

1983

As part of Reform and Opening Up, the Chinese authorities decided to allow some foreign investment in the country and permit private entrepreneurs to start businesses. With this goal in mind, in 1980 the Chinese Government approved the establishment of China's earliest Special Economic Zones (SEZs) in Shenzhen, Xiamen, Zhuhai, and Shantou. Although labour mobility remained limited until the mid-1980s, the companies that set up shop in the zones relied on a workforce coming from the Chinese countryside. Excluded from the perks of the 'iron rice bowl', these migrants took on temporary wage labour without many legal guarantees in the hope of earning higher wages that eventually would allow them to save enough money to return home and set up their own family or, possibly, stay in the city. Many of them were young rural women—a whole generation of 'working little sisters' (打工妹). Based on the experience of the Sanyo mei—female workers recruited from 1983 by one of the first Japanese firms to set up shop in the Shenzhen SEZ—this essay is a heartfelt tribute to that generation of Chinese women.

Dagongmei: Gendered Troubles in the City of Dreams

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When Shenzhen was the world's factory during the 1980s and especially during the 1990s, migrants came to the city with the goal of finding jobs that would enable them to earn enough money to improve their lives and status. Men were referred to as *dagongzai* (打工仔) or 'working boys', while women workers were classified as *dagongmei* (打工妹) or 'working little sisters'. At the time of the establishment of Special Economic Zones (SEZs) in 1980, both men and women understood temporary wage labour (one possible translation of *dagong*) to be a transitional role that filled the years between leaving home to find work and setting up an independent family, usually back home, but possibly, through luck and hard work, in the SEZ itself. However, by the late 2010s in Shenzhen the term *dagongzhe* (打工者) had come to refer to temporary workers from rural areas who lived and worked in the city's outer districts or in second-tier cities such as Huizhou and Dongguan and had few life options other than leaving home to take up low-paying jobs that offered little hope for advancement and respectability. In this essay, I draw on fieldwork since 1995, sociocultural research on Shenzhen, the city's gazetteers, newspapers, and statistical reports, as well as *dagong* writing (打工文学), to discuss the emergence and degradation of Shenzhen's *dagongmei* within and against the city's gendered moral geography, tracking how roles such as wife and mother, sister and whore, girlfriend and female boss have shaped migration and belonging to Shenzhen through the real and imagined bodies of 'little sisters' (*mei* in Mandarin and *mui* in Cantonese).

Sanyo Mei: Normative Migration

I remember once I was in an elevator, when a former colleague said to me: 'Are you still a Sanyo *mei*?!' At the time, I felt embarrassed because I was still working at Sanyo. But actually, I'm proud of what I did there. In fact, Sanyo *mei* could get jobs anywhere in the Special Zone. We had the best training and were the most conscientious workers. — A Wen, former Sanyo line girl¹

Shenzhen is famously a city of migrants and more famously a city of opportunity. From the city's official establishment in 1979 to its fortieth anniversary in 2019, the population grew from roughly 300,000 to an unofficial estimate of twenty million people. Yet residents are quick to point out that population figures obscure more than they reveal because tens of millions have come and left China's oldest and largest SEZ. Maybe thirty, maybe forty million people have lived and worked in Shenzhen over the years—or so residents speculate over *dim sum* and pu'er tea, casually reckoning population, gross domestic product (GDP), and projected growth in billions and trillions because it seems impossible to exaggerate the scale and intensity of Shenzhen's boom times.

Before President Xi Jinping launched the China Dream campaign in 2012, before Shenzhen became the first Chinese city without villages in 2004, before the Handover accelerated the ongoing social and economic integration of Shenzhen and Hong Kong in 1997, before Deng Xiaoping came to Shenzhen to announce that Socialism with Chinese Characteristics would not be derailed in 1992, and before Yuan Geng went to Shanghai to participate in debates on extending Reform and Opening Up policies to China's coastal cities in 1984—before all this, the elevation of Bao'an County to Shenzhen City in 1979 and the subsequent establishment of the SEZ in 1980 symbolised a turn away from the austerities of Maoism towards more: more appliances, houses, cars, and democracy; more enlightened thinking, industry, j-pop idols, and Taiwanese crooning. Deng said: 'Let some people get rich first.' And they did.

