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**GLOBAL SUPPLY CHAINS OF DESIRES AND RISKS: THE CRAFTING OF  
MIGRANT ENTREPRENEURSHIP IN GUANGZHOU, CHINA**

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

ANTHROPOLOGY

by

**Nellie Chu**

June 2014

The Dissertation of Nellie Chu is  
approved:

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Professor Gail Hershatter

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Professor Melissa Caldwell

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Tyrus Miller  
Vice Provost and Dean of Graduate Studies

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**Dissertation Abstract:**

Global Supply Chains of Desires and Risks: The Crafting of Migrant  
Entrepreneurship in Guangzhou, China

by Nellie Chu

This dissertation examines how rural migrants' experiments with small-scale entrepreneurship serve as the intermediary links through which global commodity chains for fast fashion are anchored in post-socialist China. While anthropologists of transnational capitalism have examined the diversity through which market participants determine the movement of labor and capital across vast geographic distances around the globe, their works tend to rely on the stability of categories of people, objects, and practices. They overlook the ways in which people's identities shift and move within ongoing conditions of ambivalence and uncertainty.

Based on 22 months of fieldwork in the Pearl River Delta (PRD) region, this dissertation underscores the shifting qualities of experiences among migrant entrepreneurs as they craft the transnational links of commodity production and exchange. I show how the global commodity chains for fast fashion link and de-link through the building and destruction of social spaces, through the production and challenges to social subjectivity, and through the intensification of gender and class-based inequalities. Drawing on participant observation and interviews with intermediary traders, migrant factory owners, and wage workers, this project asks: how do migrants in China negotiate the paradoxes of entrepreneurial freedom as they

work through the political implications and affective dimensions of becoming entrepreneurial citizens?



## **Acknowledgements and Dedication**

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I dedicate this dissertation to my mother and my paternal grandmother whose strength and courage have showed me what feminism means long before I was old enough to appreciate the significance of the term.

## **Introduction: The Paradoxes of Entrepreneurial Freedom**

In 2002, Xiao Ye, a thirty-year old mother of two from Shantou city in the southeastern region of Guangdong province, migrated with her husband to the garment district in Guangzhou. Lured by the prospect of city life and wealth, the couple followed their fellow villagers to the outskirts of the provincial capital, where garment factories, warehouses, and five-story apartment houses were quickly transforming the lush agricultural landscape. Xiao Ye and her husband settled into the unfamiliar environs of the industrial enclave by laboring as wage workers in one of the surrounding factories. By then, dozens of sweatshops in the district had sprung up, serving markets in Hong Kong and Taiwan, many of which extended their reach overseas to Europe, North America, Africa, and Latin America. As years passed, Xiao Ye and her husband witnessed the fervor of market activity around them, fueling their dreams of entrepreneurship. With a modest amount of savings pooled by her family members in Shantou, Xiao Ye and her husband ventured out on their own by opening a yarn supply shop directly behind the Changgang Accessories Market. Their business began in a simple five by seven foot stall that was built out of several wooden planks supported by steel poles. The store gradually established its presence when it occupied a corner space of a commercial building, surrounded by high display windows.

Ten years later, I met Xiao Ye unexpectedly one day as my friend and I wandered through the maze of factory workshops, pedi-cabs, and pedestrian traffic that stretched behind the towering accessories market. In the local Cantonese

language, she explained that during the initial years of operation, the couple's business had remained steady and profitable. Their relative success enabled the entire family, including their children and the husband's aging parents, to relocate and settle in the garment district so that the family members could remain in close proximity to one another. However, those years of prosperity had already passed. Xiao Ye explained that the prices of cotton and other raw materials had sky-rocketed within the past several years, making their business difficult to sustain. "Right now," as she explained, "business is no good" (*sheng yi bu hao*). It suddenly occurred to me that during the course of my research, a number of factory bosses throughout the garment district had repeated this phrase to me. I then wondered whether it was merely a saying to deflect bad luck, or whether it portrayed a broader milieu among business owners in the neighborhood.

As Xiao Ye launched a tirade about the recent economic downturn, a half-blind man with severely distorted facial features turned the corner to join our conversation. Xiao Ye immediately introduced the man as her younger brother. Dressed in a sports outfit, he looked to be in his mid-twenties. In a hushed tone, she quietly explained to me that her brother had encountered a tragic hit-and-run accident along one of the alleyways nearby that left him handicapped. A motorcyclist in the area had collided with him head-on and quickly left the scene. The police never caught the driver, leaving Xiao Ye and her family to wonder why the accident befell them. Hospital bills left the couple in financial hardship, but they were relieved that his life was spared. As undocumented migrants from China's countryside, Xiao Ye

and her family had no rights to the state-sponsored health and welfare benefits that city residents could access. Fortunately, their modest savings saved them from a lifetime of bottomless debt and grave worries.

While Xiao Ye's life history unraveled before us, it became clear to me that what had started off as a narrative of entrepreneurial triumph over poverty and social displacement quickly became a narrative of personal tragedy and ambivalence over the family's business pursuits. Her sense of ambivalence stemmed not only from her business's diminishing profits, but also from the fact that she believed a business competitor had staged her younger brother's accident out of jealousy at her financial success. Sadly, personal tragedies, like Xiao Ye's, often reverberate among the life histories of migrants who have settled in the past decades around the surrounding factory enclave. These narratives commonly add fuel to the fire of prejudice and discrimination among local Guangzhou residents against migrant workers who have taken up residence and low-wage employment among the thousands of garment factories here. Popular discourses of violence, danger, and impurity that Guangzhou's city residents project onto this garment district and its residents compel migrants such as Xiao Ye to position themselves as aspirational entrepreneurs in relations to the post-Mao project of massive urbanization in order to shed their former status as rural citizens. To be sure, Xiao Ye's emotional framing of the accident as a market competitor's act of bitter revenge signals a deliberate and conscious acknowledgement of such social inequalities. Her deep-seated feelings of personal loss, compounded by her struggles to sustain her business, lead her to reassess

whether her family's entrepreneurial pursuits are worth the cost to her and her family's sense of security. In the meantime, Xiao Ye labors through part-time employment for someone else to sustain her business in the garment district despite mounting debts and growing anxieties over recurring economic crises.

This dissertation takes Xiao Ye's story as a point of departure as it traces the emergence of migrant entrepreneurs as key agents in driving the transnational links of commodity exchange in post-socialist China. I intervene in anthropological discussions of transnational capitalism by analyzing the negotiations and paradoxes of becoming entrepreneurial subjects in an era of supply chain capitalism.

Anthropologists of transnational capitalism have primarily focused on the production of particular citizen-subjects and personhoods through the conjoining of state governance with market practices. Their topics primarily cover the topics of neoliberal governmentality (Ong 1999, Ong and Zhang 2008), desire (Rofel 1999 and 2007, Yanagisako 2002), worker exploitation (Pun 2006, Tsing 2009), and risk (Ho 2011). Overall, their studies intervene in structuralist models of capitalist exchange that tend to echo homogenizing and totalizing views of globalization and transnational capitalism. These anthropologists emphasize the diversity and heterogeneity of people's experiments with capitalist practices by examining how market participants articulate with the speedy accumulation of labor and capital across vast geographic distances. Analytically, their works insightfully underscore facets of human agency, including people's gendered desires and risks which unfold as they experiment with practices of flexible capital accumulation. While these



scholars critically shed light on human subjectivity as it relates to capitalist practices, their works tend to rely on the stability of categories of people, objects, and practices. They overlook the ways in which identities shift and move within conditions of ambivalence and uncertainty.

This project extends the anthropological literature on transnational capitalism by highlighting how global capital produce and is produced by the paradoxes and instabilities of people, objects, and practices. It focuses on the fast fashion sector in Guangzhou, since the industry serves as an exemplary case study into how transnational commodity chains link and de-link various production and consumption networks across the globe. A study of fast fashion sheds light on precisely what it purports to deliver: that is, the constant and speedy supply of fashion objects and the rapid influx of new styles. Corporate practices, which are often posited as responses to consumers' ever-changing demands, have been mediated by multinational corporations which outsource manufacturing capacities and low-wage labor to countries across the Pacific Ocean, including China. Foreign direct investments, particularly from overseas Chinese, and demands for low-cost labor have, in turn, facilitated the mushrooming of small-scale enterprises throughout the coastal areas of China.

Across the Pearl River Delta (PRD) region of southeastern Guangdong, millions of migrants who have flooded Shenzhen and the surrounding Special Economic Zones (SEZ) during the initial years of economic reform have become

small-scale entrepreneurs in their own right. With modest amounts of starting capital, they have gathered the technical skills and business acumen of “just in time” garment manufacturing processes from their bosses, many of whom are based in Hong Kong and Taiwan. Through their participation in the transnational links of fast fashion manufacture and exchange, migrant wage workers and entrepreneurs in Guangzhou have begun to forge ties with traders from Korea, Senegal, Nigeria, Russia, and Dubai. Collectively, the traders’ experiments in fast fashion exchange link and produce novel relations of trade. These practices predominantly entail the rapid turnover of cash-based, low volume, and small-scale production of designer-inspired fashions. Through these transnational exchanges, fast fashion brings divergent manufacturing spaces, worker subjectivities, and relations of labor into productive yet unequal exchanges. The “just in time” delivery of fashion commodities, in many ways, mirror what Harvey (1990) describes as processes of flexible accumulation, or the speedy mobilizations of labor, land, and natural resources, for consumption and profit-making.

Though Harvey (1990) presents compelling theories of fast capitalism, his analysis tends to overlook the diversity and contingency upon which capitalist relations are forged (Tsing 2000). Drawing on anthropological theories of global connections, this dissertation highlights the instabilities and paradoxes that come with re-organizing labor, spaces, and capital for profit-making ends in post-socialist China. It uncovers the dynamic processes and unequal relationships that enable these rapid mobilizations of labor and other productive capacities. These processes in turn blur

categorical distinctions such that it is nearly impossible to draw neat divisions between rural and urban; worker and entrepreneur; freedom and displacement. These categorical instabilities are at the heart of how global capital operates today.

Migrants' experiments in small-scale entrepreneurship deserve scholarly attention because they demonstrate how conditions of economic insecurity and ambivalence emerge. I argue that migrants' engagements with small-scale enterprise leave them feeling ambivalent toward the possibilities that entrepreneurship might hold for them. Their struggles in grappling with what entrepreneurship might represent underscore the ways in which the social links that comprise the global networks of commodity exchange remain tenuous and unstable. While scholars have noted the growing influence of multinational corporations such as Apple, Walmart, and Foxconn in determining the circulation of labor and capital (Chan 2011, Pun 2012, Chan, Pun, and Selden 2012, Luethje, Luo and Zhang 2013), this study emphasizes the centrality of wage workers, intermediary contractors, small-scale factory owners, and wholesalers to the formation of these buyer-driven supply chains. Their collective labor serves to articulate post-socialist divisions of land and personhood with capitalist practices of export production and exchange. The majority of these various participants are undocumented migrants from China's lower-tiered

cities and the countryside who operate alongside these corporate players. As migrants, they remain spatially and subjectively suspended between the rural and the urban.<sup>1</sup>

In an industrial section of Guangzhou, it is precisely because of their categorical ambiguities in which they find themselves that they assert themselves as so-called enterprising selves. Specifically, they are as neither fully rural nor fully urban. They also find themselves drifting back and forth between the categories of wage worker and entrepreneur. Scholars tend to assume that the categories of rural and urban, as well as worker and entrepreneur, are dichotomies. Others tend to frame these categories along a continuum (Christopher and Staufer 2011, Mukherjee 1953). I contend that neither framework adequately capture the instable conditions and ambivalences that migrant entrepreneurs in China frequently confront. In Guangzhou, small-scale enterprising migrants bear the most economic and social risks along the production chain precisely because of their intermediary and unfixed statuses. Their processes of becoming entrepreneurs challenge linear progressions of destination or arrival. They must work through ongoing paradoxes and ambiguous conditions of desire and risk, as well as freedom and displacement. Their struggles in defining for themselves the meanings and practices of entrepreneurship reveal the unstable categories of rural and urban; autonomy and servitude; mobility and displacement; private and public; masculine and feminine.

