

Organizational Hierarchy, Deprived Masculinity, and Confrontational Practices: Men Doing Women's Jobs in a Global Factory

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Abstract:

Based on an interactionist approach, this article examines how men workers negotiate doing of factory jobs conventionally considered suitable for young women, and how they defend their masculinity in harsh and contested organizational environments. Data collected during a 15-month long ethnography of a large global factory in South China reveal that in an oppressive institutional setting that involves coercive management, devaluation of men labor, and the lack of a family wage, men workers defend their masculinity through offensive language, flirting and sexual harassment, as well as physical violence. In doing so, they develop a rebellious identity, *diaomao*, both to address themselves and to curse others, as a way to resist their low status, reconstruct their own understanding of the power hierarchy, and consequently, defend their deprived masculinities. This article asserts the critical role of daily interpersonal interaction in gender practices and in labor process.

Keywords

Work, gender, interaction, language, masculinity, identity, post-socialist China, labor process

Introduction

The role of gender in labor control practices has long been acknowledged by labor studies scholars. Young women workers, considered to be inexpensive, docile and dexterous, are ideal because they reduce labor costs at both the global and local levels (Cavendish 1982; Mies 1998, 114-17; Salzinger 2003, 9-10). This tendency to hire young women started to take place in China during the first decades of its reform when a massive number of young, single, rural women were just as keen to work in coastal factories as the employers were to hire them (Lee 1998, 70; Pun 2005, 49, 54). Gender and femininity formed the basis of the regimes of workplace control and played a central role in the accumulation of global capital in China (e. g. Lee 1998, 160-62; Pun 2005, 143-44; Hanser 2008, 17-18; Yan 2008).

However, the increasing demand for young women workers has in turn caused a shortage. For example, the shortage of women labor in the Guangdong province alone was 1,398,600 individuals in 2007.¹ In view of this labor shortage, global factories, which are owned by transnational corporations and mainly produce goods for the world market, have resorted to recruiting young men for assembly line jobs that were previously occupied by women.² In the electronic manufacturing industry in China, the percentage of men employees has increased from 42% in 2004 to 53.9% in 2012.³ As a result, men have recently replaced women as the dominant gender in many global factories in China. Consequently, the recent predominance of men workers has transformed gender practices, discourses, and the labor process on the shop floor.

¹Source: Department of Labor and Social Security of Guangdong Province. 2007. "Guangdong Sheng Laodongli Shichang Gongqiu Zhuangkuang Fenxi" (A Report on the Supply and Demand in the Labor Market in Guangdong).

²Salzinger (1997) discussed a similar situation in her study where the high demand for women workers led to the difficulty of attracting sufficient numbers of young women to work in export-processing factories on Mexico's northern border.

³ Source: *Chinese Labor Statistic Yearbook*, 2005, 2013.

Slovcoon Technology Company,⁴ one of the largest electronics manufacturing services providers in the world, offers assembly and engineering services to top global brands. Slovcoon established its first factory in Mainland China in the 1980s. Today, it has dozens of production facilities across different regions in China, employing over one million people (Slovcoon Technology Company, 2015). Due to the shortage of women workers in the labor market since the mid-2000s, Slovcoon has resorted to employing a large number of men on the assembly line. Since 2008, the number of men workers has gradually surpassed the number of women and, as of 2014, men comprise 64.5% of the total workforce (Slovcoon Technology Company, 2015, 26).

To safeguard productivity, Slovcoon management has established a strict and formal organizational hierarchy. The company uses coercive control to ensure the absolute obedience of subordinates to their superiors. Under these arrangements, many men workers on the production line find themselves at the very lowest level of the company hierarchy. Also, the standardized operation procedures and lack of a family wage mean that the conventional expectations of masculinity, such as autonomy and the ability to support a family, cannot be fulfilled at the workplace. Thus, the strict hierarchy and coercive control in these sorts of factories render them an oppressive environment for men workers to perform masculinity.

Contrary to numerous studies that have focused on men who do the jobs of women in the Western context and face the challenge of doing masculinity in “contested” or “embattled” environments (Williams 1995; Lupton 2000; Dellinger 2004), Chinese men workers are facing greater challenges because gender relations and identity are mediated by the class relations of global capitalist production, which is highly exploitative. Their unique challenges include the absence of upward mobility, daily verbal and physical abuse, and lack of a family wage. Therefore, we use the term “deprived masculinity” to describe these unique challenges faced by

⁴ All names, including company, location, and people, are pseudonyms.

Chinese men workers, and to capture the situation in which they are deprived of both masculine privileges, such as being superior to women, and resources to rely on for sustaining masculinities.

Partly due to the deteriorating work conditions of these factories as publicized by the media, there has recently been burgeoning literature on Chinese migrant workers. Most studies have been concerned with labor rights, management style and working conditions (Pun et al. 2012; Pun and Chan 2012, 2013; Pun and Xu 2012). Others have focused on the differences between the first and second-generations of migrant workers (e.g. Pun and Chan 2013; Smith and Chan 2015). Although these studies have provided valuable insights into the management style and living conditions, none have examined the subjective experiences of men workers in a job environment where their masculinity is challenged.

Based on a 15-month ethnographic study in one of the largest global factories, this article examines how young men workers employed in factory jobs that are conventionally considered appropriate for young women situate themselves and defend their masculinity in the absence of institutional support. Unlike most analyses of labor processes that focus on institutional and cultural factors (Lee 1998; Pun 2005), this study focuses on the micro-sociological approach to the interaction order (Goffman 1983; Fine and Fields 2008). The interactionist approach helps us understand how men workers maintain and construct their masculinity in a highly coercive and exploitative global factory. In particular, we investigate how men workers engage in compensatory manhood acts when they are deprived of the usual benefits afforded to them in a patriarchal society, and when they fail to meet the social expectations associated with a masculine identity such as authority and autonomy. Even under disparaging conditions, these men workers defend their masculinity through daily on-the-ground interactions. Without

institutional support, they have rebuilt their masculinity through the use of offensive language, sexual harassment, and even physical violence.