Consider the first generation of Sanyo *mei*, who are still held up as exemplars of the success of Reform and Opening Up in transforming the destinies of ordinary people. From 1983 until roughly the end of that decade, Sanyo recruited female workers from cities and towns throughout Guangdong. The first Japanese firm to invest in Shekou—a former customs station of Bao'an County that in 1979 was made into a pioneering industrial zone—Sanyo produced electronic components, as well as radios, boomboxes, and televisions. At that time, urban unemployment was high throughout Guangdong, and provincial leaders hoped to manage it by limiting access to formal jobs in Shenzhen to workers with provincial urban *hukou* (household registration). In such circumstances, the first generation of Sanyo *mei* were not only thrilled to receive an offer to work in an international factory, but some also left existing jobs to take their chances in Shekou.

Getting an offer from Sanyo was a complicated process. The company's human resources department requested workers via the Shekou Industrial Zone Human Resources Department, which in turn arranged for urban labour departments to hold onsite tests in maths, science, and Chinese as well as interviews for female high school graduates, who had to be at least 1.6 metres tall. The tests aimed to identify the smartest applicants, while the interviews focused on Mandarin communication skills, manners, and self-presentation. After all, Sanyo recruiters reasoned, these young women would represent China in one of the country's first fully foreign-owned factories of the reform era.

Getting into the recruitment process was the first step, and many women—especially shorter applicants—relied on relatives to 'open a backdoor' (开后门) to secure a chance to sit the job exam and be interviewed by recruiters. Tests were graded after the exam and results posted the next day, along with the interview list. As many as 2,000 might sit an exam, but ultimately only one in ten or sometimes even one in twenty made the cut. A week after selection, hometown labour bureaus arranged buses to bring cohorts of seventy to 100 workers to Shekou. While recruits were excited to set off for the industrial park, most were disappointed to find themselves travelling on dirt roads through rice paddies and lychee orchards. They had departed relatively prosperous cities and towns only to discover that Shekou was a rural backwater. Consequently, most recruits did not stay. One former Sanyo worker remembered that her hometown cohort had seventy people, and only four or five stayed, while another recalled that of her 105-person cohort only five remained.

Recruits who stayed were employed as contract workers. The Shekou Industrial Zone Human Resources Department arranged for their files (档案) to be transferred from their hometowns to Shekou. As contract workers, Sanyo *mei* were entitled to subsidised housing and medical benefits. In contrast, workers who had not transferred their file to a company in Shekou were employed as temporary workers. The distinction between contract and temporary workers made a difference because only contract workers were eligible to transfer their *hukou* (户口) to Shekou, which in turn made them eligible to send their children to a local school and receive a retirement pension. The window of opportunity for Sanyo *dagongmei* to secure a Shekou *hukou* as a single woman was brief. By the late 1980s, Sanyo—like many manufacturers in Shenzhen—hired temporary line workers, rather than offering migrant workers a contract

that included transferring one's *hukou* to the industrial zone. By the end of the decade, unlike the first generation of Sanyo *mei*, the majority of migrant workers came from villages and held rural *hukou*, complicating their ability to secure legal residence in Shenzhen because the SEZ only recognised city-to-city *hukou* transfers. This meant that rural migrants had to first transfer their village *hukou* to their hometown county seat, and from there make an urban-to-urban *hukou* transfer to Shenzhen; for many, this was not a viable option.² In addition, after 1990, when Shekou was incorporated into the SEZ, *hukou* allotments were assigned by the city government. In the majority of cases, men had priority in receiving *hukou*, not only because it was assumed that men were the heads of households, but also because most managerial jobs and work unit transfers that offered *hukou* transfers were given to men. In practice, this meant that women and children usually received Shenzhen *hukou* as dependants of husbands and fathers, blurring the distinction between a woman's status as a worker and her status as a household member.

Lisa Rofel's work on female silk workers in Hangzhou offers insight into why Sanyo *mei* have continued to derive pride from their time as wage labourers.³ In particular, she describes how family roles shaped women workers' experience of revolution, arguing that a key factor in the respectability of female work was not the work itself, but rather its location. Before the nationalisation of the silk industry in 1956, wives, mothers, and daughters who worked inside the family home retained their respectability. In contrast, women who performed the same jobs outside the family home were seen as sexually available 'broken shoes' (破鞋). For these women, being brought into nationalised production repositioned them from outside to inside, affirming their moral status and respectability. Similarly, the sponsored bus ride that Sanyo *mei* took from their hometowns to Shekou protected and affirmed their moral status within the state apparatus, even as having a Shekou *hukou* enabled them to legally reside 'inside' the SEZ. In addition, like the first generation of female factory workers in Hangzhou, Sanyo *mei* experienced the work they did in Shekou factories as an improvement over previous work. The Sanyo factories were modern and clean, the uniforms were more international in style than uniforms in traditional work units, and wages were significantly higher, allowing young women to contribute to their natal households, purchase cosmetics and clothes, save for school tuition, or open a kiosk. Sanyo also provided workers with relatively spacious dormitories, a bicycle for local transportation, and training

in production and management, giving these young women access to physical and professional mobility and independence.

