To what extent the two generations of Chinese women peasant workers are able to benefit from the factory work opportunities?

Wei Zhu

Abstract

Economic reforms in China have brought opportunities to Chinese rural women, and have drawn them into the front lines of global capitalism. These opportunities have enabled rural women to migrate to cities and generate independent income. However, the state bureaucracy, the forces of global capitalism, and a culture of patriarchy tend to exploit these migrant women from rural areas, rather than provide space for them to benefit. It is important to examine how the two-generation women peasant-workers that have lived since the advent of reforms have responded to these conditions of exploitation. Moreover, in line with continuing trends of social change and technological development, the second-generation women peasant-workers have enjoyed more opportunities and a greater power of negotiation. The comparison of these two generations shows that they have different characteristics, implying that the influences of work opportunities on the two generations are changing.
Introduction

China's economic reforms since the late 1970s have completely changed China's society and the fate of many Chinese. Chinese women peasant-workers, who are from rural areas and migrate to cities to work, are one of the significant groups. They dominate the export-oriented manufacturing industries in China as well as in many other developing countries (Salzinger, 2002). According to the government's data (NBSC, 2013), there are about 262 million migrant people from rural areas. One third of these migrants are women. It is said that they promote China's economic miracle (Razavi and Pearson, 2004). Conversely, as one women peasant-worker, also an interviewee of this research says, 'if there had not been the economic reforms, which promoted the export-oriented manufacturing industries and generated many work opportunities, rural women might still stay in rural areas, doing agricultural work and looking after families for their entire life'. Therefore, the fate of these women attracts concern from many people. On one hand, the economic reforms have challenged the traditional gender division of labour in rural areas, offering new opportunities. Reforms have also decomposed the strict urban-rural division characteristic of the planned-economy period, allowing rural-to-urban migration and generating a new social category—the peasant-worker. On the other hand, similar to poor women in many other developing countries, Chinese women peasant-workers may be the last group to benefit from this process. As Deng Xiaoping said, reforms were intended 'to let some people get rich first'—and women peasant-workers have never been part of this 'some'.

Chinese rural women have indeed gained opportunities and the possibility to change their fate and pursue their dreams. This dissertation aims to explore the extent to which this possibility has been and can be realised. China has gained a reputation as the 'world factory', while many Chinese factories are known as 'sweatshops' as in some other developing countries. In other words, these new work opportunities are also chances for the forces of global capitalism to exploit women workers. Moreover, since the 1980s, concerns have been raised as to whether Third World women can benefit from factory work opportunities. It is argued by feminists that Third World women are exploited by both global capitalism and patriarchy. Global capitalism does not challenge patriarchy, but instead may intensify, decompose and recompose it (Elson and Pearson, 1981). In research conducted in China, represented by Pun's (2005), it is shown that in the context of contemporary China—
an interesting combination of socialist ideology and market economy—women peasant-workers are oppressed not only by global capitalism and patriarchy, but also by the state.

The perception of Chinese women peasant-workers is that they are young, docile and hard-working, as shown in much of the literature, echoing the general image of Third World women workers (Elson and Pearson, 1981; Zhu, 2008). Moreover, because of China's resident system, rural people are not allowed to settle in cities. This resident system makes rural people subordinate, inferior and cheap in urban labour market. These characteristics make them popular in manufacturing industries. Yet, these characteristics are also responsible for their subordinate status in gender relations, the society, and the labour market. However, according to media reports about Chinese women peasant-workers in recent years, these characteristics are not changeless. For example, women peasant-workers nowadays require higher wages and have begun to struggle for them (Reuters, 2011). In order to examine the changes taking place within this group, we compare the two generations of women peasant-workers that have existed since the advent of China’s economic reforms: the first generation, comprising those who entered the labour market in the 1980s to the mid-1990s, and the second, comprising those entering the market after the late 1990s. This comparison attempts to offer an indication of whether, and to what extent, women peasant-workers are able to benefit from factory work opportunities in contemporary China, and a case to examine the universality and time effectiveness of claims about Third World women's roles in work, made by the researchers, which are discussed below.

Two threads are followed herein in discussing the extent to which the two generations of Chinese women peasant-workers are able to benefit from manufacturing work opportunities. The first thread discusses the macro context, focusing on changes of government policy and development of global capital in China. It shows the way in which, during the 35-year economic reforms, the state and global capital, collaborating with patriarchy, have exploited rural women and restricted their development. It further discusses how the state and global capital respond to the changes of market and society, and the dynamics of how they collaborate and restrain each other. The second thread discusses the subjectivity of these two generations of women peasant-workers. In other words, it compares their experiences, identities, and how they seize the opportunities and
respond to the impacts of the state, society, and culture. We argue that, in order for the exploitation of women peasant-workers to continue, their key characteristics, such as docility and cheapness, must be intensified or at least retained. In other words, the different characteristics shown by the second-generation of women peasant-workers may be the key in overturning their status of subordination. Therefore, this thread explores the possibility for these women to benefit through changes in their lives and thoughts at the micro level.

Methodology

The materials presented here are from historical literature about Chinese women peasant-workers and interviews involving six women peasant-workers, aged between 21-33, belonging to the second generation. There has been much empirical research on the first generation, so the interviews only focus on the second one. Four of the interviewees are currently working in Chinese factories and two used to work in such factories and subsequently established an NGO serving women peasant-workers in 2012. The interviews took place over the Internet through an instant messaging programme. The four current women peasant-workers were recruited through the NGO. Of course, the small size of this sample cannot represent the full scope of second-generation women peasant-workers. However, an attempt has been made to capture a diversity of perspectives: the interviewees include married and unmarried persons, a person who received an industrial injury, and persons whose roles changed from worker to NGO staff. Moreover, the interviews are grounded in the historical research on Chinese women peasant-workers, which is surveyed herein. Because of the limited scale of the interviews, they are used primarily to examine claims about second-generation women peasant-workers and to offer some clues in comprehending their situation. In order to protect the interviewees, they are anonymised herein through the use of pseudonyms.

Literature Review

In order to examine the different situations faced by the two generations of Chinese women peasant-workers, it is necessary to review the research on the role of women in paid work,
especially in factory work, in developing countries worldwide. Since the 1970s, when many women in developing countries began to participate in factory work, many researchers have discussed whether factory work can change women’s subordination in gender relations, because factory work leads to the capacity to generate independent income, which may allow women to gain more autonomy and power within household and society. In the context of market-economy China, these discussions offer a theoretical framework within which to analyse the situation in China. On the other hand, the comparison of the two generations can also help to examine the universality of these theories and may provide new angles for understanding this issue.

**Why Women Are ‘Suitable’ for Factory Work**

The participation of women in paid work—an effect that changes the traditional gender division of labour—is discussed by many researchers. In the traditional gender division of labour at household level, men are responsible for productive work or generating incomes for the survival of the household, whilst women are mainly responsible for reproductive work, such as the bearing and care of children. However, the gender division of labour is recomposed but not decomposed by the new role of women in a developing society, meaning that women must engage in both productive and reproductive work (Irving, 2008). In addition, women’s development of career and other benefits are restricted by their reproductive role. They are considered a ‘reserve army of labour’ (Standing, 1989) and as inferior labourers, mainly because they must bear and care for children (Elson and Pearson, 1981). Elson and Pearson (1981) argue that the reproductive responsibility of women is beneficial to factories, because factories are able to adjust the number of workers flexibly. They are easily fired and re-hired by factories. Furthermore, the secondary status of women in the labour market tends to result in women workers receiving lower pay and worse working conditions than men doing similar jobs (Elson and Pearson, 1981a). Dependency theory argues that, in this way, capitalism can exploit women workers as much as possible, through low wages and terrible working conditions (Mackintosh, 1981; Lim, 1990).

