Becoming *Dagongmei*

Liminal Identity Practices in Migrant Women's Autobiographies

Moira De Graef

Presented in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts in Sinology

Supervisor: prof. dr. Nicolas Standaert

Academic year 2018-2019

139 650 characters

KU LEUVEN
FACULTY OF ARTS
BLIJDE INKOMSTSTRAAT 21 BOX 3301
3000 LEUVEN, BELGIË

KU LEUVEN
FACULTY OF ARTS
BLIJDE INKOMSTSTRAAT 21 BOX 3301
3000 LEUVEN, BELGIË

I hereby declare that, in line with the Faculty of Arts' code of conduct for research integrity, the work submitted here is my own original work and that any additional sources of information have been duly cited.

KU LEUVEN
FACULTY OF ARTS
BLIJDE INKOMSTSTRAAT 21 BOX 3301
3000 LEUVEN, BELGIË

KU LEUVEN
FACULTY OF ARTS
BLIJDE INKOMSTSTRAAT 21 BOX 3301
3000 LEUVEN, BELGIË

Contents

KU LEUVEN
FACULTY OF ARTS
BLIJDE INKOMSTSTRAAT 21 BOX 3301
3000 LEUVEN, BELGIË

Acknowledgments

First and foremost, I would like to extend my gratitude to the Sinology department of the KU Leuven. To my classmates, as their questions and suggestions helped bring my thesis into sharper focus. To my professors and teachers, for their patience and knowledge these past five years. To Wu 老师, for her linguistic support and for her willingness to help me struggle through a minefield of theoretical concepts that do not yet have established Chinese translations. To professor Standaert, my supervisor, whose constant support and thoughtful questions helped shape this project. Thank you for inspiring the turn to liminality, and for giving me the space and opportunity I needed to untangle the knots in my head.

Second, I wish to thank my family, for their unrelenting love, warmth, and confidence in me. Mom, for keeping me well-nourished and for allowing me to use her laptop when mine no longer functioned. Dad, for always keeping me grounded. Arto, for providing me with synonyms and a fresh eye whenever needed. Lenn and Sara, for brightening up long and difficult days with pastries and Qosmo.

Third, I want to thank my friends, for their support and their kindness. Dyan, for taking the time to proofread a thesis way outside of her own field. Belle, Anthe, Elias and Willemijn, for the endless supply of coffee, and for the lunch and dinner dates that helped keep me sane. Anna and Yentl, for their bottomless understanding and for everything else. You inspire me every day to continue trying, to continue working, and to have confidence in myself.

Fourth, thank you to the women at *Ai Da Xun*, for their never-ending patience in explaining the Chinese situation to me, and for showing me what strength and conviction look like.

Finally, I want to extend my deepest gratitude to Wu Xia and Fang Yiluo. Though I do not know these women personally, their stories have left a deep impression on me. I would like to thank them for their bravery, their perseverance, and their openness in sharing themselves with the world. I hope I have done their words justice.

KU LEUVEN
FACULTY OF ARTS
BLIJDE INKOMSTSTRAAT 21 BOX 3301
3000 LEUVEN, BELGIË

KU LEUVEN
FACULTY OF ARTS
BLIJDE INKOMSTSTRAAT 21 BOX 3301
3000 LEUVEN, BELGIË

Introduction

> "Even though us migrant workers are an enormous group within China's population, getting even larger and larger, yet we still try to survive between the cracks. We exist in the awkward state of the 'three don't cares': the country doesn't care, our place of origin doesn't care, our place of temporary residence doesn't care."
>
> 虽然我们这些外来工在中国人口中属于一个非常庞大的群体，甚至越来越庞大，但我们却依然在夹缝中求生存，处于尴尬的"三不管"状态，即国家不管、原住地不管、暂住地不管。[1]

This excerpt from migrant worker Fang Yiluo's autobiography poignantly summarizes the topic of this thesis: the experiences of China's rural migrant workers (*nongmingong* 农民工), a group of over 286 million Chinese with a rural *hukou* 户口 living and working in urban areas.[2] Having left their hometowns and no longer truly belonging to the countryside, this so-called "floating population" (*liudong renkou* 流动人口) is not recognized as urban residents either. They live, as Fang Yiluo puts it, "between the cracks" of contemporary Chinese society.

During my stay in China, I had the opportunity to work with an NGO that provides services for both rural-to-urban migrants in Chengdu as well as for left-behind women and children in the Sichuan countryside.[3] This experience allowed me a brief glimpse at China's internal migration, more specifically at how this phenomenon affects women – a group that accounts for 34.4% of China's floating population. My time with the NGO motivated me to do my thesis research on female rural migrant workers, sometimes referred to as *dagongmei* 打工妹 (literally: working sisters). These women find themselves in somewhat of a double bind. As migrant workers, they have to navigate local *hukou* regulations and possible friction with city residents of their new (temporary) home. Additionally, as women, they also have to cope with gender stereotypes and discrimination in and outside of the workplace.

---

[1] Fang, 369; All translations in this thesis are mine, unless indicated otherwise.
[2] National Bureau of Statistics of the People's Republic of China
[3] *Ai Da Xun* Social Service Center 爱达迅社会工作服务中心, Chinese branch of Aide et Action.

State actors, urban employers, popular media and even rural women themselves often portray rural-to-urban migration as a way for young rural women to lift themselves out of the "backwardness" of rurality, and to transform themselves through hard work into modern and sophisticated urban women. However, the reality of migrant women's experiences often appears to be more complex than this ideal of self-improvement would suggest. This thesis aims to take a closer look at "going out to *dagong*" as a transformative process, in order to gain a clearer and more nuanced perspective on the migration experience, and on how it impacts migrant women's self-perceptions.

Much valuable research has already been produced on the institutional and cultural discrimination that China's rural workers face in urban spaces[4], and on the ways in which they respond to and cope with these difficult conditions. A sizeable portion of these publications concentrates on literary texts produced by migrant workers: so-called "migrant literature" or "*dagong* literature" (*dagong wenxue* 打工文学). While *dagong* literature exists in a variety of different genres, most of the academic work on this topic has concentrated on migrant poetry (*dagong shige* 打工诗歌). In this thesis, I turn to migrant women's autobiographical narratives of their migration experience. By analyzing their presentations of themselves and their own stories, I aim to trace the ways in which *dagongmei* construct and reconstruct their own identities during their migration experience.

The first section gives a brief overview of the circumstances in which the notion of *dagongmei* emerged and of dominant discourses surrounding this group, providing the context for the personal histories presented later on. The second section outlines the theoretical background used for analyzing migrant women's autobiographical texts. Most importantly, the concept of "liminality" is employed in order to conceptualize migration as a transformative "rite of passage" (following Victor Turner). In addition, Nic Beech's proposal of liminal identity practices is used to highlight the ways in which migrant workers discursively construct new identities for themselves. The final section turns to the autobiographical narratives of two self-identified *dagongmei*: Wu Xia and Fang Yiluo. The analysis of these works illustrates the extent to which their lived experiences conform to the

[4] For a brief overview of factors influencing migrant women's integration in urban spaces, see Hao Caihong.

theory of rites of passage, and employs the framework provided by Turner and Beech to discuss the impact of Fang and Wu's migration experience on how they construct and present their own identity. Particular attention is paid to the ways in which the two women relate to larger discourses on rural-to-urban migration.

I believe that female migrant workers' experiences can offer a valuable insight into the impact of China's fast-paced development, and a necessary nuance to certain mainstream portrayals of China's "floating population". As Pun Ngai points out, "there is no individual story that is not also a historical narrative"[5] and among the migrant women, "there was no individual story that was not political and social".[6] While it is indisputable that the reform policies generated a lot of change in mainland China, it is vital that we listen to the stories and hardships of those who played a crucial part in making that change happen: the rural women (and men) employed as a cheap and flexible labor force in China's modernity project.

[5] Pun, p. 193
[6] Pun, p. 192

KU LEUVEN
FACULTY OF ARTS
BLIJDE INKOMSTSTRAAT 21 BOX 3301
3000 LEUVEN, BELGIË

1. Literature Review

Much has been written about Chinese migrant workers in general, and about Chinese migrant women in particular. The topic has been approached from a variety of different angles and has inspired countless different publications. This includes scientific research on how to efficiently manage rural migrant women in urban landscapes, sociological and ethnographic research on migrant women's lived experiences, cultural research on how these women are represented and how they represent themselves,… The list goes on. The following section gives a brief and necessarily incomplete overview of the existing literature, limited to those sections of existing research I consider to be most relevant to this thesis. First, this section includes an account of some of the sociological and ethnographic research detailing the emergence and characteristics of the "female migrant worker" identity. Second, it summarizes some of the literature concerning cultural representations of rural migrant women, touching on both outsider perceptions and migrant workers' own cultural productions. Finally, it includes an overview of how several leading scholars in this field have previously theorized migrant worker identity construction.

1.1. The Emergence of a New Social Class

In her book *Made in China: Women Factory Workers in a Global Workplace*, Pun Ngai offers a valuable interpretation of *dagongmei*. Although she concerns herself specifically with female factory workers, her analysis can also be extended to rural migrant women in general, regardless of their occupation. Pun understands *dagongmei* as "a newly embodied social identity emerging in contemporary China, produced to meet the changing socio-economic relations of the country and the needs of capital"[7]. In other words, she views the female migrant worker today as a product of changes in post-Mao China. Two of the major changes that have been identified by scholars as essential to the creation of the modern migrant worker are the emergence of a new type of labor relations, and the simultaneous devaluation of the Chinese countryside.

[7] Pun, p. 109

As for the former, Pun argues that while Mao-era laborers (*gongren* 工人) had occupied a privileged position within Chinese communist society and rhetoric, the policies of the Reform and Opening Up (*gaige kaifang* 改革开放) ushered in a new type of labor relations, in which labor is now sold to capitalists. The use of the word *dagong* 打工, meaning "working for the boss", exemplifies this change. As such, *dagongmei* (and its male equivalent *dagongzai* 打工仔) implies a new and inferior position for China's laborers.[8] Or, as Sun Wanning puts it: "while Chinese workers and peasants (…) used to be the political and moral backbone of socialist China, they have now well and truly become the 'subaltern' class in the contemporary Chinese polity".[9]

Simultaneously with the formation of this new social class, another major change took place in post-Mao China. In her ethnographic work on rural migrant domestic workers (*baomu* 保姆), Yan Hairong identifies this change as "the emaciation of the Chinese countryside". She argues that reforms caused the countryside to lose economic, ideological and cultural value to the state. Cities became a priority for policy and investment, and so urban-rural relations started to change. The city came to symbolize "modernity", the countryside the "backwardness" of Chinese tradition.[10] For rural youth, migration came to be seen as a way to "modernize".[11] This is especially true for young rural women who, contrary to their Mao-era predecessors (the Iron Girls)[12], have arguably been left out of contemporary state discourse.[13] Even attempts to address rural-urban inequality often lack strategies for combating gender injustices.[14] Migration, in this context, is assumed to be a way for rural women to emancipate themselves from poverty and patriarchal domination.[15] Instead of

[8] Pun, p. 111
[9] Sun (2014b), p. 6, quoting Marxist scholar Lü Xinyu 吕新雨.
[10] Yan, pp. 36-52
[11] Gaetano, pp. 30-36
[12] For a more nuanced and complex approach to politics around gender and labor in the Cultural Revolution, see Honig Emily, "Iron Girls Revisited: Gender and the Politics of Work in the Cultural Revolution, 1966-1976" in *Re-Drawing Boundaries: Work, Households and Gender in China*, edited by Entwisle, Barbara & Gail E. Henderson, Berkeley: University of California Press, pp. 97-110
[13] Gaetano, p. 26
[14] Jacka (2013)
[15] Li, Zhang, p. 172

remaining at home under parental authority and guidance, young women choose to head to the city to construct a new modern identity for themselves.[16]

1.1.1. The Importance of Gender

Besides implying a shift in labor relations, the post-Mao change in the language used to describe laborers (from the Maoist "*gongren*" to the reform-era "*dagongmei*" and "*dagongzai*") reveals another relevant shift: a division based on gender. While the asexual *gongren* was used to include both men and women, the gender of the laboring subjects of the post-Mao era is more specified. The character *mei* 妹 in *dagongmei*, meaning either "younger sister" or "girl", specifically indicates young women.[17] Similarly, the character *zai* 仔 in *dagongzai* means "young man" or "boy". Pun argues that this gender division in language exemplifies the process of (re)sexualizing laborers that was undertaken by capitalism in post-Mao China.[18] As the Chinese workforce once again became gendered according to cultural notions of "appropriateness", migration came to be simultaneously empowering (as it offers women a way out of rural "backwardness") and restricting (as occupational patterns reinforce more traditional notions of gender, and limit women largely to low-wage and informal sectors).[19]

One aspect Pun does not touch upon in her analysis, is that modern vocabulary does include a word that can be used to signify both male and female migrant workers: *nongmingong* . This term can be translated to "peasant workers", and can be applied to anyone with a rural *hukou* who has moved to the city in search of work.[20] While this term does not put any emphasis on the gender of the worker, it emphasizes another aspect of laborers' perceived identities: their place of origin. Sun Wanning explains the sensitivity surrounding this term in her book *Subaltern China: Rural Migrants, Media and Cultural Practices.* On the one hand, some advocates for rural migrants view the term as problematic. They argue that it labels

[16] Yan, pp. 36-52
[17] Pun Ngai also argues that the use of the character *mei* (for "younger sister", as opposed to *jie* 姐 for "older sister") can further emphasize an inferior position for the female migrant workers, Pun, p. 111.
[18] Pun, pp 142-143
[19] Gaetano, pp. 22-25 and Wang Feng, pp. 236-237; Hao, p. 22
[20] Sun (2014b), p. 3

migrant workers as "peasants" long after they have left the countryside. In this way, it provides a certain justification for treating them differently from urban workers, meaning laborers with an urban *hukou*. On the other hand, many migrant workers themselves feel the term does not apply to them, but strictly to those migrants who work on construction sites.[21]

1.2. Cultural Representations

1.2.1. Outsider Perceptions and Representations

Much research has been done on the dominant cultural perceptions of migrant workers, and particularly of *dagongmei*. In her studies on migrant women, Tamara Jacka observed that prejudices are prevalent among the urban population, as migrants are often associated with crime, dirt, and general disorder.[22] The rural migrant, she argues, is the "other" "against which the city defines itself and its modernity"[23]. Particular attention has been paid to the ways in which migrant workers are portrayed in popular and state media. For example, Sun Wanning dedicates an entire chapter of her aforementioned book to the ways in which news media report on stories concerning migrant workers, and on how migrant workers in turn can sometimes make use of news platforms to draw attention to certain issues. Most striking, of course, are the stories about migrant workers publicly threatening suicide unless poor working conditions or breaches of contract by their urban employers are adequately addressed.[24]

Stories about migrant women are also a popular subject matter for TV shows and movies. Scholars have pointed out that many TV narratives concerning *dagongmei* depict them as engaged in a "transformation" from a rural "backward" woman to an urban subject worthy of economic and romantic success – echoing Yan Hairong's analysis of migration as a modernizing project.[25] In these TV narratives, the rural-urban divide is portrayed as the

[21] Sun (2014b), p. 13
[22] Jacka (1998), pp. 44-45; Gaetano, p. 119; Hershatter, p. 70
[23] Jacka (1998), p. 48
[24] Sun (2014b), chapter 3
[25] Yan, pp. 36-52

distinction between "ignorant" and "civilized".[26] As Sun points out, while these narratives are not necessarily an accurate reflection of migrant women's actual lived experiences, they offer an interesting insight into what an ideal migration experience could look like.[27] In these stories, migrant women who manage to overcome this divide and adapt to their new environment (a transformation for which they carry full responsibility[28]), are eventually rewarded with upward social mobility in the form of better job opportunities and even the chance to "marry up".[29] Those who fail to improve themselves are doomed to either return home, or turn to crime or prostitution.[30]

According to Sun Wanning, this perceived threat of prostitution and a broader concern with the possibly deviant sexuality of migrant women are key elements of many discourses surrounding *dagongmei* identity. While academic work and policy guidelines often view migrant sexuality as a possible source of social instability (for example, because under-regulated mobility complicates family planning regulations)[31], state media tend to present a dichotomous image of migrant women as either virtuous, or shameless and morally corrupt.[32]

1.2.2. Self-Representations

Many scholars have pointed to the value of rural migrants' own oral and written self-representations as a valuable tool to nuance the dominant discourses concerning this group. For example, Jaguscik calls these self-narratives a way to "counterbalance the mainstream narrative of rural women as passive, helpless victims"[33], Jacka sees "the ways in which these women recount their stories, and construct subject positions for themselves (…) as a direct response to urban discourses, as a form of 'answering back'"[34], and Sun discusses texts

[26] Jaguscik, p. 122
[27] Sun (2010), p. 67
[28] Jaguscik, p. 125
[29] Sun (2010), pp. 56-57
[30] Jaguscik, p. 126
[31] The same point is made in Jacka (1998), p. 46.
[32] Sun (2014a), pp. 172-175; Gaetano, pp. 101-102
[33] Jaguscik, p. 126
[34] Jacka (1998), p. 44

produced by migrant women as a form of agency that can "turn hegemonic representations on their heads"[35]. While these self-representations can take many forms, this next section focuses on so-called migrant literature or *dagong wenxue*[36].