Quintessential Outsiders: Situating *Dagongmei*

For those Shenzheners who already have a ‘green card’, we wage workers are simultaneously respected and pitied. Without a long-term *hukou*, a house, investment capital, a stable work unit and speaking with northern and southern accents, we are scattered in construction sites and on factory lines, behind counters and between offices, drifting from job to job; we make lives out of precarity. — An Zi, Shenzhen author⁴

Sanyo *mei* and young female migrants to Shenzhen during the 1980s imagined factory labour as a pathway to changing their destinies. However, even as Sanyo recruits forged the normative path for *dagongmei* in Shekou, a second, more precarious, path emerged.

An Zi was seventeen when she migrated from Meixian, a rural district of Meizhou City, Guangdong Province, to downtown Shenzhen in 1984. Her home village was in the mountains and she writes that ‘the vitality of the city filled the heart of a Hakka girl with hope.’⁵ She joined a cousin at a privately owned factory in the Caiwuwei area. The company’s five-storey dormitory had ten forty-square-metre rooms per floor, with beds for twenty-four women per room. That first night, An Zi’s cousin brought her a bucket of water for washing because the line at the shower room was too long. The next day, the girl was assigned to the assembly line managed by a young man who was also from Meixian. The workday was twelve hours and entailed assembling small metal components. An Zi does not say what the components would be used for, but she does mention that within several days her hands were bruised. By calling attention to how manufacturing injured *dagongmei* bodies, specifically hands, her writing refutes a common stereotype that young women are best suited for assembly work because they have nimble fingers. In fact, these contradictions between the hype and the lived conditions were an important feature of Shenzhen’s *dagong* literature in the 1980s and 1990s.⁶

A temporary worker, An Zi has written about the difficulties *dagongmei* experienced on the road from factory work to respectability. In the essay ‘Luohu Mei’ (罗湖妹), for example, she introduces Luo Ling, who is described as someone no longer young enough to be amused by romance

and who instead just wants to get married.⁷ While working in a factory, Luo hooks up with Ren Honghui, a Chaoshan migrant who ‘has a head for business’. The two move in together. Luo gives her savings and free time to helping Ren start up a restaurant near the factory, anticipating that they will formalise their relationship once he has made enough money to support a family. When the restaurant succeeds, however, Luo realises that Ren is not a faithful lover. Failing to convince him to respect their relationship, Luo cuts her losses and moves from Luohu to Shekou, where she eventually sets up her own shop. Luo’s takeaway from her failed romance–business venture is that she is better off as an independent businesswoman, and she starts donating money to support a *dagong* literary club.

When An Zi published this essay in 1991, the idea that hard work would facilitate self-transformation was already an established trope in Shenzhen.⁸ However, the implication that Shenzhen *dagongmei* shackled up with boyfriends scandalised many outside Shenzhen, even if living together seemed a quasi-respectable option for young women who were ‘temporarily’ in the city and vulnerable to economic and sexual predators. Shenzhen was infamous as a place where Hong Kong businessmen set up second wives, where nightclubs included private rooms where men purchased time with ‘three accompany mistresses’ (三陪小姐), who ate, drank, and played with them, and where barbershops operated as low-end brothels. From the late 1980s and well into the 2000s, Shenzhen common sense held that, ‘when men have money, they become bad. When women become bad, they get money’ (男人有钱就变坏, 女人变坏就有钱). The definition of ‘bad’ for both genders referred to having illicit sexual relations. Indeed, the three-line pun ‘Bureau-level cadres play the hole [golf/vagina], division-level cadres play the ball [bowling/breast], and department-level cadres play with themselves [mahjong/masturbate]’ (局级干部打洞、处级干部打波、科级干部自摸) reflected the institutionalisation of illicit sexuality in the SEZ.

