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CLASS, GENDER, AND MEDIATED LABOR ACTIVISM IN GLOBALIZING CHINA

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ABSTRACT

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SEPTEMBER 2019

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My dissertation analyzes the relationships between mediated labor activism and the formation of counter-hegemonic forces in contemporary China. As China becomes a seemingly ideal model to justify the normalization of global capitalism, this study seeks to demonstrate how resistance from disenfranchised groups can challenge hegemonic power. Rural-to-urban migrant workers, who have been among the most disadvantaged groups since China's economic reform of the 1980s, suffer from institutionalized discrimination, economic exploitation, and social exclusion. Approaching the analysis from an intersectional feminist lens, I explore the politics and possibilities of working-class resistance in searching for a just and equal China. Based on online and offline ethnographic fieldwork from March 2016 to July 2018 and using mixed qualitative methods, I analyzed communicative and mediated practices of rural migrant workers, NGO staff, activists, scholars, and other social actors in terms of their advocacy for social equality.

By identifying and explicating four sites of activism: performance, music, social media, and alternative/community media, my study shows that the fight for migrant workers' equal rights has become not only a moral but a political and ideological standpoint from which to resist capitalism, consumerism, and urban and middle-class superiority in post-Mao China. Feminist agendas have been incorporated – but still rather marginalized – in contemporary Chinese labor activism and working-class resistance. By demonstrating how workers' collective resistance is embedded in their daily lives and explicating the ways in which media and culture become both sites and means for resistance, my dissertation contributes to labor studies in China and bridges the fields of media research and resistance studies. The study also enhances theoretical discussions on mediated activism and social movements by examining China as a unique case. I demonstrate that mediated activism facilitates the formation of counter-publics and counter-power, with possibilities to grow into more enduring and large-scale movements in non-democratic regimes such as China.

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CHAPTER 1

DEPOLITICIZED CHINA AND STRUCTURAL INEQUALITIES

<u>Introduction</u>

As the world witnesses China's growing power on the global stage and its tremendous economic achievements, China seems to have become a successful development model to which other countries may aspire. Alongside the celebratory discourse attributing China's triumph to its eager embrace of capitalist globalization, critics have noted the exploitation of millions of workers, most of whom are rural-to-urban migrants, in hundreds of Chinese factories and the abusive state policies that deprive those workers of basic rights. Critical scholars and some international news media have documented the increasing numbers of workers' protests and strikes in the past decade. Chinese workers' collective action is certainly part of the international labor resistance against the ever-condensing power of transnational capital. Although workers' protests enable them to bargain for higher wages and more benefits, such success is confined within one factory, and their marches and demonstrations often face state suppression; they gain little coverage in the Chinese news media and thus often fail to attract public attention. To seek more sustainable forms of resistance with far-reaching social impact, my dissertation explores how mediated and communicative practices have been deployed in labor activism by workers and other various social actors. Approaching China as a case which stands for a contested arena of hegemonic and counter-hegemonic powers, I intend to manifest the politics and possibilities of disenfranchised groups' resistance in transforming unequal power structures.

In his book *The End of Revolution: China and the Limits of Modernity*, Wang

Hui, a leading Chinese leftist scholar, identifies the hegemonic component in

contemporary China as comprising coercive state power, market ideology, and capitalist

globalization (Wang, 2009). Building upon Wang's proposition, this dissertation seeks to

explicate that the hegemonic power intertwines the Party-state, which holds ultimate and

authoritarian and utmost political power; capitalist globalization, in which transnational

and domestic capital makes profit from labor exploitation; and consumerist culture and

rural-urban dichotomy, which produce and sustain both the privilege and superiority of

the urban middle-class and the patriarchal power structure that has long existed in

Chinese history and society. These interlocking systems of power produce inequalities

and affect people's lives in different ways. At the same time, modernization,

globalization, and development become key concepts of depoliticized ideologies (Wang,

2009), which are reinforced through dominant discourse and mainstream media to

legitimize China's integration into capitalist globalization and obscure the increasing

inequalities in the country. Wang argues that the function of China's contemporary

ideological state apparatuses transitions from being ideological – as in Mao's socialist era

– to coercive through the repressive control of media and other sphere, and market

ideology supports the state in constituting the "consensus" part of hegemony.

> The most direct expressions of the market-ideological apparatus
> are the media, advertising, "the world of shopping," and so forth.
> The mechanisms are not only commercial, but ideological. Their
> greatest power is in their appeal to the "common-sense," ordinary
> needs which turn people into consumers, voluntarily following
> market logic in their daily lives (Wang, 2009, p. 16).

The depoliticization of the development model advanced in contemporary China leaves a

barren ground for nurturing public discussions of systemic inequalities. As Goodman

summarizes in the conclusion of an edited column, "unequal China" (Sun & Guo, 2013), "the problems China faces are not just those of uneven distribution or economic inequality. The bigger problem is political and economic culture" (Goodman, 2013, p. 207). If China aims to imagine and build an alternative future, it will be urgent to re-politicize the present and seek counter-hegemonic powers.

It is from within this context that my dissertation looks at rural-to-urban migrant workers to explore the possibilities of workers' resistance to re-politicize public discourses of equality and foster counter-hegemonic forces. Migrant workers have emerged as a social group since the economic reforms of the early 1980s. By 2016, there were 270 million rural migrants. These populations are among the most underprivileged and marginalized in China. Migrant workers are exploited by transnational and domestic companies as cheap laborers, deprived of political rights as secondary citizens; and their access to education, housing and medical care is limited. In mainstream culture, they are marginalized as inferior and deviant others.

Reviewing Literature on Rural Migrant Workers' Resistance

Existing studies on rural migrant workers' collective action tend to focus on labor protests and factory strikes in the industrial areas of South China (Chan & Pun, 2009; Chan & Selden, 2014; Guo, 2014; Leung, 2015). In the past two decades, there have been growing numbers of workers' strikes demanding better working conditions, fair wages, and benefits. In their studies of factory rural migrants' labor protests, Chris Chan and Pun Ngai observe that workers' protests are interest-based and anti-foreign capital, and their collective actions draw upon sources of Maoist discourse, labor law, and local networks (Chan & Pun, 2009). Workers' appropriation of Maoist discourse is politically nostalgic

of China's socialist past. On the other hand, labor law in contemporary China becomes a regulatory regime for the Party-state to discipline and suppress labor power (Lee, 2010). When workers seek legal protection of their violated rights, the state channels labor protests into law regimes (Lee, 2010). Cases of labor disputes have shown that workers' attempts to seek legal protection are costly, time-consuming, and often rejected; and the requests are hard to pursue outside the domain of law. The relations between the state and workers' collective action are repressive and regulatory: the state represses workers' demonstrations and strikes through the local government, the police, and even the military police (Chan & Pun, 2009); Local governments strategically mediate conflicts and prevent any autonomous organizing power among the workers (Chan, 2013; Chan & Selden, 2014; Lee & Shen, 2011; Xu, 2013). In addition to facing government suppression, Jenny Chan and Mark Selden demonstrate that although labor strikes can often succeed in one factory, they face "formidable difficulties in extending success throughout an industry" (Chan & Selden, 2014, p. 609). It is within this political context of contemporary China that I seek to explore how workers' voices and appeals can go beyond the circle of short-term strikes and turn into more enduring movements.

A central debate among labor scholars so far has been whether migrant workers have cultivated class consciousness in their collective action. Based on ethnographic studies of the second generation of migrant workers in South China, Pun Ngai and Lu Huilin argue that the younger generation of migrant workers has shown greater class consciousness (Pun & Lu, 2010). The term first-generation rural-to-urban migrants usually refers to those born in the 1960s and 70s who migrated to urban areas to work in the 1980s and 90s, while second-generation migrants are those born in the 1990s who

went to cities after 2000 (Pun & Lu, 2010). Documenting migrant workers' uses of ICTs in labor strikes, Jack Qiu celebrates workers' power in the protests and their disposition of class consciousness (Qiu, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017). During labor strikes, factory workers rely on social media to spread the word, distribute pictures and videos, narrate stories, and express opinions to inform and mobilize action (Qiu, 2016). QQ, blogs, and online forums were common tools in early years of the Internet, and Weibo and WeChat have recently become popular (Qiu, 2014). While the above discussions are optimistic of the formation of migrant workers' class consciousness, others are more skeptical. For instance, some scholars argue that workers' resistance, which demands substantial rights, can be attributed to their rising rights or citizenship consciousness (Guo, 2014; Lee, 2007). The younger generation has become more aware of the value of their labor and of their legal rights (Guo, 2014). Focusing on migrant workers' expressions through cultural and media practices, Sun Wanning contends that their oppositional stance or defiance derive from subaltern consciousness rather than class consciousness (Sun, 2014). Rural migrants' communicative practices, such as writing dagong poetry and literature[1] and using digital cameras to document their lives, enable subaltern resistance against mainstream culture and media that construct rural migrants as deviant and alienated others (Sun, 2012, 2014). Rural migrants' subaltern consciousness arises in response to "the mainstream, the urban, and particularly, the middle-class" (Sun, 2014, p. 41). The above debates about migrant workers' consciousness – be it rights, class, or subaltern – have all fallen into frameworks of liberal nation-state, Marxism, and postcolonialism. Yet viewing migrant workers merely as citizens, working-class people, or a subaltern group is insufficient to grasp the complex subjectivities, the intertwining inequalities, and the

possible alternatives to which their resistance can lead. As Lowe and Lloyd critique the

emancipatory theories of modernity,

> "for liberalism, historicist temporality entails the gradual
> emergence of civil society and the citizen-subject of the state; For
> Marxism, the development of proletarian class consciousness out
> of the contradictions of capital and labor. Both superordinate one
> particular understanding of what constitutes the 'political' over
> all other forms of opposition or sociality" (Lowe & Lloyd, p. 3).

I thus argue that one must incorporate an *intersectional lens* to analyze migrant

workers' inequalities and inequalities. The political and theoretical account of

interlocking systems of oppression developed by black feminists is illuminating here

(The Combahee River Collective Statement, 1978). Interlocking systems of oppression

address the repressive conditions of black women and call for practices, organizations,

and movements to combat inequalities. For black women, the intersections of racism,

sexism, heterosexism, and classism not only create unequal structures in their material

and cultural lives, but also marginalize them in social movements such as the black men's

racial justice movement and the women's movement led by middle-class white women.

In the situation of Chinese rural migrant workers, scholars have discussed their

multifaceted inequalities: the state's repressive policies, transnational and domestic

capitalism, rural-urban disparity, and urban middle-class consumerist media and culture

(e.g. Pun, 2005; Sun, 2014; Wallis, 2013a; Xu, 2000). Some scholars have paid particular

attention to female migrant workers' situations, exposing how patriarchal power has

further suppressed female migrants (Jacka, 2006; Pun, 2005; Yan, 2008). In this

dissertation, an intersectional lens entails analyses of the diverse political subjectivities

and alternative imaginaries formed in migrant workers' resistance, and the power

dynamics in building coalitions.

As trade unions hardly represent workers' interests in China (Chen, 2015), scholars turn to non-governmental organizations (NGOs), which have become important institutional forces advocating for migrant workers' issues over the past three decades. Sociologists and political scientists have mainly focused on NGOs' contributions to improving migrant workers' substantial rights. The emergence and development of labor NGOs respond to the rising problems and conflicts encountered by increasing numbers of rural migrants, which the state and market often fail or are unwilling to address. From the mid-1990s, labor NGOs began to emerge in the south coast area in China (Chan, 2012). The Pearl River region is where the economic reform was pioneered: labor-intensive and export-oriented factories were built, and here is where millions of rural people first worked and settled. Activists and organizations from Hong Kong, like the Chinese Working Women Network, along with international civil groups and foundations helped to establish labor NGOs in the Pearl River Delta region (Chan, 2012). Labor NGOs in the Pearl River region founded service centers for migrant workers, including setting up libraries with free media and cultural products, offering educational classes, and organizing recreational activities (Chan, 2012). Providing legal service and education about labor rights and laws are a primary focus for most NGOs (Chan, 2012). In the ensuing years, labor NGOs have spread from the south to other regions in China, such as the east coast, the central area, and the capital city, Beijing. About thirty labor NGOs have been established in major cities like Beijing, Shenzhen, and Guangzhou; and secondary cities like Wuhan, Qingdao, and Chongqing (Lee & Shen, 2011).

On the other hand, labor NGOs bear criticism for their limitations as a radical force for structural change. The contentious relations between NGOs and migrant

workers have been questioned. As a highly mobile population, rural migrant workers

hardly maintain long-term connections with local labor NGOs (Franceschini, 2014).

Unlike western civil societies where NGOs or civil organizations have a relatively high

public profile, NGOs in China often lack public recognition. In the case of labor NGOs,

Chinese migrant workers often do not trust them and their "free service" (Franceschini,

2014). In politically sensitive situations, such as demonstrations and strikes, labor NGOs

often fail to represent migrant workers (Franceschini, 2014). Some scholars point out that

NGOs' service work reproduces dominant ideologies. Both Jacka (2006) and Wallis

(2013b) have revealed that NGOs' service often just takes the form of lip service for

individual cases, without addressing structural inequalities. NGOs' training programs

become a form of governmentality to nurture the enterprising self of migrant workers,

which fits the state agenda of self-development and discipline (Wallis, 2013). Lee and

Shen's analysis of labor NGOs' practices show that labor NGOs tend to avoid cultivating

solidarity and collective power among migrant workers and maintain a cozy relationship

with the state (Lee & Shen, 2011). These scholarly analyses and propositions remind us

of NGOs' limitations against the backdrop of China's political system where the

government holds authoritarian and coercive power. But at the same time, we must also

realize the potential of NGOs as an organizing force to cultivate collective identity and

mobilize collective action among migrant workers; and view NGOs as sites and agents

for activism and social change (Yang, 2005).

So far, excepting a few cases (Qiu, 2014, 2016, 2017; Sun, 2012, 2014; Wallis,

2018), media and communication have been underexplored areas in studies of working-

class activism and resistance. *My dissertation explores how mediated labor activism and*

communicative resistance can re-politicize public discourse around social inequality and foster counter-hegemonic power in China. Given the fact that labor strikes/protests rarely appear in mainstream news media, what are the other avenues through which resistant voices can reach wider publics? I propose to look at migrant workers and other social actors' engagement in activism. To explore complex subjectivities and possible alternatives, I propose an intersectional approach to analyze workers' engagement with media, culture, and technologies in their activism and resistance. To explore more sustainable modes of organizing and mobilizing collective action, I examine the role of NGOs in facilitating multimodal labor activism.

Research Questions

My dissertation proposes four research questions:

1. Whose voices are enacted through mediated labor activism, and to what extent can those voices reach wider publics?

2. What political subjectivities and imaginaries have been formed and displayed through mediated and communicative resistance?

3. What social actors have participated in NGO activism to form coalitions?

4. What are the outcomes of and obstacles to NGO activism to cultivate enduring counter-hegemonic movements in China?

Theoretical and Methodological Frameworks

Resistance Studies

To avoid using "resistance" as a buzzword without offering conceptual clarification (Hollander & Einwohner, 2004; Weitz, 2001), I take a sociological definition of resistance to mean action that opposes dominant power. Actions are physical and

symbolic behaviors such as marches, demonstrations, and marginalized groups writing their own stories (Hollander & Einwohner, 2004). The scale of actions can be at the individual level (Weitz, 2001) and/or the collective level. An example of individual resistance is Scott's seminal work on peasants' everyday concealed tactics, such as foot dragging and slander, which, as "weapons of the weak," are much less directly confrontational than protests or armed revolt (Scott, 1985). Collective action often appears in protests, social movements and, of course, revolutions (della Porta & Diani, 2006; Tilly & Tarrow, 2006). Opposition manifests in challenging power structures (Rubin, 1996) and rejecting values and ideologies that sustain subordination and existing power relations (Faith, 1993; Weitz, 2001). Scholarly debates focus on definitional parameters of resistance. For instance, Rubin argues that resistance should be strictly defined as recognizable collective action that leads to social change (Rubin, 1996). Others, including Scott, contend that some resistant acts are intentionally concealed so that the powerless can protect themselves from repression (Kanuha, 1999; Nurius et al., 2000; Scott, 1985). Not all resistance is intentional action (St. Martin & Gavery, 1996) or can result in the changes the actors expect (Scott, 1985). To resolve these conceptual disagreements, Hollander and Einwohner developed a typology that helps construct an analytical common ground for resistance studies (Hollander & Einwohner, 2004). They adopt three dimensions to categorize resistance: whether actors' resistance is intentional, whether the resistance is recognized by its target, and whether it is recognized by observers. Targets include directed people, institutions, and social structures; observers are the general public, media, and researchers (Hollander & Einwohner, 2004).

To categorize migrant workers' resistant communicative actions, I propose four categories that build on but are different from Hollander and Einwohner's typology: individual discursive resistance, individual material resistance, collective discursive resistance, and collective material resistance. My typology assumes two dimensions: scales of resistance and impact of resistance. Scales of resistance are divided into individual and collective levels, as discussed above. Collective resistance includes small group actions, organizational actions, and large-scale movements. I define the impact of resistance from discursive and material perspectives. Discursive resistance involves raising awareness of proposed issues, constructing new discourses, intervening in common sense, and changing hegemonic norms and values. I incorporate the recognition of resistance in Hollander and Einwohner's typology as one assessment of the discursive changes. Once the resistance is regonized by targets and/or observers, the very action enters the discursive domain of power negotiations over visibility and should be counted as having some discursive impact. Material impact includes altering institutional rules and policy reforms.

This typology does not discriminate intentions and types of actions upon which some scholars (Leblanc, 1999; Silva, 1997) rely to define and classify resistance. Instead, I focus on the consequences and impact of the resistant actions. Shifting attention away from intentions and types of actions is not to overlook the agency of actors in resistance, but to situate their actions within specific contexts of power dynamics. Power dynamics are complex, and resistance against one unequal power relation may simultaneously reproduce or conform another form of domination (Hollander & Einwohner, 2004). Also, intentions are hard to put into neat categories, especially when resistors themselves have

unclear or undecided subjective interpretations. Unintentional or less conscious resistant

actions should not be discredited when they have led to change. Among these types of

resistance, activism belongs to collective actions with symbolic power and can often lead

to material change. My dissertation draws from mediated activism as a conceptual

framework to explore politics and possibilities in the formation of counter-hegemonic

forces.

Mediated Activism

I approach mediated activism as a broad framework to account for a wide range of

communicative practices, such as theatre performance, songs, radio, blogs, and many

other forms of cultural production and uses of ICTs for the purpose of social change.

Mediation theory, which captures the flow of media and media practices that shape social

realities (Couldry, 2004; Silverstone, 1999), is keen to encompass the role of media in

activism and social movements (Cammaerts, Mattoni, & McCurdy, 2013; Mattoni &

Treré, 2014). The definition of activism is inclusive, ranging from social movements and

protests to campaigns and advocacy projects. The inclusive approach to activism

encompasses diverse forms of collective action for social change, especially in contexts

like China where there is little governmental tolerance and political space for large-scale

social movements and protest. My study will explicate mediated activism from three

perspectives: representations of social movements/protests in mainstream media;

mediated and communicative practices within the processes of activism and social

movements; and alternative media production. With the advent of digital media and

technologies, some scholars highlight the democratic potential of the Internet, especially

in facilitating the formation of national/transnational networks; while others are mindful

of the celebration and adopt more critical and contextual approaches to digital media and activism. In my dissertation, I will explore the role of digital media in mediated labor activism and communicative resistance.

Representations of activism/protests in mainstream media

Gaining representation in mainstream news media has remained one of the most crucial means for social movements and protests to enhance their public visibility and influence. As Gitlin asserts, media attention scales the success of the protest (Giltin, 1980). In a more general sense, the relationship between social movements and mass media is far from being a symbiotic one (Rucht, 2004). Radical protests rarely get coverage in mainstream news media (Coleman & Ross, 2010; Hocke, 1999). Social movements often receive distorted reports in mass media, which either circumvent their authentic political goals and messages or foster public resentment and hostility (Rucht, 2004). Series of studies on news representation of trade unions and labor strikes have shown that workers' perspectives and voices are almost entirely excluded from the news narratives, and workers are portrayed merely as noisy dissenters (See the Glasgow University Media Group, in Coleman & Ross, 2010, p. 74). Social movements' strategies with mass media can be separated into two categories: resistant and collaborative. Resistant actions include what Rucht has categorized as "abstention" and "attack" (Rucht, 2004). Abstention is when, due to negative experiences with mass media, social movements and protest groups stop seeking media coverage. Attack can be verbal and physical actions against media distortion: examples include student protesters' effort to impede the distribution of *Springer* newspaper in 1960s Germany (Rucht, 2004), and Greenham women's uses of parody to contest mainstream media's misrepresentation of

their peace protest against US nuclear weapons in the 1980s UK (Feigenbaum, 2018). Realizing the importance of publicity, many social movement leaders, protesters, and activists strategically seek attention from mainstream media. Case studies have revealed the strategies, such as staging spectacular events, establishing public relation units, and hiring professional journalists, that have been used by various progressive movements to reach mainstream media, although often at the expense of omitting political goals (Coleman & Ross, 2010; Rucht, 2004). In the mass media sphere, the relationship between mainstream media and social movements/protests have been globally contentious. Media opportunities, together with political opportunities, have become structural constraints on social movements' ability to reach the general public (Cammaerts, Mattoni & McCurdy, 2013; della Porta, 2013; della Porta & Pavan, 2018). Against the backdrop of scarce representation of labor protests and strikes in Chinese mainstream media, my dissertation discusses how mediated labor activism has gained media coverage and how media represent migrant workers' communicative resistance.

Mediated activist practices

Within the sphere of activism and social movements, activists and protesters worldwide have resorted to a wide range of mediated and communicative practices, such as theater, art, video, music, and the Internet. Kerr traces the popularity of theater for development (TFD) among indigenous people, artists, and activists as a means to advocate for indigenous rights, women's and marginalized groups' rights in post-colonial areas, including Africa, South Asia and Latin America (Kerr, 2014). Influenced by Brazilian theorist Augusto Boal's "Theatre of the Oppressed" (Boal, 1979), TFD practitioners take community-based and participatory approaches to affect and educate

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audiences through drama (Kerr, 2014). In the area of public health communication, Winkell and Enger conceptualize story-telling and people's narratives of HIV as crucial components in campaigns to change people's behaviors and perceptions at the individual level, and values and norms at the societal level (Winkell & Enger, 2014). Artist activists raise public awareness of inequalities and injustice through various artistic activities, for example: feminist artists fight against the patriarchal gaze upon women's bodies through artistic prices in Japan (McLelland, 2018); musician activists produce and circulate advocacy songs to foment support for social movements in different parts of the world (Eyerman & Jamison, 1998; Rothental & Flacks, 2011). While the examples are numerous, and it is beyond the scope of this section to present a comprehensive account, the discussions above demonstrate that activists carefully adopt multiple communicative and media practices (Couldry, 2004) that are available to them and that can appeal to the target audiences in specific contexts. *My study maps out different types of mediated activist practices among various social actors to fight for migrant workers' equality.*

Debates on ICTs and social movements

ICTs, such as the Internet, mobile technologies, and social media, have greatly shaped the mediation process of activism. Proponents of ICTs' positive roles in facilitating social change mostly follow Castells' argument that ICTs enable the formation of networks of transnational social movements (Castells, 1996, 2009, 2012). Bennett builds upon Castells' idea of network society (Castells, 1996) to claim that the Internet fosters the "growth of new global publics," and that "perhaps the next step is a thoroughly personalized information system in which the boundaries of different issues and political approaches become permeable, enabling ordinary citizens to join campaigns,

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protests, and virtual communities with few ideological or partisan divisions" (Bennett, 2004, p. 128). Bennett and Segerberg's concept "connective action" provides a framework to capture a new form of social movements based on individuals' content sharing through social media networks (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012, 2013). Connective actions are large-scale and deploy inclusive discourse/memes whereby individuals may connect their personalized experiences with the movements, and social media play a vital role in the formation process. The concept of "logic of connective actions" captures the characteristics of the new social movement, which are diverse, decentralized, and transnational (Donk et al., 2004), and has generated debates among scholars about the relation between connective and collective action. Papacharissi's concept of "affective publics" supports the logic of connective action in ways that recognize the collaborative but potentially fragmented storytelling among networked publics via social media (Papacharissi & Trevey, 2018). Others warn of the danger of excessive attention to connective actions. For instance, Meikle contends that connective action is "the personalization of politics," and "there is no reason to think that connective has replaced the collective and the concepts are best understood as complementary" (Meikle, 2018, p. 7). In the introduction of their coedited special issue "Social Media and Protest Identities," Gerbaudo and Trere argue that we should avoid over-fragmented politics and go back to the collective identity to search for the "we" in social media activism (Gerbaudo & Trere, 2015). My dissertation shows that the debate between connective and collective action in the digital age should take into consideration the specific social groups involved. In the case of migrant workers, their stories can surely connect them among themselves; but as an underprivileged and marginalized population, building a

collective identity and organizing collective action is of vital importance to their resistance.

More skeptical scholarly views demystify the promising potential of technologies in promoting transformative change. Acknowledging the new possibilities of ICTs to nurture new voices and new scales of – and space for – organization, Couldry argues that although technologies can enable voices to enter larger political processes, they cannot guarantee those voices will be valued (Couldry, 2010). In their edited volume, Rovisco and Ong collect case studies across the global South and North and demonstrate that street protests "are more underpinned by small-scale interpersonal and transnational networks that operate across a range of online and offline environments, rather than by technology-based decentralized networks (Rovisco & Ong, 2016, p. 5). In other words, digital protests do not stand alone as being technology-enabled; they are part of the larger body of diverse existing protests. A similar argument comes from Downing, who emphasizes that digital and social media, such as Facebook and Twitter, are only additive to prevailing conditions and movements (Downing, 2018). Rather than centralizing ICTs' role in contemporary China's activism, as some scholars do (Qiu, 2014, 2016; Tai, 2015, 2018; Yang, 2009), I demonstrate how ICTs have become embedded within the diverse forms of communicative resistance among migrant workers.

Alternative media

The production of alternative media has been among the most prevalent and significant   mediated activist practices, often serving as its own end to constitute a counter-power against mainstream media. Alternativeness means to supplement, contest, and resist the power of the media system which benefits the elites; and to establish

independent media outlets for marginalized and silenced groups. Scholars have developed concepts of alternative media (Atton, 2011), citizens' media (Rodriguez, 2000), and social movement media (Downing, 2014) to refer to this specific form of mediated activism. Alternative media tend to be organized in nonhierarchical or collective ways and based on non-commercial interests, to produce media messages in more inclusive and democratic ways (Atton, 2011; Carpentier, Lie and Servaes, 2008). Alternative journalism not only has different values about what should be considered news, but also adopts different approaches to gathering, writing, and presenting news (Atton, 2011). Civil society organizations, like NGOs and labor unions, consider alternative media as primary communication strategies to promote social change (Hadl, 2011). Citizens' media help previously silenced groups to gain their voices, strengthen their sense of self, articulate their realities in their own discourses, and provide alternative sources for information (Rodriguez, 2000). Rodriguez's citizens' media takes a radical view to emphasize the capacity of communities and social groups to reshape power relations between agency and media structures. Specifically, citizens' media focus on social and cultural processes of information and technological appropriations by local communities: ICTs facilitate the appropriation of these communication strategies to recognize voices and narratives of agents as political subjects (Rodriguez, 2011). In this sense, citizens' media offer possibility for "newly politicized social subjects, like social movements and grassroots organizations, to establish their own small-scale media outlets and to spin their own communication and information networks" (Rodriguez, 2011, p. 99). Focusing on "constructive social change," Downing proposes "social movement media" to situate media projects as well as the use of communication technologies within

the process of social movements (Downing, 2014, p. 344). This approach directs media and communication activities toward specific objectives for social justice and equality. Media become a strategic means for social movements to construct plural spaces for deliberations. Within the deliberation space, "numerous challenges, like climate change, women's subordination, digital surveillance, can be addressed with collective wisdom, insight and argument" (Downing, 2014, p. 346). As the above discussion shows, organizations and local communities play a leading role in the production of alternative media. To reveal the impact and limitations of migrant workers' alternative/community media as a sustainable form of communicative resistance, my dissertation discusses the production, distribution, and reception of alternative forms of media by local NGOs.

Feminist media activism

Feminist scholarship brings a critical gendered perspective to mediated activism. Women organize campaigns and protests against misrepresentation and underrepresentation of women in media, and women's organizations strive to increase mainstream news coverage of women's political campaigns and social movements (Gallagher, 2014). Feminist advocates successfully promote changes at the policy level to include agendas of gender equity in media policies in Latin America, Africa, and Europe (Gallagher, 2011). Byerly and Ross (2006) propose a "Women's Media Action" model that specifically accounts for feminists' media activism. Building upon Felski's concept of the "feminist public sphere" (Felski, 1989), Byerly and Ross review feminist media production and establishment to create feminist public spheres in 20 countries in Europe, South Asia, and Latin America (Byerly and Ross, 2006). For instance, Indian women establish their own media to increase women's participation in the dominant public

sphere (Virmani, 2001). Women in South Asia express their voices through the Internet (Ananda, 2004). Another perspective looks at carving out a feminist public sphere within mainstream media: feminist journalists and media workers working in media industries seek to promote progressive women's perspectives and increase the visibility of women's issues (Byerly & Ross, 2006). In Byerly and Ross's model, feminist media activists are educated, privileged women who self-identify as feminists and are politically motivated. The model can be expanded to include mediated activism by underprivileged women, such as working-class women, and activists who do not identify as feminists.

I draw from the above perspectives of media activism to explore and analyze communicative and mediated activism and resistance among various social actors toward equality and justice. My framework of mediated activism expands Qiu's typology of Worker-Generated-Content (WGC). WGC classifies workers' alternative and resistant expressions through digital technologies, which are different from consumerist User-Generated Content (Qiu, 2016). Adopting an intersectional lens of gender and class, my framework embraces a wide range of social actors in activism, including NGOs, activists, migrant workers, and scholars, among others; and pays attention not only to media and technologies but also to other forms of communicative practices, such as performance and cultural production. The framework also emphasizes the importance of institutions in consolidating workers' resistance (Dencik & Wilkin, 2015) and networks in organizing social movements. I will elucidate the role of non-governmental organizations and networked publics in the formation of coalitions. So as not to idealize resistance, I will also reveal the power dynamics that shape the actual process and outcome of the resistant action.

I locate my primary research sites with two local NGOs, a female activists' group, and an advocacy media outlet. The two NGOs are Migrant Women's Club (MWC) and Migrant Workers' Home (MWH); the activist group is Jiu Ye; and the online media NGO is *Jianjiao buluo* (referred to as *Jianjiao*). Migrant Women's Club, founded in 1996, is the first NGO working for rural-to-urban migrant workers in China. Migrant Workers' Home, founded in 2002, is an NGO advocating migrant workers' cultural rights. Jiu Ye is a band of four female activists who promote the rights of women and children. *Jianjiao* specializes in advocating for female migrant workers' equality. I choose these four research sites first due to their pioneering roles in enabling activism and resistance through different agendas; and second, because they represent the current ecology and a new wave of grassroots movements for equality and justice. The two NGOs and the activist group are located in Beijing, which supplements the majority of scholarly attention on labor NGOs in the South. The online media NGO is unique in that it shows that the production of migrant worker media has been integrated as a main component of the advocacy effort. I analyze the processes and implications of activism and resistance enabled by the three NGOs and one activist group, and the participation of migrant workers and different social actors in the process.

Performance as Communicative Resistance

Migrant Women's Club (Dagongmei Zhi Jia)

Migrant Women's Club has remained one of the oldest and most influential NGOs for rural-to-urban female migrants in China. The establishment of MWC was driven by historical and structural opportunities and needs. In 1995, the Fourth World

Conference on Women was held in Beijing, and the event created a friendly political atmosphere and offered institutional and networked support for domestic NGOs to flourish. The conference contributed to the rising public awareness on gender equality (Wang, 2010a). In 1996, MWC was founded by a retired chief editor from an official media in Beijing, to create a homelike space for female migrants.

In the 1990s, more and more rural migrant workers migrated to cities to earn livings. Compared with migrant workers working in factories in the south, rural migrants mostly worked in service sectors in northern cities. Their direct and frequent contact with urban residents often deepened the social exclusion they felt. From the beginning of the establishment, MWC has maintained a beneficial relationship with the state (Jacka, 2004, 2006), and has garnered extensive coverage in mainstream media as a pioneer and well-established NGO for female migrants. In 2000, staff members decided to extend their work and service to rural areas and reach rural women, so they restructured the organization and registered Rural Women Knowing All (RWKA) as an NGO. MWC became an affiliated department of RWKA and kept its focus on female migrant workers. MWC's main work has covered providing services, resources, and skills training to female migrants and policy advocacy with the government; it also builds networks with domestic and international NGOs. Specifically, the services, resources, and training include legal services, provided by volunteer lawyers and law students; small funds to support migrant women who need emergency financial aid; trainings on legal knowledge, citizens' rights, and labor skills for domestic workers from rural areas; community service and education programs for migrant worker families, such as building libraries for

children; workshops and courses on family relations and women's health; and social gatherings and activities.

A few studies on Migrant Women's Club have demonstrated its contributions and limitations. For instance, Jacka traces the early years of MWC's work from its establishment through 2001, revealing that its work leads to migrant women's empowerment but views migrant women as vulnerable, low suzhi[2], and incapable subjects (Jacka, 2006). By analyzing the discourses on MWC's own publication, Fu makes a similar argument that the MWC produces a subordinate subject of migrant women that limits their voices (Fu, 2009). More recent studies have looked at MWC's cultural production as a means for female migrants' empowerment, such as the publication of a female migrant magazine (Yin, 2016) and domestic workers' drama club (Wallis, 2018). Despite the controversy, to date, MWC remains an important institutional space for migrant women where they can seek help, meet other migrants, and make friends.

