

Producing Gendered Migration Narratives in China: A Case Study of *Dagongmei Tongxun* by a Local Nongovernmental Organization

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This article offers a case study of a periodic publication, *Dagongmei Tongxun*, produced by local Chinese nongovernmental organization Rural Women Knowing All. *Dagongmei Tongxun* publishes articles regarding life and working situations of rural-to-urban women migrants (*dagongmei*) in Beijing. I apply Bourdieu's field theory to analyze the ways *Dagongmei Tongxun* shapes the field of migration narratives. Drawing on interviews with the organization's staff members, discourse analysis of the publication's articles, and the state discourses of *dagongmei*, I argue that the publication of *Dagongmei Tongxun* is an institutionally bounded political and cultural project. Entitling women migrants to authorship is a political intervention that mobilizes often-silenced women as active agents in producing gendered migration narratives. Whereas the state discourses still tend to objectify and marginalize *dagongmei*, narratives by women migrants themselves present their diverse subjectivities and complex life situations. At the same time, the publication's advocating discourses fail to confront hegemonic ideologies that underpin unequal power structures.

Keywords: rural-to-urban women migrants, nongovernmental organization, China, cultural production, migration narratives

Far away from hometown, family and friends, I came to Beijing, a big city, to make a living. I have no one to share my feelings with. I do not want my family to worry about me so that I cannot tell them how hard my life is in Beijing. Neither can I tell friends, for they are very busy with their work and I do not want to bother them. Then isn't writing [to *Dagongmei Tongxun*] an ideal way for us migrant workers to express our feelings and concerns? (X. M. Zhu, 2013, p. 13)

This is part of the narrative by Zhu Xiumei, a 50-year-old rural-to-urban migrant woman who was employed as a domestic worker in an urban household. Her article was published in *Dagongmei Tongxun*, a nongovernmental organization (NGO) publication particularly targeting at women migrants in Beijing. It has been more than 35 years since the Chinese government initiated economic reform and hundreds of rural migrants have settled in cities. However, these workers often face political, economic, social, and

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cultural inequalities. Concerned with possible forces confronting the inequality of women migrants, I examine *Dagongmei Tongxun*, a periodic magazine produced by the NGO Rural Women Knowing All, to publish stories of rural-to-urban female migrants (*dagongmei*).

Since the 1990s, labor NGOs have emerged as important institutional forces to work on migrant workers' issues and advocate for their rights in contemporary China. Rather than simply assuming that *Dagongmei Tongxun* is a transformative or counterhegemonic force because it is produced by a NGO, I integrate Bourdieu's field theory of cultural production to analyze how existing power relations and social conditions are shaping and being shaped by different social agents' practices in producing gendered migration narratives. Drawing on interviews with the NGO staff members about the publication process, discourse analysis of *Dagongmei Tongxun's* articles, and the state discourses of *dagongmei*, I analyze how the cultural production of gendered migration narratives by a local Chinese NGO responds to the inequalities of rural migrants. My research questions are as follows: In what ways does Chinese labor NGOs' cultural production work shape the field of migration narratives? And, what are the political, cultural, and social implications of such work?

Rural-to-Urban Female Migrants in China

Since the late 1970s, the Chinese government has launched economic reform to shift the state-controlled economy to a state-regulated market economy. Economic reform commodifies rural migrants as a cheap labor force for profit accumulation in the country's economic development (Pun, 2005). This reform has produced a new social group, rural-to-urban migrant workers. Rural-to-urban migrants often suffer political, economic, and cultural deprivations of unequal power structures. Gendered power relations are fundamental to migrants' experiences. Women migrants often work in factories as assembly-line workers in south and east coast areas (Pun, 2005; Xu, 2000), domestic workers for urban families (Davin, 1999; Jacka, 2006; W. Sun, 2009; H. Yan, 2008), bar hostesses who sometimes offer sex services to make more money (Zheng, 2004), and waitresses or salespersons in low-service sectors such as small restaurants or shops (Wallis, 2013b). Gender norms not only shape the labor divisions among rural migrants, but also create distinctions for different types of work. For example, 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; W. Sun, 2009; H. Yan, 2008).

In the media and cultural sphere, female migrant workers have gradually become present yet heavily subjected to marginalization and underrepresentation. Media, both state-run and market-oriented media, are primary sites to represent and construct rural-to-urban women migrants as alienated and deviant others. The official discourses are in line with the national agenda of economic development and its emphasis on the necessity of individual contribution. For example, a program from China central television broadcasted "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 suffering and difficulties (Orgad, 2012). Commercial media, on the other hand, construct women migrants as consuming objects for urban readers. Compassionate journalism, including some commercial evening newspapers such as the *Southern Metropolitan Daily* and official media such as

the China central television show *Focal Point*, expresses sympathetic attention to the hardship of female migrants and frame them as individual victims (W. Sun, 2004).

