An Empowerment Approach to Female Migration:
A case study of China's Manufacturing Industry

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I.   Introduction

Women make up about half of the international migrants, yet there is insufficient incorporation of gender dimension in the theorisation of migration. Theory and policy too often associates female migrants as either rational economic beings that respond to wage differentials or sufferers of uneven development. The dichotomised debate on agency and structure not only fails to comprehend the interactive dynamics between individual motivations and the broader social and cultural context, but also neglects women's subjectivity and discounts their struggle for changes. As a response to the myopic analysis on migration, the structuration approach is proposed to disentangle the dyad and stresses that constraining structure can also provide opportunities for women to manoeuvre. Domination and subordination are reciprocal and through individual and collective actions, social structures can be transformed.

Following the structuralist argument, migrant women should not be regarded as charity subjects. As observed by Mohanty (1991), third world women have often be homogenized and portrayed as a monolithic subject by Western feminists. The so-called 'colonialist move' reinforces the binary of 'men oppress women' and presupposes that women are powerless victims, thus ignoring their political, economic and social agency. While acknowledging that third world women are frequently constrained by structural and local factors, it should be reckoned that they embrace diverse kinds of subjectivity and have the potential to exercise choice.

In this connection, a feminist perspective of empowerment serves to fill the theoretical gap on gender awareness and is conducive to further the structurational analysis in the arena of migration discussion. Empowerment as a process by which 'those who have

been denied the ability to make strategic life choices acquire such an ability' (Kabeer 1999, 435) concerns the 'self', women's awareness-awakening and the ability as well as conditions of making choices. Empowerment entails a process of change which can be employed as a heuristic to analyse the action and interaction connecting social structure and individual/collective agency in the course of migration.

While many scholars acknowledge that migration has both empowering and disempowering effect, it is the latter that tends to receive more attention. Hugo (2000) pointed to the lack of research in this area despite the exponential growth in female migration over the past two decades and Oishi (2005) also called for more research on the social dimensions of female migration and clarify the concept of empowerment in the discourse. Indeed, migration is not necessarily exploitative and discriminatory, it can also be a conscientising process which inspires women to negotiate the gender relations and structural inequality in contingent institutional settings.

With this in mind, this paper argues that an actor-centred *and* multilevel approach which takes into account the interconnectedness of global, national, local and individual considerations is much needed to examine the (dis)empowerment process of women in migration. As China is experiencing extensive internal migration and feminisation of labour today, a case study of China will be used to illustrate the multidimensional aspects of migration and empowerment. Section II reviews the literature on migration theory and empowerment, and proposes a schematic model to link gender, empowerment and migration in a holistic approach. Section III analyses (dis)empowerment of female migrant labour in the Chinese context, with specific focus on the manufacturing industry and stages in the migration course. Last section concludes and points to future research direction.

II.   Threading Through Migration, Gender and Empowerment: Theory and Approach

Before examining the situation of women and how they situate themselves in the changing spatial context from rural home to city's factory, we shall first ponder the institutional factors that initiate(intervene) their decision to move(stay). This section argues that migration decisions are not only directed by rational response towards economic incentive, but also influenced by cultural and social determinants (e.g. de Haan 1999). As population movements are gendered and the consequence of complex interaction of structure and agency, a structuraction approach as developed by Giddens which emphasises on mutual dependency of human agency and social structure (Giddens 1979) serves to be a more appropriate heuristic (see Chant and Radcliffe 1992). To complement the structuration concept, it is argued that the empowerment framework can be employed as a prism through which the multilevel and interactive dynamics in the migration process can be examined. A number of studies on power and women's empowerment will be discussed, and a schematic model will be outlined to apprehend the transformatory, emancipating and inhibiting influences of migration on women. Such perspective places women as the core change agent while acknowledging various global and local factors at work. To further address the issues of women on the move, it is suggested that the conception of empowerment be broadened to fit into women migration study.

2.1   Women on the Move

2.1.1   'Feminisation of Migration'

In the past 40 years, the number of international migrants has increased from 75 million in 1960 to 175 million in 2000 (IOM 2005) and women has always been the central constituent in international migration. Both the common perception of male dominance in migration and the recent notion of 'feminisation of migration' (see Koser and Lutz 1998; Phizacklea 1998) are flawed and needed further qualifications.

Female migrants have already made up about 47% of the total migration flow in 1960 and its proportion has increased steadily to an estimated 49% in 2000 (ILO 2003). Migration pattern has also evolved, with more women moving on their own in search for educational and employment opportunities rather than following other male relatives or rejoining family members (Martin 2005). Nevertheless, 'feminisation of migration' is not a universal process as there are significant regional and sectoral differences. For example, as the largest exporter of migrant labour in the world, majority of the emigrants are female (approximately 60% in the 90s) in the Philippines (Ibid.), while Mexico, as the second largest exporter, have more male emigrants who majority of them migrate to work in USA (Engle 2004). In countries where only temporary migration is allowed, there is a higher proportion of male migrants, particularly in the masculine industry such as construction, mining etc. (Martin 2005). Alongside with international migration, evidence suggested that the volume of internal migration has increased in general, particularly that involving women (Deshingkar 2005). Regional comparison suggested that Latin America and South-east Asia has a high women's migration (Davis 2003, Guest 2003), and many

of the female rural-urban migrants are young and single, clustering in the mega-cities.

Industrialisation has increased women's labour participation and this notion of 'global feminisation of labour' (Standing 1989) goes parallel with 'feminisation of migration', with both the population movement and division of labour clearly gendered. Increased demand in industries and services attracts more women to move and employers are drawn to recruit them as they are perceived to be cheaper and more docile than men. Women are considered as natural provider of care and housework (Bock and Duden in Lutz 2002) and it is common for African and South Asian female migrants to take up domestic work (Deshingkar and Grimm 2005). Migrant women are also engaged in sex work, either voluntarily or trapped into forced prostitution (Martin 2005).

2.1.2   Theorising Female Labour Migration

Scholars from different disciplines have endeavoured to understand who migrates, why and where, but the efforts on theorisation are often futile and this lack of a theoretical core accounted for the continuous marginalisation of the field of migration studies (Hirschman 2001). Figure 1 shows the major approaches to migration and it is unsurprising that a single theory can not thread through a diversified field. In the bold attempt of generalisation, gender issues are often compromised (Willis and Yeoh 2000). Claimed as the first theorist on migration, Ravenstein (1976) stated that men are generally more migratory than women, although the latter are more mobile over shorter distances. This 'laws of migration' failed to question the rationales behind moving and set the tone to reduce gender into biological sex, containing women's mobility within a definitive scale (Silvey 2006). More recently, economic logic prevails in the conventional thinking and labour migration is understood as a natural

response to wage differentials or structural inequality, and other social and institutional dimensions are subdued in the micro/macroeconomic or agency/structure dichotomised discourse (Schiller et al. 1993, Koser and Salt 1997). Giddens addressed this structure-agency duality by offering the structuration approach, stressing that structure and social relations like gender which are designed to mediate migrants' agency also provide room for them to manoeuvre and constitute the migrant labour system. The structuration model's emphasis on 'dialectic of control' intertwines with the empowerment discourse and together they present a useful tool in analysing female migration.

