposed to be exclusively possessed by urbanites, and in the process confirming the city's superior status and obscuring the socio-political reasons behind the rural/urban inequality (Sun, 2004).

In both Chinese and Western academia, the surge of rural-to-urban migration in transitional China has attracted much attention, but the scope of this attention is narrow. Most of the existing research is concerned primarily with the macro-level demographic, economic, and political effect of migration (Chan, 2011; Dong & Bowles, 2002; Lee, 2007; Murphy, 2009; Ross, 2004; Shen & Huang, 2003; Wong & Song, 2008; Wang & Fan, 2013). Few studies provide a gendered insight into how the making of a Dagong subject is experienced by female migrant workers, and even fewer have identified the gendered discourse as the basis of their research. However, recently, researchers have started to examine the impact of migration on peasant women in post-socialist China. To date, most studies on this topic have centred on migrant women working in the entertainment sectors (Zheng, 2004), service industries (Gaetano, 2004), and in South China's export-oriented special economic zones (SEZs) (Pun, 2005; Yu & Pun, 2008). These studies have

provided important insights into the effect of migration on gender relationships, as well as female rural workers' agency within the nexus of institutional barriers, global capitalism, and rural family life. In the next section I adopt a gendered perspective and take a brief look at the pattern of rural-to-urban migrant women, or in other words, the Dagongmei.

The Making of the Dagongmei

Figure 6: The Dagongmei working on the assembly line of an electronics factory in Shenzhen, 2018. Courtesy of *Dongfang IC*.

In post-socialist China, female Dagong workers are usually called as the Dagongmei. This identity stands in contrast to the Maoist, non-sexualised subject of *Gongren*, and entails a process of sexualisation within labouring bodies. In Chinese "*mei*" means young, single women, which denotes not only gender but also marital status. For Chinese women, marriage is seen as the formal entry into the patrilineal social order. As such, whatever subject position the Dagongmei may occupy in the city, it is viewed as temporary, because their "real" and "complete" subjectivity can only be obtained when they return to the village, "settle down" (*andingxialai*), and become wives, daughter-in-law, and finally mothers (Pun, 2005). Together with the term Dagong, the Dagongmei signifies an inferior working identity inscribed with capitalist labour relations and patriarchal gender roles.

In terms of the Dagongmei's prospective occupations in the city, as Fan (2003) observes, the urban labour market in post-Mao China is highly segregated, and that rural-to-urban migrant labours are segregated by gender. In China, as in the west, women are associated with domestic environment and reproductive labour. In general, women are stereotyped as passive, dedicated care givers, and their occupations in urban workplace are seen as the extension of their gender roles in patriarchal family. Migrant women, in particular, are expected to be obedient, submissive, and good at doing works that require high precision (Chang, 2008). In addition, the Dagongmei are disadvantaged in urban job market due to their lack of education. Under the patrilineal and patrilocal tradition, after marriage young rural women will join their husband's family and no longer devote their resources to their natal family. As a result, rural families usually regard their unmarried daughters as outsiders and are not willing to invest in their education or other forms of personal development. Hence, the Dagongmei as an inadequately educated, disposable, and submissive workforce is "especially attractive to a labour regime that pursues profit maximisation at the expense of worker's benefits and career development" (Fan, 2003, p. 28). These young women usually work at the assemble lines of labor-intensive factories, or in service industries as waitresses, domestic workers, shop assistants, and prostitutes.

For rural girls, the unequal gender relation as well as the vulnerable subject position that they occupy in the countryside act as the motivating force for their migration. Researchers have shown that rural-to-urban migration acts as an important opportunity for rural women to escape gender-related violence and oppressive domestic chores, and sometimes even an early death (Murphy, 2009; Jing, Wu, & Zhang, 2010). In China, the suicide rate in rural areas from 1995 to 1999 was three times that of cities, and among young rural adults 20-25 years of age, the suicide rate for women was 200% higher than in men (Philips, Li, & Zhang, 2002). In recent years, however, the suicide rate of rural women under 35 has dropped by as much as 90% (*The Economist*, 2014). Considering the fact that in China modest improvement has been made in suicide prevention and/or mental health service, most scholars believe that rural-to-urban migration, though under

considerable restrictions and discriminations, has been the salvation of many rural women (*The Economist*, 2014).

Like their counterparts in other developing countries, through rural-to-urban migration the Dagongmei can temporarily free themselves from the patriarchal authority and patrilineal family order. In many cases, these young rural girls may discover better subject positions within the broader horizons of the cities. However, we should also note that in the city, the Dagongmei often become the victims of sexual discrimination, harassment, and abuses. In addition, they face considerable pressures and stigmatisation relating to their tastes and styles, especially those linked to gender and sexuality, from both popular media and urban dwellers. Scholars have found that in post-socialist China, bodies of the Dagongmei are often described as rustic, rough, clumsy, and dirty (Zheng, 2004; Sun, 2004; Pun, 2005; Yan, 2008). Their "country bumpkin" look stands in sharp contrast to the refined and stylish appearance of city women, whose images are associated with luxury goods and modern lifestyles. Official and popular media often sneer at the Dagongmei's outdated attires, dark skin colour (a peasant signifier associated with outdoor labour and excessive sun exposure), and "uncivilised" habits (i.e., their hygiene practices), all of which distinguish them unfavourably from urban women, who, armed with trendy apparels and whitening makeup, have constantly been defined as "the most beautiful scenery in the city" (Chu, as cited in Sun, 2004, p. 84). The message to the Dagongmei is that, unless they emulate the style of their urban sisters, they have no place in a modernised city. In this sense, the Dagongmei's modernisation is inseparable from the post-socialist discourse of Chinese fashion.

The Dagongmei and Chinese Fashion

In Western academia, a few studies covering Chinese fashion have emerged from disciplines like History (Finnane, 2008; Steele & Major, 1999), Cultural Studies (Wu, 2009) and Fashion Studies (Tsui, 2010). In *Changing Clothes in China: Fashion, History, Nation* (2008), Antonia Finnane investigates Chinese fashions in their political, economic, and cultural contexts from the late imperial era to the present. Valerie Steele and John Major's work, *China Chic: East Meets*

West (1999) also focuses on the changing dress in Chinese history, such as the dragon robes of the imperial China, *qipao* (cheongsam) and Mao's suit of the modern period, and the return of Western fashion in post-socialist era. In the realm of Cultural Studies, as a contemporary account of modern Chinese fashion from 1978 to the present day, Wu Juanjuan's *Chinese Fashion: From Mao to Now* (2009) analyses how the trend and style of post-reformed China has been influenced by local policies, mass media, Western designs, and subordinated groups like queers and otakus. On the design spectrum, in her book *China Fashion: Conversations with Designers* (2010), Christine Tsui provides a fascinating insight based on the personal and professional experiences of several influential Chinese fashion designers born in the 1960s, '70s and '80s. Being a scholar as well as a managing director of a local Chinese fashion brand, Tsui's 'insider' account of contemporary Chinese fashion is both informative and scholarly.

All these studies are situated within specific political-historical contexts and they provide valuable interpretations on how these contexts influenced the particular consumerist and fashion patterns that emerged in China. Nonetheless, due to China's unique socio-political context, research studies on post-socialist Chinese fashion usually follow a Marxist political economic framework and try to discover how the macro-level socio-political alterations have shaped China's changing apparels. As a result, few studies on Chinese fashion have sought to understand how fashion in the post-Mao era is defined, experienced, and "dressed" in everyday life by Chinese people themselves. Moreover, although much of the research on Chinese fashion has focused on its gendered dimension, few studies examine "the normally hidden set of rules, codes and conventions" through which the ideological and semiotic connection between fashion, gender, and sexuality are "rendered universal and 'given' for the whole of society" (Hebdige, 1979, p. 9). Most importantly, most studies define Chinese fashion as an urban, and in most cases Western phenomenon, while the "outdated" countryside and its "rustic" female inhabitants are left unexamined. Hence what fashion means to the Dagongmei's experience of migration and life in the cities needs an in-depth examination.

As Finnane (1996, p. 99) claims, since the beginning of the 20th century, "what should Chinese women wear" has always been a national problem. However, most of the time, the term "Chinese women" does not include peasant females. After the end of imperial rule and the establishment of republican regime, Chinese women were able to show their presence in public sectors for the first time. This marked the emergence of modern women's fashion in China (Huang, 1999). To look for fashion during Republican period was to look at the intersections of newly emerged public spaces, for instance campuses, public parks, dance clubs and boulevards; and media landscapes constituted by newspapers, magazines, posters, and cinema (Huang, 1999). All these spaces were exclusively urban, and they constituted and verified the privileges of urban females in modernity and civilisation.

During the years of Mao's rule, women's fashion was regarded as backward and anti-revolutionary. In Mao's era, strong and hardy women in simple and genderless clothes adorned official billboards, and femininity was "overruled by the revolutionary spirit" (Wu, 2009, p. 4). The implementation of market reform in late 1970s marked the end of frugal ideal and has since led to the return of fashion and femininity. With the rise of neoliberal ideology, the post-socialist state has actively promoted both the market and cultural value of fashion, combining it into the figure of young middle-class women who embody "a cosmopolitan modernity through their consumerist practices and performance of femininity" (McWilliams, 2012, p. 166). For those women, fashion consumption is "not just about pleasure", but also "a post-socialist technology of the self by which Chinese young women, and, by metonymic association, the Chinese nation, enable themselves to transcend the specificities of place and identity and be part of the 'world'" (Rofel, 2007, p. 118).

While young, middle-class urban women construct a modernised female subjectivity through the discourse of fashion, the Dagongmei have seen their gender value depreciated in the new hegemonic and oppressive "system of recognition, hierarchy, and exclusion" (Baudrillard, 2001, p. 22). Advertisements and soap operas in mass media are filled with derogatory images of the

Dagongmei: they are most often portrayed as docile, dependent, and identical country bumpkins, lacking a consciousness of fashion, femininity, and *suzhi*. However, the script of "country bumpkins" (*tuqi*) coexists paradoxically with the promiscuous images of loose, hedonic "factory girls" (*changmei*). As "clean sheets of paper", once the Dagongmei are interpellated by all-powerful consumer desires as sexualised subjects, they are viewed as no longer pure and uncontaminated and are therefore no longer perceived to be desirable (Yan, 2003, p. 502).

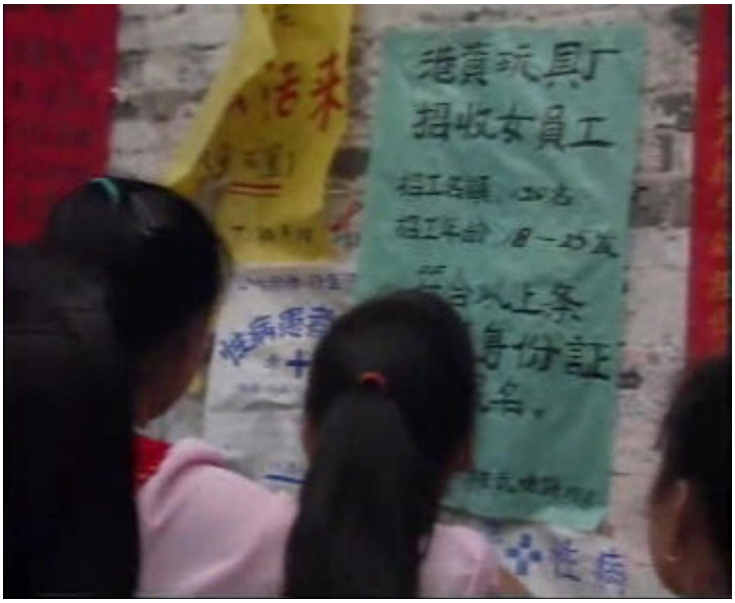

Figure 7: Migrant girls looking at a help-wanted advertisement posted by a Hong Kong-owned toy factory, next to which are posters of venereal disease clinics, TV series *Wailai Mei* (Girls from Outside), 1991.

However, the discursive regime of fashion that urban institutions impose upon the Dagongmei is never stable or permanent. Rather, it is subject to rural migrant women's tactical "repossession". In this sense, the Dagongmei's fashion is not just passively mirroring "the modern model of female beauty that was increasingly imagined and imaged by the mass media and popular magazines" but is also a site of tactical interventions (Pun, 2005, p. 158). Through the clothing and fashions available to them, the Dagongmei are able to create their own representations and may turn the strategies of fashion into their own tactical weapons.

Conclusion

The historical path of Chinese fashion has for a long time been overlooked by both media and scholars. Given both Chinese and Western media reports that contemporary Chinese people are "'discovering' fashion" (Finnane, 2005, p. 588), it is necessary for us to examine the history

of Chinese apparel. In Chinese context, clothing has played an important role in constructing and maintaining the class and gender hierarchy. In the case of Chinese women, her adorned body has always been a gendered subject of desire and discipline. After decades of rigorous sartorial control, fashion returned to the discourse of post-socialist China as a symbol of modernity and individual freedom, and became a crucial expression of female subjectivity.

In order to recognise the socio-cultural significance of the Dagongmei in transitional Chinese society, I tracked the origin and history of Chinese peasant's subject position from the 19th century to the present, analysed the construction of the Dagong worker and the Dagongmei in post-socialist Chinese urban discourse, and examined the way in which the Dagongmei was defined and interpellated in the discourse of Chinese fashion. Regardless of how the countryside and the peasant have been represented in the discourse of Chinese modernisation—as a rustic and backward burden, a revolutionary comrade, or a disposable Dagong worker—the subtext of the peasantry as a problem to national development has remain unchanged (Jacka, 2006). In terms of the Dagongmei, in dominant discourse they are mostly described as either naive country bumpkins or frivolous whores. Both representations indicate the Dagongmei's inadequacy of cultural capital, and such inadequacy is illustrated by their inappropriate dress codes.

The connotations of rural-to-urban migration, female migrant worker, and the dress code of the Dagongmei, however, are not static and can be displaced and altered by the Dagongmei through their everyday sartorial practices. In the following chapter, I analyse the relationship between the Dagongmei and fashion from a theoretical perspective, examine how fashion operates on the Dagongmei's body as norms and disciplines and how it can turn into a practice that involves individual agency and resistance.