In the dissertation, I approach Migrant Workers' Club and Migrant Workers' Home (discussed below) as non-profit and pro-social change institutional spaces wherein different social actors participate. I choose MWC's Didinghua Theatre (referred as Didinghua below) as a case to analyze female migrants' resistance through participating in performance activities at the NGO. In 2011, Didinghua Theatre was established by MWC to call for public awareness and recognition of domestic workers' situations and respect toward the group. China has estimated 20 million domestic workers who are mostly women from among the rural areas and urban poor. Similar to domestic workers in other countries, Chinese domestic workers often face long hours and heavy workloads

with low wages, mistreatment from employers, and social exclusion. In 2011, the International Labor Organization passed a convention concerning Decent Work for Domestic Workers. In this process, Migrant Women's Club served as an active local representative. The convention sets labor rights to protect domestic workers worldwide. Yet China is still not among the 24 states which have ratified the convention to date. Around 2011, Migrant Women's Club founded Didinghua Theatre as part of its advocacy effort toward labor legislation of domestic work in China. Didinghua is the name for small wildflowers growing at roadsides and in the wildlands. It symbolizes the hard-working determination of female migrant workers who make livings in difficult situations. Most of the domestic workers participating at Didinghua are middle-aged female migrants and a few are laid-off workers. At Didinghua, with the help from staff and volunteers, female migrants told about their lives and working stories, wrote those stories into plays, and rehearsed for performances.

Through contacting Didinghua participants, I came to know a group of middle-aged female migrants and to trace their life situations. I then analysed how domestic workers' performance has constituted a form of resistance and the politics that shape that resistance.

Advocating Class Equality through Media and Cultural Production

Migrant Workers' Home (Gongyou Zhi Jia)

Migrant Workers' Home is a grassroots NGO pioneer in constructing a "new worker" culture and identity for migrant workers (Kuo, 2017; Thelle, 2013). The organization was founded by a group of activists in 2002 in Beijing. Different from MWC, whose founders and early organizers had relatively high social status, the majority

of staff members in MWH have been migrant workers themselves. MWH represents a new trend where more and more migrant workers start to organize their own NGOs; most of them are small-scale and community-based. Among the grassroot migrant worker NGOs, MWH has gradually become one of the most influential. In early 2000, several young male migrant workers formed a band to sing for migrant workers, traveling to construction sites and factories to offer free performances. These young men later registered MWH officially as an NGO in 2002. The core members, including several founders, have stayed in MWH until now. MWH has been located in several suburban villages in Beijing and settled in Picun, a suburban village in east Beijing, where the organization rents two shabby yards and several bungalows.

Migrant Workers' Home's main programs and activities cover the areas of cultural production, media production, education, and social entrepreneurship. Cultural production includes a musical band, a migrant workers' museum, festivals and galas. New Workers Troupe is the musical band that has offered over 500 free concerts for migrant workers at construction sites, factories, rural migrant communities, universities, and other public spaces in different cities. The group has produced independent CD albums and several documentary films. The Museum, built in 2008 in Picun, is the only grassroots migrant worker museum to document the history of rural-to-urban migration in reforming China and to honor migrant workers' contributions to the country's development. During major holidays, such as Spring Festival and International Labor Day, MWH organizes galas and festivals for migrant workers. The organization's media production includes publication of MWH's own newspaper as well as use of social media to publicize its activities. Picun Community Newspaper is a monthly-published

newspaper MWH produces for residents at Picun village, most of whom are migrant workers. Tongxin Primary School, established in 2005 in Picun, is among the very few schools for migrant workers' children in the city. Workers' College offers free classes to migrant workers and the classes are often about Marxist labor theories and labor issues. Tongxin Shop and Tongxin Farm are both social enterprises MWH established to seek financial independence.

Migrant Workers' Home has become a key site where migrant workers, activists, scholars, and concerned publics join to advocate for migrant workers' equality and rights. In the dissertation, I focus on MWH's cultural production and media production through the cases of the New Workers Art Troupe and Picun Community Newspaper. I also look at the alliances that are forming through MWH's activism and resistance.

Gendered Activism through Music: A female activist group

Jiu Ye is an independent band of four female activists who advocate gender equality and children's rights with an emphasis on female migrants and migrant children. Jiu Ye represents the current trend of activist groups in China which take flexible forms of organizing without registering as NGOs. For instance, migrant worker activist groups have emerged in Beijing and other cities in the recent several years. These activists are mostly male migrant workers do activism as full-time activists through cultural activities, such as singing original songs and performing in galas for migrant workers. These activist groups build their own local and trans-local activism networks to support each other and share resources. Jiu Ye shares commonalities with other activist groups while also showing its uniqueness as a female-led activist band. Jiu Ye was formed by three women in spring 2016. Two of them were once female migrant workers, with one later

becoming a housewife and the other becoming a violin teacher at a local violin shop. The third member is a doctoral student. *Jiu* means nine in Chinese and symbolizes and represents the multiplied power of three members of the band; *Ye* symbolizes wildness and freedom. In summer 2017, another doctoral student joined the group to make up its current four members. Jiu Ye maintains a close relationship with New Workers' Art Troupe and often participates in MWH's events. Its two female migrant activists were once members of New Workers' Art Troupe in the early 2000. Jiu Ye sing about women's lives and struggles, through which they advocate women's independence and resistance. Some of the songs are original, written by band members, while others are adapted from a variety of domestic and international sources, such as Bread and Roses, a song to honor female workers in labor strikes in the early 20th century in the U.S. As an independent band, Jiu Ye relies on crowdfunding and out-of-pocket spending for their activism activities. Through the case of Jiu Ye, I analyze how gender politics shape the process of activism and activists' agency. By comparing New Workers' Art Troupe and Jiu Ye, I demonstrate the interplay between gender and class in contemporary working-class resistance in China.

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Feminist Media Activism

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A Media NGO: Jianjiao Buluo

Jianjiao Buluo is an online feminist advocacy media outlet with a particular focus on female migrant workers. Several activists founded and registered *Jianjiao* as an NGO in 2014. In recent years, China has witnessed the growing numbers of feminist media NGOs that campaign for feminism and criticize the unequal power structure rooted in China's patriarchal past and present. These feminist media NGOs primarily rely on the

Internet to promote feminist thoughts, opinions, and analysis to the general public. But these NGOs' feminist agenda tends to prioritize gender issues faced by urban middle-class women, while largely neglecting working-class politics. On the other hand, in migrant worker activism and working-class resistance, feminism is usually an unfavorable framework. In this context, *Jianjiao* takes a pioneering role in leading a feminist non-profit and advocacy media for female migrant workers. *Jianjiao*'s mission is to provide a media platform to promote equality and social inclusion of female migrants. It states an inclusive feminist agenda that fights against sexism, homophobia, and class inequalities. It holds an office in Shenzhen and has five full-time staff members, together with several part-time staff members and interns. Like other online media NGOs, distribution is mainly based on ICTs, including Jianjiao's official website and three public accounts on the social media platforms WeChat, Weibo, and QQ. Jianjiao publishes 30-60 articles every month. Most of the articles are written and submitted by female migrants and male migrants about their lives and working experiences, and discussions and reflections on various issues. Other authors include Jianjiao's staff, and publics who are concerned with migrant workers' issues. The formats of articles are diverse: narratives, poems, commentaries, analysis, and discussions. In the dissertation, I analyze Jianjiao as a case of alternative media, alongside the case of Picun Community Newspaper, to discuss the politics and possibilities in migrant workers' mediated activism and resistance.

Data Collection

Through these sites, I conducted offline and online ethnographic fieldwork from March 2016 to July 2018. The offline ethnography covers non-consecutive periods: the

first round of fieldwork was from early March 2016 to early September 2016, the following round was in December 2016 and January 2017, the third round was from late May to late August 2017, and the last round was from early June to mid-July 2018. During the field research, I adopted the mixed qualitative methods of archival research, participatory observation, and interviews to collect data. Through offline and online ethnography, I collected archival materials, attended and participated in activities and events, had numerous talks with various participants, and interviewed staff members, activists, migrant worker participants, volunteers, and journalists. Beyond the four main research sites, I also visited beauty salons and barbershops where many young migrant workers often work nowadays. I talked to young workers who were not participants in any of the advocacy/resistance activities organized by NGOs and activists. In the next section, I discuss issues of access and ethics, reflexivity and positionality, and methods of data collection.

Issues of Access and Ethics

My access to research sites and subjects was largely granted by the networks among NGOs, activists, scholars, and migrant workers. I am fortunate and grateful to know these people who are willing and often enthusiastic to share with me their experiences, thoughts, and opinions. Through my preliminary study with *Migrant Women's Club* in 2014, I got to know several core staff members of the organization. In late February 2016, I contacted one of the staff members, Zhang Yan, then executive of MWC, and visited MWC's office when I was in Beijing. In my first visit, I talked with Zhang Yan and another staff member, Chengmei, about my research project and timeline. Chengmei is the founder and then director of *Didinghu Theatre.* Zhang Yan invited me to

help with the preparation of MWC's 20th anniversary celebration event, and kindly offered me an office space. The office was a three-bedroom apartment in a residential community. The general secretary of Rural Women Knowing All and the treasurer took one office room. Zhang Yan, Chengmei, two other staff members of RWKA, and I shared another room. I went to the office every workday until early April when the celebration gala was held. Meanwhile, I started attending Didinghua's activities on Saturdays and gradually became familiar with many female migrant participants. As with access to Migrant Workers' Home, I was introduced to Sun Heng, the founder and leader of Migrant Workers' Home, by an alumnus who volunteered at MWH in March 2016. I paid my first visit to MWH's office in Picun, where two staff members openly and warmly received me. They introduced MWH's up-to-date work and showed me around. During my following visits to Picun and other locations where MWH held events and activities, I got to know more staff members of MWH and a group of migrant worker participants. Xu Duo, another chief member of MWH and the leading singer of New Workers Troupe of Art, told me about Jiu Ye when we first met in late April. I later attended several of Jiu Ye's live shows in different places in Beijing and became familiar with its members. I was introduced to Jianjiao Buluo by a migrant worker participant of MWH who has written for and been a reader of the medium for some time. I was not able to meet Jianjiao's staff members in person as their office is in Shenzhen, but I managed to reach its editor online through its public account on WeChat. Within the three years of periodic fieldwork, my online ethnography complemented my offline fieldwork from 2016 to 2018. I follow the four research sites' public accounts on social media to stay informed and updated about their activities and events, and frequently talk with staff members and

migrant worker participants through WeChat. Up to the present, I remain connected with most of the research participants through social media.

I obtained IRB approval for interviews in May 2016 and renewed the IRB approval respectively in May 2017 and May 2018. I presented and gave the informed consent to each of my interviewees and did not ask for signatures from those who were not comfortable signing the form. For the data I gathered through participant observations, I acquired consent from the participants to include their presence, ideas, and thoughts in any published accounts. To avoid any disclosure of identifiable information, I present informants anonymously or employing pseudonyms. Exceptions apply to several NGO staff, activists, volunteers, and migrant workers who are willing to appear as identifiable sources, and I use their real names or the nicknames their fellows use to show affection and respect. To protect confidentiality, all the collected data are stored in my password-protected server, and only I have access to them.

Reflexivity and Positionality

I have been aware of my positionality which could shape the power relations and negotiations in the research process. Growing up in an urban, middle-class family in a capital city in Northwest China, and having overseas studying experiences in higher education, I realize that I have a more privileged position than many of my research participants. That privilege does not prevent me from being highly sympathetic and respectful toward migrant workers' great effort to make livings in hard conditions. Also, I look for and have fortunately received mutual understanding and support from NGO staff members, activists, volunteers, migrant workers, and other participants. I have shown them my respect toward them and their activities and the goodwill of my research. There

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were many inspiring and empowering moments when informants were sharing the difficulties and the accomplishments of their lives and work with me. We shared countless moments of anger, sadness, and joy. My feminist standpoint sometimes triggered disagreement with some of the informants, quite often with male activists; but we did consider the discussions inspiring and in good faith.

My positionality as a female doctoral student shapes my interaction with migrant workers. Middle-aged migrant workers, both male and female, regard me as a little sister. Young migrants treated me as their peers, and we gossiped about dramas and television shows then being aired. When we gradually became familiar during my fieldwork, many of them were curious and asked me about my experiences studying abroad. Sharing my personal life with them helped build rapport between us. Some of them also inquired about reasons why I chose to study this dissertation topic. Tensions arose when I explained my views of inequalities as research interests and political concern. Several migrants complained that it was futile to talk about inequalities, as people only cared about making money. This attitude can be attributed to China's depoliticized environment since the 1990s. Others were more positive, telling me that although they were not clear what my research would contribute to, they thought it was good that more and more people are paying attention to migrant workers. These workers expected that, ultimately, the government will take more actions to improve migrant workers' lives. Yet speaking of the government, most workers were cautious to avoid commenting on it.

Methods

Archival Research

Through online and offline archival research, I collected texts, images, and other audio-visual materials to explore the discourses and activities in the activism and resistance process. I conducted offline archival research at the two NGOs' sites. Online sources included the Internet, NGOs' websites, and social media accounts. During my visits to MWC and MWH, I collected the MWC's organizational documents, the descriptions, agendas, and promotional materials of Didinghua's plays, and the scripts of the performances; MWH's documents, media reports, nine CD albums of the Troupe, and 45 issues of Picun Community Newspaper that were available from MWH's archives. I also collected information from the two organizations' websites and social media accounts. The Internet was the main source through which I retrieved governmental policy about migrant workers and NGOs, the news reports of Didinghua and MWH, and commentary articles written by scholars about MWH. As with the online media NGO, Jianjiao Buluo, I retrieved around 1,400 articles that it had published up until March 2017 from its website and social media platforms and analyzed the themes of the articles.

Participant Observation

I adopted participant observation to examine actual practices, interactions, relations, and coordination in the process of activism and resistance. Participant observation allowed me to collect data that were not available through archival research or interviews, such as the ongoing activities of different social agents and groups. I did participation observation with MWC, MWH, and Jiu Ye during the inconsecutive periods of fieldwork from 2016 to 2018. Specifically, I spent a month going to MWC's office

every weekday in March 2016. Through helping with the preparation of MWC's 20th anniversary celebration, I got to know many female migrants who were early participants in MWC in the 1990s. During the periods of spring and summer 2016 and winter 2017, I frequently visited *Didinghua* on Saturdays. *Didinghua*'s scheduling on Saturdays was to coordinate with domestic workers' schedules – most live-in workers were only allowed by employers to take one day off, so they made Saturday a rest day. Activities were usually practices and rehearsals for performances. MWC's office's living room was their main space. I also attended *Didinghua*'s formal performances on several different occasions, such as MWC's twentieth anniversary gala in April 2016 and a university's Labor Day celebration event in May 2016. During my fieldwork, I became close with many female migrant participants. They were very friendly to me and treated me as their younger sister. I helped take pictures when they rehearsed for the performance and sometimes offered my feedback as a potential audience member. When they had breaks, we sat together, chatted and shared snacks, and sometimes we went out for lunch. I told them about my research, and they were interested in asking about my experiences studying abroad. They shared with me about their families and lives.

As with MWH, New Workers Art Troupe*,* and Jiu Ye, I attended the events, galas, and live shows where New Workers Art Troupe and Jiu Ye advocated through singing. MWH was usually the organizer or co-organizer of the events and shows. The shows took place in various places around the community where MWH was located, in bars, bookstores and coffeeshops, and universities. University student associations or professors sometimes invited New Workers Art Troupe to perform in classrooms. In organizing the shows and events, New Workers Art Troupe was usually the main

coordinator to contact other grassroots artists or activist groups for participation, including Jiu Ye. Participant observation enabled me to have numerous informal interactions with NGO staffs, activists, volunteers, and migrant worker participants. I took fieldnotes of the practices that have been generated, discourses that have been produced, and subjectivities that have been constructed in participants' activities.

Interviews

To further explore individuals' experiences and perspectives, I conducted 42 semi-structured interviews with migrant workers, NGOs' staff members, activists, volunteers, and journalists.

Table 1 Semi-structured Interviews

Interviewees	Male migrant workers	Female migrant Workers	NGOs' staff and activists	Volunteers and journalists
Number of interviews	9	14	13	6

I got to know and recruited most of the interviewees during my first round of fieldwork in 2016. I took the first three months of fieldwork to build rapport with the interviewees and conducted 30 interviews in summer 2016. From fall 2016 to summer 2018, I did another 7 face-to-face interviews and 5 online interviews through WeChat. Migrant worker interviewees included three groups: female and male migrant participants at the NGOs, and migrant workers who were not participants in any of the NGOs' activities. In the interviews, I asked all the migrant workers about their life histories, their lives back in rural villages, and migration experiences in cities. With the participants, I

invited them to talk about their participation at NGOs' activities, such as their

motivations, the actual experiences, influences on their lives, reflections, and thoughts;

and with non-participants, I looked for reasons why they did not participate in NGOs.

Interviews with NGO staff members and activists probed for their insights on activism

and resistance, and experiences in launching projects, working with migrant workers, and

collaborating with other institutions and agents. As with volunteers and journalists, I

asked about their experiences with NGOs' activities, and opinions on migrant workers'

issues and activism toward social change.

Chapter Outlines

Chapter 2 draws upon the political-economic and socio-cultural background of

rural migrant workers' inequalities, their agency in resistance, and the role of NGOs in

intermediating between migrant workers and unequal social structures. I review the

existing studies on migrant workers and elaborate how the authoritarian Party-state,

transnational and domestic market, and mainstream media and culture intertwine to

produce structural inequalities in contemporary China.

Chapter 3 maps out the social actors that participate in the NGO-based activism

for equality and justice, reveals the power dynamics that shape the participation process,

and assesses the outcomes of the participation. Analyzing Migrant Women's Club

(MWC) and Migrant Workers' Home (MWH) as two cases, I argue that migrant worker

NGOs have become sites where various social actors gather together and organize

different forms of collective action. Social actors include individuals, such as migrant

workers, activists, scholars, government officials, volunteers, and journalists; and

organizations, including advocacy groups, domestic and international NGOs, and funding

agencies. The motivations for participation are diverse and can be social, cultural, and/or political. Participation in NGO-based activism has brought symbolic empowerment to migrant workers and the symbolic impact has led to a material one.

Through analyzing the case of *Didinghua Theater*, chapter 4 discusses how female migrant domestic workers' performance have enacted a form of communicative collective resistance. In conversation with scholarship on domestic workers in global contexts, I explicate the specificity of female migrant domestic workers' situation in China. Drawing upon performance studies and Gibson-Graham's concept of the "politics of possibilities," this chapter reveals domestic workers' motivations, actual practices, and negotiations in the performance. Domestic workers' performance at *Didinghua* has enabled subjective transformation and intervened in the public and media sphere.

Chapter 5 explores cultural production as a specific form of mediated labor activism in contemporary working-class resistance. This chapter addresses the extent to which labor activism has challenged hegemonic power, the political imaginaries that cultural production has created, and the solidarities that have been formed. From the perspective of advocacy communication, I analyze Migrant Workers' Home's construction of "New Worker Culture," its musical band and advocacy songs, and show that MWH's activism has confronted ideologies of consumerism, neoliberalism, and capitalism. Through the case of Jiu Ye, I explore female activists' experiences and their gendered activism. The case analysis complements current studies on labor activism by revealing gendered politics. Applying Gramsci's concept of organic intellectual and Hall's concept of ideological struggles, I point out the formation of ideological alliances among activists, migrant workers, intellectuals, students, and concerned publics and

argue that they are organic intellectuals of subordinate groups and enter the open and continuing process of ideological formations in post-Mao China.

Chapter 6 explores the production, distribution, and reception of migrant workers' alternative media. By analyzing Picun Community Newspaper, Jianjiao Buluo, and Migrant Workers' Home's public WeChat accounts, this chapter presents the forms of alternative media which are produced in labor activism, the roles that NGOs and local communities have played in alternative media practices, and the potential and limitations of migrant workers' alternative media to promote changes. I argue that the transformative potential of alternative forms of media has been limited by China's political and ideological environments.

Chapter 7 concludes with the empirical and theoretical contribution of the dissertation. Mediated labor activism contributes to working-class resistance in contemporary China. Mediated labor activism strengthens the power of civil society. Working-class resistance constructs socialist imaginaries that constitute the discursive counter-hegemonic power against capitalism and neoliberalism. The counter-power is embedded as it seeks legitimacy and collaboration with the Party-state to fight against capitalist globalization. Feminist intersectional agendas are marginalized in working-class resistance. In the actual resistant practices, women's access to the activist space is constrained and greatly shaped by unequal gender power. My dissertation contributes to the fields of resistance studies, mediated activism, ICTs and social change, and feminist media studies.

CHAPTER 2

RURAL-TO-URBAN MIGRANTS, RESISTANCE, AND NGOS

Introduction

To lay out the political-economic and socio-cultural background of the dissertation, Chapter 2 traces the historical formation of rural migrant workers, their resistant actions, and the role of NGOs in intermediating between migrant workers and the unequal structures. I review the studies on migrant workers across disciplines, including sociology, communication, and anthropology. Focusing on migrant workers as an underprivileged and marginalized social group, scholars from these disciplines have extensively elaborated how the authoritarian Party-state, transnational and domestic market, and mainstream media and culture intertwine to produce unequal structures in contemporary China. The following story comes from a migrant worker I met during my fieldwork in 2016. The worker exemplifies hundreds of millions of rural migrant workers who face structural inequalities in post-Mao China and long for social mobilities, better working conditions, and social inclusion.

Guo is a 52-year-old rural-to-urban migrant worker who has been working as a contract carpenter for almost ten years in Beijing. Guo works for different contractors and usually gets his salary at the end of the year without any pension or benefits. Because of the informal hiring and lack of legal protection, Guo, like many other contract workers, is quite often owed back wages. Guo has two children, living with his wife back in their home village, and he sends most of his salary back home to support the family and children's education. Growing up in a rural village in north China, Guo went to a nearby town to attend middle school yet did not get into high school as the school only admitted

150 out of 5,000 student applicants. He joined the army but failed to get promoted and had to leave after four years. Due to the unequal distribution of resources between urban and rural areas, obtaining higher education and joining the army are among the very few ways in which rural people can seek social mobility, although the chances are rather small. Guo went back to his home village and worked in a cement factory in a nearby town. Since then, he has been to different cities and towns to look for jobs. Around 2008, Guo went to Beijing and started to work as a carpenter. For cheaper rent, he has lived in different suburban villages where migrant workers and low-income local residents live. In 2014, he moved to a suburban village, Picun, where he encountered the migrant worker NGO Migrant Workers' Home. At the beginning, Guo was attracted to the NGO's free library and he gradually became a regular participant in various activities. By the time I met Guo at Migrant Workers' Home in May 2016, he had become one of the most active participants in MWH's activities. Guo told me in the interview that it was the feeling of equality and respect at the organization that attracted him most. Staff members, some of whom are migrant workers themselves, keep close relationships with migrant worker participants. The mutual support and trust among migrant workers at the NGO made Guo feel at home, especially when he found that it was usually hard to develop trust and friendship with his migrant worker colleagues in the workplace. With his strong interests in reading and writing, Guo has become a key member in MWH's writing group, where a group of migrant workers gather together to read and write. Despite his heavy workload and busy work schedule, Guo writes almost every day, documenting his life, thoughts, and feelings. He particularly enjoys lyric prose, as he can see the beauty of life through those aesthetic narratives. Guo has many thoughts about migrant workers'

situations: rural people are forced to migrate to cities and to be separated from their families, for there are few job opportunities in the countryside and rural people earn so little money from farming; migrant workers are treated poorly in the workplace, have low salaries and few benefits. During the weekly meetings of the writing group, Guo and other migrant workers discuss these issues. Guo believes workers need space to express their voices, but their voices are too weak to influence policy: after all, the government leaders will not listen to them and do not even allow them to publicly criticize or complain about the inequalities. He regards the MWH as a very important organization for migrant workers and expects there can be more organizations like this. At the end of the interview when we talked about possible changes that can be made, Guo looked frustrated and helpless: "No one can really change the reality," he said.

Inequalities of Rural-to-urban Migrant Workers

According to the National Bureau of Statistics of China, by 2016 there were about 300 million rural migrant workers in China.[3] Rural migrant workers are among the most underprivileged groups in post-Mao China. The decline of the agricultural economy, the rising market economy and the demand for a cheap labor force, extensive disparities between urban and rural lives, and the adjusted household policy has produced historical and structural conditions for the formation of the rural-to-urban migrant population in China.

Production and Distribution: State Policies and Market Economy

Since the early 1980s, economic reform has facilitated the country's transition from a state-planned to a market-oriented economy. Although the state still plays a vital role in China's economic development, domestic and transnational capital forces

dramatically shape the production and distribution processes. State policy advanced a labor-intense and export-oriented industry which demanded large numbers of cheap laborers. Transnational corporations and capital were appealed to set up factories and take advantage of the cheap labor force in the Special Economic Zones (SEZs) of China, an area in the southeast coast as an experimental region to test the economic reforms. The adjustment of the *Hukou*, a household registration policy, was in response to this economic demand. Segregation was mandated through *Hukou* policy in Mao's era to forbid rural populations to work or live in cities. It was not until the 1980s economic reform that the policy allowed rural peasants to migrate to and work in urban areas. Up to the present, *Hukou* policy still affects migrant workers' basic well-being.

Class and rural-urban inequalities create precarious labor conditions for migrant workers. Gendered power relations further shape labor divisions among rural migrants. Compared with urban residents, most rural migrant workers have relatively low levels of education and skills and much less social capital. Migrant workers take the low-paid, temporary jobs with heavy workloads yet little job security and benefits, which are undesirable to urban residents. The average monthly income is ￥3275 (less than $500); about 55% of rural migrants work in manufacturing and architecture industries, and 45% are in the service industry. They work at urban construction sites, in factories as assembly-line workers in southern and eastern coast areas (Pun, 2005; Xu, 2000), and in low-end service sectors like small restaurants or shops (Wallis, 2013 a). Female migrants take relatively lower-paid and lower-hierarchical positions, while male migrants enjoy more and better opportunities. Most domestic workers in urban families are female rural migrants (Davin, 1999; Jacka, 2006; Yan, 2008). Domestic work and service is culturally

viewed as primarily women's work. Discursively, the association between femininity and domesticity constitutes the formation of domestic workers (Gaetano, 2004; Sun, 2009; Yan, 2008;). As Sun's ethnographic work on maids in China reveals, "the domestic space of the urban home is often perceived as safer, and more respectable morally, for a rural woman" (Sun, 2009, p. 11). Even among migrant women who have gained higher economic status, many are still constrained by patriarchal norms. Zhang's ethnographic work on rich migrant families in Wenzhou, a town famous for its trading economy in Southeast China, shows that although some wives often own more capability for business, their spatial mobility is rather limited to get into spaces which are predominately men-preferred, and it is the husbands who are granted privilege and superior positions in trading areas to negotiate business, and in public entertainment locations like restaurants and bars to enjoy leisure time (Zhang, 2000).

Structural inequalities also lie in distribution of education, household, and welfare resources to which migrant workers access is severely constrained and deprived. Lack of urban *hukou* greatly restricts migrant worker children's (liudong ertong*)* access to public schools in cities. Migrant workers cannot afford the elite private schools to which urban rich families send their children. Many migrant children go to schools established for migrant children; yet there are far fewer of these schools and they usually cannot provide the quality of education that public and elite private schools do. Children who stay back at rural villages and do not go to cities with their parents become left-behind children (liushou ertong). Left-behind children live with their grandparents and face many problems due to the lack of economic and cultural resources in rural communities (Biao, 2006; Hu, Lu & Huang, 2014). In cities, especially metropolitan ones such as Beijing and

Shanghai, where house prices and rent are too high to afford, migrant workers live in suburban villages to save on living expenses. These villages can only be temporary living places for migrant workers for they are frequently demolished for real estate development or other governmental requisitions. As pensions and healthcare are associated with job benefits, migrant workers in cities do not have access to these basic welfares. The Party-state privatizes public resources and welfare. The market further deprives and marginalizes migrant workers, who are unattractive consumers. These unequal political and economic structures leave migrant workers to face precarious living and working conditions.

Marginalization and Objectification in Mainstream Media and Dominant Culture

Before exposing the marginalization of migrant workers in Chinese mainstream media, this section introduces the political-economic transformation of the Chinese media system in post-Mao China. In China, the state, market, domestic private capital, and transnational capital negotiate and cooperate to allocate and exploit media and communication resources. When People's Republic of China was founded in 1949, the central government was in control of all media productions and distributions; and those media primarily served to reproduce Party ideology (Zhao, 1998). For example, the daily operations of news media had to resort to directives and guidelines from the Party bureaucracy at various levels (Zhao, 1998). Chinese media, particularly news media, were basically a "state ideological apparatus" (Althusser, 1970) heavily regulated by the Party-state in this era. In the late 1970s, media reform initiated alongside economic reform when the Chinese government intended to facilitate economic development. On one hand, the Party and government reformed the media system to cater to an emerging

market economy. On the other hand, there was an increasing concern from the below- and within-media system to promote the democratization of communication (Zhao, 1998).

The production of media has gradually incorporated market forces since the 1980s. A complete economic dependency on the state was insufficient for the survival of media organizations. The government also launched policies to cut subsidies and commercialize the media systems. The pattern of co-production between the state and market becomes increasingly noticeable since the 21st century, especially in the film industry. With the rise of the Chinese media market, investment in film production becomes a popular way for domestic and transnational corporations to make profit. The state takes a regulatory and gatekeeping role to preserve ideological control, while making profit through rent-seeking and outsourcing production work to private capital (Zhao, 2008). Since the 1990s, major media like television and newspapers have mostly relied on advertising for income generation and profit-making (Zhao, 1998). Market forces do bring structural changes to Chinese media and communication systems; and capital excavates the existing unequal power structure by benefiting certain groups while further depriving the underprivileged. Migrant workers are among the groups who are marginalized in mainstream media and culture, which are middle-class oriented, consumerist, and elitist.

I apply Bourdieu's two levels of cultural inequality to discuss the situation of migrant workers (Bourdieu, 1984). The first level is the unequal distribution of cultural capital among different social groups, or according to Bourdieu, between the dominant class and the dominated one. Cultural inequality in reforming China resides in the

unequal distribution of media and cultural products as well as communication technologies, particularly between urban and rural populations. Despite the large number of rural populations in China, newspapers for peasants has sharply declined along with the commercialization of the newspaper industry (Zhao, 1998). Depending on advertising for surviving and making profit, commercialized newspapers leave out rural populations who are not considered profitable readers. Unlike urban readers, rural migrants do not usually buy newspapers, magazines, or other media publications frequently; rather, they tend to read daily papers and magazines only occasionally when they are available or free (Sun, 2009). Live-in domestic workers' access to television is very much controlled by their urban employers. Urban families often hold the attitude that their nannies watch too much TV, which takes up their duty time (Sun, 2009). When new information technologies, like mobile phones, personal computers and Internet, first appeared in the 1990s, only a small group of elites could afford to have them (Qiu, 2009). As ICTs get less expensive and more prevalent, less privileged groups are able to possess them and integrate them into their everyday lives. But the consumption and use of ICTs among less privileged groups are dramatically different from those among the elites (Qiu, 2009; Wallis, 2013a). Unlike middle-class consumers who are devoted to fancy foreign brands ICTs, like mobile phones from Apple and Samsung, less privileged groups like rural migrants tend to buy second-hand phones (Qiu, 2009) or copycat cell phones (Wallis, 2013a).

With little political and economic capital at their disposal, rural-to-urban migrants also lack cultural capital. The second level of cultural inequality lies in the distinction that a dominant class creates in the social reproduction of established order. At this level,

the unequal distribution of cultural capital is legitimized through the arbitrary construction of distinctions (Bourdieu, 1984). In China, the distinction of urban and middle-class culture, value and lifestyles is consolidated through degrading rural people and migrant workers. Rural people and migrant workers have been often exposed to the elites' judgement, gaze, and control. *Suzhi* is the term proposed by the Chinese government in early era of its economic reform to cultivate "high-quality" citizens to meet the demand of modernization. First appearing as a political discourse, *Suzhi* has been quickly adopted by media and popular discourses to refer to an ideal and desirable type of subjectivity which modern Chinese should embrace (Sun, 2009; Yan, 2008). Literally, *suzhi* means having civility, ability to self-discipline, and capability to achieve modernity (Yan, 2008). Rural people and migrant workers are primary targets for the disciplinary power of *suzhi* discourse. For example, an article from a Party magazine comments, "We must admit that the *suzhi* of Chinese peasants is not high. The grave concern is to educate the peasantry" (Yan, 2008, p. 114). While Yan takes a Foucauldian approach to unravel *suzhi* as a neoliberal discourse with a governmentality power, Jacka adopts a post-colonial approach to expose the relations among *suzhi* discourse, rural migrants, and modern China (Jacka, 2006). The emergence of discourses like *suzhi*, which constitutes the subjective position of rural migrants, are "bound up with a form of 'internal orientalism' on the part of Chinese intellectuals searching for ways to respond to western projects and colonialism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries" (Jacka, 2006, p. 33). In this sense, the subordination and displacement of rural populations has its trajectory and genealogy in China's search for modernization in the

past centuryone hundred yea. The discourse of *suzhi* reinforces the superiority of urban status while it disdains and stigmatizes rural identity.