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<sup>1</sup> This condition of suspension between the rural and urban is quite commonly seen among the urban poor in developing countries such as India. Specific problems related to poverty, inequality, and urbanization vary by historical and place based contexts.

Through ethnographically informed analysis, this dissertation centers on the shifting qualities of their experiences in crafting the transnational links of commodity production and exchange. Fashion serves as a critical force of social production and spatial transformation by conjuring fantasies and eliciting desires to connect to a wider world through a globally oriented language of style. I show how global commodity chains link and de-link through the building and destruction of social spaces, through the production and challenges to social subjectivity, and through the intensification of gender and class-based inequalities. I investigate how migrants negotiate the paradoxes of becoming entrepreneurs through their participation along unequal, multi-scalar chains of exchange. More important, I demonstrate how migrants remain within conditions of uncertainty and ambivalence as they work through the political implications and affective dimensions of becoming entrepreneurial citizens in China.

By detailing the conversions of people and spaces of fast fashion exchange, I underscore the subjective and affective dimensions that are implicated in the making and unmaking of entrepreneurial subjects along the uneven chains of commodity production and exchange. Specifically, they jostle to extend their social worlds beyond the immediate confines of their factory labor by striving for the freedom that entrepreneurship might represent. Though the practices of sub-contracting grant migrant entrepreneurs a certain degree of entrepreneurial freedom, such freedom is often accompanied by financial uncertainties and emotional losses. This dissertation examines the following analytical inquiries: How do China's post-socialist

transformations of factories and market spaces, migrants' subjectivities, and relations of labor articulate with the crafting of global supply chains in Guangzhou? How do migrant entrepreneurs along the global supply chains for fast fashion in Guangzhou experience these transformations? How do migrants grapple with the ambiguous and unstable conditions in which they find themselves?

Though a number of anthropological studies have described conditions of economic precariousness and ambivalence (Butler 2004, Berlant 2011), this project shows how uncertainties emerge from migrants' everyday market practices and how market participants grapple with socio-economic uncertainties. This dissertation works through their desires and exposures to risk as they struggle to define themselves as "free" by becoming entrepreneurs. Key to their struggle in becoming entrepreneurs is the issue of "owning" or claiming the rights to one's property, labor time, and personal qualities or skill set. As anthropologists have shown (Verdery 1996, Hann 2003, Dunn 2004, Caldwell 2010), contentions over ownership of land, labor, and citizenship rights define people's experiences of privatization and marketization among post-socialist societies. Uncertainties concerning the terms and definitions of private ownership unfold through people's difficulties in designating land and defining citizens as either rural or urban. Indeed, this question remains at the center of defining private ownership of land and personhood among post-colonial and post-socialist societies today. In China's case specifically, the *hukou* household registration system, a policy of population control enacted during the Maoist period, keeps over 260 million rural migrants administratively bound to their land in the

countryside and denies essential social services in the cities.<sup>2</sup> In addition, the issue of reforming ownership of rural land, which is held collectively, has remained contentious.<sup>3</sup> Suspended between rural and urban classifications, migrants operate home-based factories which depend on low wage migrant labor. These factories have sprouted throughout the PRD region in response to growing demand for cheap labor from overseas investors. Operated by small-scale migrant entrepreneurs, these home-based factories have mushroomed precisely within urban villages, which have become post-socialist intermediary spaces between the rural and urban. The flourishing of these factory spaces has thus demonstrated that the mobility of the home and the factory, which facilitate the market demands of flexible accumulation, rely on the ambiguous and unstable categories of the rural and urban.

The increased mobility of people, objects, and practices has made possible constructions of the so-called enterprising self, as Dunn (2004) argues in her study of post-socialist Poland. She writes, “Persons who are “entrepreneurs of themselves” flexibly alter their skills and manage their careers, but they also become the bearers of

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<sup>2</sup> The *hukou* system classified citizens according to the following four categories: urban non-agricultural, urban agricultural, rural non-agricultural, and rural agricultural residency statuses (Zhang 2006). Only those who possessed urban non-agricultural status received state-sponsored welfare through *danwei* work-units, which included housing, government jobs, education, health care, and pensions, while rural residents were excluded from any benefits. Consequently, the *hukou* registration system instituted discrimination and socio-economic inequalities by barring rural peasants from moving from the countryside to the cities.

<sup>3</sup> To date, rural land in China is still owned by collectives. For this reason, migrants in the cities cannot “sell” or freely trade their use-rights to land in the countryside.

risk, thus shifting the burden of risk from the state to the individual.<sup>4</sup> In Eastern Europe, (the work of) transforming persons into choosers and risk-bearers soon became the project at the heart of the post-socialist transition” (2004: 22). As Miller and Rose (1990) argue, the figure of the enterprising self who can freely choose to construct elements of one’s interior self is central to defining the role of “the boss” in contrast to her employee (Dunn 2004). This emergence of this enterprising figure ultimately enables shifting the burden of risk from the state to the private individual (Maurer 1999, Dunn 2004).

The privatization of market risk is particularly true for many migrant entrepreneurs in Guangzhou. The promise of linking or connecting to a wider world via global commodity chains fuels their aspirations to become enterprising selves. The processes of becoming entrepreneurs for the sake of achieving economic freedom, however, are not stable and complete transformations. As Xiao Ye’s story reveals, market participants encounter the paradoxes of entrepreneurial freedom through their experiences of violence, loss, and disappointment, leaving male and female market participants feeling ambivalent toward the trials and rewards that come with entrepreneurship. In the case of Xiao Ye and other migrant entrepreneurs, the question of agentic “choice” is nearly as ambivalent and paradoxical as the question of “freedom,” since they constantly encounter structural violence and social

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<sup>4</sup> Dunn (2004) draws from discussions by Strathern (1988) who have addressed the notions of the “partible” person or the “dividual” among residents in Papua New Guinea.



inequalities through their everyday engagements with commodity production and exchange.

In this introduction, I first outline the theoretical contributions of this dissertation to the following sets of literature: transnational capitalism, global commodity chains, gendered desires and risks, and urban studies. Then, I lay out the theoretical bases of this study. First, I emphasize how city spaces transform as commodity chains are rescaled from a rural-to-urban orientation to fast fashion export production. To this end, I describe the historical transformation of a garment district in Guangzhou as migrant workers convert former agricultural villages to an industrial hub for garment production. Second, I underscore how conversions of these village landscapes and factory spaces de-stabilize migrants' identifications as rural and urban citizens as well as wage workers and entrepreneurs. In particular, I highlight migrant wage workers and entrepreneurs' gendered desires and risks as they negotiate the inequalities, paradoxes, and uncertainties of self-employment and small-scale enterprise. Rather than conceptualizing desires and risks as discrete conditions, this dissertation views desire and risks as on-going entanglements that are inflected by gendered differences. Finally, I reflect on my ethnographic methods, followed by a chapter outline.

## **Contributions to the Literature**

### **Transnational capitalism**

This dissertation contributes to inter-disciplinary works of transnational capitalism by highlighting the unstable and ambiguous categories that define people and spaces. Since the 1970s, world systems theorists have introduced the structural dichotomy of “cores” and “peripheries” to spatially and historically situate the unequal relations of production and consumption regions across the globe. Adopting Fernand Braudel’s notion of *economie-monde*, Wallerstein (1974) defines the world economy as political units (specifically nations), loosely tied together that collectively constitute an international division of labor and resource extraction. Wallerstein’s world systems theory is characterized by political and economic struggles among nations (or what he calls “state-machineries”) in playing out their respective structural roles that ultimately benefit the interests of the core nations (Wallerstein 2004). Though their analyses have been instrumental in highlighting the spatial and historical inequalities that have defined the capitalist world system, their structural frameworks, however, tend to overlook the transnational movements of labor and capital, as well as the ambiguous spaces that cannot be categorized as core and periphery or as rural and urban.

Following Appadurai’s (1986) call to study the social life of things, I draw from the works of anthropologists who trace the mobility of objects. Their studies illustrate how changing consumer demands change the paths of traveling objects, and

that these shifts in the cultural biographies of things can lead to wider shifts in market spaces, personhood, and relations of labor. For example, Appadurai (1986) describes the social life of things in order to show how objects are valued differently by people within various contexts. He conceptualizes commodity as a certain phase in the social life of an object, and argues that the source of value lies in exchange. By looking at the total trajectory of an object's social life from production, exchange, to consumption, Appadurai claims that the movements of objects are historically contingent. That is, certain conditions of exchange propel or hinder the physical movement of objects across various social contexts. Echoing Appadurai, Kopytoff's (1986) essay in the same edited volume argues that objects move in and out of the commodity state (commodification, de-commodification, and re-commodification). For this reason, he contends that researchers should trace the biographies of things by asking questions they conventionally would ask people. Furthermore, Steiner (2001) traces the transnational movements of art objects such as hand-crafted sculptures and masks from contemporary Africa. By situating international border zones as sites of negotiation and transactions over definitions of things (and people), Steiner proposes to conceptually dismantle the categories that separate art, money, gift, and commodities, because he argues that people constantly transform commodities into inalienable objects (and vice versa). Steiner's transnational scope demonstrates that the value of objects involves global and local circuits of exchange, display, and storage. These exchanges often entail questions of authenticity and originality, as well

as whether the objects fall into the categories of art, artifact, or commodity.<sup>5</sup> These categories are constructed through national, regional, and local criteria, and could shift as objects move through spatial and temporal contexts.<sup>6</sup>

While these anthropologists have cogently demonstrated how the movement of objects transforms people's perceptions of value and their relations of exchange, this dissertation shows how landscapes and worker identities also shift within ambiguous spaces between the rural and urban, as well as worker and entrepreneur. By emphasizing the diverse forms of labor relations and personhood that comprise the intermediary links of global supply chains, this dissertation underscores how global commodity chains for fast fashion mobilize labor and capital through migrant entrepreneurs' ongoing struggles as they try to maintain a foothold in the category of being entrepreneurs but remain on the ambiguous boundary between wage-worker and entrepreneur. I demonstrate how migrant entrepreneurs negotiate their social inclusions and exclusions as they attempt to convert their spatial and subjective identities from rural to urban and from worker to entrepreneur.

In sum, studies of transnational capitalism and commodity exchange have contributed numerous insights on the formation of global supply chains, particular

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<sup>5</sup> Steiner's writings on the issues of commodification and authenticity among African art objects intersect with scholars who have debated on the relationship between so-called primitive art and the universal definition of art itself (Errington 1989, Clifford 1988, Marcus and Myers 1995).