Suzhi is the term proposed by the Chinese government in the early era of its economic reform to cultivate "high-quality" citizens to meet the demand of modernization. First appearing as political discourse, *suzhi* has been quickly adopted by media and popular discourses to refer to an ideal and desirable type of subjectivity that the modern Chinese should embrace (H. Yan, 2008). Literally, *suzhi* means having civility, self-discipline, and the ability to achieve modernity (H. Yan, 2008). Rural migrants are particular targets for the governing power of *suzhi* discourse. The subordination and displacement of the rural population have their trajectory and genealogy in China's search for modernization in the past 100 years (Jacka, 2006).

The Field of Producing Migration Narratives

To analyze the social conditions and power relations in which different social agents participate in the field of producing migration narratives, I apply Bourdieu's field theory of cultural production. Bourdieu explicates how cultural production serves as sites for social formations of consciousness, conceptions, meanings, and values, all of which constitute social reality (Bourdieu & Johnson, 1993). The "objectivity of subjectivity" addresses the symbolic and material characteristics of cultural practices situated in specific contexts. Bourdieu defines the field of cultural production as the space of positions and position-takings in which social agents interact (Bourdieu & Johnson, 1993). The position is defined by the possession of certain forms of capital and by the occupation of structural positions based on distributions of this capital. In the field of producing migration narratives, those who own relatively high political, economic, and cultural capital with privileged positions in the power structure are often the authors entitled to write migration narratives, such as journalists and TV producers. Journalists write rural migrants into news stories as objectified facts. In popular TV dramas, producers commodify female migrants as consumable media products.

The space of possibles in the field of cultural production changes as new agents enter the field and alter position-taking. For example, there has emerged a growing group of migrant worker-writers who write "*dagong* poetry" and "*dagong* literature," through which rural migrants narrate their experiences and thoughts (W. Sun, 2013). By entering the field of producing migration narratives, this new group of writers may radically transform the dominant definition of writers and redistribute the capital of entitlement (Bourdieu & Johnson, 1993), which has been possessed exclusively by privileged groups. But the transformation is not automatic or guaranteed; rather, it requires contestations among forces. For instance, urban cultural elites often label *dagong* poetry as a low-brow form of art (W. Sun, 2013). Such judgment and distinction tend to subordinate the cultural practices by rural migrants and legitimate the supremacy of a high-brow aesthetic taste. To occupy the field thus requires power to alter the position-taking, which can redistribute the capital in existing structures (Bourdieu & Johnson, 1993). It is the changes in the "space of the possibles" that move me to explore the negotiation of power relations among social agents in the production of migration narratives.

In the next section, I bring Chinese labor NGOs as institutionalized nonprofit forces particularly dealing with rural migrants' issues into the field of producing migration narratives. By further exploring contestations of forces in the field, I analyze implications of NGOs' practices in redistributing the cultural capital to produce migration narratives and the ways in which those practices could possibly confront the cultural inequality rural migrants face.

Chinese Labor NGOs

NGOs are becoming important institutional forces to deal with social problems in contemporary China. Analysis and discussions have mostly focused on the role of NGOs in the formation of civil society in China, and scholars have explicated NGOs' relationships with the state and market and as international civil organizations (Jacka, 2004; Ma, 2005; Saich, 2000; Spires, 2012). Critics point out that Chinese NGOs lack autonomy from the state's regulation, and those NGOs depend heavily on foreign funders and Western modes of management (Spires, 2012). Defendants argue that NGOs can contribute to a more egalitarian and critical public sphere (Jacka, 2004), and given the authoritative political control, NGOs' "nonresistant activism" can be a sustainable form of social change in China (Wang, 2015). The two camps of the debates are valid in a sense that they explicate the complexity of Chinese NGOs.

Among Chinese NGOs, labor NGOs work on migrant workers' issues. From the mid-1990s, labor NGOs working on migrant workers' issues began to emerge in the southern coast area of China (Chan, 2012). Activists and organizations from Hong Kong, such as the Chinese Working Women Network, and international civil groups and institutions helped with the establishment of labor NGOs in the Pearl River Delta region (Chan, 2012). In the meantime, labor NGOs have spread from the south to other areas in China. Approximately 30 labor NGOs have been established in major cities such as Beijing, Shenzhen, and Guangzhou, as well as in secondary cities such as Wuhan, Qingdao, and Chongqing (Lee & Shen, 2011). The emergence and development of labor NGOs have responded to the rising problems and conflicts that increasing numbers of rural migrants have encountered, whereas the state and market often fail or are unwilling to address those issues.

Labor NGOs often bear criticism on the limitation of being a radical force for structural changes. As a highly mobile population, migrant workers hardly maintain long-term connections with local labor NGOs (Franceschini, 2014). In politically sensitive situations, such as demonstrations and strikes, labor NGOs usually fail to represent migrant workers (Franceschini, 2014). Moreover, service-providing work by NGOs can reside with the reproduction of existing power structures. Lee and Shen's (2011) preliminary analysis of labor NGOs' practices revealed that labor NGOs tend to avoid cultivating solidarity and collective power among migrant workers. They looked at the organizational culture and practices of some labor NGOs, and argued that there was a tendency toward co-optation and commercialization among those NGOs. In other words, labor NGOs either kept cozy relationships with the state or adopted corporate practices in terms of management (Lee & Shen, 2011). Wallis's (2013a) analysis of an NGO's technological training program revealed that although the NGO provided service to women migrants, it also reproduced these women as docile labor subjects.