Mainstream media, both state-run and market-oriented, are primary sites to represent and construct migrant workers as alienated and deviant others. The alienation and otherness classifications objectify rural migrants as despicable and undesirable in urban middle-class culture. Media representations of the backwardness and deviance of migrant workers create the displacement of the political, economic, cultural, and social inequalities embedded in China's reform era. Such displacement becomes a way to gain popular consensus of neoliberal ideology among ordinary Chinese citizens that people gradually accept and normalize privatization, individualism, and even inequalities. Official media legitimize the political leadership of the Party-state by sidestepping the structural disparities. The official discourses fall in line with the national agenda of economic development and its emphasis on the necessity of individual contribution. Party media endorse rural women's migration as a significant way for self-improvement and celebrate stories of migrant women who return and help with their villages' entrepreneurial setups (Sun, 2004). News reports on rural-to-urban female migrants from the Women's Federations promote model women as those who are independent, strong, and educated in order to cultivate competitive individuals for China's economic reform (Sun, 2004). A program from China central television (CCTV) broadcasted a "Song for the rural migrant workers" in its 2008 Spring Festival Gala (Orgad, 2012). The song celebrated how rural migrants' experiences in cities were satisfying and empowering, without mentioning any sufferings or difficulties. Such a celebratory tone in media representations echoed the Party slogan, "building a harmonious society," proposed by

the Hu Jintao government. In Women's Federation's reports on prostitution and migrant women, they interpret prostitution as "a result of women succumbing to the seduction of a materialistic and hedonistic lifestyle brought by westernization and made possible and easy by the growing number of mobile women" (Sun, 2004, p. 115). Official discourses of migrant women prostitutes displace the gender and class inequalities migrant women encounter onto the influence of western capitalist values and individual immorality.

Commercial media, on the other hand, construct rural migrants as consuming objects for urban readers. Female migrants quite often appear in commercial newspapers as victims of rape, domestic violence, and human trafficking (Sun, 2004). Compassionate journalism, including some commercial evening newspapers like *Southern Metropolitan Daily* and official media like the CCTV show *Focal Point*, expresses sympathetic attention to the hardship of female migrants and frames them as individual victims (Sun, 2004). Compassionate journalism commodifies the sufferings of women migrants as a selling point to appeal to readers, and often constructs the issue as moral rather than political. Urban consumers explore fetishizing pleasure to watch female migrant maids as exotic others entering their lives (Sun, 2009). A television drama, *Professor Tian and His Twenty-Eight Maids*, first launched in 1999, is such an example. The drama told stories about an urban middle-class family's experiences constantly seeking a "proper" maid. The media consumption practices of the maids' images and the dis-identification with those maids become a way to highlight consumers' urban, middle-class identities.

Inequalities of rural-to-urban migrant workers are political, economic, social, and cultural. The unfair policies and market-oriented economy intersect to exploit migrant workers and deprive them of substantial rights. Mainstream media and dominant culture

further marginalize migrant workers as undesirable others. An urban, middle-class, male supremacy is consolidated through degrading and excluding the agency of rural female migrants. My dissertation explores the extent to which mediated labor activism and communicative resistance have challenged these inequalities.

Migrant Workers' Resistance

Demanding Substantial Rights

Facing these inequalities, migrant workers have resorted to various forms of resistance in the past decades. An extreme form of migrant workers' resistance is suicide. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, news media reported many cases of migrant workers' threatening suicide in cases where they were asking employers for wages in arrears. Public attention to migrant workers' wage arrears reached a peak when former Premier Wen Jiaobao addressed the issue and numerous media outlets reported the supreme leader's demands. In the recent few years, the most notable case has been the Foxconn Suicide Express. Foxconn is a manufacturing factory that hires large numbers of migrant workers and is well-known for its manufacturing work for Apple (Chan & Selden, 2014). In 2010, a series of Foxconn workers committed suicide by jumping from their dormitory buildings, triggering massive media and public attention. Although the factory tried to frame the suicide as individual cases, as if it only happened among a small group of young and immature workers (Qiu, 2016), criticism from media and scholars has been directed at Foxconn's sweatshop working conditions and repressive management system. Workers committing suicide is "one extreme form of labor protest chosen by some to expose an oppressive production regime in which migrant workers are deprived of dignified work and lives" (Chan & Selden, 2014, p. 614). Concluding with a detailed

account of Foxconn suicide survivors' testimonies, Qiu makes a similar and compelling

argument,

> "This unprecedented string of suicides at Foxconn was so much
> more than individual attempts to relieve pain, so much more than
> personal insanity, as the company would like us to believe. The
> suicides can also be interpreted as a subliminal collective
> endeavor to expose the unbearable conditions that manufacturing
> iSlaves have to endure. They constitute a defiant act of resistance,
> too" (Qiu, 2016, p.88).

The tragedy of workers committing suicide gained symbolic impact by reaching the

media. The resistance achieved material consequences when public pressure urged

companies to improve working conditions and the political leaders' discursive

intervention prodded governmental departments to take some actions to protect workers'

rights. The impact is still rather limited within individual companies or cases, and the

structural inequalities are circumvented. On the other hand, this form of extreme

resistance is more individualized and often channeled by mainstream news media,

although sometimes sympathetic, to portray worker suicides as individual grievances.

Migrant workers' collective actions often include bargaining, protests, marches,

and demonstrations, particularly among factory workers. This collective resistance at

industrial production sites mostly aims for material gain such as higher wages, better

working and living conditions, and more benefits (Chan & Pun, 2009; Chan & Selden,

2014; Guo, 2014; Qiu, 2016). In other words, they demand substantial rights and

interests. Some scholars attribute the increasing protests and strikes in the past decade to

the rising rights consciousness (Guo, 2014) or class consciousness (Chan & Pun, 2009;

Pun & Lu, 2010) among younger generation of migrant workers. Adoptions of ICTs

become a notable new trend in labor protests. Since 2004, there has been increasing use

of social media by migrant workers during instances of industrial strikes in China; QQ, blogs, and online forums were common tools in early years of the Internet, and Weibo and WeChat have recently become popular among migrant workers (Qiu, 2016). ICTs help facilitate the process of mobilizing and organizing. For instance, in the factory strikes in Shaanxi, Shenzhen, and Shandong, among other provinces, workers rely on social media to spread words, document pictures, share videos of the action and events, narrate stories, express opinions and commentary to inform and, more importantly, mobilize action (Qiu, 2016). It is not surprising that workers' protests often face government and corporate suppression. Compared with individual grievances, collective actions such as labor strikes and marches seldom get coverage in mainstream media. So far, studies on migrant workers' collective resistance tend to focus on factory workers in industrial zones and little attention has been paid to workers in non-industrial sectors. There is a scholarly tendency to emphasize the generational differences among migrant workers, while such an arbitrary distinction overlooks the complex and often interchangeable realities and subjectivities of the two generations of migrant workers as well as their agency in resistance. To claim that the younger generation has more rights and/or class consciousness may discredit the older generation's continuous resistance effort. My later chapters explore how non-industrial migrant workers participate in collective action and show that the older generation has also been an active group in the resistance.

Resisting and/or Reproducing Cultural Domination

Migrant workers' resistance against cultural domination is most often conducted at the individual level with symbolic and material implications. For instance, being

exposed to disciplinary power, gaze, and control through *suzhi* discourse, migrant

workers become quite aware of stereotypical judgements. In Sun's ethnographic study on

maids in China, one domestic worker said, "I'm tired of being told that we domestic

workers have low *suzhi.* Our level of education may be low, but that has nothing to do

with low *suzhi*" (Sun, 2009, p. 48). Migrant workers are not merely rural consumers of

urban commercial culture; some of them also take active roles as "cultural producers" to

write migrant stories. The emergence of *dagong* poets (Sun, 2010; Yang, 2007) and

dagong writers (Jiang, 2007; Sun, 2014) reflects the discursive resistance. *Dagong* poetry

has become a specific genre of subaltern literature where a small group of migrant

workers write poetry to document their lives and express emotions (Yang, 2007). Some

female migrants self-publish their stories about migration in popular online forums, such

as *Tianya*, and when the novels attract a certain number of readers, publishers approach

these writers to sign book contracts (Sun, 2014). The publishing process through which

migrant women writers go is different from the one encountered by urban middle-class

professional writers. Online publishing enables migrant women writers to "reach out

without having to go through the conventional institutions of publishing" often

dominated by male elites (Sun, 2014, p. 220). These female migrant writers' stories very

often are gendered. In particular, they explore female migrants' sexual lives in novels.

The feeling of sexual repression is very common among rural migrant workers and is

even worse among females, as young female migrants "face the added difficulty of

having far fewer outlets than other social groups, including male migrants, for pursuing

their desires, and they often live in much more circumscribed, deprived and scrutinized

spatial arrangements" (Sun, 2014, p. 226). The social and cultural taboo for women to

explore sexual lives forms a patriarchal gaze and control over young female migrants' bodies, and their rather constrained access to resources and capital makes the already grave situation even worse. The self-published literature describes diverse accounts of migrant women's sexual desires, activities, frustrations, and struggles (Sun, 2014). These narratives address migrant women's lives, which are seldom represented in mainstream media and cultural accounts, and thus make the personal political. Migrant workers' compositions of poetry and narratives carry discursive implications that their practices resist the urban cultural elites' domination in the field of literature and increase the group's visibility in the public sphere. Although *dagong* poets and writers appear as a distinct subaltern group, their voices rely more on talented individuals' practices rather than on collective actions. The cultural resistance actions also have material impact. For instance, some migrant worker poets and writers have achieved social mobility through writing by taking up "white-collar" professional jobs such as editors of magazines (Sun, 2012). But such upward social mobility is constrained to only a rather small group and inaccessible to most migrant workers.

Migrant workers' relationship with mainstream media and culture is generally more complex than the simple binary of domination and resistance. Popular and commercial media become references for female migrants who desire a modern life, which usually means an urban, middle-class lifestyle, ranging from clothes, make-up, and consuming goods to leisure activities. Through certain consumption practices, like purchasing a mobile phone and window shopping for fancy clothes, young women migrants seek to embrace a modern life (Wallis, 2013a). Jacka has a vivid description of a young female migrant working as a salesperson in a clothes retail in Beijing, "Zhu Jin

had painted her eyebrows and was wearing mascara and eyeshadow. She wore a

closefitting black sweater and jumpsuit, with a necklace… Her hair was cropped short,

smart and fashionable" (Jacka, 2006, p. 227). Young migrant women construct their

femininity and embrace modernity as a way to empower themselves and display their

detachment from the "backward rurality." But at the same time, their catering to

dominant culture reproduces the disciplinary power over women's bodies and subjects

them to the hegemonic construction of modernity. Sun provides a nuanced account of

domestic workers' consumption of urban media (Sun, 2009). Just like urban residents,

watching television drama is an entertaining activity for domestic workers, but it also has

a social function because these women workers share feelings and comments about the

drama stories with their peers during free time. In their social gatherings, female migrant

workers validate or challenge the representations of migrant workers from TV shows

(Sun, 2009). As Hollander and Einwohner well contends the politics of resistance,

> "resistance is not always pure. That is, even while resisting
> power, individuals or groups may simultaneously support the
> structures of domination that necessitate resistance in their first
> place. This dual role may be especially likely with 'everyday'
> and externally defined resistance whose true purpose goes
> unnoticed by its targets" (Hollander & Einwohner, 2004, p. 549).

These consumptions and talking constitute both resistance to and complicity with the

power of mainstream media and culture. Female migrants' resistant actions are shaped by

their gendered experiences and existing gendered power relations, which are deeply

embedded in social and cultural structures. While resistant actions challenge one aspect

of power, they may accommodate or even reproduce other aspects of domination.

Existing studies on migrant workers' resistance focus on their protests and strikes

for substantial rights, which are collective resistance with material impact; and their

cultural oppositional practices, which occur mainly at an individual level. My discussion

will explore how migrant workers' mediated activism has enabled collective resistance

and the impact to which such resistance has led.

NGOs and Disadvantaged Groups

NGOs have been an important organizational force intermediating between

migrant workers, the state, and the market. In this section, I will review the studies and

discussions on Chinese NGOs. Since the economic reform, Chinese government has

recognized civil society organizations as an important force to release the burden of the

state, and many non-government organizations have been founded in the areas of

education, disaster relief, and social welfare (Jacka, 2004; Ma, 2005). While

acknowledging the significance of NGOs in dealing with social problems that the state or

market are unable or unwilling to solve, the government is meanwhile quite aware of

NGOs' potential to organize and mobilize collective actions, particularly bottom-up ones

which can threaten the leadership of the Party-state. After the 1989 Tiananmen Square

movement, the government set up strict regulations over all forms of social organizations,

mobilizations, and movements for the purpose of maintaining political stability. Official

policy toward NGOs is comprehensively regulatory (Ma, 2006). Registration is the main

way for the government to control NGO development. The policy either sets a high bar

for social organizations to register as NGOs, requiring over 50 members and 10,000

RMB for operating funds, or eliminates NGOs by shutting down registered ones which

the government regards as badly managed or engaging in illegal actions (Ma, 2005).

Coping with the State and Funding Agencies

Given the authoritative regime in China, scholars have agreed that NGOs'

autonomy from the state should not be the only standard by which to evaluate their

democratic potentiality for constituting civil society and the public sphere. They shift

attention and have analyzed the following areas: NGOs' benefits from their closed

relations with the municipal governments; the micro-politics of NGOs' actual practices

and influences; and the special configurations of civil society and the public sphere in

China. NGOs, such as the China Family Planning Association and Rural Women

Knowing All, both of which maintain close relationships with the government, have

successfully brought issues and concerns into the policy-making process (Saich, 2000).

Other benefits of maintaining close relationships with government include easier access

to registration, political protection, approval of activities, and grant funding (Ma, 2005).

Wang argues that NGOs' providing "social service for social good" is a form of

"nonresistant activism" which offers possibilities for sustainable social change in

authoritative China (Wang, 2015). Although there is a general agreement that civil

society cannot gain autonomy from the state in China (Jacka, 2004), it does not mean that

civil and social forces cannot penetrate into the totalitarian power of the Party-state.

Based on the research about services that Rural Women Knowing All provided to

migrant workers in the 1990s, Jacka points out that the organization's activities fit with

the state's agenda for self-development and self-governance and are not against the

state's power, yet they do contribute to a more egalitarian public sphere in China (Jacka,

2004). The public sphere is not separate and completely independent from the state, but is

in constant interaction with the state. Wang Hui provides an account to understand the

unique nature of the public sphere in China, "the public sphere is not a mediating space between state and society; rather, it is the result of the penetration of society into a certain space of the state" (See Wang, 1998 in Jacka, 2004, p. 6). As the Party-state is no longer regulating every aspect of Chinese people's lives with its omnipotent power, the emerging societal force, such as NGOs, leverage public influence by providing social services from which the state withdraws its responsibility.

NGOs' relationships with funding agencies and international NGOs has been contested by scholars. Like NGOs all over the world, it is common for Chinese NGOs to get funding from western sources, like Ford Foundation and Oxfam. International NGOs also become an indispensable force in the development of Chinese NGOs (Ma, 2005). The collaborations foster the ongoing formation of a global civil society, which helps mobilize local forces to build networks and solve problems emerging in globalization. Yet such collaborations are not without questions. For example, building upon his ethnographic study of Chinese NGOs' participation in two "capacity-building" programs in Guangzhou, Spires argues that the practices and operations of Chinese NGOs are often structured by foreign grant-makers' concerns, including good governance, transparency, and accountability (Spires, 2012). Western donors urge the professionalization of local Chinese organizations, without taking into consideration the local NGO's experiences and needs (Spires, 2012). The Chinese government has economic motivations to incorporate International NGOs and foreign funders to deal with social problems in China, but also carries keen political caution regarding western influence on and erosion of Chinese society (Ma, 2005). So far, literature on Chinese NGOs has mostly taken a political economic approach, but has not dealt with cultural production dimensions of

NGOs. My project fills this gap to explicate the political and ideological implications of NGOs' cultural production.

Labor NGOs and Migrant Workers

NGOs have been a vital organizational force to deal with migrant workers' issues. From the mid-1990s, labor NGOs began to emerge in the south coast area of China (Chan, 2012). The Pearl River region is where the economic reform pioneered: labor-intensive and export-oriented factories were built, and millions of rural people migrated to seek jobs. Activists and organizations from Hong Kong, like the Chinese Working Women Network, and international civil groups and foundations helped establish labor NGOs in the Pearl River Delta region (Chan, 2012). Labor NGOs in the Pearl River region founded service centers for migrant workers, including setting up libraries with free media and cultural products, offering educational classes, and organizing recreational activities (Chan, 2012). Providing legal service and education about labor rights and laws are the primary focus for most NGOs (Chan, 2012). Another approach of local NGOs is to collaborate with domestic and international enterprises in cooperative social responsibility projects. These projects promote participation from migrant workers to address the issues, difficulties, and unfair treatment they experience in the workplace (Chan, 2012). Recently, labor NGOs have spread from the south to other areas in China, particularly the east coast area and Beijing. About thirty labor NGOs have been established in major cities like Beijing, Shenzhen, and Guangzhou, and secondary cities like Wuhan, Qingdao, and Chongqing (Lee & Shen, 2011). The emergence and development of labor NGOs responds to the rising problems and conflicts that increasing numbers of rural migrants have encountered, while the state and market often fail or are

unwilling to address those issues. Instances include Home of Workers in Jiangsu province (Chan, 2012), Rural Women Knowing All (Jacka, 2004, 2006), and Picun Village Rural Migrants' Home (Sun, 2014) in Beijing.

Labor NGOs bear criticism for their limited status as a radical force for structural change. The contentious relation between NGOs and migrant workers has been questioned. As a highly mobile population, rural migrant workers hardly maintain long-term connections with local labor NGOs (Franceschini, 2014). Unlike western civil societies where NGOs or civil organizations have a relatively high public profile, NGOs in China often lack public recognition. In the case of labor NGOs, Chinese migrant workers often do not trust them and their "free services" (Franceschini, 2014). In politically sensitive situations, such as demonstrations and strikes, labor NGOs often fail to represent migrant workers (Franceschini, 2014). The critiques also address that NGOs' rights-advocacy and service-providing work can foster the reproduction of dominant ideologies. Jacka (2006) and Wallis (2013b) have pointed out that NGOs' service often can be just lip service for individual cases, and does not address structural inequalities; for instance, training programs become a form of governmentality to nurture the enterprising self of migrant workers, which fits the state agenda of self-development and discipline. In Wallis' fieldwork at a three-month technological training program, she reveals that although technical training can benefit rural migrant women with new skills, it actually reproduces these women as "low-tech labor subjects" (Wallis, 2013b). The training program was offered by a Peony school established by a Chinese NGO, which had close affiliations with the All China Women's Federation and the government; the program recruited young rural women from impoverished areas in China, offered

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scholarship, and taught them basic computer skills. Upon graduation, those who passed the test were sent to a technology company to take data-input jobs. These jobs were low-paid and intense. Migrant women were preferred because females were considered patient, docile, and careful. "Notions of gendered 'docile labor' and the myth of 'nimble fingers' that have been associated with garment and electronics factories circulate in data input companies in China as well" (Wallis, 2013b, p. 354). Lee and Shen's preliminary analysis of labor NGOs' practices argue that labor NGOs tend to avoid cultivating solidarity and collective power among migrant workers (Lee & Shen, 2011). Their analysis of organizational culture and practices of some labor NGOs shows that there is a tendency towards cooptation and commercialization among those NGOs. In other words, labor NGOs either maintain cozy relationships with the state or adopt corporate practices in terms of management (Lee & Shen, 2011). For example, in providing labor law education, some labor NGOs hold "highly circumscribed conception of labor rights stipulated by the central government," which often fails to address the actual experiences of migrant workers and their basic human rights (Lee & Shen, 2011, p. 181).

The above discussions demonstrate two scholarly camps about migrant worker NGOs in China. One is more optimistic of NGOs' contributions, while the other is more suspicious of NGOs as possible interventions into or transformations of unequal structures. I would stress that there should be a more discursive understanding of NGOs as a field wherein different social actors participate and form collective actions. There is also a gap in building connections between migrant workers' resistance and their participation in NGOs. Some scholars simply assume that migrant workers' activities at

NGOs are merely to seek service and overlook their diverse motivations and practices, especially in activism.

Conclusion

China's economic reform and integration into capitalist globalization have enlarged class disparities and intensified social inequality. Rural migrant workers, a historically formed social group in post-Mao China, are deprived of political rights, exploited as cheap laborers, and marginalized in the urban space. Female migrants are also subject to patriarchal power. Being a disenfranchised group, rural migrant workers have vigorously strived for change through individual and collective actions. Among the existing scholarly analysis and discussions, there have been empirical and conceptual gaps in exploring workers' mediated resistant actions. In China's context where large-scale social movements are forbidden and protests can hardly appear in mainstream media, it is worthwhile to seek possibilities mediated activism has enabled to form counter-hegemonic power. For instance, how can mediated labor activism expand workers' requests for substantial rights and dismantle the interlocking systems of oppression they face? Debates on NGOs focus on their relationship with the state and as service providers for migrant workers, but their transformative potential has yet to be further investigated. The ways and extent to which NGOs can serve as sites and agents for activism have been underexamined. In the following chapters, I analyze migrant workers' mediated activism, different social actors' political engagement and participation in the advocacy process, and NGOs' potential to mobilize collective resistance.

CHAPTER 3

THE FORMATION OF PLURALISTIC COUNTER-PUBLICS IN NGO-BASED ACTIVISM

Introduction

Chapter 3 seeks to answer three questions: (1) Which social actors are participating in the NGO-based activism on migrant workers' issues? (2) What are the power dynamics that shape the participation process? (3) What are the outcomes of the participation? Based on analyses of Migrant Women's Club (MWC) and Migrant Workers' Home (MWH) as two cases, I explicate how migrant worker NGOs become sites where various social actors gather together and organize different forms of collective action. Building upon counter-public theory (Felski, 1989, Fraser, 1990; Gordy, 2015; Nget & Klug, 1972/1993), I propose a four-perspective model to explore the dynamic formation of counter-publics in contemporary China's working-class resistance. Existing literature focuses on the economic and political dimensions of resistance and contentious politics in China. This chapter fills the research gap by presenting the social and cultural dimensions of NGO-based activism.

Contentious Politics in Post-1989 China

China has a long history of rebellion and resistance, from the peasant uprisings during feudal dynasties to the socialist revolution which subsequently founded modern China in 1949. After the fierce suppression of the 1989 Tiananmen Square pro-democracy movement, Chinese government strictly controls and forbids any massive protests, demonstrations, or movements. An implicit scholarly consensus is that there have been few social movements in the post-1989 period, due to a rather sensitive

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political environnment. Studies have shown that contentious actions take place in the form of protests (Cai, 2010; Perry & Selden, 2010) and activism (Yang, 2009), and cover a variety of issues, such as labor rights (Lee, 2000; Zheng, 2000), environmental protection (Huang & Yip, 2012; Jing, 2000; Yang, 2009), and reproductive rights (White, 2000), among others. Forms of contention range from individual resistance on a daily basis, to collectively mobilized actions and establishment of organizations and institutions. For instance, in the late 1990s, urban state-owned factory workers protested against their disenfranchisement as a result of economic reform (Lee, 2000). The market economy eliminates the job security, guaranteed benefits, and welfare that the urban working-class owned in Mao's socialist economy. Individual workers adopted non-compliant behaviors as a form of resistance by showing low interest in acquiring new skills and improving productivity and minimizing work effort in state jobs while devoting real effort into private and profitable job sectors (Lee, 2000). Workers also relied on collective actions with more bargaining power. They turned to strikes, demonstrations, and protests to demand substantial rights. Urban workers re-appropriated Marxist and Maoist discourses of "exploitation and inequality to unite a broad spectrum of veteran laborers in the state sector" (Lee, 2000, p. 57). Recent scholarly attention has placed more focus on the use of media and ICTs in resistance and activism by ordinary citizens, activists, and NGOs. Despite the government's political control and online censorship, the Internet does provide possibilities for expression and action. There have been numerous online contentious actions by individuals, groups, and organizations about HIV/AIDS, environmental protection, women's rights, and religion, to name a few (Yang, 2009). Dispersed individuals form grassroots activism via social media to expose

misconduct by individuals and government officials for the purpose of social justice (Tai, 2015, 2016, 2018).

Contrary to the popular belief that the authoritarian state is repressive toward any type of collective resistance, studies have illustrated the dynamic relations between the government and protestors. Applying the concept of "political opportunity structure" in social movements, some scholars demonstrate that the government tends to be more tolerant toward protests on environmental issues (Huang & Yip, 2017; Yang, 2005; Yang, 2016), while labor strikes and demonstrations more easily face direct suppression. Cai's extensive analysis on collective resistance in China reveals that protestors can often gain leverage against local government by seeking intervention from upper-level government, and the central government is more acceptable of non-regime-threatening protest (Cai, 2010). In other words, successful protest/resistance that leads to problem-solving or even policy change must occur within the legitimate political framework of the Party-state. Perry and Selden thus critique that contemporary protests and resistance are merely "single issue conflict" which lacks "interconnective ideological and organizational bonds" and fails to form collective counter-power to overthrow the Party-state (Perry & Selden, 2010, p. 15). This critique confines the implications of resistance to the political arena, while overlooking the cultural and social dimensions of resistance and activism. As discussed in the introduction chapter, the authoritarian Party-state is only part of the hegemonic power reforming China. Transnational and domestic capitalist markets, urban middle-class-oriented consumerist culture, and patriachal power are all interlocked to form hegemony in contemporary conjuctures. Also, it is important to take into consideration that any confrontation with the Party-state's political power simply

faces brutal repression, as seen in the 1989 students' movement. It is within these

parameters that my dissertation explores how activism and resistance toward equality and

justice can form a counter-hegemonic force.

Counter-public Theory

I apply counter-public theory to account for the various social actors that have

participated in NGO-based activism on migrant workers' issues. Nget and Klug

(1972/1993) first develop the idea of counter-public and proletarian public spheres as

important and necessary components of counter-hegemonic movements. Counter-public

and proletarian public spheres are a conceptual framework designed to account for

marginalized groups' movements to realize their specific interests "with a view to change

the society as a whole" (Nget & Klug, 1972/1993, p. xvi). Contextualized in working-

class experiences and culture in 1970s Germany, Nget and Klug's proletarian public

sphere is a critical response to Habermas' bourgeois public sphere which excludes the

interests and voices of working-class people. Habermas views public sphere as an

assemblage of individuals' interests through rational deliberations and mediation between

the state, market, and private realm. Habermas' public sphere rests upon living

experiences of the bourgeois and the formation of bourgeois society; yet the interests of

the working class cannot be realized within the capitalist mode of production and their

experiences are excluded from the industrial-capitalist publicity (Nget & Klug,

1972/1993). Nget and Klug argue that working-class experiences are vital to form

collective identification and claim subjective positions as the transformative starting point

to organize the working-class toward alternative modes of being and production, which

prioritize equality rather than profit. In reality, working-class language and

communication are mediated through bourgeois-industrial-commercial publicity, which often leaves the working-class in a bourgeois camp and consciousness. The proletarian public sphere thus needs to develop counter-ideas, counter-languages, and counter-publicity to cultivate collective awareness about labor exploitation and oppression and inspire collective action for liberation and emancipation.

Developing from a Marxist and Gramscian tradition, the theory of proletarian public sphere generally overlooks gendered power relations in transformative politics. Feminist scholars incorporate a gender perspective, calling for recognition of the multiplicity of counter-publics. Felski elaborates on a feminist public sphere in which women can express gender-specific concerns and share experiences of gender subordination (Felski, 1989). Feminist public sphere is a space where feminist claims strive to intervene in the dominant public sphere to shape public awareness. Fraser's "subaltern counter-publics" refers to discursive arenas for marginalized and disadvantaged groups, such as women, workers, racial minorities, and LGBT, who face inequalities, oppression, and exclusion to claim power (Fraser, 1990). In Fraser's view, subaltern counter-publics can form a strong force to leverage public power against state power through participatory and inclusive decision-making processes. The post-structural lens is also adopted by other counter-publics theorists. Arsen argues that the discursive quality of multiple counter-publics is inherent and cannot be reduced to identities, places, or topics (Arsen, 2000). Warner sees counter-publics as performative in that counter-publics are enacted in relation to wider publics (Warner, 2002).

Scholars remind us that counter-publics are neither utopian nor without politics. Unequal power relations may persist in alternative spaces, and there are pluralistic

counter-publics whose interests may conflict (Felski, 1989; Gordy, 2015). Later work on counter-publics further explores the politics and strategies to effectively transform the dominant public sphere. Squires argues for an alternative typology of counter-publics that goes beyond identity-based counter-publics (Squires, 2002). Through exploring the African American public sphere, Squires distinguishes three types of counter-publics – satellite, enclave, and counter-public – based on available resources, goals, discourses, and public impact. Arsen contends that people can participate in multiple publics and counter-publics which may overlap or conflict (Arsen, 2002). More recent studies have examined counter-publics in the Internet age, when new information technologies offer communicative opportunities and spaces to connect marginalized groups and facilitate the formation of counter-publics. For instance, women and girls use social media to resist sexual violence through fostering counter-discourses and exposing perpetrators (Salter, 2013). Feminist counter-publics are able to reach and influence the mainstream public sphere through enhancing participation in cyberspace (Travers, 2003). Arabic women bloggers create a counter-public literary cyberspace which breaks the monopoly of the mainstream literary industry (Elsadda, 2010).

Although counter-public theory has been mostly developed in the context of western liberal democracy, it also bears merit in authoritarian regimes, such as China, where counter-publics can be a counter-balance to hegemonic power. The post-structural turn embraces a wide range of possibilities of multiple counter-publics to combat oppression and exclusion. But the emphasis on discursiveness shifts attention away from seeking counter-publics' potential to form collective and transformative power. Going back to Nget and Klug's proletarian public sphere, counter-publics emerge when workers

forge collective identification through their social experiences and become aware of labor exploitation in the capitalist mode of production. The collective identification and consciousness cultivate actions to disrupt the bourgeois public sphere. To avoid overemphasis on differences, it is crucial to return to the collectiveness of counter-publics while recognizing the politics, conflict, and tension. Collectiveness encompasses both the connections and contradictions among different social movements and protests. Connections are the interests, discourses, and strategies that are shared by these counter-movements. Contradictions are the politics and conflict that should be addressed and reconciled with a goal of forming collective power.

Building upon counter-public theory, I propose a model to assess how various social actors in NGO activism have formed counter-publics. This model emphasizes the co-existence of collectiveness and discursiveness in the formation of counter-publics. The first dimension is to acknowledge any social actors that participate in an organized sphere to combat any forms of inequality. Anchoring Arsen's critique of counter-publics (Arsen, 2002), inclusiveness means to avoid the reductionist views and not to presume identities and topics as decisive components. It must rather examine the subjectivities, motivations, and actual practices. The second dimension looks at the discourse of activism and counter-movements. Discourse includes both rhetoric and modes of communication (Cordy, 2015). The third dimension investigates connections and contradictions across pluralist counter-publics in forming collective power. The last dimension is to assess the impact of counter-publics. These impact may be discursive and material changes that counter-publics make at the levels of the individual, community, or institution, and may

be national and/or transnational, such as changing public perceptions of minorities and advocating policy changes in favor of underprivileged groups.

In the following sections, drawing upon the above four dimensions, I explicate the process and politics in the formation of counter-publics in contemporary activism and resistance against inequality.

Mapping Social Actors in the NGO Space

Migrant worker participants at MWC are mostly first-generation rural migrants, and workers at MWH represent a mix of first and second generations. Compared with participants at NGOs in South China, most of whom are migrant factory workers (Florence, 2007; He and Huang, 2015; Zhang and Smith, 2009), participants at NGOs in non-industrial areas are more diverse, including those who work in low-end service sectors, construction sites, and small workshops. When MWC was founded in 1996, it provided free skills training, legal aid, services, and consultation to young migrant workers in Beijing (Jacka, 2006); these workers belong to the first generation of rural migrants. As MWC shifted its agenda to work on issues of domestic workers in early 2000, many early participants no longer attended the activities and events. Middle-aged female migrants, who work as domestic workers, have become the organization's main participants since then. These middle-aged women are also first-generation migrants. For the first-generation female migrants, who face severe social exclusion in their urban lives, MWC creates an identity-based community and becomes particularly appealing to these workers. Since its founding in 2002, MWH has been located in several suburban villages in Beijing and has become a community space for rural migrants. Both first- and second-generation migrant workers, who live in or near those suburban villages, regularly attend

MWH's activities. The spatial proximity becomes an advantage for MWH to attract migrant worker participants.

Staff members at MWC and MWH represent two typical types: those with educational and professional background and training in social work, and those who themselves have been migrant workers. The current staff members of MWC are mainly the first type and they adopt a professional management model similar to NGOs in South China. This model is heavily influenced by western NGOs which have clearly-defined positions, titles, duties, and responsibilities. Relationships among staff members tend to be more professional, as colleagues. When I visited MWC in 2016 and 2017, there were five staff members who lived in different parts of Beijing. Staff who live far from the office must commute long hours every day. One staff told that it took her four hours per day on subway and bus to reach work, and that commute became a big difficulty for her to overcome. The professional management model has somewhat led to high staff mobility. By summer 2018, three staff members had already left MWC for new jobs. In comparison, MWH has more staff, and most of them are rural migrants with no educational background or professional experience in social work. Staff members live in MWH dorms and maintain close relationships with each other. They regard MWH as a family-like club rather than merely a workplace. In my interview with Ruo, a female staff member, she talked about the pleasant social environment at MWH,

> "we (staff) are like a family here. When I worked in factories
> before, people were cold to each other and it was hard to make
> real friends. Here, everyone is open to others. We share about our
> personal lives, help each other, and live like sisters and brothers."

Before joining MWH, Ruo had been a migrant worker in factories for years. She did not like working at factories, where in Ruo's words, "people are treated like machines, not

humans." When I met Ruo, she had worked at MWH for six years and was mainly attracted by the organization's friendly working environment. Yet despite maintaining cozy social relations among colleagues, unequal gendered power appears prominent in MWH's organizational culture. A few male staff members, who are founders of the organization, hold the utmost power in the organization (Thelle, 2013). These male members are like patriarchs of a family. Positions at MWH are not distinctly associated with specific duties and tasks. Many staff members take responsibilities for various tasks without clearly entitled positions. Although adopting different management styles, both organizations have hierarchies: the hierarchy of MWC is based on rankings of positions, and the power of MWH's staff members depends on seniority in the organization.