<sup>6</sup> As he states, "Definitions of art, artifact, and commodity typically occur at such interstitial nodes, which act as site of negotiation and transaction where things must continually be reassessed according to national or regional criteria and local definitions. At each point in its movement through space and time, an object has the potential to shift from one category to another and, in doing so, to slide along the slippery line that divides art from artifact from commodity" (2001: 224).

forms of labor, and sources of capital across multiple sites of analyses (Nevins and Peluso 2008, Gereffi and Korzeniewicz 1994, Bair 2008). Their analytical frameworks, however, tend to rely on the stability of categories of people, objects, and practices. Following the ethnographies by Tsing (2004 & 2009), Guyer (2004) and Chalfin (2004), this study on small-scale traders in China contributes to the transnational circulation of labor, commodities, and capital by underscoring the instability of cultural categories of people, objects, and practices, as well as the ambiguous conditions of desire and risk. Specifically, it shows how migrants actively remake meanings and practices of entrepreneurship as they acquire freedom and social mobility, encounter market risks, and work through the paradoxes of entrepreneurial freedom. Furthermore, this project's focus on migrant entrepreneurs reveals how their everyday engagements with market exchange determine the nature of global capitalism. This insight draws from Elyachar's (2005) study of production workshops in Cairo. She highlights how the skills of small-scale craftsman, which build a vibrant economic life, even though intervention by NGO workers and officials leaves them vulnerable to social dispossession. I illustrate people's participation in business and entrepreneurship as ongoing experiments that unfold and are mediated through the building and destruction of spaces, production and challenges to social subjectivity, and the intensification of social inequalities. Specifically, I understand capitalism as a project "under construction." It is "performative and is always engaged in experiment... a project is perpetually unfinished" (Thrift 2005: 3). These

projects, as I argue, expose migrant entrepreneurs to uneasy situations of ambivalence, which are colored by on-going risks and desires.

### **Global commodity chains**

This study also engages in cross-disciplinary research on global commodity chains. While the circulation of commodities has long served as a focus of research among economic historians, anthropologists, and world systems theorists (Braudel 1972, Mintz 1985, Appadurai 1986), Terence Hopkins and Immanuel Wallerstein's (1977) introduction of the global commodity chain framework has enabled scholars to ground the processes of commodity production and distribution within particular territories and national economies. Since then, a number of inter-disciplinary scholars have used commodity chain analysis as a heuristic framework in order to reject models of global capitalism that tend to overlook people's everyday engagements with capitalist practices. Instead, they emphasize the historical and spatial particularities through which the diversity of labor and production processes are mobilized and enacted (Bair 2009). In particular, researchers in the humanities, including world historian Topik (2003, 2006) in his study of the global coffee trade, have underscored the significance of social relations in the making (or unmaking) of world-spanning commodity chains. They have begun to examine how social actors bridge, constrain, and manipulate relationships of trust and obligation that shape the contours of these cross-cultural webs of commodity production and exchange. Their contributions shed light on the historic transformations, the spatial specificities, the

institutions of governance, and the multi-scalar power dynamics of cross-border production networks that articulate with global capitalist processes but are not necessarily effaced by them.

Anthropologists have employed this heuristic device to shed light on cross-cultural encounters within trans-national relations of commodity production (Rofel and Yanagisako forthcoming); colonial histories embedded within commodity outsourcing and exchange (Friedberg 2004); the semiotic reproduction of images depicting primitive peoples who source coffee beans (West 2013); the qualification of food safety and standards based on colonial North/ South divides (Chalfin 2004); and human/ non-human interactions (Tsing forthcoming). Their analyses underscore the diversity of cultural contacts across faraway places, which are dynamically shaped by distinct colonial and post- Cold War histories. Meanwhile, human geographers and other anthropologists highlight the processes of labor dispossession as commodity chains dis-articulate or even “leap-frog” over space (Ferguson 2006, Bair and Werner 2011). Their works highlight the social effects of capital flight and other economic downturns.

Since the 2008 financial crisis, other scholars have increasingly paid attention to market conditions in China as the world’s low-cost manufacturing hub in order to speculate on the future directions of supply chain capitalism. They have addressed issues pertaining to urban poverty, factory labor conditions, employee-employer relations, land redistribution, and environmental concerns. In light of these

discussions, some political economists and industrial sociologists (Silver 2003, Appelbaum 2008, Silver and Zhang 2009, Arrighi 2007, Calhoun and Derlugian et al. 2011), have begun to focus on China's recent economic developments in order to observe larger historical and geopolitical shifts in the global distribution of capital and military power. Several of these scholars have commented that the growing inequalities in China have in recent years blunted the re-centering of world capital accumulation there. More specifically, they have noted that the over-crowding of low-cost manufacturing based on low-end technology (as in the case of the fast fashion sector) has forestalled the long-term continuation of dramatic economic growth there (Silver and Arrighi 2011, Balakrishnan 2011).

This dissertation bridges these sets of anthropological and social science literature by exploring the unstable categories that attempt to define changing spaces and changing subjectivities. Specifically, it examines how the formation of global commodity chains transforms urban landscapes, as well as market participants' changing identities and relations of labor as workers and as entrepreneurs. More importantly, though some scholars tend to assume that the transnational links of global commodity exchange are stable and continuous, this project emphasizes the tenuousness and contingency through which social relations are made and un-made. Drawing from Bair and Werner's (2011) contention that global commodity chains break up or dis-articulate in face of environmental destruction and capital flight, I emphasize the on-going processes of linking and de-linking commodity chains through the experiences of migrant entrepreneurs who serve as the intermediary



connections of transnational exchange. In particular, I examine the on-going processes of linking and de-linking the social relations of commodity production and exchange. Specifically, I ask: how do transformations of factory landscapes and market spaces shape the ways in which industry participants experience work, building laboring communities, and define themselves as entrepreneurs? By revealing how migrant entrepreneurs are dispossessed yet are continually drawn to export production of fast fashion, I highlight the dynamicism, possibilities, and exploitative effects of transnational market exchange.

### **Capitalist Desire and Risk**

Anthropologists of fashion and transnational capitalism converge upon the notion that capitalist motivation among market participants depends on the intimate workings of gendered desires. Their works emphasize how desires mark social inequalities and normalize embodied performances of femininity and masculinity. For example, theorists of fashion and material culture have increasingly focused on clothing and the body as sites of contestation and cultural differences, particularly among marginalized groups conventionally excluded from Euro-American standards of fashion. They approach clothing as inter-subjective markers of difference within specific contexts. Hendrickson's (1996) edited volume explores the body surface as a site in which differences in gender, race, sexuality, religion, and ethnicity are constructed through adornment practices in sub-Saharan Africa. Wilson's (1985) work celebrates the dreams and fantasies that fashion elicits among its participants.

She writes, “(Capitalism) manufactures dreams and images as well as things, and fashion is as much a part of the dream world of capitalism as of its economy” (Wilson 1985: 14). Jones (2007) demonstrates that certain veiling practices within Indonesia’s Islamic fashion culture enable women to feel more pious and modern at the same time. Although Wilson and Jones emphasize the fantasies and religiosities that certain adornment practices generate, other scholars underscore the anxieties, alienation, and violence often associated with clothing. Macaraeg (2007) links clothing practices to the ornamentation and display of weaponry across various historical contexts. While Stoler (2002), Niesson (2003), and Tarlo (2007) note that particular clothing and adornment practices have enabled violence and alienation through the exercise of colonial power, Woodward (2005, 2007) explores how some women’s desire to “look good” and “feel right” through clothing paradoxically produces anxieties about what they should wear for certain occasions.

The current literature on fashion, capitalism, and gendered desires predominantly addresses women’s consumption practices in their efforts to become urbanized, cosmopolitan citizens (Hebdige 1979, Miller 2009).<sup>7</sup> In contrast,

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<sup>7</sup> In his study on the origins of punk rock and other sub-cultures among the poor and disadvantaged communities of London, Hebdige observes that certain styles intended to display defiance and non-conformity face a self-defeating fate as upper classes adopt and popularize those styles. Miller’s (2009) historical analysis of dandyism among African-Americans from the nineteenth century to the contemporary period highlights the sense of sense of individuality and liberty that the style enabled among nineteenth century slaves. She argues that dandyism was a form of cultural capital with which African-American slaves could transcend their inferior social positions by negotiating gender, race, and class differences. At the same time, however, Miller contends that dandyism also served to heighten the objectification of African-American slaves, since the so-called excessive adornment of the dandy-slave (referred to as “stylin’ out”) reinforced the wealth and privilege of the slave-owners. Miller thus argues that the dandy style embodies the ambiguous boundaries between individual self-empowerment and social complicity through dress.

anthropologists Rofel (1999) and Yanagisako (2002) counter this trend in the literature by analyzing gendered desires in the realm of production. They situate their ethnographic studies within silk factories in China and Italy respectively, in order to examine how Chinese women wage workers in the post-Mao era and male capitalists of Italian family firms articulate their discrepant desires across gender and generations. Moreover, they examine the broader socio-political implications of desire as China and Italy face periods marked by the increasing privatization of land and manufacturing capacities. This dissertation draws from their works in order to analyze the expression and performance of consumerist desires for fashion among Guangzhou's wage workers and entrepreneurs who have not yet joined the ranks of full-fledged fashion designers or entrepreneurs. Rather than conceptualizing production and consumption as bounded and separate arenas of desire, I highlight the unstable relationship between production and consumption by examining how the consumerist language of fast fashion fuels migrants' aspirations to become producers and entrepreneurs in their own right. How do market participants with minimal starting capital and limited formal knowledge about design and merchandising learn to become entrepreneurs in their own right through their consumerist engagements with fashion? By examining how migrants continually aspire to become self-enterprising citizens, I show how they negotiate and re-assess their desires as they work through challenges associated with becoming entrepreneurs.

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Another set of anthropological literature on capitalism explores risk as a cultural trope through which people engage in global financial and stock markets (Zaloom 2006, Ho 2009, Miyasaki 2013). These ethnographies primarily explore male white-collared employees and managers, who currently dominate financial industries around the world. They demonstrate how men perform their sense of masculinity through risk-taking practices in the market however anxiety provoking or uncertain these endeavors might be. Indeed, as Tsing (2008) and Moodie (2013) argue, capitalist risk-taking activities are primarily coded as masculine undertakings. Desire, on the other hand, particularly in the arenas of love, biological reproduction, and fashion consumption is often signified as feminine.

The experiences of migrant entrepreneurs in Guangzhou highlight the workings of gendered desires and risks as market participants negotiate the inequalities, paradoxes, and uncertainties of small-scale enterprise. Through their stories, this dissertation shows the ongoing processes of risks and desires, whereby migrants are pulled into participating in the transnational networks of commodity production and exchange, yet those desires expose them to various forms of risk. These conditions leave them feeling suspended between the roles of wage worker and entrepreneur, cultivating ambivalence among migrants toward the promises of small-scale entrepreneurship.

### **Urban Studies, Fashion Studies, and Global Capitalism**

Finally, this scholarly work bridges anthropological literature on urban studies and fashion studies in order to examine the material and affective dimensions of change as transnational commodity networks reconfigure social spaces and human desires in the interests of capital. Since anthropologists have tended to focus exclusively on fashion or urbanization, few scholars have examined the processes of urbanization and global commodity exchange through the lens of global fashion. The topic of fashion deserves scholarly consideration, because the gendered desires, entrepreneurial aspirations, consumption practices that the global fashion industry conjures bring market participants across national boundaries into contact with one another. Such dynamics are often characterized by love, longing, ambivalence, competition, and mis-understanding. The auras of cosmopolitanism, femininity, and glamour that fashion designers and advertisers creatively manufacture enable city planners to situate Guangzhou within an imaginary city-future, much like the policies surrounding the *Grand Paris* project in France in which transportation infrastructure throughout the city is designed to extend its physical reaches throughout the globe (Enright 2012). The aim among city planners in Guangzhou to re-scale the metropolis from a rural-to-urban orientation to one that attempts to extend the globe is suffused with desires and aspirations among its inhabitants and market participants. Yet, it is simultaneously situated within the spatial-temporal orders of the global fast fashion industry, which is characterized by low-wage labor and sub-contracting practices, as well as within China's post-socialist transformations.