Below we first review the relevant literature on gender and work, especially those that examine how men reconstruct their masculinity when entering traditionally women-dominated jobs in Western contexts. We compare this situation faced by men in Western contexts with that of Chinese men workers. Then, we present the methods of data collection. After an overview of Slovicoon and its organizational structure, we provide an ethnographic account of how the men workers deal with the crisis of deprived masculinity. Lastly, we analyze how they engage in resistant actions and redefine the power dynamics within the rigid and formal organizational hierarchy, thereby maintaining their masculinity through daily face-to-face interactions.

The Advantages of an Interactionist Approach to Doing Masculinity at Work

Gender identity, such as femininity or masculinity, is not an essential entity because it is constituted through the repetition of gender performances (West and Zimmerman 1987; Williams 1995; Bird 1996). As suggested by Butler, individuals repeatedly perform their gender identities in accordance with gender norms (rules or ideas of how men and women should look or act in the social discourse) (Butler 1990, 25).

Since gender identities are constituted by repeated acts and practices, this article adopts an interactionist approach by asserting the practical nature of gender identities. Under this view, gender identity is both a goal that workers aim to achieve and a tool for them to draw on when negotiating their position in the factory. This approach underscores how imperative daily face-to-face interactions are for workers trying to sustain their masculinity in harsh and contested environments.

Performing Gender on the Shop Floor of Global Factories

Most of the existing work on gender and globalization has focused on women, which is not surprising given that women's labor has been a resource for global capitalism (Acker 2004). Studies have revealed that women workers in underdeveloped countries are desirable workers for the assembly lines of transnational corporations because they are regarded as docile, inexpensive, and able to tolerate repetitive, low skilled and low paid work. However, the opposite is true for men, who "...have been redefined as less desirable workers—lazy, demanding, and unreliable" (Salzinger 1997, 549).

Since the early decades of reform in China, industrial production for the world market has mostly been carried out by migrant women workers from rural areas. Because they are hired and believed to be best at the "lowest" form of work (the repetitive, "easy" assembly line jobs), the gender hierarchy on the shop floor is clear: women constitute the lower ranking assembly workers, while most managerial positions are reserved for men. Moreover, men in managerial positions use patriarchal discourses to define young women workers as "maiden workers" (*dagongmei*) to legitimize their biased division of labor (Lee 1998, 124). The term *dagongmei* insinuates that women workers are domestic-oriented laborers who are waiting to be married off; they are deemed unreliable and undeserving of promotion. The use of the term *dagongmei* by the management staff clearly exemplifies a point made by Pun (2005, 142-145) that the regulating of the gender identity of women workers is a key disciplining and self-disciplining technique to make them more exploitable because they are constantly reminded of their femaleness, which entails submissiveness and obedience to management.

However, both Lee (1998) and Pun (2005) agree that women workers are not passive objects of patriarchal and capitalist ideologies. Women workers may subscribe to the identity of *dagongmei*, but they assign new meanings to this identity. Working in the city gives them the opportunity to develop their skills and broaden their horizon to create a relatively independent womanhood in marriage and family. In this way, women workers actively engage in defining their identities and constituting their interests (Lee 1998, 80-82). Moreover, through gossip, jokes, and fighting, the women who subscribe to this *dagongmei* identity can disrupt the dominating gender discourse, resist the disciplinary machine, and struggle to return to being social actors (Pun 2005).

As these studies show, individuals have the capacity and autonomy to take up, abandon, and re-build gender identities through each act in order to contest and re-shape regulatory gender discourses. While the relationship between femininity and labor processes has been well-studied, little work has been done on how highly exploitative global capital influences working-class masculinity in China. However, now that factories have to hire men to work on the shop floor, men workers need to address the corporation's perception of them as being less suitable for the job. To better understand this phenomenon, we first look at masculinity and work in Western contexts in which men are doing women's jobs but facing different institutional settings, i.e. without the institutional deprivation of human dignity or family wage.

Gender, Masculinity and Work

As an "aspect of identity formation" (Kerfoot and Whitehead 1998, 440), masculinities are defined as "configurations of practice within gender relations, a structure that includes large-scale institutions and economic relations as well as face-to-face relationships and sexuality"

(Connell 2000, 29). Therefore, the key to sustaining and reproducing masculinities is through constant practices in daily routines, including both work relations and interpersonal interactions (Martin 2003, 353).

Based largely on practices from the global North (Western modern culture), Connell notes four kinds of masculinities: hegemonic, subordinate, complicit and marginalized (1995, 76-81).⁵ Even though it is expressed by few men, hegemonic masculinity dominates because most men (even subordinated ones) support it; hegemonic masculinity enables them to reproduce the existing relations of male supremacy, or domination of men over women.⁶ In this way, men can agree on the existing gender order and maintain its reproduction (Kerfoot and Whitehead 1998; Whitehead 1999; Acker 2004).

Work organizations are key venues for constructing, routinely practicing, refining and testing hegemonic masculinity (e.g., Connell 1987; Kerfoot and Knights 1993; Williams 1995; Martin 2001). Indeed, ideologies and discourses of gender play a central role in maintaining and reproducing sexual segregation and sexual division of labor (Pierce 1995; Simpson 2004). The organizational context and workplace culture lead to different masculine performances, and consequently, construct specific versions of masculinities (Morgan 1992; Dellinger 2004).