CHAPTER 2:

Theorizing Fashion

Examining the relations between the Dagongmei, fashion, and modernity serves to demonstrate how rural migrant working girls work with fashion to mediate their relationship to the state, market and family. As discussed in the previous chapter, the discourse of fashion manifests the state's endeavour, with the help of the neoliberal market and patriarchal structure, to secure its control by reconstructing the Dagongmei as docile and backward, yet promiscuous and sexually available subjects. How then do rural-to-urban migrant women as subalterns deal with the contradictory images of sexual purity and promiscuity? How do they deal with style imposed by the dominant socio-economic order? How do they construct their own identity within the discourse of their capitalist and modernised "masters"? To address these questions, this chapter focuses on the theoretical approaches I employed to analyse how rural migrant women negotiate their styles and subjectivities in everyday life. However, before embarking on such an analysis, the term "fashion" needs to be examined and the way in which fashion and power are interrelated requires clarification. This involves considering these definitions within various bodies of literature and debates that have emerged around them. In particular, I find writings of Roland Barthes on the fashion system and Michel de Certeau on strategy/tactic as relevant and inspiring frameworks of interpretation in facilitating my analysis of the fashion scene of the Dagongmei in post-socialist China.

Roland Barthes and Fashion

Fashion and Language

In *The Fashion System*, Barthes (1967/1983) constantly stresses the way in which the ideas and methods of semiology can be adopted and exercised in his research of fashion. Using models derived from the work of Ferdinand de Saussure, Barthes provides a structuralist account of

fashion that clearly reflects a semiotic concern. At the heart of this account is the belief that language as well as the framework of structural linguistics can provide some universal methods for examining human activities that are not within the scope of the purely linguistic realm (Carter, 2003). Barthes then draws analogies between fashion and semiology, considering the way in which the system of dress functions like a system of language. According to Barthes, clothing resembles language in a number of ways. First, like language, clothing is adopted, appreciated, and utilised in a collective manner. Second, clothing is a strongly coded system which shares many similarities with grammar and vocabularies. There are sartorial equivalents of taboos (how certain pieces of clothes cannot be combined to make an outfit for certain individuals), slangs (i.e. donning Ben Sherman shirts and Dr Martin shoes to create a skinhead ensemble), and adjectives (i.e. different accessories). Third, clothing resembles language in that it "displays a synchronic density, but at the same time also has a diachronic dimension-history—so that it exhibits the dual aspects of system and process, structure and becoming" (Carter, 2003, p. 155).

The most important part of Barthes's fashion theory, as Carter (2003) argues, lies in his Saussurian approach to the relationships between language, signification, and clothes. In his book *Course in General Linguistics*, Saussure (1959/2011) emphasises the arbitrary nature of the language as a sign. In general, language can be viewed as "a system of mutually related values, in which arbitrary signifiers are connected to equally arbitrary signifieds to form signs" (Hebdige, 1979, p. 141). The meaning of sign is not embedded in the signifier, but is the result of signifying process, or in other words the "meaning-making" process of signification. Similarly, the meanings of clothes do not embed in their physical forms or components; rather, they are created and circulated by those who choose to wear and/or alter these clothes. As such, any study of clothes and fashion should take into consideration the social, cultural, and historical context under which the cloth or accessories is adorned.

This is the situation to be found in the 1980s' China, where the population in urban areas liked to dress in suit, a clothing that had "originated" in modern and "advanced" Western

countries. During that time, the fashion of the suit "trickle[d]-down" from the cities to the villages, and this Western garment was happily adopted by Chinese peasants (Wu, 2009).

Does this mean that the connotations of the suit in Chinese rural society remained the same as in Western countries or Chinese cities, or that what was happening was a kind of displaced "re-use" on the part of Chinese rural inhabitants (de Certeau, 1984, p. 30)? As a response, Wu (2009) examines how the meaning of suit changed as it circulated in the distinctive environment of Chinese countryside. In fact, Chinese peasants in the 1980s did not seem interested in the cultural connotations behind this Western attire; they simply regarded the suit as a fancy dress from the city and wore it in every occasion, even in farming.

Figure 8: A Chinese peasant doing farm work in a suit. Courtesy of *Sohu*.

Such displacement cannot be overlooked in the study of clothing and fashion. Firstly, the idea that a garment originating from a geographical, or socio-cultural "centre" like the cities is more authentic in its connotative meanings should give way to more in-depth studies on how a garment is taken up and imbued with certain meanings within specific context like Chinese countryside and among specific social groupings like Chinese peasants (Carter, 2003). Moreover, the rapid globalisation of fashion industries means that we should shed more lights on how the mass-produced garments designed by the mainstream fashion system, as for example, suits, can have their meanings altered by local circumstances (Carter, 2003).

Language/Speech Versus Costume/Clothing

Barthes applies Saussure's dual concepts of *langue* and *parole* to the system of fashion, by first defining the garment as a sign that is made up by costume (*le costume*) and clothing

(*habillement*); then he relates the costume and clothing to Saussure's notion of language (*langue*) and speech (*parole*). For the relevance of language and speech to costume and clothing, Barthes describes it in the following way:

> Language is a social institution, independent of the individual; it is a normative reservoir, "a system which is actualised in the speech of individual" (Saussure). Parole (Speech) is an individual act— "an actualisation of the function of language". It would appear to be extremely useful to make a similar distinction in clothing; there is an institutional component which is profoundly social and is independent of the individual; this takes the form of a systematic and normative reservoir and does not draw upon any external elements to guarantee its operations. We propose to call this dimension, which corresponds to Saussure's *langue, le costume*. The domain proper to the actions of the individual we will call "*habillement*". This is where the individual makes the institutional personal. Costume becomes a personal garment. Costume and clothing constitute a totality that we propose to call "*vêtement*". (Barthes, as cited in Carter, 2003, p. 157, italics in original)

The relation between costume and clothing is important to the study of fashion, as it demonstrates a basic tension between structure and agency. As the language of the fashion system, costume imposes parameters on how to dress; however, within these constraints, individuals can be creative, even rebellious, in their personal speech of costume and their practice of clothing. Similar tensions also appear in de Certeau's analysis of strategy and tactic, in which a tactic as an "art of the weak" can be adopted by subalterns to turn their master's code (fashion in this case) into metaphors of their own quest (de Certeau, 1984, p. 37). These theoretical works then provide a framework to advance an understanding of how disempowered individuals like the Dagongmei deal with the style imposed by the dominant socio-economic order. I now take up de Certeau's theory on strategy/tactic to demonstrate how it can be employed in examining the fashion scene of the Dagongmei.

Strategy, Tactic, and The Fashion Scene of the Dagongmei in Post-Socialist China

While Barthes's theory focuses on mainstream fashion from a structural perspective, Michel de Certeau's work sheds light on how the rules imposed by dominant powers can be appropriated by marginalised individuals in their everyday practices. In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, de Certeau divides the subjects of society into two groups: the makers and the users. On the one hand, the makers claim their ownership of market, mass media, and other mainstream socio-cultural sectors, and they act as the providers of culture. On the other hand, the users do not claim the ownership of a social space and thus perform as the "passive" consumers of a given culture. In dominant discourse, representations of marginalised users produced by mainstream media are biased and distorted, and more often than not, oversimplified. As de Certeau described:

> The presence and circulation of a representation (taught by preachers, educators, and popularizers as the key to socioeconomic advancement) tells us nothing about what it is for its users. We must first analyse its manipulation by users who are not its makers. Only then can we gauge the difference or similarity between the production of the image and the secondary production hidden in the process of utilization. (de Certeau, 1984, p. xiii)

Under the control of the ruling makers, the system of production is a means of power and a "mechanism of discipline", but marginalised users can "manipulate" these mechanisms through a tactical way of consumption, in short, "conform to them only in order to evade them" (p. xiv). In this regard, de Certeau emphasises the value of tactical consumptions and operations that people perform every-day in resisting the dominant strategies.

Strategy

In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, de Certeau describes strategy as "the calculus of force-relationships which becomes possible when a subject of will and power (a proprietor, an enterprise, a city, a scientific institution) can be isolated from an 'environment'" (p. xix). The state of isolation, as de Certeau claims, is achieved through (the institutionalised) subject's postulation of "a *place* that can be delimited as its *own* and serve as the base from which relations

with an *exteriority* composed of targets or threats (customers or competitors, enemies, the country surrounding the city, objectives and objects of research, etc.) can be managed." (p. 36, italics in original). In short, strategy rationalises its power through its self-claimed possession of a Cartesian place, that is, the place of its own power and will and independent from all other influences. In general, de Certeau outlines three points for the operation for a strategy. First, strategy is "*a triumph of place over time*" (p. 36, italics in original). Second, occupying a space is also "a mastery of places through sight" (p. 36). Finally, the power of strategic knowledge is generated from and rationalised by its self-claimed possession of a place of its own. It has a panoptic gaze through its locus of power, which enables it to anticipate and perceive potential threats and advantages.

In the case of China, since late 1970s the state has shifted its focus from collectivism and class conflict to economic growth and social order. *Fazhan* (development) and *Wending* (stability) became the new source of national strength (Yan, 2003). Central to this transformation is the mastery of neoliberalism as an "imperative worldview" as well as "the force of ethics" (Yan, 2003, p. 510). As Harvey defines it (2005, p. 2), neoliberalism stands for agendas of "political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free market, and free trade". For the "neoliberal value" of market exchange, neoliberalism considers it as "an ethic in itself, capable of acting as a guide to all human action, and substituting for all previously held ethical beliefs" (Treanor, as cited in Harvey, 2005, p. 3).

To take up the discussion of the value of poor people like the Dagongmei in neoliberal consumer society, I refer to Zygmunt Bauman's book *Work, Consumerism and the New Poor*, where he analyses the transformation of modern society from "a society guided by the work ethic" to "one ruled by the aesthetic of consumption" (Bauman, 2005, p. 2). Accompanied with such neoliberal transformation is the connotative change and charge of "being poor": If in

industrial times, the poor as an identity was associated with "the condition of being unemployed", now in neoliberal discourse it "draws its meaning primarily from the plight of a 'flawed consumer'" (p. 1). The incapability of a person as consumer leads to self-depreciation, social degradation, and "internal exile - shut off or excluded from the social feast to which others gained entry" (p. 38), and the only way for one to end such miserableness is to internalise the aesthetic of consumption and perform the "consumer spirit"–endless shopping with incessant desires (p. 29).

Through the strategy of consumption, neoliberal discourse interpellates (to use Althusser's term) people as consumers and deprives them of their power to construct alternative subjectivities. "On every successive visit to a market place" people as consumers "have every reason to feel in command", and they seldom question the ideological equation between consumer freedom and the freedom of individual choice (p. 26). For those who are unable to make a satisfying consumption, their socio-economic subordination is viewed by members of neoliberal society as the result of their personal flaws as well as the proof of their "choice incompetence" (p. 76).

In terms of the Dagongmei and urban fashion, in post-reformed China, the new interest in commodities and fashionable lifestyles has forged a new relationship between people and their identities, so that individuals are classified not so much by their occupation in the system of production but instead by their knowledge and capacity in style consumption. The all-powerful technology of consumption constructs a strategic site that embeds the language of class, gender, and social distinction into the commodified sartorial discourse, through which the eye of urban dwellers transforms undisciplined peasant women into passive Dagong workers who can be observed and measured, and thus controlled and incorporated into the urban context of fashion. Beneath its impartial, universalised surface, the urban dress code becomes an ideological discourse which refuses "to be made to examine the premises on which it is founded" (Hall, 1977, p. 325). Uncovering the ideological dimension of fashion strategies requires us to locate

and pry open the invisible seam between representations, language, and reality, and here the concept of tactic allows one to examine how individuals "make do" (de Certeau, 1984, p. xv) with the fashion norms that are imposed on them.

Tactic

In contrast to a strategy, according to de Certeau (p. 37), a tactic is "a calculated action determined by the absence of a proper locus". Since "the space of a tactic is the space of the other", it must "play on and with a terrain imposed on it and organized by the law of a foreign power" (p. 37). Thus, a tactic is unable to claim its independence from surrounding context and fails to acquire a panoptic, objective vision. As a result, it does not have a solid space to store and maintain its achievements and fails to generate any strategic knowledge or organise any long-term project. Lacking its own place, however, gives a tactic an ephemeral mobility through which marginalised users can appropriate elements available to them in the maker's place and use these elements for their own advancement. In short, a tactic is "an art of the weak" (p. 37).

In this thesis, the "weak" represents the subordinated Dagongmei whose interpretation of fashion and modernity coexists (albeit veiled) and runs parallel to the dominant discourse. Moving between the city and the countryside, the Dagongmei are denied by both sites as outsiders and are not entitled with strategic power to maintain a space of their own. As a result, they have to grab every sizeable opportunity available in the space of others and try hard to make maximum advantage from their mobility and fluidity. For these women, the art of the weak is realised through a clever utilisation of what is available to them within the dominant context of neoliberalism, urban modernity, and fashion. Adherence to urban fashion, then, does not necessarily mean their unconditional submission to a stigmatised definition of themselves as culturally backward and sexually unbridled, but rather, can be viewed as a "ruse" (p. 39) that rural women adopt to "insinuate" (p.105) themselves into the discursive and institutional orders of the state, market, and family.

Consumer Production and The Appropriation of the Master's Space

De Certeau argues that under the passive label of consumers, ordinary people are able to "make (*bricolent*) innumerable and infinitesimal transformations of and within the dominant cultural economy in order to adapt it to their own interests and their own rules" (pp. xiii-xiv), and they make such transformations mainly through consumption. Consumption, as de Certeau argues, is in itself a tactical process, a "silent production"; it "does not manifest itself through its own products, but rather through its *ways of using* the products imposed by a dominant economic order" (pp. xii-xiii, italics in original).

De Certeau provides two examples of the subversive consumption-as-production: "*la perruque*" and the walker in the urban space. De Certeau defines *la perruque* as "the worker's own work disguised as work for his employer" (p. 25). In terms of how it functions within the space of the employer, de Certeau gives an example of a worker using left-over materials and machinery at the workplace to create something "precisely not directed toward profit" and based on his or her own needs (p. 25). Other examples of *la perruque* include "a secretary's writing a love letter on 'company time'" and "a cabinetmaker's 'borrowing' a lathe to make a piece of furniture for his living room" (p. 25). In the space of employers, the worker

> cunningly takes pleasure in finding a way to create gratuitous products whose sole purpose is to signify his own capacities through his *work* and to confirm his solidarity with other workers or his family through *spending* his time in this way. (de Certeau, 1984, pp. 25-26, italics in original)

With a tactical consumption of time, space and left-over materials, the workers are able to install their own experiences into the space of their masters, thus challenging the disciplinary power of the industrial place.

De Certeau's example of the walker demonstrates how tactical subject diverts the discipline of the urban space, whereby the strategy imbedded in urban roads which force the pedestrians to follow specific direction are countered. Rather than leaving the cities, the walkers make their

ways through the established path with tactical short-cuts and detours, and they distort the ideological connection between the given space and its "spatial signifiers" by "making choices among the signifiers of the spatial 'language'" in walking or by "displacing them through the use he makes of them" (pp. 98-99). In short, the marginalised individuals exercise their resistance through a tactical appropriation of signs and symbols towards their own interests without openly challenging the strategies laid out by the dominant discourse.

