
Am I the Only Survivor?
Global Capital, Local Gaze, and
Social Trauma in China

Pun Ngai

*I don't know how I survived, but I am the only one who can be alive.
All the women from my village died in the fire. I still can't believe that
I'm lucky enough to have escaped the gates of hell. . . .*

a survivor of a factory fire in China

Fire, pain, and memory flashed into Xiaoming's life story, highlighting a social trauma that runs through the lives of *dagongmei*, migrant working daughters, in this time of restructuring for China's state socialist system. Reform-era China is imaged through a lens focused squarely on the global market, a lens that not only occludes new forms of class and gender inequality—and thus legitimizes them as necessary evils—but also leaves the voices of individuals subsumed within the collective enterprise. Who cares? A giant China is coming, a few thousand deaths a year mean nothing. After all, it was the West that was the first to dream of and promise a giant China to come in the twenty-first century! Thus was triggered a mighty desiring machine in mainland China, its effects felt especially among the elite. The desiring machine, with all its power, was targeted on one goal: to set the nation inexorably on the track of globalization, *yu quanqiu jiegui*, and join the World Trade Organization. What has been tragic is the calling up of a generation of young women to work toward this dream of integration with the global economy. A consideration of China's subaltern condition within the global order could have foretold the voices of tragedy—the tragedy of compressed time

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and space and the tragedy of compressed grievances—hidden, yet not choked off. Social explosions emerged from time to time, severely suppressed, leaving behind deep social traumas that continue to haunt the country.

The Blaze

Seven years have already passed. Chance had brought me to meet Xiaoming who, alone of all the migrant women from her village, had survived a factory fire in Shenzhen. Shenzhen was the first of the Special Economic Zones set up in China in the early 1980s as stepping-stones for international capital. On 19 November 1993, a blaze had engulfed a plant there run by a Hong Kong subcontractor to a European toy maker, a brand famous in U.S. and European markets. It killed over eighty workers. Twenty others were seriously burned and another sixty injured. Half a month later, I met Xiaoming in the hospital. Her body was completely burned, all her skin seared and charred; left behind were a pretty face and glinting, innocent eyes. She looked weak but calm, very calm.

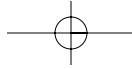
Three years later, in the course of my doctoral fieldwork, I would meet Yan, another migrant working daughter, who worked at a Shenzhen electronics factory. Her condition seemed unexceptional, except that she screamed into the darkness every morning at four, frightening other female workers in the dormitory. Yan was awakened by nightmares.¹ As a disclosure of social violence, this speech act seemed obvious and urgent, but I could still find no device of writing that could work to turn the pain inside out and get deeper into the grip of the power that held her. Hope of resistance was still far away.

*Yet I had no choice
I was compelled to murmur
The desire*

I never expected to meet Xiaoming and Yan, and vice versa. Fire, pain, dream, and scream nested three lives together, bound us with a mutual imperative to give voice. Xiaoming, a young girl of twenty-one when I met her, was a migrant worker fresh from a village in Hubei, a relatively poor region. Worried that recalling memories of the fire would be too hard for her, we chatted about her childhood, her family, and her work experience in Shenzhen.

*Kids like to fight, to jump, to sing. But I liked to dance, so I figured I
could be a dancer some day. . . .*

1. For details of Yan's dream, see Pun 2000.



It's not easy to get to my village. It's in a mountainous area that no train or bus can reach. You have to walk about an hour to reach my home. . . .

For a couple of years, I helped my parents doing farmwork and housework. Young people don't like tilling the fields. I didn't either. Everybody said working "on the outside" was fun and I could earn a lot more money that way.

In 1990, I left with some co-villagers and took a job in a garment factory in Shenzhen. Getting out the first time was exciting—the big city, the skyscrapers, the shops, and so many people. . . . It was like watching a film, and I was there. Everything was interesting to me, and I found myself very rustic and innocent. . . .