Dagong wenxue is a phenomenon that has attracted much academic attention. It was first "discovered" and promoted to a wider audience in Shenzhen in 1985, by Yang Honghai, who was at the time doing research at the Shenzhen Cultural Bureau. In 1991, he was also the first to coin the term *dagong wenxue*.[37] Yang initially meant for this term to include both elite and grassroots writers reflecting on *dagong* existence, but now advocates a more narrow definition of the term: texts by migrant workers, about migrant workers (打工者写，写打工者).[38] While *dagong* literature can appear in a host of different genres, the most prominent form thus far has been migrant poetry.[39]

It is important to note that the actual practice of migrant writing preceded its "discovery" by Yang: he simply used his privileged position to further promote it.[40] Furthermore, the popularization of migrant literature is inextricably linked with the support of the Shenzhen municipality, who fostered *dagong wenxue* as a way to encourage a sense of belonging in the migrant community and to maintain social stability.[41]

As a literary phenomenon, *dagong* literature is not without its controversies. For instance, questions have been raised about the literary value of migrants' works[42] (proponents arguing that the authenticity and lack of artifice are what makes the works valuable[43]). Additionally, the label *dagong* literature has been questioned even by those inside the migrant writers' community, as it implies (possibly condescendingly) that migrant literature

[35] Sun (2014a), p. 178
[36] It is sometimes also referred to as "subaltern literature" (*diceng wenxue* 底层文学) or "rural migrant literature" (*nongmingong wenxue* 农民工文学).
[37] Yang, p. 43
[38] Yang, p. 44. This narrower definition is also the one that will be used in this thesis.
[39] van Crevel, p. 246
[40] Sun (2014b), pp. 186-186
[41] Sun (2014b), p. 201
[42] Jaguscik, p. 127
[43] For example; Liu, p. 61; Yang, p. 45 quoting migrant writer Wang Shiyue 王十月 in *Jingbao* 晶报, 24/4/2011.

should be viewed as distinct from literature in a more general sense.[44] Finally, there has been debate on whether migrant literature should be considered a literary genre, a form of political or social activism, or both.[45]

1.3. *Dagongmei* Identity Construction in Academic Works

As mentioned above, migration is often depicted as a transformative experience, allowing rural women to transform themselves into modern urban subjects. This final section of the literature review gives a brief overview of discussions of migrant women's supposed identity changes in relevant academic literature. This section draws mainly on the works of Pun Ngai, Yan Hairong and Arianne Gaetano, who have all published extensive ethnographic work on "working sisters".

According to Pun Ngai, newly arrived workers are not yet *dagongmei*, but rather need to be molded and adapted in order to fit their new identity. Pun asserts that this adaption happens through two simultaneous processes: technologizing of the self by the disciplinary forces of the workplace on the one hand, and self-technologizing by the migrant workers on the other hand.[46] Pun summarizes this experience of "becoming *dagongmei*" as follows: "a dual process of displacement and replacement that produces anxiety, uncertainty, and pain for individuals in their daily struggles, and drives them toward a self-technologizing project, helping to accomplish a hegemonic construct"[47]. In what follows, the dual processes of technologizing and self-technologizing are discussed in further detail.

1.3.1. Technologizing

A disciplinary force in the workplace can use different techniques to try to mold newcomers into *dagongmei*, or into what they perceive as a "good worker". Pun describes many of these techniques, such as the imposition of a timetable on the workers or the specific way in which

[44] Sun (2014b), pp. 202-203
[45] For example: Sun (2014b), pp. 187-188; van Crevel, p. 253
[46] Pun, pp. 109-132
[47] Pun, p. 132

tasks on the factory floor are divided among different workers.[48] She pays particular attention to the way gender is used in technologizing discourses: "being feminine", as it was presented by those in charge, included being obedient, industrious and docile.[49]

Another one of the technologizing discourses highlighted in several studies, is the notion of migrant workers being "too rural". As several scholars point out, the "rurality" of these women is seen as the root of many different behaviors and attitudes that are perceived as problematic in the urban workspace. For example, for the factory-girls of Pun Ngai's study, not working fast enough, accidentally damaging the product and taking waste from the factory to repurpose it in their dormitories are all behaviors seen as an expression of the women's "peasant"-identity and as inappropriate for their new position. In order to function well in the factory, they are expected to change their habits.[50] In this context, Pun quotes one woman in charge of personnel as saying: "you are working now in the factory; bad habits you bring from the country should be given up."[51]

1.3.2. Self-Technologizing

As mentioned above, the process of turning migrant women into "urban subjects" fit for the workplace is not only undertaken by external forces. Many scholars point out that migrant women generally work hard to construct a modern identity for themselves: there is a desire to, as Arianne Gaetano puts it, transform themselves from "country bumpkins" into "urban sophisticates"[52]. In fact, even the All China Women's Federation (*Zhonghua Quanguo Funü Lianhehui* 中华全国妇女联合会) advises rural migrant women that in order to take advantage of the market economy, they should work to improve and transform themselves.[53]

[48] Pun, chapter 3
[49] Pun, pp. 143-145
[50] Pun, pp. 114-120
[51] Pun, p. 119
[52] Gaetano, pp. 80-98
[53] Sun (2010), pp. 56-57

One way in which migrant women try to emulate a more "urban" style and behavior, is through consumption.[54] Pun Ngai describes the process of buying "urban" clothing and make-up in order to adopt a more "modern" appearance as a sort of "rebirth" for the rural migrant women. She sees shopping and trying on new things as an affirmation of a *dagongmei*'s new identity as a modern subject.[55] Additionally, Yan Hairong offers another function of consumption: it is not simply a way to reaffirm your modern identity for yourself, but also towards those you left behind in the countryside. She argues that migrant women returning home for a visit will often flaunt their consumption as a way to conceal the hardships they went through in order to make the necessary money.[56]

Of course, there are many other ways in which migrant women can attempt to present a "modern identity", such as adopting a specific dialect[57], engaging in leisure activities in the public space, window-shopping, and signing up for technical trainings to learn skills and increase their cultural capital.[58] In any case, the goal of self-technologizing is clear: migrant women wish to change their appearance and deportment so they can look like they "belong" in the urban landscape. As Yan phrases it in her book on domestic workers: "Proper consumption and appearance reflects a migrant woman's level of *suzhi* 素质 and enhances her value as a domestic worker[59]. In the eyes of the manager, a migrant woman's ability to pass for an employer is the highest level of *suzhi* she can attain."[60] However, both Yan and Pun point out that despite the effort migrant women put into looking like "urbanites", they usually fail to convince outsiders that they truly belong in the city.[61]

---

[54] Gaetano, p. 83
[55] Pun, pp. 158-159
[56] Yan, pp. 148-155
[57] Pun, pp. 128-131
[58] Gaetano, pp. 83-90
[59] In this sense, domestic workers possibly differ from factory workers: they are not only producers, but also objects for consumption (by their employers). They must present themselves in a way that will be considered "attractive" for potential buyers. For more on this, see Yan, p. 174-178; *Suzhi* can be translated here as "quality". For more on the discourse surrounding *suzhi*, see Yan chapter 3.
[60] Yan, p. 173
[61] Pun, p. 162; Yan, pp. 146-147

KU LEUVEN
FACULTY OF ARTS
BLIJDE INKOMSTSTRAAT 21 BOX 3301
3000 LEUVEN, BELGIË

2. Theory and Methodology

From the descriptions above, it is clear that "going out to work" can be perceived as a transformative identity project by both urban employers and migrant women themselves, as both parties try to turn the women into modern subjects "appropriate" for the urban (work)space. The question at hand is whether or not migrant women's actual experiences of this identity project correspond to the envisioned journey from "backward rural girl" to "elegant urban woman". In order to formulate an answer to this question, I investigate the ways in which Chinese migrant women (re)construct their identity in autobiographical texts about their time as a *dagongmei*.

The following section begins with an introduction of the theoretical concepts employed in the analysis of these autobiographical texts, including a discussion of the concept of "liminality", an overview of the ways in which this notion has previously been connected to migrant workers, and a summary of liminal identity practices as proposed by Nic Beech. Second, the used methodology is explained. Finally, this section addresses the criteria which were used in the selection of the source materials.

2.1. Theoretical Concepts

2.1.1. Liminality

The concept of "liminality" was first introduced in 1909 by anthropologist Arnold van Gennep in a discussion of *rites de passage*, which he defines as "rites which accompany every change of place, state, social position and age"[62]. He conceives of these rites marking "transitions" as being made up out of three phases: separation, margin, and aggregation.[63] "Liminality", in van Gennep's work, denotes the middle phase: after the ritual subject has been detached from society and stripped of their previous social status, but before they are allowed to rejoin the community and take on their new position.[64]

Later, the notion of liminality was further elaborated upon and popularized by anthropologist Victor Turner. In his book *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*, he

[62] As quoted in Turner, p. 94.
[63] Turner, p. 94
[64] Wels et al, p. 1

points out that liminal people (or alternatively "threshold people") are "necessarily ambiguous (…). [They] are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial"[65]. Turner applies the notion of liminality to a variety of different groups and individuals (from court jesters to small nations), but all of his liminars commonly share an uneasy position within the larger social structure: they fall between the cracks or find themselves at the margin or the bottom of society.[66]

"Liminality" proved to be a very fruitful concept, and it has inspired scholars across a variety of academic fields, such as postcolonial studies, literary studies, and organization studies.[67] In fact, somewhat closer to home, liminality even proved useful to Nicolas Standaert's exploration of what it means to practice (New) Sinology.[68] Many of these scholars, in turn, further expanded and refined the concept of liminality according to the needs of their respective disciplines. However, it is beyond the scope of this paper to trace the evolution of "liminality" since the concept's relaunch by Victor Turner.

2.1.2. Dagongmei *as Liminal Subjects*

The analysis conducted below employs the notion of liminality primarily as a way to highlight the potentially transformative aspects of labor migration. However, it is not the first time Chinese migrant workers are conceptualized as liminal subjects: several scholars have already described "going out to work" as a "rite of passage" into (semi-)adulthood.[69] In her previously mentioned ethnographic study on migrant *baomu*, Yan Hairong points out that her subjects, "[n]ot being able or desiring to return, yet unable to cohere as subjects of Development [sic] in the city, (…) remain stuck as struggling *liminal* subjects"[70]. Similarly, in

[65] Turner, p. 95
[66] Turner, p. 125
[67] See, respectively, the works of Homi Bhabha, Manuel Aguirre, and Sierk Ybema.
[68] Standaert
[69] For example: Jaguscik, p. 125, Gaetano, pp. 42-44. Jaguscik further argues that "true adulthood" for rural women can only be obtained through marriage.
[70] Yan, p. 224, emphasis mine. This is especially poignant when contrasted with the existing discourse portraying migration as a way for rural youth to gain *suzhi* (or "quality"), enabling them to raise the quality of their communities upon return. For more on this, see chapter 3 of Yan Hairong's *New Masters, New Servants*.

an article dealing with migrant literature (specifically with migrant poetry or "battlers poetry"), Maghiel van Crevel points out that Homi Bhabha's notion of in-betweenness "captures a core image of 'the city you can't stay in and the village you can't return to' 留不下的城市，回不去的乡村"[71]. He then connects this notion of liminality or in-betweenness to the migrant identity, stressing that this "image speaks not only to concrete socio-economic challenges such as insufficient resources to start a family, but also to issues in identity"[72].

2.1.3. Liminality and Identity Practices

While some scholars have already discussed the notion of migrant workers as liminal subjects, this thesis aims to provide further insight into how migrant women themselves express their experiences with liminality (and more broadly with the "rite of passage" of going out to *dagong* as a whole) by looking at their autobiographical texts.

Of particular interest to this project is management expert Nic Beech's theorizing on liminality in the process of identity construction within organizational structures. Beech investigates how professionals construct and reconstruct identities within their working environment. While I would warn against envisioning *dagongmei* identity construction as taking place strictly within the work environment, their occupation nevertheless seems to play a key role in their identity as "working sisters". As such, I believe the tools Beech develops can usefully be applied to *dagongmei* identity practices.

Nic Beech conceptualizes identity work as "a mutually coconstructive interaction between individuals and social structures"[73], and thus as a fundamentally dialogical process. It is an interaction between an individual's own concept of who they are on the one hand (what he calls their "self-identity"), and the way this individual is perceived in external discourses on the other (their "social-identity").[74] He employs the concept of liminality to investigate

[71] van Crevel, p. 252. Translation van Crevel.
[72] van Crevel, p. 252
[73] Beech, p. 285
[74] Beech, p. 285

identity (re)construction practices among individuals whose professional identity is in the process of changing.

Beech identifies three identity construction practices that can take place during this liminal process:

1. *Experimentation*: in the search for a new identity, the individual constructs and "tries out" different versions of the self, which are then projected to others.
2. *Recognition*: an individual responds to an identity that is projected onto them by others. Recognition can be a gradual process (what Beech calls "dawning"), or can happen all at once, in an "epiphany", when an individual realizes: "I am not the same as I was, as I used to be"[75].
3. *Reflection*: an individual considers the perceptions of others, and as a result questions (and possibly changes) the self.

Of course, in reality these different identity practices are not necessarily neatly separated from one another: rather than adhering strictly to one practice, a liminal subject might engage in multiple practices simultaneously.[76]

Drawing on this conceptualization of identity construction and on empirical data he collected, Beech maps out certain aspects of liminality as conceptualized by Turner that can also be applied to identity work in organizational structures. First, the liminal process is set in motion by a "triggering event". The individual then becomes "structurally invisible", as they are (at least for a while) neither here nor there, and as there is no space in social structures for these "in-between" people. Additionally, there is a certain degree of "social separation": during this period, the liminar in question might be "regarded as (perhaps a milder version of) 'unclean' or 'prohibited'"[77]. Furthermore, during this period the liminar is expected to take

[75] Beech, p. 289; Quoting Strauss, Anselm, *Mirrors and Masks: The Search for Identity*, New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1996, pp. 94-95
[76] Beech, pp. 289-290
[77] Beech, p. 297

on a submissive attitude, obeying those occupying a higher social position. Finally, a new identity is constructed, one that shows a considerable change from their old identity.[78]

2.2. Methodology

In order to investigate how migration affects the ways in which Chinese rural women construct and reconstruct their identity, I will perform content analysis on autobiographical accounts of *dagongmei*'s migration experiences. Concretely, I will look for answers to the following questions, which were inspired by the theoretical work described above:

1. Does the author experience the aspects of liminality highlighted in Nic Beech's work (i.e. a "triggering event", "social separation", invisibility, a need to take a more submissive stance)? If so, how do they reflect these experiences in their autobiography?
2. How does the author discursively construct a sense of self? Can their practices of identity formation be categorized as one of Beech's identity construction practices (i.e. recognition, reflection, experimentation)?
3. How does the author relate their own experiences to larger discourses around rurality and urbanity, tradition and modernity?

Rural-to-urban migration is often portrayed as a way for rural women to "modernize" themselves, or as a way to improve their "quality" (*suzhi*).[79] By analyzing migrating women's autobiographical accounts according to these questions, I aim to bring their lived experiences of this transformative process into closer focus. I expect to find a story that is much more complex and diverse than the straightforward upward social mobility implied by the notion of "modernizing". At the same time, I also expect to find that the ways in which these women discursively construct their own identities will be heavily influenced by this narrative of migration as a journey of personal improvement.

[78] Beech, p. 297
[79] For example: Yan, chapter 3.

2.3. Selection of Autobiographical Sources

The research portion of this thesis analyzes autobiographical texts written by two different *dagong* authors: Wu Xia and Fan Yiluo. Before going into the analysis of their self-narratives, it is necessary to address two main points concerning these primary sources. First, this next section outlines the used understanding of "autobiographical". Second, it discusses how the public character of the texts (which are all easily accessible online) can impact the self-representation of the authors.

In her book on the autobiographical texts of Chinese women in the twentieth century, Wang Lingzhen's use of the Chinese term *zizhuanxing wenxue* 自传性文学(autobiographical literature) usefully reminds readers that not all self-focused work necessarily takes the shape of a conventional "retrospective account in prose that a real person makes of his own existence stressing his individual life and especially the history of his personality"[80]. In her own study of Chinese women writers' autobiographical practice, she discusses texts "diverse in genre (…) and imaginative in nature, but they center on a self in the text that is (…) *based* on real relations or the writing self in history"[81]. In other words: autobiographical practice can take various forms, such as poetry, essays, fiction, and non-fiction. However, in order to limit the scope of my investigation, this thesis will focus on texts that can be identified as conventional autobiographies, meaning retrospective first-person narratives.

This conscious limitation to conventional autobiographies is not meant to imply that certain forms of self-narratives are somehow more "pure" or "representative" than others. Even with the most straightforward autobiographies, it is important to acknowledge the influence of the audience on the author's self-representation. For example, despite Wu Xia's assertion that she writes whatever she wants, or whatever "is in her heart" (都是我手写我心，自己想写什么就写什么)[82], she is also conscious of her audience – something that becomes very explicit when she interacts with readers in the comment section. However, even when the author is not explicitly engaging with her audience, their presence can still (partly) influence the way she represents herself. This point is also made by Nic Beech when he points out that

[80] Wang, p. 12, quoting Lejeune, Philippe, *Je Pacte Autobiographique*, Paris: Seuil, 1975.
[81] Wang, p. 12, emphasis in original.
[82] Wu, "Yige ren de zhandou"

the ways in which an actor performs his or her identity "may have much to do with the actor's sense of the audience, as well as their sense of self"[83]. In other words: if identity construction is fundamentally a dialogical process, the reading public can potentially be a part of the conversation.