De Certeau offers a valuable base for understanding the power relations within a transitional society that is constituted by heterogeneous and tactical individuals. However, it is important to avoid a simplistic reading of the manifestations of power analysed in de Certeau's theory. First, the identity of makers and users are not mutually exclusive. Second, the resistance of people and their awareness of their tactical power varies. Finally, the agency of subordinate individuals and the power of their tactical practices should not be overestimated.

In terms of the subject of my thesis, I argue that the Dagongmei are challenging the well-established landscape of representation in which they are portrayed as either rustic or sexually promiscuous. As discoverers of their own path in the urban space, the Dagongmei produce through their tactical navigations something that demonstrates their ways of "making do", ways of dealing with an imposed position of inferiority and marginalisation.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I briefly introduced the theories and the works that informed this thesis. Both Barthes's analysis on fashion system and de Certeau's dual concepts of strategy and tactic help us to understand the operation of fashion discourse in neoliberal, post-socialist Chinese society and how the Dagongmei is able to negotiate her identity and subjectivity by the bodily practice of dress. In particular, de Certeau's concept of tactic demonstrates the subversive potential of marginalized groups like the Dagongmei in resisting the the dominant discourse without openly challenging or leaving it. By "making do" with the repressive urban code of fashion in a tactical

manner, the Dagongmei can appropriate the time, space, and resources of their "masters" and consume them for their own benefit. The rest of this thesis specially deals with how the state, market, and family in post-socialist China attempt do discipline the body of the Dagongmei through the discourse of fashion, and how the Dagongmei as tactical fashion consumers resist the disciplinary power in the sphere of fashion consumption.

CHAPTER 3:

From Country Bumpkins to the Dagongmei: The Subject Formation of Rural Female Migrant Workers in Post-Socialist China

Departing from the Village

> People (*dajia*, referring to migrants, including the speaker herself) don't understand, but people escape from the countryside like fleeing from death. This really is worth analysis. Why is it like this to such an extent? Even if we die, we want to die outside! It's not that we don't miss home. We miss home. Time and again, we return home, but time and again we come back out. It's not a single person doing this, but a whole generation. Coming out is to meet suffering (*zaozui*), but (we) still want to come out… (A veteran migrant woman from Jiangsu, as cited in Yan, 2008, p. 44)

According to Marx (1844/1964), the worker is not working when he is at home, and when the worker is working he is not at home. For Marx, "at home" as a concept connotes not only a geographic location, but also "an existential mode of being by which a man or woman actualises his or her being in the world" (Pun, 2005, p. 64). However, most female inhabitants in the village of post-socialist China do not feel "at home" in rural space, rather, they choose to leave home by selling their labour to the capitalists in the cities. As Pun Ngai (2005) claims, no violence or force is involved when Chinese rural girls make their decisions to leave home. Most of the Dagongmei have a clear understanding before leaving their village that they will work in a sweatshop with low salaries and poor conditions. They know both the neoliberal market and the capitalist employers will treat them as disposable commodities. They are aware of the existence of a hierarchy between the modernised city and the backward countryside, and that they are going to be mocked, stigmatised, and humiliated by both mainstream media and urban dwellers (Pun, 2005). In short, they know quite well that "coming out is to meet suffering". Nevertheless, rural girls leave the countryside in a manner akin to "fleeing from death", hoping that the result of their migration might change their individual "fate" and bring a better future.

Most researches on the individual motivations fuelling rural to urban migration in China have emphasised the importance of the "push-pull" factors. It is argued that the rural-to-urban migration is pushed by rural poverty and pulled by the burgeoning urban economy (Lin, 2015). However, in China, the migration of young rural girls involves a more complex decision-making process. When being asked about the reason for their migration, the common response among the Dagongmei is "I had nothing to do at home (*mei shi gan*)" (Jacka, 2006, p. 133). In general, it highlights the marginalisation of young, unmarried women in rural society. As Jacka (2006) points out, shortage of land and the inequality in the gender division of labour in the countryside means that there is little possibility for young and unmarried rural girls to find a stable source of income in the village: Farm work is usually done by their parents and other male relatives, and in the countryside the few non-agricultural occupations are usually only available to men. The reproductive roles that young women usually perform in the private sphere of family do not bring any income and thus are not considered as work in rural China. Labour like domestic chores and babysitting do not bring young women any bargaining power within their family; they are just "nothing" -- "*mei shi gan*" (Jacka, 1997, pp. 133-134). In this sense, "*mei shi gan*" signifies not only rural girls' socio-economic subordination in the countryside but also their sense of boredom and worthlessness (Pun, 1999; Jacka, 2006).

In areas where rural-to-urban migration is common among local young women, it is more likely for those who have not yet departed from the village to show a sense of boredom, worthlessness, and loneliness (Murphy, 2004). It is apparent that the opportunity to escape the marginalised subject position in rural society, combined with the socio-cultural superiority of the city over the countryside, has contributed to a common agreement among rural girls that the village is nothing but a wasteland.

Recent research has also shown that the migration of the younger Dagongmei is usually not motivated by economic reasons or by past experiences of deprivation or sufferings (Jacka, 2006; Pun & Li, 2006; Lin, 2015). Rather, young rural girls are more interested in trying new

experiences, broadening their horizons, testing new identities, and promoting self-development through new styles available in the cities. For example, when being asked about the reason for her migration, a young rural girl openly expresses her appreciation for the cosmetic transformations that the older Dagongmei have undergone in urban space:

> Recently all the girls in our village went out and worked in the cities as Dagongmei. Before their departure everyone wore rustic clothes, but they all changed after coming back from the cities. They dressed in fashionable clothes with whiter skin, and all of them looked prettier than before. Their transformation really allured me. (Qiuyue, as cited in Pun and Li, 2006, p. 10)

In particular, this rural girl mentioned her preference for a brighter skin tone. As Gaetano (2008, p. 633) observed, the Dagongmei commonly describe farming with the expression "being burnt by the sun". In Chinese elite traditions, dark skin colour is always linked with low social status, thus the Dagongmei's remark on farming makes an "explicit connection between agriculture, dark skin, and class" (p. 633).

Being bombarded with advertisements that promote an urbanised fashion standard of white skin, double eyelids, slim body and dyed hair, rural girls are drawn by modern looks, fashionable commodities, and the beauty of pale skin. They wish to acquire both knowledge and capital for trendy consumption; and through the purchase of sunscreen, makeup, and stylish apparels, migrant women hope to disassociate themselves from the image of rustic country bumpkins, and instead embody a cosmopolitan femininity.

Figure 9: Pedestrians passing a sunscreen advertisement in Shanghai. Courtesy of *China Daily*.

Between Us and Them

> Some Beijing people are a bit scary (*kepa*). For example, on the bus, they'll say: "Look at this outsider! The bus is so crowded, what are you doing here?" It's like we're dirty; no one wants us near! (Liu, as cited in Gaetano, 2008, p. 634)

The dreams and desires for the Dagongmei in the end have great costs. The work and struggles of migrant women are neither accepted nor appreciated by the urban societies. Often described as *mangliu* (a discriminatory term against rural migrants, which literally means "blind drifters"), the Dagongmei, while being urgently required by booming urban modernisation, are mocked and stigmatised in official discourse, popular media, and daily conversations among urban dwellers (Jacka, 2006). In the next section, I look at how assumptions, ideas and attitudes embedded in the very terms used to refer to the Dagongmei are played out in both official and popular media, and the ways in which representations of the Dagongmei in mainstream media both reflect and contribute to dominant discourses that inscribe and underscore the hierarchical relationship between the city and the countryside.

Suzhi

Most analytical reports on rural migrants published by official discourse portray them in an ambivalent manner. One such article, published by a magazine sponsored by Henan provincial government, begins by claiming that:

> Nowadays the number of rural-to-urban migrant workers in China has reached 260 million and the migrant worker has become an important force of Chinese modernisation. (Zhou, 2015, p. 44)

It subsequently reports:

> However, the overall low skills and low *suzhi* of migrant workers has restricted their choice of occupations, growth of income and career development. (Zhou, 2015, p. 44)

Despite all the contributions that they have made in the project of modernisation, rural migrant workers are excluded from the discourse of modernity and national development due to their lack of *suzhi*.

Being inadequately translated as "quality", in post-socialist China *suzhi* stands for a subject's value/competitiveness/respectability in the society. As a form of value-coding, *suzhi* makes possible a "translation or a transvaluation between human subjectivity, culture, and consciousness on the one hand and the rate of (neoliberal) Development on the other hand" (Yan, 2003, p. 498). In post-Mao China the term *suzhi* first appeared in the context of a eugenics slogan, which literally translated, states: "Control the number of the population and improve the quality of the population" (*kongzhi renkou shuliang, tigao renkou suzhi*), according to which the rural population in post-Mao China appeared as an obstacle to national development (Yan, 2003). Large in numbers and low in quality, it was perceived that the rural population prevented the country and its educated urban population from "catching up with the rest of the world" (*yu shijie jiegui*) (Yan, 2003, 2008). Together with the image of extreme poverty among rural households, in both official and popular discourse, the rural population was defined not only as poor and backward, but also as "lacking a *consciousness* of development that the post-Mao Chinese state has been thriving to foster" (Yan, 2003, p. 495, italics in original).

After four decades of reform, *suzhi* now occupies the central position in a number of discourses relating to modernity and national power (Jacka, 2006). Despite its importance in the discourse of social advancement, the content of *suzhi* has always been a myth (Yan, 2003; Jacka, 2006). Nonetheless, as Jacka (2006, p. 41) argues, the key to understanding the significance of *suzhi* is not to find out its precise definition; rather, it is important to recognise *suzhi*'s "catch-all" nature and its strong power of signification. One of the most important characteristics of *suzhi* is its flexibility such that the *suzhi* of an individual or of a state is not static but rather it depends upon the amount of efforts that the subjects put in their *suzhi* cultivation (Jacka, 2006). The discourse of *suzhi* as the criteria of one's value and respectability in transitional Chinese society

> feeds and answers to new, very powerful desires and anxieties in the populace, for the possibilities of attaining higher levels of *suzhi* for oneself, of competing with others over who has the most *suzhi*, of feeling superior because of one's *suzhi* and looking down with either sympathy or contempt on those who have less, has proved enormously enticing. (Jacka, 2006, p. 41)

These new desires and anxieties have quickly been utilised by both the state and neoliberal economy as strategies for their hegemonic rules. On the one hand, the state disciplines the rural population in the name of "raising the *suzhi* of Chinese population" through a variety of disciplinary laws and regulations; on the other hand, individuals are responsible for their "self-development" (*ziwo fazhan*), and the efforts to improve their *suzhi* include the consumption of goods and services that signify their cultural capital (p. 41).

In this sense, the road to high *suzhi*, to a privileged place in society, requires "daily visits to the market place" (Bauman, 2005, p. 26). In post-Mao China, people in both rural and urban areas have been surrounded by state campaigns and commercial advertising that promote the dreams of a "well-off" society (*xiaokang shehui*) and that encourage individuals to gain higher *suzhi* by increasing their expenditures (Jacka, 2006, Yan, 2008). As a crucial means of *suzhi*, consumption has been internalised among Chinese population, regardless of whether they are rich or poor, as a necessity; and "that internalised pressure, that impossibility of living one's life in any other way, reveals itself to them as in the form of a free exercise of will" (Bauman, 2005, p. 26).

From late 1970s, the proliferation of commodities as the result of market reform has presented Chinese people with an "unprecedented range of options", which has allowed consumption to be regarded as a "free expression" of one's inner self (Zheng, 2004, p. 88). However, "freedom to choose does not mean that all choices are right—there are good and bad choices, better and worse choices" (Bauman, 2005, p. 76). In this sense, the competence of a person is demonstrated by one's ability to make the right choice of purchase. In terms of the Dagongmei, it is believed that her lack of taste prevents her from utilising commodities as a tool

of personal development, therefore her low *suzhi* should be identified as an "aggregate product of wrong individual choices" (Bauman, 2005, p. 76). In this regard, the stigmatisation of the Dagongmei in the discourse of *suzhi* is naturalised as the proof of her lack of competence, and her inferiority can only be transcended through the guidance of the fashion-savvy urban dwellers.

Style Consumption

If falling into the category of low *suzhi* is the outcome of choice, then the recovery from the state of low *suzhi* is also a matter of choice. In reformed China, the right choice of *suzhi* is made through appropriate lifestyle investment. Since the 1990s, in the dominant discourse, the controversial figures of the nouveau riche have given way to the images of "successful figures" (*chenggong renshi*) and fashion-chasing consumers (Yan, 2008). As the literary critic Wang Xiaoming describes it, the modern "successful figure" in post-Mao China is usually

> a middle-aged male with a slightly protruding stomach and dressed in well-ironed attire. He is very rich and drives a new BMW to his office. He may have studied in America and cultivated a Western style. Before hurriedly stepping out of his front door on his way to sign a contract with a foreign enterprise, he does not forget to kiss his beautiful wife. (Wang, as cited in Yan, 2008, p. 153)

As Yan (2008) suggests, the "successful figure" constitutes a role model for a confident, post-reform generation of well-

Figure 10: Real estate advertisement in China: "The Place for Successful Figures—You have been working hard and have 'met the conditions', of course you should choose to live in a better house."

educated, upwardly mobile urbanites in an increasingly globalised setting. For those people, western lifestyles and prestigious brands constitute the language of self-development, as they ambitiously make their adventure in a neoliberal world of competition, market, and materialism.

If the "successful figure" is usually male, then "the consumer, a continually thriving, celebrated, forefront figure in the post-Mao imagination of modernity, is often associated with middle-class women" (Yan, 2008, p. 159). For an expanding number of young, well-educated urban women, the consumption of Western luxury goods and designer labels constitutes a crucial strategy articulating a new cosmopolitan female subjectivity, a subjectivity "that is always internationally oriented and seeks to join a global sisterhood of like-minded young women that celebrates agency and empowerment often in a consumerist rhetoric of commodity ownership and conspicuous display" (Chen, 2013, p. 558). By actively hunting for the latest designs and fashion, middle-class women in post-socialist China are able to accrue their feminine *suzhi* citizenships and socio-cultural competitiveness in an increasingly neoliberalised social context.

Figure 11: The opening of Cartier's flagship store in December 2004, attended by Chinese celebrities and prestigious luxury patrons. Courtesy of Yong He.