A Case Study of *Dagongmei Tongxun*

Bearing the above discussions and critiques in mind, I explore labor NGOs' cultural practices and their ideological and political implications. To explore the role of Chinese labor NGOs in the field of producing migration narratives and the ways that NGOs' cultural production shift position-taking in the field, I analyzed the publication process of an NGO journal primarily for women migrants as a case study. *Dagongmei Tongxun* is a publication by Rural Women Knowing All (RWKA);¹ it particularly addresses life and work situations of rural-to-urban female migrants. RWKA was founded in 2001 in Beijing. Jacka (2006) has extensively documented and analyzed the development of RWKA since it was originally established in 1993. I present a brief account of RWKA. The aim of the NGO is to promote development for Chinese rural women. Specifically, RWKA works on promoting civic participation of rural women, social inclusion and policy advocacy, providing education and care for leftover children in rural villages² and children of migrants in cities,³ and offering services to low-income elders. It was generally agreed that RWKA would maintain a close and cozy relationship with the government (Fu, 2009; Jacka, 2006); yet, such a relationship should not dispute the contributions and the potential of the organization. Discussions of the democratic potentiality look at the actual practices and activities of the NGOs (Jacka, 2006; Lee & Shen, 2011).

Staffs from *Dagongmei* Home are in charge of publishing *Dagongmei Tongxun*. *Dagongmei* Home was reorganized from the Migrant Women's Club⁴ into RWKA as a department in 2001. Since then, *Dagongmei* Home has focused on the welfare of women migrants who work as domestic workers in Beijing. There are five staff members and a few volunteers working for *Dagongmei* Home. The first issue of *Dagongmei Tongxun* was published in 2002. *Dagongmei Tongxun* publishes articles written by female migrants, NGO staff members and volunteers, and agents from collaboration institutions, such as teachers from migrant children's schools. It also reprints news articles about policy and laws particularly related to the rural migrant population from mainstream media. Each issue of the publication includes the following sections: First Experience, Zero Distance, Retirement and Pension, Policy Analysis, Rights Protection, Family Activities, Voices of Volunteers, Health and Life, Entertainment, Education for the Children of Migrants, Caring for Elders, and Major Events.

¹ Information retrieved from the RWKA website: <http://www.nongjianv.org/>

² Leftover children are rural children whose parents migrate to cities to work. These children often stay with their grandparents in rural villages and their parents probably come back to villages only once a year and stay for several days during the spring festival, a traditional Chinese holiday for families to get together.

³ Rural migrant workers' children who live in cities also face a lot of problems; for example, they cannot go to urban schools because of the restrictions of Hukou policy that do not allow those without urban residency to attend urban schools.

⁴ The Migrant Women's Club was founded in 1996 as the first Chinese NGO to work on women migrants' issues.

As an NGO publication, *Dagongmei Tongxun* relies on funding from donors or grant-makers. Oxfam⁵ is a welfare foundation originally established in Britain, and its branch in Hong Kong provides funds for *Dagongmei* Home. The publication of *Dagongmei Tongxun* is part of the work included in the grant applications by *Dagongmei* Home. My later interviews with the staff members showed that part of the funding from Oxfam to *Dagongmei* Home was used as financial support for the publication cost of *Dagongmei Tongxun*.

Fu (2009) argued that *Dagongmei* Home reproduced a *dagongmei* identity for women migrants that echoed the state discourse of modern development, and such reproduction limited those women's articulations and embodiment of different identities. Concerned with such a critique, I analyzed the publication of the magazine to further explore the role of *Dagongmei Tongxun* in the field of producing migration narratives. Specifically, I interviewed the staff members, analyzed the discourses produced in the magazine, and incorporated an analysis of recent state discourses regarding *dagongmei*.

Data Collection

Interviews

To explore the publication process, I conducted interviews with three staff members working for *Dagongmei Tongxun*. I acquired the staff's contact information through RWKA's website, and reached Yan Zhang, the chief editor of *Dagongmei Tongxun*, via a phone call. Yan willingly accepted my interview and she recommended Chengmei Yan, a main staff member, for me to conduct a joint interview. Due to the constraint of distance, the three of us talked via QQ⁶ in Spring 2014. When I visited the site of the NGO in Beijing in Summer 2014, Yan Zhang introduced me to the vice president of RWKA, Huimin Han, who was one of the founders of *Dagongmei Tongxun*. I later did a face-to-face interview with Huimin. My interviews with the staff members addressed the following questions: What specific work do staff do in the publication of *Dagongmei Tongxun*? How do they call for articles? Are there any particular affiliations through which they can collect articles? What are the qualifications for the articles to be published? What has motivated them to work at RWKA? What roles do they take in the organization? How do they identify with the mission and goals of RWKA, and how do they practice those ideas, such as promoting the development of rural women and female migrants? What do they think of their relationship with the female migrants, especially those for whom RWKA has provided service? By exploring these questions, I aimed to discuss the ways in which NGO staff members navigate cultural politics in the field of producing migration narratives.