But I wasn't happy with my first job. The factory, which was owned by a Taiwanese boss, often put off paying our wages. We were supposed to get paid on the first day of each month, but they were often late, sometimes a month, sometimes two months. . . . At least the pay wasn't any lower than in the other factories. I could make about 300 yuan each month.²

I left that factory in May 1991 and was introduced by my cousin to the toy company. It was a big plant. . . . We worked very hard, from sunrise to midnight, twelve hours a day. Every day I would be worn out, all my energy gone. . . . But I felt happy there. I had dozens of relatives and friends; we chatted a lot and helped each other.

From that point on, I never thought of working in another factory. . . . Every three months I could send about 600 yuan back to my hometown to my father. I thought I could at least work there for another two or three years.

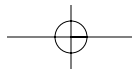
But then the fire happened, the fire. . . .

In the Field: Gaze/Gate of Desire

The blaze of 1993 caused the collapse of the toy-making plant. The event, however, did not dash the dreams of the young *dagongmei* who continued to flood into the industrial zones for better lives and opportunities. Year in and year out, migrant workers were to be seen hanging around the train stations, waiting for the chance to rush through factory gates. Fates such as Xiaoming's posed no threat to the desire for mobility of young rural women striving to leave their village; nor were they heeded as a lesson.

And three years later, I was again in the field.

2. The dollar exchange rate through the 1990s was about 8.2 yuan to U.S.\$1.



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It was Monday, 4 March 1996, a week after the Chinese New Year holiday, and thus the day to which migrant workers in Shenzhen had looked in hope for the chance to enter a factory. At one o'clock in the afternoon, the gate at the Hong Kong-owned Meteor Electronics Company was surrounded by a crush of people hoping to get in for an interview. There were more than two hundred people there, most of them women. It was not hard to tell by their appearance that they were the *mang liu*, the “blind nomads” (in the words of the official ideology machine)—members of the first wave of migrants who came annually, immediately after the New Year, to hunt for jobs in the industrial zone. In launching its economic reforms, the Chinese state had decided to open not only the national door to foreign capital, but also an urban door to its rural people. The whole society then began to ride on top of a great movement—a movement of economic systems, a movement of political ideologies, a movement of practices of everyday life, and a movement of real people.

On the Day of Recruiting

The crowd stood fast at the factory gate. Three factory guards, male, tall, and strong, each holding an electric cattle stick and standing beside the gate, tried to maintain a seemingly impossible order. Two ladies from the personnel department, Ying and Jun, stood at the entrance, examining the documents held by the job seekers. As they worked busily, they tried to explain the situation to me standing behind them.

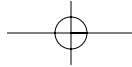
Ying: We didn't put ads in the newspaper or on the notice boards on the street. We simply spread the news on the shop floor that we were going to recruit labor this afternoon. Now here come so many people, we can't handle them. Every year is like this.

Pun Ngai: Where do they come from?

Ying: Oh, provinces all over the country. But anyway, I'm sure they're people who have relationships with our factory. Maybe relatives or co-villagers, or peers of our factory workers.

Ying and Jun checked four kinds of papers: national identity cards, secondary-school graduation certificates, certifications of unmarried status, and entry permits for the Shenzhen Special Economic Zone.

Ying: Our priority goes to workers from Guangdong province, aged over sixteen, but preferably eighteen to twenty-three, single, and with a secondary-school education.



Jun: Nowadays, people can easily buy a school certificate at a low price. So it's difficult for us to tell the real from the fake. We have to judge not only from their certificates, but also from their appearance.

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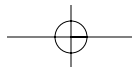
Following Jun's eyes, I looked at the crowd as well, focusing on their faces and bodies. They were so varied—some tall, some short, some thin, some fat—some with a more urban look than others. Whatever their appearance as individuals, the whole crowd had set their gaze in my direction. The only direction, the face of the factory, where *gaze* and *gate* met, absorbing all kinds of expectations into a single flow of desire—the desire for factory life.

That day, twenty people were chosen. The gate was pulled down, leaving the crowd in the outside world of disappointment.