Furthermore, while urban anthropologists have theorized “the city” as spaces of class, racial, gendered, and ethnic inequalities, their works have tended to conceptualize urbanized contexts as sites of either social inclusion or exclusion (Roy and Ong 2001, Brown 2005, Caldeira 2000). Few studies have theorized urban spaces through the lens of global commodity chains, particularly the ways in which the circulation of commodities, people, and capital reconfigure city spaces. The rhythms through which urban spaces move underscore the fracturing of class and gender relations, as well as fragmentation of commodity export production, as the manufacturing of fast fashion in Guangzhou shows. In short, rather than conceptualizing spaces as static and unchanging, this dissertation draws from the work of Sinn (2013) in order to conceptualize the Pearl River Delta (PRD) region in southeastern China as a dynamic, intermediary space, mirroring what Sinn refers to as “frontier towns” that facilitate the movements of commodities, people, capital, and ideas across national borders and transoceanic boundaries. Like the former trading port of Hong Kong, Guangzhou remains a liminal, in-between space that mediates transitory exchanges across national borders and promises market participants certain degrees of social mobility and fluid identities, along with ambivalent conditions of entrepreneurial freedom and loss. Specifically, I ask: How do images of Guangzhou as an emerging intersection of fashion production and export trade shape migrants’ perceptions of their work as aspiring designers and entrepreneurs? Migrant entrepreneurs, as I emphasize, are caught between competing discourses of what

rightfully counts “as a city” and who qualifies as a legitimate participant in the production of Guangzhou and the PRD region as a world-class fashion metropolis.

### **Re-scaling Rural and Urban Spaces**

A number of anthropologists have described the crossings of objects, people, and capital as trans-national or trans-local in order to emphasize the cultural interconnections and travels of people and objects across diverse spaces (Oakes and Schein 2006. Ong 1999). For instance, Ong (1999) examines Hong Kong elites who claim multiple forms of citizenship, thereby reworking the regulatory governance of nation-states. Chu (2012), on the other hand, focuses on Fuzhounese migrants who arrive in the United States and claim a sense of personhood far away from their native places. Through their studies of Beijing-based artists, Filipina wives in Japan, and transnational Chinese medicinal practices, Welland (2006), Faier (2009), and Zhan (2009) stress various forms of cosmopolitanism and uneven entanglements that are produced through cross-cultural encounters. Their works highlight how discrepant and sometimes competing visions of “the global” connect and interact through networks of intimacy, knowledge production, and exchange. While their studies have highlighted the various constructions of gender, ethnicity, race, class, and the nation in the transnational processes of mobility and capital accumulation, their works have focused primarily on the flows of people, objects, capital and desires across spaces that are assumed to serve as the backdrop for mobility. Drawing from Brown’s (2005) study of de-industrialization of Liverpool and the associated constructions of racial belonging there, I extend the anthropological literature on transnational connections

by considering the movements of spaces as circulations of traders, commodities, and imaginaries transform them.

In fact, the rapid industrialization of the PRD region since the ushering of market practices since the late 1970s relied primarily on the cross-border movements of people, commodities, and capital. In 1978, Deng Xiaoping and other leaders from the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) initiated market reforms by dismantling the institutions of central planning in favor of free market policies. These economic changes began with the projects of massive urbanization. Party leaders designated Shenzhen as the first Special Economic Zone (SEZ) as a testing ground for foreign investment and private ownership of industry. While agricultural collectives and factory work units were slowly broken up, friends and relatives from the neighboring city of Hong Kong, a former British colony, were encouraged to invest in factories and businesses in order to boost Shenzhen's economy. Over the ensuing decades, Shenzhen used foreign direct investments primarily through overseas Chinese from Hong Kong and from other countries including Taiwan and the U.S. in order to establish countless high-rises and factory towns.<sup>8</sup> Other capitalist experiments included Shenzhen's opening of the nation's first stock exchange in the early 1990s as a step towards what officials call "socialist market economy." This event

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<sup>8</sup> In the contemporary period, overseas Chinese are colloquially referred to as *hua quiao*, which can be translated literally as Chinese "bridges." Dirlik (1997) argues that Asian Americans have internalized representations of themselves as "bridges" in their role as cultural mediators between China and the U.S. I suggest that the metaphor of "bridges" can be further extended to encompass the role of overseas Chinese as cultural infrastructures of investments and monetary capital. See Candela (2013) for an elaboration on the relationship between public representations of overseas Chinese and transnational capital.



represented one of the country's early attempts in linking the transnational flows of capital, people, and commodities with the agricultural landscapes, place based lineages, and relations of labor that characterized the PRD region.

Although Party leaders boast Shenzhen as “The City That Rose Overnight,” remnants of the socialist past are not so easy to demolish. The state-run project of building Shenzhen and other Chinese cities “overnight” was possible only through the labor of millions of undocumented migrant workers from China's countryside. These migrant workers are often referred to as “the floating population,” because the central government's socialist policies of demographic control (otherwise known as the *hukou* household registration system) label them as rural residents who are legally not allowed to live and work in the cities (Zhang 2001). Because of their rural designations, undocumented migrants are denied state-sponsored employment and other entitlements including housing, education, and healthcare.

As cities continue to develop, the economic disparities between urban and rural China have grown. At the same time, industrialization of cities like Shenzhen and Guangzhou has unleashed a flood of demand for cheap labor needed to manufacture commodities for overseas export. Faced with pronounced economic hardships in their home villages as well as in the cities, over 260 million undocumented migrants have found low-wage factory and construction labor as means of making a living. Despite their presence in the cities, the migrants' legal designation as rural residents inhibits them from being fully accepted as legitimate

urbanites among locals. Residents with urban *hukou* often discriminate migrants based on their accents, demeanor, dress, and their low-wage occupations.

Furthermore, the restrictions upon rural to urban mobility throughout China have left undocumented migrant parents to leave their children in their home villages. An estimated 58 million children are left behind in the countryside, under the supervision of their grandparents.

Furthermore, former agricultural neighborhoods that have emerged before the Maoist period have been encroached by urban sprawl. These neighborhoods are called “urban villages,” or quite literally “villages in the city” to describe the paradoxical status of these neighborhoods as neither completely urban nor completely rural. The stark contrast in architecture between the new and the old shows that what used to be homes for numerous families now have simply become an eyesore for many urban residents. As in the case of the urban village in Guangzhou, lush agricultural land becomes re-zoned and re-configured into channels of commodity trading and capital accumulation. Through this process, hybridized rural and urban spaces convert into intermediary zones of capitalist exchange that bring together former Maoist agricultural cooperatives and profit-making interests, as well as rural migrants and transnational traders, into dynamic exchanges.

Certainly, urban villages are neither exclusive nor unique to China. In India, city planners in New Delhi and Naya Raipur have grappled with problems related to containing the rapid growth of urban areas, which have engulfed former agricultural

land. As Batra (2013) writes, though it is commonly assumed that urban poverty in India emerges from the rural to urban migration of people in search of employment, social inequalities in fact result from the unprecedented speed with which city areas have grown. Consequently, officials and planners face problems in defining city boundaries. In contrast, the development of the urban villages in Guangzhou has been made possible by the flood of undocumented migrants from the countryside, as well as the spatial encroachment of urban areas upon the former agricultural village. Difficulties in distinguishing rural and urban land, coupled with uncertainties among villagers pertaining to their use-rights to the land, subsequently enable the flourishing of home-based factories that produce garments for export based on temporary, low-wage labor.

For example, amid a dense sea of low-lying and unadorned concrete buildings in this industrial section of southern Guangzhou, thousands of migrant wage workers and small-scale factory owners live and work within the factory enclave, which is nestled within the city landscape. This garment district is an urban village, which currently serves as a large-scale factory community and gateway for recently-arrived migrants from the countryside searching for affordable housing in Guangzhou. This designation is significant, since it refers to its former administrative status as an agricultural collective during the socialist period under Mao Zedong. Prior to the late 1990s, these clusters of low-lying concrete buildings were flat and lush agricultural land. Today, thousands of migrant workers from all regions of China work, live, and run businesses in this factory enclave. Neither fully rural nor fully urban, this garment

district facilitates the movements of people, desires, objects, and money across various city districts and national boundaries.

The export production of fast fashion in Guangzhou has been facilitated by emergence of urban villages as well as home-based factory workshops that are operated by migrant entrepreneurs. The movements of factory spaces and residents in and out of the area leave the surrounding district, along with its residents, have been enabled by the area's suspension between the rural and the urban. Specifically, migrant entrepreneurs operate small-scale factory workshops and warehouses for globally-oriented garment production and trade based on design copying in small batches, thereby resembling a turn to DIY ("do it yourself") craft-based production. Here, several hundred factories with simple machines and technology facilitate about five percent of China's annual garment manufacture. Many of these home-based factories are organized such that some workshops have workers that specialize only in one aspect of the garment mass-manufacturing process such as constructing samples, and assembling garment pieces. The linking of these intricate production processes comprise the globally-oriented fast fashion production economy; that is, the low-cost, small-scale, flexible, and "just in time" delivery of designer-inspired fashion. Globally recognized fashion labels have begun to source fabrics, accessories, and designs from these surrounding markets and factories.

Migrant workers engage in small-scale production ranging from three hundred to a thousand pieces per order, as well as consumer-led customization of products and

styles and quick delivery. Their migrant factory owners, whose everyday forms of labor closely resemble those of their employees, underscore the ambiguities that delineate the categories of small-scale migrant entrepreneurship from wage-earning factory labor. These factory owners maintain a financial stake in manufacturing garments quickly and cheaply using simple, straight stitches, leaky dyes, and second-hand fabrics, since this low-cost market niche sustains their business ventures, however irregular and temporary these projects might be. In fact, many garments remain unfinished with hanging threads, loose buttons, and unattached labels as soon as they leave the factory floor. While some garments are destined for domestic markets in China, others are shipped to secondary assembly sites in the United States, Japan, Russia, and countries in Southeast Asia, where designer labels are attached before they are finally sent to retail outlets. Thus, the factory spaces and production processes characteristic of Guangzhou's fast fashion sector are arranged such that the technical and social division of labor has multiplied into various spatiotemporal orders. In effect, factory workshops grant workers a certain degree of spatial mobility so that they can engage in self-employment and attempt to dictate the terms of their temporary labor.

On the whole, these intermediary spatial zones and subjective conversions serve as post-socialist experiments in linking up to the transnational chains of fast fashion exchange. Through their encounters with transnational traders and the commodity they exchange, migrants thereby engage in "worlding" projects (Zhan 2009); that is, globe-scaling experiments that link and transform spaces, social life,

and relations of labor that comprise divergent garment production networks across vast geographic distances. Market participants engage in productive dialogues with people in other geopolitical locations, producing divergent and uneven perceptions of global markets and of “China” in the world. Thus, worlding projects rely on tenuous relations of difference that are inscribed by place-based histories, identities, and forms of belonging. More broadly, the formation of global commodity chains involves trans-local dialogues and exchanges among market participants as they cooperate and compete to extend the transnational markets for fast fashion.

As a case in point, Guangzhou’s garment district stands as only one out of hundreds of industrial clusters that have mushroomed across the PRD region. The decentralization of governance and fiscal policies since Deng Xiaoping’s introduction of market reforms in 1978 expanded the fiscal and political authority of local governments at the city, district, and neighborhood levels in collecting sources of their independent streams of revenue while providing education, health, housing, and local infrastructure for their citizens (Shue and Wong 2007). Consequently, local officials cooperate with certain entrepreneurs in establishing entire cities, towns, villages that produce a single commodity for export in world markets. Guangzhou’s garment district, for example, competes with cities throughout the Dongguan metropolis, such as Humen, a women’s fashion city, Shaxi, a women’s and men’s sportswear city, and Xintang, the world’s largest denim manufacturing city. Other cities include sock city, and shoe city. Each of these manufacturing clusters across the PRD represents cultural and economic projects of world-making, driven spatially and

subjectively through native place affiliations, by which officials, entrepreneurs, and wage workers compete and cooperate in order to link the supply chains for various commodities across the globe. These native place affiliations attest to the significance of market participants' place-based identities in the formation of the factory towns and commodity chains. Though these industrial clusters are geographically and culturally delineated through native place identifications, migrant wage-workers and small-scale entrepreneurs who have no claims to inclusion to local lineages must compete with one another under heavy financial burdens and highly uncertain market conditions.