According to Mies (1986, cited in Pearson, 1998), the reason why women interest factory employers more is that they are restricted by their responsibilities, while men can
plan their lives freely. Similarly, Elson and Pearson (1981) argue that women are not able to become complete breadwinners, because their reproductive responsibilities cannot be socialised completely. Therefore, most of the women factory workers in developing countries are young and single or childless (Pearson, 1998). This is because young girls not only are more reproductive, but also lack family responsibilities (Lim, 1990). In other words, they can fully engage in factory work. Compared with productive work, reproductive work is more important for women (Pearson, 1998), which means unmarried women are more available to work in factories. However, many cases suggest that whether unmarried women are more popular than married ones in manufacturing industries also depends on other factors. For example, in China, married women peasant-workers might be more loyal than unmarried ones, because married women must feed their children (BSR, 2013), meaning that some factories may tend to hire more married women.

It was also noticed by some researchers in the 1980s that women were more likely to engage in ‘unskilled’ or ‘semi-skilled’ work, while men usually dominate skilled work, such as construction and transportation industries (Phillips and Taylor, 1980). On the one hand, women’s training is usually ‘invisible’, because this sort of training happens on private occasions and in daily life. Consequently, women’s skills are often regarded as untrained (Elson and Pearson, 1981). However, the demand for domestic labour in Chinese cities in recent years has been increasing significantly. As a result, domestic work—traditional women’s work—has been revalued in the market, and many men also engage in this industry (Lin and Mac an Ghaill, 2013). Unfortunately, this does not automatically mean that women’s work is upgraded or that domestic work is shared by both men and women within households. Instead, the revaluation of domestic work may only happen in the commercial marketplace. According to Lin and Mac an Ghaill (2013), the men who engage in ‘women’s work’ tend to discover the masculinities in the work. For example, cleaning storm windows is dangerous and requires strength, a task for which men may be better suited. This suggests that men tend to engage in skilled work, such as revalued domestic work, and regard masculinity as a key precondition for engaging in such work.

Apart from their disadvantages, the ‘advantage’ of women with respect to factory work is their ‘nimble fingers’. Women are often regarded as naturally having ‘nimble fingers’ and as docile and willing to accept tedious, repetitious, and monotonous work (Elson and
Pearson, 1981). These attributes, as well as their low wage requirements and high productivity, are also crucial ‘competitive factors’ of women in the labour market. Yet, Elson and Pearson (1981) argue that the ‘nimble fingers’ are not natural or inherited biologically from their mothers. Instead, the ‘nimble fingers’ of women are trained through women’s work, such as sewing, according to their female roles. Similarly, the docility of women is also cultivated in daily life. At the same time, labour-intensive manufacturing industries include a lot of elaborate manual labour, which requires workers with ‘nimble fingers’ (Pearson, 1998).

How Factory Work Opportunities Impact Women

The question of whether women can benefit from factory work opportunities and whether women’s subordination in gender relations can be changed has raised a lot of discussion. Some proponents, represented by Lim, argue that women can be independent from family and gain more influence in family affairs through generating an income. The advantages also include more independence and autonomy, higher incomes for consumption or for education and dowry, freedom to choose a spouse, and more life experience and wider horizons (Lim, 1990). It is also stated that work opportunities in the context of globalisation can reduce the income gap between men and women, as well as sex discrimination, because in order to win the global business competition, factories would rather offer jobs to women, who are cheaper labourers (Chan et al, 2013).

However, some opponents, represented by Elson and Pearson, criticise this conclusion as too optimistic and simplified (Pearson, 2007). Pearson (1998) challenges Lim’s (1990) argument that women are willing to work in modern factories, because of lack of modern job opportunities in developing countries. Pearson argues that in many cases, women are forced to work and sacrifice their future by their families, in order to support other family members. Moreover, Pearson (1998) also questions whether women can gain power to make decisions and autonomy to spend the money they earn. Some cases in Asian countries show that their income may be reallocated by their families, such as for the education or wedding of a brother.
In principle, capitalism is gender-neutral, which means it chooses labour based on cost rather than gender. The reason why it favours women more than men is women’s low wage and high productivity (Pearson, 1998). However, in practice, it is suggested that patriarchy is integrated into capitalism. Irving (2007) argues industries are dominated by men, who benefit from restricting women at the bottom of labour market. Phillips and Taylor (1980) believe that the emergence of capitalism was based on the existing patriarchy, which is unlikely to be eliminated automatically. Furthermore, labour market institutions are the bearers of gender relations and also intensify gender inequalities. On one hand, all the labour market institutions are gendered, such as labour legislation and job evaluation systems. On the other, the labour market does not challenge but adapts the gender division of labour within the household, restricting women's career development and intensifying the existing gender inequalities (Elson, 1999).

Contrary to Lim’s optimistic assumption, Elson and Pearson (1981) believe that women’s participation in factory work cannot automatically change women’s subordination in gender relations. But the situation is not static. The changes of economy, politics and culture create new gender relations (Irving, 2008). There are three tendencies of these changes: to intensify, decompose and recompose the existing subordination of gender. For example, in factories, the male boss and female worker relation is a new sort of subordination of gender (Elson and Pearson, 1981).

In summary, we are concerned here with the dynamics of patriarchy and capitalism that influence the expectations, experiences, and status of women workers in developing countries. Although it is widely agreed that the situations of women workers differ in different contexts (Lim, 1990; Pearson, 2007), this section presents a critical literature review of theories and concepts used in analysing the case of women peasant-workers in China.

Conceptual Framework

As mentioned above, peasant-workers refer to migrants from rural areas. They are usually called dagongzai/dagongmei in social discourse distinguishing sex or nongmingong in both
social and official discourses. We adopt the term *nongmingong*—*nongmin* refers to peasant and *gong* refers to worker in Chinese. However, in most of the literature on Chinese peasant-workers, the authors prefer to use *dagongzai/dagongmei* rather than peasant-worker, because *dagongzai* and *dagongmei* refer to men and women peasant-workers respectively, distinguishing sex (Zheng, 2007). *Zai* and *mei* refer to young men and young women, implying one of the main characteristics of peasant-workers—they were usually very young when they first migrate to cities. Moreover, different from the *gongren* class—the working class—who used to be the masters of this socialist country, *dagong* refers to working for bosses, implicating lower status, temporary work and lack of social protection (Pun, 2007). We agree with the explanation and use of the term *dagongzai/dagongmei*, because it clearly presents the changes of gender relations and workers' social status in discourse of the society from the planned-economy period to the market-economy period in China. However, we prefer to adopt the term ‘women peasant-worker’ for three reasons.

First, we herein compare the two generations of women peasant-workers and observe that there are still many first-generation women peasant-workers in labour markets, who are no longer young. The term *dagongmei* is not suitable for these women, either. It suggests a change of demand in the labour market, which is discussed below. Second, *dagongzai/dagongmei* is an unofficial and oral term, while peasant-worker—*nongmingong*—is used in both governmental and social discourses. It implies that ‘peasant-worker’ as a social category is constructed not only by the society, but also by the government, which is more powerful and efficient. Third, the term ‘peasant-worker’ clearly presents the dilemma of these people. As Pun and Lu (2010) state, they are not pure workers, because they do not have the right to settle down in cities; nor are they peasants, because they do not have lands and do not work on fields.