Along similar lines, it is important to be aware of the role of the researcher in this analysis, as the process of re-presenting the authors' experiences necessarily involves the selection of specific fragments and metaphors. While I have tried to give a nuanced and well-rounded overview of the different self-narratives, it is important to acknowledge that the construction of this overview was not purely inductive, but rather was made with a specific theoretical framework in mind.

[83] Beech, p. 291

3. Identity Practices and Labor Migration in Autobiographical Narratives

This third chapter turns to the autobiographical narratives produced and published by two self-identified *dagongmei*: Wu Xia and Fang Yiluo (in that order). For both authors, the analysis starts with a summary of the basic details of the author's life based on their own descriptions, followed by a note on the source texts. This section then provides an overview of the ways in which the key aspects of liminality as highlighted by Nic Beech (i.e. a trigger, social separation, invisibility, subordination) appear in the texts, as well as a discussion of the potential for aggregation. Finally, this analysis investigates the ways in which both authors discursively construct a sense of self throughout their narratives, with particular attention paid to their engagement with larger existing discourses on rurality and migration

3.1. Wu Xia 邬霞

3.1.1. Life Summary

Wu Xia 邬霞 was born in 1982 in rural Sichuan. In 1996, a lack of success in school led her to drop out. Soon afterwards, her parents decided she should start contributing to the household finances. When she was just fourteen years old, she migrated to Shenzhen to join her mother in a Japanese-owned garment factory. At the time, China's labor law of 1994 had already made it illegal to employ minors, defined as anyone under the age of sixteen.[84] Additionally, Wu Xia should have been protected by the law on the protection of minors of 1991.[85] In order to circumvent this legislation, she took on a false identity: she became known as Yu Zhenlian 余真联, and claimed to be twenty years old.

Work and life in the factory was physically exhausting, as she had to work for up to ten hours a day and was allowed very few breaks. She quickly became sad and withdrawn, and eventually took up writing as a way to escape her day-to-day reality. Writing quickly became the central part of her day, and she used every minute that she did not spend on the factory floor to think up new stories. Finally, after four years in Shenzhen, she applied to and was accepted by a private art school in Dalian. Unfortunately, contrary to her own hopes and

[84] People's Republic of China Labor Law (1991), art. 2
[85] People's Republic of China Law on the Protection of Minors (1991)

expectations, her stay at the art school did not signal the end of her life as a migrant worker. After graduation, she was unable to sell her work for publication and struggled to make money from her stories. Eventually, she wound up returning to the factory floor to support herself, her family and her two daughters. During this time, she also grappled with issues in her personal life: divorcing her husband after eight years of marriage. [86]

3.1.2. About the Text

The tagline of Wu Xia's official WeChat account is "record every moment" (记录每个瞬间). As such, it is not surprising that the original articles collected there provide a rich insight into her personal life. She offers detailed descriptions of her circumstances in the countryside and in Shenzhen: her stories chronicle the challenges of accessing quality education in the countryside, the stress of coping with the strict working regime on a factory work floor, the difficulties migrant workers encounter in trying to build a stable life for themselves away from home, etc. In short, her WeChat account contains a wealth of information on her everyday life as one of China's many migrant workers.[87]

The texts cover a period of over a decade: some stories are said to have been written as early as 2007, and to this day Wu Xia continues to regularly add new articles. Though she is a prolific writer, engagement on her account remains limited: most of her work has received under a hundred views, some texts being viewed as little as thirteen times. Very rarely one or two people leave a comment on a story, complimenting her writing or encouraging her to stay positive despite the hardships of day-to-day life. This limited engagement is especially striking when contrasted with the fact that Wu Xia was one of the migrant workers included in the 2016 English-language *Iron Moon: An Anthology of Chinese Migrant Worker Poetry*. While some of her work has managed to garner interest among an international public, other work struggles to find an audience at all.

[86] All of this information is taken from her personal autobiographical narratives, listed in the references.
[87] Footnotes referencing Wu's texts include their pinyin titles. The original texts can be found easily by employing the search tool on Wu Xia's official WeChat account, using the Chinese titles included at the end of this thesis.

The discussion of Wu Xia's identity project in the following section is based on a qualitative content analysis of nineteen texts, most of which were downloaded from her official WeChat account. Two of these texts were collected elsewhere: both "Record of the Factory Life of a Child Laborer (2001)" and "Work Notes of the Front Desk Clerk of an Electronics Factory (2011)" were published in a literature magazine called *Tianya* 天涯 (though the latter text was later also published on her WeChat account under a different title).[88] The selection of these nineteen texts was based on the following criteria:

1. *Autobiographical*: a large portion of Wu Xia's work is fictional. These texts undoubtedly could also offer valuable insights into the author's self-perceptions and aspirations. In fact, Wu Xia repeatedly states that she uses her fictional narratives to escape reality. Particularly during her first four years in Shenzhen, she let the girls in her stories live the happy lives that she dreamed of having, as a way to make up for a perceived lack in her own life.[89] However, for the sake of this research, this selection focuses on texts that can be perceived as autobiographical in a narrower sense of the word: primarily retrospective accounts narrated in the first person. For this same reason, poetry was excluded from the selection.[90]

2. *Self-narrative*: As this research focuses on how migrant workers make sense of their own identities, the texts selected for content analysis are all primarily centered on Wu Xia herself. Publications in which she focuses on the life stories of her parents, her sister or friends from her hometown were excluded.

3. *Related to her occupation*: Finally, the selected texts focus on Wu Xia's experiences as a migrant worker, or alternatively as a worker and author. By selecting texts that focus on occupational changes, this research excludes texts that focus on other life-changing events like marriage, divorce, or the illness and death of a loved one. This was primarily done to ensure compatibility with the theoretical framework used in the content analysis, as the identity construction theories described above were

[88] Wu, "Wode qiantai de rizi"
[89] Wu, "Tonggong gongchang shenghuo shilü (2001)", p. 74
[90] This criterium was based on Wang, p. 12, quoting Lejeune, Philippe, *Le Pacte Autobiographique*, Paris: Seuil, 1975.

developed based on the experiences of actors who found themselves in a liminal position in their workplace. Of course, this limited focus is not meant to imply that Wu Xia's status as a migrant worker exists independently from other aspects in her personal life: her married life, for example, is influenced by her circumstances and vice versa.

3.1.2.1. Double Liminality

When reading through Wu Xia's autobiographical narratives, it becomes clear that she is a threshold figure in more than one way. First, as a migrant worker she lives on the threshold between rural and urban China. Second, as a *dagong* author, she exists on the border between "workers" and "writers". In both instances, the difference between the two communities is marked by a perceived lack of "culture" (*wenhua* 文化, used here to imply "civilization") in one group, and an abundance of it in the other. This double liminality echoes Maghiel van Crevel's conceptualization of migrant poets as doubly "translated people": translated once when they move across the physical and cultural distance between the city and the countryside, and then again when they turn to literary writing.[91] This section takes a more detailed look at both instances of liminality in Wu Xia's life.

3.1.3. Elements of Liminality

3.1.3.1. Between Rural and Urban

a) Trigger

Wu Xia's first experience with in-betweenness is triggered when she is just fourteen years old. After having dropped out of school, her parents decide that she should join her mother to work in Shenzhen. This news is extremely shocking to her, as up until that point she had always assumed that she would never become part of China's large community of migrant laborers. Tellingly, she identifies the moment when she is told to pack her bags to go to Shenzhen as the end of her youth.[92] She instantly loses interest in the game she had been

[91] Van Crevel, pp. 252-253
[92] Wu, "Tonggong gongchang shenghuo shilü (2001)", p. 69

playing and becomes sorrowful, a feeling that will continue to haunt her throughout her *dagong* experience.

The entering of a threshold state is often associated with metaphors of death and rebirth[93] (for example, liminal actors are sometimes symbolically buried or covered with blood).[94] Calling upon similar symbolism, Wu Xia equates the start of her life as a migrant worker with the death of the dreams she had had for her future: "these beautiful fantasies had not yet been conceived, and they were already killed in the belly" (这美好的想象还不 及受孕，就被扼杀在了肚里)[95].

b) Social Separation:

Crucially, the event triggering liminality is followed by a period of separation: the actor is not just separated from their own previous identity (which will be discussed more extensively below), but can also experience a certain degree of social separation. In Wu Xia's work, this separation from an "outside world" manifests itself both physically and metaphorically.

On the most literal level, the work regime in the garment factory separates the workers from life outside the workplace. Every day, the workday starts at eight o'clock in the morning and lasts until at least twenty past five in the afternoon. However, most days the laborers are expected to work overtime, from six in the evening until midnight.[96] After a long day, Wu Xia and her mother go back to the dorms, which are also owned by the clothing manufacturer and where they share their room with ten other coworkers. In other words, during her first four years in Shenzhen, Wu Xia works, eats and sleeps on the premises of the factory. Only very rarely does she get the opportunity to interact with the world outside of the company. Even during lunch hours, the doors to the factory remain closed. When people from outside of the factory come to see a worker during their break, they can only talk to them through the closed gates, "like visiting a prison" (如同探监)[97]. This metaphor of the factory workers

[93] Turner, p. 95
[94] Beech, 287
[95] Wu, "Tonggong gongchang shenghuo shilü (2001)", p. 69
[96] Full schedule of working hours can be found in Wu Xia,"Dengdai yangguang de zhenzhu"
[97] Wu, "Dengdai yangguang de zhenzhu"

as “prisoners” echoes Nic Beech’s assertion that liminal actors can be perceived as somehow “unclean” or “prohibited”.[98]

On a more metaphorical level, Wu Xia describes herself as “a bird that was locked in a cage” (一只被关进樊笼里的鸟)[99]. Like the comparison of the factory to a prison, this metaphor implies a separation from an outside community. However, while the prison-like qualities of the factory keep her from interacting with the material outside world, her metaphorical birdcage keeps her separated from a more abstract ideal life. In her fantasies, “life should be colorful, I am eager to fly freely like a bird” (生活应该是多姿多彩的， 我渴望像鸟儿一样自由自在 地飞翔)[100]. Interestingly, while her life as a migrant worker has separated her from her earlier dreams and goals, she seems to imply that *dagong* might also be a way to work towards achieving her dreams. When she feels like her freedom has been taken from her, she pins a motivational reminder on her wall: “I am not working [*dagong*] to make money, but to dream” (我打工不是 为了金钱，而是为了梦想)[101].

c) Invisibility

When entering their threshold state, Victor Turner’s liminars are stripped of the symbols signifying their previous identity and status. In this way, actors who find themselves in a liminal phase become socially (and sometimes even physically) invisible. Turner gives the example of a boy in the process of becoming a man: “a society’s secular definitions do not allow for the existence of not-boy-not-man, which is what a novice in a male puberty rite is (if he can be said to be anything)”[102].

When entering the factory at fourteen years old, Wu Xia is explicitly stripped of her previous identity. Made to work for a living, she is no longer a child. However, her young age also keeps her from being fully accepted as a worker. As life in the factory does not allow for her

[98] Beech, p. 297
[99] Wu, “Tonggong gongchang shenghuo shilü (2001)” , p. 72
[100] Wu, “Tonggong gongchang shenghuo shilü (2001)”, p. 72
[101] Wu, “Tonggong gongchang shenghuo shilü (2001)”, p. 72
[102] Turner, p. 95

existence in between rural childhood and urban adulthood, she is literally made to take on a new identity. Using fake documents, she becomes twenty-year-old Yu Zhenlian.

The erasure of her previous identity goes beyond the adoption of a new name: all of the workers in the garment factory are made to wear the same blue work uniform, and instructed to tie their hair up. On the one hand, these clothing regulations serve to distinguish the assembly line workers from the employees on higher levels of the factory hierarchy. Illustrating this, Wu Xia enviously describes how Zhang Jian, a female translator in the factory, is allowed to wear clothes of her own choosing: "every day [Zhang Jian] wears different styles and colors of clothing. But look at myself, wearing the large blue work uniform every day" (每天换不同款式不同颜色的衣服穿。可看看自己，每天穿着宽大的蓝色工衣)[103]. On the other hand, the uniforms also erase any kind of individuality, flattening out pre-existing differences among the workers.[104] For Wu Xia, the wide and shapeless clothes help conceal her young age by making her body look bigger than it really is. In fact, the only time she truly feels like a young girl is when she secretly tries on her newly bought dresses in the middle of the night – out of the view of her coworkers and supervisors.[105] Returning to the topic of her work uniform, she goes on to note that it is still "difficult to cover up [her] childish face" (但它难以掩盖我稚气未脱的脸)[106].

Going beyond clothing, Wu Xia describes this lack of variety and individuality as a main feature of her *dagong* life. Not only are the work uniforms "sky blue, close to grey" (工衣都是天蓝色，接近灰色)[107], but this lack of brightness characterizes the rest of her experiences in the factory as well: "this color [grey] stings my heart, I can't see the bright spots in life, it makes people feel desperate and fearful. If you would ask which color *dagong* is, I would not hesitate to say that it is grey" (这个颜色刺痛了我的心，看不到生活中的亮点，让人感到绝望、恐惧。若问打工是一种什么样的颜色，我会毫不犹豫地说是灰

[103] Wu, "Yong bu yan qi"
[104] In his work, Victor Turner also notes the equality characterizing liminal subjects undergoing a rite of passage together. Turner, p. 96
[105] Wu, "Tonggong gongchang shenghuo shilü (2001)", p. 75
[106] Wu, "Tonggong gongchang shenghuo shilü (2001)", p. 70
[107] Wu, "Huise de tian"

色)[108]. Reflecting on her own circumstances and those of her mother, she writes that she does not even feel like a person anymore (我觉得我已不是一个“人”了)[109]. Statements like these attest to the extent to which factory life erases her individual personhood (at least in her own perception).

d) Subordination

One final characteristic of liminality highlighted in Beech's work is the expectation that, during their transitional period, liminars should adopt a submissive attitude: they have limited rights and should submit to the orders of those who are considered socially superior to them.[110]

This expectation to obey is very present in Wu Xia's autobiographies, as it is an aspect of *dagong* life that she struggles to accept. Her stories are filled with instances in which she is confronted with injustice or unfair treatment, but is forced to tacitly accept the situation as she is not in a position to object. This powerlessness is especially detrimental to her self-esteem, as is evident from her own summary of her position: "what I had not realized, was that from the day I started to *dagong*, my self-esteem would become worthless. When you want to survive under another person's roof, you have to obey others in everything" (我没有想到的是，从我打工的那日起，自尊便变得一文不值，在别人的屋檐下求生存，一切都得服从别人)[111]. For Wu Xia, the humiliation she suffers at the hands of her supervisors is even harder to endure than the physical exhaustion of working in a factory.[112]

One of the most poignant examples of this is her narration of the first time she was fined for breaking one of the dormitory rules. In the factory dorms, every floor houses about a hundred women, who all share the same bathroom facilities. In order to speed up the process of getting ready for bed, the women brush their teeth by taking a cup of water out into the hallway (rather than queue up to brush their teeth at the sink). Unaware that this

[108] Wu, "Huise de tian"
[109] Wu, "Dengdai yangguang de zhenzhu"
[110] Beech, p. 297
[111] Wu, "Yong bu yan qi"
[112] Wu, "Tonggong gongchang shenghuo shilü (2001)", p.71

practice is in fact against factory regulations, Wu Xia does not hide her cup of water from a guard patrolling the dorm hallways in the evening. Enraged, the guard yells at her in front of her coworkers and her mother, and forces her to pay a fine of two hundred yuan (her basic monthly salary at the time is four hundred yuan). Powerless to protest either the guard's treatment or the punishment, Wu Xia hides in the bathroom and cries for the first time since she arrived in Shenzhen. Tellingly, she is not just crying over the money she has lost, but also over the injury to her self-respect (不仅为要被罚款两百元，更为自尊任人践踏)[113]. Later, her mother tells her that in any other context she would never allow anybody to treat her daughter in such a way, but as they have come out to work, "sometimes you have to learn to be patient" (有时必须得学会忍耐)[114]. In other words, both mother and daughter find themselves in a situation where they have no choice but to subject themselves to the will of others.

The metaphors Wu Xia uses to describe the supervisors in the factory paint a vivid picture of the antagonistic and unequal relationship between the workers and their superiors. For example, the women are not allowed to speak to each other while they are working, a rule that is sometimes broken when the supervisors are away. When the supervisors come into the room again, the workers quickly quiet down, "like mice that have seen a cat" (员工们就像老鼠见了猫似的)[115]. Along similar lines, guards patrolling the hallways of the dorms are described as hunters looking for their prey (如猎人出动，来捕捉猎物)[116]. Both of these metaphors serve to underline the relatively powerless position of the regular workers.

At the same time, the fact that rules are constantly being broken behind the supervisors' backs (e.g. most women still brush their teeth in the hallway) serves as an important reminder that factory workers are not just powerless victims. Despite the expectation that they should adopt a submissive attitude, the workers still have agency. As such, Wu Xia's stories also include examples of ways in which working women circumvent factory

[113] Wu, "Dengdai yangguang de zhenzhu"
[114] Wu, "Dengdai yangguang de zhenzhu"
[115] Wu, "Dengdai yangguang de zhenzhu"
[116] Wu, "Dengdai yangguang de zhenzhu"

regulations to help themselves and each other.[117] For example, before Wu Xia can start her work in her mother's factory, she needs a place to stay in Shenzhen. During this time, she spends a couple of days living with a family member who works in a different factory, despite the fact that it is against regulations for an "outsider" to enter the dorms. When necessary, the workers can also tip the power balance in the factory in their favor, for example by undertaking collective action and announcing a strike that will shut down production.[118]

e) Aggregation?