While urban women build their identity through fashion consumption, working class women like the Dagongmei have seen their value depreciate in the discourse of fashion, consumption, and body culture (Yan, 2008). This is most evident in the way that popular media and urban elites describe the Dagongmei and her sartorial practices in a derogatory manner. For example, on Chinese social media WeChat, Gogoboi, a famous Chinese fashion blogger who "has a strong relationship with luxury brands

such as Louis Vuitton, Fendi, and Givenchy", openly criticised the Dior's S/S 2018 collections by claiming that these styles were in line with the "cheap" taste of the Dagongmei (Pan, 2017). In his post, Gogoboi compared Dior's new design to that of the local Chinese womenswear brand Ayilian, a brand that is known for its vulgar style and its reputation among urban consumers as "the Dagongmei's staples".

Figure 12: The Sale of Ayilian clothes in shopping mall.

According to fashion elites like Gogoboi, the Ayilian-like Dior is at risk of losing its prestigious position in the world of haute couture. To regain its reputation, this brand must resonate with its traditional customers—the middle-class women living in the metropolis. Like Gogoboi's post, articles about fashion published by urban media frequently regard the style of the Dagongmei as a negative example to avoid. In these articles, the image of rural women is linked with immaturity, poor taste, and out-of-date fashion. The message to rural women is that, unless they transform themselves, they have no place in the city.

The Flawed Outsider

Based on her study of migration in the Philippines, Lillian Trager (1988) argues that young women migrating between the countryside and the city move between these two subject positions with ease. Nonetheless, as Jacka (2006, p. 212) points out, the degree of ease with which one shifts between different identities hinges on "various contingencies including cultural expectations, social context, and the gap between subject positions that must be negotiated". She argues that in Trager's case, due to convenient and frequent rural-urban travels and communications, most inhabitants in rural Philippines have been exposed to urban culture and lifestyle prior to migration (Jacka, 2006). As a result, they feel less confused when entering the city and experience less difficulty in shifting between rural and urban identity. However, in terms

of the Dagongmei in transitional China, their urban transformation is much harder to achieve. For most young rural women who travel to the city for work, this is the first time they have experienced the urban environment and the first time they have been given paid work (Jacka, 2006). Many girls are shocked by the lifestyle in the city and they struggle to learn how to fit in with their new identity and how to adjust their rural bodies to the urban context.

In the city, the Dagongmei are forced to bear discriminations from urbanites against their bodies and their identities as flawed outsiders in the discourse of urban modernity and style consumption. For instance, Pun (2003) records the unpleasant experience of three Dagongmeis at the Window of the World, a theme park in Shenzhen with replicas of some of the world's most famous attractions like Tower Bridge and Eiffel Tower. As a "heterotopic space", Window of the World "enables the dreams of the Dagongmei to connect their immediate social location in Shenzhen to a cosmopolitan imaginary" (p. 485). Being separated from the "real world" by thick walls, the Window of the World as a tourist site is only available to those who can afford the expensive entrance ticket. In this respect, this theme park with its high entrance fee not only symbolises the urban ideal of modernization and global citizenship, but also "renders visible the divide between the insiders and outsiders" to the modern scene of Chinese urban space (p. 485). Compared to the urban rich, the Dagongmei has to make greater sacrifice in order to entre this space. Being "mesmerized by this enigmatic dream world", the Dagongmei's absorption into this urban wonderland is believed to "brings with it a certain compensation in their self-completion as 'cultured' subjects" (p. 485).

During this visit, Pun was not only impressed by the joy and excitement expressed by the Dagongmei in their site-seeing and photo-taking activities, but also the disciplinary and exclusionary gaze of urban tourists projected onto the rural girls' "abject" bodies. Although what these rural girls were doing was no different from that done by other urban visitors, as for example, taking "endless snapshots, bouncing along in a jovial mood" (p. 485), compared with the affluent outfits of urban tourists, the Dagongmei appeared rustic even in "their best jeans and

T-shirts" (p. 485). When the girls were too busy taking photos and temporarily forgot other people waiting in line for photo-shooting (like every other devoted tourist did), a middle-aged male suddenly called out, "Would you please step aside (*rangkai yidian*)? Dagongmei! Why don't you get some work done at the factory instead of loafing around!" (p. 485). The three Dagongmeis were shocked by his words and found themselves interpellated as abject disposable workers who should stay in factories rather than wandering in the leisure space of affluent urban tourists. As Pun points out, although commercial sites like the Window of the World are supposed to open to everyone "for a price", in reality they do not treat the Dagongmei in an equal manner but instead inscribe the latter's abjectness "even more forcibly" (p. 485).

Although the Dagongmei are eager to follow a cosmopolitan lifestyle and attempt to adjust their bodies to urban environment through style and leisure consumption, they nonetheless encounter exclusions and discriminations in their contact with urban institutions and city dwellers. It does not take a long time for most Dagongmeis to recognise their position in urban discourse as outsiders: the city is a dazzling, magnificent space, full of skyscrapers, theme parks, shopping malls, and luxurious experiences, but it is not a place for them (Pun, 2003). And regardless how many years they spend in the city, as rustic, abject disposable workers, the Dagongmei will always be labelled by urban discourse as flawed outsiders.

Country Bumpkin/Promiscuous Whore

As Zheng (2004, p. 90) argues, the body of the migrant woman is "the battleground for the formation of hegemonic cultural norms". On the one hand, migrant women's rustic bodies need to be "dressed up" with the expertise of modernised urbanites; on the other hand, once rural migrant women dress up as lustful and sexualised subjects, their "unbridled" sexuality and their desire to "occupy" the city are seen as a potential threat to the state, market and patriarchal family values. As a result, despite its active promotion of rural-to-urban migration, state propaganda constantly calls for the return of migrant women to their "rustic" rural hometown and "backward"

reproductive role. The Dagongmei, defined by their contradictory images of sexual purity, and promiscuity, have little room for expressing agency.

Country Bumpkin

Between 1980s and 1990s most analytical articles on rural to urban migration published in Chinese media tended to associate many social problems with both migration and migrant labour (Jacka, 2006). These analyses were based on a clear divide between "us" (the city) and the "other" (countryside), regarding rural migrant workers as troubles and burdens. The aim of these articles was to express an anxiety about urban security and the stability of rural/urban divide, as well as the urgency for the state to find the best way to control and discipline the unregulated rural migrants (Jacka, 2006). Overall, these narratives related the identity of the migrant to the image of rustic, low *suzhi,* and evil rural "other" against which urban civilisation and the social order are constructed and maintained as good, valued and stable.

Figure 13: A Returning Dagongmei at Shanghai Railway Station, 2013. Courtesy of Yang Yanzheng.

However, from the 2000s, a growing number of articles began to view rural migrants in a positive manner and regarded rural-to-urban migration as "an indication of the dynamism of development pointing toward the eventual connection of interior areas with the market at large" (Yan, 2008, p. 146). It was in this context that the camera of *Xinmin Evening News* captured the migrant women at the bus and train stations of Shanghai. The photo, taken by Yang Yanzheng, was accompanied with a short descriptive message by the photographer:

> In the past few days, Shanghai had experienced a peak in the number of labour migrants returning home for Chinese New Year. Dressed fashionably like the real Shanghai girls

(*Shanghai mei*), the outsider (*wailai*) Dagongmei arrived at train and bus stations and embarked on a journey home. (Yang, 2013)

The message accompanying the photo illustrates the title of this report: The Dagongmei "return home in silken robes" (*yijinhuanxiang*), which aims to both entertain its urban readers and to share with them a privileged position in modernity and fashion. On the one hand, the message links the image of Dagongmei to that of the Shanghai girls, two figures typically positioned at "opposite ends of the backward/modern spectrum" in transitional Chinese society (Yan, 2008, p. 146). On the other hand, through terms like "outsider" and "real", the message points out the apparent flaws embedded in the image of the modern-looking Dagongmei and indicates that the fashion of rural woman is nothing but a parody of that of the urban middle-class woman. As such, the message implies that the returning Dagongmei can only become subjects of cosmopolitan femininity when they go back to their rustic rural hometown, letting the (presumably urban) reader to "smile knowingly" and to be aligned with the author as the privileged group of modern urbanites: the urban dwellers are more informed than villagers in strategies of fashion, and they would never misrecognise the returning Dagongmei as Shanghainese (Yan, 2008, p. 147). "Discernment and knowingness" are two essential preconditions for "shared amusement" between the author and the reader of this news and confirm them as the true owners of the city (Yan, 2008, p. 147). Overall, only urban elites are privileged with the agency and the ability to dress up their bodies by means of apparels and fashion, whereas the Dagongmei are regarded as passive, docile, dependent, and identical country bumpkins, lacking a consciousness of fashion, femininity, and the knowledge of style consumption.

Promiscuous Whore

In urban discourse, the Dagongmei's script of "country bumpkins" coexists paradoxically with the image of sexual promiscuity. The columnist Tong Xia, for example, claims:

Many (rural women) have precocious sex biology but late-maturing sexual psychology. They experience strong sexual desires and weak sex control. That is why peasant women

> will offer their virginity to their male partners in the most unbearable and unsustainable sexual hunger. (Tong, as cited in Zheng, 2004, p. 89).

According to urban elites like Tong, rural woman's early sexual development, undisciplined sexual desires, and low *suzhi* easily degrade her into a promiscuous subject and a "fallen woman" (*shizufunǚ*, or prostitute). Compared to the more civilised urban middle-class woman, the low *suzhi* and sexually premature Dagongmei ought to be under stricter control in terms of their dress and behaviour, and subjected to greater punishment for choosing an inappropriate dress code.

Being in most cases defined as either country bumpkins or promiscuous whores, the Dagongmei have limited room for expressing their agency through fashion consumption. On the one hand, the Dagongmei face the pressure to conform to the ideal of metropolitan femininity; on the other hand, they are deeply concerned by the moral stigma attached to their bodies. The following article from *Rural Women* vividly conveys the Dagongmei's struggles in everyday life between fashion, sexual morality and norms of comportment:

> I still like to braid the type of plaits that only rural girls wear. When they see this, my friends shake their heads and say "They're so rustic! You're a silly girl, cut them off and be done with them!" I still like to wear the country clothes that I brought from home with me—things with high collars and long sleeves. My friends see them and say: "Such a hot day, look at what you're wearing! Are you still not willing to wear the clothes we helped you buy…"
>
> What makes everyone even more convinced that I'm a lovable bumpkin is that I never allow any of my roommates to shower with me. Because of these things they're always imitating me, laughing till they're sore in the stomach. One day three sisters decided to "reform" me, pushing and pulling me over to the dance hall. But when they got me to the entrance, I held onto the doorframe for dear life. By this time, they were panting and out of breath, but one of them had to ask, "Tell us, why don't you want to go?"
>
> That place isn't right for me…I don't have to tell you that."
>
> Then they attacked me en masse: "You're too feudal, too ignorant, we simply must 'reform' you!" And all I could say was, "I'm not feudal and I really don't want to seem ignorant. To tell you the truth, I enjoy watching other people's graceful dancing. I even envy them and wish I could be like that, but I can't." But they still wouldn't lay off, so in the end I said: "I'm going to wait until I've got a boyfriend and then I'll go dancing."

> They laughed themselves silly, but they could not persuade me. Actually, when I think about it, I feel a little ridiculous myself. Why am I like that? I feel I'd be embarrassed to hold my hand out to a man I don't know. And I feel that if I was to behave that way, I'd be turning bad, I'd be betraying the sincere, honest, upright village folk who brought me up. But I can't explain how I feel, even to myself.
>
> It's true, some say I'm "rustic," and I know I am, it's just that sometimes I feel very assured about being "rustic." But at other times it feels stupid, and a burden. You see, I've gradually come to understand: these days the model rural girl doesn't have to be like me. (Xiao Chun, as cited in Jacka, 2006, p. 229).

For the Dagongmei, signs of her rusticity are written on her clothes, hairstyles, language, manners, and body motions. In order to get rid of these signs of rural identity, the Dagongmei often learn from their peers, co-workers, urban dwellers, and the mass media about fashion, and they also spend a considerable amount of their salaries on clothes, cosmetics and other fashionable adornments. However, as Jacka (2006, p. 213) points out, it is unlikely that they can eliminate their differences and inferiorities "even on this superficial level". Similarly, Pun also considers the Dagongmei's attempt to adjust themselves to the dominant symbolic order through fashion consumption as a process of "negative hallucination":

> The dream of consumerist gratification, of transforming themselves into modern selves, and their pursuit of modish feminised beauty to disguise their rural identity could only result in reinforcing their class and gender differences…When the women workers decked themselves out to go shopping, they discovered that they failed to be recognised as the ideal consumers." (Pun, 2005, p. 162)

Contrary to the claim that consumption is a liberating force leading to the promotion of *suzhi*, modernity, and democratisation, in post-Mao neoliberal society the power of the Dagongmei's consumption is constrained by their wage and demolished by their status as disposable labour (Yan, 2008). Their salaries do not allow for a level of consumption that is able to raise their status to that of the desirable urban consumer subject. As flawed consumers, the Dagongmei are targets of surveillance and punishment in every urban public space. The urban management crew (*chengguan*) and local police keep a close eye on them, examine their bodies

for the traces of rurality, and throw them out of the city in periodic forced evictions that maintain "a clean and civil image of the city" (Yan, 2008, p. 177). In the face of the disciplinary power of the city, the Dagongmei's attempt to conceal their rurality through sartorial practice often ends up in vain. Jacka (2006, p. 213) writes that when she asked rural migrant women how the police are able to distinguish them from the urbanites given that they dress identically, some women believed that the police are able to tell from their accent that they were from the countryside; some replied: "we look different, we walk different"; the rest have no idea and just "shrugged their shoulders".

After spending some time in the city, usually the Dagongmei would find themselves being excluded by both rural and urban communities. The hegemonic power of rural/urban divide has been embedded in, and enforced through every urban space, which structurally determines the marginality of Dagongmei in urban society. Yet, most Dagongmeis feel that they can no longer return to the life in the village, and the villagers also regard them as outsiders. As a subaltern, the Dagongmei are haunted by a sense of "in-betweeness", because they belong to nowhere and have no place to go (Beynon, 2004). As one migrant woman wrote: "Rural people take me for a city person, but city people take me for a rural person. To both of my distant home village and to this city I am forever an outsider" (Mei, as cited in Jacka, 2006, p. 213).

The Dagongmei in post-socialist China have been struggling to find a proper sartorial representation that transcends the binarized stereotypes of the rustic virgin and the promiscuous whore, but in the end always find themselves trapped in deeper confusions. What, then, should a "model Dagongmei" be like in the dominant discourse of transitional China? In the next section, I attempt to explore the answer to this question by examining examples of typical representations of female migrants presented in both official and popular discourses.