The phrase ‘women peasant-worker’ refers to three types of status of this category of person—women, peasant, and worker. These three statuses echo the argument claimed by many authors, represented by Pun (2005), that such people are affected or even oppressed by patriarchy, the state, and global capitalism. Moreover, these three factors not only affect Chinese women peasant-workers jointly, but also strengthen one another in this process (Pun, 2005).
In terms of the ‘women’ status, gender inequalities still exist in traditional families, especially in rural areas. Girls are usually the last to receive investment from their family in education (Yuan, 2005:80). In many cases, as with poor women in other developing countries, Chinese rural women are forced to sacrifice themselves to support other family members, such as for brothers’ education or weddings (Pearson, 1998). Although, in the Mao period, the central government underwent a gender equality reform to integrate women in production and offer them equal legal status, this top-down reform did not really improve gender relations, especially in rural areas and within households; this is discussed in section 3.

In terms of the ‘peasant’ status, this refers not to their occupation, but rather to their identity in contemporary discourses created by the state. The main aim of the economic reforms is to achieve modernity. One of the mottos is ‘yu shijie jiegui’—linking tracks with the rest of the world—the western countries. This discourse of modernisation constructs urban-rural differences—urban areas are modern and rural areas are backward (Jiang, 2003; Gaetano, 2004). Thus, ‘peasant’ as a traditional but not modern occupation refers to 'backward' rural people in social discourse. Moreover, the Chinese resident system—the Hukou System—divides residents into urban and rural residents. Rural people cannot enjoy urbanites' benefits, which makes them secondary residents institutionally.

In terms of the ‘worker’ status, in contrast to the workers in the Mao period, who were the masters of the country, ‘factory worker’ is a low-level occupation nowadays in China. The Chinese adopt the western phrases—blue and white collar to distinguish low-level and high-level work, represented by factory and office work respectively. Moreover, the factory is the field that presents joint oppression from the state and capitalism on women peasant-workers most intensively (Pun, 2005:16). In the whole processes of recruiting and producing, which are discussed below, factories attempt to exploit workers as much as possible. In sum, the phrase ‘women peasant-worker’ is not only a conventional term, but also indicates the complicated situation faced by this category of people, and the way social and governmental discourses and state power construct their status and identities.
The phrase ‘women peasant-worker’ is adopted by both the two generations, because they still cannot get urban hukou to settle down in cities or enjoy the same benefits as urbanites. These three statuses define the dilemma they face—they are sexually subordinated in the household and the labour market, they are 'backward' and inferior residents, and they are fully exploited by capitalism. This does not mean the situation has not changed at all from the first to the second generation, but the continuing usage of the phrase indicates that the second generation still faces many of the same inequalities their mothers faced.

**Government Policies and Global Capitalism**

This section presents the main context in contemporary China and discusses the implications of these contexts. We focus on how factory work opportunities emerge and in what conditions rural women are able to seize these opportunities. Furthermore, this section analyses the changes of this context in different respects, including government policies and globalisation of capitalism, and discusses how these factors affect the abilities of the two generations of women peasant-workers to interact with and respond to the changes of market and society.

**Government Policies**

In the massive migration process of the ‘tide of peasant-workers’, the Chinese central government plays the most important role. From the economic reforms that attract foreign investment, to the changes of the *Hukou* System that controls the flow of rural people, the central government plays a manipulative role that dominates the whole process through its incomparable power. This section focuses on the changes of government policies in the historical process.
Economic Reforms

During the Cultural Revolution of 1966-76, China’s economy almost collapsed and the authority of the Communist Party was challenged. In 1978, Deng Xiaoping regained power of the party and decided to launch large-scale economic reforms, changing the development model from a centrally-planned economy to a partial market economy, in order to boost China’s economy and reduce poverty. In 1979, the central government set up four Special Economic Zones (SEZs) along the south-eastern coast, in order to attract foreign investment.

In the mid-1980s, more similar zones, called export-oriented industrial zones or technology development zones, were set up and opened to the world (Berik et al, 2007; Pun, 2007).

These government policies and China’s own advantages, such as an ample cheap labour force, attracted much foreign investment from all over the world. This investment has mainly focused on labour-intensive manufacturing industries, such as garment and electronic industries, requiring a large number of workers. Consequently, many rural people, especially young and unmarried rural women from all around the country, migrated to the south-eastern cities to work in factories (Jacka and Gaetano, 2004; Pun, 2007).

Apart from the ‘opening’ policies, the central government also launched radical agricultural reforms in rural areas. Since the 1950s, the central government had established people’s communes in rural areas all around the country. During that time, peasants worked for their communes and with very limited wages, but they ate in the common cafeterias for free. However, the communes had to be responsible for feeding all the rural people, no matter whether there was sufficient demand for labour (Li et al, 2007). In the late 1970s, along with the other economic reforms, the central government eliminated communes in rural areas and launched the Household Production Responsibility System (HPRS). Decollectivisation of agriculture has led to a huge labour surplus in rural areas (Jacka, 2006:6).

On one hand, the central government promoted economic reforms in the south-eastern coast, attracting foreign investment and generating work opportunities. On the other hand, the agricultural reform made the rural people available to fulfil the demand of the labour market. This combination of economic reforms set up a sound foundation to attract foreign investment and boost the national economy. On the other hand, the reforms
stimulated peasants' incentives to improve productivity in agriculture and provided opportunities to access a larger world. However, the economic reforms further expanded the urban-rural, coast-inland and East-West differences. Moreover, alongside the increasing competition of agricultural products, peasants' income decreased. Lack of work opportunities in rural areas, decreased income of farming, and stimulation from cities have led to the migration of a huge quantity of rural people to cities looking for opportunities.

In 2000, in order to narrow the differences between coastal areas and the hinterlands, the central government underwent another economic reform—the Western Development Programme. This reform aimed to attract foreign and domestic investment to the hinterland provinces (Lai, 2002). As a result, many factories have moved to the hinterlands from the SEZs, for cheaper land and labour forces. Moreover, for many peasant-workers, the coastal areas are not as attractive as they were in the 1990s, because the hinterland cities are closer to their hometowns, with lower living costs and stress. This reform also indicates the control of the central government on economy and people’s flow (Reuters, 2010).

The Hukou System

On one hand, the economic reforms generate work opportunities and offer chances to rural people to migrate to cities. On the other, China’s specific resident registration system—the Hukou System—prevents rural migrants from settling in cities. Since the Mao period, the Hukou System has been used to control migration by the central government.

The Hukou System was launched in the late 1950s. Under this system, people were classified to agricultural or non-agricultural hukou (residence permits) according to their place of registration. It is a very effective way to control rural-to-urban migration because migrants were not allowed to stay in the places they did not belong to without the permission of the government (Davin, 2004; Jacka and Gaetano, 2004).

In the 1980s, in order to fulfil the increased demand of labour caused by the economic reforms and to solve the unemployment problem in rural areas, the central government loosened the Hukou System, allowing certain rural people to work in cities
Migrants without urban hukou cannot enjoy the benefits that urban citizens have, such as housing, healthcare and education.

In rural areas, the social welfare of rural peoples was provided by their family or commune before the economic reforms (Davin, 1994). Alongside the elimination of communes, the welfare of rural people has also declined. Rural people must rely on their families, friends, or fellow villagers in difficult times (Yan, 1996, cited in Davin, 2004). Under the Hukou System, if rural-to-urban migrants could get urban hukou easily, the government had to be responsible for providing social welfare and entitlements to the migrants. Thus, it is extremely difficult for the rural-to-urban labourers to become permanent urban citizens.