The moral status of *dagongmei* was further degraded outside the SEZ. Built between 1982 and 1986, the Second Line (二线关) separated the SEZ from Bao’an County, which was reconstituted in about 1981. In practice, the Second Line operated as an internal border. Visitors were required to have travel passes (通行证) to enter the SEZ, while employers secured passes for contract workers. Anyone without a travel pass was inside the SEZ illegally and could be deported, making these workers vulnerable to policy shifts and economic swings. However, no Chinese citizen needed

a travel pass to enter Bao'an. Consequently, Shenzhen City comprised the SEZ and Bao'an County, which functioned as interrelated ecosystems—one officially urban and the other rural, allowing for political, economic, and social exceptions to the already exceptional space that was the SEZ.⁹ Inside the Second Line, the municipal apparatus and designated enterprises annexed collective land to build the city proper, while outside the Second Line, township and village enterprises thrived. In fact, Shenzhen's first urban plans (in 1982 and 1986) considered only the SEZ, and it was not until 1996 that the city promulgated a comprehensive urban plan for the entire city. This institutional geography not only echoed the themes of 'inside' and 'outside' that Rofel identified in Hangzhou and that Sanyo *mei* experienced as critical to their transition from unmarried migrant worker to respectable matron, but also appropriated the concomitant gendered morality of being inside and outside a 'proper' household to post-Mao society.

Shenzhen author Wu Jun has paid particular attention to how a *dagongmei*'s location inside or outside the Second Line was mobilised to mark, distinguish, and classify female bodies. In her first short story, 'From the Second to the Sixth Ward' (二区到六区), the narrator—a college graduate with urban *hukou* back home—happily migrates from northern China to Bao'an to work at a cultural station, the lowest level of cultural administration and production in Shenzhen City. On her arrival, the narrator discovers that she cannot enter the SEZ proper without a travel pass because her work permit is for Bao'an.¹⁰ Lonely and isolated, she convinces her boss to offer a job to her hometown friend Guo Xiaogai. When the women first reunite, they cry and repeatedly exclaim how much they have missed each other. After their emotional reunion, the narrator notices that Guo's boyfriend, Xu Senlin, has also come. The relationship between the two women breaks down because both the narrator's boss and her friend believe she is having an affair with Xu. By the time the narrator breaks off her relationship with her friend, her reputation has been irreparably damaged. Eventually the narrator stops trying to make people see that she is a proper young lady and hooks up with 'Little Foreman', a married Cantonese-speaker (it is unclear whether he is local or from Hong Kong) who visits her dormitory and buys her clothing and small gifts. One night, a drunk and loquacious Xu stops by the dorm room, where he encounters Little Foreman. It is a strange and desperate cock block. Xu exhorts Little Foreman to treat the narrator better because

she's a good girl, a college graduate. But on the wrong side of the Second Line, in her work place, she's treated like a whore. No one will marry her. No one will give her a decent job. She's doing random jobs just because she's from the Northeast and speaks Mandarin.¹¹

Gendered Troubles in the World's Factory

Maybe it would be better if I teach my daughter to be selfish.
— Xiao Xu, migrant and young mother¹²

Pun Ngai has observed that *dagongmei* were aware that hard work would not secure them a place in the city, noting that 'the socialist machine had not smashed the patriarchal machine in the Maoist period, nor did the capitalist machine do so in contemporary China; in fact, these systems worked happily with each other, hand in hand; gear meshing with gear'.¹³ In retrospect, it is clear that the life sequencing that Pun observed—from home to factory to home—was itself a normative path to respectability, if not in Shenzhen, then at least back home. Many of the *dagongmei* who came to Shenzhen not only enabled their parents to build new homes, but also helped finance their brothers' marriages. In rural areas, especially in the Hakka and Chaoshan areas of Guangdong, young men must own a house and provide a bride price to get married. Since the 1980s, sisters have earned much of the money that has transformed brothers into husbands and fathers. In turn, having paid back their natal family's investment in them, these daughters have 'married out' (嫁出去), becoming wives and mothers in houses partially paid for by their *dagongmei* sisters-in-law.