1.Economic determinants on migration

a. Individual level: Neoclassical economics   +ve

b. Household level: Stark/new economics   +ve

c. Institutional level: Structuralism/Marxism   -ve

2. Structuration theory/ Gender analyses

Economic

Individual

Sociological

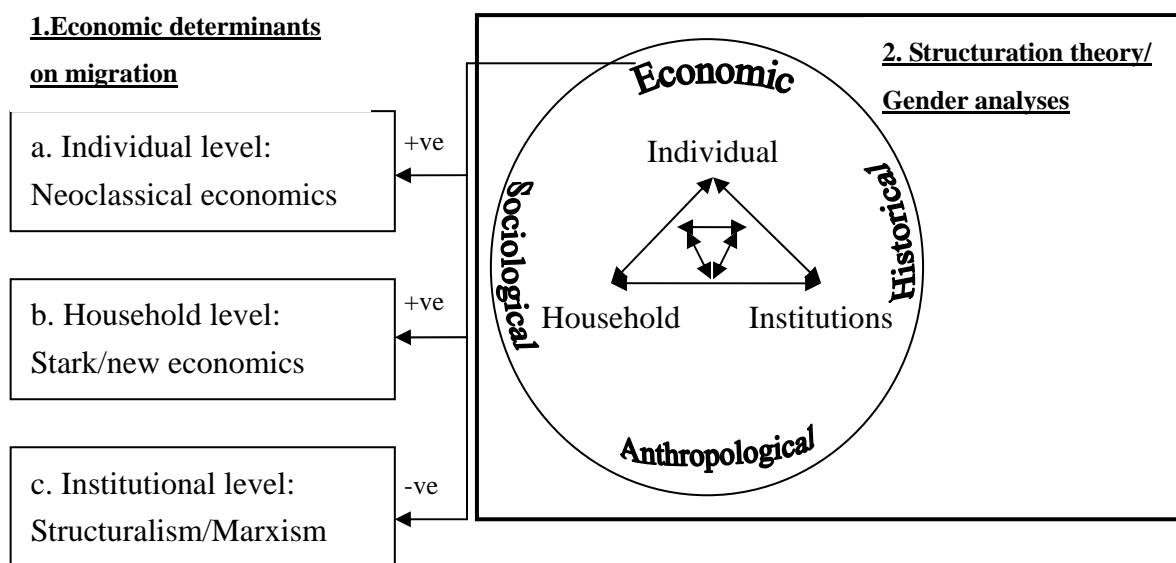Historical

Household   Institutions

Anthropological

Fig.1. Theoretical approaches to migration (adapted from de Haan 1999)

The Neoclassical Model

Functional approach to migration springs out from Lewis's model (1954) on the transfer of agricultural surplus labour to the urban capitalist sector. Harris and Tadaro (1970) further explain rural-urban migration as people movement driven by

wage-differentials and hold that a potential migrant would weigh the wage differences and access the probability of securing a job in the urban area. Neoclassical economists assume that social process is an aggregate of individual decisions (Masseys et. al. 1993) and individuals, both men and women, are subjected to the same economic motivations. This model is criticised as being gender blind and evaded the multi-identity of migrants (Cadwallader 1992), the political and social contexts are also isolated from economic decision-makings. To extend the Tadaro model, the 'new economics of migration' embraces household as an analytical unit and migration is seen as an income diversification and risk minimisation strategy. However, this escalation of analytical scale cannot escape from the criticism for substituting 'rational' individuals with 'rational' families and obscure the patriarchal stratifications and conflicts within households (Goss and Linquist 1995).

The Structural Model

Structural model, as another epistemology on migration, also fails to apprehend the gender perspective and undermines individual agency. According to dependency theory where economy in the centre expands at the expense of the peripheral country, a dual labour market is created globally. The Third World provides cheap labour and the migrant system is developed by the exploitation of capitalism, with labour migrating selectively to substantiate profits at the core (Piore 1979, Wood 1982). Not only it has no improvement in gender awareness, the structuralist approach 'may even have been a retrograde step, tending to render gender invisible' (Wright 1995, 776). While neoclassical model is charged for skewed towards individual functionalism, structuralism is open to the criticism for placing too much emphasis on capital. As migration flows are perceived to be regulated by changes in production pattern, social

relations are reduced to part of the production process and women's subordination thus taken as natural (Mackintosh in Wright 1995).

The Structuration Model

In response to the critique on neoclassical and structural schools, structuration theory is developed from anthropology, sociology, history and gender studies and has been applied in recent scholarships (Chant and Radcliffe 1992, Goss and Linquist 1995). Giddens (1984) rejects the dichotomised notion of structure and agency and articulates the connection between them. The approach transcends the dualism and substitutes it with 'duality of structure' which proposes that on one hand, structures 'are both constraining and enabling because they are both medium and outcomes of the practices they recursively organise' (Phizacklea 1998, 26). On the other hand, agency, as 'action taken in specific contexts', cannot be 'entirely autonomous or without constraint' (Scott in Abelson et al. 1989, 51). Social actors are being shaped by structure in specific context and in turn counter influence it.

Researches as inspired by structuration focus on the social interactions in the locale and there are two aspects which are relevant to our study in migration. Firstly, structuration encompasses the recognition of unsymmetrical allocative and authoritative power and the resultant unequal distribution of resources and power along the gender and class lines (Wright 1995). In this sense, migrant women are not homogenous group and some of them have greater capacity to resist the patriarchal order. Secondly, although power is unequally distributed, women who are perceived to assume a 'weak' position still have some leeway in choosing to react strategically and challenge the establishment. According to Giddens's 'dialectic of control', "even

the most seemingly 'powerless' individuals are able to mobilize resources whereby they carve out 'spaces of control'" (1982, 197). Migration thus includes the possibilities of exploitation as well as empowerment (Jolly et al. 2003). Paying heed to this observation, we shall examine the application of empowerment theory in migration.

2.2   (Dis)Empowerment in Migration

2.2.1   Power and Empowerment

The notion of empowerment has become a buzzword in development literature and has been abused by multilaterals and NGOs, its much nuanced meanings on power need to be deconstructed for it to be employed as a constructive analytical tool. Power is usually conceived as the ability to exert *power over* institutions, resources and people (Held et al. 1999) This understanding of power is myopic and Lukes (1974) argues that power is exercised by agenda controlling as the powerful can get their way by preventing the less powerful to conceive of the existence of possible conflicts. Foucault (1979) furthered the debate by arguing that power is fluid and relational and it echoes with Giddens' claim that domination and subordination are reciprocal in nature. Drawing from his writings, empowerment should not be limited to possession of power, but the exercise of it.