Informants

Having a college degree in social work and been concerned with the migrant population and women's rights, Yan Zhang joined RWKA in 2012. In addition to serving as the chief editor of *Dagongmei*

⁵ Information retrieved from website of Oxfam's Hong Kong branch at <http://www.oxfam.org.cn/fieldlist.php?id=46>

⁶ QQ is an online chat software widely used in China.

Tongxun, Yan was also the head of *Dagongmei* Home. Before working at RWKA, Chengmei Yan was at a research institute doing policy analysis regarding women's rights. Highly identified with the mission of RWKA, Chengmei later joined the organization and initially worked for *Dagongmei* Home. Collecting and publishing migration narratives through *Dagongmei Tongxun* was part of Chengmei's daily work. Huimin Han originally joined *Dagongmei* Home as a volunteer responsible for hotlines, through which migrant workers asked for legal advice. Since the early 2000s, Huimin has worked at RWKA after graduation from college where she earned a degree in law. After working at *Dagongmei* Home for 10 years as a leading figure, she became the vice president of RWKA in 2012.

Dagongmei Tongxun Articles

To further discuss the political and ideological implications of *Dagongmei Tongxun*, I analyzed articles written by and/or about women migrants. Nine issues of *Dagongmei Tongxun*'s electronic versions were available on RWKA's website: four issues in 2012, one issue in 2013, and four issues in 2014. There were totally 270 articles published in these issues. Among them, 77 articles were written by women migrants, three articles were from children whose parents were migrant workers, 89 were written by *Dagongmei* Home's staff members and volunteers, eight were written by teachers from migrant children's schools, 53 were reprinted articles from mainstream media, and 40 were reprinted articles from online sources. I analyzed all the 270 articles and identified main themes. Women migrants' articles were often about their life and working experiences in cities and their thoughts and feelings. Staff members' articles included commentaries on migrant workers' issues and archives of *Dagongmei* Home's activities. Volunteers' articles were usually about their reflections on voluntary experiences at *Dagongmei* Home. The reprinted articles were news reports on policies related to migrant workers, for example, new regulations on domestic service in major Chinese cities.

State Discourses

To explore recent state discourses of *dagongmei*, I searched for and analyzed articles regarding *dagongmei* from *People's Network*, an online platform founded by *People's Daily* in 1997. *People's Daily* is the state-owned and government-administrated newspaper and serves as one of the main propaganda channels for the Chinese government. One essential function of *People's Network* is to publish news nationwide, especially reprinted news reports from local official news. It thus is a keen official online media site. These characteristics make *People's Network* an ideal case to analyze state discourses. To match with the analytical period of *Dagongmei Tongxun*, I searched for articles about *dagongmei* on *People's Network* from 2012 to 2014. There were 114 news reports of *dagongmei* within this period of time, and most of them were reprinted from local official news. I analyzed all 114 articles and main themes.

Analysis

The Production of Dagongmei Tongxun in the Field of Migration Narratives

As one of the programs for *Dagongmei Home*, the production of *Dagongmei Tongxun* was conditioned by institutional affiliations. Staff from *Dagongmei Home* initiated *Dagongmei Tongxun* and supported its development. The original idea to found *Dagongmei Tongxun* came from a workshop, organized by *Dagongmei Home*, to discuss rural-to-urban migrant workers' labor rights in 2002. The head of *Dagongmei Home* asked Huimin, who was at that time a college student volunteer, to take notes of the workshop. Huimin then turned the notes into a one-page newsletter. Staff members from *Dagongmei Home* later decided to turn the newsletters into periodicals. In the beginning, *Dagongmei Tongxun* was basically a news release for *Dagongmei Home* to record and promote its services and activities. Workers relied on interviews with female migrants and published these women's stories in *Dagongmei Tongxun*. They then shifted the strategy and worked on cultivating female migrants themselves as authors. Among female migrants, domestic workers were a main author group for *Dagongmei Tongxun*. *Dagongmei Home* mainly worked with domestic workers so that NGO workers could have more access to these women. The theme of *Dagongmei Tongxun* was closely associated with the agenda of RWKA, such as helping female migrants with rights protection and providing a space for these women to articulate their concerns. In other words, the publication work by *Dagongmei Tongxun* of producing migration narratives was shaped by the specific political agenda of *Dagongmei Home* and RWKA.