Furthermore, because rural migrants are not permanent residents and their residence permit is temporary, they are regarded as inferior citizens. They can only do the work that urban people are not willing to do, which is typically low-paid, hard, dirty or ‘immoral’ work, such as construction and factory work (Tan, 2005). Moreover, under the Hukou System, they are only able to work in cities, but not settle in cities and enjoy the welfare and rights as other urban residents do (Pun, 2007). Thus, peasant-workers contribute significantly to China’s economy, but do not gain a commensurate reward. In addition, in order to ensure economic growth, local governments often sacrifice peasant-workers’ rights. As Chan and Pun (2010) state, because of peasant-workers’ inferior status and governmental nonfeasance in protecting their rights, employers are able to exploit peasant-workers easily. At the same time, the Hukou System helps the government avoid the responsibility of guaranteeing the rights of migrants.

Gender Equality Reform

The central government launched a wide scale of gender equality reforms during the Mao period. In addition to ensuring the equality of women with men in terms of legal status, the central government also encouraged women to join in social production to achieve their self-worth (Razavi and Pearson, 2004). This radical reform deconstructed the traditional Chinese gender division of labour—‘men outside the home, women inside’ (nan zhu wai, nv zhu nei). Since then, it has become common for women to work outside, which is a crucial
foundation that enables the government to mobilise a vast number of rural women to migrate and work in cities. As Razavi and Pearson (2004) claim, foreign investments and manufacturing industries benefit from the state’s previous social investment. In other words, capital in contemporary China can more easily exploit Chinese women workers than those in other developing countries, because they had been mobilised by the government before the economic reforms.

However, although the Chinese women are able to achieve their self-worth through participating in work nowadays, gender equality has not been achieved in China. The practice of mobilising women through gender movement has been criticised as a tactic for the contemporary socialist government/party to consolidate its power (Molyneux, 1996, cited in Razavi and Pearson, 2004). Moreover, the method that the Chinese government adopted was a simplistic and orthodox Marxist approach, based on the supposition that the participation of women in social production is sufficient to liberate them (Jacka, 2006:38). This simplistic view of gender equality and top-down approach are insufficient to completely deconstruct the gender inequalities in China, which have lasted for thousands of years, especially in rural areas. The unequal gender relations within the household and the gender division of labour are still important factors that constrain rural women’s development; this is discussed in the next section. This Marxist approach to the liberation of women has been criticised by many authors (Wolf and Margery, 1985, cited in Jacka, 2006:38) as ‘unfinished’ or ‘postponed’, failing to solve the fundamental gender inequality whilst placing a double burden on the shoulders of women.

**Global Capitalism**

As mentioned above, since the 1980s, because of the economic reforms, China has attracted considerable foreign investment. Depending on an abundant labour force and transnational or foreign investment, the state establishes an export-oriented development model. Whilst this model has led in part to the economic miracle in China, it has also drawn Chinese rural people, especially rural women, into the process of globalised capitalism (Chen and Pun, 2010). This section focuses on the non-state-owned export-oriented manufacturing enterprises, which emerge after the economic reforms of the late 1970s. Although many
women peasant-workers work in domestic factories, they still participate in the global economy, because the products they make are sold all over the world.

**Gender Segregation in Manufacturing Industries**

Floor shops in manufacturing industries in China are dominated by women peasant-workers (Davin, 2004). This does not mean that Chinese women peasant-workers control manufacturing industries, because they remain at the lowest working levels. Razavi and Pearson (2004) observe that in the Special Economic Zones (SEZs), technological and managerial work is usually assumed by foreigners or middle-class men, while women peasant-workers usually do unskilled or low-skilled work. Both horizontal segregation—the domination of a given type of work by a single sex—and vertical segregation—the tendency for high-level work to be assumed predominantly by one sex—are evident in manufacturing and processing industries (Irving, 2007).

Male peasant-workers usually engage in construction, mining, and transportation industries, which require stronger body strength but are higher-paid (Tan, 2005; Lin and Mac an Ghaill, 2013). These types of work are traditionally men’s work in rural areas, demonstrating their masculinities. For example, rural men are usually responsible for constructing their own houses or those of others (Lin & Mac an Ghaill, 2013). The capabilities of men in construction and other such fields are trained and gendered during the process of maturation in society, echoing the situation with the ‘nimble fingers’ of women. Conversely, women peasant-workers usually engage in manufacturing industries, service industries, domestic service, and prostitution (Pan, 1999, cited in Zhu, 2008). Even though rural women leave the private realm and their villages, they still do the equivalent work, such as housework and caring for others, in cities that they once performed in rural areas. The same is true of men. Thus, the traditional gender division of labour within the household has been adopted in the labour market.

As with manufacturing industries in many other developing countries, the Chinese factories also favour young women, who are seen as docile, careful, and able to tolerate monotonous and repetitious work. The bodies of these women are also considered more
suitable to factory machines (Pun, 2005:134-135). Chinese women are traditionally oppressed by patriarchy and cultivated to be docile and careful (Zhu, 2008), echoing the situations in other developing countries (Elson and Pearson, 1981). Compared with middle-aged women, young women have fewer health problems and more energy. Because manufacturing industries often request workers to work overtime, energetic young single women are preferred: they are more able to handle long work hours, and do not have to assume other family responsibilities (Davin, 2004; Zhu, 2008). These characteristics of rural young Chinese women enable them to obtain manufacturing work opportunities, but also render them vulnerable to exploitation.

However, the young rural woman’s dominance in floor shops is changing. Along with the labour shortage in manufacturing industries in recent years, married women have also come back to the urban labour market. Many married women peasant-workers also work in manufacturing industries, because factories cannot recruit enough young workers (Mi and Liu, 2013). Moreover, men have also begun to join the group of assembly line workers, although women are still more popular. In the 1980s and the 1990s, it was very difficult to find factory work and the requirements for workers were very strict, because there was a sufficient labour force. However, since the 2000s, with increasing capital expansion and labour shortage, employers have loosened their requirements for workers (Chan and Pun, 2010).

Although the participation of men in assembly lines challenges the gender division of labour in the labour market, it does not automatically decompose the gender inequalities. First, it does not automatically increase the possibility for women to get promotion. In this situation, no matter what sex the workers are, the hierarchy within factories is still gendered. Instead of improvement of gender relations, the manager/worker relation among men indicates that another type of hierarchy is adopted in the workplace. Lin, Mac, and Ghaill (2013) argue that, in traditional Chinese values, sangang, the three cardinal guides—monarch rules ministers, father rules sons, and husband rules wives—refer to the basic hierarchical relationships in traditional China. In modern China, the father-son relationship has been extended to urban workplaces. In other words, when a man does traditional women’s work, in order to adjust this subordination—which used to belong to women—he regards the employer as an agency that offers protection, like a father. Therefore, it is more
likely that the participation of men in this 'subordinated' work is because they admit their subordination in the hierarchy, rather than that any challenge or revaluation of traditional notions of women's work and subordination are taking place in the labour market.