Model Dagongmei in Dominant Discourse

The Returned Dagongmei

As a group, rural migrants are regarded by both dominant and popular discourse as backward and harmful to urban society. However, individual migrants are sometimes promoted by dominant discourse as models of self-development that provide inspiration to other rural people to follow. Reports about migrant women who have been awarded for their achievements in overcoming their poverty as well as low *suzhi* appeared constantly in both state and commercial media after 1990s (Jacka, 2006). Usually these women dropped out of school unwillingly and became the Dagongmei at an early age. After several years of enduring low wages, poor working conditions, and the abuse of urban managers, these women finally returned home with money and managed to set up their own business in the countryside (WCC Daily, 2013; Xinhua, 2014; Zhangjiakou News, 2015; Dai, 2015; Xu, 2018).

While labour performance occupies a central position as the qualifier for the value of these rural women, the urban discourse does not forget to discipline the returned Dagongmei on their image and consumption. For example, when commenting on a returned Dagongmei who once worked as a successful domestic worker in the city, the manager of her former agency said:

> Now when you look at her, although she still has that…that kind, that bit of…what do you call it…about rural people, yet in the way she speaks, she has a certain refinement now, and her air of awareness shows that she has learned a lot, at least in these respects, at the same time that she was doing the housework. (Manager of a domestic helper agency in Beijing, as cited in Yan, 2003, pp. 505-506)

Although a few traces of rurality remained on her body, as a subject of *suzhi* this returned Dagongmei no longer dressed as "uncouth, even nearly imbecilic, an embarrassment to polite Chinese society" (Solinger, as cited in Yan, 2003, p. 505), and she was not like other young female migrants who, in the eye of that manager, "learned nothing else but cosmetics and bright red lips" (p. 506).

Based on their sartorial choices and self-presentation, the urban manager referred to above, divides the "low *suzhi*" Dagongmeis into two categories: those who are too conscious about their appearance and obsess with vulgar adornments and makeup, and those who have no consciousness or no knowledge about their image (Yan, 2008). The manager's words imply that both types of migrant women are viewed as inappropriate and rustic in urban discourse, as their appearance denotes their low status in urban society and therefore turns them into subjects of low *suzhi*. Proper consumption of fashion reflects the Dagongmei's level of *suzhi* and enhances her value as a modernised migrant worker.

In general, the urbanites demand a semiotic value from the representation of the returned Dagongmei: she needs to undergo a transformation into a productive labourer in market economy, obtaining "just enough *suzhi*" for her to represent modernity and urban civilisation on her return to the countryside; she has to be transformed to "'know' her place in social hierarchy", and in the process confirming urbanites' self-identity and cultural-economic superiority (Yan, 2003, p. 506). It is believed that when the young woman returns to the village, she will become a role model of self-development through rural-to-urban migration, facilitating the future migration of labour in her area (Jacka, 2006). Thanks to the knowledge, capital and *suzhi* these successful, returned, Dagongmei have obtained from "the great classroom of the city" (*chengshi daxuetang*), they not only succeed in escaping backward peasantness but also

> deal a blow to their fellow villagers' traditional concepts and ways of thought, and at the same time they have trained a production army that dares to weather the ups and downs of the market; their actions have opened up their home counties to the fact that the outside world is broad and expansive, and once you have left the narrow fields you must rely on yourself, blaze a path for yourself, and fight. (Wang and Li, as cited in Jacka, 2006, p. 51)

However, such portrayals overestimate the progress and gains that the returned Dagongmei can make in both rural and urban spaces. First, these portrayals tend to ignore the fact that for most rural girls working as the Dagongmei, their job as low-skilled, disposable labour in the city

is physically exhausting, psychologically humiliating, and leads nowhere in terms of self-advancement. As one Dagongmei describes it:

> Even though I live in the bustling city, I have a loneliness that I've never felt before. I'll never be on the same level as city people, never be on an equal footing. Once a customer asked me: "Little sister, you're so young, why are you here suffering and being exhausted and not at home studying?" I was speechless. To earn money? –My salary is so low it's pitiable. To blaze a path into the world? It's difficult for me to even step outside this shop a few times a day, what world would I blaze a path into? To extend my experience? All of the costumers here are other migrant workers or lowly paid city dwellers, and once they come in all they do is order some food, eat, pay the bill, then leave. I don't even exchange a sentence with them–how would I extend my experience? (Shanshan, as cited in Jacka, 2006, p. 149)

Second, in dominant discourse the discursive connection between the Dagongmei and rurality was developed to support the belief that while her experience in the city was valuable to herself and to urban economy, the Dagongmei's future ultimately lies back in the village. Such a belief, as many scholars have argued, veils the sombre socio-economic condition of rural women in Chinese countryside (Yan, 2003; Fan, 2003; Beynon, 2004). As previously mentioned, in the countryside the resources required to run a business, including money, personal connections (*guanxi*), and land use rights, are dominated by men. In her study of the occupation of returned migrants in Jiangxi Province, Murphy (2002) discovered that just 15 percent of returnee entrepreneurs were women, and their business were all small in scale, low in profit, and concentrated in the service sector. With neither skills nor resources, the returned Dagongmei have little chance of either finding paid work in township factories or starting their own business. For most of them, the future in the countryside is constituted by early marriage, child rearing, unpaid domestic labour and dreadful farm work, and with the narrowing rather than broadening of possibilities of self-development, obtaining a disposable income, and gaining more bargaining power in the household (Jacka, 2006). Combined with an appeal to self-sacrifice to the state and family, the claim that the Dagongmei should return to the countryside reflects "a high degree of

coercion, hypocrisy, and discrimination" held by urban elites against rural women (Jacka, 2006, p. 129).

To sum up, by promoting the returned Dagongmei in the discourse of neoliberal market economy, the state obscures the problem of rural/cultural divide, the labour exploitation, and the socio-cultural stigmatisation of rural females, and thus lends legitimacy to gender inequality, neoliberal modernity, and the city's hegemony over the countryside.

The Lienǚ and The Shizu

From the 1990s stories of the Dagongmei as victims of sexual violence have been increasingly prevalent in both state and popular media in China (Sun, 2004; Jacka, 2006). As discussed by Sun (2004), in 1998, several state newspapers published a story about the brave resistance of a rural female migrant against sexual violence. In this story, the Dagongmei named Hong Zhaodi was forced by her prospective boss into prostitution. When she refused to cooperate, the man stripped her, kicked her repeatedly, and photographed her. A few days later she was heavily injured and taken to the hospital. Despite her urgent pleas, the staff in hospital were not willing to help her and refused to contact the police. Out of despair, Hong jumped from a second-floor window and ended up with first-degree spinal damage.

Sun noticed that in official media, Hong Zhaodi was identified as a *lienǚ*, a Confucian concept describing a woman who would rather die than losing her virtue. As such, the media reinforced the image of the Dagongmei as either virgin or whore. According to the report, Hong's "heroic act" of resisting prostitution signifies "Chinese women's self-respect and civility" (Zheng, 2004, p. 90). In this regard, the unnamed "others" in this narrative—rural female migrants who are trapped into prostitution or sex crimes—lack self-respect and are low in *suzhi*, and thus do not deserve to be regarded as virtuous Chinese women.

While in transitional China, the dominant media are keen to promote "*lienǚ*" like Hong, whose bodies are docile and disciplined, the commercial media show more interest in the "bad" rural women and their unruly bodies. Being referred to as "*shizu*" (the fallen woman), stories of

the fallen Dagongmei are often exemplified by exposé journalism, which claims to offer eyewitness accounts (*jishi*) written by reporters working undercover (*anfang*) (Sun, 2004).

For urban readers, the most appealing aspect of these reports is that it transforms undisciplined peasant women into the passive and voiceless objects of voyeurism and objects of discipline. Although the aim for exposé journalism is to reveal the wrongdoings in the society, its real selling point lies in its strategy in blending moral surveillance and social control with the voyeuristic details about sex, body, and violence; "the object of the gaze being, in both cases, the migrant woman" (Sun, 2004, p. 119). Overall, the multiplicity of gazes presented in exposé journalism "demonstrates the desire for control and the exercise of the power to control" (Duan, 2011, p. 131).

The following excerpts of a story about the sex trade of the Dagongmei in Foxconn is a prime example of the Dagongmei-related exposé journalism:

> Xiao Xue's mood changes as swift as the dazzling lights of the discotheque, and she has a typical air of the girl of her age: confused and rebellious. Xiao Xue comes from a poor rural household in Sichuan and she has been in Foxconn for almost two years. Her work is to assemble iPhone and she gains a monthly salary of more than 2,000 yuan.
>
> Xiao Xue likes to sing and drink with her "sisters" on holidays. Although the charges of KTV and bars close to Foxconn are low, with a monthly wage of 2,000 yuan she still often finds herself running out of money.
>
> After seeing the enviable adornments of her fellow "sisters", Xiaoxue decided to "jump into the water" (*xiashui*, engage in prostitution). She said apart from her regular work in Foxconn, she only need to "come out" two or three nights a week and now she can earn nearly 10,000 yuan a month. When she returns home she also brings a considerable amount of money to her parents.
>
> Xiao Xue's life has changed (because of prostitution). Now she usually carries two mobile phones with her: One is a Nokia phone she has kept for many years - now is mainly used to contact the "business"; and the other is an iPhone 4S - this is the first gift she gave herself after "jumping into the water". (Minnan Net, 2013)

A typical story like this often inscribes a relationship between physical desires, the *shizu*, and the phenomenon of rural-to-urban migration, according to which the *shizu* is a result of rural women being allured by the seduction of materialistic and hedonistic lifestyles of the cities as evidenced by the growing number of migrant women in the cities (Sun, 2004). The implication here is that peasant women's lack of "culturedness" (*wenhuadiyun*) makes them "sexually available" to men and "willingly trapped into becoming a 'fallen women'" (Zheng, 2004, p. 89). While "fallen" and prostitution are linked to a sick obsession with fashionable products and hedonistic lifestyles of the cities, this only happens to the rural women, as the "the wiser, better-educated and urban" women would not subject themselves to such dangerous and disgraceful situation (Evans, 1997, p. 172).

Figure 14: The cover of an exposé journal.

The image of the *lienǚ* in official and the *shizu* in commercial press are demonstrations of the dominance of the patriarchal discourses of gender and sexuality "in which such terrible violations of women's basic rights are grounded", and "it is precisely these discourses that make young rural *women*, rather than men, such appealing objects of consumption for an urban media audience" (Jacka, 2006, p. 55, italics in original). Together with the discrimination resulting from the rural/urban divide, the gender representation of the Dagongmei as being either rustic virgin or promiscuous whore serves to rationalise the oppressions and stigmas that rural women have suffered in the city. Moreover, it reinforces urban dwellers' sense of superiority and enables them

to voyeuristically gaze onto bodies of the Dagongmei, viewing the latter as objects of sympathy, mockery, and fascination.

Conclusion

This chapter examined the discursive formation of the Dagongmei as an abject subject in both official and popular discourse. Two factors contribute to rural women's desire to work in the city: one is women's marginalisation in rural society, the other is the great socio-cultural disparity between the city and the countryside. By means of Dagong in the cities, rural women hope to obtain both knowledge and capital to formulate a new, fashionable identity. Through an active consumption of fashion, they wish to disassociate themselves from the image of rustic, earthy country bumpkins, and instead embody a modern, cosmopolitan femininity. However, despite their efforts of a makeover, the Dagongmei often fails to change their marginality in both urban society and the discourse of fashion. As an "in-betweener", the Dagongmei in transitional Chinese society occupies "the liminal space between the 'civilised' and the 'uncivilised', the urban and the rural, the public and the private, or the 'cultural categories of high and low'" (Sun, 2004, p. 117). In addition, the Dagongmei's departure from the private sphere of family and her refusal to "settle down" in patrilineal family order make her morally suspect in patriarchal discourse. For these reasons, the Dagongmei's subject position connotes the possibility of ideological transgressions that are not tolerated by the state and urban elites (Sun, 2004). Belonging to neither city nor the countryside, the Dagongmei's diasporic subjectivity results in her vulnerability, making her the object of discrimination, fascination, and voyeurism in both official and popular discourse.

However, as I have argued, the discursive regime of fashion that urban institutions impose upon the Dagongmei is never static or permanent. Rather, it is subject to rural migrant women's tactical "repossession". The idea of fashion, modernity, and *suzhi* are not static concepts and can have different definitions for the Dagongmei at different points in their lives. How migrant

women want to present themselves to the public can change depending on their social context and their own preferences. In the next chapter, I examine the ways in which rural-to-urban migrant women make do with the codes of fashion imposed on them by the dominant socio-economic order.

CHAPTER 4:

Tactical Bodies and The Style of the Dagongmei

Fashion as Urban Adaptation

As Chang (2008) claims, the experiences of the Dagongmei share certain features: Most women leave their villages with friends, acquaintances, or other family members, but after entering the city they receive less and less support from their fellow villagers and usually end up being alone. They switch from one occupation to another, with little possibility in developing stable, long-term ties with their workspace and colleagues. The nature of their occupation is never important; what matters is the suffering and opportunities that come with it. As disposable workers, the Dagongmei have no bargaining power and do not form a united class of resistance (Pun, 2005). Unlike the *Gongren* in Mao era who regarded working as "a value in its own right, a noble and ennobling activity" (Bauman, 2005, p. 5), for the Dagongmei working means nothing but a process of self-alienation. The following quote by Karl Marx sheds light on the nature of the Dagongmei's labour:

> The fact that labour is external to the worker, i.e. it does not belong to his essential being; that in his work, therefore, he does not affirm himself but denies himself, does not feel content but unhappy, does not develop freely his physical and mental energy but mortifies his body and ruins his mind. The worker therefore only feels himself outside his work, and in his work feels only outside himself. (Marx, 1844/1964, p. 110)

As such, taking part in the low-tech waged labour is regarded as leading to "a fatal process of self-estrangement and self-objectification of the true self" (Pun, 2005, p. 64), and such a process is commonly experienced by migrant workers. For example, the trace of self-alienation was vividly recorded in the diary of the Dagongmei Chunming:

> A lot of people say I have changed. I don't know if I have changed or not…I am much more silent now and I don't love to laugh like I used to. Sometimes I feel I have become numb.

> "Numb". Numb. No! No! But I really don't know what word I should use to describe the me that I am now.
>
> Anyway, I am so tired, so tired.
> Really, really, I feel so tired.
> Too tired, too tired.
> I don't want to live this way anymore.
> I don't want to live this way anymore.
> Never to live this way anymore.
> How should I live? (Chunming, as cited in Chang, 2008, p. 51)

Cheap, identical, and disposable, the Dagongmei is never the owner of the urban space. With no base where she could "stockpile her winnings", build upon her own position, and "plan raids", she must "vigilantly make use of the cracks that particular conjunctions open in the surveillance of the proprietary powers" and find a shortcut to finish the process of urban adaptation (de Certeau, 1984, p. 37).