The positions staff members and college student and lawyer volunteers took in the field of power and their position-taking practices shaped the ways these actors participated in producing migration narratives. For example, Yan talked about her motivation to work for *Dagongmei Home*. Yan believed that the agenda of RWKA, which was to promote development for rural women and rural-to-urban female migrants, matched her professional goals and political concerns (Y. Zhang, personal communication, April 16, 2014). Working for *Dagongmei Tongxun* was not only a job, but also a way to fulfill her goals of promoting social equality. Huimin revealed in our interview that, given their high economic and social capital, lawyers were a group that could maintain a relatively stable relationship with *Dagongmei Home* and provide long-term volunteer service (H. Han, personal communication, April 16, 2014). College students, on the other hand, given their high mobility and low economic capital, were able to do the volunteer work for only a short period of time and could thus serve as temporary authors only.

In their "call for papers," *Dagongmei Tongxun* invited women migrants to contribute stories: "Dear readers, sisters and friends, this magazine is mainly to publish stories from our sisters. We welcome all kinds of articles, which can be about your life and/or working experiences, thoughts and reflections." Yan explained that the main objective of *Dagongmei Tongxun* was to provide a platform for rural-to-urban female migrants to get their voices heard, to let the public be aware of the life situations of female migrants, and to encourage these women to reflect on their lives through narrating personal stories (Y. Zhang, personal communication, April 16, 2014). To view female migrants as prospective authors who were able to narrate their own stories meant to recognize their potency in self-expression and self-representation.

Rural-to-urban female migrants are not an essential identity category, but in fact perform diverse subjectivities. As Gibson-Graham (2006) argued with reference to Butler's theorizing of "performing gender," "for Butler, insights into the productive tension between being and becoming have arisen from a consideration of subjection as an active process that is always ongoing and never completely successful" (p. 24). It is this active process of subjection that interests me in the politics of producing migration narratives. Interviews with staff revealed that some female migrants were active authors for *Dagongmei Tongxun*, whereas others were reluctant to write. For those who were willing to write, *Dagongmei Tongxun* became a public platform where they could narrate their stories and experiences and express opinions and reflections. Writing, as a process of self-representation and self-recognition, constituted a new mode of being for female migrants as they started to occupy symbolic space in urban life. There were also female migrants who enjoyed literature, and for them, writing was not necessarily a political action but was undertaken for pleasure. Chengmei told me about one such example. A female migrant was good at writing and often submitted her articles to *Dagongmei Tongxun*.

As for female migrants who were not active participants, appealing to them to write their stories required much more work than merely a call for papers. *Dagongmei Tongxun* workers and volunteers often needed face-to-face interaction with some migrants to encourage them to write their stories. Coming from rural areas, where women generally have low levels of education and limited access to cultural resources, many female migrants were not used to writing as a form of expressing themselves and they sometimes even resisted doing so. Writing seemed an expressive form that exclusively belonged to privileged groups such as urban cultural elites. As Chengmei revealed, for example, some female migrants lacked confidence and thought their writing skills were poor, far from being good enough to publish (C. Yan, personal communication, April 16, 2014). To deal with these situations, *Dagongmei Tongxun* workers first talked with female migrants about their everyday life and work experiences in the city, and then encouraged these women to write the stories they had relayed in conversations. *Dagongmei Tongxun* then published these stories in the "Zero Distance" section. Chengmei recounted one such case (C. Yan, personal communication, April 16, 2014). Chengmei got to know one migrant woman through *Dagongmei Home's* service for domestic workers, and later she tried to motivate the woman to write about her working experience taking care of an elder. At first, the woman was very reluctant and thought her experiences were too plain to write. Chengmei persuaded the woman that her writing would enable her to share experiences and concerns with other domestic workers who were likely living through similar situations. The worker was finally motivated and wrote an article and had it published. These practices by *Dagongmei Tongxun* workers mobilized female migrants to write their stories, which cultivated new subjectivities among this group of subordinate women in ways that might transform their exercises of thinking and acting.

Dagongmei Tongxun workers tended to humanize the publication process and prioritize the recognition of migrant voices. Yan claimed in the interview that *Dagongmei Tongxun* workers cared most about whether female migrants could have their voice heard and get improvement through the exercise of writing. There was a special section, "First Experience," in *Dagongmei Tongxun*, which published migrants' first-time submissions. Workers helped revise only a very few grammar problems and then published the articles. Yan explained, "We found that once their articles get published, female migrants often become more motivated and active to practice writing and they do write better. One of our aims is to help them

gain confidence" (Y. Zhang, personal communication, April 16, 2014). *Dagongmei Tongxun* distinguished itself from market-driven cultural products that regard female migrants as media consumers or objects to be consumed. The publication was a cultural form with specific political motivations. It embraced possibilities for local transformation in which marginalized and underprivileged groups reclaimed power.

Dagongmei Tongxun was distributed in a range of ways. *Dagongmei Home* staff members offered free copies to female migrants, collaborating institutions, and communities through their services and activities. In Bourdieu's field theory, one indispensable aspect of the unit of production is producing belief and generating values for particular artistic and literary work. Cultural creators, including publishers, dealers, critics, and reviewers, all jointly construct a system of meanings and values in which perceptions of and beliefs about cultural products are cultivated (Bourdieu & Johnson, 1993). The distribution of *Dagongmei Tongxun* tended to invite various social groups, such as female migrant workers, collaborative institutional members, college professors, public figures, and government officials, to imagine themselves as cultural creators engendering the system of meanings and value in which the perception of female migrants' narratives was made available and potentially changed. The distribution circle also preserved autonomy for *Dagongmei Tongxun* from the laws and principles of a market economy in which cultural products survive only when they can make a profit through commodification.