A more important aspect of empowerment lies in its root in Freire (1973)'s 'conscientization', that subordinated women should develop a 'critical consciousness' and struggle actively for change. In this connection, empowerment involves self-respect and challenge of existing power structures (Batliwala 1994, Ashfar 1998)

and the ''multidimensional nature of power suggests that empowerment strategies for women must build on '*the power within*' as a necessary adjunct to improving their ability to control resources, to determine agendas and make decisions''(Kabeer 1994, 229).   Rowlands (1997) reckoned that 'empowerment is more than participation in decision-making; it must also include the process that lead people to perceive themselves as able and entitled to make decisions' (1997, 14). While some scholars focus on internal strength and individual empowerment (e.g. Moser 1989), others emphasise on the *power* to work *with* others and the collective conscientisation process that affect both men and women (e.g. Young 1993).

The tension between the structure and agency dyad and their interactions situate at the centre of the empowerment debate. Phillips is right in observing that structural inequality is entrenched in the production regime of capitalism and few would expect it to be eliminated (1999, 17). Therefore, we shall understand how the capacity of women can be enhanced without some transformation of the existing power structure (Parpart et al. 2002), and this reflection is particularly pertinent in the evaluation of female empowerment strategies in a migration scenario, where both the time frame and spaces are largely determined by the strong institutional forces.

2.2.2   Migration and Women's Empowerment

Women migration has often been linked with negative consequences such as discrimination and exploitation, and mass media tends to victimize migrant women. Major focuses have been on the disempowering effects such as the adverse effects on job opportunities and wage earnings by the gendered division of labour (Anker and Hein 1986), harsh working conditions and abuses (Brochmann 1990), perpetuation of

traditional gender roles as dutiful and filial daughters (Greenhalgh 1985) and downward class mobility (Parrenas 2001). Instead of a liberation of the patriarchal oppression at home, the status quo of gender positioning is often preserved or even strengthened, and women move 'from one household-based patriarchal to another in which their status is no better or even worse than at the origin' as they are subordinated in the masculine capitalist system (Hugo 1997, 23-24). Factories in urban areas are portrayed as purgatory where women are encaged to satisfy capitalists' insatiable greed. In response to the vulnerability of migrant women, international community steps up to enshrine their rights in international instruments such as the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1990, although promises are not necessarily translated into actions (Martin 2005).

Migration certainly has its negative aspects but does it only bring about disempowerment to women? Although many scholars contend that migration has both empowering and disempowering effects, majority of them only concern on the latter ones. One possible explanation is that Third World women are often rendered as weak, voiceless and faceless subjects, homogeneous and indistinguishable (Ong 1988). Their individual agency and their ability as social agents to negotiate and transform the structure are denied outright. Even if an 'actor-centred' approach is adopted, the complicated and contingent interactions between individual, household and institutions in migration are seldom comprehended. A skewed focus on disempowerment has discounted the fluidity of empowerment, and women's active struggle against subordination goes unrecognised.

A more level-headed approach would take migration as a two-edged sword and

acknowledges that migration can have its blissful moments, albeit insignificant in outsiders' eyes, on the women involved. Narratives should begin from the standpoint of migrant women themselves: how do they perceive migration; how does the experience shape their agenda and livelihood strategies, and most of all, their sense of 'self' and their willingness as well as ability to communicate/negotiate with the power structures, i.e. the *power-within*. Female employment and empowerment are interlocked and although their relationship remains a 'vexed' one, 'many women themselves feel there is a connection' (Moore cited in Chant and Craske 2002, 197). We shall accept women's own and frequently contradictory accounts about what migration means in their lives.

How has migration affected women, their families and the social structure in an empowering sense? Situated at the central of the empowerment discourse, migration has significant implications on the moulding of women's 'selfness' and internal sense of power. Oishi's fieldwork (2005) showed that migration had some positive effects on women, with nearly 90% of Filipino respondents agreed that they had experienced positive changes like increased self-confidence and skill-set, even though majority of them have been exploited and/or harassed at the same time. Besides increase in self-worth, urban works can bring women more steady cash than they can possibly earn from agricultural employment back home, and as most of the migrants are at the early stage of their life-cycles, these young and single women can exert greater control of their earnings (Wolf 1992 on Java). Although increased autonomy cannot be taken as enhanced agency per se as women are still subjugated to familial and social controls, the distance from home, greater control of income and support networks nonetheless give them some leverages to scythe parental control and negotiate their terms of lives at least for a certain period of time, e.g. women's

positioning in decision-making processes such as marriage and fertility is strengthened, and despite being subordinated in the factory system, they are able to exercise choice and challenge traditional patriarchal family authority (Safa 1990 on the Dominican Republic and Puerto Pico). At the collective and structural level, transformation of an 'I cannot' fatalist sentiment to a 'we can' spirit can be observed and women can both resist employers' exploitation in a subtle way (Parrenas 2001) and engage into strategic negotiations that employ active citizenship in longer-term migration policy (Constable 1997). As Caldwell argued, 'circular forms of movement, far more than permanent migration, have the potential of spreading new ideas, attitudes and knowledge to rural areas and contributing greatly to processes of social change' (1969, 45), the oscillating and temporal qualities of women migration vis-à-vis their male counterparts also imply that besides personal empowerment in situ, female kin in sending areas can also be benefited in varying degree.

To encapsulate the multidimensional interactions between migration, gender and empowerment, it is argued that a multilevel and dynamic approach which puts individual agency at the core and encompasses global/local factors at work is much needed. As inspired by the structuration model, figure 2 is a schematic model which attempt to incorporate empowerment as an analytical component in migration discourses and focuses on the intersection where structure and agency meets. The premise of the model is the consideration of women's heterogeneity and experiences, and reckons their differing and often conflicting interpretation of same events. Gendered factors in global, national and local perspective, such as trade liberalisation, government policies, social acceptance on women leaving home, household strategies and individual considerations, etc. determine migration decisions and shape migrants' experiences, and migrant women are subjectively (dis)empowered during the course.

The 'core' of the (dis)empowerment process is the transformation of individual, which include self-agency, critical awareness of self-positioning, respect, negotiating ability with power structures, etc. The (dis)empowerment process involves the exercise of power that brings about personal, collective and institutional changes. The inter-related changes in these three arenas in turn influence the (dis)empowerment process and have a remote effect on migration determinants. Before further developing this model with reference to the case study on China's manufacturing industry, we shall first add a few qualifications to the concept of empowerment for it to be adopted in migration discourse.