As Zhu (2008) suggests, urban adaptation stands for a comfortable living state in urban environment, and consists of social and psychological adaption. For those living in the city, urban adaption is a process of socialisation according to which they have to learn and follow the values and code of conduct of their place of residence. In the eyes of urban dwellers, the process of urban adaptation is identical with the process of growing-up, while for peasants such a process is mysterious, challenging, and full of tricks. Raised in rural society, migrant workers do not have enough knowledge of urban culture and lifestyles prior to migration. Once entering the urban job market, rural women are required by urban employers to abandon their old ways of life and learn to disguise or change the rural body in order to make it urban or quasi-urban. As one manager of a domestic service agency put it:

> Another thing is about wearing makeup. We are not against you wearing makeup, but it's not appropriate for this situation. Customers (the urban employers) don't like to see you wearing makeup: eyebrows thick and black like worms, eyes as shadowed as a giant panda's, lip as bloody red as if you had just eaten a dead mouse. But some women from Anhui don't especially care about their image. You wear an undershirt under your skirt in

> the summer, but you don't button up your shirt. When you walk, the unbuttoned shirt flaps around. Your customer will think, "If you can't even put yourself together, how can you clean and organise my home?" So you must look neat, but do not try to stand out. On your day off, you may wear light makeup. Among the "excellent domestic workers" we have here, some are good at it and have good *suzhi*. On their day off, you can't even tell by looking at them whether they're here to hire a domestic or to look for a fellow migrant. (Manager of a domestic helper agency in Beijing, as cited in Yan, 2008, p. 172)

The Dagongmei are quickly conscious of the visual signs that mark them as abject outsiders, especially their clothes, makeup, accent, and body motions. Most of them put much attention into erasing these signs, trying hard to speak in standard mandarin or Cantonese, and spending money on fashionable items. Pun (2005, p. 158) argues that the Dagongmei's desire to consume fashionable objects is driven by their "urgent desire to reduce the disparity between themselves and the city dwellers, as well as to live up to the calling of the modern model of female beauty that was increasingly imagined and imaged by the mass media and popular magazines." However, recent cases have shown that the reason behind the Dagongmei's passion of fashionable apparels is more complex, and in practice, these rural girls often rupture the established rules and regulations of urban fashion. In the section below, I examine the reasons and tactics behind the Dagongmei's sartorial transformation.

The first, and the most apparent reason for the Dagongmei's urban makeover is that she needs to dress-up for a job with sufficient salary for her to stay in the city. Compared to male migrants who work in technical and construction sites, the Dagongmei usually find their works in service industry as sales, domestic workers, and assistants. They come into more direct contact with urban dwellers, and it means that they are subjected to higher requirements for their appearance. Here we can look at an example of the help-wanted advertisement posted by a mid-range restaurant in Guangzhou:

> We seek to employ:
> A waiter, female only, between 18 and 22 years of age, with junior high school education, good-looking, standard mandarin/Cantonese speaker preferred. (Zhu, 2008, p. 165)

The record about the experience of a Dagongmei working in a café reflects a comparable situation:

> The boss told sister L that she had to resign next month, as the business of the restaurant did not run well, and it is no longer possible to hire an employee of her salary. But we all knew the main reason was that the boss thought she was not pretty enough and wished to substitute her for a chic girl who once worked in Hong Kong. (Miss H, as cited in Zhu, 2008, p. 165)

Through the process of job searching and job hopping, the Dagongmei quickly understand the importance of the required look as well as the urgency of fashion adaptation. For the practical-minded young rural woman, the adoption of a "right" look helps her to secure employment advantage in the competitive job market.

After fulfilling the first demand of a paid job, the next reason for the Dagongmei's fashion transformation is to accumulate enough socio-economic capital. According to Chinese tradition, after marriage the male is expected to return to the house of his parents with his wife. As a male member of the patrilineal system, the male migrant would have his home secured in his home village. Rural girls, once grown, have no home to go back to. However, as Chang (2008) argues, this sexism sometimes works in the Dagongmei's favour. In China, rural parents usually require their son to stay close to his home village, and they are more likely to impose their influence on their son's place of migration, types of work, and choice of marriage. Young women— "less treasured, less coddled"—can migrate further afield and obtain more agency (Chang, 2008, p. 57). Compared to their male counterparts, the Dagongmei enjoy more freedom and are less encumbered with family burdens; they travel farther from their home village, tend to stay longer, and feel less obliged to send their salary back to the family (Beynon, 2004). As the Dagongmei are less valued in patriarchal discourse, they are more motivated to improve themselves and more likely to consider rural-to-urban migration as a life-changing opportunity.

But such advantage is time-bound. Due to her lack of capital, weaker social relations with urban dwellers, and little knowledge of urbanised taste and manner, in most circumstances the Dagongmei has to regard her body as capital and probably the only source of upward mobility. As Zhu (2008) argues, for most young rural girls there exists a positive correlation between the value of their appearance and their length of stay in the city. However, when the young woman reaches the age of 25, her body capital declines progressively; in the meantime, her occupation and wages are also likely to become increasingly unsatisfying.

In addition, if rural-to-urban migration temporarily liberates the Dagongmei from the patriarchal family, it also prevents her from having a happy marriage. In a typical Chinese village most girls are married before their mid-twenties, and a migrant woman who postpones her marriage may risk closing that possibility for good. In the eyes of rural people, a woman aged 25 is considered too old to find a good husband; while in the eyes of most urban dwellers, the peasant female has never been within their scope of consideration.

As a result, the Dagongmei is always in fear of being stuck where she is (Chang, 2008). On the one hand, time worries the Dagongmei, reminding her that her youth is passing away and she has been unable to make any progress; on the other hand, time is also her solid resource, because she is still young, single, and free. During her short stay in the city, the Dagongmei draws her hope on a clever utilisation of her youth and appearance, of "the opportunities it presents and also the play that it introduces into the foundations of power" (de Certeau, 1984, p. 39). By means of an urban makeover, the Dagongmei is more likely to survive in the city, gain higher self-esteem, and accumulate more socio-economic capital for her future.

Tactical Fashion

Dress Up for Myself

As discussed in previous chapters, patriarchal family and patrilocal marriage pattern to a large extent influence the formation of rural women's subjectivity. Even after physically

departing from the family and living thousands of miles away as the Dagongmei, rural girls still feel that their bodies are being scrutinized by their parents' disciplinary power. For example, Gaetano finds rural parents are often openly opposed to their daughter's interest in body and fashion:

> Domestic worker Wang sent most of her earnings home for the first two years to help with her mother's medical debts. But last year she told her mother she wouldn't be sending home quite so much, because she intends to study cosmetology and haircutting. Her parents disapprove because they think it is unseemly (*bu timian*)- that it is too close to prostitution. (Gaetano, 2008, p. 636)

From the attitude of Wang's parents, we can detect how fashion has been closely connected to morality and gender. In Chinese historical context, female's identity was largely constructed within the patrilineal kinship networks as wife and mother (*xianqiliangmu*) and her value rested on her ability to maintain and reproduce the clan. Historically, in the realm of fashion, women's virtue was connoted by her highly refined yet restrictive way of dress (the lotus shoe is a prime example) and her sartorial practices was morally acceptable only when it appeared as a passive response to the erotic gaze from her male master (*nǚ wei yuejizhe rong*). For women who dared to violate the dominance of male gaze and adorn her body without the permission of her patrilineal guardians, her desire for fashion was seen by the society as evidence of her "vanity" and "frivolousness" and exposed her to moral punishment. With the disciplinary knowledge of fashion, the patriarchal society "produces the bodies it controls" (Butler, 1993, p. 1).

Figure 15: The lotus shoes for bound feet.

Under patriarchal discourse, fashion is deployed as a regulatory strategy, according to which women's body is restricted to private space of family and reduced to an object of male control/desire. However, if we take a closer look at how fashion as a discourse is adopted, experienced, and interpreted by the Dagongmei in their everyday dressing practices, we can find that in reality the dominant discourse of fashion also opens up the possibility for rural girls to use it for their own fulfillment. The following accounts illustrate how fashion consumption is utilised by the Dagongmei as a means of self-empowerment:

> We definitely live a better life than our parents' generation did, and we spend money more carelessly. Those in their 30s are still unable to change their mind and always bargain when making purchases. For we girls, we buy clothes we love and do not too concern about issues like price or practicality. (My constant fashion investment) does not necessarily mean that I'm very positive about my future, it is just because I think I need to treat myself more before getting too old. Once I get married and have children I may not be able to (*meibanfa*) to spend (for my own good). (The Dagongmei Fan, as cited in Yu & Pun, 2008, p. 157)

> Previously I had to sit at my workplace for a whole day and I felt very depressed. As a result, I often did impulse shopping and spent quite a lot of money. Although now I'm not doing this anymore, I still consider it is necessary to fulfill yourself (through fashion consumption), otherwise how much value and meaning is left in our life? (The Dagongmei No. Z26, as cited in Zhu, 2014, p. 35)

In this sense, fashion is appropriated by rural female migrants as a tactic for self-affirmation. By means of an active dress-up, the Dagongmei is able to temporarily regain the control of her body from patriarchal power and become more assertive and self-assured.

Fashion as Bricolage

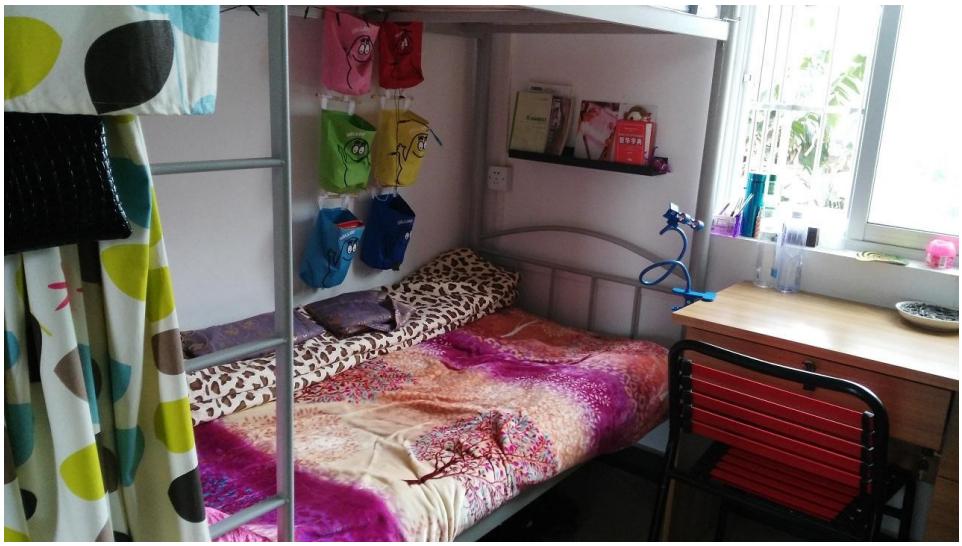

Figure 16: Interior of a staff dorm for migrant women workers in Guangzhou.

Being the Dagongmei, female migrants have neither time nor resources to master a comprehensive body of knowledge on urban fashion. Urban employers often describe the new Dagongmei as "a blank sheet of paper", a metaphor that connotes migrant woman's socio-cultural ignorance (Yan, 2003, p. 502). In order to get rid of the state of ignorance, the Dagongmei need to quickly understand the norms and values of urban society as well as the strategic knowledge of urban fashion. Rather than being seen as clumsy and docile country bumpkins who have no ideas about their future in the city, most Dagongmei are clearly aware of their marginal position and often complain about the unfair treatments they face in urban workplace. But rather than challenging these inequalities and discriminations in an open and decisive manner, rural girls often choose to solve these problems in a more pragmatic and tactical way. With limited spare time and money and being unable to live in a stable and comfortable space, the Dagongmei manage to create a better living environment for themselves by filling their rented dormitories with items and decorations chosen by their own aesthetic preferences. On weekends they like to wander around in downtown and "*zhiguangbumai*" (appreciating without buying, or window shopping) (Zhu, 2014, p. 64). Acting as de Certeau's urban walkers, through their tactical "trajectories" rural girls temporarily appropriate the urban space, displacing the

established order of the city and filling it with "the forests of their desires and goals" (de Certeau, 1984, p. xxi).

When facing pressure from the dominant discourse about appearance, the Dagongmei often try hard to collect fragmented information about fashion, combine it with tips and knowledge of *suzhi*, modernity and urban culture, and use it in various combinations to fit in with their own situations. In order to understand how the fashion scene of the Dagongmei is constructed, we need to focus on what de Certeau (1984, p. 35) defines as the "tactical trajectories" of the Dagongmei's sartorial transformation, which "according to their own criteria, select fragments taken from the vast ensembles of production in order to compose new stories with them".

Figure 17: The Dagongmei trying out shoes in a night market.