Scholars, college students, lawyers, corporation employees, and journalists are active participants at the two NGOs. Scholars, college students, and lawyers usually build and maintain their relationships with NGOs at an individual level. Domestic and international scholars act as instructors and teachers, co-organizers and advocates for migrant workers' equality and justice. For instance, Bu Wei, a professor from Chinese Academy of Social Science, has been among the most active scholars in MWH's activism. Paul Willis, a famous British Marxist scholar, visited MWH in summer 2016 and hosted a workshop with staff members and migrant worker participants to discuss labor issues. Zhao Zhiyong, a professor from Central Academy of Drama, had been a volunteer instructor at MWC for two years and active in the organization's activism. Many scholars have volunteered to be instructors for MWH's literature group for migrant workers. These scholars maintain close relationships with staff members and migrant worker participants. Compared with college students who usually volunteer for NGOs

from several months to one year, volunteer lawyers more often serve as long-time

consultants to provide free legal services to migrant workers. Employee volunteers are

those who take charge of the charitable programs through which their corporations

collaborate with NGOs. Both MWC and MWH have a small group of journalists who

maintain long-term relationships with them. These journalists often show great concern

regarding migrant workers' issues and recognize the importance of NGOs' work. One

journalist, Zhensheng, who has reported on MWC and its *Didinghua* Theater, expressed

that she was sympathetic toward domestic workers and found it very unfair that the group

often faces bias and disrespect. After graduating from college, Zhensheng started

working for a news media outlet run by a municipal government and specialized in the

"social news" section where she reported on the lives of marginalized groups. By the

time I interviewed her, she had already left the media due to the shrinking institutional

support for journalists to report social news. Zhensheng expressed her support to MWC

in the interview,

> "I think activities like *Didinghua's* are very important and needed
> in our society, for nowadays people look down upon the poor and
> have little respect or mercy towards the disadvantaged. Most
> people only care about making money. This is very problematic,
> and we should change people's views."

Although journalists' connections with NGOs are based on institutional cooperation, the

agency of individuals is often more prominent in shaping their actual relationships and

attitudes.

Networks have formed among local and international NGOs, foundations,

activists, and advocacy groups. The participants include both those well-established and

those working at the grassroots level. International foundations, such as Oxfam and Ford,

have remained the main financial sources for Chinese NGOs in the past three decades. International NGOs become an indispensable force in the development of Chinese NGOs (Ma, 2005). For instance, both MWC's and MWH's financial support comes from Oxfam. The Chinese government has economic motivations to incorporate international NGOs and foreign funders to deal with social problems in China (Ma, 2005). Yet, in recent years, the central government has enforced regulations over international foundations and NGOs which have resulted in a sharp reduction in local NGOs' funding. A staff member of MWC disclosed that all of Oxfam's funding for the organization's rural programs was cut off due to these government regulations. MWH has started social entrepreneurship projects and relied on crowdfunding for financial sustainability. MWC and MWH maintain connection and interaction with NGOs, activists, and advocacy groups in mainland China, Hongkong, Taiwan, and foreign countries. They pay visits to other NGOs and hold visits from NGOs, individual activists, and groups. The visits usually last one to several days, including organizing workshops, cultural and social events. For instance, staff members and female migrant participants of MWC often visit local domestic worker NGOs and those in other cities, such as Xi'an and Jinan. MWH frequently organizes events with local grassroots labor NGOs and advocacy groups. The collaborations foster formation of transnational and trans-local networks, which helps mobilize local forces in the activism and resistance process.

Government is more than a regulatory force in its relationship with NGOs. In the China context, maintaining a good relationship with the government can bring labor NGOs benefits of resources, support, and legitimacy. Criticisms, such as the observation that labor NGOs keep cozy relationships with the state (Lee and Shen, 2011), do not

account for multi-layer relationships between NGOs and the government. It is true that NGOs face severe surveillance and regulation from the state (Lee and Shen, 2011; Salmenkari, 2015), yet NGOs also need recognition and support from the government (Hsu, 2010; Salmenkari, 2015). A credible public image is particularly important for migrant worker NGOs, as some scholars observe that Chinese migrant workers often do not trust labor NGOs and their "free services" (Franceschini, 2014). In the 1990s, Migrant Women's Club collaborated with local Women's Federation and the labor department of local government to successfully reach out to migrant workers and provide them with services. When lacking public recognition and credibility in the early times, MWC's collaboration with municipal government and its leader's prior governmental background helped build migrant workers' trust toward the organization. Organizing events in a government-sponsored space grants NGOs symbolic legitimacy. This symbolic legitimacy appeals to migrant worker participants and attracts public attention. For instance, Migrant Workers' Home held one of the early *Dagong* Spring galas at Chaoyang Cultural Center, a municipal governmental space. Such collaboration helps the grassroots cultural event enhance its influence among migrant workers and the general public. Spires describes the relationship between the authoritarian state and NGOs as a "contingent symbiosis" where the state claims credit for NGOs' work (Spires, 2011). It should be noted that NGOs also need state recognition to gain influence and credibility. MWH has been awarded by Beijing City Hall as one of "Beijing top 10 volunteer groups" and the New Worker Troupe received the honor of "National advanced group to serve migrant workers" from the Ministry of Culture. Sun Heng, the founder, has received several honorary titles from the government. These awards from the government

greatly increase MWH's symbolic capital as a grassroots migrant worker NGO. In the discussions of NGOs' relationship with the government, individuals' roles are often neglected. These individuals, including key staff members and government officials, serve indispensable roles in maintaining the relationship between the two parties. For instance, when MWC was founded by Xie Lihua in 1996, Xie's background as a retired senior government staff member and connection with the government provided crucial resources and support for the organization's establishment and development. A municipal governmental official provided tremendous support to MWC and MWH during his term of office. Staff members from both NGOs recalled that the director was very concerned about migrant workers' issues and had granted resources and approval to the two NGOs' events and activities.

Motivations and Goals

Migrant workers' participation at NGOs is often driven by social and cultural needs, such as making friends, borrowing books, and watching films. Socializing was once a main component of migrant workers' activities at MWC in the 1990s. In the early days, migrant workers came to Beijing without families and friends; meeting people, especially other migrant workers, and making friends were important for them to deal with loneliness in the city where they also faced severe social exclusion, bias, and prejudice from urban residents. After staying in the city for years, migrant workers gradually develop their own social networks and become less motivated to participate in NGOs for social purposes. But for domestic workers, social factors still play a vital role in their participation. These domestic workers are mostly female migrants who come to Beijing for the first time, and they face similar situations to migrant workers in the 1990s.

The majority are live-in maids who hardly have any private space or social life when living with employer families. MWC is one of the few places where domestic workers can spend leisure time. When I met some domestic worker participants at MWC in 2016, they expressed a strong sense of belonging to the NGO. One worker told me on our way to the subway station after MWC's activities on a Saturday, "living in employers' family, I feel myself a stranger and need to be cautious all the time, but here (at MWC) I am relaxed and comfortable, and we are like a family." Others have told similar stories. Many of the workers have to take a bus for more than two hours to go to MWC, but they said it cannot stop them from going. Another worker explained in the interview,

> "I don't mind the long distance because I really enjoy staying here (at MWC). I am always counting days until I can come (to MWC) and have fun on Saturdays. Even if I do not usually participate in any formal activities, just sitting there and chatting with sisters (other female workers) make me joyful."

At MWC, in addition to the main program of performance, middle-aged female migrants do dance and fashion shows over the weekend. A staff member proposed the idea of fashion shows and explains that it means to improve female migrants' self-confidence and has turned out in an effective way. One participant, a 50-year-old domestic worker, told me in the interview that,

> "I don't have opportunities to wear beautiful clothes and make-up when I am working in employers' house on weekdays, but which woman doesn't love dressing up? So I really enjoy doing fashion shows with my sisters (other female workers) here (at Migrant Women's Club)."

Dancing and fashion shows are well received among female migrant participants. These cultural activities enhance participation among female migrants, as they demand less skill than performance.

MWH, on the other hand, has been a community space for migrant worker residents to spend their off-work time in the evenings and on weekends. During my visits to MWH at Picun, I observed workers coming to borrow books, attend galas for holidays, watch films, or just gather as small groups to chat. Workers and their children borrow books from MWH's library and watch outdoor movies that MWH shows in their office yard on summer weekends. The movies are mostly commercial ones for entertainment. On holidays, MWH organizes galas in which staff members and migrant workers perform various shows. There are often several hundred community residents attending as audiences. Lei, a 38-year-old migrant worker, who was a regular participant in MWH's activities, said that, "we workers also need spiritual (cultural) life, but it is too expensive to do these (such as going to movie theatres and attending concerts) in cities." Lei worked in a furniture factory near Picun and he had lived in Beijing for almost ten years. Just like many other middle-aged migrant workers, Lei has worked in factories, restaurants, and manual workshops. MWH's various cultural activities appealed to Lei to live in Picun, where he rents a small room. NGOs' activities and service confront the first level of cultural inequality: that cultural resources are unevenly distributed between urban residents and rural migrants.

The social and free cultural activities mainly appeal to older migrants, the first generation, rather than the younger ones. Although the two generations share the same positionality in the unequal structure, they face somewhat different economic and cultural circumstances. Despite the fact that younger migrants are still exploited as cheap laborers, they have less economic burden and more financial freedom; their parents have accumulated years of hard work, while the younger ones are more aspiring to city life.

NGOs' free activities, classes, and services can be a great attraction for middle-aged migrant workers while younger migrant workers are less interested. In contemporary China, middle-class consumer culture dominates urban cultural life – going to theaters, coffee shops, fancy restaurants, and shopping malls constitute a typical urban middle-class lifestyle. Such a lifestyle is usually not appealing to first-generation migrant workers nor affordable to those who need to provide for families. Comparatively, the younger migrants are much more absorbed into urban consumer life and they do not have the economic burden to support families that the first generation does. As Qiu argues, the younger generation can be more "individualist, consumeristic, and prone to seduction" (Qiu, 2016, p. 132). When first-generation migrant workers entered cities in the 1980s and 90s, urban exclusion was severe and there was little public space for these workers to spend leisure time. Since the late 1990s, as China accelerates market reform, there has been much more commercialized space for young migrant workers. In my chats with several young migrant workers who work in beauty and hair salons, they disclosed that they spent most of their leisure time on the Internet. Like their urban counterparts, these young workers also hang out with friends in commercial spaces, going to movie theaters and having meals in restaurants. Xiaodan, a young female worker, confessed that,

> "I just do what others do, otherwise, what else can I do for fun? I
> like to do shopping on Taobao (China's largest retailer website),
> but I don't have much money, so I just lurk online or watch
> dramas and videos, nor do I go out to eat very often."

Xiaodan was a 21-year-old female migrant worker and came from a rural town in Sichuan province. She attended a professional beauty school after dropping out of middle school. As a second-generation migrant, Xiaodan had much less economic burden than her parents did. She said she was not good at studying and had little chance to pass the

national entry exams for college, so her family decided to let her learn some professional skills. "Factory work is too torturing," she said, "doing beauty work is a better fit for us girls." For Xiaodan, the working environment in a beauty salon is much better than in a factory, but the workload is not much lighter. She often has to work more than ten hours per day and does not have breaks for holidays. Physical distance is another obstacle to younger generation migrants' participation. In cities with few factories, younger migrants often work in low-end service sectors, such as waitresses/waiters in restaurants, beauty salons, and hair salons. The busy working schedules leave them few fixed rest days. Their living places are scattered throughout the city. Xiaotian is a 19-year-old young male migrant worker from a rural village in Hebei province, which is near Beijing. His story is very similar to Xiaodan's. Considering factory work dirty and messy, Xiaotian went to work at a hair salon in Beijing. When I asked about his work and leisure time, he complained,

> "I have to work till midnight every day and don't have regular rest days. During holidays, we are even busier when many more customers want to do their hairs. We have to work from early morning to late night and stand all day. For busy days, we don't even have time for meals. I just want to lie in bed when I don't need to work. It's already so exhausted. I don't want to go anywhere."

The inconvenience certainly discourages younger migrants to attend NGOs' events. In such circumstances, community-based NGOs, as in the case of MWH shows, can overcome the distance constraints younger migrants face in their participation.

Not all migrant workers are consumers of dominant culture. Some, including both generations, become cultural producers through NGO-organized events. NGOs organize cultural events and migrant workers are the main participants as performers and coordinators. Among the regular events, "*Dagong* Spring Festival Gala" is the most

influential. In 2012, MWH held *Dagong* Gala for the first time and invited a famous star who has expressed concern for underprivileged groups to host the gala. The theme of the migrant workers' gala and the fame of the host soon helped the event attract wide public attention. Since 2012, MWH has held the gala every year. The gala has become a national cultural event for migrant workers to celebrate Spring Festival and has remained an independent and non-profit event with no commercial sponsorship. Each year, migrant workers nationwide perform their original shows as individuals or groups at the gala. They sing songs, recite poems, dance, and perform mini-dramas, among other attractions. Guo, the migrant worker in my opening story in chapter 2, recalled his experiences on the stage, "I feel so honored to recite poems with several other workers (at the gala). The poems are all written by us ourselves. We are acknowledging all the migrant workers who face difficulties but carry on in lives." In 2015, MWH started to use the Internet for gala's live stream to reach a wider audience. Since then, the annual online hit rate has maintained at tens of thousands. Migrant workers' cultural participation in cultural events such as the *Dagong* Gala has political implications in that it contests the distinction of urban middle-class culture which degrades and marginalizes rural and working-class people. Through cultural participation, migrant workers transform their roles as recipients or objects of mainstream culture to producers of their own culture, which speaks to migrant workers' subjective experiences.

Figure 1 2014 Dagong spring festival gala.
Source: http://www.jianjiaobuluo.com/content/1154

As I will discuss subsequently in chapters 4, 5 and 6, participants in the two NGOs' programs with advocacy missions are often driven by political motivations. For instance, staff members aim to improve domestic workers' social status (Chapter 4), migrant workers cultivate class consciousness through participating in advocacy projects (Chapter 5), and activists promote a feminist agenda to interrogate female migrant workers' inequalities through alternative media (Chapter 6). In the advocacy projects, moral motivations appear to be more common among some migrant workers, staff members, and volunteers. Discourses such as inequalities and social justice are not used among these participants; they prefer moral discourses. In moral discourses, there appears to be a distinction between "to help" and "to be helped." Participants believe that they are helping migrant workers who are underprivileged people and need help. Interestingly, the boundary is blurred when migrant workers devote their time to help with NGOs' work

and service. Migrant workers often interpret their participation in activism as "doing the right thing." Here, rightness appears in a moral sense rather than political. Moral motivations are less politically sensitive and more attached to the traditional value of "being a good and noble man." For instance, Lu, a staff member who recently joined MWH, said in the interview that, "I join the organization because I believe they are doing good things and I want to be part of it. We need to help migrant workers." Lu was a worker at a state-owned coal factory for over 20 years in a small city in Shandong province. He happened to learn about MWH's activism at a local event, which generated a strong interest. He quit the job, went to Beijing, and became a staff member at MWH. Lu's understanding of NGOs' works as "doing good things" is similar to migrant workers' statement, "doing right things," both of which are expressed in a moral sense rather than political.

The blurred boundary between politics and morality and the emphasis on morality undermines the political potential of activism. This is particularly evident in the popular construction of NGOs' work as "*Gong Yi.*" A great number of *Gong Yi* projects have recently emerged in China, launched by corporations, funds, and NGOs. "*Gong Yi*" literally means public benefit. It is closely tied to philanthropic principles and becomes a depoliticized concept through celebrating the moral standpoint of the givers without addressing any structural problems. Large corporations, domestic and transnational, become a major force to initiate *Gong Yi* projects. These projects are mainly charitable in that they rely on donations and purchases from the wealthy and middle-class to help the poor. Providing free services is still a dominant mode in developmental projects of international NGOs and domestic NGOs. The charitable and service components can also

be seen in MWH and MWC's work, such as getting donation of goods, providing legal consultation, lending free books, and offering free classes on using smartphones. But *Gong Yi*, as popular discourse to frame all NGOs' activities, dilutes the radical potential and possibilities of their activism and resistant action.

In Chinese NGO studies, volunteers' subjective experiences are often overlooked while their motivations to participate in NGOs are simply assumed as driven by moral concerns. The following two stories reveal how volunteers' complex identities and experiences can shape their motivations and relationships with migrant workers. Liu has been a volunteer lawyer for MWC for several years. Growing up in a rural village herself, Liu is very concerned about migrant workers' well-being. She said, "Though I become a lawyer, I feel I am part of them (rural people) and I want to help them with my knowledge." Ke was a corporation employee volunteer for MWC and he was responsible for a charitable program of a transnational company. The program collaborated with MWC to offer free training classes to migrant workers on Internet use through smartphones. During an eight-week training period, every Sunday or Saturday, Ke and his colleagues taught a group of middle-aged female migrants how to use maps, buy train tickets, and search the web through their smartphones. Ke referred to these female migrants as "old sisters." Being alone in Beijing and far away from his hometown, Ke said he felt very warm when he received many greetings and emotional care from these old sisters. Although Liu and Ke are in a more privileged position, they do not presume any superiority toward migrant workers. As Masaki has argued, "It is imperative to avoid making assumptions about the interests of social actors from their presumed structural locations in society" (Masaki, 2004).

Connections and Contradictions

Different from earlier observations that local origins play a vital role in the formation of migrant workers' social networks (Jacka, 2006; Pun, 2005), social relations among migrant worker participants at the two NGOs are more often based on their collegiality and NGO membership. For instance, domestic workers make friends with female migrants employed by the same domestic company, and they meet other workers through MWC's activities. Identification with NGOs as members of a community is prominent in forming social bonds among migrant workers. Female migrants strongly identify with MWC and its current advocacy mission. When they participate in MWC's activities in the public space, they often proudly introduce themselves as the organization's members. Jacka's study of MWC in the 1990s reveals that MWC created a subjective position of *dagongmei* for female migrants and focused on improving their *suzhi* as self-development, but many female migrant members were not satisfied with the judgmental discourse of their lack of *suzhi*. My analysis shows that female migrant participants start to embrace an organizational identity as the NGO shifts from being a mere service provider to an advocacy force. Migrant worker participants at MWH are also closely bonded by membership and identification with the organization, while collegiality plays a less notable role in their network-forming. This kind of membership is more a community membership than an organizational one. Whereas organizational membership tends to be a professional relationship based on shared interests, a feeling of community constitutes social inclusion and belonging and collectiveness among migrant workers themselves. Migrant workers at MWH do different jobs as contract workers at small manual factories, self-employed carpenters, and domestic situations, among others.

These workers develop a strong sense of brotherhood and sisterhood through frequent participation in MWH's activities. Staff members of NGOs serve as key coordinators to maintain close relationships and connections with migrant worker participants. Some early female migrant participants at MWC in the 1990s still maintain connections with earlier MWC staff. Many migrant worker participants at the two NGOs express that some staff members are very nice, attentive, and caring to them, and their close relationships with these people is one of the most important reasons for them to attend NGOs' activities.

The use of ICTs has gradually become a vital component of participation in NGOs in the past few years and virtual access is a critical counterpart to physical participation, which is often limited by distance and time availability. The increasing use of smartphones among migrant workers provides a material basis for their enhanced participation through technologies. QQ was once the most popular Internet communication tool among migrant workers (Qiu, 2016). In the recent few years, WeChat has become the main social media used by migrant workers and it has also been a prominent communicative platform for NGOs' participants. Staff members of MWH and MWC have formed a variety of chat groups through WeChat. Each organization has one main chat group with around 300-400 people, and these people include all types of participants discussed above. In the main MWH chat group, daily discussions are usually about social and political issues, such as government policies and labor exploitation. There has often been harsh criticism toward China's embrace of capitalism. MWC's main chat group focuses more on information sharing and social networking. Job recruitment information is shared among domestic worker participants. Female migrants tend to chat

about their lives with friends they know through MWC. MWH and MWC also set up separate discussion groups for their different programs. These groups have dozens of people who are participants in the programs, including staff members, migrant workers, scholars, volunteers, and some visitors who once attended events. The use of social media facilitates communication and interaction among participants. For those who do not live in Beijing or cannot attend NGO activities regularly, online chat groups enable them to keep informed of and remain connected with the NGOs and other participants.

Participation is not neutral and free from politics; rather, it is often "infused with existing relations of power, interactions with them may reproduce rather than challenge hierarchies and inequalities" (Cornwall, 2004, p. 81). Power dynamics of participation could exclude certain actors or views (Cleaver, 1999; Gaventa, 2004). In the cases of MWC and MWH, gendered dynamics of NGOs' organizational culture and patriarchal power greatly shape female migrant workers' participation. MWC is predominately a women's place. All founders and most of the earlier and current staff members are female. In the 1990s, many young migrant women as well as some young men attended MWC's activities. Migrant worker participants have all been female migrants since the early 2000. Gender dynamics are quite different at MWH. The founders and main staff members of MWH are men. Male power and authority appear to be dominant in the organization. Among the core members of MWH, there are many more male migrants than female ones. Some female migrants are prevented by their husbands to attend MWH's activities and events. As it is a mixed space for women and men, husbands do not want their wives to participate in activities with other men. A staff member related instances where, when MWH organized a gala, young female migrants who wished to

perform were often prevented by their boyfriends because they considered "paotoulumian" (public display) a stigma for women. The gendered power dynamic is also epitomized in MWC's space. Some domestic workers express that their husbands encourage and support them to participate at MWC as it is a women-only space. As one female worker disclosed in the interview, "my husband never worries about my coming to MWC. There is nothing to worry, right? All of us here are women." These examples of two NGOs reveal that female migrants' access to participation in public activities is still rather constrained by patriarchal power relations. As prior studies on young female migrants and NGOs merely look at unmarried women or fail to account for gendered power in shaping these women's participation (Jacka, 2006; Wallis, 2013b), reconsidering migrant workers' participation from a gendered dimension is necessary to understand and intervene with the constraints that prevent female migrants' participation. A gendered dimension to participation politics complements the existing critique of NGOs' relationship with migrant workers in general. The connections between migrant workers and NGOs are not only influenced by this group's high mobility (Franceschini, 2014) and NGOs' corporate practices (Lee & Shen, 2011), but also structured by long-established asymmetric gendered power in Chinese society.

From Symbolic to Material Impact

Migrant workers' participation in NGOs brings symbolic empowerment through enriching their social and cultural lives. NGOs' activities create cultural and social spaces in which migrant workers claim agency to articulate their own voices and needs, which are marginalized in the dominant culture. The collaboration among various social actors in NGOs' service and activism contests the cultural inequalities and social exclusion that

migrant workers face. The symbolic impact of NGOs' participation can transform into material effects. The following event is one promising example.

On a freezing and gloomy afternoon in December 2015, about 50 officials flooded into one of the two Migrant Workers' Home's yards where its staff lived and smashed their winter heating boilers. The officials were from the police, urban management department, fire department, bureau of trade, township government, and the village committee of Picun. Destroying the boilers was done in the name of preventing potential security risks, but no prior notice or contact was made with MWH. This was not the first violent enforcement in the past few months. Two months ago, officials of Picun village demanded MWH to move out without giving any specific reason. As the organization had a legal rental lease with the landlord, they refused to do so. One day, their two yards were suddenly powered down. Since then, more than 20 staff members had lived without electricity for two months. As the winter approaches, MWH started to use boilers for heating, equipment commonly used by Picun residents in winter. The situation got tense after the officials smashed MWH's boilers. The average temperature of winter in Beijing was around minus ten degrees Fahrenheit and it would be extremely hard to live without heating equipment. MWH announced a call for fundraising through its WeChat public accounts. The call narrated the incident and listed the itemized financial aid the organization needed to buy 30 sets of thickened quilts and a large diesel generator. The fundraising article had over 10,000 pageviews[4] and quickly attracted wide attention. The article was widely shared across social media platforms. Several mainstream media reported the instance. Domestic well-known scholars, migrant workers, NGOs, activists, and various publics expressed their support of MWH by writing and sharing articles and

commentaries through social media. Although the voices and discourses deployed in the articles were different in that some were moderate while others were radical, and interpretations of the instance were also addressed from different perspectives, those actions did generate public attention towards MWH's difficult situation and lead to further discussions on social equality and underprivileged groups. By the end of December, MWH had raised $10,000 in crowdfunding which enabled them to purchase a diesel generator for electric heating. On January 2, the power supply for MWH was restored after 78 days of power outage.

The instance of MWH's "being forced to move," a frame frequently used in the endorsement articles, reveals the still precarious conditions of migrant worker NGOs in China's political and economic ecology. On the other hand, this instance epitomizes how the symbolic power generated through collective action can lead to material impact.

Conclusion

The cases of Migrant Women's Club and Migrant Workers' Home show that NGOs can become an active organizational force to cultivate social change, a finding which expands prior scholarly observation of labor NGOs as merely service providers. Through participating in NGOs, migrant workers and various social agents form pluralistic counter-publics that react against migrant workers' inequality. Their participation in NGO activities to improve migrant workers' lives forms collective action that disrupts the urban-middle-class public sphere. The counter-publics are pluralistic, as these social actors are driven by different needs and their interests are not always in alignment and may even cause conflict. For instance, female migrants' access to the

public space at NGOs is shaped by the unequal gender power in their lives, which echoes prior scholars' critique of politics in counter-publics.

Migrant workers and other social actors' participation in NGOs' activities and activism creates what Cornwall defines as "organic spaces" where people with common goals get together (Cornwall, 2002), and here is where possibilities to exercise countervailing power emerge (Gaventa, 2004). The motivations and practices of participation are diverse and hybrid: they are political, moral, social, and cultural. These practices challenge the unequal structures that produce migrant workers as cheap laborers and alienated others in both discursive and substantial ways. Migrant workers' participation at NGOs' service and advocacy programs reclaims cultural, social, and communicative power, although the power redistribution is constrained within the NGO-enabled space and occurs at a small scale. The actions embody a form of everyday collective resistance which interrogates their cultural, social, and economic inequalities: marginalization in mainstream culture, underrepresentation and stereotypes in media, social exclusion in urban life, labor exploitation, and lack of social welfare support, to name a few. The resistance is more sustainable and integrated into workers' daily lives, which is different from short-term labor strikes or protests in industrial zones. In non-industrial zones, migrant workers are scattered in cities, which makes them harder to organize than factory workers in industrial zones. In urban spaces, middle-class and locals can easily embrace a collective identity as consumers and residents, whereas migrant workers are alienated as outsiders and others. At NGOs, migrant workers gather together with a collective identity to claim their own space and build communities in cities. Social media facilitate migrant workers' communication and sustain their offline

interactions and activism in the online space. Other social actors, including individuals, social groups, and institutions from sectors in civil society, the market, and the state join NGOs' service and activism for migrant workers as individualized and networked collective action. Participants' different possessions of political, economic, cultural, and social capital are not determining forces in shaping their relations and collaborations with NGOs. Individuals' subjectivities and subjective experiences more often serve as the driving force behind their participation. Transnational and trans-local networks constitute a collective force of civil society. Within these networks, influential local NGOs, such as MWC and MWH, are key actors in forging connections and allocating resources.

In the next three chapters, I analyze different modes of communicative activism that constitutes working-class resistance, the politics that are embedded in the process, and the impact the activism has generated.

CHAPTER 4

SUBJECTIVE TRANSFORMATION THROUGH PERFORMANCE: FEMALE MIGRANT DOMESTIC WORKERS

Introduction

By 2010, the number of domestic workers had reached 20 million in China and most of them are rural-to-urban female migrants. Chapter 4 analyzes the female migrant domestic workers' performance through the case of *Didinghua Theater* at Migrant

Women's Club. This chapter explores the questions: (1) How have female migrants been mobilized to take part in the performance as collective resistance? (2) What changes have been enabled though the resistance? (3) What are the limitations of NGO-intermediate collective action? In conversation with literature on scholarship on domestic workers globally and in China, I explicate the specificity of the current situation of female migrant domestic workers. Besides the heavy workload, long working hours, and low hourly rate, domestic workers lack protection from labor laws, employment security, pensions, and other social welfare. They face severe biases and discrimination.

Drawing upon performance studies (Conquergood, 2002; Denzin, 2005; Madison, 1998; Mutua & Swadener, 2004) and Gibson-Graham's concept of the "politics of possibilities," I analyze how domestic workers' motivations, processes, and practices of performance at Didinghua have enabled transformations at a subjective level and intervened with images of domestic workers in the public and mediated spheres. The last section reveals the institutional politics of Migrant Women's Club which have shaped the resistance process. This chapter expands the understanding of the political implications of performance as a particular form of communicative resistance: the transformation can happen at a subjective level in the process of mobilization and actual practices. Collective identities, values, and emotions are vital for mobilizing collective action. NGOs are important sites and agents to nurture and organize collective action among working-class women, but they can also increase the radical potential.

Intersections: Middle-aged Female Rural Migrants as Domestic Workers in China

Domestic Workers and Global Capitalism

Domestic workers worldwide are women, and most of them are working-class, migrants/immigrants, and racial minorities. Since the 1950s, capitalist markets have commodified reproductive labor as commercial services in western industrialized societies (Glenn, 1986, 1992). Scholars have explicated how capitalism adapts to various forms of power relations to produce and exploit cheap, feminized, and flexible domestic laborers in different parts of the world. For instance, in the U.S., white middle-class women displace the burden of domestic work onto working-class, immigrant, and racial minority women with degrading social status, heavy workload, and low wages (Glenn 1986; Romero, 1992/2002). Paid domestic work produces an interlocking system of oppression based on gender, race, and class (Glenn, 1992). In Singapore, nationalist and gendered ideologies lower the labor value of transnational maids (Huang & Yeoh, 1998). In 1990s' Hong Kong, working-class women from Philippines, Indonesia, and other Southeast and South Asian countries are commodified as cheap and ideal labor to fill Hong Kong's shortage of domestic workers (Constable, 2007). Similar accounts and stories have been revealed in the U.K. (Anderson & Hochschild, 2002), Malaysia (Chin, 1998), and many other geopolitical contexts. This section analyzes the recent specific configurations of domestic workers in China and builds upon the existing literature on female migrant domestic workers.

In China, domestic workers are mainly rural-to-urban female migrants with a small number of urban poor. Existing studies on domestic workers in China expose their precarious circumstances and unequal power relations. Domestic workers lack protection

of labor laws, employment security, pensions, and other social welfare (Yan, 2008; Yao, Zhang, & Zou, 2014); Besides heavy workloads, the group also faces alienation, biases, and discrimination (Sun, 2009; Yan, 2008). Over centuries, household servants were among the most deprived social groups in ancient China. It was the poor and disenfranchised people who were household servants to the privileged. The feudal political system regulated and categorized servants as inferior people without entitlement to land or any civic rights (Yan, 2008). Given this low social status, servants became a contemptible social identity. Upon the founding of modern China in 1949, Mao's government abolished the exploitative and oppressive relations of production to promote a socialist version of equality. In Mao's China, the feudal form of domestic servants no longer existed and only a few political and intellectual elites could hire household maids (Yan, 2008). Economic reform in the late 1970s facilitated a recurrence of domestic workers, and there has been an increasing demand for domestic service among ordinary urban families ever since. Similar to other countries in the world, typical families that hire domestic workers in reforming China are middle- and middle-upper-class urban families. Middle-aged working couples are often in crucial need of domestic service for child-caring and housework. There is also an increasing demand for domestic service to care for the elders among urban families. From the late 1980s to the beginning of the 21st century, rural young female migrants, the laid-off urban workers and rural relatives of urban families, constituted the main labor pool for domestic work (Gaetano, 2004; Yan, 2008). For middle- and middle-upper-class housewives, employing domestic workers for housework become a way of embracing a typical middle-class lifestyle. Yan argues that the contemporary relationship between employer families and domestic workers is a new

master-servant relationship (Yan, 2008). Gaetano used the term "enslaved" to describe domestic workers' mistreatment and bias from their employers (Gaetano, 2004). Sun's study of media and cultural politics demonstrates how mainstream media representations of domestic workers perpetrate the urban-elitist gaze that these female migrants' "lower socioeconomic standing is synonymous with moral inferiority" (Sun, 2009, p. 51).

According to the recent national report on domestic workers, middle-aged female migrants, who are from 40 to 55 years old, have gradually become a main labor force for paid domestic work in major Chinese cities since the beginning of 2000 (Yao, Zhang, & Zou, 2014). Despite the remaining structural defects, one notable change is domestic workers' dramatically increased salaries from the past. The average monthly salary of domestic workers in Beijing is around $1000 (6000 CNY), and just slightly lower in other cities (Yao, Zhang, & Zou, 2014). But prior studies did not capture this new trend and few studies have looked at middle-aged female migrant domestic workers. Gaetano's work on young female migrants in the late 1990s found that although domestic work was low-paid, young rural women viewed it as a gender-appropriate occupation and considered the household as a relatively safer space than other working environments, such as restaurants (Gaetano, 2004). But at the same time, the occupation is highly stigmatized by women workers themselves and their families and acquaintances (Gaetano, 2004). Yan's years of ethnographic accounts of domestic service in China reveal that domestic workers are constructed as a low-quality subject through the discourse of *suzhi* as a form of neoliberal governmentality (Yan, 2003, 2006, 2008). My ethnographic accounts of middle-aged female migrant domestic workers continue and supplement the conversation with more diverse subjectivities and situations of these

women workers. The following four stories represent life trajectories of middle-aged female migrant workers, belonging to the first generation of migrant workers. These female migrants come from rural villages and dropped out of school at an early age. Some have worked in factories, shops, and restaurants; some of them run small businesses in towns close to their home villages. Yet, after twenty years' work, most of them still have little social mobility. Given the constraints of age, low education level, and lack of professional skills, many middle-aged female migrants become domestic workers. Aside from the high salaries that domestic workers nowadays can earn, these women still face bias and unfair treatment and lack legal protection of their labor rights and securities. Tracing the subjectivities and situations of middle-aged female migrant domestic workers helps us to understand their motivations to participate in the performance program and clarifies the possibilities for change the program may bring to their lives.