Wage, Working Conditions and Development Prospects

Manufacturing factories are often called ‘sweatshops’, implying a difficult working environment, low wages and long working times. However, as discussed above, abundant workers who can tolerate these difficult conditions are a very important factor in the development of export-oriented industries in China, leading to the availability of ‘made in China’ products all over the world. In terms of wages, it is known that overall wages have continued to rise. Peasant-workers earned 50-60 pounds per month in the SEZs in the mid-1990s, and by the year 2000 they were able to earn about 100 pounds per month (Knox, 1997, cited in Davin, 2004; Davin, 2004). At present, the minimum wage in Shenzhen, one of the SEZs, is 160 pounds per month (Lu, 2013). However, even though the wages of workers have risen, the cost of living has likewise risen. The real wage growth of Chinese peasant-workers actually started in 2005 (Chan and Pun, 2010). Workers’ wages usually constitute a very small part of all the profits of products. For example, Chinese workers earn less than 10 dollars by assembling a 575-dollar iPhone, while Apple can earn almost 60% of the profits (Kraemer and Dedrick, 2011). In addition, almost half of their wages are from overtime work (Tan, 2000; Chan and Pun, 2010). According to Chan and Pun’s (2010) research, for example, at Foxconn—the biggest electronic product contractor in Asia—worker’s overtime hours are 103.36 hours, which is over twice as much as the statutory overtime working hours—44 hours. Although workers are not forced to work overtime, they would be punished if they refused (Davin 2004, Chan and Pun, 2010). For example, in the factories where the participants of this research work, if they refuse to work overtime for some time, as punishment their employers would not permit them to take any overtime work. This situation is also demonstrated in Chan and Pun’s (2010) research on Foxconn. As a result, these workers can only earn minimum wage, about a half of the usual wage they earn, which is not sufficient to support their cost of living.
On one hand, under the pressure of low wages, workers would like to work overtime. According to the wage composition of a worker at Foxconn in 2010, the wage of normal work time is about 0.71 pounds per hour, but overtime wage is about 1.1 pounds per hour (Chan and Pun, 2010). Even though many cities have set up minimum wage, the minimum wage is usually too little for living in cities. Many peasant-workers would like to take the overtime work and reduction of such work is a form of punishment. In terms of this problem, the key is that hourly pay is so low that workers have to work overtime. On the other hand, as Davin (2004) argues, in order to remain competitive in the global market of manufacturing industries, the central government might keep the worst management on labour issues and keep ignoring the rights of labour. Moreover, the promotion of government officers is usually based on the achievement of economic development (Schröder, 2012). Therefore the local governments usually ignore workers' rights, including wage arrears and frequent injuries (Zheng, 2007).

Lack of prospects for promotion and training is also a form of exploitation of workers. Although many women peasant-workers wish to get promoted, there are few opportunities to be trained for upgraded skills and capabilities (BSR, 2013). One explanation of the lack of promotion prospects for peasant-workers is they change work too frequently (Lian et al, 2012). However, according to the interviewees of this research, it is extremely difficult for the floor shop workers to rise to the managerial positions. Factories usually only offer basic training to new workers to familiarise them with the products they make, and some training about security and health (BSR, 2013). Assembly line work is repetitive, taking from a few seconds to a few minutes to complete each step. Assembly line workers can learn little in the way of knowledge, skills or capabilities from this kind of work. No matter how long they work in one position, the only thing they learn from the work is a specific process of assembling a product.

In the 1980s and the 1990s, there were limited work opportunities; it was difficult for peasant-workers to find factory work, so that peasant-workers did not have the power to negotiate with employers (Chan and Pun, 2010). In recent years, labour shortage has been a big problem for manufacturing industries (Chan and Pun, 2010). However, the situation has not changed a lot. Along with the Western Development Programme, more work opportunities have been generated in the hinterland regions. Many peasant-workers
migrated back to the cities closer to their hometown from the coast, but with similar working conditions. Although their wages have been increasing, they are still very low (Hogg, 2010). There are three main reasons that prevent them from gaining the power of negotiation. First, they are flowing very frequently. It is very difficult for them to establish communities that are able to negotiate with employers collectively. For example, as Xiaoli (28 years old)—one of the interviewees who established a women peasant-worker NGO—says, one of the main difficulties the peasant-worker NGOs face is that workers might migrate to other places at any time, making it very difficult to cultivate worker leaders.

Second, peasant-workers, including both of the generations, have very few ways to search for jobs. They usually rely on their own social network—the co-villagers or relatives, who are also peasant-workers (Jacka and Gaetano, 2004). The information about job opportunities of peasant-workers is usually heard from others rather than discovered from media such as newspapers or the Internet. This prevents them from searching for jobs with the best pay and working conditions all around the country, and increases the cost of job discovery.

Third, the central government and the local governments play crucial roles in constraining workers’ wages and working conditions. The state faces challenges from other developing countries with abundant cheap labour, while the local governments have to compete with each other in order to develop the local economy. As a result, although there are many laws protecting workers’ rights, these laws are not implemented effectively.

Management and Dormitory System

Strict management practices in manufacturing industries are pointed out by many media reports and scholars (Chan and Pun, 2010). These practices are intended to guarantee productivity. According to the research in manufacturing industries from the 1990s to the 2000s, the situations in factories have not improved a lot (Pun, 2005; Jacka, 2006; Chan and Pun, 2010). Factories usually set up very strict schedules to arrange production and the lives of workers. Usually factories run all the time and arrange two to three shifts. Except for a very limited meal time, workers work almost from the time they wake until the time they sleep. According to Pun (2005), in an electronic factory in one SEZ, the day-shift workers had to wake up at 6:30 a.m. and work until 22:00 p.m. Peasant-workers in manufacturing
industries do not have much private time, which leads to high stress and little opportunity to develop themselves.

Production settings in floor shops are also arranged for productivity. The assembly line is the most effective equipment for the discipline of workers. As mentioned above, assembly line workers take their own position and repeat the same movement every day, making them the master of that process. Because they are extremely familiar with the process they do, they do not need to think when they are working on such lines. Many manufacturing workers say they feel like a machine (Chan and Pun, 2010). As Pun (2005:77-78) argues, assembly line settings tend to discipline women, who only repeat the same movement without thinking and are easily replaced. In addition, assembly lines are set up by the factories to run at a specific speed. Workers must follow the set speed of assembly lines. Once they are not able to follow this speed, they will be criticised by the managers or even be punished. When the workers adjust to the speed, factories will accelerate the speed until the workers are burned out and unable to keep up (Pun, 2005:91-93; Chan and Pun, 2010).

Apart from floor shop work, the dormitory system enables employers to control workers’ daily life. On one hand, this system offers accommodation to peasant-workers in cities, enabling them to live in cities. On the other, this system also enables factories to exploit workers’ time and bodies outside of the workplace. Under this system, workers are required to obey the rules set up by the factories even outside the workplace. The dormitory system creates an atom-like life space for workers, making workers feel like they are living alone, even though they have roommates. Because of the shift structure, workers sharing the same room are not always arranged at the same shifts. When some stay at their accommodation, others are at work. They might never have the opportunity to meet in their own rooms (Pun, 2007; Chan and Pun, 2010). In 2010, 14 Foxconn workers committed suicide, one of whom had never been known by his roommates before he did so (Liu and Yang, 2010). This system separates workers from family, friends, and communities. However, it is welcomed by the parents of some young women peasant-workers, because their daughters do not have the chance to come into contact with other men, which can protect their virginity (Davin, 2004).
This section presents the ways and extents to which the state and global capital exploit women peasant-workers in order to benefit from the process of economic development in contemporary China. To respond to the question of this dissertation, it is clear that the state and the machinery of globalised capitalism provide little space for women peasant-workers to benefit from these factory work opportunities. It is true that rural women might stay in rural areas doing agricultural work and caring for families for their entire lives, if the state and capitalism had not generated these work opportunities. It is also true that these jobs offer hope and the chance for rural women to enrich their lives. However, the space for women peasant-workers is so limited that they hardly have the chance to benefit beyond having a factory job. Even though the society and market have changed, and the state and capital interests also adjust their strategy to respond to the changes, they still attempt to maximise their benefits at the expense of the peasant-workers. Moreover, traditional values, such patriarchy and hierarchy, also play a part in this process, intensifying the negative impacts of the state bureaucracy and global capitalism on women peasant-workers.