Zhu's descriptions of the dress of three groups of young rural girls living in three different social spaces provide us a vivid illustration of such "tactical trajectories":

> High heels, thick patterned nylon socks, dark-coloured leggings, bright yellow, red, blue jacket, faux leather shoulder bags decorated with metal buttons, fluffy curled hair or shoulder-length hair with straight bangs and several glassy-shine hairpins. (The appearance of young rural girls attending a wedding in Yongxin county, Jiangxi Province, 2000)
>
> Platform shoes, bell-bottoms or above-knees A-line skirts. When taking a closer look at their platform shoes, one can easily see their white or pink cotton socks with animal or geometric patterns. These girls often wear T-shirts with different colours and motifs as well as bucket

> backpack. Usually they choose to dye their hair yellow. In terms of their hair style, they are either bob-haired or tying their hair with ribbon in a pony tail. (The weekend leisure look of the Dagongmei in Tangxia Industrial Zone, Dongguan, Guangdong Province)
>
> She wears a pair of well-made flat sport shoes, a pair of light-grey cotton-made leisure pants, a boat-neck T-shirt, and a backpack. Her hair has been straightened and cut in trendy style. (The dress of the Dagongmei L, who is now working in Western Restaurant *Dongni*, Guangzhou, Guangdong Province) (Zhu, 2008, p. 160)

In particular, the choice of shoes is regarded by the Dagongmei as a vital signifier indicating their possession of cultural capital (Zhu, 2008). When being asked why she chose not to wear platform shoes typically adorned by the Dagongmei working in industrial zones, L replied:

> I used to wear them when I worked in a relatively high-end Chinese restaurant, as the owner likes taller people and requires all waitresses, foremen and managers to reach at least 160 cm. I'm quite petite (about 158 cm) and the platform shoes can add my height by 6-8cm easily. Also at that time I found myself look chic with platform shoes, I believed they could refine the contour of my legs and make them look longer. However, petite waitress seems more popular in the western restaurant I'm currently working in. Although I still prefer longer legs, I find platform shoes too exaggerating and wearing these shoes make me look out of shape and ugly. Moreover, the platform shoes are now regarded as the Dagongmei's staples, too rustic. Now I will never wear platform shoes even someone give me a pair for free. (L, as cited in Zhu, 2008, p. 161)

Many researchers working on the Dagongmei's fashion consumption believe that the rural working girls use the techniques of body refashioning and ornaments mainly to disguise their trace of rurality and completely assimilate their bodies into the discourse of urban fashion, or in other words, to dress up as a real urban girl (Zhu, 2004; Zhu, 2008; Wang & Yan, 2011; Xie & Zhu, 2011). In this sense, the process and outcome of the Dagongmei's fashion transformation can be explained by Veblen's (1899/2007) theory of fashion as "trickle-down" emulation. According to this theory, styles are created and adopted first by those at the top of social hierarchy, then the classes below gradually imitate the style of the elite class in order to seek the chance of entering a higher social rank. However, as Entwistle (2000, p. 63) argues, as an

ontology of dress, fashion as emulation is "too mechanistic and too simplistic". First, it fails to recognise the agency of the "underclass" consumers of fashion; second, it views the meaning of dress/fashion as being frozen and universalised, thus it overlooks the way in which fashion is incorporated into everyday dressing practice within a particular social context. Overall, in such theorizations, fashion and dress are "divorced from the body and from the practices of dress in daily life which are complex and over-determined" (Entwistle, 2000, p. 100). De Certeau (1984, pp. 34-35, italics in original) also points out that such a perspective can "grasp only the material used by consumer practices- a material which is obviously that imposed on everyone by production- and not the *formality* proper to these practices, their surreptitious and guileful 'movement,' that is, the very activity of 'making do'". What is counted should be "the *ways* of using", not "*what* is used" (p. 35, italics in original). In the case of the Dagongmei L, if we take a closer look at her reply, we will find that albeit mentioning the connotation between platform shoes and rusticity, the reason for L not wearing the platform shoes is also pragmatic, as she wants to readjust herself to a new workplace where a "petite waitress seems more popular".

In addition, scholars also find that although most Dagongmeis appreciate urban fashion and often dress up like female models presented in popular TV series or fashion magazines (Bao, 2012), they do not accept urban fashion discourse uncritically and clearly introduce some tactical criteria in their dressing practice. For instance, Zhu (2008) discovered that although the Dagongmei she met like to imitate the style and fashion of young female urban dwellers, usually they will not take the fashion of white collar women as a reference point. After hearing Zhu's praise of the shawl over her shoulder, the Dagongmei L replies immediately that the shawl was set aside by the restaurant for its female clients. Though showing her fondness for adornments like shawl, L states that she will never buy one because "l will feel uneasy (*buzizai*) if I go shopping with a shawl around my shoulder" (Zhu, 2008, p. 20). Similarly, Wang and Yan (2011) also find the Dagongmei they work with in a cosmetic store never imitate the dress of their

wealthy female customers, rather they prefer to copy the style of local beauty advisors, as the latter's fashion are more practical in their daily life.

How, then, are such tactical criteria of fashion constructed and made functional? The concept of bricolage is helpful here. In *The Savage Mind*, Levi-Strauss describes the ways in which 'primitive' peoples used modes of magic like "superstition, sorcery, and myth" to form "an implicitly coherent, though explicitly bewildering, systems of connection between things which perfectly equip their users to 'think' their own world" (Hebdige, 1979, p. 103). These magical systems of connection can be extended in many ways, because their "basic elements can be used in a variety of improvised combinations to generate new meanings within them" (p. 103). Thus, bricolage is defined as a "science of the concrete":

> [Bricolage] refers to the means by which the non-literate, non-technical mind of so-called "primitive" man responds to the world around him. The process involves a "science of the concrete" (as opposed to our "civilised" science of the "abstract") which far from lacking logic, in fact carefully and precisely orders, classifies and arranges into structures the *minutiae* of the physical world in all their profusion by means of a "logic" which is not our own. The structures, "improvised" or made up (these are rough translations of the process of *bricoler*) as *ad hoc* responses to an environment, then serve to establish homologies and analogies between the ordering of nature and that of society, and so satisfactorily "explain" the world and make it able to be lived in. (Hawkes, as cited in Hebdige, 1979, pp. 103-104, italics in original)

In terms of the impact of bricolage on an established system of fashion, John Clarke points out how styles in dominant system of fashion can be appropriated, subverted, and tactically reinterpreted by individuals who act as fashion bricoleurs:

> Together, object and meaning constitute a sign, and, within any one culture, such signs are assembled, repeatedly, into characteristic forms of discourse. However, when the bricoleur re-locates the significant object in a different position within that discourse, using the same overall repertoire of signs, or when that object is placed within a different total ensemble, a new discourse is constituted, a different message conveyed. (Clarke, as cited in Hebdige, 1979, p. 104)

In this way the Dagongmei's appropriation, re-organisation, and re-use of styles can be recognised as an act of bricolage.

In her book *Factory Girls: From Village to City in a Changing China*, Leslie Chang (2008) records the Dagongmei's tactical bricolage of the dominant rules, ideas, and regulations in an office etiquette course held by a commercial education organisation in Shenzhen. On the first day of that course, the teacher started his class by asking the Dagongmei to talk about their dreams in front of the class. After introducing the relationship between moods and the choice of the clothes' colour, the teacher turned his topic to the tips on how to build confidence to speak in public and then to Chinese history. In the end, he finished his class with a few bars of popular song. After that class, Chang claimed it was "the strangest jumble of ideas that I had ever encountered" and did not believe the Dagongmei could learn anything from it (p. 180). But she soon found that these young women were busy grasping the fragmented, heterogeneous information that was presented in the class and re-used them in a tactical manner:

> The students did not fall asleep. They did not look bored. No one ever left to use the bathroom during the two-hour class; they were afraid they might miss something…They knew by heart the incoherent mush of rules, self-help, and Confucian exhortation. They took only what they needed, grasping the principal lesson long before I did: If you look and act like someone of a higher class, you will become that person.
>
> After the first day, I never saw any girl wear her factory shirt to school again. (Chang, 2008, p. 181)

At first glance, what the Dagongmei did in the etiquette class is nothing but another trivial and frivolous imitation of the middle-class lifestyle. These rural girls show strong consent to urban values, obey the rules of urban fashion system, and actively conform to the dictates of modernisation. However, ambiguities and transgressions also creep into the dominant discourse through the Dagongmei's use of the concepts imposed on them by the dominant discourse of fashion and modernity. In this class, the signs of a modern, successful middle-class urban woman:

trendy styles, office etiquette, popular songs, and the ability to speak in public—were repurposed of their original connotations—femininity, compliance with authority, consumer's modernity, and urban superiority—and transformed into the resources for the Dagongmei's own independent, autonomous, and instrumental use.

In this sense, the Dagongmei's body refashioning should be regarded as an integral part of their struggle for social respect in the city, through which they are able to improve their self-esteem and enjoy a better quality of life. As Chen Ying, one recent graduate who has successfully changed her identity from a Dagongmei to an office worker, spoke about the value of the class at the beginning of the etiquette course:

> I am the same as you. I graduated from middle school. I worked on the assembly line until I became numb. I didn't even know what I was thinking about.
>
> One day I asked a friend: "What is life all about? Why we are working so hard?" My friend could not answer.
>
> I went to look in books. They had no answers. I thought: "If you work on the assembly line, is there meaning in life? No."
>
> So, I started to take this class. In one month I learned a lot. I could not even say a single word in front of other people before. I was shy and afraid. What do you think of my eloquence now?
>
> I think you all want to learn what I learned. Leave the assembly line. Don't let people look down on you any longer. Don't let people say, "You are the lowly workers." We must lift up our hands and say, "We can also be successful." (Chen, as cited in Chang, 2008, pp. 174-175)

For the Dagongmei, the dominant symbols of femininity, modernity, and fashion can all be transformed into tactical resources with which to envision their own futures. They deploy these dominant cultural symbols tactically to resist their socio-cultural marginality and appropriate an urban persona to gain higher salaries and more upward mobility. Appearing submissive and consenting to the dominant system of fashion, modernity, and urban superiority, the Dagongmei nevertheless often refashion the rules and representations imposed on them into something reflecting their own interests and their own rules. They subvert the dominant order not by

rejecting its rules, but by "using them with respect to ends and references foreign to the system they had no choice but to accept" (de Certeau, 1984, p. xiii). Unlike urban middle-class women who regard the Western, cosmopolitan fashion as a strategic site to "assert one's position in social space" as well as "a rank to be upheld or a distance to be kept" (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 57), the Dagongmei learn how the system of fashion functions in the urban society and use that knowledge to transgress the social hierarchies and gain the positions for which they were usually disqualified. That tactic of fashion helps the Dagongmei get a better job, avoid excessive discrimination, and "sell more of whatever they end up selling": "We are all in the sales business," as the teacher of the etiquette course reminded, "What are we selling? We are selling ourselves" (Chang, 2008, p. 183).

Such a claim is nonetheless problematic from a feminist perspective. In popular media, the young and fashionable Dagongmei are referred to as "eaters of the rice bowl of youth" (*chi qingchunfan de*) (Gaetano, 2008; McWilliams, 2012). As Gaetano (2008, p. 635) explains, the "eaters of the rice bowl of youth" capitalise on their youth and appearance in jobs that "value qualities like vitality, deference, sexuality and glamour". This gendering of jobs provides young rural women with a new possibility of life and subjectivity, but it also disguises and naturalises the social mechanisms that result in gender disparity, rural/urban divide, and the abjection of rural labour. Furthermore, the value that this term places on the "ephemeral characteristics" of appearance and youth rationalises the disposable status of the Dagongmei, which the rules and laws relating to rural/urban divide and gender asymmetry structurally reinforce (Gaetano, 2008, p. 635).

Yet in empirical practice, an urban makeover does help the Dagongmei to survive in the city, allowing them to "duck under the radar" and avoid scrutiny from the disciplinary power (Gaetano, 2008, p. 635). In addition, the Dagongmei often experience much pleasure in their makeovers. Appropriating an urban persona boosts their confidence in urban environment and improves their self-esteem; as a symbolic capital, it raises their status in the eyes of their peers,

their family members, and their urban employers (Gaetano, 2008). As such, instead of inscribing a teleology of vanity onto the fashion adornments and the rural women who adopt them, we might consider rural women's embodiment of a stylish, albeit commercialised, cosmopolitan femininity as a process of tactical mimicry. For the rural girl who capitalises on her youth and femininity in urban workplace, her embodiment of urban fashion opens up the opportunities for her own social and economic powers within the urban metropole to distort the dominant cultural connotations assigned to various items of fashion. In this way, the Dagongmei's fashionable look connotes that "I am like you in that I wear the clothes expected of me by the urban employer and the discourse of modernity, but I am different from what you expected and I am not a docile, identical and disposable commodity in urban society" (McWilliams, 2012, p. 175). This rupture in the meanings associated with the fashion scene of the Dagongmei is inscribed in the social and cultural landscape of rural women who are willing to become tactical players in the urban space. In making themselves anew, the Dagongmei exercise more agency over their bodies, their occupational choices, and their own futures.

Loafing on the Job with a Mobile Phone

According to Pun (2005, p. 80), once the Dagongmei entering the space of urban workplace, she is immediately placed by her capitalist boss into a position and thus "nailed down" into a network of power and management. Most Dagongmeis work in a closed, indoor environment (i.e. hotel, shop, factory), which make them perfect subjects of the Foucauldian panoptic surveillance. By placing the Dagongmei in a disciplinary space, the capitalist power is able to transform their "clumsy" and "unruly" bodies into obedient, productive, yet disposable labour force. However, as Pun (2005, p. 93) points out, panopticism itself is not sufficient enough in producing a "disciplined yet productive body", and she argues that the neoliberal discourse of time is more important in producing self-disciplined woke force. By following the timetable of urban workplace, the Dagongmei internalises the neoliberal discourse "time is money, efficiency is life" (*shijian jiushi jinqian, xiaolǜ jiushi shengming*) into her body by readjusting her body motions,

sleeping time, appetite, and even her menstrual cycle in alignment with the time of market economy (Pun, 2005; Liu, 2015). Gradually, the female worker finds her life and her sense of time being separated and contradicted, and her body alienated by her timetable. In his account about the life of Foxconn assembly line workers, Li (2013) finds that new migrant workers are usually very talkative during their first week of arrival, but after a week they become silent and indifferent like other experienced workers. "When your time is occupied by USB heads and you have 2,000 heads to wipe everyday," Li (p. 48) writes, "after a week of cleaning, there is nothing left to talk about." In a word, under the discourse of neoliberal market, no time or energy is allowed to leak out of "the capitalist mode of construction of temporality" (Pun, 2005, p. 99).

But sometimes the panoptic workspace and the capitalist timetable can also become terrains of contestation. Although urban employer tries to discipline rural migrant girls through panoptic surveillance, such surveillance is not invincible. For example, Pun (2005, p. 102) observes that although the factory as her field site has strict regulations on worker's daily behaviour, in reality "talking, eating snacks, making jokes, and teasing were all done openly in the late afternoon and on night work." By means of "overt and covert individual defiance", the Dagongmei are able to "humanise" the harsh disciplinary power and temporarily liberate themselves from "the boredom and drowsiness" of the repetitive work (Pun, 2005, p. 102). In addition, the Dagongmei also make a tactical use of urban media. They turn the pop music or story radio loud during the work time and turn it into a "fertile soil for daydreaming, alleviating work pressure, and lessening nostalgia for home" (p. 105). When the assistant manager attempts to regulate the Dagongmei's behaviour by ordering them to switch off the radio, his disciplinary intervention often results in the latter's open revolt (Pun, 2005).

In the eye of post-reform generation, the mobile phone is probably one of the best representative objects of Chinese modernity. Being imported with other capitalist terms like corporation and the Dagong worker from the 1980s Hong Kong, the mobile phone was first named in mandarin as "*dageda*" ("boss of the boss"), which reveals its close connection with

capitalism and modern entrepreneurships. Apart from its significance as a tool of new information technology, the mobile phone in post-socialist China symbolises the essence of neoliberal modernity: efficiency, fluidity, upward mobility, wealth, individual freedom, and most importantly, an air of chic. As Fortunati (2002, p. 54) argues, in modern capitalist society the mobile phone has become a "necessary accessory", and the image of which has been associated with that of the upper class. In this sense, the mobile phone is not only a means of communication, but also an object of fashion expression and a symbolic language of a modern self.