Men Doing Women's Work in Western Contexts

⁵ Connell's four types of masculinities differ from deprived masculinity in the sense that none of them describe the situation faced by Chinese men workers who are facing institutional deprivations. Let's take "subordinate masculinity" as an example. According to Connell, it mainly means the subordination of homosexual masculinity to heterosexual masculinity. But in the Chinese case, the low status of these men workers is caused by the exploitative capitalism and organizational structure in the factory, rather than "homosexuality" or other forms of marginalized masculinity. The harsh situations faced by Chinese men workers rarely exist in the Western context, where labor rights and basic human rights are to a certain degree protected.

⁶ See also Schwalbe (1992).

Men construct masculinities differently depending on whether the context is considered to be safe or embattled; that is, whether the workplace culture supports or challenges the elements of dominant masculinity (Dellinger 2004). When challenged, men tend to perform “protest masculinity” (Connell 1995, 109-12; 2000). One place to examine how men perform masculinity in an embattled context is when they enter workplaces that are traditionally women-dominated.

Since the mid-1980s, much work has been done on men who work in women-dominated occupations such as nurse practitioners, librarians and elementary school teachers (Robinson & Hockey 2011). Extant studies have found that in occupations traditionally seen as women’s work men benefit from their minority status, such as being more likely to have upward mobility than their women colleagues (Williams 1989, 1995; Pierce 1995; Robinson & Hockey 2011). Williams (1995, 87) calls this phenomenon the “glass escalator.”

However, the predominance of hegemonic masculinity means that when men enter occupational sectors that are traditionally populated by women, their masculinity is challenged. Rather than abandoning their gender identity, they still try to play up their masculinity (Williams 1995; Lupton 2000) by utilizing various strategies to confront the challenges such as emphasizing the masculine components of their jobs (Williams 1995, 17-18, 141), prioritizing their future career prospects rather than the job (Lupton 2000), aligning themselves with other more powerful male groups (Floge and Merrill 1986; Martin 2001), and distancing themselves from women (Williams 1993, 3; Lupton 2000).

Existing studies have identified that interpersonal interactions are very important in the process of reconstructing masculinities. “Impression management” strategies (Thompson and McHugh 1990, 343-46), such as dress (Collier 1998), are important ways that men reinforce their

masculinity when working with women. Some men even proceed to do the job differently such as refusing to defer when necessary (Williams 1995; Lupton 2000).

In addition to performing gender norms, there are other factors that influence the social construction of masculinities and masculinity practices such as race and class. Despite the prevalence of the “glass escalator” phenomena (Williams 1995; Lupton 2000; Simpson 2004), some studies found that not all men who do “women’s work” can equally ride the “glass escalator” (Henson and Rogers 2001). Black men nurses, for example, do not benefit from their “token status” in the same way as white men who can advance in the women-dominated sector of nursing (Wingfield 2009). Consequently, men who try to reconstruct their masculinities engage in collaborative performances when conversing with other men to reinforce their hegemonic masculinity and domination over women.

Masculinity is also expressed differently by different classes (Collinson 1992, 77). Studies on working-class men have shown that hard labor in factories proves male toughness (Willis 1977; Donaldson 1991). Yet, in modern automated production processes, working-class masculinity is constantly undermined by low pay and alienated work that induce and reinforce feelings of stupidity, ignorance and powerlessness. Therefore, as Donaldson (1991, 20-24) argues, working-class men obtain confidence, meaning and respect in family life. Home is where they could repair and sustain their undermined masculinity.

Across many societies, masculinity is tightly linked to the role of the breadwinner (Livingstone and Luxton 1989; Donaldson 1991). The ability to bring home a living or family wage affirms manhood and the structure of patriarchy (Livingstone and Luxton 1989). Men who cannot support their families consider themselves failures (Kleinberg 1979). Similarly, in China

today, when market values penetrate all realms of social life, masculinity is largely related to salary, possessions, and the ability to provide respectable living conditions for the family. However, most Chinese migrant workers, especially those in electronic factories, are young single men, far from home, and cannot earn a family wage.

In this paper we examine how Chinese men workers rescue their deprived masculinity by engaging in confrontational activities. Our argument is that the young men workers defend their masculine identities through daily interactions with fellow workers and the line supervisors, who are the lowest level of management. In particular, they defend their masculinity by constructing a rebellious *diaomao* identity through offensive language, flirting with women workers, and even sexual harassment and physical violence. While engaging in conflicts or flirting, they evoke alternative discourses that the Slovcoon management downplays, such as gender and class, redefining the power hierarchy on the shop floor. For example, they use gender discourse to take advantage of women workers and supervisors, and equate themselves with the line supervisors by emphasizing the common class status of migrant workers.

Methods and Data

Our data were mainly collected from 15 months of ethnographic research in D city located in South China. As the borderland of global capitalism, D city has experienced substantial economic growth and attracted millions of migrant workers from inland provinces such as Hunan,

Hubei and Sichuan since 1980. There were 6.13 million migrant workers in D city at the end of 2011, accounting for 80.1% of the total workforce, of which, men workers constituted 58.1%.⁷

From 14 November to 18 December 2011, the second author worked as an assembly line worker in the Longflower Factory of Slovcoon. The Longflower Factory is infamous for its strict and heavy-handed entrance control as those not employed by Slovcoon are not permitted to enter the workplace. Therefore, the researcher concealed her identity and applied for work in this factory, ultimately being hired to the assembly line. Although she concealed her identity to access Slovcoon, she identified herself as a researcher to her co-workers on the production line. After she clearly explained the purposes of the study, they agreed to keep her “secret” from their line supervisors and other managerial staff.