Narratives

A Gendered Perspective of Migrant Workers' Experiences

Articles from women migrants displayed a gendered perspective of migrant workers' experiences. For example, domestic workers wrote about discomfort and tensions they had when taking care of male elder employers. Women migrants, at different ages, narrated various motivations that drove them to cities. These narratives presented women migrants' diverse subjectivities and complex life situations.

As domestic workers were a main targeting group for *Dagongmei Home*, they were also the main authors for *Dagongmei Tongxun*. In Ren's story, she was working as a domestic worker taking care of disabled elders. But she was very reluctant to take care of male elders because she felt uncomfortable, so she preferred to work only for female employers (Ren, 2012). Haifeng worked for a disabled old man and she often had to bathe her employer. Her boyfriend found her caring work for male employers intolerable so that they had many fights and their relationship was tense (Zhang, 2012). The labor market prefers women migrants, who are considered cheap, docile, and feminine, as an ideal labor force for domestic service. These women's narrated experiences exposed the tensions and discomfort they encountered when working as domestic workers from a woman's standpoint.

Women migrants' narratives presented complex life situations that did not fall into the category of the first or second generation of migrants. First generation refers to those who were born in the 1960s and 1970s and worked in cities of southern China; second generation refers to migrants who were born in the late 1970s and 1980s and became migrant workers in the late 1990s and 2000s (Pun & Lu, 2010). Bai was such a case. She went to Beijing in her 50s to take care of her granddaughter for her daughter and

son-in-law, who were themselves rural-to-urban migrant workers (Bai, 2012). After living in Beijing for a while, Bai decided to find a job and got one as a janitor. Bai wrote that she was very eager to rely on herself to make a living, which would help reduce the economic pressure of her daughter's family. Bai's motivation for migration was driven by kinship bond and obligation. In contemporary Chinese society, it is widely accepted and expected that grandmothers take care of their grandchildren. Such cultural norms embody a gendered division of labor in the domestic sphere. Whereas grandmothers from urban middle-class families have more resources and support, such as having retirement pensions and health insurance, rural woman grandmothers, like Bai, do not have such privilege. When they have to enter labor market to make a living, they can be even more disadvantaged than younger migrant workers.

Ru (2012) narrated her difficulties as a divorced rural woman who migrated to and worked in Beijing. She got divorced at the age of 36 when her son was only five years old. She wrote in the article that "Married daughters are like pouring water in rural villages, and once they got divorced, their families and neighbors would consider them losing faces [shameful]. Unfortunately, I was such a divorced rural woman" (p. 10). Ru chose to go to Beijing to run away from such social pressure in her home village. Having been in Beijing for 14 years, Ru had worked as a domestic worker, janitor, and then washed dishes in a restaurant. Her social life mostly relied on online chatting with strangers; yet, she was often teased by them because of her divorce. She was frustrated and angry at people's lack of understanding: "They asked me if it was because my husband cheated on me or we had unpleasant sexual lives. When I told them it was just because we did not love each other, they thought I was crazy and pretentious" (p. 11). Ru's situation was depressing: The stigma of divorce for Chinese women made her social life difficult. And as a rural migrant worker and single mother, her economic conditions were difficult.

From Individual Issues to Social and Structural Problems

Some articles from *Dagongmei Tongxun* went beyond individual issues and addressed social and structural problems. These articles exposed social problems and provided information and consultancy for rural (women) migrants.

Dagongmei Tongxun published articles written by its staff members and by women migrants to discuss issues of rural migrants in general and women migrants in particular. Issues included education of migrant workers' children, domestic violence, and discrimination against domestic workers. In Huimin Han's (2014) analytical article "Where Is the Future of Migrant Children?" she argued that migrant children have limited access to educational resources because household policy prevents migrant children from registering at urban schools. Also, these children often had to frequently transfer to different schools because their parents did not have stable jobs and had to move a lot (H. M. Han, 2014).

One women migrant wrote about the experiences of domestic violence her friend encountered, and she argued that domestic violence should be viewed as a social problem, and that there should be laws to protect women from domestic violence and victims should fight back instead of tolerating abuse (Qiao, 2014). Domestic violence is a social problem that results from political, economic, and cultural inequalities. Women across different classes can be victims of such violence, but at the same time, those who are underprivileged are more vulnerable. When discussing the discrimination against domestic

workers, women migrants questioned the urban employers' lack of respect and understanding toward them. Liu Jiuxiang, a domestic worker, complained about her being discriminated against (J. X. Liu, 2012). "Employers from urban families," she wrote, "look down upon us and they never care about our situations. Isn't our work important to them? Without us domestic workers, how can they balance their professional lives and domestic lives well?" (p. 9). Jiuxiang's words recognized and emphasized the value of their labor, which was often underestimated in labor market and even neglected by the male-dominated culture. Zhu Xiumei, another domestic worker, wrote that "urban people feel superior to us just because we are from rural villages, and I feel very unfair" (X. M. Zhu, p. 13). Urban supremacy embodies the social reproduction of inequality that rural migrants often encounter in their everyday lives. Jiuxiang's and Xiumei's critiques demonstrated their political awareness of social justice and equality.