According to Victor Turner's conceptualization of rites of passage, the liminal phase ends when the liminar in question is re-aggregated into the larger society. Having gone through a transitional period, the actor is allowed to take on their new identity. For instance, returning to Turner's example of a boy passing through a puberty rite, the boy will take on his new identity as a grown man after he has successfully completed all the ritual requirements.

At first sight, it seems as if Wu Xia experiences a rather explicit version of "aggregation". When she turns eighteen, she can no longer be considered a child laborer, and no longer has the need to pretend to be someone she is not. After four years in Shenzhen, she quite literally takes back her own identity by reclaiming her real name, stating: "I finally got back to being myself" (**我**终于做回我自己)[119]. Tellingly, in her article "Record of the Factory Life of a Child Laborer", this "return to herself" is closely linked to another life-changing event: after having submitted her writing to a private art school in Dalian, she has been accepted as a student. She is leaving the factory, expecting that she will never have to return to it. In other words, at eighteen years old she appears to leave behind her liminal identity as a *dagongmei*, and takes on her new identity as an art student, or even as a writer. Wu Xia's life path appears to follow the ideal transformational path of a migrant worker: through education and hard work, she manages to create an opportunity for upward social mobility for herself.

---

[117] Pun Ngai gives various examples of this kind of agency in her work. For example: Pun, pp. 91-93.
[118] Wu, "Tonggong gongchang shenghuo shilü (2001)", p.77
[119] Wu, "Tonggong gongchang shenghuo shilü (2001)", p. 77

Contrary to her expectations, after graduation Wu Xia finds herself forced to return to working in the factory to support herself. As such, her enrollment in an art school does not signal the end of her experiences with liminality in the urban landscape. In 2019, twenty-three years after she first moved to the city but still without an urban *hukou*, she remains part of Shenzhen's floating population. In more recent texts, she poignantly describes how this continued existence on the border between the rural and the urban affects her relation to her surroundings. One such text, "I Can't Leave You" (written in 2017) is an ode to the city of Shenzhen. In it, she discusses her position in the city: "It doesn't matter if I have a Shenzhen *hukou* or not (...) I think I only had to be here for one day to belong to Shenzhen, and for Shenzhen to belong to me" (**不管有没有深圳**户口[...]**我想只要我在**这里一天，我就属于深圳，深圳也属于我)[120]. While this statement is meant to reaffirm her status as a resident of the city, it simultaneously casts doubt on that idea: regardless of how she feels about Shenzhen, her *hukou* status continues to define her as an "outsider". In fact, in a later article she discusses the possibility of leaving Shenzhen, as she is unable to obtain social security there, nor is her daughter allowed to attend the public schools.[121] In other words, even though she feels that she belongs to the city, Shenzhen might not actually belong to her. No longer truly at home in her rural birthplace, nor truly accepted as an urban resident, she remains stuck in the in-between, never quite reaching Turner's "aggregation" phase in her rite of passage.

3.1.3.2. Between "Workers" and "Writers":

The section above explored Wu Xia as a figure existing on the threshold between rural and urban China. Her turn to writing (fiction, poetry and autobiographies) puts her on yet another threshold: she exists on the margins of both the migrant worker community and the writing community.

[120] Wu, "Li bu kai ni"
[121] Wu, "Taoli Shenzhen"

a) Trigger

Two years after entering the factory, an incident on the work floor leaves Wu Xia feeling disrespected and angry. This anger is what inspires her to start writing her own stories, explicitly as a way to change her destiny and earn other people's respect (心中有个强烈的愿望，通过手中的笔来改变命运，并得到别人的尊重)[122]. She is very diligent in pursuing this goal, making use of even the smallest breaks in her workday to write, and regularly staying up until two in the morning to reach her personal goal of producing eight pages a day. Unlike the events that put her on the threshold between the rural and the urban, in this instance it is Wu Xia's own decision that puts her on the border between being a worker and being a writer. She voluntarily chooses to attempt to abandon her previous identity as a migrant worker, in order to work towards a new identity as a writer. Initially believing that she will be the first author ever to emerge from the *dagong* group[123], this project becomes a point of personal pride during her life in the factory.

b) Social Separation:

Wu Xia's experiences with social separation as a *dagong* author are twofold: on the one hand, she separates herself from the community of migrant workers. On the other hand, she feels separated from others in the literary community.

In the factory dorms, she separates herself from her coworkers both mentally and physically. On a physical level, she isolates herself from the other women by refusing to join them on outings during their free time. On the rare evenings that they do not have to work overtime, most of the women in the factory dress up to meet their boyfriends, go shopping, or go dancing in Shenzhen. In other words: they take advantage of these evenings to partake in the social life in the city. Turning down the invitation of the women in her dorm, Wu Xia chooses instead to remain inside and work towards her dream of becoming an author.[124] She firmly believes that because of this dedication, her future will be better than that of her

[122] Wu, "Yong bu yan qi"
[123] Wu, "Tonggong gongchang shenghuo shilü (2001)", p. 73
[124] Wu, "Jin wan bu jiaban"

peers (我坚信我的 未来会比她们精彩)[125]. In this way, she also mentally separates herself from the other workers: she sees herself as different from them. This is not only because she believes her future will be different, but also because she believes she has a different goal in coming out to *dagong*: while others are there to make money, she is there to pursue her dreams.[126] Furthermore, her writing also serves to isolate her on a more metaphorical level, as it allows her to escape to a better world, different from the one she is living in (另一个精彩的世界).[127]

In the writing community, on the other hand, her experiences with social separation are not as self-inflicted. As soon as she enters the art school in Dalian, she feels different from the other students because of her rural background and her previous life as a *dagongmei* (而在这学校，我却是异类)[128]. Even after graduation, Wu Xia feels like the writing community does not accept her. In "The Tragic Life of a Suspected Autistic Person", she states: "Before, when I was looked down upon by other people, I thought I could still write, and I could still hide in that world [the literary world]. How could I know that the people in these circles would also look down on me" (以前我被人瞧不起，想我还可以写作 ，还可以躲进这个世界里，哪知这个圈里的人也瞧不起)[129]. Here too, Wu Xia's description of how she is treated closely echoes Beech's statement that liminars can sometimes be treated as somehow "unclean".[130]

c) Invisibility

As Wu Xia experiences social separation both from the working community and from the writing community, it is unsurprising that her experiences with invisibility are also twofold. She appears to feel that neither the *dagong* community, nor the literary community can allow for her identity as both-*dagong*-and-author. Rather than challenge these norms, she regularly tries to solve her predicament by covering up certain parts of her identity.

[125] Wu, "Tonggong gongchang shenghuo shilü (2001)", p. 75
[126] Wu, "Tonggong gongchang shenghuo shilü (2001)", p. 72
[127] Wu, "Jin wan bu jiaban"
[128] Wu, "Sheng"
[129] Wu, "Yige yisi zibizheng huanzhe de beican rensheng"
[130] Beech, p. 297

Before she is accepted into the art school in Dalian, she tries to keep her writing hidden from those around her as much as possible. Despite the fact that writing is a very important part of her everyday life, she does not want others to be aware of this: "I'm afraid that others will say that despite not being cultured, I still want to write novels" (怕别人说我没什 么文化还写小说)[131]. Nervous that others will mock her for the apparent discrepancies between being an "uncultured" *dagongmei* and a "cultured" author, she decides to simply hide part of who she is from those around her. While some coworkers do eventually find out that she is writing stories, most of the women in the factory think she is simply writing letters.

Similarly, she finds that she needs to cover up her identity as a migrant worker in order to be accepted as an author. Sometimes, this invisibility is self-inflicted: for example, in Dalian, she is so embarrassed by her own background (which she feels makes her inferior to those around her) that she does not dare tell her classmates of her *dagong* experiences (介于那四年打工生活所带来的耻辱和在人前的自卑，我不敢在同学面前说我打过工)[132]. At other times, such self-censorship is demanded of her by others, like when she is asked to speak at the opening event of a summer camp, but told to hide her occupation from the participants.[133]

d) Subordination

In Wu Xia's experiences on the border between migrant worker and author, the subordination that is characteristic of liminality manifests itself most strikingly in her non-questioning of other people's opinions on her writing. Throughout various fruitless attempts to get published, she is told repeatedly that her work is not good enough. In some instances, she is initially told that she is eligible for publication. She then invests considerable time and resources into editing her stories and travelling back and forth to the publishing companies, only to be rejected later on. However, at no point does she question publishers' assessments

[131] Wu, "Tonggong gongchang shenghuo shilü (2001)", p. 74
[132] Wu, "Sheng". It is interesting to note here that she is not the only student with a past as a migrant worker: when one of her classmates tells Wu Xia she used to be a *dagongmei*, Wu Xia feels confident enough to share her own experiences with this student.
[133] Wu, "Yige yisi zibizheng huanzhe de beican rensheng"

of her work. By the time that she meets Yang Honghai, who encourages her to focus on writing *dagong* literature, she has already internalized all of the previous rejections, telling him: "My work not writing, it's garbage" (我的不是作品，是垃圾)[134].

e) Aggregation?

As with her experiences with liminality between the rural and the urban, Wu Xia's identity project of becoming an author appears to come to an end when she turns eighteen. As described above, she is accepted into a private art school and decides to leave her job and life in the factory. Furthermore, as she is packing her bags in the factory dorm, one of her coworkers sees her texts, exclaiming: "us migrant workers don't have anything, but Xiao Hui [Wu Xia] has so many novels" (我们打工什么都没有，小会有这么多小说)[135]. This recognition from a coworker makes her feel like her hard work has already been worth it, even though she has not succeeded yet. However, this sense of having been "aggregated", of having taken on her new identity, turns out to be only temporary. Wu Xia struggles to secure a financially stable future through writing and eventually returns to her previous life as a migrant worker. She writes: "[I thought] I could realize my dreams, but in the end they were empty" (可以实现自己的梦想，可是到头来是一场空)[136].

Instead of assuming a new identity, Wu Xia seems to slowly give up hope of ever achieving her dream of becoming an author. In her youth, she had expressed the ambition to change her destiny through her writing. Later texts, on the other hand, offer a more pessimistic assessment, writing "I don't believe literature can change destiny" (相信文学可以改变命运)[137], and stating that she, "like most migrant workers, will become dreamless and insensitive to life" (我也将如大多数打工者一样，变得没有梦想，对生活麻木不仁)[138]. Habits that used to be an important part of her identity project, now become reasons for regret. Referencing her previous choice of staying indoors to work on her stories while her

[134] Wu, "You mengxiang shei dou liaobuqi (xia)"
[135] Wu, "You mengxiang shei dou liaobuqi"
[136] Wu, "Yong bu yan qi"
[137] Wu, "35 sui"
[138] Wu, "35 sui"

coworkers enjoyed themselves outside of the factory, she writes: "If I could live my life again, I would prefer to fall in love when it was time to fall in love, to dress up more, to enjoy everything that young people should enjoy" (如果人生可以重来，还是该谈恋爱的时候谈恋爱，多打扮自己，享受年轻人应该享有的一切)[139]. This reflection stands in sharp contrast with her previous opinion that she should not "waste [her youth] on eating, drinking and playing" (不能浪费在吃喝玩乐上)[140]. Of her old conviction that her future would be better than that of her peers, she writes that in retrospect, it has become a joke (现在看来，这句话成了一个笑话)[141].

On the one hand, Wu Xia struggles with this perceived lack of success in completing her journey from migrant worker to author. Feeling like she has not amounted to anything, she tells her parents: "I am so useless, throw me in the trash" (我那么没用，把我扔进垃圾桶)[142]. When her mother protests that she is not useless, as she is an author, Wu Xia comments that this makes her feel even more ashamed: "how am I an author?" (哪是什么作家哟)[143]. On the other hand, however, Wu Xia does seem to identify at least partially with the role of a writer. In "Anyone Who Has a Dream Is Amazing", she argues that while writing cannot be her entire life, it will remain a necessary part of it. Furthermore, she seems determined not to give up completely, saying: "if you ask me, how can you continue on? I will say, it is the unshakeable belief that 'there will be success one day'" (如果你问我，为什么能一直坚持下去？我会说，是"总有一天会成功"这样坚定不移的信念)[144].

3.1.4. Identity project

Starting from the earlier conceptualization of identity formation as a dialogical process between an individual and its surroundings, this next section summarizes how Wu Xia constructs and reconstructs her own identity throughout her autobiographical narratives.

[139] Wu, "35 sui"
[140] Wu, "Jin wan bu jiaban"
[141] Wu, "35 sui"
[142] Wu, "Yige yisi zibizheng huanzhe de beican rensheng"
[143] Wu, "Yige yisi zibizheng huanzhe de beican rensheng"
[144] Wu, "You mengxiang shei dou liaobuqi"

First, her autobiographies are analyzed according to Nic Beech's liminal identity practices (i.e. experimentation, recognition, reflection). Second, particular attention is paid to the way she relates to the modernizing discourse surrounding rural-to-urban migration. Finally, this section also includes a discussion of how her struggles with her identity manifest themselves physically.

3.1.4.1. Identity Practices

Throughout the texts analyzed for this thesis, Wu Xia primarily engages in two of Nic Beech's proposed liminal identity practices: experimentation and reflection. Beech sees experimentation as an "inside-out dialogic orientation", a process during which individuals construct and "try out" different versions of the self, "judging the relative success of their attempts before trying again"[145]. For Wu Xia, this identity practice manifests itself in her repeated attempts to get published, and in her application to the art school in Dalian. In an effort to construct a new identity for herself, she sends out her work over and over again in the hopes that someone will recognize her for what she wishes to become: an author. When her work is rejected for the first time, she is devastated. Temporarily losing all hope of ever leaving her life as a migrant worker, she even contemplates jumping out of one of the windows in the factory dorms.[146] Interestingly, in the end she finds recognition as an author (at least in part) when she decides to start writing about her life as a migrant worker. She finds her platform in *Dagong Wenxue*, a magazine dedicated specifically to migrant worker literature.[147] In other words, her experimenting eventually leads her to combine two identities she had initially perceived as contradictory: *dagongmei* and author. It is precisely the experiences and circumstances she wants to leave behind which, in the end, bring her some measure of success in attaining the future she wants to work towards.

Throughout the analyzed texts, Wu Xia also frequently engages in the identity practice Nic Beech calls "reflection". This practice involves self-questioning based on external influences. In a way, it can be closely linked to experimentation, as it can entail reflecting on how one

[145] Beech, p. 289
[146] Wu, "Tonggong gongchang shenghuo shilü (2001), p. 74
[147] Wu, "You mengxiang shei dou liaobuqi (xia)"

should project themselves towards others. However, the notion of "reflection" is employed primarily to highlight the internalized dialogue of a liminal subject in the process of constructing a new identity, which may or may not result in outwardly visible changes.[148] Wu Xia's autobiographies contain many instances of this type of reflective internal dialogue.[149] From a very young age, she starts internalizing outsiders' perceptions on what is and is not appropriate for her. These perceptions are often based on a perceived lack of "culture". For example, when one of her elementary school teachers tells the class that they should take care of their eyes as you "shouldn't wear glasses if you don't have any culture" (不要没什么文化还戴一副眼镜)[150], she concludes that this means that she should stop using her glasses – despite being near-sighted. This near-sightedness decreases her ability to do well in school, eventually contributing to her decision to drop out of school altogether. In other words, certain prejudices about the rural population's supposed lack of culture held by educating figures from her childhood started influencing her life path from very early on. Later in life, similar reflections about the contradiction between the lack of culturedness associated with her rural origins and migrant worker identity on the one hand, and the abundance of culture associated with her aspired identity as a writer on the other hand, lead her to hide specific parts of her life depending on the audience she is addressing.

3.1.4.2. Modernizing Discourses and Rural-to-Urban Migration

This degree of reflectivity is also evident in the way Wu Xia discusses her possible future selves. In imagining what the future may hold in store for her, Wu Xia shows how she relates to larger discourses surrounding her situation. For this thesis, the most relevant is her changing attitude towards the idea of the city as the site of modernity, and the understanding of rural-to-urban migration as a way for young Chinese women to modernize themselves and improve their *suzhi*.

[148] Beech, pp. 289-290; Beech also points out that the liminal phase in general can be described as a phase of reflection.
[149] The frequency of this particular identity practice can also be due to the nature of the analyzed texts, which are largely retrospective autobiographical narratives.
[150] Wu, "Dengdai yangguang de zhenzhu"

Despite her initial unwillingness to migrate, Wu Xia does initially appear to understand *dagong* as a way to secure upward social mobility for herself. As described above, she firmly believed that she would be able to change her destiny through hard work and dedication, stating: "a butterfly must struggle in pain until its wings are strong enough to fly. Although peanuts are buried in the dark soil, like always they still work hard to bloom" (蝴蝶必须在痛苦中挣扎，直至双翅强壮，方可破蛹高飞。花生虽身埋黝黑的泥土，却依旧努力地开花结果)[151]. In this context, she talks about "shedding her identity as a *dagongmei*" (我摒弃了打工妹的身份)[152] and about becoming "a person with good prospects" (有出息的人)[153]. These statements cover a whole host of dreams and expectations: finding the love of her life, becoming financially independent, wearing beautiful dresses every day, having white and soft skin, having the freedom to stroll down the boulevards of the city, ... These imagined future selves echo the narratives about rural women transforming themselves into sophisticated urbanites mentioned in the literature review.