At her location, men comprised more than 70% of the workforce. Among the 1,920 night shift workers, there were 1,511 men and only 409 women. She worked and ate as an ordinary worker with other workers. Her task was to assemble e-book readers for a well-established American brand. While employed, she worked a total of 336 hours on the assembly line. As a woman on the assembly line, the second author empathized with the feelings and experiences of her coworkers such as feeling exhausted after a long day or humiliation and anger after being reprimanded by the line-supervisors. She lived in a Slovcoon dormitory, sharing a room with seven others, and visited workers in the same dormitory building. Before given a day off, the second author was required to work 12-hour shifts for 13 consecutive days. Due to the long work hours, most workers were too tired to engage in long conversations after work. As a result, most of time, the second author recorded her feelings, experiences, observations and conversations

⁷D City Investigation Team, National Bureau of Statistics of the People’s Republic of China. 2014. “Xiandai Hua Jiegou Zhuanxing de Jiannan Jincheng” (The Difficult Process of Organizational Modernization Transformation).

with her coworkers at the end of the workday, and most of the interviews were conducted after she left the factory and moved to the Greenwood community.

The Greenwood community is located in the vicinity of the Longflower Factory, and the second author resided there for over 14 months (from January to April and August to November in 2012, and then February to July in 2013). Greenwood is a compound community consisting of Slovcoon dormitories, rental rooms, and entertainment facilities such as a shopping mall and restaurants. Thousands of Slovcoon workers reside in the factory dormitories in Greenwood, and many married or cohabitating couples rent rooms. By visiting the Slovcoon workers in their homes, and frequenting the karaoke bar and shopping mall with them, she befriended many Slovcoon workers, and observed their daily lives outside the workplace.

Informal interviews were also conducted throughout the field observation, while 59 semi-structured in-depth interviews were implemented with workers and line supervisors that spanned 30 minutes to three hours. The interviewees included 44 men and 15 women employees who were chosen due to their differences in age, education background, marital and relationship statuses, and ranks in the factory. All 59 interviewees were informed of the identity of the researcher and then granted permission to be questioned.

Data collection generated over 350 pages of field notes (in Chinese), which, together with interview transcripts, were double-blind coded by both authors. The main coding schemes include the organization structure, the workers' daily routines, the workers' responses, and consequences on their daily life, behavior, and attitudes. The main theme of the paper (men workers resort to interpersonal confrontations to defend their deprived masculinities) emerges from the discussions between the two authors based on the field notes and interview transcripts.

The second author also took part in a Slovcoon study group of 60 scholars and students from 20 universities in Mainland China, Hong Kong and Taiwan. In 2010 and 2011, this research team collected more than 2,100 questionnaires (hereafter called the Survey) and interviewed 400 Slovcoon workers in different cities such as Tianjin, Shanghai, and Zhengzhou. Both authors analyzed the Survey and interview transcripts of other locations independently and then compared notes and conclusions. A comparison between this research on the Slovcoon workers in D city and other locations showed that many of the findings in this work in general apply to all Slovcoon factories. In particular, analyses of the Survey data indicate that the phenomena observed in this particular factory, as such the *diaomao* identity, are pervasive among the majority of Slovcoon men workers.

Oppressive Institutional Arrangements for Performing Masculinity

Although men have replaced women as the majority on the factory line, the work in Slovcoon has not been restructured to be independent, autonomous and well paid. The men workers face different expectations than those by the women workers. Consequently, there are many limitations in maintaining masculinity, which are discussed as the oppressive institutional conditions for doing masculinity in the factory, as follows.

Organizational Hierarchy and Coercive Management

The most obvious distinction at the factory is not gender but rather rank and position. All workers wear uniforms that designate the different ranks. Ordinary workers wear white coveralls,

while line and group supervisors, a blue vest. Technicians wear blue coats, while quality controllers—women and men alike—wear pink shirts and caps.

This dress code directly reflects Slovcoon's "semi-militant management" strategy, a style based on dictatorial control and unquestioning obedience of the hierarchical order. There are 12 employee ranks, from ordinary worker to the general manager. In the assembly line, "ordinary workers" (*pugong*) are the lowest rank. The workers point out that in this hierarchical system, the upper ranks have absolute power and control over the lower ranks, while the lower ranks must take orders and execute commands from the upper ranks without questioning. The rigidity of the hierarchy was repeatedly emphasized by workers during interviews.

In this hierarchy, the power and status of the actors are strictly defined by the formal roles assigned to them by the factory. Factors external to the worker-supervisor interactions, such as gender, age, education, and class, are replaced by the hierarchy, which is defined by the factory itself. For example, the uniforms are gender neutral, hiding their gendered bodies and caps cover every strand of hair. Therefore, in contrast to men employees in Western contexts who can express their gender through dress and hairstyle (Robinson & Hockey 2011, 24), this is not the case for these workers.

To ensure obedience to the hierarchical order, Slovcoon employs coercive management, which is best exemplified by its heavy use of security. An estimated 1,000 security guards are hired for the Slovcoon Longflower factory (Dean 2007). Equipped with batons on their belts, security guards are responsible for keeping internal order and maintaining discipline. They check workers by using metal detectors when they need to leave the production line to use the washroom, eat, drink, or at the end of the shift. If the metal detector is set off, the workers are body searched by the guards.

Coercive management is also reflected in the language and practices of the supervisors. Superiors verbally abuse and physically punish workers to reduce their self-esteem, convincing them of their low status. Roy (1959) discusses how the informal interaction among workers on the line, such as sharing food and drink, lead to job satisfaction. However, the prevailing condition in Roy's case is the laissez-faire management at the workplace (166). This is in sharp contrast to the conditions faced by Chinese workers, who are not allowed to engage in any activities other than working. For example, workers must apply for an off-duty permit to drink water or visit the washroom, and workers are not allowed to talk or walk around their station. When rules are violated, workers face verbal and physical abuse. A worker said: "I think that Slovecon treats us like slaves. Management yells whenever they like, and we just suffer silently." According to the Survey, in 2010, 16.4% of workers have experienced physical punishment by management or security guards, and 54.6% feel unsatisfied or angry about factory regulations and management.