Fig. 2 An empowerment approach to migration
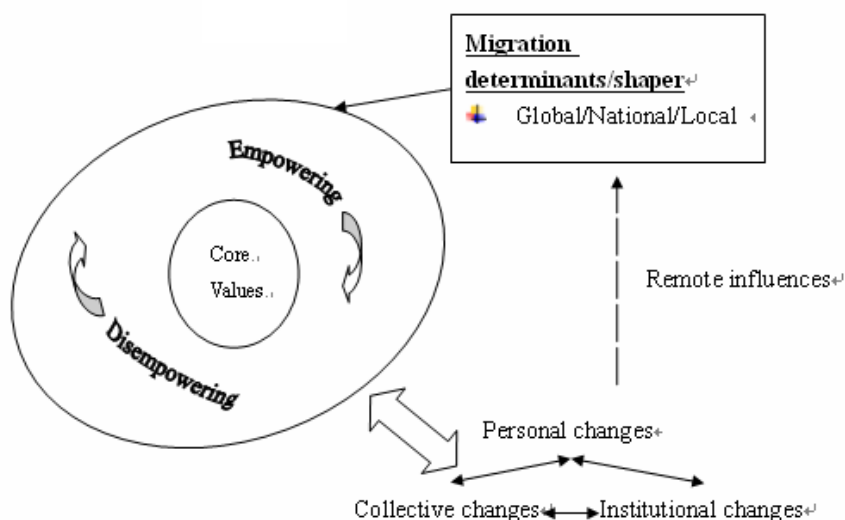
2.2.3   Revisiting Empowerment in Migration Discourse

As migration study over-emphasises on the macro and meso structure or economised individual incentive, the awareness of self-generated power as well as interactions between individuals and social structures in the empowerment discourse can fill the theoretical gap. However, for empowerment to be incorporated into the migration

discipline effectively, a few issues need to be addressed.

Firstly, empowerment process involves both empowering and disempowering effects and the highlight of former does not mean that we are complacent with the achievements. It only implies a broadened perspective on individual agency and a demonstration of the positive elements which are often shelved. Secondly, most examinations of the empowerment have focused on the local level. Indeed, as Parpart et al. (2002) argues, global and national forces on women's empowerment should not be ignored, e.g. many of the migrant women who work in factories are resulted from globalisation and expansion of multi-national corporations' production network, and those who work as domestic maids in developed countries participate directly in the global care chain (Lutz 2002). Thirdly, compounded with migrants' mobility, empowerment in migration context has a contingent perspective, i.e. those who are empowered in destination areas may be disempowered when they return home (Adi cited in Hugo 1997), or vice versa. This fluidity of power and the possibility of backlash should be given ample attention. Having examined the close links between migration, gender and empowerment, we shall now use the China case study to illustrate the empowerment approach in female migration.

III. Context and Methodology

3.1 Feminisation of Migrant Labour in China's Manufacturing Industry

Since the adoption of open-door policy in late 1970s, China's economic reforms have brought about an unprecedented surge in internal rural to urban migration. According to the Fifth National Population Census in 2000, it is estimated that the number of internal migrant workers in cities was over 120 million people, about one third of them are women. Economic migrants have moved from interior provinces like Sichuan, Hunan, Hubei, Guizhou, Jiangxi, and Anhui, to the southern and coastal provinces where the Special Economic Zones (SEZs) are located. Many foreign-owned enterprises in Hong Kong, Taiwan, South Korea, Japan, the United States, and Europe, and their subcontractors, have established factories in SEZs and recruit millions of peasant migrants to work in the export-led, labour-intensive manufacturing sector. One of the major manufacturing industries that worth looking into is textile and garment. According to the China National Textile Industry Council (2003), China accounted for about one-fifth of the world's textile and garment exports in 2001, and reaching US$61.69 billion by the end of 2002. At the time when the Multi-Fibre Arrangement (MFA) was uplifted on January 1, 2005, more than 2,000 categories of textile and clothing were freed from the export quota (Chan 2006). Furthermore, when the World Trade Organization (WTO) eliminate the 'safeguard quotas' (which limit selected categories to grow by 7.5% annually) by 2008, China will likely to absorb 50% more of the global textile production (Ibid., 20).

In the seminal study of female labour in Third World's export-oriented zones, Elson and Pearson observed that employers favour recruiting young rural women for

assembly work (Elson and Pearson 1981). This gender stereotype still hold in contemporary China as most employers like to employ female from the countryside, in particular unmarried and young girls, whom they believe to be docile and dexterous. According to the China Labour Statistical Yearbook (2005), manufacturing is the largest sector to employ women, absorbing 13.9 million in 2004 and about 43.6% who work in the sector are female; 39.5% work in Guangdong, Shandong, Jiangsu and Fujian.

On the supply side, limited educational opportunities and rural employment prospects for females have pushed the unemployed women and young girls in their late teens to search for opportunities in the cities. Some rural women also leave their homes to pursue modern life in cities and escape arranged marriages, familial conflicts, and patriarchal oppression. In projection of the future trend, it is expected that both local and transnational firms will scale up their production and employ more 'nimble fingers' and increasing number of young girls will leave home in search of job opportunities in the manufacturing industry.

The exploitation and vulnerability of these migrant workers in the industry have been well-documented (e.g. Tang 1998, Chan 2002). For instance, because they move away from their registered place of residence without a corresponding transfer of official household registration (*hukou*), they cannot stay in cities permanently and are discriminated in urban areas and deprived of government-subsidized benefits. In terms of helping women to climb up the social ladder, factory work does little to help as women often take up jobs in the assemble lines which are perceived to be low hierarchal. Their jobs are also characterised by overtime, insecurity, insufficient legal protection, congested living conditions and lack of private space. To elucidate the

inter-relationship between the (re)construction of migrant women's identities and production politics, Lee (1995) coins the factory regime as a 'localistic despotism' where young migrant women are subjugated to the blatant punishment-oriented mechanism. Migrant women are situated in the borderland of socialism and capitalism and ensnared in the global manufacturing chain.

Or is it so? In this first instance, a recent update of the institutional development gives us cause for cautious optimism on protection of labour rights. Since 2000, many policies have been made to protect the right of rural migrants, positive change includes a surprise removal of the government's decisions to abolish the Detention-Repatriation Regulation which give official right to detain migrants who are not carrying their temporary residence card (Zhu 2004). The State Council also committed in January 2003 to improve the working and living conditions like health care and personal safety for rural migrant labourers, especially women. In the meantime, Western multinationals are improving their labour standards under the pressure of labour shortage and international anti-sweatshop movement (Chan 2004). Although the progress is slow and largely rhetoric, institutions are not static and being continuously contested and renegotiated.

More importantly, migrant women are not charity subjects that passively receive the images constructed by the disciplinary system. Instead, they interpret these new identities in their own terms and use the representations to their advantages. Factory work, no matter how 'unliberating' it may seem to outsiders, has increased women's economic independence and has a positive effect on migrant women agency.