However, Wu Xia slowly loses her faith in the idea that she will be able to transform herself and her circumstances if only she works hard enough. She writes: "The word *dagong*, I bitterly hate it. It's like a nail that is deeply embedded in my body; and no matter how advanced medical science becomes, it can't pull out the nail" (对于打工二字，我深恶痛绝，它像一枚钉子深深嵌入我体内，无论医学多么发达，也拔不掉它)[154]. Her initial hopes for social mobility turn into disenchantment, as she remains (in her own perception) "someone without prospects" (没有出息的人)[155].

One aspect of the modernizing discourse surrounding migration that does appear to maintain its credibility for both Wu Xia and her family, is the interpretation of the city as the site of modernity - as opposed to the countryside, which is seen as backward and traditional. In fact, early on in her autobiographies Wu writes of her family's conviction that there are

[151] Wu, "Rang wo xiang shangxin gaobie"
[152] Wu, "Tonggong gongchang shenghuo shilü (2001)", p. 75
[153] Wu, "Yige yisi zibizheng huanzhe de beican rensheng"
[154] Wu, "Huise de tian"
[155] Wu, "Yige yisi zibizheng huanzhe de beican rensheng"

only two options for rural girls aiming at a better life: either study, or go out to work.[156] No matter how harsh life as a migrant worker is, anything is better than staying in the countryside and working on a farm.[157] Even after spending decades struggling in Shenzhen, despite being unable to obtain an urban residence permit, the city center still inspires her to yearn for a better life.[158]

3.1.4.3. Physical Manifestation of Identity Struggles

Some of the descriptions above already hint at the way Wu Xia's identity struggles are closely bound up with her physical body and the way she appears on the outside. In a way, this preoccupation with her body is unsurprising: all throughout her autobiographies, Wu Xia offers evidence of the extreme physical demands that come with being a migrant worker. She talks of having to work ten-hour days, of not being allowed to sit during working hours, of short nights and inadequate food. At one point, she becomes so exhausted that she has to lay down for five days straight. Afterwards, she develops a sensitivity to motion sickness and air conditioning.[159]

Throughout her autobiographies, Wu Xia repeatedly contrasts her own appearance with the appearance she considers appropriate for the person she hopes to become. When she arrives in Shenzhen for the first time, she is described as short, skinny and dark-skinned. Like all other factory girls, she is made to wear the blue work uniform every day.[160] This stands in sharp contrast with the future she imagines for herself, which is heavily focused on outward appearances, involving having lighter skin and being able to wear whatever she wants.[161] However, soon after arriving in the factory she already notes: "after a few years, I will be like the other *dagongmei*, because of the exhaustion, staying up late, and malnutrition, I will

[156] Wu, "Tonggong gongchang shenghuo shilü (2001), p. 69
[157] Wu, "Dengdai yangguang de zhenzhu"
[158] Wu, "Li bu kai ni"
[159] Wu, "Tonggong gongchang shenghuo shilü (2001)", p. 77
[160] Wu, "Dengdai yangguang de zhenzhu"
[161] For example in Wu, "Tonggong gongchang shenghuo shilü (2001), p.75

become yellow-skinned and thin" (过不了几年，我也将与其他打工妹一样，由于劳累、熬夜、营养不良，变得面黄肌瘦)[162].

In her text "35 Years Old", Wu Xia reflects on how two decades of life as a migrant worker has affected her body. As she had predicted, she notes that years of staying up late and frequent crying have resulted in yellow skin, spots on her cheeks, and bags under her eyes. When she finds a gray hair, she connects this to all the worries in her life, including her continued financial instability and the insecurity of her daughter's future. In the end, even her disillusionment with her predicament is reflected in her relation to her body. Accepting that she is unlikely to achieve upward social mobility, she writes: "I looked at my hands, and thought such smooth hands did not suit me. I had to rely on them to build my life (...) if only I had a pair of hands that loved labor, I wouldn't be afraid of anything!" (我看着我的手，想我不配拥有一双如此光滑的手，我要靠它去创造属于我的生活 (...)只要有一双热爱劳动的手，就什么都不怕！)[163]. Smooth hands, in her perception, are only appropriate for "people with prospects". As she feels that she has been unable to become part of this group, she would rather have the coarse laborer's hands that she feels are suitable for her situation.

3.1.4.4. Conclusion

From the above discussion, it becomes clear that Wu Xia's identity construction is highly impacted by her liminal position as a migrant worker. She is stuck between accepting her position in what appears to be perpetual liminality, while also still hoping for and working towards improvement. These circumstances affect both the way in which she views herself and the way she attempts to present herself towards the outside world. One the one hand, her inability (in her own perception) to obtain her aspired identity position appears as very detrimental to her mental health, leading her to perceive and describe herself in very negative ways. On the other hand, her struggles with her ambiguous or "in-between" identity also translate themselves into a preoccupation with the image she projects towards the outside world. These struggles are summarized in the pseudonym teenage Wu Xia chose

[162] Wu, "Dengdai yangguang de zhenzhu"
[163] Wu, "35 sui"

for herself when she first started writing: she called herself "distant dreams" (梦遥), as a way to remind herself to keep working even when her dreams seem far away.[164] In retrospect, this self-chosen name appears as almost a prediction for the predicament that she would continue to find herself in for decades to come.

3.2. Fang Yiluo 房忆萝

3.2.1. Life Summary

Fang Yiluo 房忆萝 was born in rural Sichuan in 1981. Like many places in the Chinese countryside, her native village is mainly inhabited by children, married women, and elderly people: most able-bodied men and unmarried women have migrated in search of work. In high school, Fang had proven herself to be a good and hard-working student and after graduation she passes the entrance exam for "that famous university in the North" (北方那所著名大学的校)[165]. However, while Fang and her mother are trying to figure out how they will pay for her tuition fees, the village receives terrible news: thirty-eight village men were killed in a gas explosion in the mine where they were working – and Fang's father is one of them. The owner of the mine flees and the government refuses to pay the victims' families any compensation, so nineteen-year-old Fang Yiluo has no other option than to give up her dream of attending university. In order to support her mother and younger brother, she decides to move to Dongguan in search of work.

As soon as Fang and her friend Li Juan arrive in Dongguan, it becomes clear that life as a migrant worker will not be easy and that many people are willing to take advantage of their unfamiliarity with their surroundings. They are swindled repeatedly, losing more money than they can afford on their first day in the city. Fortunately, a male acquaintance of Li Juan is willing to help them find their way. With his guidance, Fang moves from factory to factory: making wristbands for watches, producing plastic parts, packing clothes, … She becomes romantically involved with a coworker called Shen Zhou, but later finds out that he has a girlfriend in his hometown and that he has no intention of marrying Fang. After having an abortion that causes her to lose a dangerous amount of blood, she decides to move back to

[164] Wu, "You mengxiang shei dou liaobuqi"
[165] Fang, 2 [Last consulted 15/8/2019, http://bbs.tianya.cn/post-free-689114-1.shtml]

the countryside for good. Unfortunately, she eventually finds herself forced to leave her hometown again, this time finding work in a Japanese-owned factory in Shenzhen. By the end of her online self-narrative, she is employed as a clerk in the personnel department of this factory.[166] In addition to providing intimate insights into Fang's personal life, her autobiography also gives a vivid description of migrant workers' lives in the early 2000s, discussing the impact of major events like the war between the United States and Iraq and the SARS epidemic in China.

3.2.2. About the Text

On May 10, 2006, Fang Yiluo posted the preamble to her autobiographical narrative on a website called Tianya Club (*Tianya Shequ* 天涯社区), an internet community that provides users with a platform to ask each other questions, upload photos, and post stories. The story was originally titled "Record of the Life of a *Dagongmei* in Dongguan" (东莞打工妹生存实录) and was posted under the username *Dongguan Dagongmei* 东莞打工妹. In the text itself she uses the pseudonym Yang Haiyan 杨海燕.

Fang uploaded her story in installments, adding a few paragraphs with every new post. Her final update, made in October of 2009, was number 423. By that time, there were already three separate versions of her text, all likely having been written by the same person. In December of 2006, the username *Dongguan Dagongmei* stopped posting on Tianya Club.[167] When readers started to get frustrated with the lack of updates, another user by the name of abing1893 posted a comment linking to Fang's personal blog on which she continued updating the story. Additionally, abing1893 also copied several of the newer blog posts to the thread on Tianya Club. In August 2007, Fang herself returned to Tianya Club (still using the same username as before). She thanked abing1893 for helping her out and continued posting until the end of September 2007. After another long break, Fang Yiluo announced that her life-story would be published as a book, titled "I Am a Floating Flower" (**我是一**朵飘

[166] All biographical details are taken from Fang Yiluo's own narrative.
[167] It is suggested in some comments that her account was blocked by the site, causing her to be unable to continue updating.

零的花).[168] She briefly returned to the original thread once more in October of 2009, posting two new installments before disappearing again without any further explanation. Since then, she has not shared any further updates.

The high level of engagement on the original post shows that Fang's story struck a nerve with a large audience. At the time of writing, the thread on Tianya Club gathered over 1.6 million clicks and 11.847 comments. [169] Only a small part of these were written by Fang Yiluo herself, including the updates of her story and interactions with her many readers. Most comments from other users are short messages praising her writing or asking her to update soon. Interestingly, a significant portion of the comments is written by other self-identified migrant workers, sharing their own experiences (sometimes in the form of poetry, or by linking to their own blog), offering advice, and even advertising group chats specifically created for *nongmingong*. As such, the thread has become a collection of migrant worker memories that far exceeds the individual story of Fang Yiluo, as well as a place where those engaged in labor migration could find a community of people with similar experiences.

The analysis below is limited to Fang's online updates, focusing on her posts on Tianya Club and on her blog – amounting to a total of around 460.000 characters. This was primarily done because the published book is more likely to have been edited by people other than Fang Yiluo and is therefore to a certain extent less reliable as an example of how she presents her own story and identity. As such, the online version of Fang's text is better suited to the purposes of this thesis.[170]

3.2.3. Elements of Liminality

a) Trigger

The event that causes Fang Yiluo to become a migrant worker (and thus triggers her experiences with liminality) is a particularly traumatizing one. Reflecting on it, she writes: "My destiny was completely changed in the summer of my nineteenth year. Even today,

[168] The book was published in 2008.

[169] The last reaction was posted March 20, 2018. [Last consulted 19/5/2019, http://bbs.tianya.cn/post-free-689114-119.shtml]

[170] For reference, posts numbered 1-123 and 416-423 were taken from Tianya Club. Other posts were taken from Sina Blog, where posts can easily be located using the blog's menu.

when I think of it, my heart still flutters with fear"(我的命运，是在十九岁那年暑假彻底改变的。至今想起来，仍然心有余悸)[171]. Fang is all set to go to university in the North of China when she receives the devastating news that her father was killed in a mining accident, along with thirty-seven other men from their village. She quickly realizes that she will have to set her dreams aside: with her father dead and her mother unable to work, she is the only one who can provide for the family. She decides to become a migrant worker.

As mentioned before, entering a threshold state is often associated with metaphors of death and rebirth. In Fang's narrative, this manifests itself not only in her father's literal passing but also in the symbolic "death" of her previous ambitions. After she has made the decision to go out to work, Fang Yiluo takes her little brother to their father's grave and burns her university admission notice – simultaneously burning the future she thought she would have.[172] Arriving in Dongguan, in this sense, is the start of a new life for her, which also includes new goals: on the one hand, she wants to compensate for her lack of university education through her intelligence and diligence, building an even better life for herself. On the other hand, she wants to find the owner of the mine where her father worked, and hold him accountable for the deaths he caused.[173]

b) Social Separation

As with Wu Xia, the social separation experienced by liminal subjects manifests itself in more than one way in Fang Yiluo's narrative. On the one hand, she discusses being perceived as somehow "unclean" or "different" by the media, Dongguan locals, and even rural villagers. On the other hand, her life as a migrant worker often also physically separates her from the outside world.

In the preamble to her autobiography, Fang already makes it clear that she is fed up with the way migrant workers – particularly female migrant workers – are represented in the media. She writes: "In these news reports, if the *dagongmei* has not become an escort, prostitute or

[171] Fang, 2 [Last consulted 15/8/2019, http://bbs.tianya.cn/post-free-689114-1.shtml]
[172] Fang, 5 [Last consulted 15/8/2019, http://bbs.tianya.cn/post-free-689114-1.shtml]
[173] Fang, 18 [Last consulted 15/8/2019, http://bbs.tianya.cn/post-free-689114-5.shtml]

mistress out of vanity, then she lives in an environment so bad she has no way to survive, living dark days without any sun, a life no better than that of a pig or a dog"(这些报道里，打工妹不是爱慕虚荣做了三陪小姐二奶，就是环境恶劣地无法生存，过着暗无天日、猪狗不如的生活)[174]. Being depicted as either morally corrupt or extremely poor, migrant workers become a group that the "general public" can look down upon. Even the words *dagongmei* and *dagongzai*, Fang argues, imply contempt for the laborers – though she prefers this terminology above any other label for migrant workers. [175]

In Fang Yiluo's story, this general perception of migrant workers as being somehow "unclean" or "contemptible" is not limited to media reports, but bleeds into everyday life as well. For example, in a discussion about finding a suitable marriage partner, one of Fang's co-workers tells her that she does not think she will find a husband in her hometown, as girls who have gone out to *dagong* do not have a good reputation in the villages: "They think that all the girls who are outside [in the city] have either become mistress to an old man with money, or 'sell their flesh like pork' in entertainment venues" (他们以为在外面的女孩子不是给有钱的老男人做二奶，就是在娱乐场所'卖猪肉的')[176]. In other words, female migrant workers can be perceived as somehow morally corrupt and therefore unmarriable even by their native rural community.[177]

On the other hand, in the context of the city this sense of "prohibitedness" manifests itself in frequent and random police checks: Fang Yiluo describes how one of their rental rooms is raided by police officers (*zhi'an* 治安) in the middle of the night.[178] Several weeks later, she is again stopped on the street by a drunk police officer, who even threatens her with a knife when she cannot immediately show him her temporary residence permit.[179] In both instances, the migrant workers were not engaging in any illegal activities, nor were they disrupting the public order. Their apparent identity as a laborer was enough to assume that

[174] Fang, 1 [Last consulted 15/8/2019, http://bbs.tianya.cn/post-free-689114-1.shtml]
[175] Fang, 1 [Last consulted 15/8/2019, http://bbs.tianya.cn/post-free-689114-1.shtml]
[176] Fang, 123 [Last consulted 15/8/2019, http://bbs.tianya.cn/post-free-689114-91.shtml]
[177] This is reinforced later on, when she returns to the countryside and is confronted with other people's prejudices concerning migrant workers, as in Fang, 266.
[178] Fang, 22 [Last consulted 15/8/2019, http://bbs.tianya.cn/post-free-689114-6.shtml]
[179] Fang, 55 [Last consulted 15/8/2019, http://bbs.tianya.cn/post-free-689114-24.shtml]

their presence in the city was somehow illicit. It is interesting to note that during the aforementioned raid on their rented rooms, one of Fang Yiluo's roommates is arrested despite being able to produce a temporary residence permit – the reason being that he does not have a health certificate (*weishengzheng* 卫生证), a permit that he did not even know he was supposed to carry.[180] In other words, even being able to produce proof of legal residence is not always enough to mitigate urban perceptions of migrant workers as somehow "prohibited".

Fang Yiluo's experiences with social separation are not limited to certain preconceptions about migrant workers in public discourses but also extend to a more physical separation from the outside world and even from other workers. As soon as Fang arrives in Dongguan, she notes how migrant laborers and locals are literally separated in the urban landscape: "locals mostly live in different places, the houses there are newer and more beautiful" (本地人大多住在别处，那里的房子又新又漂亮)[181]. In fact, this separation from local people goes beyond physical location, as Fang points out that locals and migrants do not even eat the same kinds of food: "Pig lungs are said to be considered dirty by the locals, they don't eat it, but it has become a delicacy for us workers" (猪肺据说本地人嫌脏，不吃，却成了我们打工者的美味)[182].

Just as in Wu Xia's story, as soon as Fang finds work in a factory, this physical separation from the rest of the city becomes even more extreme. She writes: "Our lives are a fixed three-point line: the dorms - the factory floor - the dining hall, and every day we repeat this three-point line" (我们的生活是固定的三点一线：宿舍一厂区一饭堂，我们每天在这三点一 线间周而复始)[183]. Spending all her time inside of the factory, she "will quickly forget what the sun looks like" (都快忘记太阳长什么样子的了)[184]. To a certain extent, this isolation is self-inflicted: when Fang is given time off from work during the holidays, instead

[180] Fang, 23 [Last consulted 15/8/2019, http://bbs.tianya.cn/post-free-689114-7.shtml]
[181] Fang, 14 [Last consulted 15/8/2019, http://bbs.tianya.cn/post-free-689114-3.shtml]
[182] Fang, 114 [Last consulted 15/8/2019, http://bbs.tianya.cn/post-free-689114-85.shtml]
[183] Fang, 111 [Last consulted 15/8/2019, http://bbs.tianya.cn/post-free-689114-84.shtml]
[184] Fang, 114 [Last consulted 15/8/2019, http://bbs.tianya.cn/post-free-689114-85.shtml]

of going out into the city, she decides to "lock herself into her room" (把自己关在房间里)[185], becoming extremely lonely.