This episode of labor recruiting contains nearly all the crucial elements of a plot that has yet to be resolved. First of all, the meeting of *gaze* and *gate* at this site instantiates the politics of desire in contemporary China—the desire of global capitalism and local nationalism to produce wants, lacks, and wishes in the individual to serve the forces and demands of the society at large. The desire to be *dagongmei*, as manifested in the great flux of migration to the urban industrial areas, cathects the politics of the capitalist machine in producing social lack and generating desire in individuals to fill the void. The urge of young girls to leave their rural homes is a phenomenon far too complex for any programmatic explanation. Current migration flows in China are often traced to the root cause of a poverty that can only be addressed when economic development has brought full integration within the global capitalist system. But as a crystallized form of social lack, poverty and its discourses have in fact been extensively produced, repetitively and ubiquitously, penetrating into every corner of society. This poverty—as most conspicuously manifested in the huge gap between the urban and rural communities—is not unreal, but it was artificial and historically made, and, most important of all, it needs to be consumed.

At the factory gate, the regulation of the body and desire began at the very moment of the migrants' encounter with the production machine. It seemed that power simply could not wait to inscribe itself on the body when the two parties met. Of the two hundred hopefuls, the twenty interviewees were picked up arbitrarily by judging, at first glance, their appearances and then their paper credentials. As Michel Foucault (1977: 25–26) poignantly states, the political technology of the subject is bound up with its economic use: “It is largely as a force of



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production that the body is invested with relations of power and domination. . . . Its constitution as labor power is possible only if it is caught up in a system of subjection." Turning rural and lazy "socialist bodies" into industrialized, efficient, and productive subjects is the fundamental work of the production machine. And if, as Frantz Fanon (1967) says, the black man's soul is the white man's artifact, it could be said that the *dagongmei*'s body is the production machine's desire.

The Dream Goes On: Back to Xiaoming's Memory

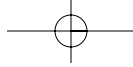
Many years later, after I had returned to the field, I still could not forget Xiaoming's face and voice.

I was satisfied with my job in Zhili. . . . It was terribly hard work, but we had fun, too.

We had a plan. We were going to save money to go to Beijing. It was such a big dream.

Transience was a defining characteristic of Xiaoming's life in Shenzhen, as it is for most other working daughters. In the Maoist period, the *hukou* system of household registry—a hybrid creation of developmental statism and collectivism—had been imposed as a highly effective mechanism for controlling mobility and citizenship rights among the population. Under *hukou*, one's fate was tied to the area of his or her birth: in the village, one's whole life would be spent as a peasant, whereas those lucky enough to be born in the city were workers, part of a privileged class that enjoyed all the products of the peasants (a relationship that was not reciprocal). Population mobility was not permitted unless it was part of state planning. But with the advent of the open door policy and economic reform, state controls on mobility were eased and the labor surplus from the rural areas was drawn to the cities to meet the needs of global capital. After being bound to the land for three decades, it was the first time that the whole of the Chinese peasantry gained the freedom to move—and the freedom to experience the inequality between the rural and the urban.

In a reverse movement, however, working daughters in urban factories generally returned to the countryside by age twenty-four or twenty-five, before it became too late to marry. Their situation was one of being torn between familial expectations and industrial demands, between inevitable pressure to get married and the temptations of city life. And sometimes it seemed that the capitalist regime was making use of such cultural expectations by extracting maximum labor from these women workers during the best years of their lives. After work-



ing four or five years for twelve hours a day in the factory, they would be completely worn out. It would then be high time for them to get married and continue their labor in a different mode by producing sons, serving the patriarchal system at another site: the village.

The socialist machine did not smash the patriarchal machine, nor did its new capitalist motor; in fact, they worked smoothly with each other, hand in hand, gear meshing with gear.



Xiaoming knew well that she would encounter the same impasse as other daughters: a choice between single life as a worker in the city or married life in the village. She and her friends, nevertheless, had other thoughts. They knew that after marriage they would be forced to stay in their husband's village for the rest of their lives and probably get no more chances to work in the city. Around the time of the 1992 New Year holiday, a wish became a plan: save money for a tour of the capital before they were married out.

Xiaoming began to save money for herself. By the late autumn of 1993, after sending money to her family, she had 500 yuan. One chill night, the fire burned the money and the dream. . . .

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