3.2   Research Methodology

Qualitative research will be employed to study the (dis)empowerment of female migrant labour, using migrant women working in China's manufacturing industry as a case study. Documents and literatures which focus on how female migrant workers conceptualise their migration experiences and the resulting changes in individual as well as group agency will be examined. They will be analysed with reference to the variables mentioned in the schematic model developed in Section 2.2.2. The course of migration will be divided into three stages: *before moving*, *in the factory* and *returning home*, and studied accordingly. Firstly, factors affecting migration decisions will be examined and it is argued that women already exercise their agency before moving to cities. This will be followed by a discussion on the empowerment dynamics in the factory, taken into account the personal and collective perspective which suggest that agency can be expressed in various forms and migrant women as a collective identity is indeed heterogeneous in composition. Last account will be given to the changes women experienced and bring about when they return home. Acknowledging that the struggle for empowerment takes place locally as well as in a global and national context, we will begin with the macro-structural constraints as well as potentials in the next section.

IV. Between Worlds: (Dis)Empowerment of China's Female Migrants in Manufacturing Industry

4.1 Global and National Structures: Constraints and Enablers

The roles of global and national politics have becoming increasing central alongside with local politics in the study of empowerment (Stiles 2000) as it is believed that local is embedded in global and national and vice versa (Parpart et al. 2002, 16). Global and national institutions thus serve to frame the context where consciousness and individual/collective agency are shaped, and it is critical to situate the examination of empowerment in this institutional discursive.

Common discourse on globalisation focuses on the exploitative nature of globalisation and its corresponding expansion of transnational corporations (TNCs). The shift in productivity on a global scale has gendered impact and accelerated the feminisation of China's manufactory workforce and the docile rural women are most affected in this development. On one hand, female migrants become mechanised subjects and their rights are undermined in the buyers' labour market, e.g. TNCs deliberately neglect the code of conduct and impose strict rules to control the workers (Chan 2006), and the 'race-to-bottom' operating mode of foreign direct investment functions to suppress wages (Mehmet and Tavakoli 2003). On the other hand, globalisation has increased women's burden and caused tensions within the household and community at large as gender relations are renegotiated. However, globalisation also opens up an empowerment pathway for women. As China negotiates with modernity and capitalistic development, 'modern women' is constructed through 'subordination and exclusion, most notably of the rural, uneducated and the poor' (Evans 2000, 238).

Under this modernisation project, rural women leave home to search for new opportunities and identities in the newly created global/local space. Some of them can eventually take the advantage of the markets to advance their life goals.

As empowerment depends on the space women are capable to manoeuvre within the political, economic and social structures, the omnipresent state interacts with global market to play a critical role in (re)defining the boundary for women to pursue their strategic interests. One of the instruments which has a lasting impact on migration is the household registration system (*hukou* system). Implemented in 1958 nationwide, the *hukou* system is designed to manage the internal migration flow and tying people with rural and urban status with their land and urban residence respectively (Kam and Li 1999). Although the laws on *hukou* transfer have been relaxed in recent years, it is very difficult for rural women, especially those who engage in manufacturing industries, to secure an urban registration for they lack the money and targeted skills. Without a local urban *hukou*, access to entitlements such as housing, pension and social security, etc. are denied and migrant women have limited *power over* urban resources and experience downward social mobility in cities. The construction of 'outsider' and the material difficulty to stay in city also rendered the migration highly circulatory. The interplay of *hukou* system with marriage and links with villages will be discussed in later section.

The rigid *hukou* system may appear to be inhibiting to women empowerment in terms of denial of access to resources and limiting their choice-sets. However, such discriminatory policy has not deterred millions from moving internally. Indeed, not all migrants are in favour in overhauling the system as they are unwilling to give up the land that is granted to their rural *hukou* (Peng and Yao in Tunon 2006).

Besides the *hukou* policy, the state also regulates migration flow through decentralised practices and because of different interests, policies are local-specific and have various (dis)empowerment effects. For instance, provincial governments of sending areas are particularly concern about migrants' rights, e.g. Sichuan government, which is one of the main places of origin of migrant workers, advocated that migrants should be granted the right to settle in the destination after a period of residence (Davin 2001, 20), and some county governments even provide coaches to transport women to work in Shenzhen and other towns in Guangdong Province (Ibid.) In contrast, the destination provinces often side with the capitalist rather than labour in pursue of breakneck economic development (Chan 2001). National politics is a key front for migrants to fight against marginalisation and yet provinces vary significantly in their ability or willingness to negotiate with global force and institutions. The global/national instruments can be both constraining and enabling, and are interconnected with the local dynamics in the context of women's empowerment.

4.2   (Dis)Empowerment at the Locales: Intersecting Individual Agency with Social Structures

4.2.1   Before Moving

Long before the adoption of open-door policy in 1978 and the subsequent economic development which induce massive flow of *liudong renkou* (floating population), Chinese men and women have been migrating inter-provincially. Taking a historical perspective, Lary (1999) pointed out that China's labour migration started in late *Qing* dynasty (1644-1911) when peasants moved to coastal cities and Manchuria. In

pre-reform Maoist China, migration was restricted but millions of people were forced to move for various reasons, such as relocation for social progress, famine, organised labour migration etc. (Ibid.). All along, there is inter-generational transfer of migration experiences and Chinese women do not suddenly start migrating with the onset of 'modernity'.

In understanding the motives behind the phenomenon of contemporary rural-urban migration, scholars in early 90s started to look at the macro and structural push and pull factors such as urban-rural wage differentials, surplus labour in the agricultural sectors, stagnant rural development, and the *hukou* system (Croll and Ping 1997). In addition to the long-range studies, scholars turned to meso variables in late 90s and considered household dynamics and rural development in shaping women's migration decision. However, despites their efforts in highlighting the grand logic of rural labour flow, the personal narratives of women are often overlooked. It is not to deny that factors such as household land-per-worker allocation, information networks based on communal and family ties (Mallee 2000) or job opportunities in rural non-farm sectors and the rural patriarchal structure (Hare and Zhou 2000) contribute in facilitating women labour migration, but it is also inaccurate 'to assume that female migrants workers were the passive objects of the Chinese patriarchal family, sent out by their households based on pure economic factors and deliberate family decisions' (Pun 2005, 55).

Subsuming female migration under household strategies ignores the complex interactions of compromises and conflicts within household and most of all, subdues women's individual motivation. Wolf argued in the Java study that female migrants respond to household decisions by desisting, withdrawing or accommodating (1992, 5)

and in the Chinese context, Pun (2005) found that most of her interviewees who move to work in Guangdong's factories kept detached from household affairs, which echoes with Sun's suggestion that migrant workers don't know much about their family agricultural land possession (2001), all they know is that farming can't make money.