The coercive management style, especially the constant verbal and physical abuse, means that the conditions that these Chinese workers face are much more challenging than those of men performing women's jobs in the Western context. Here, the masculinities of the Chinese men workers are not only challenged by working with women, but also by losing their basic human dignity through public reprimanding.

Moreover, most of the men workers lack a sense of confidence or control, much like factory workers in other contexts who operate within a rigid division of labor and perform highly repetitive tasks. For example, most line workers referred to themselves as parts of a "machine" on the production line. One worker, a 20 year-old man whose job is to place four tiny screws

onto mobile phones, expressed: “Every day I have to do the same thing...thousands of times...drives me nuts, but I have no choice.”

Another men worker indicated that the hardest part of his job is to suffer the verbal abuse and punishment from his supervisors on the shop floor.

I’m not afraid of...hard work, but...being scolded every day...is very stressful. Sometimes they [supervisors]...threaten to punish me...We are treated like children... over 20 years old, but still get yelled at every day.

Their sense of independence, pride, and self-esteem, which is a fundamental part of masculinity, has been eroded by the highly repetitive and low-skilled work. While management can develop and reinforce masculinity by controlling others, working-class men under management’s control find their masculinity constantly questioned, undermined, and degraded. The quasi-military type of management style, characterized by strict discipline and despotic punishment, reinforces feelings of powerlessness, alienation, and degradation in the men workers.

Devaluation of Men Labor

Not only are men *pugong* at the bottom of the ladder, they are considered by management to be inferior to the women workers of the same rank. From the management’s perspective, women workers outperform the men workers in many respects. For example, the women tend to have higher production output. If a woman worker has low output, the line supervisors and technicians would say to her: “The guys can make 200 an hour. But you’re a woman, so how come you can’t

even do as well as the guys?” The implication is that the women should not even compare themselves to the men workers since the men are less desirable workers.

In addition to being less desirable, men workers are treated poorly by the management staff. According to the Survey, men workers are more likely to be scolded or physically punished by managerial staff than women workers, who are given an oral warning. Not surprisingly, the percentages of men workers who felt angry, unsatisfied, and desperate are also higher than women workers.

Men know that they are considered less qualified than women. Faced with such prejudice, they do not work faster or compare themselves to women workers; instead, they are more likely to loaf on the job by visiting the washroom or dozing off. Some even try to persuade the women workers to reduce their pace. For example, a man worker once said to Fang, a woman worker, with sarcasm: “Why are you working so fast? Are you trying to get your handsome brother [the man line supervisor] to praise you?” Other men workers resorted to rudeness and yelled at the women workers: “Fuck! What’s wrong with you?! Why are you working so fast?” Others tried to reason with the women: “Slow down. Slovcoon will not give you more money for working harder.” In contrast to Mexican men who assert their masculinity by disparaging the ability of the women to do the work at all (Salzinger 1997, 561-562), these Chinese men workers mock their women peers for being docile and “ideal” workers.

Lack of Family Wage

Since providing a family wage is essential for masculine identity, men workers on the production line report not being fulfilled because their wages cannot support a family in the

future. The low salaries at Slovcoon are far from being a “family wage.” The average monthly earnings of Slovcoon workers in 2010 were 1723 RMB (about 278 USD) (Pan et al. 2012, 253). Such a meager salary can only provide the basics for day-to-day necessities in a large city like D city, and nothing more, as exemplified by a popular saying among the workers: “working in Slovcoon, you’ll never have a wife, and even the occasional prostitute can give you financial problems.” In contrast, women workers do not face the burden of securing family wage employment because the societal expectation is for them to return to their hometown for marriage and childrearing.

A small percentage of men workers are married, and their marriage and family life practices are significantly influenced by their semi-proletarian status in China (Pun and Ren 2008), meaning they have lost most of their patriarchal dividend. Meager wages have inhibited the settlement of migrant workers in urban communities and cohabitation with their spouse. Thus, it is normal that a couple would work in two factories or even in two cities, while their child (or children) is raised by grandparents back in their rural hometown. This segregated family life destabilizes the family’s structure and relationships. Some of the married men workers expressed frustration and low self-esteem at their inability to support their family:

My son is now school age, but I don’t have the ability to send him to school. I feel so embarrassed. This is so frustrating! To be honest, if I can’t pay for my son’s tuition...I really want to die. (*Married man worker, father*)

This father-son relationship—a fundamental component of patriarchal family relations—is damaged and undermined due to the lack of a family wage. Their inability to earn a “decent” or “living” wage—the material base of familial patriarchy—means that their patriarchal dividend

can be challenged and undermined within the family. They are also unable to remedy their undermined masculinity with family life, as discussed in the literature (Donaldson 1991, 99).

In sum, the men workers at the Slovcoon factory are placed in an environment that oppresses their gender identity. Facing these conditions, the Chinese men workers are different from men who are doing the jobs of women in Western contexts. First, there is no “glass escalator” because they will not be promoted. In fact, they are considered less desirable than women workers and even less likely to be promoted; as such, the majority of line supervisors are women who have been promoted from the position of *pugong*. Second, in addition to the usual challenges to their masculinities because they work with women, these men workers endure daily verbal and physical abuse from management. This coercive environment provides them with little to reconstruct their undermined masculinity. Third, unlike men workers in the West who can earn a decent salary to support themselves or raise a family, these men workers do not earn enough to support a family and are unable to live with their wife and children. Family life, the one area in which undermined masculinity can be remedied, is not available to these Chinese men workers.

Yet they still try to defend their masculinity. Although there is little that they can do to seek upward mobility, they defend their masculinity through confrontational practices characterized by using offensive language to undermine the authority of management and to redefine the power order on the shop floor, flirting with and sexual harassment of women workers, and physical violence. All of these acts of resistance lie in interpersonal interactions.⁸

Performing Masculinity and Negotiating Power Dynamics on the Shop Floor

⁸ Don Roy (1954) made similar observations in that workers turn to informal interactions at the workplace to resist strict labor controls. However, Roy (1954) focused more on the cooperation between different sub-groups among the workers. Here we focus on how the Chinese men workers interact with other workers and their supervisors on the same line or workshop.