These industrial clusters aim to extend its geographical reach and investment capacities upon a global stage therefore demands conceptual analyses of the formation of labor communities and the inter-connections among various actors whose everyday experiments with entrepreneurship and factory labor contingently constrain or enable their articulations with global capitalist practices. How do these experiments with capital accumulation compete, collide, and overlap in curious and unexpected ways?

Gordon Mathews' study of African, Southeast Asian, and Middle Eastern male traders who live and work in the Chungking Mansions in Hong Kong uses the notion of "low-end globalization" to illustrate their small-scale, quasi-legal market activities "commonly associated with the developing world" (2011: 20). Though his research deftly captures the precariousness that are commonly entailed in traders'

risky and sometimes illegal entrepreneurial ventures, Mathew's formulation of "low-end globalization," however, reproduces the structural core/ periphery mappings of world systems analysis that tend to obscure the contributions of small-scale migrant entrepreneurs in the global capitalist economy dominated primary by corporate interests via financial investments and sub-contracting practices. Also, his association with members of the developing world as "low-end" suggests that small-scale migrant entrepreneurs serve merely peripheral roles in the wider processes of global capitalism rather than squarely within. As Rofel (2007) attests, key experiments in neoliberalism take place along the global South as nation-states "remake themselves in order to participate in the global (capitalist) order" (2007: 20).

Tsing (2009) challenges the idea of discrepant capitalisms as characterized by the divisions of high/ low, north/ south, and core/ periphery by describing global connections as "friction" which relies on the diversity of social actors who, through their moments of awkward linkages and cultural mis-understandings, mobilize concrete projects of capitalist exchange and other emergent cultural practices (2000). More importantly, she highlights the diversity of actors (or groups of actors) with competing ambitions in projects that aim to extend their spatial reach and to expand its (capitalist) accumulative power. They do so by forming place-based ties that bridge cultural, national, and geopolitical boundaries. She refers these orientations to the world and processes of interconnection among actors across geographical distances as scale-making, which she defines as "the units of culture and political economy through which we make sense of events and social processes" (2000). As



she writes, “Scale is the spatial dimensionality necessary for a particular kind of view, whether up close or from a distance, microscopic or planetary. I argue that scale is not just a neutral frame for viewing the world; scale must be brought into being; proposed, practiced, evaded, as well as taken for granted” (2009: 58). She reminds us that the work of linking production chains across various communities must take into account different ways of defining and organizing the movement of labor, commodities, and capital across time and space.

Tsing’s analyses converge with those of contemporary human geographers who similarly emphasize the production of geographic scale in their studies of capital accumulation across time and space. In particular, Neil Brenner (1998, 2000) extends David Harvey’s (2001) conceptualization of “the spatial fix” by underscoring the critical role of spatial scale-making practices in the cyclical processes of capital accumulation and over-accumulation. He, along other geographers and social scientists, emphasize that the seamless flows of capital must paradoxically be situated or “fixed” within placed-based institutions and infrastructures, including banking, legal, and transport systems, before capital circulation is de-territorialized and re-territorialized (Brenner 1998). As in the case of Guangzhou, entire neighborhoods have been forcibly gutted and re-built so that the global commodity chains could be carved within the very landscapes of the city. Towering scaffolds have become common visual features of the surrounding panorama. He writes, “It is only through the construction of relatively fixed and immobile transport, communications, and regulatory-institutional infrastructures – a “second nature” of socially produced

configurations of territorial organization – that this accelerated physical movement of commodities through space can be achieved” (1998: 433). Cities and states serve as territorially-situated structures of capital organization or what he calls “hierarchical scaffolding.” While Tsing emphasizes how ordinary people create world-spanning commodity chains through their everyday engagements with capitalist activities, Brenner focuses on how the state serves as institutions that amass capital flows.

As these scholars instruct us, the formation of global commodity chains requires mobilizing labor and capital among communities across geographical distances. Cartier (2001) argues, “From a theoretical perspective, linking social processes across geographical distances must allow any number of scales, different and changing scales- even simultaneously existing different types of scale – and flexible conceptualization defined by the social processes at stake.” One such imaginary is demonstrated by the pooling of investments among overseas Chinese and their fellow native place villagers in establishing factory towns and scaling them globally through export trade. The existence of these distinct clusters, as well as the small-scale enterprises that sustain them, testifies to the reliance of global supply chains upon divergent projects of scaling. For instance, transnational corporations attempt to raise their profitability and extend their global reach by shrugging off the legal and societal costs of low-wage labor and contracting their manufacturing capacities off-shore to places in the global south such as China, India, and countries throughout Southeast Asia and Latin America. At the same time, the introduction of high speed trains, canals, highways, and ports, as well as on-line lending and payment

systems interspersed throughout the global south attempt to facilitate the flows of capital and labor across transcontinental oceans and national boundaries. In recent years, the increasing establishment of other SEZs across the globe, including Rason in North Korea, Panama, and Shanghai in China, has created state-sponsored, experimental sites of capital accumulation, which channel seemingly even and rapid movement of goods, transport, capital, and labor.

In practice, however, the linking of these multi-scalar flows of labor and capital are far from seamless. Tensions arise among entrepreneurs along each node of the commodity chains of fast fashion as market participants variously collaborate and compete with another as they link distances and differences in order to accumulate capital. For instance, corporate capital flight within certain areas of the PRD, for example, has left former factories and industrial spaces empty and idle, while masses of workers in other factories throughout the region are left without pay for their labor. Protests among factory workers demanding improved working conditions and higher living wages also lead young migrants in Guangdong to increasingly seek employment in the service sector, resulting in a growing shortage of low-wage factory workers in the PRD. Meanwhile, migrant youths, particularly women, return to their homes in the countryside after their physical bodies become exhausted, overworked, and even disabled from the unfair demands of low-wage labor in the cities. Some village-level officials illegally confiscate land belonging to former village collectives in the interests of profit-making and speculating on lucrative redevelopment projects proposed by transnational corporations. Other city

governments, such as Foshan, remain heavily in debt, as planners try to curb industrial pollution without stifling productivity and halt the emerging shadow economy created by villagers who illegally lease communal land to outside investors. In addition, small-scale entrepreneurs struggle to compete with one another in an increasingly hostile and uncertain economic climate, while district-level governments cooperate with local property use-rights holders to evict long-term tenants in an attempt to convert old commercial and residential properties in order to engage in real estate speculation projects which tend to benefit only the elite classes.

### **Scaling Spaces, Scaling Subjectivities: Blurring the Distinctions between the Rural and Urban, Migrant Entrepreneur and Wage-Worker**

If factory spaces are as flexible as the people and objects that flow through them, how are migrants' senses of personhood transformed through the movement of these spaces? Drawing from Lefebvre's (1974) assertion that spaces (imaginary and material) are socially produced, this dissertation highlights how garment producers and wage workers' experiential notions of labor and urbanization are shaped by the spatial organization of fast fashion production. In this urban village, the processes of urbanizing former agricultural lands and rural migrants converge with global market demands for fast fashion production. Certainly, as Harvey (2011) states, urbanization serves as a key analytic through which capital accumulation and subsequent global economic crises are examined. He writes, "Capitalism has to urbanize to reproduce itself" (2011: 277).

Specifically, Harvey argues that urban spaces are crucial for the organization of production and consumption, as well as for the circulation of money and capital through the construction of infrastructures. In recent years, plans by the Guangdong provincial government to build a high speed railway that connects Guangzhou, Shenzhen, Hong Kong, and Macau aim to link urban zones of capitalist experimentation so as to facilitate the seamless and rapid movement of goods, transport, capital, and labor. Unfortunately, construction of this railway has involved mass evictions among long-time villagers residing along the Hong Kong – China border. While Harvey’s work highlights the spatial aspects of capitalist exchange, particularly the unequal distribution of wealth and resources as well as on-going class conflicts among market participants, he tends to overlook the diversity and contingency through which these capitalist exchanges are forged.

Using Lefebvre and Harvey’s studies of urban spaces as points of departure, this study challenges homogenizing views of urbanization and capital accumulation. It focuses on the relationship between shifting spaces and changing ideas of personhood within Guangzhou’s fast fashion sector as a case study in analyzing how global commodity chains are crafted by migrants in China. Rather than assuming urbanization and capital accumulation as top-down and totalizing processes, I emphasize migrants’ ambiguous condition of being identified neither as completely urban nor as completely rural. I also underscore migrants’ ambivalence toward their experiences of low-wage labor, which often blurs the distinction between entrepreneurship and wage work. The fast fashion industry in Guangzhou is a

significant case study of these ambiguous categories. The quick turnover of commodities, profits, and stylistic trends intensifies market participants' pursuits for fast money in their efforts to become entrepreneurs as a path towards achieving their financial and administrative statuses as urban residents. However, profits are difficult to gain and few participants are able to control the variable conditions of transnational capitalism. For instance, the sheer diversity of commodity chains for fast fashion in Guangzhou leaves unclear who the "bosses" are along the intermediary links of manufacture and exchange. Anticipation of market losses and failures increasingly colors the migrants' experiments with entrepreneurship, as they compete and negotiate to fulfill their desires as enterprising subjects.

In effect, as Xiao Ye's personal account above reveals, migrants find themselves under conditions similar to what Priti Ramamurthy (2010) theorizes as perplexity, a structure of feeling among the Dalit (a formerly untouchable caste) community of small-holding farmers who cultivate cottonseeds for global export in the Andhra Pradesh region of southern India (Ramamurthy 2010). As she explains, increasing numbers of farmers with small amounts of starting capital have ventured out on their own, declaring that they "labor only for themselves" even though their profits were lower than the wages they would have earned as hired workers (Ramamurthy 2010: 1050). The social exclusions and profit losses that the small-holders continually face generate a collective sense of confusion and perplexity that Ramamurthy illustrates as a fraught process that is "mysterious, paradoxical, and outside their (the small-holders) control even when they appear to have control over

some of its elements and are drawn to its possibilities” (Ramamurthy 2010: 1051-1052). The condition of perplexity thus highlights the conditions of desires, ambivalence, and discontentment that increasingly characterize people’s everyday practices of capitalist exchange. This collective sentiment also underscores the paradoxical experiences of freedom and disenfranchisement among small-scale farmers and entrepreneurs who increasingly stake their already unstable livelihoods upon profit-driven market activities.

In a similar vein, Xiao Ye’s story unveils how participants along the production chains of fast fashion must constantly negotiate their positions along the commodity chains in relation to their marginal gains and losses. I extend Ramamurthy’s analysis of perplexity as a structure of feeling among small-holding entrepreneurs in the global south by showing how the lure of self-enterprise leaves market participants suspended between wage work and entrepreneurship. I demonstrate how the spatial organization of technical knowledge and low-wage labor characteristic of fast fashion production in Guangzhou shape the gendered desires of migrant entrepreneurs and low-wage workers. Fast fashions are made by migrant wage workers and entrepreneurs who operate small-scale, family-owned industrial workshops, market stalls, and warehouses for globally oriented garment production and trade based on design copying in low-volume batches, thereby resembling a return to craft-based production. This particular mode of production differs from the electronics sector in China, which Pun Ngai and Jenny Chan (2013) have examined in their investigations of female workers (or *dagongmei*) within institutionalized, large-

scale factories, such as Foxconn which produces the majority of the world's Apple products. The relative openness and fluidity of fast fashion's factory workshops allow migrant wage workers and factory owners to experiment with the conditions of self-employment. Through these processes, they transform their perceptions of labor and personhood as they negotiate their desires for social mobility with market demands for low-wage labor.