Experiences, Identities and Subjectivities of the Two Generations of Women Peasant-Workers

The previous section shows how the state and global capitalism influence women peasant-workers. However, this cannot explain why so many rural women prefer to migrate to cities rather than stay in rural areas. Neither the first-generation nor the second-generation women peasant-workers are forced to work in factories. Moreover, before most rural women migrate to cities, they have heard reports of the difficulties of factory work and city life from the women who previously experienced them. Many of them still decide to venture forth. In order to respond to the question of this dissertation, apart from exploring whether the environment provides chances and space for them to benefit, it is also necessary to explore in what way these two generations of women seize these opportunities and pursue their dreams, happiness and freedom. By drawing comparisons between these two generations of working women, this section attempts to explore the
differences between them, such as the contrasting ways in which they respond to poor working conditions, their relations with family, and their expectations of the future.

Thus, this section focuses on presenting the subjectivity of these women peasant-workers. They are not objects of culture, power, and ideology, but subjects that attempt to practice and resist in the process of globalisation and modernisation in contemporary China (Pun, 2005:12-13). Each generation of women peasant-workers is unique, making different decisions to maximise the chance to benefit from the opportunities of this era. Yet they also show some similarities, enabling us to explore in what respects the market, society, and culture have remained the same during the 35 years since the advent of China’s economic reforms.

The First Generation of Women Peasant-Workers

The economic factor is definitely one of the most important. Although the agricultural reform has improved productivity and liberated labour, the concomitant increase in agricultural product supply inevitably led to price reduction, causing incomes in rural households to fall. Moreover, rural areas were lacking in work opportunities, resulting in a high rate of unemployment (Jacka, 2006:6). In order to increase household income, in many cases rural women had to go out to work as well as men, especially the eldest daughters of a family (Tan, 2005). The families of such rural young women usually did not prevent them from going out to work, because unmarried daughters can provide little assistance at home, so that their departure is not seen as a great loss (Lee, 1998:74-75).

However, generation of income was not the only reason that women decided to work in factories. Even though rural people suffer from poverty in rural areas, factory work is never an attractive opportunity. The central government’s emphasis on urban development has led to severe inequalities between urban and rural areas. These urban-rural differences have generated the desire in rural people to abandon their backward life and join the modern way of living (Pun, 2005:71-75). These desires were intensified by contact with previous rural-to-urban migrants. For example, in past occasions of the Chinese traditional new year, many migrants dressed up and brought presents with them when they
returned to their hometowns. Meili (27 years old), one of the interviewees, says, 'Before I came to the city, I had believed there was gold everywhere in cities, because the co-villagers, who had gone to cities, always wore jewellery and fancy clothes.' Such experiences also created the desire in rural young people to pursue a better life in cities.

For rural young girls, the city represented hope, opportunity and also hardship (Razavi and Pearson, 2004). However, according to the very well-known traditional Chinese motto—‘chi de ku zhong ku, fang wei ren shang ren’—if you wish to be the best person, you must suffer the bitterest of the bitter—rural women knew they had to suffer hardship in order to achieve their dream. Moreover, rural life is also hard, boring and lack of development chances.

The pursuit of freedom, expanding horizons and escape from traditional authorities are also important reasons (Pun, 2005:71-75). Indeed, many women peasant-workers experienced a certain degree of freedom when they are away from their family and other traditional authorities (Jacka, 2005; Jacka, 2006:7). Moreover, the first-generation women peasant-workers usually went back to their hometown to get married and might stay in rural areas afterwards, the urban experience was precious for them (Pun, 2007). According to their expectation of city life and the reasons they decided to migrate to cities, it is not suitable to regard them merely as objects of oppression. They are also individuals, pursuing happiness, development, and freedom.

**City Life, Factory Work, and Identity**

For peasant-workers, solving the hukou problem to allow for settlement in a city is extremely difficult. Therefore, becoming a real urbanite might be just an impossible dream. On the other hand, many women peasant-workers yearned for the urban woman’s lifestyle (Jacka, 2006:8). However, apart from their different lifestyle, their peasant-worker identity also made it very difficult to get involved in the city (Jacka, 2006:8). They were discriminated against by urban people (Jacka and Gaetano, 2004), and were only able to do the work urban people were not willing to do, such as factory work, low-level service industry work, domestic work, and prostitution.
Competition in service industries is very intense, requiring workers to be physically attractive and adept at speaking—requirements that many low-educated rural young women were unable to meet. Working hours in service industries were also very long. As for prostitution, participation in such work made it unlikely that they could marry a good man, because the chastity of women is a very important traditional Chinese value. Domestic work is also hard, dirty, and fiercely competitive, as well as providing little opportunity for private time. Therefore, while factory work may not be the only choice for women peasant-workers, other options were not much more attractive. None of these forms of work can draw the lives of women peasant-workers closer to those of urban women. Moreover, these jobs even exacerbate the differences between peasant-workers and urban women. Even though they yearned for the lifestyle of urban women, the big gap between urban and rural areas prevented them from acting like such women (Jacak, 2006:8). Their 'backward' image—the way they spoke and dressed—implied their rural identities. These traits, as well as their education level, capability and social network, also made it more difficult to get decent work and positions of higher status, such as that of a salesgirl in a high-level shopping mall.

Marriage, Life Circle, and Gender Relations Within the Household

As mentioned above, many rural girls migrated to cities to pursue freedom, escaping from family and other traditional authorities. However, for many of them, this freedom would not last long, because traditional values dictated that women should eventually marry. The view that women should marry is still very popular in China, even in cities. Those women who have not married and who are over 27 years of age are referred to as 'leftover' women (Magistad, 2013). It was very difficult for women peasant-workers to find a suitable husband in cities, because their social circle was very limited and people in cities were not as reliable as those from their home environments. Therefore, they usually returned to their hometowns and their parents would introduce them to some good men of whom they approved (Pun, 2007). After marrying, many such women would stay in rural areas to take care of children and parents, and do agricultural work. Their husbands would return to the cities to earn money to feed the family (Tan, 2005).
Pun (2005) notices this phenomenon, which was also demonstrated by her research participants. However, in fact, many women returned to cities and left their children to the elderly. Because Pun’s research participants in the 1990s had not married, it is reasonable that they believed they would stay in rural areas for their entire life after marrying. In terms of the population structure in rural areas since the economic reforms, there were three tendencies. The first is the ‘feminisation of agriculture’, which means most of the rural men migrated to cities and their wives had to take their position in agricultural labour (Zuo, 2004). The second is that there are many ‘left-behind children and elderly’, which means that both married men and women migrated to cities and left their children to the grandparents to look after. According to the latest government data, there are over 60,000,000 ‘left-behind children’ in rural areas (Xinghuawang, 2013). The third is that there are many peasant-workers’ children in cities (Qian, 2011). These tendencies look contradictory, but they indicate the diverse decisions women peasant-workers make. They also show that not all rural married women stayed in rural areas; many even took their children to cities. However, more women than men stayed in rural areas. According to the historical data, the number of women peasant-workers is about a half that of men, implying that the rural men who migrate to cities are twice as women (NBSC, 2008; NBSC, 2013).

It is also important to examine the relations of these women with their parents when they begin to contribute to the household economy and whether they are able to decide how to spend the money they earn. One kind of freedom women peasant-workers gain from working in cities is that they have their own money and their parents are too far to interfere. They usually send money home, but they can decide how much to send. Moreover, even though they can only earn very limited money in factories, the money they send home might be still more than their parents' annual income as peasants, which improves their status within the household (Jacka, 2006:177-179; Zheng, 2007).