To deal with their inferior status, the men workers actively constructed a masculine identity of *diaomao*. *Diaomao* is the most popular identity shared by all men workers across the Slovcoon factories in other cities.⁹ Here, “*diao*” means the male genitalia in Chinese, and “*mao*” refers to hair, so the term literally means male pubic hair. *Diaomao* constitutes an identity because the men workers call themselves and each other *diaomao* in many different and conflicted situations. On most occasions, *diaomao* refers to any man worker in Slovcoon. These men show their intimacy and comradery by stating that “we are all *diaomao*.” Yet, *diaomao* can also be used to remind others of their low-status, causing quarrels and even fights among the men workers.

A term created and widely used by all Slovcoon men workers and only by Slovcoon men workers, *diaomao* denotes an identity that is rebellious in nature. Compared to “*diaosi*,” a popular self-depreciating and self-mocking identity bred online (Szablewicz 2014; Yang, Tang, and Wang 2014), *diaomao* is a working-class identity rooted from the “*diaoren*” (scolding people) management style at Slovcoon and the daily experiences of “*aidiao*” (being scolded). As *diaomao* uses obscenities and sometimes acts like a hooligan. As *diaomao*, the men workers emphasize that they are constantly challenging management. The collective identity of *diaomao* builds on a working-class masculine solidarity because it separates them from women, who do not share the identity of *diaomao*. Moreover, the making of the masculine *diaomao* identity aids in negotiating power to gain superiority over the women workers and to resist the control of the line supervisors on the shop floor, as discussed below.

⁹The popularity of *diaomao* identity is also documented by journalist Liu Zhiyi (2010). After working in D city Slovcoon for 28 days, he noted that “they call others ‘*diaomao*’, even though they don’t know each other.” “In the workplace and the dormitory, *diaomao* is the only personal pronoun except the first-person pronouns.”

Offensive Language to Re-negotiate Inequality

The *diaomao* identity is demonstrated through the use of offensive language as a means of defending dignity and regaining masculinity. Every day on the production line, angry men workers are quarreling with their frontline supervisors. When the workers are reprimanded for minor mistakes, they use offensive language with their frontline supervisors. For example, after a line supervisor disciplined several men workers by having them stand for 30 minutes as punishment for their inability to meet quotas, they yelled: “The line supervisor should have his ass kicked! That scum!” The men workers use such language to express their frustrations towards the excessive control in the workplace (Jay and Janschewitz 2008).

A man worker called Li stated that the *diaomao* mindset is not just peacocking, but also a necessary personality change.

Slovcoon’s corporate culture... turns good people into bad people. In high school and college, we were polite to our classmates and teachers. We didn’t swear nor did we want to...but here, you can’t survive without doing that.

There are many cases where workers confessed to using threatening language with lower management because it implies that they are associated with gangs. By using such threatening language, these men workers hoped that line supervisors would hesitate to discipline them.

I was late once, and he [supervisor] pointed his finger at me, so I knocked him down. He said: ‘As soon as I saw you, I knew that you’re in a gang’...Then he transferred me and afterwards, I threatened him...told him I’ll wait for him after work... [now] everyone is afraid to annoy me because they know I’m short-tempered. (*Man Worker*)

The use of offensive language to counter management means that the men workers constantly take on roles other than that of the worker-supervisor as defined by the hierarchical ranking at the factory, such as with the use of gender and class, to discredit the authority of the line supervisors.

The use of gender to renegotiate status and power is most obvious when the men workers clash with women line supervisors.

Our line supervisor...yelled at us... she said we are useless...we are scum, rubbish!

Being yelled at by a woman is humiliating. Everyone...hates her. I'm not the only one...everyone...wants to beat her up. But we're men, so we can't hit a woman. (*Man Worker*)

This man worker used traditional gender discourse to express his frustrations: men do not fight with women because they are weaker, so he does not try to hit his woman supervisor. Moreover, despite the fact he was angry with her, he renegotiated a higher status by drawing on the existing gender discourse. This is similar to Purser's (2009) finding that Latino immigrant day laborers make sense of their work and find dignity in their quest for work by invoking gender discourses.

While gender roles are activated to address women supervisors, the most commonly used discourse to deal with any supervisor is social class. When a man worker was asked by his supervisor: "What on earth are you doing? You want to keep your job or not?", he replied:

Whether I get to keep my job is not up to you. If it is, if you're that tough, then fire me now. But you don't have the right to fire me...you're just a line supervisor...under the...group supervisors.

This greatly angered his supervisor who said: “So what? Line supervisor is still higher than you. You’re just a low-level frontline worker...just a *dagongzai* [working man].” To which he replied: “So aren’t you just a *dagongmei*?”

Line supervisors are in the same social class as the workers; many were promoted from the assembly line, and their wages are only slightly higher than those of the workers, despite the fact that they are somewhat higher on the factory hierarchy. The use of class as retaliation is also very common with the men supervisors. When the workers were reprimanded by men line supervisors, they would often say: “Why is he so cocky?! He is just here to *dagong* [work], just like us.” Sometimes they also call the male management staff “useless *diaomao*” in private, attempting to equate themselves with management by emphasizing a common class status.

Thus, while Slovcoon compels its workers to accept the power inequality defined by their assigned formal roles, the men workers actively make their own roles to resist authority. To do so, they use offensive language and evoke other social discourses, such as those of gender and class, that were originally suppressed by the organizational hierarchical ranking.