As a result of this separation, the actual urban space of Dongguan is largely absent from her narrative and most of the described events take place within the confines of the factory. When the world outside of the factory walls does appear, it is often described as a dangerous and unpredictable place: police officers inflict random violence on migrant workers, acquaintances try to pressure her into prostitution, and robbers and swindlers try to cheat her out of her hard-earned money. In comparison, the factory seems to be a safe haven where Fang can feel like she belongs. After having paid the security deposit required of new factory workers, she writes: "I know, I have finally settled into Dongguan" (我知道，我在东莞终于安定下来了)[186].

However, this sense of safety does not last. Soon, Fang discovers that her position inside of the factory is just as precarious as her position in the city surrounding it. When one of her co-workers loses an arm in a work-related accident, Fang's supervisor is replaced by a man called Zhang Pei. Unfortunately for Fang, Zhang is good friends with security guard Li Lianping, who had previously tried to court her. When Fang rejected Li, he assumed it was because of his relatively low salary, and thus tried to pressure her into sleeping with a superior officer in exchange for a promotion for Li (this incident will be explained in further detail below). Needless to say, when Fang refused to cooperate, her presence in the factory became problematic to Li Lianping. As soon as Zhang Pei is promoted to supervisor, Li convinces him to demote Fang and ultimately even fire her. As Fang Yiluo becomes the victim to these complex factory politics, she notices that the other women in the factory start avoiding her.[187] When she is fired, her roommates do not even say goodbye to her. In other words, even within the workers' community Fang falls victim to social separation, to a certain extent ostracized by her peers for failing to comply with what was expected of her.

[185] Fang, 58 [Last consulted 15/8/2019, http://bbs.tianya.cn/post-free-689114-26.shtml]
[186] Fang, 39 [Last consulted 15/8/2019, http://bbs.tianya.cn/post-free-689114-14.shtml]
[187] Fang, 83 [Last consulted 15/8/2019, http://bbs.tianya.cn/post-free-689114-57.shtml]

c) Invisibility

In the preamble to her autobiography, Fang Yiluo specifically denounces the way the life circumstances of the majority of *dagongmei* are ignored by the media and the general public.[188] As such, her self-narrative is a way to make herself (and other women like her) more visible to the public eye. However, this under-representation in media reports is not the only type of invisibility that Fang experiences.

On the one hand, Fang's invisibility manifests itself on a structural level, her existence on the threshold between the rural and the urban excluding her from legal and political frameworks in the city. Her identity as a migrant worker grants her only a temporary and precarious position, and therefore she does not enjoy the same legal rights and protections as people who "belong" in Dongguan. Before she obtains a temporary residence permit, she has no choice but to literally make her presence in the city invisible, even spending a night outdoors in order to hide from police controls.[189] However, even after her paperwork is in order, she stills feels unable to demand police protection because of her temporary status in the city. As mentioned above, at one point Li Lianping tries to pressure Fang into sleeping with a superior officer. He does this by leaving her alone with this man under false pretenses and without informing her of what he expects her to do. When the man realizes she is not willing to cooperate, he tries to force himself on her. Fang considers yelling for help, but decides against it: she has not brought her residence permit and the man in question has ties to the police. Instead of calling for help and risking an arrest, deportation and damage to her reputation, Fang resorts to threatening suicide, eventually convincing the man to leave her alone.[190]

On the other hand, Fang quickly realizes that neither the factory nor the city really recognizes her as an individual person. Instead, she feels that she is considered part of a mass of easily replaceable, interchangeable workers. For example, after a co-worker is severely injured because of deficient equipment, Fang realizes that his loss of livelihood will not prompt the factory to make any changes: "The (...) factory doesn't care about them,

[188] Fang, 1 [Last consulted 15/8/2019, http://bbs.tianya.cn/post-free-689114-1.shtml]
[189] Fang, 22 [Last consulted 15/8/2019, http://bbs.tianya.cn/post-free-689114-6.shtml]
[190] Fang, 65 [Last consulted 15/8/2019, http://bbs.tianya.cn/post-free-689114-39.shtml]

because constantly there are people like Chun Cao, like me, like all the people who are as poor and hard-working as we are" (亮光厂之所以不在乎他们，就是因为不断地有春草，有我，有许许多多象我们一样贫穷而吃苦耐劳的人)[191]. Sometimes it appears that even the migrant workers themselves consider each other to be replaceable. When a young woman commits suicide inside the factory, a coworker nonchalantly comments: "what is so terrible about that? In this worn-out factory, people die every year" (有什么可怕的，这个破厂，每年都要死人)[192].

Fang complains that while workers offer up their youth to make both the city and the factory owners rich, they are continually looked down upon.[193] Eventually, factory life becomes so monotone that she no longer feels like a person with individual thoughts and feelings herself, but rather like one of the production machines.[194] Interestingly, this perception of herself as a machine persists even when she is eventually promoted to a white-collar job.[195] As with Wu Xia, these statements illustrate the strain *dagong* life puts on Fang Yiluo's sense of individual personhood.

d) Subordination

As with Wu Xia, Fang Yiluo's story is filled with instances where she is expected to adopt a submissive attitude towards her superiors. Although Fang is not always willing to obey those who are higher up in the (urban- or factory) hierarchy, her circumstances often leave her no other choice. This becomes especially clear whenever she is made to comply with any demands the local police might have, as she fears being detained and sent back to her hometown if she refuses.

In the factory as well, Fang often has no other choice than to obey factory regulations and orders from higher-ups, as her position does not afford her the power to contest unfair practices. This is poignantly illustrated when management introduces a new rule that holds

[191] Fang, 76 [Last consulted 15/8/2019, http://bbs.tianya.cn/post-free-689114-52.shtml]
[192] Fang, 147
[193] Fang, 147
[194] Fang, 111 [Last consulted 15/8/2019, http://bbs.tianya.cn/post-free-689114-84.shtml]
[195] Fang, 417

workers accountable for deficient products: when products are sent back, the fault is traced back to a specific department and laborers in that department are then made to compensate the cost of the faulty products. When the workers try to protest, the factory manager announces: "This is a factory regulation, is there anyone who doesn't accept it?" (这是厂规，有谁不服气的吗？). "Of course", Fang writes, "nobody dared to say they didn't accept" (当然没有人敢说不服气)[196]. This expected subordination also ties into and amplifies the precarious legal position of migrant workers like Fang Yiluo: only a small percentage of the workers are given labor contracts, which they would need to claim certain legal rights. However, when Fang raises this concern with Li Juan, Li dismisses her: "you are even more naive than I am! (你比我还天真!)[197].

Furthermore, within the factory, this subordination also manifests itself in a certain lack of solidarity between the workers. As described above, when Fang is fired through no fault of her own, her former friends avoid talking to her, for fear of being associated with her by the factory bosses. In other words, reluctance to displease their superiors can also affect the relationships between the workers.[198] Finally, subordination on the work floor does not appear to be limited to blue-collar workers: even after Fang has obtained a job as a clerk in a Japanese-owned factory, she notes that "the majority of Chinese people act extremely slavish in front of the Japanese [superiors]" (大部分中国人在日本人面前都表现得奴性十足)[199].

e) Aggregation?

Throughout her narrative, Fang Yiluo frequently reflects on her own liminality, repeatedly illustrating her position on the border between urban and rural China. In Dongguan, she feels "like rootless duckweed, I can't find a sense of security and belonging" (株无根的浮萍

[196] Fang, 51 [Last consulted 15/8/2019, http://bbs.tianya.cn/post-free-689114-22.shtml]
[197] Fang, 46 [Last consulted 15/8/2019, http://bbs.tianya.cn/post-free-689114-18.shtml]
[198] Fang, 83 [Last consulted 15/8/2019, http://bbs.tianya.cn/post-free-689114-57.shtml]; By contrast, Fang Yiluo also describes several instances of solidarity among workers – though rarely as a way to challenge their superiors, as in Fang, 174.
[199] Fang, 418

一样，找不到一定安全感和归属感)[200]. However, when she finally returns to the countryside it quickly becomes clear that she no longer truly belongs there either. Her hometown has changed in her absence, becoming completely different from the one in her imagination.[201] The previously clean air and environment have become polluted with pesticides and other harmful chemicals[202] and her own reputation has been severely damaged as news of her failed affair with Shen Zhou has reached the village. Despite her own insistence that she prefers life in the countryside over that in the city, financial stress on her family and her own repeated failures to find a suitable husband eventually lead her to go out to work again. This inability to put down roots in either rural Sichuan or urban Guangdong is powerfully summarized in the metaphor that inspired the title of her published book, "I Am a Floating Flower":

> "That's right, every woman is a flower, they leave the branches on which they grew at the start of the flowering period, and come to distant places. For these distant places, they pay with their youth, their love, and their blood and sweat. They only receive thin banknotes, hearts full of pain and withered faces. At the end of the flowering period, they want to return to their loved ones again, but in their hometowns, they can no longer find a branch to stay."
>
> 是的，每个女人都是一朵花，她们在花期初始时离开生长的枝头，来到遥远的异地。她们为遥远的异地付出青春、爱情和血汗，她们得到的，只是薄薄的钞票、满心的伤痛和枯萎的容颜。花期结束时，她们想重新回到亲人身旁，而在故乡，她们却再也找不到可以停留的枝头了。[203]

While it is clear that it has become very difficult for Fang Yiluo to find a place for herself in her rural hometown, the question of whether or not she can truly belong in the city is somewhat more difficult to answer. Returning to Victor Turner's terminology, the abrupt and unexplained interruption of Fang Yiluo's online story does not allow for a definite answer to the question of whether or not she has attained the so-called aggregation phase

[200] Fang, 215
[201] For example, Fang 262
[202] Fang, 254; Fang, 262
[203] Fang, 126

of a rite of passage. Still, her final updates offer enough information to formulate a tentative conclusion.

One way to evaluate whether or not Fang has successfully completed her rite of passage from rural to urban, is to analyze her situation according to her own standards. When Fang Yiluo first migrated to Dongguan, she set two main goals for herself: first, she wanted to find the man responsible for the death of her father. Second, she wanted to show that she is no less worthy or capable than her peers who did have the opportunity to attend university.[204] While she does not come any closer to achieving her first goal, she does make considerable progress towards her second goal. Towards the end of her online story, she is promoted to a clerical position in the personnel department of a Japanese-owned factory. She reflects on how years of hard work and hardships have led her to this point, writing: "even though the road ahead is still very long, but in any case, I am now finally on the same starting line as university graduates, which makes me feel full of hope for life again!" (虽然前面的路还有很长很长，但无论如何，现在终于和大学毕业生们站在同一起跑线上了，这让我重又对生活充满了希望)[205]. As such, to a certain extent Fang successfully completes the trajectory she set out for herself, following the transformative path set out for migrant women - albeit with a lot of twists and turns along the way.

At the same time, this sense of aggregation is nuanced by several cues in her final updates. First, the narrative is unclear on whether or not Fang Yiluo's new white-collar coworkers truly accept her as one of their own. Aggregation entails the obtaining of a new identity and position in society, which can imply a certain degree of recognition of this new position by other members of the community. Her vulnerability to others' opinions is emphasized when, in a fit of rage, one of the Japanese managers fires a female coworker and implies that all the other women in the office - including Fang - should soon be replaced by younger and prettier girls.[206] At least in the eyes of this Japanese manager, Fang's status as an office-worker

[204] As in Fang, 18 [Last consulted 15/8/2019, http://bbs.tianya.cn/post-free-689114-5.shtml]

[205] Fang, 411

[206] Fang, 423

appears to be a temporary one. Second, while she obtained her promotion in 2005[207] and published her book in 2008, in personal updates written as late as 2009 Fang Yiluo continues to identify herself as a "regular migrant worker".[208] While Fang does seem to employ a broader notion of "migrant workers" than is conventional (as further explored below), her continued identification with a group whose position in the city is so precarious can cast doubt on the stability of her new status.

3.2.4. Identity Project

This final section on Fang Yiluo explores how she discursively constructs a sense of self throughout her liminal period. First, her text is analyzed according to Beech's liminal identity practices. Second, this section investigates how Fang relates to modernizing discourses surrounding rural-to-urban migration.

3.2.4.1. Identity Practices

While Fang primarily engages in what Nic Beech calls "reflection", there is also evidence of so-called "experimentation", which involves liminal subjects attempting to obtain a new identity position by adopting and projecting behavior or appearances they deem appropriate for that identity.[209] This experimentation is most striking when Fang Yiluo decides to return to the countryside after several years in Dongguan. Going out to buy new clothes for the trip back home, she argues: "I have to dress myself up a little more beautifully. All the humiliations and hardships I experienced outside, I have to cover them up under this layer of beautiful outward appearance" (我一定要把自己打扮得光鲜漂亮一些。在外面受到的所有屈辱和伤害，是要好好掩盖在这层光鲜漂亮的外表下的)[210]. By wearing new, beautiful clothes, Fang tries to project an identity that she feels she does not have: that of someone who has successfully gone out to work for several years and has now returned to the countryside as a transformed woman. Unfortunately, Fang soon finds out that her

[207] According to the chronology of her autobiography.
[208] Fang, 7/10/2009 [Last consulted 13/8/2019, http://bbs.tianya.cn/post-free-689114-112.shtml]
[209] Beech, p. 289
[210] Fang, 248; This is reminiscent of Yan Hairong's analysis of the function of shopping, pp. 148-155.

experimentation was not convincing enough and that many villagers look down upon her because of rumors they heard about Fang's affair with her coworker Shen Zhou.

Beyond experimentation, Fang engages much more extensively in so-called "reflection", frequently contemplating the ways in which larger discourses on rural-to-urban migration relate to herself, and on how they influence her identity and position in society. As mentioned before, in the preamble to her autobiography Fang indicates that her narrative is meant as a way to nuance (or "talk back to") existing discourses on *dagongmei*. As such, she very explicitly engages with what it means to be a *dagongmei* and acknowledges the prejudices surrounding the identity of migrant worker.[211] Throughout her narrative, she is repeatedly confronted with others' low opinions on migrant women[212] and even Fang herself sometimes laments being a "lowly *dagongmei*" (卑贱的打工妹)[213].

One preconception about migrant women that returns frequently, is connected to morality and sexual deviancy. Already in her preamble, Fang denounces the association of *dagongmei* with prostitution and sexual promiscuity.[214] Throughout her autobiography, she frequently shows a certain degree of contempt for sex workers[215] and praises coworkers who "observe the traditional virtues of Chinese women" (恪守中国女性的传统美德)[216]. In the end this, discourse surrounding morality is turned against her when she returns to the countryside. As rumors of her affair with Shen Zhou have reached the village, the other locals know she is no longer a virgin. Suddenly, Fang Yiluo herself is seen as somehow worthless because of her perceived sexual promiscuity, and she falls victim to one of the narratives she set out to denounce.[217]

While Wu Xia hopes to someday "shed" the fraught label of "migrant worker"[218], Fang Yiluo employs a different tactic to negotiate her identity: she broadens the notion of *dagongzhe* to include everybody who is not their own boss. "So in this sense", she writes, "civil servants

[211] Fang, 1 [Last consulted 15/8/2019, http://bbs.tianya.cn/post-free-689114-1.shtml]
[212] As in Fang, 309
[213] Fang, 196
[214] Fang, 1 [Last consulted 15/8/2019, http://bbs.tianya.cn/post-free-689114-1.shtml]
[215] Fang, 111 [Last consulted 15/8/2019, http://bbs.tianya.cn/post-free-689114-84.shtml]
[216] Fang, 123 [Last consulted 15/8/2019, http://bbs.tianya.cn/post-free-689114-91.shtml]
[217] As in Fang, 304
[218] Wu, "Tonggong gongchang shenghuo shilü (2001)", p. 75

are also *dagongzai* and *dagongmei*" (所以从这个意义上讲，公务员也是打工仔打工妹)[219]. Similarly, when a factory manager uses the word *mingong* 民工 (migrant worker) in a derogatory way, she quietly accuses him: "Don't think that you are not a *mingong*!" (别以为你不是民工)[220]. She goes on to point out that, while *mingong* or *nongmingong* in the strictest sense is meant to refer to an individual's rural origins, it is more commonly used to connote people from a lower class: "Anyone who doesn't have a high income, even if they don't have a rural *hukou*, can be called a '*mingong*'" (任何一个收入不高的人，就算不是农业户口，也很可能被称为"民工")[221].

In the instances described above, Fang Yiluo reflects on the commonly held notions about migrant workers and then re-imagines these discourses for herself in order to negotiate her own identity. By broadening the notion of *dagongzhe* beyond those who work on assembly lines[222], she is able to continue identifying as a *dagongmei* even after she has obtained a white-collar job.[223] Additionally, by criticizing the equation between *mingong* and lower class, she attempts to detach the label of migrant worker from its associations with a lack of culture or civility. By reconsidering what it can mean to be a migrant worker in this way, it becomes possible for Fang to obtain upward social mobility and personal improvement without having to separate herself from China's migrant worker community.

3.2.4.2. Modernizing Discourses and Rural-to-Urban Migration

This space for upward social mobility and personal improvement ties into the ways Fang relates to conceptualizations of rural-to-urban migration as a way for young rural women to modernize themselves and improve their position in life. This next section takes a closer look at Fang's attitudes towards the idea of upward social mobility through hard work, and the notion of the city as the site of Chinese modernity.