Stories of Female Migrant Domestic Workers

During my fieldwork with *Didinghua*, I gradually got to know many domestic worker participants. Most of them were rural female migrants from 35 to 55 years old. Malan was a 46-year-old domestic worker. Coming from a rural village, Malan dropped out of school at the age of 17 and went to a city to sell clothes with her older sister. She went back to the village in her early 20s as her parents urged her to pursue marriage, and later got married to a guy from a neighboring village. Upon marriage, she moved to a nearby town with her then-husband and started a small furniture business there. They ran the business for almost twenty years until she decided to get divorced after finding out about her ex-husband's cheating. The ex-husband did not agree upon divorce at the

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beginning, but Malan was so angry, sad, and determined to get divorced that she was

willing even to give up her deserved property to accelerate the process. Malan left the

town in 2009, and first went to Shanghai where she had worked as a domestic worker and

restaurant waitress. As she was not used to the climate of Shanghai, she went to Beijing

in 2011, where she has stayed and worked as a domestic worker since then. Malan

recalled in the interview that she encountered many employers who looked down upon

domestic workers. She did not like to be referred as "baomu"[1] by her employers and

found the term discriminatory, "some employers kept speaking ill of their previous

domestic workers, and it made me very uncomfortable when they constantly using the

word baomu." Malan shrugged and told of instances when her employers despised rural

people. She said in an ironic tone,

> "they were surprised when they saw me using brandy cosmetics
> and even asked me how come I also used expensive brands like
> they did. Did they mean that I only deserved cheap things? They
> just looked down upon us from rural villages. But I actually have
> better living conditions than some of them. I showed employers
> the photos of the big condo I bought in the urban town close to
> my home village."

Fangfang first went to Beijing when she was only 17 in the early 1990s. Like

many other young women migrants back in the 1990s, Fangfang was introduced by a

relative to accept work at an urban household. The employer family promised to pay her

$50 (300 CNY) per month for taking care of their new-born baby. But when she arrived,

they only paid her $40 (250 CNY) and had her do all the housework. Fangfang was

recalling her unpleasant experience,

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[1] Baomu is a term used in China to refer to domestic workers, often carrying demeaning
and discriminatory connotations.

> "the workload was very intense, and what was worse is that I felt
> so depressed living with them. They were not bad people, but
> they made very noticeable boundary with me and treated me in a
> very uncomfortable way. For example, they would rather have
> the fruits rotten than have me eat them."

Fangfang left the family after two years and never worked as a domestic worker again.

She told me about her obsession with having an office job,

> "I was so desperate to find a secretary job back then and I did not
> even know why. I knew I have no degrees and few computer
> skills. But my handwriting is very pretty, and my writing skills
> are good. I believe they can be my advantages."

As a young rural girl who dropped out of school at 16 years old, Fangfang took every

chance to learn knowledge and professional skills when she entered Beijing. She read

from books about speech skills, learned Microsoft software at a neighbor printing shop,

and even acquired a college diploma through self-study. Her hard work and

determination paid back: all her later jobs have been as secretary in small or medium-

sized companies, just as she longed for.

Xiaohong found domestic work a suitable occupation for herself. She never

worked in factories and believed the collegial relationships could be too complicated to

deal with. Before coming to Beijing, Xiaohong had worked at a wedding photography

shop in a town close to her home village for almost ten years. She was responsible for

doing make-up for customers and was later promoted to do sales work. She did not like

sales work and always felt pressured and stressful; so she quit the job. After marriage, she

went to a southern coastal city with her husband, and they both worked at a supermarket

there. Introduced by a friend, she took some training classes offered by a domestic

company and obtained a certificate during her stay in the city. Attracted by the relatively

well-paid domestic jobs in Beijing, she went to Beijing alone at the age of 36. Most of

her work was to take care of children. She had two clear standards to choose employer families: good wages and being happy at work. She told me, "I don't mind heavy workload if they can pay me well. But if I feel unhappy and uncomfortable, I will leave and quit immediately." To illustrate what she means by being happy and comfortable, she talked about one instance where a grandma of her employers' child often had conflict with her due to different parenting ideas. One day, during a fight, the elder woman used curse words to scold and threaten her. Feeling quite angry, annoyed, and frustrated, she quit the job after that incident.

Jiajie was born in 1960 in a town in northern China, graduated from high school in 1977, and did not go to college due to the Cultural Revolution. She worked in a state-owned enterprise in the early years and got to know her husband at work. They started their own small business in the early 1990s when the state started to boost the market economy. The business was not running well and led them into debt. In 2007, she decided to go to Beijing after seeing a job ad posted by the municipal labor ministry to recruit domestic workers. She recalled why she made this decision, "The minimum wage posted for domestic workers in Beijing is $30 (200 CNY), higher than the maximum wage I can get from my town." To pay back the debt, Jiajie went to Beijing alone at the age of 47. Speaking of her ability, Jiajie was very proud that she was an exceptionally excellent domestic worker, because she was "different from those who came from rural villages given her background and experiences." Despite of her better background than most female rural migrants, Jiajie's early years of working were not pleasant. She met many employers who were unfriendly and picky, and once she was even wrongly accused of stealing her employer's stuff. Jiajie was lucky to finally work for a nice family and she

stayed there for seven years. The wife and husband both worked as executives of big state-owned companies. Jiajie's daily routine was to cook for the son of the family and do housework. The "most important" reason that she worked for the family for such a long time was, in her words, "they do respect me." She related several instances: the employer family always waited for her to have meals together; when she had just started working for the family, the employers told her that "we are all equal, you dagong (work) for us and we dagong for the Party; there are no differences between us." Jiajie said to me,

> "My employers are not like many other (employer) families,
> which only asked their domestic workers to eat the leftovers.
> Regardless if they really think so (we are equal) or not, at least
> their words made me very comfortable and feel respectful. Once I
> was ill in hospital, the employer family did not cut my salary for
> the leave, but actually paid me extra to comfort me. They also
> visited me in hospital and brought fruits and nutrients."

Similar to Gaetano's observation that young female migrants regarded domestic work as a stigmatized profession (Gaetano, 2004), this perception was also held among middle-aged female migrant domestic workers that they found domestic work a shameful, inferior, and undesirable occupation. As my informants recalled in the interviews, they had to try incredibly hard to get themselves prepared to "serve people" (*Cihouren*) before they decided to take the job. Jiajie said that in early years, she considered herself working as a domestic worker "losing face" (Diuren), and when she was working at employers' families, she dared not face up to others and often spoke with her head down. Other domestic workers related similar experiences. They felt ashamed to tell relatives and friends back home that they were domestic workers in Beijing. Domestic workers adjusted to the submissive roles of serving people when they decide to take the job, and supposed it was what the occupation demands. But at the same time, the workers'

dismissive perception of being domestic workers was in constant contradiction with their strong feelings as dignified individuals who long for respect. When domestic workers had unpleasant encounters with employer families, they got frustrated and angry, and often felt helpless and powerless. Bias and prejudice toward their domestic work jobs becomes one of the issues of most concern for these middle-aged female migrant workers. The following sections unpack the possibilities for change enabled by domestic workers' participation in performance.

Performance as Collective Expression, Reflection, and Critique

Scholarly attention has been paid to domestic workers' resistance effort, yet the extant studies either look at individuals' tactics or fail to recognize the possibilities of forming collective resistance in China. Sun's work shows individual domestic workers' diverse ways of transgression, including talking back to the urban-centric media gaze and gossiping with other workers, among others (Sun, 2009). Gaetano also reveals the individual strategies that domestic workers have adopted to improve their working conditions, such as forging kinship-like ties with employers and switching employers strategically for higher wages (Gaetano, 2004). Constable's case study on transnational domestic workers' protests in Hong Kong speaks highly of the political potential of the collective action among Filipino, Indonesian, Thai, and Malaysian domestic workers, particularly the protestors' discourse of human rights and global justice that challenges neoliberal globalization (Constable, 2009). She argues that such protest is not possible in mainland China. This argument is partially right, considering the political environment; yet the argument is based on a western liberal democratic understanding of collective resistance that prioritizes protests and strikes. A more inclusive framework is needed to

understand the diverse forms of collective resistance that are vibrantly taking place in China. Wallis' recent work approaches domestic workers' performance at *Didinghua* from the perspectives of emotional labor and social media and discusses that the performance activities enable domestic workers' individual empowerment, yet limit the collective resistance (Wallis, 2018). The analysis of the victimhood stories emphasizes the therapeutic dimensions that constitute a mode of communicative empowerment for individual participants (Wallis, 2018). Bearing Wallis's critique in mind, my study takes into consideration the broader mission of *Didinghua* which resides in Migrant Women's Club's long-term advocacy effort for domestic worker's rights. Paying particular attention to the advocacy discourse on labor values, I draw upon performance studies to analyze how domestic workers' performance becomes a form of collective resistance.

Before the founding of *Didinghua*, Migrant Women's Club helped many domestic workers negotiate with employer families to get wages in arrears or ask for compensation for work injuries. The interaction with domestic workers led MWC staff to realize that the organization's work should go beyond merely providing such service; they should advocate for wider awareness and recognition of domestic workers' situations. As many domestic workers were interested in singing and dancing as leisure activities, performance appeared to be an ideal choice to motivate these workers to participate and offered an appealing, reflexive, and participatory way to tell domestic workers' stories. Here, performance is not staged in high-brow or commercial theatres; rather, performance represents political and cultural articulation by subaltern groups, researchers, and activists to question and challenge oppression and domination (Conquergood, 2002). MWC initiated *Didinghua* in July 2011, and Chengmei was the

main organizer. Zhao Zhiyong, a theater professor from the Central Academy of Drama,

together with two of his graduate students, kindly served as voluntary instructors to offer

performance training and guidance for female workers. In an article where Zhao Zhiyong

reflects on his instructor experiences with the underprivileged groups' performance, he

refers to Augusto Boal's "the theatre of the oppressed" to interpret the political

implication of domestic workers' performance: "Although one or two performances

cannot change the disadvantaged situations of these people, their performance contribute

to a 'new cultural' movement for social equity and justice" (Zhao, 2016, p. 168). The

statement demonstrates the early organizers' clear political goals for the performance. To

cater to the working schedule of domestic workers, most of whom only have one day off

per week, *Didinghua* holds the activity on Saturday and it becomes a routine. In the first

two years, Chengmei and professor Zhao organized workshops for the female migrants to

share their domestic workers' experiences. They helped workers realize the unfair bias

toward domestic work and confirm the value of their labor and jobs. As Chengmei told

me in the interview,

> "when I first met these women at *Didinghua*, many of them felt
> 'losing face' for doing this job. In the society, there is still a lot of
> prejudice against domestic workers and bias of viewing domestic
> work as a degrading job. We want to change the situation."

Chengmei and Professor Zhao's agenda resonated well with domestic workers' longing

for respect and dignity.

More than forty domestic workers attended the initial activities at *Didinghua*.

Instructors offered them classes on basic performance skills, such as body language,

sound, and imitation trainings. None of the women workers had prior experiences in

performance or acting. Many of them were attracted by their interests in singing and

dancing and free acting classes offered by a college professor. Yet many people got bored with the trainings after several classes. Professor Zhao adjusted the strategy and encouraged women workers to tell their stories, talk about their working experiences, and practice improvised performances. The collected stories were then written into plays by the three instructors. One domestic worker participant recalled the storytelling experiences in the interview,

> "many of us cried when we were sharing the hardship and
> difficulty of working as maids. We are treated bad and feel so
> lonely and depressed living in employers' households. When we
> were talking about it together, we got so sad and angry."

Wallis interprets the performing of victimhood stories as the cost of domestic workers' emotional labor and well-being (Wallis, 2018), yet the transformative potential of the off-stage storytelling and experience-sharing activities should not be neglected. Collective storytelling articulates domestic workers' individual sufferings to a group's experiences. The articulation interrogates the very inequality and unfairness they encountered. The storytelling by subaltern groups is firstly a process to nurture self-awareness about the systematic inequality. By telling stories, underprivileged groups actively interrogated the unequal processes that limited their lives (Madison, 1998). Performance becomes a powerful action to create space for contestation where oppressed people can seek alternative and/or oppositional ontological beings that resist their oppression and domination.

The collective stories were written into a performance titled "My Labor, Dignity, and Dream" by Zhao Zhiyong, the volunteer scholar. The performance consists of eight stories which are based on domestic workers' told experiences. The performance highlights unpleasant experiences domestic workers encounter in their daily lives,

including mistreatment by employers, discrimination against and bias from which they suffered, the dull and intensive workload, the loneliness and isolation of their emotional lives, and these workers' feelings of helplessness and powerlessness. As discussed before, mainstream media and popular discourse portray stereotypical images of domestic workers as alienated others (Sun, 2009) and low *suzhi* (Yan, 2003, 2006, 2008). Domestic workers' performance stories are critical personal narratives (Mutua & Swadener, 2004) and counternarratives (Denzin, 2005) that expose power and oppression, offer hope, and mobilize action. By performing their experiences, domestic workers express voices of critique toward the unequal power relations. Performance transforms the individual, private, and invisible cases into collective, public, and visible issues. Through performance, underprivileged groups transform their experiences into voices, and such voices constitute what Nancy Fraser calls "subaltern counter-publics." Subaltern counter-publics signify arenas where subordinated people produce counter-discourses and express their own interpretations (Fraser, 1990). I present the eight stories in Table 2 below.

Table 2 Eight Stories of The Performance "My Labor, Dignity, and Dream"

Story 1	The security guard of an apartment complex did not allow a domestic worker to enter because she did not dress like an urban resident.
Story 2	A middle-aged employer couple demanded a domestic worker to call them "master/sir" (*laoye*) and "madam/lady" (*taitai*) to regard worker as a submissive servant in feudal times.

Story 3	A middle-aged female employer made contemplated comments of domestic work as a shameful occupation.
Story 4	A young female employer had postpartum depression and often yelled at a domestic worker. One midnight, the worker was driven out of the house by the employer.
Story 5	A middle-aged female employer asked a domestic worker to do extra household duties at her mom's place without paying the worker.
Story 6	An elder female deliberately humiliated a domestic worker in a public park.
Story 7	A middle-aged female employer blamed a domestic worker when her kid was playing in the living room and fell down on the ground.
Story 8	A middle-aged domestic worker felt sad to leave the employers' kid for whom she had been caring for several years.

Three of the performed stories exposed the bias, prejudice and discrimination against domestic workers often faced. One play told about the biased attitude from security guards of residential complex towards domestic workers. The play started with a worker's monologue that security guards did not allow her to enter the apartment complex many times. She was then talking in a proud tone while dressing herself up with an appearing-expensive coat and a scarf, "the security guard used to not let me in, but when I started to wear good clothes, they thought I was a residential here". Most of urban residential complex have security guards at the gate of the complex in China. The more 'luxury' the complex is, the stricter the security guard is. As someone who lives in the households of the complex, domestic workers should have granted access. Yet, they can

be prevented to get in just because they "do not dress well like residents". The security guards judge domestic workers based on their appearances and the way they dress. Another story displayed a scene that the female employer demanded the domestic workers to call her husband and her as "laoye" and "taitai". "Laoye" meant "master/sir" and "taitai" meant "madam/lady"; they were the forms of address used by domestic servants in pre-1949 China. Although such demands did not happen much, the address forms envisioned a master-servant relationship and domestic workers' submissive positions. In the third story, a middle-aged woman employer talked to her domestic worker in an exaggeratingly sarcastic and loud voice, "even if someone paid me one million, I would never work as a domestic worker". The words by the employer demonstrated a widely-held discrimination against domestic work as an undesiring and even despicable profession.

In the first play, security guards' biased attitude echoed the superiority of the rich residents and the inferiority of the poor and the less privileged. The domestic worker's "dressing like a rich resident" expressed an ironic mocking of the hegemonic performativity of the urban middle-class. In response to the subordination of domestic labor, the monologue of the domestic worker at the end of the third play was powerful, "You look down upon me, but I make livings by my own hands. What should be ashamed of"? Such a response questioned the degraded social value of domestic workers' labor and challenged the ideological domination of domestic labor.

Another three stories displayed the mistreatment of domestic workers by their employers. In one story, a domestic worker was forced to leave the employer's house at midnight. The wife had postpartum depression and she often yelled at and took it out on

the worker. The husband sometimes apologized on behalf of the wife yet he cannot stop his wife from verbally abusing the worker. The next scene was that one night, the wife lost her temper and ordered the worker to leave her house immediately. The husband did not take actions to help, and he simply apologized to the worker and suggested she leave. The worker then packed her things and left the house helplessly at midnight. The other story showed a typical case that employers take advantage of domestic workers. In the play, an employer asked a domestic worker to do housework at her mother's house, which was beyond what the worker was hired and paid for. The employer promised the worker to pay for the extra workload but ended up paying nothing. The third story told about an employer deliberately making trouble for a domestic worker. The employer, an elderly woman, asked the worker to walk her in a wheelchair to a park. In Chinese cities, parks are social spaces where the elders, housewives and children from nearby neighbourhoods go and have fun as daily routines. In the next scene, the employer requested the domestic worker to collect her urine in a container in the corner of the park. The worker found it embarrassing task to do in a public space so she suggested to the woman that she can accompany her to go to the restroom. But the employer refused and insisted that the worker do what she asked. The worker did it quite reluctantly and went to the park restroom to pour the urinal. Later, a neighbour, another elder woman showed up and greeted the woman employer. After bragging about her son's well-paid job as a company manager with the neighbour, the employer suddenly stood up from the wheelchair and went back home with the neighbour. The neighbour asked her in a surprising tone, "you can walk! Then why did you sit in the wheelchair?". The employer replied, "I hire her so she should do whatever I demand". The domestic worker came

back and only found an empty wheelchair. She sighed and wiped away tears, saying "Why is it so difficult to do this job? I really want to quit but I need money to pay for my daughter's tuition fees".

Compared with the other two stories, the employers' mistreatment of the domestic worker seemed to be not purposely in the first play. Yet, no matter being on purpose or not, the situations represented in the plays exposed the very unequal power relations between domestic workers and their employers. Performances of these situations were not merely showing domestic workers as helpless and powerless to provoke sympathy, rather, they helped to reveal the disadvantaged conditions of domestic workers to raise empathy and awareness. The way of performing, such as the worker's sighing in the third play, was affectively appealing. The worker's hopeless confession "I really want to quit but I need money" reflected the struggles majority of middle-aged female migrants experienced. They had few job choices yet heavy economic burden. To quit can be the action they could take to resist the mistreatment and unpleasant working conditions, but at the same time, to quit was an unfordable price for these female migrants.

The last two stories highlighted how sexual division of labor and class hierarchy intersected to produce female migrants as "ideal and suitable" labor subjects for domestic work. In one play, a domestic worker was hired to take care of the kid of the employer family. The play was about an instance when the worker was cooking for the family, the kid fell down while playing in the living room. The female employer, the mother of the kid, blamed on the worker for not doing a good caring job. The worker did not argue back to the employer. Heading down, she talked to herself in a low voice, "I was cooking in the kitchen and I thought the mother was in the living room with the kid, so she can at

least take care of the kid for a moment". The other play presented the strong emotion developed between the domestic worker and the child and the elder from the employer family. In one scene, the elder said to the worker, "Xiaoju (the name of the worker), my children are too busy with their jobs to take care of me, and you have taken care of me so well that I regard you as my half-daughter". The old woman had been sick for years and her daily lives relied heavily on Xiaoju. Another scene play was about when the worker had to leave for home because of family obligations, she felt sad to leave the child of whom she had been taking caring for several years.

Just as white middle-class women displaced the burden of domestic work onto working-class racial minority women, Chinese urban middle-class women passed on domestic duties to impoverished female migrants. Paid domestic work, as a particularly form of female migrants' employment, manifested privilege of the urban middle-class. The consumption of female migrants as domestic workers underpinned the long-established sexual division of labor that regarded domestic work as primarily women's tasks. The play of Xiaoju's story emphasized on domestic workers' emotional labor and devotion. While the market economy commodified female migrants as ideal, desirable, and cheap laborers for paid domestic work, the exploitation of their emotional labor was often concealed. These performances also revealed an ironic dilemma that domestic workers were not able to accompany their own children and elder parents while taking care of the employer families' children and elders. Such sacrifice also happened in millions of transnational domestic workers' lives. To earn better livings for their families, they worked for middle-class families in developed countries, but had to leave their children far back in the home countries.

Although these stories emphasize the suffering and maltreatment of domestic workers, they are more than just victimhood stories to provoke sympathy; rather, the stories reveal the groups' disadvantaged conditions and critique the unequal power relations. The performance exposes domestic workers' inequalities: the urban superiority that creates a distinctive hierarchy between urban residents and rural migrants; the low social status of servants in feudal times that reproduces an inferior position and stereotypical image of contemporary domestic workers; patriarchal values which designate domestic work as primarily women's tasks and lower the social value of domestic labor; and a market economy that exploits domestic workers' labor and emotional labor. Becoming domestic workers appears to be these women's individual choice, but it is the interlocking system of feudal heritage, patriarchal norms, market economy, and urban superiority that produces middle-aged female migrants as subordinate, feminized, cheap, and flexible laborers. Despite the fact that domestic workers' salaries have become seemingly high, the performance advocates that the heavy workload, long working hours, and long-standing bias towards domestic work as a stigmatized profession should not be overlooked.

Discourse of labor is central in the performance's resistance framework. Advocating domestic workers' labor value implies a socialist ideology with political implications. In Constable's study on transnational domestic workers' protests in Hong Kong, she recognizes their frames of global justice and human rights as explicit critique to neoliberal globalization (Constable, 2009). Constable also makes the point that such frames go beyond labor issues of migrant workers. Considering that Constable's argument is in the context of Hong Kong with specific political, economic, and social

characteristics, the analysis of labor and labor value discourse among domestic workers should also be contextualized. I argue that the frame of labor value does not narrow the political scope of the resistance. Calling for recognition of domestic workers' labor value is direct critique against the intersection of capitalist market, feudal stereotypes, and patriarchal values that degrade women's labor value. The value has both material and symbolic dimensions, and the resistance emphasizes more of a symbolic sense through terms such as respect and dignity. As Hartmann, a well-known Marxist feminist, explicates, patriarchy forces women into lower status and makes women's labor lower-paid or unpaid, and capitalism merges with patriarchy to exploit women's cheaper or free labor in capital accumulation (Hartmann, 1979). In China's context, it is not only patriarchy and the capitalist market, but also the rural-urban dichotomy and feudal legacy that degrade and exploit female migrant domestic workers' labor. Labor value was once a state-promoted ideology and one of the most essential components of socialism in Mao's China. Although such discourse greatly diminishes as China accelerates economic reform, labor value is still tolerable in the present political environment, while feminism and human rights are often dismissed by official discourse as too western. More importantly, labor value is better received among the general public than other progressive political frames, such as feminism and human rights, especially among working-class people. The use of labor value thus can be and proves to be effective to mobilize female migrant domestic workers to use the performance as a collective form of resistance against their inequalities. As shown in the end of story 3, a domestic worker strikes a powerful statement in her monologue performance, "You look down upon me, but I make livings by my own hands. What should I be ashamed of?"

Transforming Subjectivities and Spaces through Performance

In this section, I elaborate on the changes domestic workers' performance has enabled. In their intervention framework to challenge capitalism, politics of possibility, Gibson-Graham defines the cultivation of new subjectivities as the self-cultivation of subjects who can imagine and enact new modes of being (Gibson-Graham, 2006). Applying Gibson-Graham's concept here, female migrants embrace their mode of being domestic workers as dignified and valued. Domestic workers gradually change the degrading perceptions of their job through performance to advocate for the labor value. Collective story-telling, discussions, and performances nurture female migrant participants' self-awareness of unfairness and inequality. Self-confirmation and awareness are both means to and ends of domestic workers' collective resistance. Bourdieu's concept of symbolic capital can be adopted here to interpret political implications of Gibson-Graham's account. To put it simply, symbolic capital is "the acquisition of a reputation for competence and an image of respectability and honorability" (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 291), and "the power granted to those who have obtained sufficient recognition to be in a position to imposes recognition" (Bourdieu, 1989, p. 23). Cultivating new subjectivities can be a way to acquire symbolic capital toward recognition and respectability, which may ultimately contest the reproduction of inequality in the social space. As Mei said in the interview,

> "after participating in many discussions and performance
> activities, I start to realize that our performances are not only to
> tell stories of our sufferings, but to call for respect for us
> domestic workers. It (performance) makes me believe that
> domestic work is an important job and there should be mutual
> respect and understanding between employers and us. They
> should not despise us."

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This re-subjectivation opens possibilities for further change. The self-cultivation

of subjects can transform the places where people situate (Gibson-Graham, 2006). These

places include the household, workplace, communities, and urban spaces, to name a few.

This form of action is an intervention to bring practices into contexts which could not

generate them, but in which they are helpful to undermine hegemonic power. In their

workplace households, interviewees reflected that they abandoned the belief that

domestic workers were subordinate or even submissive to employers, and became more

confident to communicate, negotiate, and even argue with their employers regarding

work, particularly when they encountered conflicts. The self-confirmation brings

confidence and power to female migrant participants to deal with difficulties in other

spheres of life. Fangfang is a new member of *Didinghua* and has only joined for several

months. She was excited about the change performance brought to her life,

> "I was very stiff when I just started rehearsing, but I gradually
> improved my performing skills and I do gain a lot from the
> practicing. I always remind myself to behave more naturally
> when we rehearse, then I apply this strategy to real lives and
> become more confident when I interact with people."

The feeling of confidence and accomplishment are often mentioned in these women's

reflections on their participation at *Didinghua*. Ying is also a recently-joined participant.

Without any prior performance-related training and experiences, Ying appears to be a

talented performer. She once played a role as a mean employer in the staged performance

at MWC's Twentieth Anniversary gala in April 2016, and her vivid and robust

performance received highly praise from the gala attendants. When I complimented her

performance in the interview, Ying talked about why *Didinghua* appealed to her,

> "I am very willing to come (to *Didinghua*) for I feel refreshed
> here, especially when I have to deal with endless housework. It's

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already so tiring at work but there is more housework waiting for
me at home. I don't have any experience in performance.
Everything just feels natural to me. I am very happy and pleased
to see that sisters here like my performance."

Xiu, a 50-year-old domestic worker, has a tense and unpleasant relationship with her husband, and her early years of working experiences at urban households is depressing. She was rather introverted and barely talked to anyone when she first participated in the activities at *Didinghua*. But after two years' participation, she gradually has become an active member. It takes Xiu two hours to take buses to get to *Didinghua*, but she is always the earliest one to come. Although she is still not a talkative person, she looks very relaxed and delighted when she is with other domestic workers. Xiu has made some good friends at *Didinghua*. Becoming a core member of the team brings her a great sense of emotional support and recognition. Another participant, Hua, had suffered from domestic violence for years. She got divorced from her ex-husband and left the rural village after her children had grown up. She went to Beijing and became a domestic worker. At first, she felt shameful to tell others her story of being abused by her husband. She gained trust and courage from participating in the performance, and finally told the other participants her story. Hua's experiences were later written into a play at *Didinghua*, "Desert Home," to advocate against domestic violence. Being marginalized and excluded from urban social life, participants like Xiu and Hua regard *Didinghua* as an intimate and secure place where they have friends and social support. Through performance, female migrants transform themselves from disadvantaged individuals to a collective group actively fighting against their real-life suffering in various ways.

Figure 2 Female migrants rehearsing performance at MWC's office.
Source: Fieldwork in March 2016

It is not surprising that not all female migrants participate in performance activities at *Didinghua* for resistance purposes. As Wallis observes, many domestic workers attend *Didinghua* for fun in a more social sense (Wallis, 2018). Like many NGOs that provide social space for marginalized groups in the past and present (Chan, 2012; Jacka, 2006), Migrant Workers' Home also enables a social and alternative public space for domestic workers to meet friends, chat, and relax after tedious and heavy workdays. Every Saturday since the founding of *Didinghua* in 2011, a group of domestic workers arrives at the MWC activity room around 9 am. The room is big and wood-floored, about 40 square meters. Before the activities start, usually at 10 am, these women sit together and chat about their work at employers' families, their lives and family affairs. They share with each other how their employers treat them, discuss which domestic work companies have more benefits for workers, and talk about strategies and tactics to deal with employers.

Figure 3 Female migrants gathering talking at MWC's office.
Source: Fieldwork in July 2016

If Sun's ethnographic stories of maids in China show that they are bounded within households and urban apartment complexes (*xiaoqu*) (Sun, 2009), domestic workers' gatherings at MWC transgress their spatial limitations. Not all activities about performance are aiming for or necessarily about collective resistance, but as the stories of Xiu and Hua demonstrate in the previous section, a feeling of sisterhood and mutual trust and support has emerged among a group of active participants through collective practices and exercises. In rehearsals and practices, only a few women can act well and naturally, while many others recite lines with stiff facial expressions and body language. Some women workers said in the interviews that performance was difficult for them, as they had no prior performance training or simply lacked such talent. One worker said,

> "I have devoted so much spare time to memorizing the lines of
> my roles (assigned in the plays). Remembering lines is not a
> problem as I just repeat and repeat for many times, but to perform
> with vibrant expressions and emotions is very challenging for me.
> I don't have a talent in performing! I can't perform well but I
> enjoy the activity very much."

Although they often must rehearse many times, which can easily become tiring and draining, these women found the activities joyful. They made jokes with each other, reminded others of forgotten lines, and suggested ways of acting based on their own understanding.

Figure 4 Female migrants preparing for performance rehearsal at MWC's office.
Source: Fieldwork in March 2016

The performance has attracted wider public attention through public staging and mediated space. A group of early domestic worker participants performed "My Labor, Dignity, and Dream" at a local theatre owned by the municipal government in January 2012. Since then, *Didinghua*'s performance had been staged at various public spaces and occasions, such as "Feifei Festival." "Feifei Festival" is an annual performance event organized by the municipal government of ChaoYang district in Beijing. The festival is a non-profit event for non-professional performance groups to perform diverse themes, and it has been held from May to June every year since 2009. *Didinghua* has also performed

at other NGOs in Beijing, Jinan, and Xi'an, and these NGOs work on migrant workers'

issues and have associations with MWC. *Didinghua* has attracted domestic and overseas

activists and organizations to visit, share experiences, and discuss related issues.

Audiences who attend *Didinghua*'s performances are often domestic workers, migrant

workers, NGO staffs, activists, scholars, students, and other concerned publics. After a

performance, domestic worker performers sometimes hold interaction sections with the

audience to further share their experiences of being domestic workers. Some audiences

wrote their thoughts on the message board of "Feifei Festival" that, although the

performance appeared not to be aesthetic and professional, they found it touching to see

domestic workers telling and performing their suffering experiences. Some audiences

praised that the performance would raise public attention toward domestic workers'

situation. One audience member sharply commented that domestic workers' issues were

not individual ones but social and structural problems, and they were victims of the

country's economic development. Responses from the audience were not always positive;

some who themselves had employed domestic workers found the performance offensive

and uncomfortable, complaining that they were nice to their employees and were not like

the mean employers in the performance at all. Despite the complaints, most of the

audience expressed understanding of the performance's mission and implication.

Performance as a form of public pedagogy articulates struggles and politics to wider

publics. The pedagogy inherent in performance can generate sympathy and reflection

and, it may be hoped, mobilize action and change toward a more democratic and

egalitarian world. As Madison augured promisingly in the "performance of possibilities,"

"when the audience member begins to witness degrees of tension and incongruity

between the Subject's life-world and those processes and systems that challenge and undermine that world, something more and new is learned about how power works" (Madison,1998, p. 282). Domestic workers' performances enact a form of public pedagogy by making the invisible visible and generating public reflection around inequalities. By reaching out to wider publics, *Didinghua* transformed performance into intervention possibilities.

Figure 5 Didinghua Performing at a national university in Beijing.
Source: Fieldwork in May 2016

<u>Politics of NGO-intermediate Resistance</u>

The two main obstacles *Didinghua* face are the high mobility of domestic worker participants and the lack of long-term volunteer instructors. Except forseveral members who remain active participants from the very beginning of *Didinghua*'s founding, most participants can only participate for a certain period of time due to job switching or

relocation to other cities. Many domestic workers often switch households for better working conditions or higher salaries. If the household location is too far away from MWC's office, this may prevent some workers from attending activities. Participant mobility brings difficulties to arranging performance on stage, and temporary substitutions happen frequently. In the study of labor NGOs in the south, Franceschini observes that due to migrant workers' high mobility, they rarely maintain long-term relationships with NGOs (Franceschini, 2014). Although domestic workers also face high mobility, their relationship with MWC is more than a short-term one: many domestic worker participants remain connected with other participants and Chengmei. Some workers have rejoined *Didinghu*a when they come back to Beijing. The other main obstacle is that few voluntary instructors can stay for the long-term. So far, Zhao Zhiyong is the only long-term voluntary instructor for *Didinghua*. Zhao was instructor until 2014 when he left. Many college professors, students, and activists have volunteered and worked with domestic workers to write new stories, practice and rehearse for performance, but they usually only stay for several months or even just pay several visits. The lack of long-term professional training resources limits *Didinghua*'s production of high-quality performances. Some domestic workers express similar concerns. Jiajie believed "My Labor, Dignity and Dream" was the best performance of *Didinghua* and later stories did not have the characteristics that make the stories so touching and powerful. She said,

> "we need more teachers like Professor Zhao Zhiyong to help us make good performance. I really like our performance ("My Labor, Dignity and Dream"), but the stories are from several years ago and become outdated now. I think our performance should tell new stories and show more positive images of domestic workers. We shouldn't always focus on the negative

stories. But we do not have teachers like Prof. Zhao to help us
write such stories."