In 2018, the former employees of Shekou Sanyo celebrated the thirty-fifth anniversary of the opening of the factory and the fortieth anniversary of Reform and Opening Up. China Merchants, the state-owned corporation that first developed Shekou as an industrial zone, provided an exhibition space and former Sanyo employees donated more than 61,000 yuan, as well as exhibit items to the project, including their uniforms, ID cards, photographs, and copies of the *Shekou Sanyo Report*.¹⁴ The exhibition documented how working at Sanyo facilitated the transformation of contract workers into Shenzheners who had not only contributed to the construction of the city, but also become members of the city's emergent middle class. Importantly, for many Shekou residents, Sanyo *mei* were not really *dagongmei*, even if, as the quotation that opened this essay suggests,

they were viewed through the prism of Shenzhen's gendered labour regime. Sanyo *mei*, one of Shekou's early managers explained to me, were high school graduates, could speak Mandarin with northern leaders, and had an urban sensibility. That is why, he insisted, it was so easy for them to find husbands in Shekou. The implication was that 'authentic' *dagongmei* were uneducated, spoke Mandarin poorly, and remained lamentably rural, which not only made it difficult for them to find suitable husbands, but also put into question their reasons for being in Shenzhen. The subtext of his comments might have been implied, but it was nevertheless clear: how sexually promiscuous—he insinuated—were *dagongmei* (as opposed to legitimate employees)?

The normative path of Sanyo *mei* makes salient how pre-revolutionary moral geographies of inside and outside the home, as well as socialist geographies of being inside and outside the state apparatus, not only shaped how young women became *dagongmei*, but also how they were perceived within and against Shenzhen's gendered moral geography. This moral geography operated along two dimensions of interiority and exteriority. The first dimension of interiority referred to being 'inside' the state apparatus as an employee of an official enterprise; the second dimension referred to being 'inside' the SEZ proper. An SEZ *hukou* signified that a young woman had successfully achieved these two forms of interiority. Within and against this larger background, marriage and respectability were either a cause or a result of one's *hukou* status. For example, Sanyo *mei*, who enjoyed double inclusion—inside the state apparatus and inside the SEZ—often married for sentimental reasons because they already had an SEZ *hukou*. In contrast, as described by An Zi, rural *dagongmei*, who were physically located inside the SEZ but did not have Shenzhen *hukou*, faced institutional barriers when trying to transform their economic mobility into a respectable household. Many resolved this conundrum by prioritising one form of inclusion over the other. Some remained unmarried and focused on their career, while others contributed to their brothers' marriage costs and then married someone from back home. In contrast, outside the SEZ in Bao'an, even an urban *hukou* and a job at a government cultural station did not ensure an unmarried woman's respectability, let alone access to the SEZ. Under these circumstances, becoming a 'second wife' (二奶) was often preferable to—and/or an inevitable result of—navigating the suspicions about one's promiscuity that arose because both one's *hukou* and one's workplace were located 'outside' the SEZ.

Today, the first generation of Sanyo *mei* are respectable matrons and grandmothers. Many of the first generation of temporary *dagongmei* who made their way into the SEZ have small businesses and families, while others have households back in their hometowns. In 1990, Bao'an County was redistricted as Bao'an and Longgang Districts, the city's original 'outer districts'. Unmarried women workers who held Bao'an or Longgang *hukou* were eventually able to secure their status inside the SEZ when border-crossing protocols were relaxed in 2003 and then disbanded in 2010. Some first-generation *dagongmei* remained in Bao'an and Longgang despite the fact they did not secure a local *hukou*, continuing to find temporary work in factories and eventually setting up quasi-legal households in urban villages. When Shenzhen opened its public schools to children with 'outside' (非本地) *hukou* in 2009, even more women stayed to raise their families inside the city.

Today, these grandmothers embody the gendered contradictions of the 1980s and 1990s: their *hukou* status remains located 'outside' Shenzhen, but they are unable or unwilling to return to their hometowns. Their children are in but not of Shenzhen, inheriting their parents' *hukou* status. The conundrum, of course, is that migrating for work has become an inevitable journey for young people, especially those with rural *hukou*. Consequently, many unmarried rural women workers who have migrated to Shenzhen since the 2000s do not refer to themselves as *dagongmei*, the preferred term being the gender-neutral *gongyou* (工友).¹⁵ *Gongyou* translates as 'work friend' and emphasises an individual's public roles as worker and friend, implying an alternative moral geography to that of *dagongmei*—the unmarried younger sister. The moral geography of *dagongmei* implicitly thrusts young women back into the pre-revolutionary moral landscape of working inside or outside a father's or husband's household, where one is sexually suspect merely for leaving home to find a job. In contrast, the moral geography of coworkers and friends, *gongyou*, offers young unmarried women places where they can make lives for themselves that are both independent and respectable.