Although we can not ignore the moderating and subtle influences of household on women's decision to migrate as some women might internalise the patriarchal oppression and fail to distinguish household and individual strategy, it will be equally problematic to conceptualise migration as a mere displacement than a positive movement. Helping their families out of poverty is often cited as a respectable cause for migration but women want to experience new life besides earning money for others (Lee 1998). Beynon's (2004) research in Chengdu points out that the individual motives of women are greater than men in rural migration, and young women who detest the drudgery farm life and aspire for a better future would leave to seek for independence. These women move to the cities 'to test myself' (*duanlian ziji*), 'to open my eyes' (*kaikuo yanjie*) and 'to change myself' (*gaibian ziji*) (Ibid., 133). They knew what they would face in the cities and have no disillusions of their working life and self-identity: the long working hours and low wage, poor working conditions in the sweatshop and the huge gap between industrial and rural life. Yet they leave to subordinate themselves to industrial labour voluntarily in the hope of a transgression of their individual fate.

Women are not family puppets and they often make autonomous decisions to subvert familial grip of power, especially that on marriage; and migration should not be conceptualised as crosscutting geographical space only, but also a motive path entangling with life space (Pyror 1975). Rural China is dominated by a patrilocal

system of marriage in which women are viewed as "goods one loses money on" (*peiqian de huo*) (Beynon 2004) and so parents tend to marry their daughters out in their early ages. In order to escape early marriage and motherhood, many women regard labour migration as a conscious or unconscious way to evade, or at least delay, this destiny. Letters to Rural Women Knowing All (*Nongjianu Baishitong*), a monthly journal for rural women, reflect that single and young women perceive rural marriages as constricting that will bound them to domestic chores, e.g. they afraid of becoming housewives (Miao 1996) and argue that early marriages will limit their future choice-sets (Zhang 1996). Albeit with increased burdens vis-à-vis single women, married women also struggle from patriarchal stereotyping and challenge the gender relations by formulating their own migration strategies, e.g. Chun left her husband and children silently to work as a cleaner in a Guangdong factory and felt proud as a wage-earner (Pun 2005, 68-71), and some women even work in order to divorce their rural husbands and pay for the child support (Davin 1999).

The process of empowerment of potential migrants begins even before they move. Women have developed aspirations, self-esteem and self-confidence through outside information and internal awakenings, and have the power to choose fighting against the patriarchal familial structure and unpromising rural life. This is not a *power over* of immediate available resources but a form of *power within* which transform women's core values and perceptions of livelihood and future, a subtle or even a 'passive' form of empowerment. Empowerment not necessarily involves direct confrontations with established power structures or demonstration of active agency, as 'control of knowledge, even through silence, can sometimes be an empowering survival strategy for the marginalised' (Suski in Parpart 2002, 49). Running away from home to work in cities may appear to be a defeatist strategy but under the

cultural and institutional discursive, 'escape' becomes a source of power and the empowerment disparity between those who move and those who stay in the villages becomes exceptionally apparent.

4.2.2   In the Factory

When female migrants arrive in cities and get recruited to work in factories, they experience a sharp change of identities and various factors interplay to influence the nuanced empowerment dynamics. First of all, their identities as rural women are reshaped into d*agongmei* which is a multilayered social construction in the rise of market economy and is encaging in its very conception. *Dagong* means 'working for the boss' and implies a commoditised form of labour and in contrast to the higher status of *gongren* (worker) in Mao's period, this new working class assumes a lower hierarchy in the labour market (Lee 1998). Whereas *mei* means younger sister and represents a subordination of self-identity. She has to be young and single, subject to the manipulation of the masculine factory system, where men assume managerial and disciplinary positions and women cluster at the lower-hierarchal assembly lines. Sexualisation of migrant women cuts across and reorients their social and private body to reconstruct a gendered identity which fit into the factory discipline, as such, the labour embodiment becomes a subjected body and a useful force as Foucault (1979) suggested.

A first glance at factory works is daunting and disempowering. *Dagongmei* have inadequate de facto legal protection and are recruited and sacked at will. They often have no legal contracts, do not receive equal pay with their male counterparts and safety standards are compromised if not ignored outright (Croll 1995). Despite the

national mandate of a forty-four hours week and maximum limit of thirty-six hours overtime per month, the length of working hours far exceeds the stipulation (Li 1999). Workers' income is structured to encourage overtime and they must work for excessive overtime and nightshifts to finish rush orders during peak periods (Romero 1995). Employers intentionally bypass occupational health and safety standards and in a tragedy in Shenzhen, the management of a toy factory locked the exit doors and blocked the windows with iron bars to prevent workers from stealing, 87 *dagongmei* were eventually killed when a fire broke out (Chan 2001).

Apart from physical assault and acrimonious working conditions, the 'dormitory labour regime' serves to configure *dagongmei*'s space and time and integrate the working time and non-working time under the control of capital hegemony (Smith and Pun 2003). Many factories have their own dormitories building adjacent to the main buildings to facilitate 'just-in-time' production (Pun 2004), each tiny room houses about 20 migrant women and even the 'showcase factory' offers virtually no private space. Their freedom of movement is limited and it also becomes difficult for them to look for better job opportunities. The harsh working environment makes many migrant women regard migration as a kind of passage with little optimism on their future.

Hope may vanish with this downbeat narrative, but migrant woman have multiple subjectivities which enable them to experience empowerment alongside with disempowerment at various conjunctures. Migrant women who wrote to *Rural Women Knowing All* represented a subaltern voice and most of them described the jobs in cities as exploitative and tiring but at the same time resist to give in and take active action to defend their personal values and respect. Huang Zhihua exercised her newly

acquired legal knowledge and power to challenge his boss on the unreasonable overtime and succeeded in improving the working conditions for her working sisters, whereas Li Jianying changed several jobs instead of putting up with insults from bosses and eventually work for herself as an entrepreneur (Huang, Li 1999 in Jacka and Gaetano 2004). As management relies on workers' cooperation to achieve the targets on time, working women have some leverage to negotiate with their working situations, albeit through subtle means (Knights and Wilmott 1986). Silence or inaction in times of rush orders demonstrate a resistance to the disciplinary power and signify a source of empowerment. In terms of body politics, Kleinman (1992, 174 in Pun 2005, 173) argues that 'chronic pain, as the embodiment of human suffering, can also be viewed as embodied resistance to the lived flow of one's daily experience.' Power and empowerment is fluid and these women's interstitial defiance echoes with Giddens's (1982) 'dialectic of control' where the most subordinated can manage to mobilise resources to influence the more powerful.