Despite fostering collective voices and actions, MWC at the same time channels

domestic workers' voices under certain themes and excludes others. Malan's story is one

example, as Malan once proposed an issue against which *Didinghua* might advocate:

geographical bias. She found that many employers had geographical bias in that they

refused to hire domestic workers from certain regions, such as provinces of Henan and

Dongbei. The stereotypes are that Henan people like to take advantage of people or even

steal others' goods, and that Dongbei people have bad tempers and often fight with

others. As a native Henanese, Malan considered such stereotypes unfair. So Malan

suggested to Chengmei that *Didinghua* should produce a   performance to advocate

against these geographical biases, but the suggestion was strongly opposed by some

domestic workers. One worker argued that such perceptions were commonly held and

accepted in the industry of domestic work, and they should never jeopardize their job

opportunities by challenging the industry. The opposition and lack of support made

Malan rather upset and disappointed,

"I don't understand why they did not adopt my suggestions.
There are lots of bias in the job market (of domestic work)
toward people from Henan and Dongbei (provinces). It's so
unfair to us from these regions. Why shouldn't we create
performance to change people's perceptions?"

Didinghua's advocacy agenda specifically addresses discrimination against

domestic workers, and successfully mobilizes these workers to participate in the

resistance; but identity politics prevent development of a more inclusive and

comprehensive framework that helps form solidarity among female migrant workers.

Explicit agenda and discourse to help form collective class and gender consciousness

among female migrant workers remains lacking. The advocacy does not connect the class inequalities of domestic workers to migrant workers or other working-class groups. Not until 2016 when MWC was celebrating its twentieth anniversary did *Didinghua* begin to recruit female migrant participants beyond domestic workers for a new performance, "Five Stories of Dagong." These five stories present the major life stages of women migrants since the early 1990s. Many of the new participants at *Didinghua* were previous members of MWC in the mid-90s, and they no longer participated after the organization shifted its focus onto domestic workers. Some of these female migrants explained to me that they found it hard to socialize with domestic workers. They said, "those domestic workers complain about bad working experiences, but we don't have such experiences. We found few in common with them." The lack of a more inclusive ideological framework also fails to address the solidarity even among domestic workers themselves.

Figure 6 Female migrants performing at MWC's twentieth anniversary gala.
Source: Fieldwork in April 2016

Among domestic workers themselves, there also exists a "them" versus "us" binary. This binary is often created based on the distinction between rural and urban. There is also a tendency to personalize the tensions between domestic workers and their employers. Recalling her first training classes at domestic companies, Jiajie looked disdained and complained that, "The training (offered by domestic work companies) was too basic and it was all about how to use washing machines, ovens and refrigerators, which only those from rural areas needed to learn, but I am different from them." Mei has been a domestic worker for almost ten years and believes herself to be a highly-skilled and qualified worker. When talking about the employers' disrespect towards domestic workers, Mei blamed the workers from rural areas,

> "There are some (people) who are from very poor rural areas, and they regard the relationship with employers as that of old times and think employers can scold and even curse maids. Why do some employers look down upon us? It is just because of those maids who only want to make money no matter how employers treat them. If everyone has self-esteem and doesn't allow employers to hurt our heart, do you think employers will still treat you like that?"

The discourse of self-governance is deployed to judge individual workers. For instance, Hong, a 45-year-old domestic worker, used the word "*suzhi*" and argued that "if we want employers to respect us, those domestic workers should improve their *suzhi*." This judgement falls into the critique of domestic workers' subjective interpellation into the neoliberal governmentality of *suzhi* discourse (Yan, 2006, 2008; Sun, 2009). And it appears that *Didinghua*'s labor advocacy agenda did not effectively strike back against such interpellation.

Since 2012, *Didinghua* has appeared in mainstream news reports. The representations of *Didinghua* in mainstream media are framed in three ways. The first is to frame "domestic workers doing performance on stages" as a selling point. This type of news report acknowledges that *Didinghua* provides opportunities for domestic workers to fulfill their cultural needs and to improve themselves through performance. For instance, "Focus Interview," one of the most influential news programs on China Central Television, broadcasted a report on Didinghua in its ten-minute-long program in 2016[5]. The "Focus Interview" program framed domestic workers' performance as "pursuing artistic dreams." Domestic workers at Didinghua are employed in the program to show how most ordinary people can pursue their dreams. The "pursuing dream" theme derives from the Party-state's and popular discourse of "Chinese dreams" and "individual dreams" promoted in recent years. Dream discourse usually emphasizes and champions individual effort and success, without reflecting social or structural inequalities. The news program does not cover the advocacy mission of domestic workers' performance and frames it as merely "art for art's sake." The second type of report focuses on individual stories of domestic workers who participate at Didinghua. The stories are individualized narratives to relate these women's hardships as migrant workers, yet discussions on structural inequalities and possible solutions are still missing. The third type of report is more progressive, introducing Didinghua's advocacy activities for domestic workers. For instance, a news report from a mainstream web news outlet writes about several local NGOs working for female migrant workers, and Didinghua and MWC are highlighted as an exemplary organization. But this type of report cautiously avoids any radical discourse such as social change, inequality, or collective action. In my

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interview with one journalist who has reported on Didinghua, she revealed the following about the institutional constraint,

> "I do agree with what Didinghua advocates and I believe people's discrimination against domestic workers is wrong. We should change that. But in my reports, I cannot use sensitive words, such as criticizing the social perception of domestic work. I actually had my first version of report denied by the editor who thought it was too critical to publish in our newspaper. So I revised my report and only focus on introducing Didinghua as a Gong Yi project."

When I discussed these observations and concerns with Chengmei, she explained her strategy to deal with mainstream media: while realizing the limitations, she believed that at least media reports could attract people's attention to Didinghua and domestic workers' difficulties.

Conclusion

I conceptualize domestic workers' performance at Didinghua as localized and institutional-intermediate communicative collective resistance. Localized means that the understanding of performance's advocacy agenda should be contextualized in the current situations of middle-aged female migrant domestic workers, these women's subjectivities, and the political and ideological environment in contemporary China. The advocacy discourse of labor and labor value challenges the low social status of domestic workers and degraded value of domestic work. Labor discourse resonates with a Marxist and socialist ideology, which was legitimized in Mao's China and remains part of the state's official discourse in reforming China. The resonance not only grants the resistance political tolerance, but also hails the domestic worker participants who long for respect and recognition of their work. The case of Didinghua expands theoretical understanding of the political implications of performance as a particular form of communicative action:

transformation can happen at a subjective level in the process of mobilization and actual practices. A localized understanding of domestic workers' performance enables us to see this specific form of communication serving as social and cultural activities that appeal to domestic workers. As they are still being marginalized as others and outsiders in the urban space, Didinghua is a friendly and inclusive social space for female migrant domestic workers. The process and practices can be fun and joyful. To some workers, participating in the performance itself is a way of gaining confirmation. For instance, thinking back to their early years' performance at Didinghua, Jiajie still remembered the excitement she and other domestic workers felt when they did their first on-stage performance in a local government-sponsored theatre, "I never expected I could perform on stages one day, and they are stages in Beijing! We were all super excited and proud at the time." The collective resistance in the case of Didinghua thus embraces the domestic workers' subjective transformations, their collective communicative actions through performance, and the interventions in the discursive spheres of capitalist market, patriarchal values, and urban superiority. Migrant Women's Club enacts an institutional-sponsored space, which is non-profit and pro-change, and at the same time empowers other possibilities, such as generating class consciousness and forming solidarity among female migrants.

CHAPTER 5

CULTURAL PRODUCTION AS ADVOCACY COMMUNICATION: LABOR ACTIVISM, GENDER POLITICS, AND SOLIDARITIES

Introduction

Chapter 5 continues to explore the politics and possibilities in the formation of counter-hegemonic power, centering on cultural production in labor activism, to address three research questions: (1) To what extent has labor activism challenged the hegemonic power in contemporary China? (2) What political imaginaries has labor activism created through cultural production? (3) How have new solidarities been formed and what are their limitations? From the perspective of advocacy communication, I analyze the construction of "new worker culture" by Migrant Workers' Home, its musical band and advocacy songs, and elucidate how cultural production has become a site for labor activism. The analyses show that MWH's activism has confronted the ideologies of consumerism, neoliberalism, and capitalism. While class inequalities are highlighted in labor activism, a gendered perspective is still largely missing from the extant research. Through the case of Jiu Ye, a female activist group, I demonstrate how gendered power relations have shaped female activists' experiences. The case analysis complements current studies on working-class resistance and labor activism by revealing the role gendered politics. The last section points out the formation of ideological allies through labor activism among activists, migrant workers, intellectuals, students, and concerned

publics. Applying Gramsci's concept of organic intellectual and Hall's concept of ideological struggles, I argue that ideological allies are the organic intellectuals of subordinate and underprivileged groups; they enter the open and continuing process of ideological formations in contemporary China by making political claims towards both the Party-state and the general public to restore the country's socialist legacy.

Cultural Advocacy Communication

In the past few years, MWH has produced and promoted "new worker culture" in its activism. The advocacy goals are to question migrant workers' inequalities, raise class consciousness among the workers, and promote change. The construction of a "new worker" identity is to discard the notion of "peasant worker," a term that refers to rural migrant workers in mainstream discourse. Sun Heng advocates for this new identity in many of his media interviews, arguing that "peasant worker" carries discriminatory connotations and is insufficient to describe the current generation of rural migrant workers. Lv Tu, an independent scholar and staff member of MWH, offers a thorough explanation of the implication of constructing the "new worker" identity in her book *Chinese New Workers* (Lv, 2013). In Lv's account, new worker represents the new generation of migrant workers: "worker" describes the new generation's situation as workers in cities who no longer identify themselves as peasants, making them different from the older generation of migrant workers who have a strong attachment to the peasant identity and usually return to their rural villages after years of working in cities. Although the new generation longs to settle in cities, they generally cannot afford to; and the term "new" is to differentiate migrant workers from urban workers in state-owned factories who enjoy many privileges that migrant workers never have (Lv, 2013).

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Compared with dominant culture that stigmatizes rural migrant workers as deviant others, new worker culture emphasizes the subjectivity, voices, and power of migrant workers. Such a configuration of culture thus appeals to migrant workers who long for dignified lives, although it appears to make a distinction between the two generations. Here, culture is viewed in Raymond Williams' sense as ways of going about everyday lives. Everyday lives of migrant workers, who are underrepresented and misrepresented in mainstream media and culture, are represented, made visible, and acknowledged by new worker culture.

Migrant workers' voices and narratives, which have emerged in various cultural and mediated spheres in recent years, often center around their struggles and difficulties. To integrate these voices into new worker culture is different from the "speaking bitterness" practices in Mao's China. "Speaking bitterness" was a state-driven cultural project and strategy to mobilize individuals to reflect on the "cruelty" of the pre-socialist past and to champion Mao's socialist state (Rofel, 1999). Voices of migrant workers' bitterness are to raise public awareness, encourage workers to reflect upon their situations, and nurture a collective consciousness and subjectivity among workers. Raising public awareness through new worker culture does not ask for sympathy as mainstream compassionate journalism does (Sun, 2004); rather, it aims to engender and restore public concern regarding class inequalities. Discussions over migrant workers' inequalities mean to bring back discourse on class equality, which was prevalent in Mao's era but has been replaced by development discourse in reform era. New worker culture occupies a political standpoint to resist social exclusion and question the exploitation and deprivation of migrant workers. To take culture and cultural practices as

both sites and means for resistance appears to be a politically permissible strategy in contemporary China, where radical political rebellions have faced fierce suppression by the government since the Tiananmen movement in 1989.

The production and promotion of new worker culture embodies a form of advocacy communication. "Advocacy communication engages strategic intervention with clear political positions, having no pretense towards neutrality, and resisting hegemonic dominance in valuing social justice" (Wilkin, 2014, p. 58). In liberal democratic contexts, advocacy can certainly stand for actions with clear political goals for policy changes (Servaes & Malikhao, 2012; Wilkin, 2014); but in regimes where bottom-up political campaigns are not allowed, advocacy should be taken in a broader sense as the recognition of possibilities for change. Advocacy communication can then be understood as those communicative processes and strategies that disrupt dominance and hegemony and lead to transformative and systematic change. The process involves symbolic meaning-making practices and issues of materiality, such as access and financial support. MWH's communicative strategies for advocacy are the production and promotion of new worker culture and the communicative practices take mostly aesthetic forms. The first type of practice is representation. For instance, MWH's musical band, New Worker Troupe, writes original songs about migrant workers, produces albums, and holds live performances; *Dagong museum*, a grassroots and non-profit migrant worker museum, documents the history of migrant workers in reforming China; five "dagong" spring festival galas (discussed in chapter 3) and three new worker cultural festivals, organized by MWH in the past ten years, have attracted numerous media reports and millions of audience members. These cultural and aesthetic activities advocate for migrant workers'

equalities through representing their everyday lives, subjectivities, and voices. Migrant workers are not merely portrayed as objects as in mainstream media and culture; rather, they are active participants and sometimes cultural producers in the representation process. The second type of communicative practice is intellectual empowerment. MWH launches an education program, "Worker University," led by Lv Tu, to offer free lectures on various topics including Marxism, China's socialist history, and workers' rights, among others. Students are mostly migrant workers, while a few are college students and interested publics. These advocating practices mean to subvert migrant workers' status as secondary citizens. Such collective advocacy efforts conducted through cultural forms and practices strategically copes with the political context, where protests and demonstrations could easily face repression.

In the following, I analyze New Worker Troupe (the Troupe), the musical band, as a case to discuss the practices and implication of MWH's advocacy communication. The Troupe was founded by several male migrant worker singers around 2000. It was the core members of the Troupe who founded MWH and they remain the organization's main staff members. Among them, Sun Heng and Xu Duo were the most influential members in the organization and well-known in its networks. Sun Heng and Xu Duo, like other members, had been migrant workers themselves before they founded the musical band and later created MWH as an NGO. The Troupe's activities constitute a major part of MWH's cultural advocacy practices. Songs by the Troupe have been the most important means of expression for MWH's advocacy. By analyzing the production and distribution of the songs, with a particular focus on the lyrics, I demonstrate how MWH has challenged the hegemonic ideologies of consumerism, neoliberalism, and capitalism.

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Since the Troupe released its first CD "All Migrant Workers are a Family" in 2003, they have published ten albums and about 100 songs. To reserve autonomy from commercial forces, except for the first album, all albums are independently produced and distributed by the Troupe. Crowdfunding has gradually become the main source for the Troupe's CD productions and lived shows. For instance, the cost of its most recent CD, "Red May," published in May 2017, totally relied upon crowdfunding. The Troupe sold CDs at MWH's events, but few migrant workers would buy them. It was usually scholars and interested publics who bought the CDs. To reach wider audiences, particularly migrant workers, the Troupe made the songs available and free to listen and download from the website of Migrant Worker's Home. In the interview, I asked Xu Duo if migrant workers listened to their songs. He replied,

> "Most of migrant workers certainly preferred popular songs and they could be more influenced by mainstream culture. But there were indeed some workers listening to our songs and even singing them. When they heard their lives being represented in songs, they could recognize more of their inequalities. For those migrant workers who already had (class) awareness and consciousness, these songs made strong sense to them."

Figure 7 Covers of the Troupe's albums.
Source: Fieldwork, July 2017

With an advocacy goal to fight against migrant workers' marginalization in mainstream culture, the Troupe occupies a standpoint against popular culture that promotes consumerism and underpins urban middle-class lifestyles as an arbitrary distinction. In a song written by a migrant worker and composed by the Troupe, the lyrics narrate the suffering, "Beijing is so big/ I have not been home for years/ My jobs have been changed one by one, and I have not earned enough money but lots of grievance/ Beijing is so hot and so cold." The name of this song, "Beijing, Beijing," is the same as a popular rock and roll song by Wang Feng, a well-known Chinese rock singer. Wang Feng's "Beijing, Beijing" is very-well received in mainstream music. Wang's song, like many other pop songs, are expressions of feelings attached to metropolitan lives. The cultural symbols in such songs, like coffee shops, signify an urban middle-class lifestyle, which has been promoted by consumer culture as a social distinction to be desired by

self-identified bourgeois consumers. Such arbitrary distinction, viewed as social reproduction of cultural inequality (Bourdieu, 1984), promotes middle-class lifestyles and underpins the supremacy of being urban middle-class in contemporary China. On the contrary, the Troupe's "Beijing, Beijing" takes the standpoint of migrant workers. The song is a mixture of narratives and emotional expressions of migrant workers' hardship and struggles. These people are socially marginalized in urban life and left out by mainstream culture, which targets middle-class audiences and consumers. Lyrics in the Troupe's other songs, such as "the city sells hypercritical dreams" and "luxury European life-styles desired by the middle-class," represent social and ideological critique toward the dominant ideology of consumerism. Challenging middle-class consumer culture makes the Troupe's advocacy different from the usual working-class resistance for substantial rights, such as laid-off workers' protests in the 1990s (Lee, 2010) and migrant workers' strikes at factories in recent years (Qiu, 2016). This advocacy contests the social reproduction of cultural inequality in urban China.

The advocacy brings a political economic critique back to inequalities in regimes of production and distribution, which have been overshadowed in neoliberal discourse of empowerment through consumption. For instance, "Biao Ge" (brother Biao) is a song about a construction worker. The first part depicts construction workers' life: "You work 13 hours every day. You say you are home-sick, but you have to work hard from day to night, so that you can earn money for your family." The second part of the song is a critique in the voice of migrant workers, "You say you hate those who gain without pains, and they always look down upon you… They do not understand who feeds whom….." Heavy workloads and endless hard work do not bring promising lives to

migrant workers; but rather exploitation and discrimination. Migrant workers sell their labor to the market in exchange for salaries merely high enough to cover basic needs. What migrant workers earn through their commodified cheap labor is far from enough to afford a small apartment in cities like Beijing. Cities rely on migrant workers' labor for infrastructure construction, service and industrial production, but they become only the deprived poor in prosperous cities. In big cities like Beijing, most migrant workers live in villages located in suburban areas, where the rent is only about 1/10 of rent in urban apartment complexes. In these suburban villages, residents are mostly low-income, including migrant workers and local working-class people. The dirty streets and shabby buildings are like ugly scars on the glowing body of urban China. One song, "Those Villages are Our Homes in This City" describe migrant workers' living conditions in cities. "Justice" is one of the most frequently used term in the songs to highlight migrant workers' class inequalities. The songs make sharp contrast between the significant contributions of migrant workers to the country's development, and their exploitation and marginalization.

The songs glorify the value of migrant workers' labor, which is exploited and degraded in the market economy. The glorification of working-class labor interrogates capitalist ideology that defines migrant workers as cheap laborers. The labor discourse is different from Didinghua's use of labor value in its performances (discussed in Chapter 3), which only advocates for domestic workers' equality as group-based resistance rather than class-based advocacy. The Troupe's advocacy discourse deploys Mao's state-socialist ideology to question China's embracing of capitalist economy. For instance, "dagong is glorious" is an appropriation of Mao's political slogan "labor is glorious."

Scholars have been skeptical of the political potential of workers' re-appropriation of

Mao's socialist discourse in labor strikes, saying it fails "to challenge directly the

legitimacy of a self-proclaimed socialist state" (Lee, 2000, p. 52), or is just "to make

moral claims for state protection" (see Pun, 2005, in Harvey, 2005, p.150). In the case of

the Troupe and MWH, I argue that uses of socialist discourse in advocacy

communication should be understood as political and ideological strategies to seek

tolerance from the Party-state. The advocacy is not moral, but rather political claims

toward the state as well as the public to rebuild a socialist and equal China. Both Zhao

(2008) and Lin (2006) have reminded us to keep in mind the socialist legacies of the

Party-state when looking at the country's ongoing transformation. Such advocacy can

certainly enter the contested and open-ended process where the marginalized and

underprivileged can undermine the hegemonic ideology of capitalism.

The strategic use of official discourse enables the Troupe's advocacy

communication to construct migrant workers' political imagination, which is both a

detachment from and a reconstruction of popular sentiment. In the Troupe's song "Our

World and Our Dreams," the dreams of migrant workers are articulated as:

> "Our dreams are to make a living, to save money and send it back
> to support families, to get back arrears wages, to not confront
> bias any more, to have health and security, and to create a new
> world with equality and solidarity."

These dreams are not magnificent desires, but rather ordinary wishes to fulfill the need to

earn basic livings. The irony lies in the disparity between the ordinariness of migrant

workers' dreams and the prosperity that dream discourse often represents. Dreams widely

appear in official and popular discourses in contemporary societies. For example, the

U.S. is often represented as "a land of opportunities" where immigrants can realize

American dreams and acquire affluent lives through hard work (Orgard, 2012). Since 2012, Xi's government has raised up "Chinese dream" as an official discourse: to achieve the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation is the nation's greatest dream in modern times. Different from "American dream" which promotes individual successes, "Chinese dream" creates a nationalist imagination to underpin the legitimacy of the Party's leadership. "Chinese dream" discourse soon becomes popular and widely appears in commercials. The official discourse generates a nationalist sentiment. Popular dream discourse promotes an individualistic approach to empowerment through consumption. The deployment of dream discourse by the Troupe detaches from what dreams symbolize in official and popular narratives. The effusive phrases in the lyrics expose the rights of which migrant workers are deprived: fair wages, housing, health care, and education. The advocacy resonates with critical scholars' argument that we should advocate for more than consumption rights, to include basic rights of education, housing, and health (Mattelart, 2011). "A new world with equality and solidarity" stands for a political imagination to reconstruct the "Chinese dream."

The advocacy songs are not only about representations of migrant workers' lives and critiques of capitalism; they also call for collective action among migrant workers. One typical example is a song "To Unite and Ask for Arrear Wages," which directly addresses the issue of migrant workers' wages in arrears. In 2003, mainstream news media extensively reported an instance where the former Prime Minister Wen Jia Bao helped a female migrant worker to ask for her back wages. Although arrears wages of migrant workers had been an issue for years, it had attracted little public attention until the news reports proliferated in 2003. Since then, arrears wage issues have entered the

media agenda, yet many news reports only cover the issue when tragedies or violence happen. In such a context, the song's emphasis on migrant workers' agency and calling for their collective action is compelling. The Troupe published this song in their CD album of 2004. The song starts with a narrative exposing the tricks bosses use to manipulate workers, such as provoking inner conflicts among workers themselves, threatening, and calling the police. At the end of the song, it calls on workers "to unite" so they can fight for arrears collectively. One member of the Troupe expressed in the interview that they performed this song in some of the Troupe's live shows, but tensions often arose when they tried to sing it at production sites such as factories and construction sites. The administrators of construction sites and factories regard such songs as too "sensitive and provocative." Once, when the Troupe was performing this song at a construction site, they were interrupted and stopped by an angry administrator in the middle of their singing.

Compared with production sites where the shows are often monitored by the administrators of factories or construction sites, migrant workers' communities and universities are often much more open spaces to communicate and embrace radical thoughts.

Figure 8 New Worker Troupe Singing Songs on A Street.
Source: New Worker Troupe's social media, 2017

I analyze one live performance below as an example of the Troupe's onsite activism. On May 1, 2016, I went to the gala the Troupe held at Picun, the suburban community where many migrant workers live. The gala was held in the yard of Migrant Workers' Home. Labor Day carries political value worldwide to recognize labor rights and solidarity among workers. However, just as many other public holidays in China, Labor Day becomes a consuming carnival for the middle classes to shop and travel. Labor Day was thus a particularly meaningful and important moment for the Troupe to organize celebration galas for migrant workers. The stage was small, about 30 square meters; and looked somewhat shabby with little decoration. Around 6:30 pm, community members of Picun started to show up and gather in front of the stage. The gala began at 7:30 pm, with about 300 people in attendance. Performers in the gala were all migrant

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workers. They danced, sang, and recited poems of their own. Xu Duo performed a guitar

solo of his song "I Quit" Before he started to sing, he asked the audience, "Do you have

breaks for Labor Day holiday? How much more wages would you get for overtime

work?" An awkward silence fell among the audience. Then he continued to advocate,

"There should be three times the regular wage for overtime work during holidays." The

solo was a rock song with a strong sense of rhythm. The audience burst into applause

when Xu Duo finished singing and shouted out that, "We workers have the rights to

quit." The lyrics of "I Quit" were radical enough to raise awareness and call for action.

To quit the job as a possible form of individual protest resonates with the working class's

long tradition of collective resistance, such as labor strikes.

Figure 9 Audience of Labor Day Gala Organized by MWH at Picun.
Source: Fieldwork in May 2016

Through the songs, the Troupe advocates for class equality of migrant workers. I conceptualize MWH's advocacy as cultural advocacy communication. Cultural advocacy communication builds on the conception of advocacy communication (Wilkin, 2014) and emphasizes cultural production and practices as both means and ends of advocacy. Cultural and aesthetic forms of practices are means to express, communicate, and advocate for the political voices and standpoints of the underprivileged. Advocacy through various cultural practices, albeit not directly confronting the authoritarian power of the state, enables resistance in questioning labor exploitation and class inequalities in the state's embracing of the capitalist market economy. The socialist claims are not nostalgic of the country's past, but rather are political and ideological calls to the state and to the people as an appealing political imagination for a more equal and just society. For underprivileged groups, such as migrant workers, to produce one's own culture is itself a resistance to the dominant culture that marginalizes them. The production of migrant workers' culture sets itself against the cultural hierarchy and distinction that urban middle-class consumer culture produces and reproduces. The representation of migrant workers' lives through aesthetic forms claims subjective positions and cultivates a collective class awareness and action among the group.

Gendered Activism and Unwelcome Feminism

In the advocacy for migrant workers' equalities, whereas the critique towards capitalism and class inequality is strong, gendered power structure is addressed at a much lower level. The downplay of gender in MWH's advocacy leads to an overall neglect of female migrant workers. In my first interview with a key member of the Troupe, the member insisted that class inequality was more important than gender inequality and

should be given priority in the resistance. Marxism is deployed in a powerful, yet orthodox way in class-based resistance that marginalizes or even excludes other possible interventions. For example, there are only three songs specifically about female workers among over a hundred songs in the Troupe's albums: "Hourly Worker," "Elevator Girl," and "My Name is Jin Feng." These three songs are narratives about female migrant workers' tedious and burdened work and life experiences. In this section, through analyzing female activists' life and activism experiences and a case of Jiu Ye, a female activist musical band, I discuss how grassroot activism has been shaped by gendered power relations and how gendered activism limits the radical potential of feminist activism.

In the activism process, gendered power relations greatly shape activists' subjectivities, practices, and experiences. The Troupe is clearly a male-dominated advocacy group, with the main members all being male. Several female members were short-term members of the Troupe periodically. Among them, Duan Yu was the longest-serving member. Back then, Duan was the only female member of the Troupe, and she is also the writer and producer of the three female migrants' songs mentioned above. Duan Yu came to Beijing in 2004 as a young female migrant worker. During her few years' stay in Beijing, she had worked as a preschool teacher at a kindergarten, a typist at a small company, and a salesperson at a clothing store. The migrant worker's experience and her interests in music drove her to join The Troupe in 2005 where she stayed until 2008. Unlike other male members who worked as staff members at Migrant Workers' Home, Duan Yu spent her spare time working on The Troupe's activities. Although she

got along well with other members, she often felt frustrated and found it difficult to "have

deep conversations" with them. She recalled,

> "I did not know why I was not comfortable at the time, but now I
> can tell it was because they only focused on male workers and all
> the other members were male and they did not understand me as
> a female worker and a woman. And they were not interested in
> women's issues."

McRobbie's seminal feminist critique of working-class youth's resistance in Post-

war Britain reminds us that a class-focused resistance can resonate well with patriarchal

power (McRobbie, 1980). The subculture resistance by male working-class youth against

capitalist dominance reproduced a structured oppression of women and girls: men had the

privilege and power to deploy street life, drugs, rock music, and alcohol to claim a

working-class youth culture as a resistance to the mainstream, while women hardly had

access to or found pleasure in those practices and were absorbed into the position only to

serve their working-class male companions (McRobbie, 1980). Duan's story reveals that

female activists' practices are subject to gender relations in the actual process of activism

and their everyday lives. Upon marriage, Duan left Beijing with her husband in 2012, and

has been a housewife since then. The tedious and heavy housework made her depressed

for a long time. Duan later joined a local migrant workers' NGO in her relocated city. At

the NGO, the female migrant participants shared their experiences as rural women:

families were disappointed when they were born; being daughters, they were forced to

drop out of school at an early age, migrate to cities to work, and save money for their

brothers to go to school; at factories, they did not get equal pay and often faced sexual

harassment; in marriage, they were treated like tools for giving birth to sons, and were

always doing all the housework. Duan found that these shared experiences resonated very

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much with her own. She then became more committed to fight against gender subordination in women's lives. In 2015, Duan went back to Beijing when her husband's job was relocated. When I met Duan in 2016, she was still a housewife, busy taking care of her three-year-old child; and at the same time, an active activist for gender equality.

Gendered experiences are also sites where gender awareness and resistance arise. At the beginning of 2016, Duan was introduced to Xiong Ying and Ma Wei by Xu Duo. Xiong Ying is a doctoral student of a scholar who has served as advisory member of MWH. Ma Wei was a female member of the Troupe for a short period of time and later left for similar reasons as Duan's. Both Duan Yu and Ma Wei said in the interviews that their life experiences as women, female migrant workers, and later wives and mothers shaped their motivation and actual practices in the activism activities. Xiong Ying explained her feminist advocacy goal,

> "The equality we aim for is not only gender equality but also encompassing other dimensions, such as class and sexuality. My feminist agenda responds primarily to the patriarchal power, as it is so omnipotent in our society, and I am particularly concerned with underprivileged women such as female migrants."

With a common advocacy goal, the three women decided to form their own activist band. The band was first named "Jiu Ye Feminist Folk Band." Jiu means nine and stands for the three members, and the denotation Ye – wildness – connotes the liberation of women. A new member, a peer classmate of Xiong Ying, has recently joined the band and it currently has four members.

Different from members of the Troupe, who have institutional support from MWH to enable them to dedicate themselves as full-time activists, members of Jiu Ye have more much constrained conditions for their activism. As housewives, workers, and

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students, they lack sufficient financial support and have limited spare time for activism. So far, Jiu Ye has relied on crowdfunding as the primary source for traveling expenses when they conduct activism outside Beijing. Jiu Ye maintains a close relationship with the Troupe, and they are frequently invited by the Troupe to stage live shows together with some other local activist artists.

Figure 10 Jiu Ye holding a lived show at a live house in Beijing.
Source: Jiu Ye's WeChat public account, June 2018

Jiu Ye's advocacy songs, such as "Bye, Fireflies," Elevator Girl," and "My Name is Jin Feng," are designed to recognize the situations of female migrant workers which are often invisible in the male-centered migrant workers' resistance. "Bye, Fireflies" is a song produced by a Hong Kong NGO based on a true tragedy story. In 1993, a toy factory caught fire in a coastal city in southern China. More than 80 women workers died in the fire. The song narrated the story of one survivor, a teenage girl named Xiao Ying. The first half of the song described Xiao Ying's heavy workload on the assembly lines

and poor dormitory conditions. Xiao Ying, together with other teenage girl workers,

produced "the cute toys for European children" in the factory. The second half told of the

difficulties of Xiao Ying's life when she returned to her home village after being

seriously injured in the fire. "Bye, Fireflies" was a compassionate song to vividly reveal

the precarious living and working conditions of young women migrant workers in

factories in the 1990s.

The second type of songs focuses more on raising gender awareness and calling

women to take action and make change. "Women's Claims" and "Bread and Roses" are

two examples. Duan Yu wrote and composed "Women's Claims" during her visit to a

local NGO for female workers in Shen Zhen in 2016. A group of women workers

gathered at the NGO and shared about their difficult lives with Duan Yu. The song was

an aggregation of these women's voices:

> "I think I am still young, and I don't want my dream of lives to
> vanish in the lives of dagong (being migrant workers). I don't
> want to be stuck in kitchens and I want to see the outside world. I
> think I am capable to choose what I want to have and I don't
> want others to tell me what to do. I can take care of children, but
> I also have my own expectations. Women should live for
> themselves. Our roads are so difficult. When can we break the
> chains of women for thousand years?"

"I don't want others to tell me what to do" is a clear resistance voice against the

constraints and disciplinary power that women face. Duan Yu clarified in the interview

that although this song came from the discussions of female workers, they wanted to go

beyond class differences to address women's gendered experiences in general. Jiu Ye's

singing of "Bread and Roses" is to advocate for women's rights. The original song was

written and sung by American activist artists to memorize and honor the immigrant

women workers' strike for economic and social equalities in the U.S. in the early 20th

century. The song's call for fair wages and dignified lives lies in the context where immigrants in capitalist countries were exploited as cheap laborers for industrial development. Through presenting the women workers' strike as a powerful example in history, Jiu Ye glorifies women's active agency and collective action.

In a live show held at Picun, Jiu Ye performed the two songs. At the beginning of the show, Ma Wei asked the audience, "How many men here have helped their wives with housework?" Few males in the audience reacted or raised their hands. Ma Wei then called out, "I hope male friends could help do some housework. Please respect your wives. Women are not tools for housework or giving birth." Wei told me in the interview that she often did this kind of interactive activity with audiences in their live shows, and she was disappointed but not surprised that very few men responded that they help with housework at home. She said, "I want to raise these men's awareness of housework burden and change their minds that housework is only women's work." After the short interaction, Jiu Ye started to sing "Women's Claims." Duan Yu sang in a charming mezzo with her guitar; Ma Wei accompanied the singing with her violin; Xiong Ying sang together with Duan Yu while playing a small tambourine for accompaniment. Jiu Ye's second song was "Bread and Rose." Duan Yu introduced the historical background of the song and its political slogan to the audience. While Jiu Ye were singing, some female audiences were video recording the show with their mobile phones and some were even wiping away tears.