Many migrants prefer taking up work in the surrounding factory-villages in contrast to the large-scale factory regimes that have mushroomed around the PRD region, because they can find their own housing and live with their families nearby. Rather than being cloistered within the confines of larger factories and constantly regulated by managers, temporary wage workers float from one factory to another based on individual production orders. Meanwhile, small-holding factory bosses learn the ropes of business management while performing their freedom through entrepreneurship by describing their work as that of "designers" rather than as "workers." However, much like the factory owners with whom I worked, many small-scale business owners in the area realize that a very fine line differentiates factory wage work from entrepreneurship. For example, numerous factory bosses work alongside their hired workers on the factory floor for ten to twelve hours a day, seven days a week. Others shuffle in and out of the ranks of temporary wage workers and entrepreneurs, as they work to source fabrics and assemble garments to markets around the world. Many temporary wage workers, particularly women workers in their thirties and forties, make extra money laboring as sewers while juggling their



own small business ventures in addition to their familial duties, such as cooking and child-rearing. They consider temporary wage work as a type of financial shelter to weather economic downturns. Older couples in their fifties and sixties take off from overseeing their wholesale market stalls and find hourly wage work in the surrounding garment factories. Some take four to five hours during the day, or work late-night shifts when they encounter lulls in their businesses. The extra money they earn from wage work is saved as part of their modest retirement funds. In short, migrant entrepreneurs attempt to maintain a foothold in the category of being entrepreneurs but remain on the ambiguous boundary between wage worker and entrepreneur.

### **Gendered Risks and Desires**

The creation of this fluid, entrepreneurial world within the spatial confines of this factory enclave, as I argue, entails the gendering of garment production into small-scale and specialized processes. The organization of fast fashion's manufacturing processes into small-scale factory spaces and intimate relations of labor emphasizes the family as the primary unit of industrial production while intensifying migrants' conditions of financial precariousness and social vulnerability. This observation echoes what Croll (1983) observed during the 1980s period of early market reforms whereby the inequalities of the labor market intensify gendered divisions of labor as the family increasingly becomes the primary unit of industrial production and biological reproduction. I add to her analysis by showing how the organization of garment manufacturing within small-scale, home-based factories

blurs the distinction between public and private spaces of sociality and industrial production. There, migrant workers encounter and negotiate the rewards and risks of entrepreneurship and self-employment.

Specifically, men, on the one hand, have embraced their displacement and precarious conditions as “risk-takers” through their public proclamations of freedom from their factory bosses. As the husband of a factory-owning migrant couple once declared in public, “You know, the money I make now (as a factory owner) is about the same as when I worked for someone else in a factory in Dongguan. I operate my own business now because I have freedom (zi you).” The certainty with which he expressed his paradoxical declaration of freedom reveals the ambivalent situations and forms of personhood that emerge from the fracturing of gender and class-based worker collectivities characteristic of post-socialist China. His statement was contradictory mainly because the migrant couple and I shared countless nights of arduous factory labor that extended well into the late hours of evenings and early mornings.

Women, on the other hand, must negotiate the meanings of entrepreneurship and their desires for autonomy in relation to their male counterparts. Female workers across generations bear the double-burden of negotiating the contradiction between wage work and non-wage household labor. In fact, women’s experiences of labor within these factory workshops attest to their everyday negotiations. On the shop floor, they openly discuss the rising costs of their children’s education in Guangzhou

and in the countryside or issues of domestic violence they encounter at home. Oftentimes, young mothers who cannot afford day care bring their children to the factory while they finish their assigned tasks at their sewing stations. Needless to say, problems arise when children use the shop floor as their playground. On one occasion, I witnessed a heart-breaking moment when a young mother from Chaozhou heard that her four- year-old son had stabbed his older sister in the head with a pair of industrial-sized scissors while their mother labored at her sewing station. Sadly, other injuries, as I illustrate below, entail physical and emotional wounds:

The prevailing sense of ambivalence toward the unfulfilled promises of financial freedom through entrepreneurship is hardly unique to rural migrants such as Xiao Ye. In fact, in the years shortly after Deng Xiaoping's introduction of market reforms in 1978, a young Guangzhou woman, Gum Li, similarly started her wholesale business selling steel buttons attached on denim jeans within a modest stall inside the Changgang Accessories Market, nearly ten years prior to Xiao Ye's arrival. Her endeavor began when she worked as an independent seller of denim jeans in one of Guangzhou's first wholesale markets for fashion, directly across the street from the city's Railway Station. After several years of hardship, Gum Li tenaciously perfected her skills in calculating clients' various orders, selecting inventory, and predicting upcoming fashion trends for sale. Over time, as garment export factories mushroomed across the Pearl River Delta, Gum Li identified a rising need among her factory-owning clients for denim buttons packaged in bulk in order to facilitate large-scale manufacture. In response to this market demand, Gum Li gave up her operations

within the garment wholesale market and experimented in selling denim buttons instead. Her bold decision proved to be extremely profitable. Within a few months, Gum Li secured a client base to the extent that factory owners formed queues around the market space in anticipation of her merchandise. Within a span of a few years, Gum Li catapulted from a former *danwei* worker in a socialist work-unit during the Maoist period to a multi-millionaire in the decades of post-socialist transition during the Reform era. Within a short period of time, Gum Li became a home-grown heroine of entrepreneurial success within the garment district. The lines of clients queuing to purchase her merchandise certainly testified to her personal achievements, a particularly rare feat for a relatively young wife and mother at that time.

Her sky-rocketing success, however, also led to a tragic, life-changing event. Her sense of entrepreneurial triumph was quickly tempered one day when an unknown person outside the accessories market threw acid water directly onto her face in broad daylight before a group of stunned on-lookers. The initial moments of the horrific encounter shocked her as she immediately wiped the acid water from her left eye with her bare hand. Unfortunately, her attempt burned her hand, while leaving her half-blind with a scarred face. Like Xiao Ye,, Gum Li believed that the perpetrator, who remained uncaught by the police, conspired with a business competitor in the area, and acted out of unbridled jealousy toward her wealth. The provocation of violence sparked by envy among market participants in the emerging garment district did not seem unusual during the early years of economic boom, since the appeal of fast money, coupled with the absence of a consistent rule of law, drove

swells of rural migrants into the surrounding area in search for fast money, thereby heightening the competition for low-wage employment and small-scale business pursuits.

To this day, Gum Li understandably refuses to return to the scene of the crime, the precise place where her multi-million dollar fortune was once made. Although she currently leads a life of wealth and material comfort, the utter violence and cruelty of the act continues to haunt her. When I visited Gum Li in her home in 2012, she re-narrated those painful moments to me as her eyes remain cast downward towards a family photo taken with her ten year-old son. In a deliberate and somber tone, she explained:

This picture was taken before I began my business in the markets. Back then, family portraits like these were all the rage, but they were expensive. My son begged for me to purchase one of these pictures for him since all his friends did it. I was reluctant, since they cost 50 yuan and we didn't have that kind of money then. So I borrowed the cash from a few relatives to make him happy. I was determined then to make a good life for my son. I did it all for my son. But looking back, I realized that one doesn't need to have so much money. You really don't need that much money to live a good life....

As we sat in her luxurious apartment, I couldn't help but momentarily reflect on the contradiction of her statement. The material comforts displayed in her home exemplified the achievements of China's unprecedented economic reforms. And yet,

the physical scars of her violent encounter served as everyday reminders to her and her loved ones of her emotional toils, which resulted exclusively from her entrepreneurial pursuits. Her insistence that a person does not need money in order to lead a good life seems unlikely to convince those who have been enchanted by the prospect of wealth and entrepreneurial dreams. Furthermore, the violent erasure of her youth and beauty in a fashion-oriented industry signals a deliberate injury to what Gum Li must have personally treasured as the source of her femininity, youth, and self-confidence. The painful taking of what she must have valued as a woman made this encounter all the more chilling and cruel.

In light of such disruptions and uncertainties, market participants in Guangzhou's fast fashion sector, particularly migrant entrepreneurs, openly express the anxieties and discontent they experience as they increasingly stake their livelihoods upon the ups and downs of the global economy. Their very desires to participate in the transnational chains of commodity production and exchange paradoxically expose them to the exploitative effects of global capitalism. A number of migrant entrepreneurs that I have encountered often doubt that their businesses can continue to weather the on-going global financial crises which have recurred since 2008. Although they have witnessed and experienced numerous business enterprises come and go, many small-scale entrepreneurs, particularly members of the post-1980s generation, continue to aspire to the wealth and financial freedom that come with entrepreneurial success. They admit rather forthrightly that they have few alternatives for work and livelihood. Some migrants have even directly expressed to me that they

would rather earn less money and work for themselves than have to be someone else's employee. Others labor to maintain their business for as long as they can, while they attempt to reap as much profit as they are able. As one migrant couple explained to me, "I don't know how long our business and our (laboring) bodies can last. I just don't know. This (factory) work is too hard. Yet, it (entrepreneurship) is the only way we know to make good money." They do so by finding strategies for quick money at relatively low financial risks, including soliciting competitors' clients or copying competitors' designs. As I explain in subsequent chapters, these approaches often entail bitterness and betrayal.

### **Situating Ethnographic Practice**

This research project began with an intellectual query into why and how counterfeit consumer culture has grown in popularity across the Pacific Rim since the 1980s. When I arrived in Guangzhou in the fall of 2010, the mass scale of garment factories and wholesale markets overwhelmed me. Here, thousands of small outlets and stalls cram along narrow hallways, each serving regular clients from Seoul, Moscow, Abu-Dhabi, Mexico City, and Singapore. Amidst the whirlwind of fast-paced buyers, roving carts, and changing styles, I was shocked by the trans-continental scale and cross-cultural diversity that the aura of cheapness and fakery in fashion generated there. Indeed, Guangzhou's factories and fashion markets offered rare glimpses into the everyday encounters among undocumented migrants from China's countryside and transnational migrants from the world's developing economies who were collectively experimenting with the profitable gains and

devastating losses of small-scale entrepreneurialism through copied fashions. I was particularly intrigued by why the “Made in China” label carried a baggage of derogatory distinctions that marked it as cheap, fake, and low-quality. After several rounds of preliminary research in and out of fashion markets in Beijing, Shanghai, Hong Kong, Shenzhen, and Guangzhou, I inevitably struggled with the quandary of addressing common perceptions among many consumers in the United States toward counterfeit fashions as illegal or illicit, when far fewer people that I have encountered in China regard it with the same degree of disparagement. Above all, I was interested in hearing alternative perspectives on the issue, especially from the point of view of producers in China, whose livelihoods are most affected by the manufacture and exchange of these commodities.