Resistance

The main difference between the two generations is about the way they resist the authorities, especially the state and global capitalism. Pun (2005:71-75) indicates that the migration of first-generation women peasant-workers is a way to resist patriarchy and the
'backward' rural areas. They intended to pursue their freedom and happiness and change their fate through migrating to cities. However, that is also what their family and the state want.

Pun (2005:169-173) indicates that another means of resistance employed by the first-generation women is their body’s pain. Because of the long and repetitive work, many workers experienced occupational sickness, such as neck pain. The pains of every worker on the same assembly line are able to slow down the speed of production. Moreover, these pains also demonstrate that their bodies are not perfectly suited to assembly lines. However, all these resistance approaches are too obscure and moderate. As Zheng (2010) notes, if pain is a kind of resistance, nothing is not resistance.

The Second Generation

For the rural women who were born in the 1980s and the 1990s, migrating to cities is inevitable. As mentioned above, many grew up in cities; and many were raised by their grandparents, but learnt much about cities from the migrants. The city for them is not as mysterious as for their mothers. On the other hand, they are more educated, independent, and confident (BSR, 2013). Their motivation for migrating to cities is not the pursuit of freedom for several years, or expanding their horizons, but for self-development, and even career development (Pun and Lu, 2010). However, they are not as easily satisfied as their parents. They want higher wages, more promotion prospects and more opportunities for growth. Thus, resistance is a very important theme of their city life and work experience.

Reasons for Migrating To and Staying In Cities and the Expectations of Women Peasant-Workers

Reduction of household poverty is still an important reason for the migration of many second-generation women peasant-workers (Ma and Jacobs, 2010). Almost all the interviewees claim this is their main reason. This does not mean that the struggles of the first generation of peasant-workers did not improve their life at all. Because rural people lack social protection as mentioned above, especially pensions and healthcare, if a family
member were to come down with a serious illness, they would have to borrow money from relatives and friends. As Siya (21 years old), one of the interviewees, says, her family is deeply in debt, because of her sickness at a young age and her father’s sickness several years ago. In order to repay the debt, she has to give up the chance to study in college and work in the city instead.

Another reason is that, for many rural young people, especially those left-behind children, there are few families and peers staying in rural areas. Without the presence of their families, it is reasonable that they do not feel their hometowns to be home. Moreover, if they migrate to the city where their families have already stayed for years, at least they will have those families to rely on. Meili’s case is very typical. Both of her parents were working in a city, leaving her and her brother in their rural hometown. When she was 15 years old, her parents took her brother to the city because he got sick, leaving her alone in their rural home. Even though she was too young to work according to the law, she still decided to join her family and borrowed an identity card to work in a factory.

Compared with the first-generation women peasant-workers, who were willing to pursue freedom and expand their horizons, the new generation of women peasant-workers regard career development very highly. They are not satisfied by factory work and always want better jobs. Moreover, they are not happy with the low wages and long working hours in factories, because they have fewer economic pressures and longer careers than their mothers (Pun and Lu, 2010). The One-Child Policy, in effect since the 1980s, has meant that the new generation has few brothers and sisters, which means less economic pressure within households (Guan, 2011). As a result, the rate of change of work is very high among the second generation. One research study shows that the second-generation peasant-workers change jobs 0.26 times per year on average, three times as much as the first generation (Pun and Lu, 2010).

In sum, the reasons for the second generation of women peasant-workers to migrate to or stay in cities are mostly different from those of their mothers. For the second generation, it is even seen as unreasonable to stay in rural areas, because ‘there is nothing to do’, according to all the interviewees. Doing agricultural work, getting married and
looking after children are not included in their 'to do' list, especially for the unmarried women. As a rural woman, pursuing self-development is becoming increasingly acceptable.

City Life and Identity

Even though the first-generation peasant-workers have worked in cities for over 20 years, peasant-workers' social status in cities has not improved. They are still inferior residents in cities. They usually live in industrial areas or urban villages, where the houses are owned by locals and rented to migrants. Peasant-workers' children can only study in private schools, because the public schools only accept children with local hukou (Qian, 2011). Therefore, even though peasant-workers live in cities, they are actually excluded from the urban communities. However, even though it is so difficult to stay in cities, they are more willing to get the urban hukou and settle down in cities with the same benefits as urbanites (Guan, 2011). In contrast with the first generation, the second-generation women peasant-workers actively attempt to shed their 'backward' image and get involved in city life. Therefore, they spend a much larger proportion of their incomes on body consumption, such as clothing and makeup products (Wang and Yan, 2011).

As Luojing (32 years old) and Jieyu—interviewees who migrated to cities over 10 years ago—state, they do not consider themselves urbanites; but they will not return to rural areas, either. Alongside the economic development in the hinterland regions in recent years, many peasant-workers have migrated back to hinterland cities from coastal areas (NBSC, 2008; NBSC, 2013). It is reasonable that many peasant-workers migrated to the cities closer to their hometowns. While coastal cities offer more opportunities, the cities closest to their hometowns are more friendly and they spend less money and time on travelling. But no matter coastal or hinterland cities, they prefer cities to rural areas, and they do not have urban hukou. The second-generation women peasant-workers face a dilemma that they are not accepted by cities and cannot go back to rural areas, because there are few opportunities in rural areas.

Indeed, there are many opportunities in cities. However, the second generation of women peasant-workers is not necessarily any more able to seize these opportunities than
their mothers were. As mentioned in the previous section, there are still few promotion prospects for factory workers. The first-generation women peasant-workers may not expect promotion, because many of them quit or lost their jobs after getting married; the second-generation women peasant-workers do expect promotion and development, but they still lack these things. All of the interviewees, who are currently working in factories, want to change to a more promising form of work, but none of them know what work to do. Luojing, who has already worked in an electronics factory for 10 years, is still working in a floor shop. As the other interviewees reflect, floor shop workers have very limited chances for promotion; many of them are still the lowest-level workers after many years in the same factory.

**Marriage and Gender Relations Within the Household**

Compared to the first-generation women peasant-workers, the second generation is more willing to find a spouse by themselves (Zhang and Hu, 2013). Moreover, the range of options is also much larger, not limited only to co-villagers or the men their parents approve. For example, Mozi (30 years old) met her husband through the Internet. Jieyu's husband is her colleague, who is from a different province. Siya just began a relationship with a man who she met at a gathering. The rural girls nowadays have a strong will to pursue their own happiness.

In addition, because of the One-Child Policy, most of the second-generation women peasant-workers have one or no siblings. In the past, rural women might have to struggle to win the attention of their parents; nowadays, they have much more attention from their parents, especially those who are only children. However, some rural girls have to give up their study and work in cities to support their brothers’ educations, such as Xiaoli, who did better than her brother in school. This suggests that the top-down policy may change the structures of family, but is not able to change completely the inequalities of gender.
Resistance

For the second-generation women peasant-workers, the most common approach to resistance is to change work. On one hand, because workers change jobs very frequently, it is difficult for employers to recruit enough workers. In order to keep the workers, many employers have to raise wages and improve working conditions (Mi and Liu, 2013). Similarly, in order to keep peasant-workers in the region, many local governments set up minimum wage (Chan and Pun, 2010). On the other hand, this situation benefits the factories, because they can avoid many responsibilities to the old employees. In fact, even though workers want to find better jobs, this is not easy to achieve, because they find that conditions of others factories are similar. For example, many workers at Foxconn have quit and come back several times, because they found the other factories are similar (Chan and Pun, 2010).