Claiming Superiority in Front of Women workers

The men also construct their *diaomao* identity through flirting. Even though their masculinities have been constantly challenged and they are considered less desirable workers, flirting gives them the opportunity to rebuild their maleness and regain their status.

The following exemplifies how the men workers flirt with the women.

Male: “Give me one!”

Female: “What?”

Male: “Your sweet kiss!”

The flirtation is overtly male-dominated because the men initiate and unequivocally control the flirtation. It is generally unacceptable for women to make sexual jokes and the flirtation situates women as objects for the men's eyes to desire. Thus, through language and flirting, the men workers claim the work place as a masculine territory.

In some cases, the flirting turns into aggressive sexual harassment such as touching the body of their women co-workers, and using sexually explicit language. In contrast to Salzinger's study (1997) where flirting is the primary entertainment for both young women and men at the plant, most of the women in this case are annoyed or insulted by the flirting and sexual harassment. A woman worker said: "I think that the most troublesome thing is the guys who tell dirty jokes to us. Some of them are so dirty that I can't even repeat them." Some men even brag about their experiences with prostitutes in front of the women workers.

While the majority of women complain about flirting and sexual harassment, the men workers downplay the issue:

Yeah, there are [sexual jokes and touching]. But we don't think that's sexual harassment.

Sometimes we talk about dirty stuff during work. Some of the women can't stand it, so they say nothing. Others are more open-minded, and they play along with us.

Flirting and sexual harassment constitute relaxation and fun on the assembly line for men, and divert their attention from the alienation of production work. Moreover, as their masculinity has been constantly challenged during work, flirting and sexual harassment are used as compensatory manhood acts that allow them to rebuild their maleness. In this context, sexual harassment is also the process that distinguishes "real men" from "teenage boys." For instance, when several senior men workers talked about dirty jokes, they said to a 17 year-old man worker:

“Hey, boy. Do not listen to this. Our conversation is not for kids.”¹⁰ By preventing teenage boys from employing obscene language, these adult men workers further identify themselves as sexually active and mature men.

Men workers also expressed masculinities by engaging in sexual experiences, such as one-night-stands, and then bragging about them in front of other men workers. For example, a 21 year-old man said: “my shortest relationship [girlfriend] lasted 7 days, and the longest 3 months. If they [girlfriends] got pregnant, they got abortions. I signed for at least two abortions.” To other men workers, these sexual trysts paint them as “attractive men (men who are attractive to women, and thus perceived as more masculine).” When the men cannot accommodate gender stereotypes (Bird 2003), such as earning a family wage, they exaggerate their sexuality as a way to defend their deprived masculinity.

If a sexually harassed woman worker complains to the managers, it is to no avail because most of the men managers consider sexual harassment a “natural” expression of manhood. In fact, men managers also actively participated in the flirtation and sexual harassment. When Hong reported her experience with sexual harassment to her man group supervisor, he replied: “It’s nothing. It’s a joke. They’re [men workers] just being young. Don’t be so old-fashioned, okay?” Bing, another woman worker, also had a similar experience: “...I asked my supervisor to make the men stop telling dirty jokes...But...my supervisor said: ‘Why are other women fine with it, but you can’t cope? ...You are a woman. If you can’t...it might be difficult for you to have normal social interactions [with men].’”

As shown above, both men managers and workers often use conventional gender discourses to justify sexual harassment and gain superiority over women workers. In so doing, they also

¹⁰ Analysis of the Survey indicates that about 18.2% of the workers are between the age of 16 and 18.

perpetuate the male-dominated gender relations on the shop floor. On the one hand, men management staff secure the support of most of the men workers by tolerating the sexual harassment, and to some extent, this also guarantees the production orders. On the other hand, by actively engaging in flirting and sexual harassment, the men workers explicitly reject their low status, and silently forge an alliance with men managers. Nevertheless, this alliance is based on the “double exploitation” of women workers. Women who work on the assembly line not only suffer the exploitation of the extraction of their surplus labor by the capitalists, but also endure the objectification of their sexuality and body by men.

In such a work environment, many of the women workers are depressed. They try to protect themselves and retaliate by eliminating feminine attributes like gentleness. Some exhibit rebellious, aggressive behavior and become defensive, retaliating against the sexual harassment by fighting back or using dirty language to curse others. When this happened, however, both the men and some of the other women on the assembly line often remind them to “behave like a woman.” By disciplining women workers’ language and actions, the men reiterate their superiority over women and make the workplace a male-dominated space.

Fight for a Better Future

In addition to the use of offensive language and sexual harassment, to be *diaomao* means readiness to leave the job when challenged to a certain point, usually in an abrupt and violent manner. As a demonstration of the worker’s resolve to leave, one of the most frequent expressions heard in the factory was “Fuck it, I quit!” because, for the men workers, defending dignity is even more important than the job itself.

The men workers are well aware that their wages are not enough to support a family or meet the social expectations of being a husband, son, or father. Almost all believe that the work at Slovcoon is temporary. Their plan was to seek better paying jobs afterwards.

I don't plan to work here long. I have a relative who works on a construction site; I could work with him. (*Man Worker*)

This sentiment is shared by more than 90% of men workers. While some would consider a job as a construction worker with a better salary, others have made plans to start a small business. Being a temporary job, they do not hesitate to leave when a better opportunity arises or if the work situation becomes intolerable. Moreover, since the work cannot provide the men workers with a family wage, they feel that they have little to lose.

This type of distancing from the current job by framing it as only temporary is in line with the strategies used by men in the West who work those jobs normally reserved for women (Williams 1995; Martin 2003); however, in the Chinese case, it is not just framing, but an action that many eventually take. Indeed, the turnover rate is very high. For instance, in February 2011, Slovcoon recruited more than 5,000 frontline workers, but in July 2011, only about 2,000 remained. The Survey showed that over half have worked in Slovcoon for less than six months.