Amidst the flurry of economic activity that the markets for copied fashion generated, I realized over the course of my research, that most Chinese and transnational wage workers, factory owners, intermediary agents, and buyers who collectively labored within the production chains for fast fashion were generally aware of the negative connotations that the “Made in China” label carried in the eyes of their consumers in China and abroad. For instance, several traders from Senegal, the Congo, Japan, and Poland admitted that they often obscured the fact that the commodities that they sold in Spain, Italy, and France were in fact manufactured in China. For them, the aura of in-authenticity and “cheapness” of goods made in China failed to deter them from pursuing their desires for wealth and social mobility. While some Chinese wholesalers amassed wealth by reproducing clothing samples brought



directly from Italy and France, newcomers to the wholesale markets struggled to stake out un-territorialized niches in the marketplace by modifying existing styles or experimenting with unique designs in order to satiate the increasingly fickle tastes of their clients. However as mounting numbers of young, hopeful entrepreneurs entered the wholesale and retail markets for the first time, the problem of copying or stealing designs among competitors became a highly contentious issue. The point of contention, as I contend, did not center around legality, but rather on betrayal of trust and friendship. Market participants, therefore, must constantly negotiate the fine line between profitable gains on the one hand and intimacy and reciprocity and obligation on the other. I often witnessed quarrels that broke out among friends, relatives, and fellow business owners over claims of jealousy and accusations that one copied the other's design idea or personal taste. On one occasion, a young female stall owner complained, "We used to be good friends. Now, she (her competitor) copied every one of my (garment) pieces and sold them in her store! You know, she can steal my ideas, but she will never copy my sense of fashion!" As their emotionally charged encounter demonstrates, the women's engagements with the commodity chains of fashion produced tensions and distrust between them, sometimes at the cost of friendship and intimate relationships.

Drawing from anthropologists' research on supply-chain capitalism (Tsing 2009, Chalfin 2009), as well as human geographers' studies on global commodity chains (Bair and Werner 2011, Bair 2009, Friedberg 2004, Gereffi and Korzeniewicz 1994), I wove in and out of designers' studios, wholesale markets, and garment

factories around the city to explore the unequal connections among participants who constituted the production chains for fast fashion. This multi-sited research enabled me to examine how entrepreneurs' and workers' migration histories, cosmopolitan aspirations, and unequal market exchanges determine the flows of ideas, people, and materials that collectively comprised the fast fashion industry.

To deeply understand the work and family lives of migrant workers and entrepreneurs, I labored alongside migrant workers without pay at a small garment factory within the city's garment district. Fate led me into the intimate lives of a giving and humble migrant couple from Guangxi province. I met them one fall evening when my cousin and I walked into their factory space and inquired about their work lives. They were as interested in learning about an overseas Chinese student conducting research in Guangzhou as I was curious about their lives. My meager contributions to their daily workloads slowly allowed me to gain invaluable access to the owners' and workers' conversations about their migration histories, the successes and failures of their former businesses, their future aspirations, their struggles in keeping up with hectic production schedules, and their challenges in juggling family obligations with factory labor. Over time, the couple, particularly Mrs. Wong treated me as a confidant and friend, never letting me leave the factory space without a warm homemade meal in my stomach. Their openness and generosity allowed me to delve into the experiences of migration and work among factory wage-workers, factory owners, agents, and market stall operators. In exchange, I served as a cultural translator to a distant country to which they do not have access. To uncover

their experiences of labor among these migrant groups, I observed their everyday work schedules in handling orders, coordinating materials, and organizing the intricate processes of garment mass-manufacture. In particular, I paid attention to the hierarchical relationships between wage workers and bosses, as well as between Chinese manufacturers and transnational agents/ buyers. I focused on moments of cultural misunderstanding and conflicts, especially when parties disagreed on unpaid orders, production delays, and prices. These observations yielded compelling insights into how each group's role along the commodity chains for fast fashion conditioned their experiential notions of work. These experiences, in turn, shaped how migrant workers and entrepreneurs negotiated their social exclusions and low wage labor within their respective workplaces.

Furthermore, I toured separate factories across Foshan and Dongguan in order to trace the stages of garment production from the preparation of raw materials, through assembly, to final packaging for export. I also researched several wholesale markets where fast fashions were sold in order to uncover how the transnational chains of exchange constituted China's economic ties to Korea, Southeast Asia, and West Africa. In all, I observed and interviewed over 250 participants whose roles in fast fashion included wage workers, factory owners, agents/ brokers, market stall owners, and buyers.

## Chapter Outline

The chapters that I present in this dissertation reveal how migrants confront and negotiate the paradoxes of entrepreneurial freedom as they experiment with business enterprise and temporary wage work. Specifically, they show how the labor of carving global commodity chains in China entails post-socialist transformations of city spaces, personhood, and relations of labor. In the case of Guangzhou's fast fashion industry, they face on-going displacement and mobility as they negotiate the conditions of their exploited labor as undocumented migrants while attempting to extend their social mobility beyond the immediate confines of the factory. Home based factory workshops have sprouted within the city's urban villages where questions pertaining to land use rights and citizenship highlight the contested boundaries between the rural and urban. The fragmentation of the garment manufacturing processes into small-scale, family-based workshops dismantles class-based collectivities characteristic of the Maoist era such that factory workers no longer describe their work as collective labor but as a stepping stone to entrepreneurial and consumer-oriented endeavors. The blurring of factory spaces within spatial boundaries of the home has also accentuated gendered divisions of labor, whereby men declare their freedom as entrepreneurial risk-takers while women carry the double-burden of wage work and caring for the household. Moreover, margins of profit along the intermediary sites of commodity production and exchange are unpredictable and unevenly distributed to the extent that the opportunities for capital accumulation are difficult for small-scale entrepreneurs to identify.

Consequently, migrants regularly float in and out of the ranks of wage-workers and entrepreneurs. In short, these paradoxes and instabilities situate migrant entrepreneurs within ambivalent and contradictory sites of freedom and loss, as well as of desire and risk.

Chapter one traces the historical transformation of Guangzhou's garment district from a cluster of former Maoist agricultural collectives to a primary hub of fast fashion export production. Through this historical overview, this chapter demonstrates how lineage-based organization of land, claims to property rights, and migrant labor intersect to forge the chains of export commodity production and exchange. Using secondary anthropological and sociological sources that detail the historical development of this site (Yang 1959, Siu 2007, Choi 2010), I emphasize the reemergence of place-based exclusions that are determined by lineage membership in the contemporary period. These exclusions are evidenced by the widening disparity between lineage members who held use rights to the land and the migrant population with no land claims. As urban areas surround and engulf former village spaces, migrants remain excluded from any ties to the land and remain so-called outsiders. Their needs for low cost housing and low wage employment, however, serve as valuable sources of monetary income, real estate speculation, and negotiating power for lineage members with land use rights, who anticipate unfair land grabs by municipal government agencies and by powerful corporations. The mushrooming of these low cost networks for fast fashion production and exchange within the very landscape of the urban villages reflect these widening class based disparities.

The second chapter builds from my spatial analysis of the garment district in chapter one. It examines the dynamic re-organization of “the factory” from a large-scale, institutionalized site of enclosure to small-scale workshops that facilitate relatively quick and seamless flows of people, money, and commodities. In the course of ethnographically describing this historically specific mode of fast fashion production, I emphasize the significance of temporal regulation and quality control over rhythms of factory work, despite the relative ease with which people find themselves moving in and out of factory spaces. The spatial and temporal orders of fast fashion production in turn break down the categorical boundaries between boss and employee as migrants experiment with conditions of temporary labor and self-employment. This chapter highlights how factory owners and wage workers negotiate their physical mobility with the relentless demands for quick turnover of commodities and oppressive production schedules.

Chapter three discusses how risks and losses are speculated among intermediary buyers within the city’s wholesale markets, as well as by manufacturers and wage workers within the garment factories for fast fashion. While the previous chapter sketches the ways in which spatial and temporal dimensions of fast fashion production determine the flows of workers, clients, and raw materials in and out of Guangzhou’s factory district, this chapter elaborates on how rent speculation and the rapid turnover of fashion styles create a circular sense of production and consumption, leading market participants to speculate on potential risks and losses. This chapter then ties workers’ experiential notions of factory labor to how intermediary agents,

factory owners, and wage workers express their entrepreneurial desires and perceive market risks.

The fourth chapter analyzes men's performances of masculinity and freedom as they relate to the rise of entrepreneurship by tracing the emergent "boss" figure (*laoban*). Ethnographically, this chapter compares three men of varying class backgrounds who enact the aspirational figure of the entrepreneurial "boss" through their divergent declarations of freedom: 1) the patriarch of an elite transnational family; 2) the migrant owner of a small-scale factory-workshop; and 3) a temporary factory wage worker. As this chapter argues, a comparative analysis of the aspirational "boss" figure reveals the unfolding of gender and class-based inequalities among migrant families (domestic and transnational) as ordinary citizens increasingly encounter market risks through their engagements with transnational relations of financial investment and commodity exchange. Furthermore, this chapter shows how freedom and risk are becoming popular tropes through which men across various classes find meaning through their diverse engagements with capitalist practices. Specifically, these tropes appeal to men's desires for a better life, while paradoxically exposing them to the negative effects of market exchange.

Chapter five traces the intimate lives of female migrant entrepreneurs and wage workers in order to demonstrate how affective dimensions of love, desire, and intimacy among inter-generational female migrant entrepreneurs in Guangzhou determine the ways in which global supply chains for fast fashion come into being. I

examine women negotiate and contest gendered divisions of work and risk as they struggle to balance household labor with wage work. Analytically, this discussion extends this literature by arguing that female migrants' longings are fluid and dynamic, since market participants must constantly reassess their desires as they negotiate ongoing encounters with freedom and loss. I show how their entrepreneurial desires often lead to risks, particularly when women confront circumstances that threaten their sense of financial stability and emotional security. Other situations rupture friendship and familial ties that have once served as primary sources of emotional safety and security. These circumstances often entail heartbreak, exploitation, and the giving up of other desires among female market participants, which lead them to reexamine their aspirations as they work through the meanings of self-employment and entrepreneurship. Thus, their struggles in ascending the social ladder as aspiring entrepreneurs remain fraught with gendered and intra-familial tensions that tear the fabric of kinship, friendship, and intimacy, bonds that once served as the most assessable and invaluable source of care and cooperation in the face of possible market downturns and exploitative labor conditions.. Finally, I conclude this chapter by illustrating how migrants balance their entrepreneurial aspirations and assert their senses of ethical personhood as they confront both liberating and exploitative effects of capitalist exchange.