The second-generation peasant-workers have a greater will to learn than their mothers (Zheng, 2007). However, as mentioned above, they might not have the time and energy to attend courses. One of the largest differences between the two generations is the way they gain information and communicate. Because of the popularisation of smartphones and the Internet, most of the peasant-workers own a smartphone and have Internet access (Wang, 2013). However, most only use their phones for entertainment rather than for gaining knowledge or finding jobs (Guan, 2011; Wang, 2013). If they used their smartphones to gain more information about employers and working conditions, or if they learnt the labours laws via the Internet, it is likely that they might have more power to negotiate with employers and protect themselves. The development and popularisation of communication technology indeed shows the potential for low-level workers to acquire information much more easily, which is an important part of power.

There are two kinds of radical resistance—individual and collective resistance. Individual resistance usually takes the forms of asking for compensation for industrial injury, and ultimately suicide. The most famous suicide cases are the 14 suicides at Foxconn in 2010. A hopeless future, repetitive work, high pressure, and a lonely life, as discussed above, are the factors that lead to such suicide. Chan and Pun (2010) consider these suicides as a kind to protest to express the anger and hopelessness of the peasant-workers. In terms of industrial injury, the work of women peasant-workers—manufacturing—is not as
dangerous as that of men—construction and transportation. Therefore the proportion of women asking for industrial injury compensation is much smaller than men (Zhang and Yao, 2012). In fact, peasant-workers usually do not know how to protect their rights and local governments usually ignore their rights, as mentioned above. If they decide to sue their employer, they might spend much money, time and energy for only a small chance of success. For example, Xiaoli received an injury to her right hand when she was working in 2008. She spent two years on treating her hand and finally it became disabled. Eventually in 2012 she received compensation—about 18,000 pounds—with help from an NGO. This is a successful case in which a worker who lost her right hand finally received very limited compensation with help from an outside organisation. There are many other peasant-workers that do not receive help from anyone and might not receive any compensation, as Xiaoli states. In addition, as Xiaoli, who eventually established her own NGO to help other women peasant-workers, states, compared with men, women have more constraints when fighting for their rights. In many cases she has dealt with, the women’s families might not allow them to sue the employer, because it is very difficult to succeed, and once they succeed, they might be considered as aggressive women, a perception that can have a negative effect on their marriage prospects. In addition, although compensation is very limited, such as in the case of Xiaoli’s 18,000 pounds, it is still a lot of money for rural people. Should a rural girl acquire such a sum, her relatives might try to take it, with the excuse that it is not necessary for women to keep such money.

In terms of collective resistance, there are increasingly worker strikes and protests happening in China (Grammaticas, 2010). It is claimed by many authors that the peasant-workers become angry and cannot keep silent any longer (Guan, 2011). However, most such strikes were not prepared well, and both employers and local governments attempt to hamper the strikes. As a result, very few strikes are successful (Loong-Yu and Shan, 2007). Moreover, alongside the fast development of civil society in China in recent years, grass-roots worker NGOs and trade unions have also appeared. For example, Xiaoli and Meili’s NGO aims to cultivate worker leaders like themselves, who were cultivated by another NGO. They hope that these leaders can establish more worker NGOs or organise more actions to fight for their rights. However, most of the promoters of the strikes are men. In most cases, women peasant-workers play a supportive role rather than an organising role (Pun and Lu,
Moreover, among the worker NGOs all around the country, there are very few NGOs focusing on women peasant-workers. There is a lack of research about women peasant-worker NGOs in China. As Xiaoli estimates, there are only about five women peasant-worker NGOs in the whole of the country. Furthermore, one of the main reasons that she decided to establish her NGO is that the worker NGO for whom she worked before did not have any gender perspective, often ignoring the unique needs and circumstances of women peasant-workers.

There are similarities and differences between the situations of the two generations of women peasant-workers. One similarity is that neither of them receive sufficient economic benefit from their work, and they are unable to gain the urban hukou. Even though the second-generation might have more power to negotiate with the employers, they still face many constraints. Another similarity is that both of them attempt to pursue happiness and freedom. Because it is unlikely that the state, global capitalism, and patriarchy will make more space for the women peasant-workers to benefit, their wills and actions to struggle for their happiness and freedom are crucial. In terms of differences, the second generation is more educated and ambitious, thanks to their parents. However, they also face a dilemma that their mothers did not: they are more urbanised and have less connection with their hometown. As a result, settling in cities is an impossible dream, and going back to rural areas has become a nightmare for them. No matter where they are, they are always strangers. Last but not least, another difference is that the second generation is more resistant to established power structures. However, while the worker-government and worker-employer conflicts become increasingly white-hot, the common appeals of both genders of peasant-workers lead to concerns of gender inequality being overlooked and ignored.

Conclusion

We have shown herein a picture of how the state, global capitalism and traditional patriarchy exploit rural women to benefit from the process of modernisation and globalisation in contemporary China. This picture shows the ways in which women peasant-workers as individuals, and as a social group, resist these authorities and struggle to gain
better livelihoods for themselves. It also shows the dynamics among the state, global capitalism, and patriarchy, and how these forces interact. Although the tragic image presented by these Chinese women peasant-workers is now well-known, they always strive to control and better their own lives.

Before the Mao period, rural women only belonged to their family; during the Mao period, rural women also belonged to the state and the collective; in the post-Mao period, it might be their first time to leave the domain of the traditional authorities and make their own decisions. The movement of rural women from families and communes to cities not only promoted the economic miracle, but also enabled rural women from all around the country to create and share their common experiences. From the first generation to the second one, the means for resisting entrenched authority have become increasingly radical and active. This does not mean that radical action must lead to empowerment; but without actions arising from their own hearts, it is unlikely that the state, global capitalism and patriarchy would make the improvement of these women’s lives a priority.

It may still be too early to fully estimate the extent to which Chinese women peasant-workers can benefit from factory work opportunities. However, it is possible to explore the tendencies and potentials by comparing the two generations. On the other hand, the women peasant-workers assemble electronic products at their workplaces, and they also consume these products in the market. The low price of smartphones enables them to participate in the Internet, and offers them a chance and possibility to get information easily and to establish virtual communities. Although this possibility has not come true on a large scale, this indeed shows the potential for change.

There are also some changes that have taken place in the society. For example, rural girls have more opportunities for education, as a result of the One-Child Policy. Moreover, some international organisations have begun to intervene in the issue of workers' rights in manufacturing industries in recent years, promoted by globalisation. These changes suggest that the state, global capitalism, and patriarchy not only intensify one another, but also at times hamper one another. However, this does not mean the dynamics among these three forces would lead to a more equal and free society, or women peasant-workers could gain real benefit from their work. Most of the time, they are co-operators with the status quo.
Furthermore, the relations of Chinese women peasant-workers and the state, global capitalism, and patriarchy are all hierarchical—ruler/people, employer/employee, father/daughter, and husband/wife. These three forces tend use these hierarchical relations to control women peasant-workers. For example, a docile daughter is considered a good worker by capitalism, and cheap labourers are very good resources for the government to use to boost the economy. If one of the three forces is hampered, it might influence the others.

For the first-generation women peasant-workers, they have gained the chance to earn their own incomes and make some decisions for themselves. For the second generation, they are able to obtain more freedom, in terms of determining the course of their own lives, and have more approaches and options for negotiating with employers. They are not as docile as their mothers and the women workers in other developing countries referenced in the literature of the 1980s and 1990s, and they have begun to resist the repetitive work, low wages, and long working hours. Moreover, the development of technology also shows the potential to empower women peasant-workers. It is true that the state, global capitalism, and patriarchy tend to constrain the extent to which they can benefit from their efforts; but it is also true that the woman peasant-worker always seeks to challenge these traditional authority structures, to pursue the freedom and happiness that she deserves.

Bibliography