In mid-2017, Jiu Ye changed the band name to "Jiu Ye Female Folk Band" and deliberately dropped the word "feminist." I contacted Xiong about the name change, and she clarified that in their actual activism, feminism often invoked confusion among

audiences, and feminism is a term "too academic to speak to ordinary people." She went further to emphasize that their activism focuses on gender equality and migrant children's rights, but "feminism as a scope of thoughts, is too narrow to address these issues." These concerns about feminism exactly exemplify the common beliefs and attitudes toward feminism among general publics and academics in China. In Mao's China, in their successful promotion of gender equality policies, female officials within the state cautiously avoided any feminist discourse to avoid direct confrontations with male officials (Wang, 2016). Since the 4th World Conference on Women was held in Beijing in the mid-1990s, feminist scholars and activists, along with Women's Federation, started to promote ideas of social justice and gender equality at a time when Maoism was considered conservative and outdated (Wang, 2010 a, 2010b). Yet the mainstream gender discourse erased the critical lens of class, which resulted in a structural neglect of working-class women in Chinese feminist activism (Wang, 2016). Jiu Ye's activism undoubtedly fills the gap with its advocacy for female migrant workers. On the other hand, dropping off discourses of feminism, along with a lack of explicit critique of patriarchy and male dominance, is a strategic coping mechanism in China's social and political context where misogyny towards feminists is prevalent. This coping strategy limits the radical potential of feminism and feminist activism to   transform patriarchal structures.

The Formation of Ideological Allies

In Chapter 3, I discussed how MWH has become an intermediary site through which social actors participate in individualized and networked collective action, and their motivations and practices are diverse and hybrid. In this section, I specifically

analyze the formation of ideological allies among social actors. By ideological allies, I mean social groups who form allies based on shared ideologies. These groups do not derive from the same class position; some of them belong to the privileged class while others are among the dominated, but their shared concerns about migrant workers bring them together as a collaborative force. Applying Gramsci's concept of organic intellectual, I argue that agents of ideological allies are organic intellectuals of subordinate and underprivileged groups, such as migrant workers, and they are rebellious forces who contest dominant ideologies, beliefs, and values. Hall argues against "the last instance of determination" in the orthodox interpretation of Marxism, saying that there should not be a corresponding relationship between one's class and one's ideas (Hall, 2006). Hall replaces class-ascribed ideologies with the concept of ideological struggle to explicate the complexities of ideological formations (Hall, 2006). To view ideological struggle as an open and continuing process with no guarantees enables us to see possibilities in the activism to form counter-hegemonic forces.

Through advocating for new worker culture, activists, intellectuals, students, migrant workers, and concerned publics are forming ideological allies with political goals toward migrant workers' equality. Groups of intellectuals, college students, migrant workers, and journalists maintain long-term relationships with MWH as volunteers, teachers, members, advisory members, and collaborators. Scholars hold workshops, seminars, and conferences to invite activists, migrant workers, and volunteers to discuss the advocacy of new worker culture. Intellectuals, volunteers, migrant workers, and journalists write articles in domestic academic journals, social media platforms, and mainstream media to enhance public understanding and discussions about migrant

workers' issues. Migrant workers who attend the Workers University actively read and learn Marxist literature on capital and labor exploitation. Student associations at universities invite the Troupe to perform and introduce their activism work. These people form online groups through social media where they connect with each other, organize events, and deliberate about issues.

Ideological allies in contemporary China are different from social and political alliances, which were formed by the Communist Party, intellectuals, students, peasants, and diverse social agents in the country's revolutionary era in the first half of the 20th century. The two historical conjunctures are obviously quite different. The social and political alliances were formed to fight against imperialism and the old feudal regime, and to build an independent and modern China. In the contemporary context, the country has become an active and powerful actor in capitalist globalization. The state's propagated discourse of "the nation's rejuvenation" (Zhao, 2008) appeals to the popular nationalist sentiment to celebrate the country's economic growth as a rising global influence, which offers ideological consensus to economic reform. Consumerism has filtered into Chinese people's everyday lives and gradually becomes a dominant ideology through commercialization of media and culture (Paek & Pan, 2004; Li, 2016). The enthusiastic celebration of national power and a robust economy often overshadows the severe inequalities and rising disparities between the rich and the poor, rural and urban, and eastern and western regions. Along with the Party-state's constant consolidation of its political power and control, the state allows little space for political or social associations as potential counter-forces to its leadership. It is within this political, ideological, and social environment that people who are greatly concerned with the

increasing inequalities and injustice gather together to promote change. Advocating for migrant workers becomes a channel for these people to deliberate about and fight for equality and justice.

The majority views and voices adopt liberal and progressive perspectives. These approaches often espouse the framework and discourse of citizen rights. For instance, a group of left-wing scholars actively write articles to recognize migrant workers' cultural production and practices as means to claim their cultural rights and express their political interests. Bu Wei, a professor from Chinese Academy of Social Science, is one of the most active scholars who has a long-term relationship with MWH. Bu Wei is a leading domestic communication scholar whose research focuses on development communication and women and children's rights. In many of the articles, Bu Wei advocates that the construction of new worker culture is to fulfill the cultural rights of migrant workers who are made voiceless in mainstream media and culture[6]. Zhang Hui Yu, a professor from Peking University, has frequently appeared in news media for his long-term volunteer work at MWH. Zhang has been a volunteer teacher for a migrant workers' literature group for five years since 2012 when MWH initiated the group.

Figure 11 Zhang Huiyu (the one with laptop) teaching at Picun literature group.
Source: http://www.sohu.com/a/137683538_658673. Fieldwork, June 2017

In the media interviews, Zhang advocates that migrant workers' diverse cultural practices, such as writing, play important roles in the formation of their subjectivity and identity as new workers[7]. Young left-wing scholars, such as Wang Hongzhe and Meng Yingdeng, speak highly of the political significance of new workers' collective cultural production in their recently published articles (e.g., Meng, 2017; Wang, 2015). There are also concerns about the limitations. For instance, Guo Chunlai, one of the leading cultural studies scholars in China, reminds us that new workers' voices still face much constraint in mainstream media[8]. Guo is aware of the power of dominant consumer culture, which often dilutes public attention toward migrant workers' inequalities. These scholarly deliberations emphasize class equality to advocate for progressive change. Scholarly voices strongly echo MWH's advocacy work. Comparatively, mainstream media are inclined to highlight the "service" function of MWH and re-appropriate the official discourse. Many of the media reports on MWH frame it as an organization that provides cultural and social services to migrant workers. Phrases such as "constructing a

harmonious society" frequently appear in media articles to praise MWH's contribution. Media reports of MWH help increase the NGO's public visibility and social influence, but the ways in which media represent MWH undermine its advocacy and transformative potential.

Radical views draw from China's socialist revolutionary past, go beyond the framework of rights, and demand for a socialist China with equality and justice. In a recently published book on new workers and culture, Lv Tu brings up discourses of struggles and fighting, which were prevalent in Mao's China, to conceptualize contemporary resistance by new workers through making their own culture (Lv, 2015). Discourses such as fighting, struggles, protest, and resistance were appropriated by the Communist Party to mobilize masses in the revolutionary era but have been dismissed by Deng's administration in reforming China. Wang Hui, a leading left-wing scholar and well-known public intellectual in current China, has a sharp critique toward the Party-state in his well-circulated article titled "Two Types of the New Poor":

> "The absence of new workers in the political field is the most profound symptom of the crisis in China's political system and marks the very beginning of the constitutional principle that the working class as the leading state of the country has been disintegrated[9]."

However, such radical views are much less visible in media and other deliberation spheres.

The ideological allies are witnessing and nurturing the formation of class consciousness among migrant workers. As stated in the introduction chapter, there have been scholarly debates on migrant workers' class consciousness. Pessimistic views argue that workers have shown different types of consciousness, such as subaltern and legal

rights, but that class consciousness is generally lacking (Chan & Seldon, 2014; Guo, 2014; Sun, 2012). Optimistic views either claim that class consciousness is rising among the younger generation (Pun & Lu, 2010) or simply leave workers' class consciousness as an unquestioned premise in labor protests and strikes (Qiu, 2015, 2016). However, neither camp pays enough attention to the complex realities of migrant workers' class consciousness. Migrant workers who are active agents in the ideological alliances demonstrate a strong sense of class consciousness. They can be regarded as what Thompson describes as "conscious minority" (Thompson, 1966), for instance, those who write advocacy articles. Workers' criticism of China's embracing of capitalism and labor exploitation in the market economy is a vibrant reflection of their awareness of class inequalities. In the chat groups via social media, migrant workers – along with other groups – deliberate various political, economic, social, and cultural issues to address structural inequalities. These workers' deliberations go beyond mere concerns for their own substantial rights. There are also workers who are in the process of developing class consciousness, such as those who feel angry at their situations and actively seek solutions. Many of the Worker University's student workers reflect that the studying experience helps them understand more clearly the market economy and capitalism that produce their inequalities. In other words, workers' class consciousness can be cultivated through participating in labor activism.

Eagerly seeking for a socialist and equal China, ideological allies speak to both the general public and the Party-state. The effort is neither to overthrow the Party-state, as those who are pro-liberal democracy would often like to anticipate; nor "lacking interconnective ideological bonds" (Perry & Selden, 2010, p.15), as some scholarly

critiques of resistance in China have argued. The allies' deliberation over equality is an urge toward the state to restore its socialist legacy and intervene with the unequal production and distribution regimes in the market economy. And it also seeks to subvert hegemonic ideologies that champion market economy and consumer culture through shaping public and political discourses and discussions.

Conclusion

Migrant Worker Home's production and promotion of new worker culture, through music and various other cultural forms, embrace cultural advocacy communication. Cultural advocacy communication views culture as both means and ends for social change through cultural production and other communicative practices. Migrant workers' inequalities become an ideological standpoint for cultural advocacy to question the capitalist mode of production, distribution, and consumption. In China's authoritative regime, cultural advocacy is different from the policy-oriented advocacy in liberal democratic countries, and such advocacy has political potential. It tends to appeal through ideological claims for the Party-state and general publics to restore socialism. Ideological claims towards the Party-state call upon the socialist legacies as political strategies, yet the claims sidestep any critique of the State's authoritativeness and its integration of capitalism which has led to political economic inequalities. In the current class-based activism, gendered inequalities are addressed much less often in the advocacy agendas. Activists' experiences and practices, especially female activists', are subject to gendered power relations. Gender is also a site where gendered activism thrives for women's equality and rights. The case of *Jiu Ye* shows that gendered activism builds upon the mainstream gender discourse and cautiously circumvents feminism, as feminism

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is often labeled as provocative in current China's social and political context. By advocating for new worker culture, activists, scholars, migrant workers, students, and concerned publics become ideological allies to strive for a socialist and equal China. The formation of ideological allies and migrant workers' rising class consciousness enter the ideological struggles in contemporary China where socialist and revolutionary legacies have largely been collapsed by neoliberal agendas of development and consumption. In the contestation of the hegemonic ideologies of capitalism, neoliberalism, and consumerism, MWH and its activism enable a channel for diverse social agents to form ideological alliances. Activism toward equality and ideological allies constitute the discursive formation of a counter-hegemonic force to transform the present social, cultural, and ideological hierarchies. Meanwhile, they paradoxically and strategically confine the effort within liberal and progressive approaches and cautiously avoid radical confrontations.

CHAPTER 6

MIGRANT WORKERS' ALTERNATIVE MEDIA: PRODUCTION, DISTRIBUTION, AND RECEPTION

Introduction

Chapter 6 analyzes alternative media practices in migrant workers' activism and resistance. Drawing upon scholarship on alternative forms of media and the political economy of China's media system, I address three questions: (1) What forms of alternative media are produced in the labor activism? (2) What roles have NGOs and local communities played in the alternative media production? (3) What are the potential and limitations of migrant workers' alternative media to promote change? This chapter

analyzes two cases: Picun Community Newspaper, hereafter referred to as PCN, published by Migrant Workers' Home (MWH); and Jianjiao Buluo (referred to as Jianjiao), an independent advocacy media outlet. I also analyze how MWH's public WeChat accounts serve as a digital-mediated activist space. To avoid romantic views of alternative media, I argue that the analysis requires careful examination of the transformative potential of alternative forms of media and uses of ICTs by situating them in specific local contexts. Transformative potential refers to the extent to which alternative forms of media promote equality, rights, and justice for underprivileged and marginalized groups, and the extent to which such media mobilize and enable intended audiences to participate in these processes. Through explicating the production, distribution, and reception of migrant workers' alternative media, I propose four perspectives to assess the transformative potential of alternative media and use of ICTs in activism.

Alternative Media for Social Change

As discussed in introduction chapter, alternative forms of media serve as a significant component in mediated activism and have been used by various social groups, local communities, NGOs, advocacy groups, and activists in many parts of the world. Empirical studies and theoretical discussions have explored the potential as well as the limitations of alternative media to empower underprivileged people (e.g., Atton, 1999, 2001, 2011; Carpentier, Lie, & Servases, 2008; Downing, 2010, 2014; Hadl, 2011; Hayes, 2017; Howley, 2005;; Kaiser, 2011; Rodriguez, 2000, 2011). Insofar as it is tempting to associate such alternative media with progressive social change, careful and contextualized studies are necessary to excavate what may be idealized assumptions. In

fact, alternative media may do nothing to undermine hegemonic ideologies or to democratize the distribution of communicative power. For instance, a political economic study of a Honolulu alternative newspaper reveals that the news organization reproduces dominant ideologies and a capitalist mode of production (Gibbs, 2003). Community media can be conservative and local people may not actively participate in community media production (Rennie, 2006). When social change objectives are not constructive or progressive, social movement media can be regressive (Downing, 2014).

As new information technologies become increasingly important in facilitating activism and social movements worldwide, scholars argue against the taken-for-granted assumptions of ICTs' democratic potential. Social movements such as the Arab Spring and Occupy Wall Street were not simply positively enabled by the Internet, but also had many consequences brought on by the complex interplay between politics and human agency within their specific historical contexts (Rodriguez, Ferron, & Shamas, 2014). Thus, contextualized examinations are important if we are to avoid romantic assumptions about any inherent progressive efficacy and transformative power of alternative forms of media and use of ICTs. Rodriguez et al. (2014) remind us that research conducted in different contexts should bring historical conditions, complex communication processes, and political economic considerations to bear in any analysis of alternative media and ICTs.

In Chapter 3, I explicated how the state and market cooperate to consolidate their power in the contemporary Chinese media and communication system. Through media reform, the Party-state not only responds to neoliberal globalization, but also legitimizes its political leadership. The commodification of media and communication technologies

facilitates the development of a market economy. The state, domestic, and transnational

capital cooperate and negotiate to make profit in the commercialized media space, while

the government regulates the production and distribution process. The structural changes

in the media and communication system continue to benefit privileged groups and further

deprive the underprivileged, like peasants and rural migrants. Yet, media and

communication are contested arenas where domination is neither settled nor guaranteed.

As Mosco argues, "Communication also plays a central role in resistance and the

construction of counter-hegemonies," and a political economy of communication would

help "look at how people make use of media and information technology to increase their

own power to shape social structures" (Mosco, 2009, p. 209, 210). In recent years,

ordinary citizens, activists, and NGOs have increasingly deployed diverse media and

ICT-based practices to fight for their rights. Urban cultural elites and the middle class

resort to alternative media and the Internet in resistance actions (Guo, 2012; Huang and

Yip, 2012), while working-class people actively adopt ICTs, particularly mobile phones,

in labor protests (Qiu, 2016). For instance, Guo (2012) presents a case of elite-led citizen

media action in Beijing. In order to construct new buildings for the 2008 Olympics, the

Beijing government demolished the old neighborhood of *Dazhalan*, forcing residents to

relocate. Two artists launched the *Dazhalan* project, using their social influence to

leverage success by making neighborhood voices matter (Guo, 2012). The two artists

worked with a group of volunteers and former *Dazhalan* residents, creating a website, a

documentary film, and a brochure. Mainstream media such as China Youth reported the

project and the life stories of *Dazhalan* residents. Another community-focused study of

media documents two cases of the Internet's role in urban residents' successful protests

against local factories polluting two cities (Huang & Yip, 2012). This study shows not only that Internet communications enhanced existing offline protest actions, but also that online activism was significantly shaped by the specific social-political environments of the two cities (Huang & Yip, 2012). For working-class groups, Qiu's work has documented how migrant workers use social media to mobilize collective action and share information in labor strikes (Qiu, 2015, 2016). These studies have largely been objective-oriented, attentive to alternative media and ICTs in short-term cases of protests and strikes. Tai and Yang's studies pay attention to the role of the Internet in everyday activism (Tai, 2015, 2018; Yang, 2009). Ordinary people engage in online discussion about injustice issues, such as government officials' corruption and targeted individuals' misconduct, which forms what Tai labels networked activism (Tai, 2015). Similar to Tai's emphasis on social media, Yang also highlights ICTs in enabling activism in contemporary China. Yet analyses of sustainable and organizational modes of alternative/community media and use of ICTs by underprivileged and marginalized groups for social change remain lacking.

In the following sections, I explicate how the production and distribution of migrant workers' alternative/community media have created mediated spaces for workers to express their voices and deliberate issues on a daily basis. Through discussing the reception of alternative media, I show the constraints these media face in China's media and communication landscape.

PCN*:* NGO-based Alternative and Community Media

As a local community-based print publication, Picun Community Newspaper has constructed a migrant worker community culture by enabling worker residents to narrate

their work and lives in Picun. Conceptualization of alternative media frames communicative action as supplementing, contesting, and resisting mainstream media (Atton, 1999, 2001, 2011). PCN exemplifies how progressive alternative media can effectively produce what Qiu identifies as "worker generated content" that is collective, empowering, and enlivened by advocacy (Qiu, 2015). Based on analysis of visual and audio production by Chinese factory workers, Qiu develops a system for categorizing worker-generated content (WGC) according to different practices and their implications: whether the actions are collective, adopt advocacy goals, and whether they can lead to empowerment (Qiu, 2015, 2017). Through genuinely collective production with advocacy goals, PCN enables migrant workers – who are virtually invisible or silent in mainstream media – to create their own mediated space and express their voices.

The newspaper includes four sections: 1) a title page "News" section reporting major events and activities of the NGO in the past month; 2) "Community Culture," publishing migrant workers' writings about their lives; 3) "Social Concerns," offering information and discussion related to migrant worker concerns, such as labor policy updates; and 4) a back page "Activities Information" section used to introduce MWH, promote membership, and publicize upcoming activities. The newspaper is published monthly at a cost covered by Oxfam funding.

Figure 12 Picun Community Newspaper.
Source: Fieldwork, June 2017

Collective Media Production

PCN's media production process tends to be democratic. Alternative media tend

to be organized in nonhierarchical or collective ways, generally base themselves on non-

commercial interests, and favor inclusive and democratic modes of production (Atton,

1999, 2001, 2011). Two MWH staff members are chief editors for each monthly issue.

Migrant workers are usually authors of articles in the "Community Culture" section.

Most worker-authors live in Picun and are also members of MWH. They actively

participate in publication activities, assisting in the editing process; their names then

appear as editors on section headers. Staff and migrants attend group meetings to discuss

which articles to publish; every participant freely expresses opinions during selection and

editing discussions. PCN thus embodies collective production by MWH staff and migrant

workers.

Many worker authors participate in the literature learning and writing group organized by MWH in 2014 to mobilize migrant workers as writers and narrators of their own lives. The NGO invites university professors and writers to offer free literature classes to migrant workers from 7 to 9 pm every Sunday night. During my fieldwork period, each class had about 15 workers, perhaps half of them regular participants who attended every week. Class content ranged from writing skills and reading literature to discussions of social issues. After classes, participants wrote about their lives and thoughts. Professor Zhang from the Chinese National Academy of Arts, a volunteer resident teacher since 2014, said that the classes do not mean to train workers to be professional writers; but rather aim to construct a space for workers to reflect on and become storytellers of their own lives.

Some workers send their articles for publication not only in PCN but also to other media outlets. Fu, a 50-year-old male migrant worker, was among the most active and productive participants in the writing group. He had come to Beijing about 10 years before, to work as a carpenter. He writes poems and prose about his migrant life. Although he often had to work until late at night, he tried to write every day. In addition to publishing in PCN, he sent his prose to mainstream magazines and newspapers and, in fact, earned some royalties from his publications. Wan, another regular writing group participant, has worked at different small factories since coming to Beijing several years ago; his wife is a domestic worker. Wan had lived at various suburban migrant worker villages but reported that the main reason he chose to live in Picun was to be able to participate in MWH activities. During his interview, Wan talked about writing an article about a coworker at a furniture factory near Picun who was severely injured when a

machine cut off his finger, could not return to work after the injury, and received no compensation from the factory. Instead of submitting to PCN, Wan published this article under a pen name on an online media site. He explained that local politics dictated that he chose a different platform so as not to jeopardize himself by writing for PCN, where his factory-owner boss was more likely to read it. The experiences of Fu and Wan exemplify how PCN both enables a communicative space for migrant workers and functions as a facilitator to build a migrant worker community. Rather than being apathetic, these workers express politics in their own terms and act politically through their own networks.

PCN embodies elements of citizens'/community media. The community-centered approach focuses on media and communication practices of local communities and social groups. Within this approach, the concept of citizens' media overlaps the alternative media approach insofar as such media provide sources of information outside the mainstream even as they help often-silenced groups to strengthen their sense of self, develop voices, and articulate their realities (Rodriguez, 2000, 2011). The idea of citizens' media emphasizes the capacity of communities and social groups to reshape power relations between agents and media structures (Rodriguez, 2000, 2011). Each PCN issue's "Community Culture" section publishes three to four migrant workers' articles. They write about their jobs at local factories and shops, their everyday lives and feelings, their happiness, struggles and longings, and offer their own interrogations of unfairness and inequalities they encounter. In one article, a migrant worker touchingly describes missing his wife and daughter who live in a home village far from Beijing. Some workers describe Picun's small shops, restaurants, dirty streets, and clusters of shabby houses but,

regardless of the poor living conditions, many clearly claim Picun as their home community in Beijing. Although migrant workers are highly mobile residents who may constantly have to move to different places for work, writing about their lives in cities for Picun Community Newspaper clearly generates a sense of belonging. The successful, regular nurturing of a community culture affords robust social inclusion to migrants generally marginalized by or excluded from popular culture and urban life. The migrant worker community culture distinguishes itself in practice from the consumer culture that characterizes salient urban middle-class lifestyles. A recent study of community radio in Mexico also shows the capacity of community media to become a cultural mediator to express local values and navigate a relatively autonomous space outside the influence of national regulators and transnational funding agencies (Hayes, 2017). Through the individual accounts of migrant workers' lives, PCN has created a set of collective story-telling practices closely identified with the migrant workers' community. Community media can "work in small ways and multiple fronts which alters power configurations in the process" (Rennie, 2006, p. 189).

Civil society organizations such as NGOs and labor unions frequently consider alternative media in their strategies to promote social change (Hadl, 2011). As NGO-based alternative media, PCN serves the MWH mission of advocacy for migrant worker rights. Worker-authors' articles question low wages, deficient benefits and welfare provisions, and discrimination in general, thus moving them beyond story-telling into communal, embodied agency for activism and resistance. In addition to migrant workers' own writing, joint staff and migrant worker editorial meetings identify diverse sources of articles for PCN's "Social Concerns" section. All participants suggest articles they find

relevant to migrant workers' issues and the group discusses them to decide which ones to publish. This section has featured informative accounts of new policies regarding households and minimum wages; news analyses of cases of migrant worker wage arrears and work injuries; and identification of social problems such as migrant children's rather limited access to local public schools or lack of parental guidance for children migrant parents must leave behind. Other articles provide well-elaborated, practical information about skills and procedures for migrant workers in order to respond to labor rights violations. In addition, "Social Concerns" includes scholarly critiques of labor exploitation in the market economy, capitalist ideological domination, and consumerism in Chinese society. PCN also publicizes elements of the Migrant Workers Home advocacy agenda, the first and last pages featuring past and upcoming MWH activities and Picun events. This includes stories of live performances by MWH members, social gatherings for community members, and collaborative advocacy events involving MWH and other organizations or institutions. The last section, "Activities Information," features upcoming free services and trainings, activities, and events for Picun's migrant workers.

MWH's social media communication occurs through three WeChat public accounts: a main account, "*Beijing Gongyouzhijia*" (Beijing Migrant Workers' Home), and another two for specific programs and activities, "*Dadi minyao*" (Earth folk music) and "*Xingongren yishutuan*" (The New Workers' Art Troupe). The content of the WeChat public accounts supplements Picun Community Newspaper with an ICT presence that can reach migrant workers and wider publics not necessarily resident in Picun. The integration of online and offline media represents a typical pattern of what Rodriguez describes as local communities' appropriation of ICTs in citizens' media

practices (Rodriguez, 2011). As migrant workers' use of smartphones and social media have become more and more common in the past 10 years (Qiu, 2015, 2016; Wallis, 2013), MWH's appropriation of social media resonates with migrant workers' ICT usage habits. WeChat offers news and notices about MWH's activities located outside Picun, including live shows at universities in Beijing and other cities, and calls for members and volunteers for MWH advocacy programs. The reach of social media offers possibilities for expanding MWH's audiences and participants as its immediacy allows for timely and flexible content as staff members update news and events on a daily basis.

Jianjiao Buluo: ICTs-enabled Feminist Working-class Media

A registered NGO, Jianjiao Buluo runs as a non-profit, advocacy online media organization promoting equality, diversity, and social inclusion for female migrant workers while opposing sexism, homophobia, and class inequalities. Its editor recruitment statement reflects the agenda: "We expect that you are a feminist, can analyze issues through the lens of class, and will advocate for gender equality and labor rights in straightforward and understandable language." Jianjiao embraces characteristics of social movement media. Focusing on constructive, progressive, and/or radical social change, Downing proposes "social movement media" as a guiding term (Downing, 2014) for an analytic frame dedicated to media projects and communication activities wedded to specific social change objectives, such as human rights media (Kaiser, 2011) or youth media (Khalil, 2011, 2013), which make different uses of media and ICTs as strategies for constructing what Downing has usefully characterized as plural deliberative spaces. Within a deliberation space, "numerous challenges, like climate change, women's subordination, digital surveillance, can be addressed with collective wisdom, insight, and

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argument" (Downing, 2014, p. 346). Jianjiao publishes narratives, poems, commentaries, analysis, and discussions, many of which expose and critique structural inequalities female migrant workers face in prevailing economic and cultural regimes. Arguments against patriarchal power relations and class inequalities are often presented through the specificities of women trafficking, gender stereotypes, domestic violence, unequal pay, labor exploitation, and violations of labor rights. Self-identified lesbian workers write of subjective experiences and struggles in their everyday lives.

Jianjiao's production and distribution is Internet-based, largely through social media catering to migrant workers as a highly mobile group increasingly engaged with social media. Inclusive modes of production are part of Jianjiao's mobilizing strategy. Individual authors send articles to Jianjiao for publication, some using pen names, and all introduce themselves with a brief biography. The most frequently mentioned self-identities are "feminist," "migrant worker," "female worker," and "rural woman." The editors maintain flexible standards for migrant worker submissions; they intentionally do not emphasize writing skills or literary styles. Jianjiao's adoption of QQ and WeChat purposely are responsive to migrant workers' common and frequent use of these two social media platforms. To incentivize more workers to express their voices, Jianjiao holds periodic online, thematic writing contests offering cash and gift prizes. Themes range from migrant workplace and life experiences to narratives of emotional lives to women's rights advocacy. The contests encourage participants to use diverse formats, welcoming narratives, pictures, videos, songs, poems, and so forth.

Three social media platforms – WeChat, QQ, and Weibo – are Jianjiao's main distribution channels. About 70 percent of readers are female migrant workers, the others

being male workers and concerned members of the public. QQ and WeChat host online readers' groups where migrant workers interact with each other to discuss various issues. In addition, individual workers sometimes consult Jianjiao staff through the online platforms when they meet problems and/or need help. Jianjiao also designs dynamic offline activities to expand their audience. Collaborations with other NGOs, individual activists, advocacy groups, and scholars result in workshops, live musical shows, and other performances promoting gender equality and advocating for female worker rights. Women workers participate in such events with each other, activists, and scholars.

Figure 13 Jianjiao's media page on WeChat.
Source: Fieldwork, April 2018

While female workers' voices are hard to find in mainstream media, Jianjiao creates a hospitable mediated space for a form of citizens' media through which female workers define their voices and articulate their realities. This assembly of voices constitutes collective action by previously silenced citizens communicating and acting in ways that challenge the unequal power relations of institutionalized media. While middle-class homosexual groups enjoy a certain social and cultural space due to their power as

consumers, homosexual migrant workers are quite marginalized by their economic

inconsequence. Jianjiao's online spaces allow lesbian workers to write about their

particular experiences as members of a low-class sexual minority. One wrote that she did

not dare to say she was a lesbian for fear of others' discriminatory or even resentful

attitudes, with the result that the absence of a social space for her in factory and dorm left

her isolated and lonely. Others write about their peer workers, friends, and families'

unpleasant experiences as gays and lesbians in social lives. Through these narratives,

workers also advocate for equality in concrete ways fleshed out with everyday evidence.

In China's context, despite government political control and online censorship,

the Internet's vitality as a space for expression and action is made apparent by studies.

There have been numerous sites of contentious online agitation actions by individuals,

groups, and organizations engaged in a wide range of issues: HIV/AIDS, environmental

protection, women's rights, and religion, to name a few (Yang, 2009). Female migrant

workers' narrated experiences through Jianjiao expose gender inequalities widely

prevalent in Chinese society. They tell how son-preference culture deprives women of

educational opportunities, allows precarious working and living conditions in cities, and

implicitly condones trafficking of women. Among many Jianjiao stories about such

trafficking, one woman wrote about the realities through the story of her aunt-in-law, sold

to be the wife of the author's uncle. In the author's village were many trafficked women,

most of them from rural communities and many with histories of domestic violence and

sexual assault. Many women tried to escape but rarely succeeded, even those who, when

able to connect with their original families, were urged to simply settle in with their

buyer-husbands. Discriminated against and excluded by local women who regarded them

as outsiders, trafficked women resisted by refusing to learn local dialects; some

committed suicide. At the end of the article, the author writes,

> "as a woman growing up in rural areas, I feel responsible for
> writing the true stories of people who were neglected by the
> media and the public. Writing stories about rural trafficked
> women is focusing on women themselves, to reveal the
> difficulties of rural women and to reflect on the gender
> oppression that all females face."

In a milieu where mainstream news media report women trafficking simply as crime

without acknowledging it as gendered violence, Jianjiao articles draw attention to the

subjective experiences of trafficked women and expose the consequences of male

violence and control.

Through complementing or even contesting mainstream news media, Jianjiao

embodies a form of alternative journalism. Alternative journalism not only has different

values about what should be considered news, but also adopts different approaches to

gathering, writing, and presenting news (Atton, 2011), often referencing nonofficial

sources in news stories. Domestic violence is a related topic of intense interest. One

article by a Jianjiao editor enumerates factors that nourish domestic violence in China:

longstanding patriarchal norms that maintain male supremacy and legitimize men's

violence to women; women's lesser education and employment, making them more likely

to be vulnerable subjects; and lack of social support for female victims of domestic

violence. The article includes observations by readers who shared their experiences and

observations of domestic violence through Jianjiao. Women in mainstream media news

stories of domestic violence usually appear as voiceless victims, although the articles

themselves sometimes include heartrending stories to increase audience appeal. Either

type of representation commodifies women's victimhood as a media product for

consumption free of any inducement to reflect upon the patriarchal power structure. Jianjiao articles, on the other hand, interrogate the unequal power relations undergirding domestic violence and advocate for action towards change. One migrant author argued that families, friends, neighbors, and related institutions should intervene to protect and help victims, thus countering a reluctance to get involved based on the common perception of domestic violence as a private issue between couples. Typical is one migrant worker's story of her workmate's sufferings from multiple incidents of domestic violence. When the victim was forced by her abusive husband to go back home after escaping from a rural village, many of the workers shamed or blamed her for not being a good wife. As contemporary Chinese society still lacks general understanding of domestic violence and consequently provides almost no social support, Jianjiao's advocacy content represents an important intervention.

The practices of Jianjiao position it as a form of social change media with a progressive agenda advocating for equalities of female migrants in a participatory mode. Its social media platforms construct plural deliberative spaces where migrant workers, Jianjiao staff, and concerned members of various publics participate to consider issues of equality and justice. For instance, gender stereotypes and bias are frequent topics on Jianjiao sites. Articles raise awareness of women's excessive burden of housework, gender discrimination in labor markets, and sexual objectification in popular media. One female worker sharply criticized a news report on the sexual assault of a female janitor in a subway station, which used the suggestive headline "Making your eyes spicy" and reported the assault as out-of-the-ordinary while mocking the janitor as an old working-class woman. The migrant writer criticized mainstream media reporting on sexual assault

and harassment for focusing on female victims as sexualized objects, thus highlighting the media reproduction of inequality and objectification.