---

[219] Fang, 1; She does go on to note that she represents *dagongmei* in the stricter sense of the word in her autobiography.
[220] Fang, 418
[221] Fang, 418; In the same paragraph, she also discusses how the high correlation between poverty and rural origins is due to historical factors, and not the fault of individual migrant workers.
[222] Fang, 1 [Last consulted 15/8/2019, http://bbs.tianya.cn/post-free-689114-1.shtml]
[223] As mentioned above, she continues to do this as late as 2009.

When it became clear to Fang Yiluo that she had no choice but to become a migrant worker, she was determined to show that she could still achieve upward social mobility through her own intelligence and hard work.[224] Her belief in this narrative is exemplified when she writes: "Gold will always shine" (金子总会发光的)[225]. She knows her own value and is determined to show it to those around her. She repeatedly states the conviction that she will be able to secure better conditions for herself, both in relation to her occupation[226] and to her romantic prospects - echoing the rewards envisioned for successful *dagongmei* in popular TV narratives.[227] At the same time, Fang also repeatedly criticizes the notion that hard work alone is enough to improve one's fate. Throughout her story, she illustrates the importance of *guanxi* 关系 to obtain promotions[228] and laments how her factory job does not leave her enough free time to learn the skills she would need to work as a clerk.[229] She summarizes her predicament as follows: "It's not that we don't want to move forward, it's not that we were born to suffer from poverty, but there are many objective conditions that restrain us, so that we don't have a way to improve, so that we don't have a way to not be poor" (并不是我们不想上进，并不是我们生来就苦于贫穷，但很多客观的条件制约着我们，让我们无法上进、无法不贫穷啊)[230].

Still, despite several twists and turns, in the end Fang's story appears to confirm the possibility of upward social mobility through hard work. While it is unclear how stable her position as a clerk in a Japanese-owned factory is, she obtained her promotion largely through her own efforts and with only minor support from others. Even so, Fang's narrative appears to nuance the notion of vertical mobility as unquestionably a good thing. The case of her friend Li Juan is particularly striking, as she is chosen and eventually pressured into becoming the wife of the mentally disabled son of their factory manager.[231] Li moves to

[224] As in Fang, 18 [Last consulted 15/8/2019, http://bbs.tianya.cn/post-free-689114-5.shtml]
[225] Fang, 48 [Last consulted 15/8/2019, http://bbs.tianya.cn/post-free-689114-20.shtml]
[226] As in Fang, 90 [Last consulted 15/8/2019, http://bbs.tianya.cn/post-free-689114-66.shtml]
[227] As in Fang, 140; She believes Shen Zhou will be more interested in her if she obtains a job as a clerk.
[228] Fang, 144; This time, it works in her favor when Shen Zhou leverages his power in the factory so Fang can obtain a promotion to a job for which she is actually not qualified.
[229] Fang, 126
[230] Fang, 48 [Last consulted 15/8/2019, http://bbs.tianya.cn/post-free-689114-20.shtml]
[231] Fang, 169

Hong Kong with her new in-laws, a decision that gives her access to a lot of wealth and allows Li to provide for her family. For these reasons, in their hometown Li's experiences are seen as a success story of rural-to-urban migration[232], but from Fang's narration is becomes clear that she considers Li Juan's fate to be extremely unfortunate.

Finally, compared to Wu Xia, Fang Yiluo appears to have a more ambiguous attitude towards the association of the city with modernity. On the one hand, she denounces the importance of a woman's place of birth in determining her future, writing of other women that "only because they were born in the city, in rich places or families, they are destined from birth to live a comfortable life, and to receive a good education" (但只因她们生在城市、富庶的地方或家庭，她们一生下来便注定可以过了舒服的生活，可以接受良好的教育)[233]. Furthermore, moving to the city is frequently portrayed as the only way for rural Chinese to earn money.[234] On the other hand however, she herself does not necessarily prefer life in the city. In fact, while the prospect of marrying a farmer and living the same life as her mother initially scares her[235], she later describes becoming "a small rural woman" (农村小妇人) as the "greatest ideal of [her] life" (我人生的最大理想)[236]. In short, while Fang Yiluo seems to agree with the associations of the city with modernity and the countryside with tradition, this does not make the city superior in her eyes. Of course, her damaged reputation in her hometown and the financial situation of her family ultimately make it impossible for her to remain in the countryside and realize this new ideal.

3.2.4.3. Conclusion

Throughout her "Record of the Life of a *Dagongmei* in Dongguan", Fang Yiluo demonstrates how she negotiates existence and identity on the border between the rural and the urban. Realizing that she is unable to return permanently to the countryside, she seems to come to terms with her position on the threshold. Instead of working to move beyond the label of "migrant worker", Fang embraces this identity, expanding its conventional meaning as a way to "answer back to" prejudices surrounding the migrant community. Continuously

[232] Fang, 256
[233] Fang, 56 [Last consulted 15/8/2019, http://bbs.tianya.cn/post-free-689114-24.shtml]
[234] As in Fang, 358
[235] Fang, 315
[236] Fang, 338

denouncing the objective constraints complicating the lives of young rural men and women, Fang's approach to her liminal position allows her to attribute her predicament at least in part to societal circumstances rather than strictly to her personal failings.

KU LEUVEN
FACULTY OF ARTS
BLIJDE INKOMSTSTRAAT 21 BOX 3301
3000 LEUVEN, BELGIË

4. Conclusion

Wu Xia and Fang Yiluo's stories share many obvious similarities: both migrated from rural Sichuan to urban Guangdong in search for work, both left their hometown in order to support their families, and both encountered experiences that can be identified with the basic structure of a liminal phase (i.e. a trigger, social separation, invisibility, and subordination). At the same time, the way they negotiate their existence as a so-called *dagongmei* is very different. Still, both autobiographies show that the identity project from "country bumpkin" to "urban sophisticate"[237] can be long, complicated and ultimately incomplete - even when the women themselves appear to a certain extent to believe in the notion of transformation through migration.

This final conclusion first includes a discussion of the similarities and differences in the ways Wu Xia and Fang Yiluo negotiate their identities and the implications of these different experiences. Second, this section provides an overview of the limitations of this particular project, along with suggestions for possible future research. Finally, this thesis concludes with a reflection on the importance of research based on material produced by migrant workers themselves.

4.1. Navigating Identities

4.1.1. Experiences with Liminality

This thesis has demonstrated that both Wu Xia and Fang Yiluo's autobiographies reflect the four aspects of liminality highlighted by Nic Beech. First, both women identify a clear triggering event at the start of their liminal phase: for Fang, the trigger is her father's tragic death. For Wu, it is first her parents' decision to send her out to *dagong* and then her own decision to become an author. In recounting the start of their migrant existence, both Wu and Fang illustrate the insecurity and apprehension that was brought on by this trigger: both women clearly associate the decision to *dagong* with the end of the life and hopes they had known until that point. Second, both autobiographies portray a sense of social separation on both a physical and a more abstract level. Entering the factory, they are isolated from the

[237] Gaetano, pp. 80-98

outside world, disconnected from their ideal future (as illustrated by Wu Xia) and subject to prejudiced discourses from those outside the migrant community (as demonstrated by Fang Yiluo). Third, both women experience a certain invisibility in the context of the factory and the city: while Wu is temporarily forced to hide her true identity, Fang discusses how her structural invisibility in the urban space affects her legal and social status. Fourth, the autobiographical texts analyzed above all include instances of subordination - an aspect of liminality that both Fang and Wu struggle to accept.

The one element of a rite of passage that is arguably missing from or less evident in both narratives, is the so-called re-aggregation phase. While Wu Xia appears to temporarily achieve aggregation when she is accepted into a private art school, she soon finds herself back in a liminal position as a migrant worker. Fang Yiluo seems to attain a certain measure of aggregation when she is promoted to a white-collar job, but her new position and status remain precarious. This absence of aggregation serves to underline their continued identity as threshold figures within Chinese society. In this sense, Wu Xia and Fang Yiluo are strikingly similar to the liminal subjects who formed the empirical basis for Nic Beech's theoretical framework on liminal identity practices. Beech's liminars experience only partial aggregation, which he relates to the specific characteristics of their rites of passage (in their case in the context of occupational changes). Beech argues that the lack of overt ritual and the absence of support of mentors or peers during the rite of passage resulted in ambiguity concerning the meaning, duration and process of the rite of passage, for both the ritual subject and their society. Therefore, "the natural stress of a liminal situation was heightened when the process itself was ambiguous and uncertain"[238]. This lack of a ritual framework ultimately resulted in uncertainty surrounding the subject's new identity position, underscoring "the aspects of liminality to do with disconnection, ambiguity and loss of social place"[239]. In the case of Wu Xia and Fang Yiluo, the lack of a clearly outlined and temporally defined path from "rural girl" to "urban woman" and the absence of guidance and assistance from their environment resulted in a similarly ambiguous aggregation. To echo Fang's words

[238] Beech, p. 298
[239] Beech, p. 298

quoted in the introduction of this thesis: both women continue to a certain degree to "survive between the cracks".

In fact, for Wu Xia and Fang Yiluo, there may not be any one single aggregation that they can work towards throughout their liminal period. In their narratives, it becomes clear that different actors hope for different "destinations" in their identity projects: what the factory expects from an employee does not necessarily align with what an individual woman wants for herself. This is most evident in Wu Xia's texts, when she describes how she spends all of her free time in the factory writing, instead of resting in order to guarantee her productivity. Along similar lines, Fang Yiluo laments that she has no time to study or pursue her plan for self-improvement, as she is constantly required to work overtime. In other words, while a woman may want to work towards becoming an "urban sophisticate" (whatever that means to her), her employer's vision of what she should be like as an "ideal laborer" may be an obstacle in that transformation. Likewise, a *dagongmei*'s personal goals may not align with what the government has in mind for her. For example, while Wu Xia's continued status as a temporary resident clearly indicates the expectation of the authorities that she will eventually return to her hometown[240], Wu herself dreams of being able to remain in the city. With such a multitude of different possible endpoints, each overlapping with and frustrating the others, it is unsurprising that the end result can be ambiguous and unstable. This demonstration of the complexity of migrant workers' identity projects can serve to nuance part of Pun Ngai's conceptualization of "becoming *dagongmei*" employed in the literature review of this thesis: while Wu and Fang do appear to be engaged in a "process of displacement and replacement that produces anxiety, uncertainty, and pain", their struggles do not necessarily "[help] to accomplish a hegemonic construct"[241]. Pun's assertion can apply to certain parts of their identity projects, but other parts may frustrate or actively block the attainment of a hegemonic ideal.

[240] Possibly (as suggested in Yan, chapter 3) in order to raise the *sushi* of the rural population.
[241] Pun, p. 132

4.1.2. Liminal Identity Practices

Drawing upon Nic Beech's conceptualization of liminal identity practices, this thesis has concluded that both Wu Xia and Fang Yiluo engage primarily in so-called "reflection", a practice that "entails self-questioning and self-change along with reacting to (or absorbing) external influences and perceptions"[242]. This high degree of reflectivity may be due to the nature of the genre with which they chose to express themselves, as retrospective accounts may facilitate reflection. In any case, both Wu Xia and Fang Yiluo illustrate the ways in which larger discourses on rural-to-urban migration impact their self-perception and presentation. While Wu Xia more clearly internalizes popular conceptions of the relation between the city and the countryside, Fang Yiluo also reflects on and to a certain extent incorporates discourses on morality, modernity and on what it means to be a successful Chinese woman. The impact of existing narratives about *dagongmei* on these women's lived experiences hints at the importance of a more nuanced portrayal of migrant workers in the public sphere: one can only wonder what Wu and Fang's identity constructions would look like if the public imagination included a more varied array of what a *dagong* experience can or should look like.

As mentioned above, while Wu Xia and Fang Yiluo are similar in many ways, their experiences with liminality and their identity practices are also fundamentally different. In this way, the two women demonstrate at least two possible ways of dealing with an extended threshold situation: while Wu Xia becomes disappointed and dejected in the face of seemingly perpetual liminality, Fang Yiluo opens up space for upward social mobility by re-imagining her status through reflection. One possible explanation for these differences in their approaches comes from a distinction in the imagined destinations of their identity projects: while Wu Xia clearly hopes to make the city her home, Fang Yiluo would prefer life in the countryside and migrates primarily out of necessity. Furthermore, both women also exhibit a different degree of internalization of external discourses: while Fang Yiluo appears critical of the modernizing discourses surrounding migration, Wu Xia seems to be more sensitive to these narratives. This difference between the two women may in large part be due to their personalities and surroundings, but it could also to a certain extent be

[242] Beech, p. 289

attributed to differences in their levels of education. While Wu Xia dropped out of school at fourteen years old, Fang Yiluo depicts herself as an accomplished student, determined to migrate to the North to attend university. Possibly, her longer and more successful education has allowed Fang to develop the skills necessary to be more critical towards popular narratives.

4.2. Limitations and Future Avenues of Interest

Any research investigating broad societal phenomena like labor migration will necessarily be incomplete. For this reason, this next section addresses the limitations of this thesis, along with possibilities and suggestions for future research. First, this thesis is emphatically not intended to make statements on *dagongmei* or migrant workers in general. Instead, the stories of two specific migrant women are put at the core of this project as a way to nuance and destabilize generalizations. In this context, it is also important to remember that both Wu Xia and Fang Yiluo form part of a very specific subcommunity of migrant workers: they have both turned to literature as a way of chronicling their experiences, and are both published *dagong* authors. Their experiences may be very different from those of workers who do not feel inclined to put pen to paper. Similarly, both Wu Xia and Fang Yiluo migrated from Sichuan to Guangdong and were employed in large-scale factories. Their lives may be very different from those of women who migrate to other cities or across smaller distances, or who are employed in smaller family enterprises or as *baomu*.

Another limitation pertains to the gender of the workers featured in this thesis. While both authors are women, and their femininity often plays an important role in their narratives, it is beyond the scope of this thesis to determine the precise extent to which their experiences are impacted by their gender. Additionally, by limiting itself to the authors' occupational experiences, this thesis has excluded or only superficially engaged with other aspects of Wu and Fang's lives that interact with their identities as Chinese women, migrant workers and authors. These limitations open up possible avenues for future research, in which themes like relationships, morality and gender can be explored, or in which autobiographies of male migrant workers can be included to further investigate how the intersections of labor migration and gender influence an individual's identity construction.

Beyond that, this thesis brings up questions that could inspire future research projects. First, the analysis provided here does not address the question of historical evolution. In previous academic work, *dagongmei* have been divided into different generations: those born between the 1950s and 1970s, and those born in the 1980s and 1990s.[243] Both women discussed here belong to this younger generation. Including the stories of women from the older generation could allow the researcher to develop a more concrete insight into how political and societal changes have affected female labor migration. Second, investigating the ways in which societal discourses impact migrant identity construction raises the question of how these self-narratives can impact the public imagination. Do these texts find an audience? How does their audience relate to these texts? And do these stories have the capacity to effect social and cultural change?

Finally, the question of female migrant labor can be placed in the larger context of women's history. In researching a paper on female labor models during the Cultural Revolution, I came across the following testimony of a woman who described her life as a factory worker before her "liberation" by the CCP: "When I was eleven years old I went to the factory to do child labor, from before dawn until nighttime, I didn't see the sun for years on end (...). Going into the factory was like going into a prison" (我十一岁就进厂做童工，从天不亮做到半夜里，成年累月见不到太阳(...)。进车间就象进监牢)[244]. What is striking about this description, is how similar it sounds to the testimonies written by Fang Yiluo and Wu Xia decades later. Further exploring the evolution of female labor could help illuminate how the Communist revolution and the introduction of a planned economy have impacted China's female population.

4.3. Engaging With *Dagong Wenxue*

While this research project can be seen as an exploration into women's history, it is more fundamentally an attempt to amplify subaltern voices. In particular, this thesis has sought to reconstruct Chinese women's lived experiences with labor migration by analyzing the

[243] Hao, p. 15
[244] Zhang

autobiographies of two self-identified *dagongmei*. By doing so, it contributes to an ongoing effort to tell the stories and histories of China's floating population "from below"[245] - a project undertaken by many of the scholars cited in this research. By putting individual migrant workers' self-narratives at the center of the project, it becomes possible to nuance national narratives on economic development and increasing living standards. In other words, by including personal stories of migrant workers in our understanding of modern Chinese history, we can develop a more comprehensive picture of contemporary society in the PRC. For this reason, this thesis has quoted extensively from the work of Wu Xia and Fang Yiluo, in order to allow the voice of these working women to become an integral part of the discussion.

Along similar lines, by conducting an in-depth content analysis on the autobiographies of two migrant women, this thesis has shown that labor migration is a highly individual experience, impacted by a multitude of different factors. Placing Wu Xia and Fang Yiluo's stories at the center of the discussion helps deconstruct and personalize statistics on labor migration like the ones mentioned in the introduction to this thesis. It serves as an important reminder that there is no single story of migration, as each individual's circumstances and responses are influenced and molded by their family situation, educational level, personal goals and motivations, and often even sheer luck.