In the "Policy" section, *Dagongmei Tongxun* reprinted news reports from mainstream media on laws, regulations, and policies regarding rural migrants. These reprinted news reports were usually informative. For example, news reports on domestic service revealed various problems that domestic workers faced. Similar with other rural-to-urban migrant workers, domestic workers lack legal protection of their labor rights. So far, domestic service had not yet been included in Chinese labor laws. Due to the high mobility, domestic workers were often reluctant to pay for health and retirement insurance because they feared that they could not benefit from what they paid for ("Domestic service industry," 2012). In addition, highly structured by gendered division of labor, there was a great shortage of male domestic workers. Very few men were willing to work as domestic workers. On the other hand, employers were not used to male domestic workers showing up in their homes ("Male Domestic Workers," 2014).

The "Rights Protection" section was also informative. Articles from volunteer lawyers and reprinted news articles addressed specific cases offering legal consultancy. For example, one article provided advice for domestic workers who were fired by employers ("What to Do," 2013). Another article offered explanations about labor laws regarding companies' responsibilities and duties to protect employees' rights (Cheng, 2012). Liu Minghui, a volunteer lawyer for *Dagongmei Home*, analyzed a legal case of a domestic worker who was abused by her employer (M. H. Liu, 2012). Wu worked as a maid for an urban family taking care of a disabled elder woman. She was often mistreated by her employers. One day, when she had a quarrel with her employers, the son of the disabled woman beat her. Wu was beaten so severely that she called the police. Wu sued her employers after they refused to compensate her. The court sentenced the employer to compensate Wu, but the employer did not pay the full compensation. Wu did not fight for the rest of the compensation awarded. The lawyer commented that Wu should not have tolerated such unfair treatment. Yet, such a suggestion also revealed the deprived situation of women migrants that they usually cannot afford the struggle for equality.

The Politics of Love

"Love" was the discourse prevalent in the narratives by women migrants and *Dagongmei Home's* staff members and volunteers. The discourse of love by women migrants obscured the unequal power relations between employer families and women migrant domestic workers. The frequency of love discourses also represented affective relationships among *Dagongmei Home* staff members, volunteers,

and women migrants. Discourses about home, family, and sisters symbolized a particular way for these agents to form a sense of community.

When narrating about their pleasant working experiences, domestic workers referred to love to account for the seemingly mutual beneficial relationship between them and their urban employers. The narratives of love indicated that whether domestic workers have pleasant working experiences or fair treatment depends on their employers' affections toward them and/or whether employers are "good and kind people." For example, a domestic worker described that when her employers' child was having a birthday celebration at home, the three-year-old boy gave the first piece of birthday cake to her. She wrote, "I was so moved because the little boy regarded me as his family, and I was not treated as an outsider but a family member" (Yiming, 2014, p. 2). Here, this worker considered being regarded as a family member a great reward. The worker's appreciation toward the employers' kindness echoed the unequal power relations between employer families and domestic workers. In another article, another domestic worker expressed the idea that "devoted love" can make employers feel moved so that they can build good relationships (Jia, 2012). Such an ideology of love obscured the professional relationship between the two parties. It not only demanded domestic workers' emotional labor, but also sometimes prevented them from claiming labor rights. For example, one domestic worker told about the dilemma she faced (Shen, 2012): Her employers were very friendly to her, but they did not want to sign a contract with her. She did not want to make them unhappy and she did not dare to ask. The seemingly good relationship ironically placed domestic workers in a more vulnerable situation.

Discourse of love was also quite often used by staff members, college student volunteers, and women migrants to express feelings of solidarity. Terms such as *moved*, *touched*, and *love* frequently appeared in the narratives. As the name of *Dagongmei* Home showed, home and family were to symbolize the institution as an intimate, safe, and supportive space for women migrants. Also, staff members referred to women migrants as sisters to show the close relationships between them (C. M. Yan, 2014). Yang Huiying was a volunteer for *Dagongmei* Home to teach women migrants computer skills (H. Y. Yang, 2013). She wrote in her article that she was deeply moved by the women migrants' diligence in her class, that "although they had little computer knowledge or skills, they made every effort to learn" (H. Y. Yang, 2013, p. 47). Xiang Yongmei, a college student volunteer, expressed similar ideas that she was touched and inspired by women migrants' determination to improve themselves no matter how hard their life situations were (Xiang, 2012). In a feature article, one women migrant wrote about Chengmei Yan. She spoke highly of Chengmei's service and concerns for women migrants at *Dagongmei* Home, "she [Chengmei] is like candles that burn themselves to bring brightness to others, and she is like our family member" (H. Yang, 2014, p.10).