Interestingly, for many men workers, the *diaomao* identity characterizes even the process of resignation. The resignations often involve physical violence towards management staff. For example, a worker who was not happy with the line supervisor and wanted to leave the company sought the opportunity to be terminated. He walked over to a surveillance camera, and called for his supervisor. After his supervisor arrived, the worker slapped him. Physical fighting is strictly prohibited at Slovcoon, and regardless of the reason, anyone involved in a fight will be

terminated. Thus, since both the worker and the supervisor would be fired, the worker took revenge on his line supervisor by causing the loss of his job. In fact, it is not uncommon for the men workers to physically assault management staff before they leave their job or afterwards. There are even urban legends at Slovcoon that management staff are assaulted outside the factory. In these situations, men workers who resort to violence are not viewed as thugs but brave, righteous men who take a stance against coercive management. In some cases, worker's feelings of discontent and anger have even turned into collective violence towards management, as in the case of the riot in Taiyuan Slovcoon in 2012. The riot was sparked when several security guards struck a man worker who failed to show his staff card when entering a dormitory, and it quickly escalated into an unrest in which about 2,000 workers fought with security guards, destroyed several security posts, smashed shuttle buses and a staff canteen, and pushed over the factory gate.

These men workers are willing to engage in violent and disruptive episodes when they leave their job because a job that cannot provide them with a family wage is, by principle, only temporary. Physical violence becomes the last resort used to retain dignity and status in the hegemonic hierarchy at work, and to rescue their deprived masculinities. Consequently, this resistance disrupts production efficiency and in fact, the high turnovers affect the production and output of the whole line. Ultimately, the line supervisors also suffer the consequences because they assume the responsibility and their wages are reduced when performance quotas are not met.

It is worth re-emphasizing that the rebellious working-class masculine *diaomao* identity is acquired and gradually developed on the shop floor of Slovcoon. When new men workers enter Slovcoon, they are automatically called “*diaomao*” by other men workers whether they like it or not. After working in the factory for a while (ranging from a few days to a couple of weeks), the

new workers quickly learn how to engage in confrontational practices, such as using offensive language, in response to the strict labor control and despotic management. They also begin to address both themselves and other men workers as “*diaomao*.” Compared to the newcomers, the senior workers are more experienced in articulating their *diaomao* identity to defend their rights and dignity. They are usually the key players who socialize newcomers into *diaomao* identity, initiate flirting, and resort to offensive language and sometimes physical violence to retaliate against coercive management. This identity is made and remade during the interactions between management and workers, as well as men and women on the production line.

Despite the resistance strategies, many of the workers feel hopeless and alienated after working in the factory for a period of time, and sometimes this even affects their self-esteem. A young man worker said: “I am useless, going to work like a robot every day, make products that I could never afford to buy. I am losing everything here: hope, time and my youth.” Another young man worker explained why he left his job: “I have absolutely no freedom here, especially no freedom of thought.” The accounts of the workers indicate that despite their confrontational behavior, they still feel powerless and hopeless, and they lack self-esteem due to the shop floor’s structural constraints.

Conclusion

Capitalism, in its highly exploitative form in China, has undermined working-class masculinity. In response, men workers have developed a *diaomao* identity, characterized by confrontational behavior through the use of offensive language, flirting and sexual harassment, as well as physical violence, to re-negotiate the power order on the shop floor. By drawing on

discourses that have been suppressed by the formal hierarchy in the organization, such as gender and class, they challenge the authority of their superiors, reclaim their superiority over women in the factory, and consequently defend their deprived masculinities. In so doing, they have caused production instability and volatility on the assembly line.

Men employed in traditionally female-dominated occupations in the West are more likely to enjoy higher wages and increased opportunities for promotion because of the so-called “glass escalator” phenomenon (Floge and Merrill 1986; Heikes 1991). However, Chinese men workers at the Slovcoon factory have no such privileges. As discussed above, most of the strategies adopted by men in the Western contexts, such as focusing on the masculine aspects of the job or seeking possibilities of upward mobility, are not available to Chinese workers. Moreover, the Chinese workers have to face despotic management in the form of verbal and physical punishment, which is usually lacking in other workplaces that have been examined by existing literature. The origin of this difference between Western versus Chinese contexts is the highly exploitative global capitalism met with the local Chinese societies’ eagerness to participate in the global economy. This cooperation between the global capitalists and local Chinese states is conducted in a way that strictly controls and exploits the Chinese workers.

Consequently, these men workers mostly rely on interpersonal interactions to restore their deprived masculinity, as they have little else to use to resist inequality and coercive control. Since the main source of their oppression is direct daily control by the managerial staff, their main form of resistance or compensatory manhood acts are interactional. The workers respond to the highly controlled and oppressive organizational arrangements by using abusive language, flirting, and engaging in physical violence. But these seemingly radical resistances are strategies to overcome their material and symbolic deprivation. In so doing, gender identity is contested,

reconstructed or displaced through interpersonal interactions by using available resources in a given context (Connell 1995).

Although the agency and resistance of the men workers are emphasized here, it is important to keep in mind that they are still in oppressed positions in the global factory. Without legal protection and institutional support, the extent to which they can negotiate their power and status is very limited. In fact, many do not have basic labor rights. For example, self-termination, the ultimate step the workers can take to fight back, causes disruption on the production line, but the workers themselves are usually not able to get part of their wages by resigning.

Along this line of research, future work can be done on how the changing labor conditions in China influence how workers understand masculinity. For example, will the prolonged experience of factory life eventually change their understanding of hegemonic masculinity discourses? If they continue to be the victims of this discourse that is supposed to provide higher status and more power over women, what are the implications for the sustainability of global factories? Investigations to answer these questions will help provide a better understanding on the complex and multifaceted relationship between global capitalism, local labor processes, and gender discourses and practices.

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