Finally, I would like to end this thesis on a more personal note. This project has turned out to be a fitting and valuable challenge throughout the final year of my master's degree, as Wu and Fang's autobiographies have helped concretize and personalize the theory on contemporary Chinese policy and societal changes provided to me by the Sinology department of the KU Leuven. Equally as important, researching this topic has given me the opportunity and context necessary to more fully process my own experiences working with migrant women in Sichuan. Wu Xia and Fang Yiluo's stories are hopeful, angry, saddening, and frequently frustrating. They have encouraged me to take a step back from (or perhaps beyond) grand narratives and to focus once more on the diversity and complexity of contemporary China.

[245] Following the notion of "history from below" as popularized by historians like E.P. Thompson.

KU LEUVEN
FACULTY OF ARTS
BLIJDE INKOMSTSTRAAT 21 BOX 3301
3000 LEUVEN, BELGIË

Sources

Autobiographies

> *Note*: both sources for Fang Yiluo refer to (largely) the same text, published on different platforms. In this thesis, updates numbers 1-123 and 416-423 were consulted on Fang, "Wo shi yi duo piaoling de hua". Links to the specific page on which the post appears are provided in the footnotes. Other updates were consulted on Fang, "Yang Haiyan de boke". These updates can easily be located by using the blog's menu.

Fang Yiluo 房忆萝, "Wo shi yi duo piaoling de hua" 我是一朵飘零的花 [I Am a Floating Flower], *Tianya Shequ* 天涯社区, 10/5/2006 – 7/10/2009 [Last consulted 12/8/2019, http://bbs.tianya.cn/post-free-689114-1.shtml]

Fang Yiluo 房忆萝, "Yang Haiyan de boke" 杨海燕的博客 [Yang Haiyan's Blog], *Xinlang Boke* 新浪博客, 16/7/2006 - 8/8/2008, [Last consulted 12/8/2019, http://blog.sina.com.cn/fangyixue2008]

> *Note*: all texts published on Wu Xia's WeChat account can easily be found by inputting the Chinese title in the search tool on her main page.

Wu Xia 邬霞, "Dengdai yangguang de zhenzhu"等待阳光的珍珠 [A Pearl Waiting for the Sun], *Weixin*: *Wu Xia Zhuye* 微信：邬霞主页, 10/12/2018 - 28/12/2018 [Last consulted 28/4/2019]

Wu Xia 邬霞, "Dianzichang qiantai wenyuangong gongzuo shouji (2011)"电子厂前台文员工作手记 (2011) [Work Notes of the Front Desk Clerk in and Electronics Factory (2011)], *Tianya* 天涯 (2016:2), pp. 141-149.

Wu Xia 邬霞, "Huise de tian"灰色的天[Grey Day], *Weixin*: *Wu Xia Zhuye* 微信：邬霞主页, written in 2008 and published on 22/2/2017 [Last consulted 28/4/2019]

Wu Xia 邬霞, "Jin wan bu jiaban"今晚不加班 [Tonight, We Don't Work Overtime], *Weixin*: *Wu Xia Zhuye* 微信：邬霞主页, written in 2008 and published on 3/1/2017 [Last consulted 28/4/2019]

Wu Xia 邬霞, "Li bu kai ni"离不开你 [I Can't Leave You], *Weixin*: *Wu Xia Zhuye* 微信：邬霞主页, written in 2017 and published on 6/8/2018 [Last consulted 28/4/2019]

Wu Xia 邬霞, "Rang wo xiang shangxin gaobie"让我向伤心告别 [Let Me Say Goodbye to Sadness], *Weixin*: *Wu Xia Zhuye* 微信：邬霞主页, 30/12/2016 [Last consulted 28/4/2019]

Wu Xia 邬霞, "Sheng"省 [Economizing], *Weixin*: *Wu Xia Zhuye* 微信：邬霞主页, written in 2008 and published on 5/3/2017 [Last consulted 28/4/2019]

Wu Xia 邬霞, "Shi nian"十年 [Ten Years], *Weixin*: *Wu Xia Zhuye* 微信：邬霞主页, 16/3/2017 [Last consulted 28/4/2019]

Wu Xia 邬霞, "Taoli Shenzhen"逃离深圳 [Escape /from Shenzhen], *Weixin*: *Wu Xia Zhuye* 微信：邬霞主页, 2/11/2018 [Last consulted on 13/8/2019]

Wu Xia 邬霞, "Tonggong gongchang shenghuo shilü (2001)" 童工工厂生活实录 （2001）[Record of the Factory Life of a Child Laborer (2001)], *Tianya* 天涯(2012:4), pp. 69-77.

Wu Xia 邬霞, "Wode qiantai de rizi"我的前台的日子 [My Days At the Front Desk], *Weixin*: *Wu Xia Zhuye* 微信：邬霞主页, 20/4/2017 [Last consulted 13/8/2019]

Wu Xia 邬霞, "Wo neng xing"我能行[I Can Do It], *Weixin*: *Wu Xia Zhuye* 微信：邬霞主页, written in 2006 and published on 1/1/2017 and 2/7/2018 [Last consulted 28/4/2019]

Wu Xia 邬霞, "Yige ren de zhandou"一个人的战斗[One Person's Battle], *Weixin*: *Wu Xia Zhuye* 微信：邬霞主页, written on 26/3/2014 and published on 27/11/2018 [Last consulted 28/4/2019]

Wu Xia 邬霞, "Yige yisi zibizheng huanzhe de beican rensheng"一个疑似自闭症患者的悲惨人生[The Tragic Life of a Suspected Autistic Person],*Weixin*: *Wu Xia Zhuye* 微信：邬霞主页, 8/1/2019 [Last consulted 28/4/2019]

Wu Xia 邬霞, "Yong bu yan qi"永不言弃 [Never Give Up], *Weixin*: *Wu Xia Zhuye* 微信：邬霞主页, written in 2010 and published on 19/4/2017 [Last consulted 28/4/2019]

Wu Xia 邬霞, "You mengxiang shei dou liaobuqi"有梦想谁都了不起 [Anyone Who Has a Dream Is Amazing], *Weixin*: *Wu Xia Zhuye* 微信：邬霞主页, 4/5/2017 [Last consulted 28/4/2019]

Wu Xia 邬霞, "You mengxiang shei dou liaobuqi (xia)"有梦想谁都了不起（下）[Anyone Who Has a Dream Is Amazing (Continued)], *Weixin*: *Wu Xia Zhuye* 微信：邬霞主页, 5/5/2017 [Last consulted 28/4/2019]

Wu Xia 邬霞, "35 sui"35 岁[35 Years Old], *Weixin*: *Wu Xia Zhuye* 微信：邬霞主页, 8/8/2018 [Last consulted 28/4/2019]

Legislation

STANDING COMMITTEE OF THE SEVENTH NATIONAL PEOPLE'S CONGRESS, *Law of the People's Republic of China on the Protection of Minors*, adopted on 4/9/1991 [Last consulted 14/8/2019, http://www.ilo.org/dyn/natlex/natlex4.detail?p_lang=&p_isn=37868&p_classification=04]

STANDING COMMITTEE OF THE EIGHT NATIONAL PEOPLE'S CONGRESS, *People's Republic of China Labor Law*, adopted on 5/7/1994 [Last consulted 14/8/2019, https://www.ilo.org/dyn/natlex/docs/ELECTRONIC/37357/108026/]

Other Sources

Beech, Nic, "Liminality and the Practices of Identity Reconstruction", *Human Relations* 64:2 (2011), pp. 285-302.

Gaetano, Arianne, *Out to Work: Migration, Gender, and the Changing Lives of Rural Women in Contemporary China*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2015.

Hao, Caihong 郝彩虹, "Xianshi yu bi'an: Wailai nügong de shenghuo shijie yu chengshi rongru - Yi Beijing wei li" 现实与彼岸: 外来女工的生活世界与城市融入 ———以北京市为例, *Beijing Shehui Kexue* 北京社会科学 (2018:2), pp. 15-25.

Hershatter, Gail, *Women in China's Long Twentieth Century*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007.

Jacka, Tamara, "Chinese Discourses on Rurality, Gender and Development: A Feminist Critique", The Journal of Peasant Studies 40:6 (2013), pp. 983-1007.

Jacka, Tamara, "Working Sisters Answer Back: the Representation and Self-Representation of Women in China's Floating Population", *China Information* 13:1 (1998), pp. 43-75.

Jaguscik, Justyna, "Cultural Representation and Self-Representation of *Dagongmei* in Contemporary China", *DEP* (2011:17), pp. 121-138.

Li, Zhang, "The Interplay of Gender, Space, And Work in China's Floating Population", *Re-Drawing Boundaries: Work, Households and Gender in China*, edited by Entwisle, Barbara & Gail E. Henderson, Berkeley: University of California Press, pp. 171-196

Liu Dongyu 柳冬妩, "Dagong wenxue de leixing ronghe" 打工文学的类型融合 [A Fusion of the Types of Migrant Literature], *Nanfang Wentan* 南方文坛 (2014:4), pp. 22-26.

National Bureau of Statistics of the People's Republic of China , "2017 nian nongmingong jiance diaocha baogao" 2017 年农民工监测调查报告 [Report on the 2017 survey monitoring migrants], published on April 27 2018, [Last consulted 15/11/2018, http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/zxfb/201804/t20180427_1596389.html]

Pun, Ngai, *Made in China: Women Factory Workers in a Global Workplace*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005.

Standaert, Nicolas, "Don't Mind the Gap: Sinology as an Art of In-Betweenness", *Philosophy Compass* 10:2 (2015), pp. 91-103.

Sun, Wanning, "'Northern Girls': Cultural Politics of Agency and South China's Migrant Literature", *Asian Studies Review* 38:2 (2014a), pp. 168-185.

Sun, Wanning, "Sex, City, and the Maid: Between Socialist Fantasies and Neoliberal Parables", *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs* 39:4 (2010), pp. 53-69.

Sun, Wanning, "Subaltern China: Rural Migrants, Media, and Cultural Practices", Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2014b.

Turner, Victor, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-structure*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969.

van Crevel, Maghiel, "The Cultural Translation of Battlers Poetry (*Dagong Shige*)", *Journal of Modern Literature in Chinese* 14:2 (2017), pp. 245-286.

Wang, Feng, "Gendered Migration and the Migration of Genders in Contemporary China", in *Re-Drawing Boundaries: Work, Households and Gender in China*, edited by Entwisle, Barbara & Gail E. Henderson, Berkeley: University of California Press, pp. 231-242.

Wang, Lingzhen, *Personal Matters: Women's Autobiographical Practice in Twentieth-century China*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004.

Wels, Harry; Kees Van Der Waal; Andrew Spiegel & Frans Kamsteeg, "Victor Turner and Liminality: An Introduction", *Anthropology Southern Africa* 34:1-2 (2011), pp. 1-4.

Yan, Hairong, *New Masters, New Servants: Migration, Development, and Women Workers in China*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2008.

Yang, Honghai, " 'Dagong wenxue' de lishi jiyi" '打工文学'的历史记忆 [A Recollection of the History of 'Dagong Wenxue'], *Nanfang Wentan* 南方文坛 (2013:2), pp. 43-46.

Zhang Ruiying 章瑞英, "Dang shehuizhuyi Wenhua Dageming de xianfeng women gongren jieji yike ye bu neng likai Gongchangdan, bu neng likai Mao Zhuxi, bu neng likai shehuizhuyi. Women yiding yao tong Deng Tuo zhe huo fandang fanshehuizhuyi fenzi zuo jianjue douzheng" 当社会主义文化大革命的先锋　我们工人阶级一刻也不能离开共产党，不能离开毛主席，不能离开社会主义。我们一定要同邓拓这伙反党反社会主义分子作坚决斗争 [As Pioneers of the Cultural Revolution, Us Working Class People Cannot for one Moment Leave the Communist Party, Cannot Leave Chairman Mao, Cannot Leave Socialism, We Must Resolutely Fight Anti-party and Anti-socialism Elements like Deng Tuo], *Renmin Ribao* 人民日报 23/5/1966.

KU LEUVEN
FACULTY OF ARTS
BLIJDE INKOMSTSTRAAT 21 BOX 3301
3000 LEUVEN, BELGIË

Thesis Summary

Currently, there are over 286 million Chinese with a rural *hukou* living and working in urban spaces. One third of this "floating population" is female. For these women (also referred to as *dagongmei*), rural-to-urban migration is often presented as a way to escape the "backwardness" of rurality and to construct a modern and urban identity position for themselves. This paper investigates this supposed transformation through a content analysis of the autobiographies of two female migrant workers: Wu Xia and Fang Yiluo.

The first section provides an overview of some of the academic literature on migrant workers. It summarizes the historical background and cultural perceptions of *dagongmei* and introduces the concept of migrant literature (*dagong wenxue*). Finally, it takes a closer look at the ways *dagongmei*'s supposed identity changes have previously been theorized.

The second section then outlines the theoretical framework employed in the analysis of the migrant women's autobiographical texts. Drawing on Victor Turner's notion of "liminality", the transformative potential of labor migration is brought into focus by conceptualizing migrant workers as liminal subjects engaged in a rite of passage. Additionally, Nic Beech's proposal of liminal identity practices is used to highlight the ways in which migrant workers discursively construct new identities for themselves.

The third section presents the analysis of the selected autobiographies. It illustrates the extent to which Wu Xia and Fang Yiluo's lived experiences conform to the theory of rites of passage, discussing the ways four key elements of liminality are reflected in their stories: a triggering event, invisibility, social separation and subordination. Second, it employs the framework provided by Turner and Beech to discuss the impact of Wu and Fang's migration experience on how they construct and present their own identity, paying particular attention to the ways in which the two women relate to larger discourses on migration.

This paper finds that, while both Wu and Fang's narratives reflect the four key elements of liminality, their rites of passage remain to a certain extent unfinished. As they appear unable to definitively move beyond the liminal phase, their stories nuance the narrative of transformation through migration. In addition, both women engage extensively with outsider discourses in their identity practices, illustrating the importance of a nuanced discussion of migrant workers in the public sphere.

KU LEUVEN
FACULTY OF ARTS
BLIJDE INKOMSTSTRAAT 21 BOX 3301
3000 LEUVEN, BELGIË

论文总结：从打工妹的自传性作品分析女性农民工的身份建构

中国改革开放以来，每年大量人口从农村迁移到城市，成为城市的廉价劳动力。现在中国的农民工约 2.86 亿人，其中女性占三分之一。这些女人被称为外来女工，（简称为女工），有时也俗称为打工妹。虽然她们是促进中国经济增长的重要因素，但这个社会群体的生存状况却有颇多问题。她们不只经历严格的制度性忽视，而且也忍受城市居民对她们的歧视与偏见。由于中国大规模的流动人口对经济发展的重要性，该话题十分值得研究。

对外来女工的社会群体，学者已进行了许多研究。有些研究从女工社会地位的角度来分析其生存状况、有些研究关注法律上对她们的保障，还有一些研究专注女工的个人记忆，把所谓的“打工文学”作为研究的基础。打工文学可定义为“打工者写打工者”的作品。现有相关文献的大多数限于打工诗歌，而本研究却将打工妹的自传性作品作为主要研究材料。本研究的主要目的为探讨流动经历对外来女工身份的影响，以此加深对外来女工生活状况的认识，从而了解飞速发展的中国经济对普通中国人的影响。

根据以往研究，本论文把外出打工视作人生中的“阈限阶段”。“阈限”是人类学研究仪式的重要概念，表示的是“通过仪式”过程的中间部分。在人类学家 Victor Turner 看来，每一个伴随改变的仪式都能分为三阶段：分离或者前阈限阶段(separation) - 阈限阶段 (limen) - 集合或者后阈限阶段 (aggregation)。在通过仪式的过程中，仪式主体（也可称为“通过者”）首先从他原有的社会地位中“分离出去”，从而进入阈限阶段。在这段时间，仪式主体在社会中没有稳定的地位。渡过阈限阶段之后，仪式主体重新获得明晰的社会地位，并且承担新的权利与义务。换而言之，渡过阈限阶段之后，仪式主体采

取一个新的身份（例如：一个男孩子变成一个男人）。基于此命题，社会学家 Nic Beech 发展了一个关于“通过者”身份认同建构的理论，该理论提到三种“身份认同建构方法”：实验 (experimentation) ，认同 (recognition)和反省(reflection)。在 Turner 和 Beech 的共同研究的基础上，阈限阶段主要有四个特征：要有一个触发事件 (trigger event)、社会分离(social separation)、他们在结构上是不可见的(structural invisibility)和接受服从(subordination)。

本论文使用 Turner 和 Beech 发展的理论框架对两位女性打工作家的自传性作品进行定性内容分析。这两位作家为邬霞和房忆萝。具体而言，本研究从三方面对两个作家的作品进行内容分析：首先，本论文简要概括了两位作家的作品的主要内容。其次，本论文研究她们的打工生活是否符合 Turner 和 Beech 所定义的四个阈限特征。最后，本论文用 Beech 的理论探讨外来女工的身份认同建构。

本研究发现：首先，虽然两位作家描述的打工生活都符合 Turner 和 Beech 所定义的阈限特征，但对于两位作家来说阈限阶段是无限的：在作品里都达不到所谓的集合阶段。按照 Nic Beech 的理论，当某一个通过者在阈限阶段中缺乏指导与支持，这种情况可以出现。其次，两位打工作家在自传作品中主要使用”反思“的身份认同建构方法。这表明两位作家的身份建构过程更倾向于一种对话式的表征形态。她们在这个过程中明显感受歧视农民工的社会主流话语的影响：有时她们反对社会给打工者的污名，有时也不可避免地附带社会对外来女工的属性知识。