A Strategic Promotion or Reproduction of Hegemonic Ideologies?

As an institutional publication, *Dagongmei Tongxun* also served as a strategic way to promote the work of *Dagongmei* Home. For example, each issue of the publication had a section to present *Dagongmei* Home's working agenda. Staff members' articles were often closely related to their activities at the NGO. In one issue, many articles were about the event *Dagongmei* Home organized for leftover children ("Leftover Children," 2013). In August 2012, *Dagongmei* Home collaborated with two other institutions

and sponsored 12 leftover children from different villages to go to Beijing and have a two-day tour with their migrant worker mothers. Most of the articles emphasized the significance of the event. One advocating article argued that leftover children demanded public attention and social support (X. L. Zhu, 2012). Yet, all the articles seemed to support the idea that mothers should be taking primary roles in childcare. Such ideas were also evident in the articles about two other programs of *Dagongmei* Home. In one special section of "Advice on Childcare" ("Advice on," 2014), *Dagongmei* Home offered advice to migrant worker mothers about how to build good relations with their children and how to provide school and life guidance to their children. As one staff member claimed in an article, "these activities aimed to provide support to migrant worker mothers, and to form a sense of community" (Y. R. Sun, 2014). These activities were undoubtedly important to migrant worker mothers who often lacked childcare recourses and support in cities. But at the same time, assuming mothers' primary responsibility in childcare failed to challenge the gendered division of labor in domestic sphere.

State Discourses of Dagongmei

The recent state discourses still tended to objectify and marginalize *dagongmei* without much attention to the group's diverse subjectivities and complex life situations. In official news stories, *dagongmei* appeared as young rural migrant women in their 20s or early 30s, whereas older ones were seldom associated with this identity category. Official news often represented *dagongmei* in three ways: They were victims of crimes, especially fraud and sexual violence (e.g., Fan, 2014; Z. Han & Chen, 2014; Hong, 2014; Yu & Liu, 2012); criminals or deviant others who broke laws or the established social orders (e.g., Fang, Jin, & Tong, 2012; Feng & Liao, 2014; Xing, 2013); and role models as successful entrepreneurs (e.g., X. H. Liu, 2014; Ou, 2014). Compared with reports in the 2000s (Orgad, 2012; W. Sun, 2004, 2009), state discourses of *dagongmei* have remained almost unchanged. Official discourses portrayed *dagongmei* in a highly individualized way without addressing structural issues. Also, voices of *dagongmei* hardly appeared in news reports.

Conclusion

The publication of *Dagongmei Tongxun* is an institutionally bounded political and cultural project, which responds to the unequal distribution of symbolic resources and cultural capital among rural-to-urban women migrants in China. The institutionalized nonprofit cultural production offers possibilities to enable intervention forces in the field of power to promote social equality. Entitling women migrants to authorship is a political intervention that mobilizes often-silenced women as active agents in producing gendered migration narratives. The positions taken by these women migrants alter the space of the possible and remap the cultural politics in the field. The self-representations constitute a new mode of being in which migrants actively construct the meanings and values of their everyday life. *Dagongmei* Home's staff members and volunteers' relationships with the institution and their positions in the field of power structure the ways they participate in producing *Dagongmei Tongxun*. Through publishing *Dagongmei Tongxun*, these agents, along with women migrants, practice a particular way of forming a sense of community.

The publication of *Dagongmei Tongxun* creates a communication network and a mediated space to navigate cultural politics and democratize the distribution of symbolic and cultural capital among women migrants. Whereas state discourses still tend to objectify and marginalize *dagongmei*, narratives by women migrants themselves present their diverse subjectivities and complex life situations. Articles from *Dagongmei Tongxun* expose inequalities women migrants face as rural migrant workers in particular and women in general, for example, the urban supremacy that rural migrants encounter, lack of protection of labor rights, stigma of being divorced women, the suffering of domestic violence, and so forth.

The publication of *Dagongmei Tongxun* presents a specific form of cultural production through which Chinese labor NGOs enable political, cultural, and social interventions. But such interventions also have limitations for progressive social change. When advocating for equality and rights, *Dagongmei Tongxun* often fails to confront the hegemonic ideologies that shape women migrants' lives: Domestic work, which is either professionalized as an industry or privatized as reproduction duties, is still preferred as women's primary tasks; not many life trajectories regarding marriage are presented, which indicates that choosing to be single or divorced is a privilege unaffordable to women migrants. Such advocating discourses might reproduce gendered subordination and male supremacy, and they can also deepen the class disparities among Chinese women. In the case of domestic workers, although the critique toward urban supremacy is explicit and strong, the love discourses by women migrants themselves ironically legitimate such unequal power relations. At the same time, when exposing the inequalities that women migrants face, there often lacks advocacy to form solidarity among all disadvantaged groups to challenge unequal power structures.

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