Empowerment is more than individual change but also collective action. Young (1993) points out that a focus on the personal dimension of empowerment is insufficient to trigger a change in power relations in the society, and empowerment should be understood in a wider context as a *power* to work *with* others in setting the agenda. This interpretation of collective undertaking is particularly relevant in the Chinese context as the collectivist tradition is bolstered by the Confucian thought and Marxism which subdue personal interests to the higher interests of community, party and nation (Woo in Gilmartin et al. 1994). As the number of arbitrated collective labour disputes (which involve more than thirty employees) has increased six-fold from 1996 to 2004 (Table 1), it is argued that migrant labour are beginning to assert their rights through legal action and demonstrate collective agency to negotiate with other organisations,

including the government.

Table 1: National Total of Arbitrated Labour Disputes in China, 1996-2004

Year	Arbitrated Labour Disputes (Cases)	Arbitrated Collective Labour Disputes* (Cases)	Employees Involved
1996	47,951	3,150	189,120
1997	71,524	4,109	221,115
1998	93,649	6,767	358,531
1999	120,191	9,043	473,957
2000	135,206	8,247	422,617
2001	154,621	9,847	556,230
2002	184,116	11,024	608,396
2003	226,391	10,823	801,042
2004	260,471	19,241	764,981
Changes(96'-04')	443%	511%	304%

*Disputes involving more than 30 employees

Source: China Labour Statistical Yearbook 2005

At the factory level, group identity and dignity of *dagongmei* is one of the core values of collective empowerment. As in other parts of the world (e.g. Curran and Rivero-Fuentes 2003 on Mexico), potential migrants look for social networks when making migration decisions. Trusted family members and women from the same villages (*laoxiang*) in the cities tend to pull villagers to particular occupations and destination areas by offering help and information on job and accommodation. In addition to assistance in job searching, Fan's (in Jacka and Gaetano 2004) interview to Anhui women working in food-processing factory in Tianjin suggests that *laoxiang* in the workplace offer protection from harassment and makes newcomers' lives easier. Such social networks and strong bonding, besides having a homogenizing impact on shaping migrants' occupational decisions, have also provided a basis for sisterhood

and support. 'Sister workers' talk and gossip in the dormitory after work and such women's talk is always seen as a threat to the patriarchal and managerial oppression (Spencer 1980). Resistance is organised in multiple dimensions and intersects at both individual and collective level.

In recognising *dagongmei*'s collective identity and agency, we have to be cautious in its heterogeneity and individual's conflicting roles. Politics at workplace are often complicated by kinship and ethnic identity (e.g. Perry 1993) and workforce is stratified along these lines. The micro-level hierarchy leads to differential access to power and resources and as Parpart (2002) argues, this differential will influence on the way workers participate in local political and economic structures and some will use them to pursue their interests while others are marginalised. Therefore, it is possible that collective empowerment is achieved through disempowerment of individuals, as in the case of the factories in Shenzhen where workers are divided linguistically and those who come from Northern China are discriminated against by both the management and fellow *dagongmei* (Pun 2005).

4.2.3   Returning Home

Migration in China is highly circulatory and most of the migrant women will return home after working for a period, with very few exceptions marrying and staying in the cities. Through this migration and return flow, migrant women establish linkages between cities and villages and bring about skills, capital, and most of all, new ideas on family roles and gender relations. Urban experience not only increases women's bargaining power as they become the major source of income in the household, it also shapes their attitudes on issues in the private sphere such as marriage and sexuality.

Such personal transformation has an empowering effect which spill-over to influence other female kin in the villages and may kick-off a virtuous cycle of empowerment. Having said that, the empowerment process is again interactive and individual and collective agency has to be negotiated within the stringent structural constraints. Returnees may suffer from a backlash of empowerment in the course of contestation and lose the sense and ability to control and choose.

The duration of migration may vary with individual expectation, health status, employment opportunities, family obligations and social acceptance, but the commonality of the diverse narratives is that migrant women seldom have a choice to stay. Firstly, the rigid hukou system presents an obstacle to migrants' permanent settlement in cities. Furthermore, this legal constraint interacts with Chinese marriage culture to create and sustain a circulatory flow. Marriage in rural households is not an exercise of choice but a cooperative project (Song in West et al. 1999) and there is a cultural disposition for women to marry young. Migrant women are difficult to marry an urban man thanks to the difference in status. Even if they manage one doesn't mean they would be granted the urban *hukou* and the knowledge of this difficulty propels them to drop the idea of 'mixed marriages' (Davin 2001). Although migrant women have the leverage to those who are left behind in delaying their marriages until late twenties, almost all of them have to marry before they become thirty (Ibid.). Besides the marriage factor, there are other motivations for migrant women to go home. Migrant workers are constructed as 'other' in cities and are seen as less moral in the public discourse, which portrays them as the destabilising agent and associates them with criminals (Xu 2000, 181). Frustrated with the inferiority representation and systematic discrimination, female migrants establish closer ties with their native places and tend to return after spending a few years afar. *Dagongmei* may find it hard

to secure continued employment as employers expect migrants to return to their villages such that they can replace them by cheaper and younger cohorts (Davin 2001).

Once back in the villages, the urban influences on the young migrants may make the adjustment process difficult and disempowering. Despite living in dormitories and have less contact with the vibrant urban life, factory workers can still observe it from the streets, media and fellow colleagues. They have acquired an urban taste and strongly feel the contrast between 'backward' and 'advanced'. Young women find particularly estranged between worlds, especially when most of the women returned home need to take up the farming jobs which they left behind (Lou et al. in Gaetano and Jacka 2004, 234). It is common for them to feel frustrated and bored when there is no avenue to apply their newly acquired skills in the cities. If power is conceived as the ability to make qualified choice (Kabeer 1999), migrant women's power in making strategic life choices is constrained with the dwindled access to material, human and social resources, and the narrowed agenda-setting agency when returning home.

Marriage is another conflict zone and re-adaptation to rural society within this context not only confronts single women but also married ones. Husbands who stay in the countryside often feel uneasy with the dual burden of tending the field and housework and often recall their wives back from cities (Murphy 2002), and returned wives have to give up their urban lifestyle and work along the gendered division of labour. Being confined in the village and family, permanent return may cause emotional distress for women. A study suggests that the suicide rate among Chinese rural women is five times higher than the world average (MacLeod in Murphy 2002) and that among

returnee women is even higher (Ibid.).

Migration brings both gains and losses. Without denying the suffering associated with returnee women, it is argued that the migration experiences have nonetheless broadened their perspectives and opened a pathway of empowerment. A migrant might experience enhanced agency and social upward mobility. Migration increases returnees' leverages and influences their self-worth, attitudes towards marriage and visibility in both the household and the village.

Single women who had migrated before shown a higher level of confidence and felt that they have improved themselves (Lou et al. in Gaetano and Jacka 2004). Migration is not just a geographical passage but also a journey to maturity, especially to the young women. While the experiences in factories might be oppressive, some returnee women become more independent and assertive comparing to those who chose to stay, as they join or even organise strikes, or get promoted to supervisory positions in the workplace (Murphy 2002). They have developed critical evaluation on their personal positioning, and such reflection might prompt them to make changes to the family and the households.