Constraints on Alternative Media in China

"What Jianjiao does is so important to female workers. It provides a platform for us to express our voices," wrote one reader in response to a Jianjiao WeChat article celebrating its third anniversary. Many other workers enthusiastically endorse Jianjiao, establishing what can be described as the popularity of migrant worker media among a marginalized, unpopular social group. As noted above, some migrant workers and concerned publics have welcomed various forms of alternative media for empowerment and advocacy, yet it is clear that such content only circulates among a relatively small audience. In commercialized social media, popular WeChat articles usually have more than 100,000 page-views; many of these popular sites are entertainment-based or gear content toward middle-class audiences, and most feature advertising on their pages. By contrast, on average, a Jianjiao article draws about 1000 page-views with view numbers varying little between articles. Most draw fewer than 10 comments, usually from migrant workers relating their own experiences, questioning inequalities, or expressing the helplessness of being a female worker. Migrant Workers Home WeChat accounts generally produce a few hundred page views. On Weibo, identified as a middle-class social media site (Qiu, 2016), the number of page views, reposts, and comments for Jianjiao and MWH posts were even much fewer than for WeChat.

Alternative media are often limited in that they do not reach the large, broad audiences that commercial media do (Carpentier, Lie & Servaes, 2008). Whereas popular social media public accounts rely heavily on marketing strategies to increase readership

and thus attract more advertising, the promotion of Picun Community Newspaper and both Jianjiao and MWH social media platforms remains primarily interpersonal, accomplished through small networks of migrant workers. I did not find significant evidence to indicate that ICT presence had affected attendance at public events sponsored by the organizations or increased readership of print and online communications. It is important to note that alternative media face political repression and commercial limits. For instance, Jianjiao's editors disclosed that articles with discussions on political affairs were often deleted. Constant censorship and surveillance make PCN and Jianjiao cautious about avoiding direct critique by the government or comments on political affairs. In addition, budget limitations mean that Migrant Workers Home produces only 1000 copies of PCN and staff members themselves deliver them only to Picun residents on the last Friday of the month.

The cases of PCN as NGO-produced media and Jianjiao as a media-centered NGO offer organized and sustainable models of alternative media production, distribution, and reception. Given a Chinese context in which no media policy institutionalizes, and thus protects or promotes, alternative media projects and practices, the NGO aegis offers financial sustainability and some institutional legitimacy for alternative forms of media. On the other hand, broader mobilization of underrepresented and disadvantaged groups for participation in alternative media production requires organizational support and resources beyond what has been available heretofore. As alternative media do not cater to commercial markets or seek advertising for financial survival, non-profit organizations with advocacy goals – such as the two NGOs in this study – can lay out somewhat limited economic and social support for media production

and audience engagement. Economic support now covers media production costs, including royalties paid to authors and local distribution in the case of PCN. The social aspect is the communal support participants gain from the staff and their fellows through the production process. At present, NGOs' financial relationships cannot guarantee the sustainability of alternative media. As NGO agendas are influenced by funding agencies, the extent to which their alternative media projects will be shaped by those specific relationships remains to be further explored.

In contemporary China, the powerful integration of government-regulated and market-driven media systems reflect the hegemonic formation of Party-state leadership, consumerism, and neoliberal ideologies (e.g., Li, 2016; Zhao, 2008a, 2008b). The non-commercial Picun Community Newspaper and Jianjiao and MWH social media sites have effectively produced progressive advocacy media serving and engaging disadvantaged and marginalized migrant worker groups and subgroups in contesting dominant ideologies and elite privileges, and have done so in a participatory, empowering mode. Collective practices of media and ICTs succeed in creating an alternative media sphere set against the hegemonic power of mainstream media. More specifically, Picun Community Newspaper, aided by MWH's allied activities, developed a media form that has effectively helped to construct a migrant worker community culture and has become, for some, an element of communal life. This enables migrant workers to generate and maintain a sense of belonging and inclusion, despite being marginalized or even excluded as urban outsiders. Migrant workers participate in making a newspaper dedicated to nonhierarchical and inclusive processes of writing, article-gathering, selection, and editing. While results to date are uncertain, MWH use of social media is one attempted

strategy to promote activities and events in order to overcome PCN's limited distribution to only local community members. Jianjiao has built a hybrid form of alternative/citizen/social movement media by creating a virtual space for underrepresented working women to articulate subjectivities, acquire information, and create political commentary. Jianjiao nurtures a mediated deliberative sphere for migrant worker women in particular to discuss not just local migrant worker issues, but their situations as related to issues of equality, gendered violence, justice, diversity, and inclusion. The production and distribution of Jianjiao primarily relies on ICTs to accommodate the high mobility of migrant workers and overcome geographical obstacles to reaching audiences.

Neoliberalism and consumerism have structured the relationship between media users and media as a matter of individualistic and private consumption in China. To define an alternative communicative space for underprivileged workers, the strategy has been to organize non-profit, collective media production with goals of advocacy and empowerment. Under China's authoritarian political regimes, however, survival of alternative media means avoiding direct confrontation with the state's power. At the same time, when major media systems are dominated by markets geared toward profit, financial sustainability and expansion of non-profit alternative media become crucial issues deserving more attention and analysis.

Whereas media policy activism may successfully lobby for policy change to benefit the development of alternative media (Hintz, 2014, 2016), media activism in China is more often unable to intervene in the policymaking process. Hintz offers a thorough review of media policy activism in different countries and identifies four

approaches of policy activist practices: civil society organizations, lobby groups, and coalitions engage with policymakers directly to advocate for policy change (Hintz, 2018). A successful case is the advocacy effort of the Community Media Forum Europe, a civil society organization, with the European Parliament and national policymakers in the legalization of community media (Hintz, 2018). Offline and online campaigns and protests demand changes to media policies (Hintz, 2018). In the U.S., civil society groups organize campaigns to encourage state intervention into the monopoly of media ownership (Gangadharan, 2013). Political and ideological environments are also important factors in enabling change. The political system should first allow bottom-up collective action to intervene in the state policymaking process. The changing policy window often becomes a vital period wherein the public can be more easily mobilized, and the state becomes more acceptable to advocacy/protests (Hintz, 2018). In China's political and ideological contexts, NGOs, activists, and migrant workers encounter difficulties to advocate media policy change to favor alternative media life in both the political system and in mobilizing public support.

Conclusion

Alternative forms of media are dynamic and integrated, encompassing various elements and characteristics of alternative/community/citizen/social movement media to become, for some migrant workers, a regular feature of their daily lives. Through analyzing migrant workers' collective mediated practices, I propose four perspectives to analyze the transformative potential of alternative forms of media and uses of ICTs: such media can enable non-commercial and non-profit models of production and distribution; can embrace long-term, sustainable, and collective modes of action and practices; can

pursue advocacy goals; and can ultimately empower marginalized and underprivileged groups.

Migrant workers' own engagements with alternative media production reflect their consciousness and their demands for social equality and justice. Such engagement is articulated by their longstanding struggles for substantial rights. These workers' expressions through alternative media constitute a daily mode of activism in line with the ever-increasing demand of migrant workers for their own deliberation spaces. As many individual migrant workers have documented their own lives in diverse forms in the past two decades, increased communal and organizational support could mobilize more workers to participate in alternative, collective media production.

Different from prior scholars' emphasis on individuals' use of the Internet in networked activism, NGOs play a more important role in creating alternative media outlets for marginalized communities. Migrant workers require organizational forces to cultivate collective identification and mobilize collective action to produce their own media. Discussions of ICTs for alternative media practices should avoid technological determinism. Information technologies are certainly becoming powerful tools for the production and distribution of alternative media; but what changes the media can create depend on organizations' activist agendas and how effectively they can mobilize people's participation and attract readers.

As media expansion in China continues to be driven by market forces and media content is shaped by and for middle-class consumer culture, the challenges for alternative media are not only political and economic but also social and cultural. The number of migrant workers who participate in alternative media production is still quite small,

especially when set against a rural migrant population in the hundreds of millions. In a milieu where middle-class consumerism is likely to continue to dominate Chinese cultural and social lives through profit-driven mainstream media, it is urgent to explore how to more effectively reach, mobilize, and empower greater numbers of underprivileged people to adopt alternative media and ICTs in the formation of collective action for activism and resistance.

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION: POLITICS OF WORKING-CLASS RESISTANCE IN CONTEMPORARY CHINA

In my chat with Fangfang (the participant of Didinghua in Chapter 4), we were sharing our adolescent experiences as a girl: We became panic about the changes of our bodies that our secondary sex characteristics made us realize that we were "different" from boys. We both recalled that we felt so uncomfortable about and disciplined by the gendered norms and expectations which urged us to behave "like a girl". At the same time, we also recognized that my privilege as someone from an urban middle-class family granted me access to affluent resources of education, housing, and many other material and symbolic goods, while Fangfang's poor rural family in the 1980s were even hardly able to afford the very basic living expenses. We then talked about marriage. Fangfang

was very upset about her marriage and said that she cannot get divorced because her own wages were not enough to support her and her son's life. Yet even among many middle-class and upper-middle-class women, the stigma of being old-single or divorced women drives them to tolerate with the unhappy marriage. Fangfang and I shared about stories we have heard about privileged and underprivileged women stuck with unpleasant marital lives, and we agreed that economic needs were not the only factor that shapes women's marital decision-making. Gender and class power relations intersect to shape women's lives throughout their lifetime. The standpoint of working-class women, which is rural female migrants in contemporary China's case, offers possibilities for resisting structural inequalities.

Through analyzing various forms of communicative and media actions by rural migrant workers and other social actors, my study shows that mediated labor activism has become an important constitution of working-class resistance in contemporary China. Mediated labor activism encompasses collective, NGO-intermediate, and networked actions and is integrated into workers' everyday lives; media and communication are both sites and means for various social actors to participate in activist actions; and NGOs play a vital role as an organizational force to nurture a sustainable activist culture. Compared with labor strikes/protests, mediated labor activism expands the resistant framework of demanding substantial rights to seek political-economic and socio-cultural equality and justice. The activism aims to undermine the unequal structures sustained through capitalist labor exploitation, cultural domination, and social exclusion. Mediated labor activism embodies collective resistance with both symbolic and material impact. In China's context, where the Party-state and market have omnipotent power, collective and

sustainable resistance increases the strength of civil society. By occupying a working-class subjective position and an anti-capitalist standpoint, the resistance constructs socialist imaginaries where there are equal relations in production and distribution, and social inclusion and respect. The resistance contributes to the discursive formation of counter-hegemonic power against capitalism and neoliberalism; yet at the same time, this counter-power is embedded. The embedded counter-power means that activism and resistance seek support from and envision cooperation with the Party-state to fight against capitalist globalization. Rather than staging political confrontation with the state, they make political calls toward the state to restore its socialist legacy. This process is strategic in two senses. First, any explicit challenge against the legitimacy of the Party-state faces severe suppression given the Chinese political system. Second, as the construction of socialist imaginaries intends to build resonance with the general public, it offers opportunities for small-scale resistance to grow into more enduring and large-scale movements. The advocating discourse of class equality penetrates public deliberations which have been dominated by the state discourse of economic development and the market discourse of consumer rights. Working-class resistance exposes the rising inequalities in reforming China and re-politicizes the popular narratives that overtly celebrate China's integration into capitalist globalization.

On the other hand, feminist intersectional agendas are rather marginalized in contemporary working-class resistance. Whereas class inequality and the rural-urban dichotomy are the main targets of activism, patriarchy and male domination have been much less contested. In labor protests and strikes, female workers' concerns and needs are almost invisible. Mediated labor activism highlights class equity, yet issues of gender

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division of labor, male supremacy, and sexual violence have been addressed only by a small number of female activists and they receive far less attention from the mainstream media, other activists, and migrant workers. As the case of Jianjiao Buluo shows in Chapter 6, sufferings of working-class homosexual women are even less visible in the labor activism movement. In the actual resistant process and practices, women's access to the activist space are constrained and greatly shaped by unequal gender power relations. They must form all-women spaces or groups to enhance women's participation in the activism. The political goal of contemporary working-class resistance to build a socialist China is closely connected to Mao's socialist era, but such agenda fails to oppose the country's longstanding patriarchal power and heterosexual-normativity. I thus argue that there should be an inclusive and intersectional activist agenda to re-politicize public imagination toward a socialist and feminist China.

<u>Chinese Working-class Resistance in Capitalist Globalization</u>

In this section, I summarize the dissertation's empirical contribution to labor studies and China studies in the context of capitalist globalization. Voices from various social actors construct pluralistic counter-public spaces and interrogate structural inequalities through various communicative and mediated actions. These voices go beyond the circle of labor strikes to sustain short-term protests with long-term activism. Participants in the resistance have been diverse. Migrant workers are not only those who work in factories as industrial laborers, but also workers in service sectors and at construction sites. Activists, scholars, and volunteers are also active actors in the resistance. Migrant workers' personal stories become political voices as the formerly silenced group expresses itself collectively. The stories enact everyday life as a

deliberative space for migrant workers to reflect on problems and seek possible ways to make changes. Through performance, female migrant domestic workers express their longing for respect and expose their suffering from bias, discrimination, and mistreatment. Their voices question the degraded value of domestic work. By writing and publishing their stories in alternative forms of media, migrant workers claim their voices and agency of communicative power. The construction of migrant workers' own media space resists the middle-class-oriented mainstream media that objectify and alienate working-class and rural people. In stories of rural girls' rather limited access to education, rural women and female migrants' sexual violence, and lesbian migrants' difficult life in factories, female migrants and activists write about male supremacy, class privilege, and homophobia as interlocking systems of oppression which further suppress working-class and rural women and sexual minorities. Through cultural production and online deliberation, labor activists, scholars, and volunteers confront migrant workers' class inequalities: their exploitation as cheap laborers; their little access to education, housing, and medical care; and the social exclusion and marginalization they face. They echo socialist values and challenge capitalist modes of production, distribution, and consumption. All the above voices have been nurtured and cultivated in alternative spaces by social actors who form counter-publics in contemporary China. Social actors move across alternative spaces to construct an advocacy sphere. Yet not all voices have equal weight. As the case of Jiu Ye in Chapter 4 demonstrates, class and socialist discourses are more prominent, while gender and feminist discourses are often trivialized in the activism.

On the other hand, only particular voices have been able to enter the mainstream public sphere. And the extent to which these voices can shape public discourses depends upon the power and capital of social actors who carry the voices. For instance, although domestic workers' performance has been reported frequently in mainstream media, it is mainly represented as media spectacle and their advocacy goals and implications seldom appear in those reports. Domestic workers and NGO staff have little leverage in influencing the agenda and discourse of the mainstream media. Comparatively, scholars can rely on their social and cultural capital to allow their advocacy voices to reach dominant spaces. The articles and discussions that endorse migrant workers' activism in academic journals and mainstream media are such examples. Labor activists who have certain fame and influence, such as the leaders of Migrant Workers' Home, also can have their activist voices appear in mainstream media. These leading activists gain influence through receiving awards and recognition from the government and building collaborations and relationships with scholars and other activists. The advocacy voices about class equality and the critique of capitalism fall within the legitimate framework of the state's socialist discourses. With no explicit challenge against the Party-state's embracing of global capitalism and market economy, socialist advocacy discourses are acceptable in the mainstream public sphere. On the contrary, feminist advocacy discourses about rural and working-class women's equalities are still confined within the alternative space. Intersectional feminist activism hardly penetrates into the dominant media and culture.

Different from prior scholars' debate on migrant workers' class consciousness, migrant workers who participate in activism and resistance have demonstrated subaltern,

class, and rights consciousness. Migrant workers are not a homogenous group and it is insufficient to argue that they exclusively own any one kind of consciousness. For instance, female migrant domestic workers show subaltern consciousness in their performances to resist bias and discrimination. The subaltern consciousness is, as Sun Wanning discusses, when migrant workers realize their economically and socially disadvantaged and marginalized position (Sun, 2014), and then speak and act from that position. Migrant workers, who have been part of the working-class cultural production, display a mixture of rights and class consciousness. They advocate for economic rights to higher wages, better working conditions, and more equal distribution of education and housing resources. Class consciousness resides in workers' confrontation of capitalist systems and values. My study also shows that class consciousness can be cultivated through workers' participation in activism and resistance.

Chinese rural migrants' inequalities epitomize those which deprived groups face all over the world: workers are exploited in factories, mining sites, and domestic households; women are subject to male privilege, gender subordination, and sexual violence; minorities and the underprivileged face discrimination and social exclusion; and privatization renders basic living resources harder and harder to afford. Capitalist globalization intertwines with the local power structure to consolidate the domination of the privileged. Layers of unequal power relations intersect to shape people's lives and leave little space to imagine possible ways of being other than obeying authority. Consumerism creates a distorted image that desirable life can be acquired only through endless consumption. Communicative activism and resistance articulate the lived experiences of people, especially the underprivileged, to alternatives: to embrace an equal

and dignified mode of being. Migrant workers' inequalities serve as a standpoint from which different social actors constellate in the resistance to construct political imaginations of a new socialist China.

NGOs have become an important organizational force to nurture bottom-up and networked activism and resistance. Contrary to scholars' critique of NGOs as merely service providers, I argue that attention should be paid to the often blurred boundaries between NGOs' service and activism. For instance, Didinghua provides both a social and resistant space for domestic workers. Also, service can be an effective way to mobilize marginalized groups to take part in the activism. An example is Migrant Workers' Home's cultural activities for migrant workers, which later attract many workers to join its cultural advocacy projects. As my dissertation has demonstrated, participation in NGO activism has become routine for many migrant workers. Some workers have clear political motivations to resist inequalities, and others are more driven by social and cultural needs. NGOs are a friendly and communal space for migrant workers to attend periodically. Rather than simply disregard these types of participation as carrying little transformative potential, an epistemological shift is required to understand them as collective resistance. In the context where migrant workers are marginalized and excluded from the urban sphere, their gathering together as a community is itself a resistance practice. NGOs are also sites for other social actors to engage in activism. They provide organizational support to individuals to enable the activism to become sustainable. Through NGOs' activism, social actors collaborate and form networks. NGOs fill the gap when there lacks an organizational mobilizing force for resistance in China's current context.

Yet NGO-based activism still occurs only on a small scale due to the political and sociocultural constraints. After the 1989 Tiananmen Square Movement, any mass mobilized demonstration or protest is forbidden by the Party-state. The state regulates NGOs and cautiously monitors any forms of grassroots activism and collective resistance through local governments. NGOs rely on the state's recognition to acquire institutional legitimacy and enhance their social and public influence. Grassroots activism seeks to form alliances with the state in the resistance against capitalism, without challenging the state's authoritarian power. The opportunities for NGO-based activism to grow into more large-scale and enduring movements is also restricted by the social and cultural environment. Since the 1990s as the increasing market power continues to privatize public sectors, discourse of consumer rights and consumption extensively circulate in the media and public spheres. Although left-wing scholars warn about the ever-increasing power of neoliberalism that dominates the Chinese people's economic, social, and cultural lives, these voices are often drowned in the enthusiastic celebration of China's tremendous growth of economic and national power in popular sentiment. Equality, one of the most well-received political ideas from the early 20th century to Mao's China, has almost disappeared in public discussions. The revolutionary and socialist past only appear in the mediated public sphere as a way to legitimize the Party's leadership and the reforming China's ideology "socialism with Chinese characteristics." The country's years-long striving for political, economic, cultural, and social equalities in the past century has largely faded in public memories. The effort to build a socialist and equal China through activism and resistance grapples with these sociocultural realities.

In the following sections, I elaborate on the theoretical and conceptual contributions of my study to the fields of resistance studies, mediated activism, ICTs and social change, and feminist media studies.

Mediated and Communicative Resistance

My dissertation contributes to resistance studies by bridging the field of media and communication with scholarship on resistance. Existing literatures are mostly from the disciplines of sociology, anthropology, and political science (Hollander & Einwohner, 2004). I argue that media and communication are both sites and means for resistance. First, media and communication are essential parts of existing power structures. To identify inequalities that endure in and are supported by the media structure is to recognize the media and communication as objects/targets for resistance. For instance, Hawaiian women wrote traditional stories to preserve their native cultural heritage (Silva, 1997), to contend their underpresentation in mainstream media. In the environment of rape culture and victim blaming, victims of rape broke silence by speaking about their experiences (Hughes et al., 1995). In the case of rural migrant workers, mainstream media and dominant culture produce and reinforce their inequalities. A media system and culture industry that are profit-driven represent migrant workers as alienated others and reproduce the superiority of the urban-middle-class. Second, mediated and communicative practices can be effective avenues for resistance. As chapters 4, 5, and 6 demonstrated, performance, music, ICTs, and alternative media all serve as means for resistance. These practices appeal and are available to migrant workers and other social actors to stage their counter-discourses and form counter-publics.

Bringing media and communication into resistance studies blurs the boundary between symbolic/discursive and material/physical actions and impact. Mediated and communicative resistance often simultaneously encompass both symbolic and physical actions. Domestic workers' performance involves uses of their bodies and material goods in the resistance, which count as physical actions (Hollander & Einwohner, 2004). The resistant performance is also accomplished through telling stories and other speech acts. Breaking silence as symbolic behavior has been an important mode of resistance among marginalized and disadvantaged groups, such as American women questioning the domestic roles in dominant culture (Brown, 1994) and Arabic women creating their own literary cyberspace to resist the monopoly of the literary industry (Elsadda, 2010). Activists' production of advocacy music requires the symbolic effort of writing songs and the physical actions of holding live shows on the street and in communities. Maintaining communities, constructing counter-public spaces, and publishing with alternative media through ICTs are not only symbolic resistant actions but also accessing technologies as material goods. These oppositional actions represent resistance with symbolic impact in that they disrupt the values and ideologies that sustain the power structures (Faith, 1993; Rubin, 1996; Weitz, 2001). Resistance targets capitalisim, consumersism, male supremacy, and homophobia. They also exert material impact through redistributing communicative power. Marginalized groups create alternative spaces to express their voices as collective communicative actions, which challenges the existing unequal power relations in the mediated public sphere.

Social Movements and Mediated Activism in Non-democratic Contexts

While exisiting studies on social movements and mediated activism are largely contextualized in democratic regimes, my study explicates China as a case for non-democratic contexts. In non-democratic regimes where large-scale social movements are less likely to happen, rather than being embedded in the process of social movements, mediated activism facilitates the formation of counter-power with possibilities to grow into more enduring movements. I propose a concept "cultural and social opportunities" to illuminate how the social and cultural environment becomes a structural factor to determine the scope and impact of mediated activism. Cultural and social opportunities are interconnected with political and media opportunities, and the former emphasizes the values, norms, and popular perceptions of social issues. In China's context, the constraints on mediated activism's ability to exert impact on wider publics are certainly coming from the political control and the power of the media system. But what is often neglected is the depoliticized culture and social relations in which the general public is absorbed into highly commercialized and propagandized discourses. Inequalities are normalized through dominant ideologies of development and modernity. Collective actions and values are replaced by neoliberal celebration of individual competition and achievement. My discussions in chapter 6 illustrate that the structural constraints on alternative media's ability to thrive are not only due to media opportunities, but also attributed to the social and cultural environment. In a context where audiences are used to consumer media and culture, the capability for alternative media to attract audiences is rather limited. The case of Jiu Ye shows that the misogynist culture greatly confines the scope and influence of feminist activism.

The relationship between activism and mainstream media in China has similarities and differences to that in democratic countries. In chapter 4, the ways in which mainstream media represent domestic workers' performance confirm Rucht's observation that mass media sidestep the political goals of social movements (Rucht, 2004). The strategies staff at Migrant Women's Club adopt to get representations into the mainstream media can also been found in other cases in democratic contexts, such as ActionAid in the UK and their tactics to convey the "diamond fair trade" campaign message through media coverage (Coleman & Ross, 2010). Greenpeace, a transnational enviornmental NGO based in The Netherlands, successfully adapts to mass media's core values and manages to attract positive reports about the organization (Rucht, 2004). Media opportunities, as a structural constraint (Cammaerts, Mattoni, & McCurdy, 2013; della Porta, 2013, 2018), manifest in particular ways in different political contexts. While marches and protests gradually become routinized and hardly receive much public and media attention in democratic contexts (Cammaerts, Mattoni, & Mccurdy, 2013), mainstream media are not allowed to report collective resistant actions, such as demonstrations and strikes, due to political control in China's authoritarian environment. Thus, these subaltern forms of mediated resistance become all the more important, as they offer opportunities for collective resistant action to gain visibility.

Activists and migrant workers' creative and diverse adoptions of mediated and communicative practices are in parallel with a wide range of mediated activist actions worldwide. Performance as a means to advocate for domestic workers' rights is in line with a transnational movement of theater for development in Africa, South Asia, and Latin America, which educates local audiences about underprivileged groups' rights

(Kerr, 2014). In chapter 5, New Worker Troupe and Jiu Ye's advocacy songs join in artist activists' effort to raise public awareness about inequalities in different parts of the world (Eyerman & Jamison 1998; McLelland, 2018; Rosenthal & Flacks, 2012). Migrant workers' individual and collective stories are indispensable parts of the activism and resistance, as Winkell and Enger conceptualize story-telling and narratives as crucial means to change social values and norms in HIV campaigns (Winkell & Enger, 2014).

The production and circulation of migrant workers' alternative media become a counterbalance to the domination of the mainstream media and serve as vital components of the contemporary working-class resistance in China, and this factor is in common with numerous alternative and social movement media at the local, national, and transnational levels. Indymedia is among the most successful examples of transnational alternative media as part of the global justice movement (Downing, 2003), which contests the power of established media (Couldry, 2003). Alternative media practices flourish in different regions: activists create radical and alternative media for protest in a post-disaster zone in Italy (Padovani, 2013); and hundreds of citizens' media emerge in Chile and other parts of Latin America as components of social movements for democracy and justice (Rodriguez, 2003). The survival of migrant workers' alternative media depends on NGOs and local migrant worker communities, a fact that corroborates scholars' observation that civil society organizations and communities play a leading role in producing alternative and social movement media (Hadl, 2011; Rodriguez, 2011). Whereas dominant media are supported by commercials or political parties, alternative media often lack the financial and social resources they need to survive. It is within such media opportunity structure that organizational and community support becomes vital for alternative media. For

instance, many alternative media in Philippines are run by small underground groups and grassroots organizations with political aims for structural change, and they form loose informal networks to share resources and support each other (Brooten, 2013). The production and distribution of Chinese migrant workers' alternative media also primarily relies on NGOs and local communities.

ICTs without Guarantees

My analysis of ICTs' role in Chinese labor activism and working-class resistance enriches the debates on connective and collective actions. Personalized politics can indeed facilitate individuals' connections to campaigns and movements (Bennett, 2004; Papacharissi & Trevey, 2018), but the formation of collective actions and identities should not be overshadowed by fragmented and individualized politics. Searching for collective identities and actions are of particular importance to social groups who face disadvantaged conditions and have marginalized status in power structures. As discussed in chapter 3, female migrants build their online community via social media. Through daily chatting and greetings, organizing social gatherings, and sharing job information, these women form their own networks where emotions and sisterhood play important roles. Digital media facilitate NGO-intermediated and self-organized social and economic empowerment given the context that domestic workers and female migrants often face social exclusion in urban life. But different from their middle-class counterparts who are social media savvy, these women workers cultivate solidarity first through their offline advocacy activities and then by strengthening the online community. Their community-building relies on their collective identities and shared experiences of being women and migrant workers.

Social media serve as sites for various social actors to join labor activism. Labor activists run chat groups on social media where participants are diverse, including activists, scholars, workers, and students. They circulate information about offline protests, deliberate about political and social issues, and discuss radical thoughts from Marx, Lenin, Mao, and leftist scholars. Activists use their social media pages to inform advocacy and protest events and activities and maintain connections and networks with their allies. The networked counter-publics sustain short-term protests and supplement long-term activism through circulating counter-discourse, generating deliberations, and disseminating information regarding offline protests. The formation of networked counter-publics in China's working-class resistance supports Gerbaudo and Trere's view that social media become new sites for collective identification in the digital age (Gerbaudo & Trere, 2015). In social movements and protests in different countries, such as the U.S. (Kavada, 2015; Gerbaudo, 2015), Mexico (Trere, 2015), and Italy (Coretti & Pica, 2015), social media underpin people's collective identification as protesters and activists through accelerating information-sharing, interaction, and communication.

Digital media are undoubtedly beneficial to working-class resistance in China, but as many scholars have urged, technologies are not a determining factor in fostering resistant actions and power. In China, online activism is built upon the existing long-term, and offline activist efforts to cultivate collective identification and class consciousness and mobilize collective action among rural migrant workers. The embeddedness of online protests in the offline actions and environment also manifests in other studies. For instance, in the Gezi Park protest in Turkey, the Turkish diaspora's online activism was motivated by their emotional attachment with the offline protesters

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and concerns about people's suffering (Ogan, Giglou, & d'Haenens, 2016). In Zimbabwe, it is too optimistic to believe that social media will bring democracy and change to the country, as the majority of population not only face the digital divide but also suffer from daily struggles of hunger and poverty (Mutsvairo, 2018). To demystify the transformative potential of technologies, Couldry reminds us that technologies cannot guarantee people's voices to be valued (Couldry, 2010). Similarly, Tacchi argues that the redistribution of access is not enough if the social arrangement and hierarchies of value remain unchanged; and the voices of marginalized and underprivileged groups need not only be heard, but also listened to and valued (Tacchi, 2012). Based on the findings of "Finding a Voice" at a transnational research project on "open content creation," Tacchi proposes that there should be a decentering of ICTs to deconstruct the functionalist interpretation of ICTs and to locate ICTs' impact in larger social, cultural, economic, and political processes (Tacchi, 2012). My study supports these propositions of technologies and contests some scholars' optimistic views of the Internet's role in contemporary China's activism (Qiu, 2016; Tai, 2015, 2016; Yang, 2009). Examples of alternative media in chapter 6 reveal that ICTs do provide opportunities in China for previously silenced groups such as migrant workers to express their voices and document events and their lives, but making those voices heard and matter to more workers and the general public requires much more work than merely adopting technologies.

Toward Intersectional Feminist Emancipation

The misrepresentation and underrepresentation of women is a worldwide phenomenon (Carter & Steiner, 2004). Feminists and women's organizations advocate for positive images of women and more coverage of women's protests and campaigns in

mainstream media (Gallagher, 2014). While feminist scholarship on media studies prioritizes gender issues, my discussion on rural-to-urban female migrants brings an intersectional lens to expose intertwined unequal power relations. In chapter 4, Didinghua's negotiation with media embodies efforts of activists and women's grassroot organizations to increase media representation of working-class women. But these efforts are different from women's campaigns and protests which directly challenge media systems to promote changes. As stated before, the NGO strategically attracts media reports by accepting frames of domestic workers' performance as a media spectacle. The strategy is to compromise for the sake of gaining public attention in China's political and media environments. Within media industries in different countries, feminist media workers strive to increase reports on women's issues from progressive perspectives (Byerly & Ross, 2006). Whereas middle-class women can have feminist professionals working in the media to amplify their voices, working-class women have no such privilege. For working-class women, establishing their own media becomes a vital way to increase their visibility. Jianjiao, serving as an independent and pro-change media for female migrants, fills the void of working-class feminist alternative media in China. Similar to other feminist media activists in Europe, South Asia, and Latin America (Ananda, 2004; Byerly & Ross, 2006; Virmani, 2001), the editors of Jianjiao are educated women who self-identify as feminists and have political goals. By inviting female migrants to write their stories and opposing unequal power relations along gender, class, sexuality, and rurality, Jianjiao creates an intersectional feminist public sphere for working-class women and sexual minorities whose voices are barely heard in mainstream media or in middle-class-oriented feminist alternative media. This is different from urban

middle-class LGBT communities, who have access to commercial spaces and can often create their own communities through diverse social and cultural activities. Queer working-class people hardly have the social and economic capital to build communities. Homophobia and misogyny intersect with class inequalities to oppress queer working-class women. Feminist media activism with intersectional agendas, such as Jianjiao, is thus of critical importance for these women to claim spaces, display subjectivities, and build solidarity.

As capitalist and neoliberal ideologies gradually build hegemonic power through transnational flow of capital, media industries, and consumer culture, my dissertation demonstrates that mediated labor activism and working-class resistance are able to form counter-hegemonic forces by promoting political goals for socialism. At the same time, I urge that an intersectional feminist agenda should be incorporated into any resistance and movements to pursue just and equal societies. Without transforming the interlocking systems of oppression, women and all other underprivileged groups will continue to be marginalized, exploited, and suppressed.

Notes

[1] Dagong poetry and literature refer to poems and literary articles written by rural migrant workers. The genre emerged in the 1990s when a small group of migrant workers began to document their lives and sufferings through writing. While a few talented workers are able to gain class mobility by acquiring jobs as editors in major presses, most of migrant worker writers only take writing as a hobby.

[2] Suzhi is an official discourse raised by the Party-State to refer to the civility of Chinese citizens. The discourse means to urge individuals to improve capability.

[3] http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/zxfb/201704/t20170428_1489334.html

[4] MWH's public accounts on WeChat usually had less than 1000 pageviews for its articles.

[5] "Focus Interview", "The spring of 'Didinghua'"http://tv.cntv.cn/video/C10326/ccf4c2c9004f4b549fe0bc404ffb03cc

[6] Bu Wei has written many advocacy articles about MWH published on mainstream media and other platforms such as social media's public accounts and MWH's brochures.

[7] Many media have interviewed Zhang Hui Yu in their reports on MWH and the migrant workers' writing group, including Xinhua, Pengpai, Jiemian, Tengxun, Sohu, etc. These media cover range from mainstream official and commercial media to various online media.

[8] Guo Chun Lin wrote an article, "当新工人遭遇 "梦想秀" （When new workers encounter dream shows） on a domestic left website, Wuyouzhixiang, and argued that the mainstream commercial culture silenced migrant workers' voices. http://www.wyzxwk.com/Article/wenyi/2017/04/378737.html

[9] Wang Hui published the article "两种新穷人及其未来--阶级政治的衰落、再形成与新穷人的尊严政治" (Two types of the new poor and their futures—The fall of class politics, reformation and the new poor's political dignity) in December 2016 on an independent scholarly website, 人文与社会（humanity and society）. In the abstract, Wang Hui talked about MWH's "being forced" instance and expressed support.
Retrieved from http://wen.org.cn/modules/article/view.article.php/4166.

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