Owning a mobile phone, however, is not sufficient when considering the modern glamour of an individual, rather it is the way that people use the phone that affect other's perception of "fashionableness" (Katz &Sugiyama, 2006, p. 325). In 1980s China, owners of the mobile phone were usually urban business people. These entrepreneurs liked to carry their phones everywhere in a briefcase or in their hands. Every time when there was a call, they would run to public spaces like squares and stations (partly due to the poor signal conditions at that time), and then pick up the call swiftly with a loud voice and impatient look (China National Radio, 2018). From 2000 onwards, the image of mobile phone has been increasingly connected to urban leisure and cosmopolitan fashion. Mobile owners are taught by popular media to take their phone to sites of style consumption (i.e. bars, cafés, or "natural space" designed for trendy outdoor activities) and to use

Figure 18: A woman using a "*dageda*" in Guangzhou, 1987. Courtesy of Ye Jianqiang.

it with a smile (i.e. making selfies). Overall, as a symbol of neoliberal modernity, the mobile phone was deployed by the discourse of fashion as a strategy for the embodiment of two ideal urban figures- the ambitious, impatient entrepreneur and the joyful, carefree consumer.

Figure 19: Mobile phone advertisement in China, 2016.

In terms of the relationship between the mobile phone and the Dagongmei, both official and popular media portray the Dagongmei as the producers – as in the factory works making the phones, rather than the consumers of the mobile phone, and they believe the mobile phone as an urban essential is too expensive for rural girls to enjoy. The Dagongmei's ownership of a prestigious mobile phone is often maliciously interpreted by urban media as a sign of her moral surrender to hedonism and prostitution (Xiaoxue's story in chapter 3 is a perfect example). Hence, even if a rural girl manages to buy a mobile phone with her savings, due to her lack of modern knowledge she will not be able to use her phone in the right way. Eventually, the Dagongmei's ownership of the mobile phone is believed to end up reinforcing rather than transcending her marginality. In reality, the Dagongmei face a shortage of time and resources that impede their use of their mobile phones in a "fashionable" manner. But instead of accepting the disciplinary power of urban fashion and accepting their stigmatised subjectivity as flawed consumer, the Dagongmei use their mobile phone tactically and turn it from a symbol of neoliberal efficiency/entertainment to a tool of resistance.

Similar to urban youths, nowadays most Dagongmeis start to use mobile phone in their early teens and have constantly been accused by urban media as cell phone addicted. Although most

urban workplaces prohibit their migrant employees from using mobile phone during working hours, many Dagongmeis still hide their phone in their work cloth pocket and carry it to work. Every time when the Dagongmei find themselves momentarily at the seams of the panoptic surveillance, they will spontaneously "relax" their bodies and loaf on the job by "playing" with their mobile phone (Liu, 2015, p. 25). Here the word "play" does not stand for consuming entertainment like paid mobile games, but rather "a free way of killing time", for instance browsing social network or messaging their friends (p. 25). Such actions are tactical and ephemeral, often hard to be detected and recorded. When asked about the reason for their "mobile phone addiction", two Dagongmei working in hotel provide their answers as follows:

Figure 20: "Post-1990s Little Dagong worker": A Dagongmei browsing her phone while working on the assembly line.

> I'm used to it and I feel loss and anxious if my mobile is not with me. In fact, I'm not in an urgent need of mobile or have to make a lot of calls, (I use it) just because I want to see the posts of others and take a look at what they are doing. Besides I also like to see if there is any new entertainment and gossip today. Of course (mobile phone playing) cannot be seen by the manager, just hide yourself away and, incidentally (*shunbian*), loaf on your job. (The Dagongmei TD, as cited in Liu, 2015, p. 25).

> Well it's natural for me to talk to others (via instant message) when there are just a few customers. What's the point of standing still like a fool? The foreman will not check on you all the time. (The Dagongmei WD, as cited in Liu, 2015, p. 25).

Through a tactical use of the mobile phone, the Dagongmei not only manage to grab invaluable entertainment at the edges of the repressive working environment, but also find a way, albeit temporarily, to regain the control of their bodies from the disciplinary power of neoliberal

workplace and capitalist timetable. Although facing the risks of punishment and even dismissal, the Dagongmei are not willing to give up every opportunity for such everyday transgressions and always ready for momentary fun with their mobile phone.

Conclusion

To discuss how the Dagongmei make their choices of style in transitional Chinese society, it is first important to understand the socio-historical context in which they are making their decisions. In modern China, the freedom of dress has always been associated with the liberation of women from the control of patriarchal hegemony. Using urban fashion as a site of contestation, the Dagongmei in contemporary post-Mao China refute patriarchal representations of them as passive, subservient object of male control/desire, acquire better subject positions and enjoy more freedom through their embodiment of a modernised look.

The Dagongmei's body is an important, and probably the most valuable resource for her to manipulate. As an "in-betweener", the Dagongmei is marginalised in both rural and urban society. With nowhere to belong and nothing to depend upon, these rural girls must adapt themselves to the urban environment quickly and try their best to obtain more socio-cultural capital before becoming too old to stay in the city. In this sense, changing one's look serves as a survival tactic in urban environment, allowing the Dagongmei to avoid more overt discrimination in the city and gain higher social mobility.

Finally, and what is specific to this thesis, are the kind of tactics that the Dagongmei employ in their consumption and dress practices. In the cities, young rural women act as bricoleurs by appropriating, re-organising, and re-using urban styles like office etiquette and objects like mobile phone within the dominant system of fashion, either appropriating an urban persona for their own needs or adopting fashionable media technology as a tactic of resistance. Although their bricolage does not fundamentally alter the discursive and institutional orders of inequality around place-based identity, class, and gender, it does enable the Dagongmei to negotiate a better

position in the city and “to imagine that further, future change is possible” (Gaetano, 2008, p. 629).

CONCLUSION:

Rural Women on the Urban Catwalk

On June 23, 2018, the last episode of *Produce 101* China aired online. On that night, the final 11 members of "the best girl group in China" were chosen by on-site voting. Yang Chaoyue received 139 million votes and became the third member of the girl group. At the end of the program this beautiful rural girl was finally able to complete a dance, but her acceptance speech was still not as fluent as the others. Yet despite being regarded as the representation of "China's modern-day young generation", Wang Ju was eliminated in the 4th round and was unable to become one of the final debuting members. On social media, many netizens still thought that Yang Chaoyue showed neither enough knowledge nor capacity of a good idol, and they accused her of "stealing" Wang's position by capitalising on her youth and femininity. In response, Yang said: "I have no time to be unhappy because there are too many things I want to do. I'll try my best to pick up everything that I need later" (Huanqiu, 2018). For rural girls like Yang, their ability to dance on the stage of urban modernity was gradually obtained through their everyday practices in the city. There are "too many things" they want to do, and too little time and resources. As a result, the Dagongmei must "seize on the wing the possibilities that offer themselves at any given movement" (de Certeau, 1984, p. 37). As tactical bricoleurs, they have to make use of urban fashion and negotiate their own sense of self in a place where they are scrutinised and disciplined and in which the stereotypical representations of rural women in urban media are constantly recalled and reinforced in the public's mind.

I began this thesis with the experiences of Wang Ju and Yang Chaoyue in *Produce 101* in terms of how these two figures signify the dominant discourse of rural/urban divide, fashion, and the Dagongmei in post-socialist China. I then traced the historical transformation of Chinese women's sartorial codes, analyse how the rural/urban divide was developed, explored how the subject of Dagong worker and the Dagongmei were formed, and briefly described the

relationship between the Dagongmei and the urban-dominated discourse of fashion. As I have argued, the making of peasant, the Dagong worker, and the Dagongmei have been intertwined with the genealogy of discourses of modernity, development, and national advancement in China. From 20th to the 21st Century, reformists and political leaders have sought to revolutionise the nation from its backward, feudal past and lead it to a modernised, progressive future (Jacka, 2006). And within their lineal discourse of development, the countryside, the peasants, and the Dagong workers have been systematically constructed as a problem to a modernised nation and its affluent urban population. In terms of the Dagongmei, her inferiority is inscribed with her identity as a marginalised "in-betweener": In the village, she is regarded a temporary resident; she is not endowed with investments, family possession, and even a place in the pedigree chart. In the city, she is treated as a disposable worker, a poor mimicker of fashion, and a person with low *suzhi*. In both dominant and popular media, she is portrayed as either country bumpkin or promiscuous whore, an abject subject whose means of existence is to confirm the superiority of urban dwellers in discourses of fashion consumption, modernity, and body culture. As an exceptional figure, she confirms the benevolence and superiority of urbanites.

However, the discursive regime of fashion that urban institutions impose upon the Dagongmei is never "frozen" and permanent. Rather, it is subject to rural migrant women's tactical "repossession" based on their own social context and their agencies. In this respect, I find writings of Roland Barthes on the fashion system and Michel de Certeau on strategy/tactic particularly useful in understanding the fashion scene of the Dagongmei in transitional Chinese society. Based on Saussure's dual concepts of language and speech, Barthes sees the system of fashion as being made up by costume and clothing. As the language of the fashion system, costume imposes parameters on how to dress; however, within these constraints, individuals perform agencies in their interpretations of costume and their practice of clothing. Similar tensions also appear in de Certeau's analysis of strategies and tactics, which focus specifically on

how the rules can be appropriated and/or subverted by marginalised individuals in their tactical everyday practices.

These theoretical works provide an inspirational framework which offers me a way to understand how disempowered individuals like the Dagongmei make do with style imposed by the dominant socio-economic order. For the Dagongmei, her body is a vital tool as well as a precious resource for her urban adventure. With nowhere to belong and no one to depend upon, manipulating one's look serves as a way to reclaim their subjectivity from patriarchal power as well as a tactic of survival in urban environment. In addition, by a tactical use of fashionable devices like the mobile phone, the Dagongmei is able to temporarily resist the disciplinary power of industrial regulations and turns the space and time of their masters' into resources for their fulfillment and solidarity. Overall, as the "art of the weak", the fashion scene of the Dagongmei in post-socialist China privileges the everyday struggles and pleasures that rural migrant women articulate in their urban lives, making visible "the nuances and experiences" of a gendered reality of internal migration (Jiwani, 2011, p. 334).

Contributions to Current Studies

One way this thesis is different from previous studies is that it does not solely focus on the way that the Dagongmei suffer as powerless disposable workers; rather, this research emphasises how the Dagongmei as tactical subjects are vigorously "making do" with, and express themselves through, a given discourse imposed by the dominant socio-economic order. As I have discussed earlier, the studies of rural-to-urban migration in transitional China have been concerned primarily with the macro-level demographic, economic, and political effect of migration. Relatively few studies have provided a gendered insight into how the making of a Dagong subject is experienced by female migrant workers, and even fewer have identified the gendered discourse as the basis of their research. The intent of my thesis is, in part, to highlight the effect of migration on female migrant workers' agency within the nexus of institutional barriers,

neoliberal capitalism and patriarchal orders. While this research is mainly focused on the fashion scene of the Dagongmei, it also offers details of the rural woman's subject position in both rural and urban society, the process of her rural-to-urban transition, and her lived experience as a migrant worker in the city. In every sense, this thesis is about rural women's subjectivity and agency in rural-to-urban migration, and it provides a counterweight to much of the migration researches that foregrounds the structure.

At a theoretical level, this study sought to understand how and if the Dagongmei's tactical practices can challenge some dominant beliefs in fashion studies. Traditionally, the world's interest in fashion has been attributed to Western haute couture and a small group of fashion designers. In the case of China, recognised as one of the largest garment manufacturing centre internationally, the country is generally considered as a "world factory", one that can only copy and massively produce garments rather than actually create fashion. Within China, the fashion media and mainstream markets are dominated by International brands and Western designs. Though in recent decades a few Chinese designers have successfully created their own brands and have gained fame in the market, they are nonetheless urbanised and Westernised. These new fashion elites receive professional training in London and New York, demonstrate their talent in international fashion shows in cities like Paris, Milan, and Hong Kong, and open their boutiques in Chinese metropolitan cities like Beijing and Shanghai. They do not regard ordinary Chinese women as their potential costumer, and their design consolidates rather than transgresses the ideologies of fashion, femininity, and urban dominance. In addition, media, market and scholars all tend to regard the consumers of fashion as middle-class women living in the metropolis, whereas the poor migrant women from the "rustic" rural "wasteland" are usually absent in such consideration. In this sense, understanding what the Dagongmei evaluate as the strategy in the dominant system of fashion, and how they make do with it, is important because it attempts to break hegemonic paradigms of both fashion and its "ideal consumer".

Limitations and Future Work

Due to limited time and resources, I have restricted my examination of the Dagongmei's lived experience through only a small number of secondary materials, most of which were completed before 2010 and written in English. Ideally, I would like to gather more information and up-to-date materials through an empirical, ethnographic research of Dagongmei's everyday life. In the future I wish to have the opportunity to work with the Dagongmei and interview them about their choices of fashion in person, as this would help provide a more nuanced perspective. In addition, it would also allow me to have access to more materials on the fashion consumption of the Dagongmei in Chinese language.

In post-Mao China, most rural migrant women living in cities are young and unmarried girls who work as paid workers, and in both official and popular discourses the Dagongmei have become stereotypes obscuring all other images of rural migrant women. In fact, there are millions of rural women living in the city who are older than the typical Dagongmei, are married and have their children with them or back in their rural hometown. Compared with the unmarried Dagongmei, these rural women are more marginalised and discriminated in urban job market, and their intentions and desire to migrate can be different from their younger peers. A future study would incorporate a focus on those aged and more neglected group of women, and I think it would be inspiring to reveal their subjectivity and agency in their migration from rural to urban areas.

Additionally, we need to notice the existence of so-called "Second Generation of Peasant-Workers" (*erdai nongmingong*)— children who were born to the first generation Dagong workers and who have grown up in either the city or the countryside. Although there are no apparent differences between the first and the second generation Dagongmei in terms of their prospective occupations as well as social status, the latter are usually better educated and usually in a more prosperous material condition (Pun & Lu, 2010). Unlike the first generation Dagongmei who seldom experience ambiguity in terms of their identity (as outsider/peasant), the second generation Dagongmei are less connected to the rural communities, feel more dislodged and more

likely to adopt an urban outlook (Pun & Lu, 2010). Do they encounter the same distress and confusion as experienced by their predecessors in terms of subjectivities and appearance? How do they understand their relationship with urban fashion? And in which ways will they respond to the demands of the dominant discourse? In short, "what continuity and change" can we observe in the fashion practices of these new working sisters (Pun & Lu, 2010, p. 494)? These questions are left to be answered by future studies.

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