The physical and social distance from home and economic independence create conditions for single women to negotiate for greater autonomy on marriage decisions. Although there is little leeway for women to deny marriage, women who have migrated are more inclined to believe in free marriage and divorce, and can have more say against their parents' wishes in the choice of spouse (Ibid.). Urban experience also shapes women's attitudes on sexual and fertility behaviour, e.g. non-consensual sexual intercourse becomes unacceptable (Connelly et al. 2002), and fewer children are born

to returnee women (You and Zheng 2002).

Migrants' contribution has increased their visibility in the household and enables them to bargain with the patriarchal subjugation. The fact that family members depend on migrants' remittances and savings to support household economy implies that women can improve their bargaining position within rural household. In addition of passive transfer, their exposure to urban production system renders it possible for some of them to actively pursue their life goals by setting up small businesses and fight for more economic autonomy. Apart from these quantifiable achievements, Murphy (2002, 206) demonstrated that household's inner dynamics are also transformed as contribution of women in domestic labour becomes more visible in their absence, that some women can use the threat of returning to work in cities as bargaining chips with their husbands. A closer reading of returnees' stories thus suggests that women may exercise agency and choice by migrating. They may not have the ability, or intention, to disrupt the patriarchal system and the reality of father and husband as traditional decision-makers remain intact, but it is exactly this subtle and private form of empowerment that women deliberately opt for advance their livelihood in the contingent social setting.

However, it is reminded that power relations are not only expressed in terms of choice itself, but also the *kinds* of choice (Kabeer 1999). The world of 'doxa', which is 'the aspects of tradition and culture which are so taken-for-granted that they have become naturalized' (Bourdieu in Kabeer 1999, 441) remains unchallenged if women fail to conceptualise the possibilities of choosing differently. The case of China's returnee women seem to suggest that changes in women's resources have translated into changes in choice as well as the conditions of making choices. Even though social and

cultural order in the rural community may still impose structural constraints on the range of choices to women, returnees' narratives show that their critical consciousness has emerged in the course of migration. Working and living experiences in city and the understanding of urban labour market have improved their fall-back positions as they know that that there are a number of conditioned means to pursue their life goals. As discussed, there is certainly the possibility of re-internalisation of oppression and disempowerment when women return home, however, the exact dynamic is contextual and very often depend on social acceptance on migrant women, e.g. because of the long history of women migration, Anhui residents are more understanding of migrant women and returnees are culturally conceivable to make variant choices (Fan in Jacka and Gaetano 2004, 238).

This sense of empowerment not only influence individual woman but also function through the tightly-knitted rural social network to develop others' individual agency and collective agency of female kin. The return of migrants reinforces the desire of the next cohorts to experience urban life and results in a self-perpetuating population (2001)movement (Davin 1999, 91) and another cycle of (dis)empowerment.

V.   Conclusion and Future Research Directions

Evidence suggests that the impact of labour migration on women is mixed. Chinese rural women leave their farms behind for a more 'promising' prospect in cities' factories and gain *power over* economic and social resources through work. The distance away from home also implies that women are freed from the patriarch oppression and given ample space to dream of having a better future. However, fantasy doesn't always come true as cities can be intimidating and the factory system they newly entered is highly masculine and disciplinary. Women have to endure under harsh working conditions and their bodies are reconstructed under the subordinate representation of *dagongmei*. Women migrants may build up sisterhood and share *power with* fellow *laoxiang* but get distrusted by other colleagues from different kins at the same time. Some of them may gain knowledge on 'modernity' and able to bargain within their households for a redistribution of work burden or even open their own business. Others may get frustrated of factory life or are pressurised to go back to marry, feeling even more depressed as they find themselves entrapped again in the 'backward' and 'traditional' rural community. Situated at the borderland between socialism and capitalism, rural and urban, migrant women have different sojourn experience and construe 'modernity' and 'tradition' in their own way. Migration thus opens multiple fronts for women to define and be redefined, gaining and losing at different locales where agency and structure meets.

Despite the contradictory influences migration has on the agency of rural women, migration involves an empowering core which enable women to come to terms with their *power from within*. Rural women who have been denied the ability to make choices acquire the decision-making ability on the move. It leads them to perceive

themselves able in setting the agenda for their life, no matter how subtle and insignificant they might seem to be. Empowerment is an undercurrent that crosscuts boundaries to undo the effect of internalised oppression in the migration stream.

Women begin to exercise their choices even before they start moving. Very few migration decisions are consequences of so-called 'household strategies', indeed, many rural women express their willingness to move so as to experience urban life. While the factory is a place of exploitation, it is also a site of resistance. Individual agency and collective agency are generated and resistance takes in various forms at different conjuncture. It can be expressed in strike and violence, or silence and slowing down in the assembly line. Perceiving migration as a rite of passage, women migrants return home after working in urban factories for four to five years and present another empowerment scenario. Returning may sounds defeatist, but as the pandora box of internalised suppression is now unlocked, returnee women's critical consciousness is awakened and are capable to negotiate with the gender relations in the household. The empowerment process is contagious and even the attitudes of non-migrant women can be influenced. As a two-edged sword, migration can generate counter current of empowerment and returnees may be subject to the social norms and fail to exercise agency in full range. However, the urban experience has improved returnees' fall-back position and they can struggle against the social arrangement. In a word, each and every female migrant can have her moments of empowerment.

A closer examination of empowerment looks at the ability to exercise choice as well as the conditions and consequences of making the choice and it is for this very purpose a multilevel approach which embraces both global/national and local factors is much needed. In the case of Chinese manufactory industry, globalisation and

national polices play an important role in framing empowerment at the outset. The macro institutional factors interact with individual and group to trigger changes at all level. Any study which focuses on particular aspect in empowerment without reference to the interactions will miss the big picture and has inadequate analytical ability.

The question on the consequences of making choices in the empowerment discourse points to a future research direction in migration study. Two areas need special attention. Firstly, gender is a relational concept that matters both men and women, but the role of men are often missed out in the study of female migration. Even worse, when they are mentioned in the literature they are usually being stereotyped as oppressive father, violent husband or exploitative supervisor. Indeed, men assume different positions in female migration, e.g. they can be husbands who accompany their wives to find jobs in cities, sons and brothers who listen to their mothers and sisters' sharing on their migration experiences at home, or managers who arrange their *laoxiang* to work in the factory. Men's multiple and nuanced identities need to be re-examined. Secondly, there is insufficient attention on how men are influenced by the (dis)empowerment of migrant women. Empowerment is not a zero-sum game and empowered women can also liberate men from gender stereotyping. To fully incorporate gender dimension and improve gender awareness in migration study, men and masculinity should be discussed in more details in future research.

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