## Chapter 1: Corporatizing Urban Villages: The Re-spatialization of Rural and Urban Inequalities in Post-socialist China

Amid a dense sea of low-lying and unadorned concrete buildings in this industrial section of southern Guangzhou, thousands of migrant wage workers and small-scale factory owners live and work within a factory enclave nestled within the city landscape. This garment district is one of an estimated two hundred remaining urban villages (*chengzhongcun*), or literally “villages within the city,” around the Pearl River Delta (PRD), which are administratively no longer agricultural villages, yet their residents and the surrounding infrastructures are not considered fully urban either.<sup>9</sup> As former agricultural villages that once stood in the shadows of the city, urban villages are the results of unbridled urbanization over the past three decades, which have physically enclosed these distinct neighborhoods and threatened to envelop these spaces into the concrete jungle. They differ from city neighborhoods that are constructed upon state-owned land, since long-standing residents of urban

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<sup>9</sup> To be sure, urban villages are not exclusive to the Pearl River Delta region. Scholars and observers have written about urban villages in Beijing, Chongqing, Hangzhou, Qingdao, Wenzhou, and Lanzhou just to name a few. For a comprehensive list, see: <http://chinaurbanvillage.org/numbers>. Moreover, scholars of India have also used the term, urban villages, to refer to poor, slum-like communities in urban areas. Though they, too, focus on the problems of rapid urbanization, problems related to poverty, migration, and urban development are place based and vary by historical context. As a case in point, see: <http://terraurban.wordpress.com/tag/urban-village/>. Interestingly, the term, urban village, has also been used to describe pockets of small-scale, gentrified communities across the developed world (Sharma 2012). As part of so-called localization projects, urban planners design low-density housing that purports to retain sustainability, community solidarity, and collective engagement. On the one hand, while the shared use of the term signify common concerns in regard to urbanization and environmental degradation, the appropriation of it by urban planners in the developed world merely glosses over the problem of class and inequality. In China and India, urban villages are visible testaments to income disparities.

villages retain the administrative use-rights over their land.<sup>10</sup> Their in-between status is partially explained by the fact that in practice, urban villages around the PRD serve as slums, large-scale factory communities, and gateways for recently-arrived migrants from the countryside searching for affordable housing in major metropolises, such as Shenzhen or Guangzhou.<sup>11</sup>

The designation of the Zhongda factory enclave as a conglomerate of several urban villages invokes the feeling of liminality that pervades the neighborhood as it finds itself suspended between the classifications of a city and a village. More importantly, the naming of this type of site as urban villages highlights the residents' layered histories and entangled aspirations characteristic of area's post-socialist transformations. Indeed, a stroll through the dark alleyways of an urban village takes the visitor through the architectural symbols of the district's ongoing urban displacement, economic disparities, and contested land claims. The cramped, dingy five-storey apartment buildings are crowded so tightly that they seem to swallow up the sky above, leaving a thin "piece of thread" for the impressionable observer (Hsing

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<sup>10</sup> Technically, land in China has been collectivized during the Maoist period and currently falls under the governance of the local state in the name of "the people." Collectives own the land, and individuals have administrative use-rights to the land for a negotiated period of time (approximately 70 years). As Verdery (2012) explains, the question of property under socialism is often concerned with the question of administrative use-rights rather than legal ownership. In the case of China (as in the former Soviet bloc), few people are concerned with land ownership per se, but are more concerned over issues of administrative use-rights (Hsing 2010).

<sup>11</sup> In the case of India, journalists have speculated on the potential clout that urban villagers in India may exert precisely because of their condition between the rural and the urban. For Mishra (2013), urban villagers represent a group of aspiring middle-class workers who are likely to vote for politicians, like Arvind Kejriwal, who openly express disaffection with current conditions of inequality and corruption. These assumptions clearly cannot be applied to the China case, since village collective members and migrants cannot elect democratically Party members to the district, municipal, and central governments.

2010). These so-called “kissing buildings,” colloquially named as such because of the close proximity within which these tenements are built, often serve as the visible sites for real estate speculation and labor exploitation. Popular discourse casts these neighborhoods and its residents as disorderly and uncivilized, driving a deep wedge in the caste-like distinctions between the rural and urban social statuses. In spite of such popular disparagements, the urban villages continue to serve not only as vital sources of low-income housing for undocumented migrant workers from China’s countryside, but also as physical testaments to the contested claims to localism that underlie the district’s controversies over land use rights. They also highlight the broader demands among divergent groups in their struggles to subsist under decent living conditions within the encroaching city.

In the scene below, I reflect upon my own memories of weaving through the bustling corners of the Zhongda urban village. These everyday street encounters illustrate the diverse forms of monetary extraction and accumulation by representatives of the village committees, which frequently occur through confrontations between village residents and neighborhood officials. The following excerpt illustrates how the boundaries that cast locals (*ben di ren*) and outsiders (*wai di ren*) are constantly drawn and re-drawn through everyday forms of social governance.

Saturday afternoon, I made my way through Kanglecun to visit a factory behind the Zhongda Fabric Market. That day, the scorching heat seeping through the

cracks of the high-rise apartments made the familiar walk down to the factory almost unbearable. As I weaved through the trail of cars, bikes, and pedestrians that lined the main street leading to the village, I felt the heat from the sun piercing through my skin. A pedi-cab driver carrying mountainous stacks of fabrics upon his wooden cart raced beside me, causing me to almost lose my footing. Odors emanating from the sewer combined with the stuffy air and various kinds of street food pervaded the air around me, as my throat itched from the polluting exhaust. I found my way through the maze of alleyways and quickly found cover under the shadows of apartment buildings clustered around me. As I passed by a hardware store, I saw a plump middle-aged woman shouting at two men dressed in official green uniforms with badges attached on their shoulders. One was a rather large, round man, and the other was smaller, carrying a notepad possibly of bills and receipts. As I strolled past them, the woman screamed at the two men with extreme exasperation, "I have to pay for the water whether I use it or not!" From her bold statement, I gathered that the officials had come for the collection of water fees. As the woman continued to scream in anger, the round gentleman casually walked up to the storefront of the Lanzhou noodle restaurant next door. The vendor standing outside was preparing steamed noodles, as he greeted the approaching official with a cheerful, accommodating smile. I continued on my way in order to avoid catching unwanted attention from the officials. Although I never learned about what transpired out of the confrontation, I could only guess that both storeowners had to pay the unwanted fees. At that point, I worried that the officials would make their way up the street to the Wongs' (the neighborhood

factory owners) and would begin to demand money from them. Luckily, however, I never saw the two officials again.

Everyday attempts to extract profits through rents and fees continue to color the migrant residents' daily encounters. Although the uniformed officials I mention above represent various levels of the neighborhood's administrative bodies, the acts of extractive governance over the majority of the neighborhood's migrant residents reveal the broader tensions and discriminatory regulations that differentiate so-called local people from outsiders.

To be sure, protesters among Cantonese-speaking communities in Guangzhou who clamor against the central state-mandated ban in 2010 prohibiting the use of the Cantonese dialect in local newspaper and TV news media invoke the historic tensions that have animated their long-standing assertions of a distinctive Cantonese identity in contrast to migrants who originate from provinces outside of Guangdong.<sup>12</sup> However, as I illustrate below, competing assertions to local identity within the Zhongda garment district reveal a more complicated story than a singular notion of Cantonese distinctiveness. Rather, they entail historically specific and place based assertions to land use rights, which are often entangled with claims to lineage

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<sup>12</sup> Historically, claims to a distinctive Cantonese identity developed out of an emergent consciousness of a modern Chinese nation-state during the turn of the twentieth century. See May-bo Ching (2001) for a historical examination of Cantonese identity in Guangzhou within the context of an emerging nation-state. The contemporary case not only stems from Guangzhou's historic particularities, but also reflects the ongoing anxieties and prejudices against non-Cantonese speaking migrants in the post-socialist era. At the same time, however, the assertion of a so-called local Cantonese identity obscures the ethnic diversity that exists within Guangzhou. Cantonese-speaking Hakka, Hokkien, Toishan, Chaozhou, and Hainanese people tend to assert their provincial claims to localism through knowledge of the dialect, though not their native place ties.

membership and to collect rents extracted from the land. Assertions to local identities among residents around this garment district signal wider attempts by various groups with land use rights to extract capital by converting the physicality of the landscape from agricultural collectives to industrial and post-industrial spaces that facilitate the mass manufacturing of garments for export. These processes underline the critical role fast fashion production plays in transforming place based social relationships and collective identities around the contentious issue of property relations in the post-socialist era. They also reflect the historically specific conversions of the residents' land, housing, and productive capacities in their struggles to subsist and to accumulate wealth within the encroaching city without any state-sponsored welfare. These conversions in turn signal how industrial capital articulates with local residents' historical belonging to lineage power structures, their exclusions from state-sponsored welfare, and their place-based ties to the land.

Drawing from secondary literature among scholars of sociology and anthropology as well as from my field research materials,<sup>13</sup> I outline the historic transformations of this site from a former agricultural village known as Nanjing village to today's Zhongda garment district, which currently stands as a conglomerate of several neighboring urban villages. I highlight in particular two major historic periods. I begin by narrating the transformation of the land from individualized plots

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<sup>13</sup> Most of these scholars are affiliated with Sun Yatsen University and by extension, with Hong Kong University. This section is a brief review of the literature that documented the large-scale changes of these villages throughout the Maoist era and the Reform period. Although this overview is far from complete, I attempt to put these studies into conversation with one another in order to illustrate the historical changes in land tenure that characterized these villages.

loosely organized around various lineages into massive agricultural collectives during the early years of the Communist Revolution, and from agricultural collectives during the Maoist period to the uneasy adjustment of the land into urban villages during the Reform period when Deng Xiaoping promoted citizens to experiment with entrepreneurship and other capitalist practices. In particular, I highlight the large-scale conversions of the land through the re-definition of land use rights within this district from the socialist period to the contemporary era. Though a number of scholars have observed the displacements, contestations, and exploitation that stem from conflicting claims to local forms of belonging, I emphasize the roles of export manufacturing and real estate speculation, which facilitate the linking of commodity chains for fast fashion. These profit-driven activities shape the ways in which members of local village collectives assert their claims to land use rights.<sup>14</sup> In sum, I argue that analyses of commodity chains in the Pearl River Delta region must take into account contentious issues pertaining to property relations, particularly land use rights as they relate to processes of privatization.

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<sup>14</sup> Historian David Faure's prolific works highlighted the historical significance of lineage structures as a social, economic, and political mode of organization in South China during the dynastic period. In *The Structure of Chinese Rural Society: Lineage and Village in the Eastern New Territories*, Hong Kong (1984), Faure showed how village lineages institutionalized the mechanisms of governance that the authorities in Beijing during the Ming and Qing era were unable to fully accomplish. These mechanisms included ancestor worship based on the surname of the village founder. It also encompassed the practices of tax collection and land ownership, since land across South China was primarily registered under the lineage surname. These economic activities led Faure to coin these village-level organizations as corporate lineages.

## Communist Land Reform and Collectivization in Nanjing Village:

From 1948-1951, sociologist C. K. Yang (1959) situated his ethnographic study within today's Zhongda garment district, which today consists of Lujiangcun (鹭江村), Kecun (客村), Kanglecun (康乐村), Jiufengyangcun (舊风阳村), as well as the smaller villages called Wufengcun and Shuibocun.<sup>15</sup> Specifically, Yang focused his study on Lujiang Village, which he referenced by using the pseudonym, Nanjing village (南京) (Gao 2006).<sup>16</sup> There, he and his students documented the changes in the economy, land tenancy, kinship relations, and government structures that marked the large-scale transition of the site from a pre-communist village to a collectivized agricultural cooperative.<sup>17</sup> In his introduction, Yang noted that the issue of land ownership has historically been a site of contention, whereby local autonomy asserted by the place-based lineages oftentimes challenged the authority of the nation-state, which was first controlled by the Nationalist Party before the victory of the

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<sup>15</sup> During that time, Professor Yang was affiliated with the Department of Sociology at Lingnan University, which currently serves as Sun Yatsen University. Nanjing village is situated directly across from the university campus.

<sup>16</sup> In this historical overview, I use Yang's pseudonym, Nanjing Village, in order to refer to the area known today as the Zhongda garment district. Although his field site is Lujiang Village specifically, his study is representative of the histories of the surrounding villages based on their shared lineage organizations as well as their overlapping experiences as collectivized co-operatives and communes during the Maoist period. I use the names Nanjing village and Zhongda garment district interchangeably based on the particular historical development of the area from an agricultural village into an urban village.

<sup>17</sup> Prior to Yang's study, five bachelor's theses (see Jian and Tan 1950, Liu Yaoquan 1950, Qian Chuwen 1951, Zhang and Huang 1950, Zheng Baojie 1950) from Lingnan University also examined Nanjing village but used the real name, Lujiang village (Gao 2006). Follow-up case studies of the village included the following sociology students: See Hao Lingxin 1985, Huang Ming 1992, Lu Xueren 1991, Ren Gaoyu 1991, Zheng Deben 1991 (*ibid*).



Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 1949. Ongoing tensions between residents asserting their lineage-based autonomy and the dictates of the central government in and around Nanjing Village haunt its landscape, shaping the experiences of socialist modernization among villagers there. Yang began by explaining the affective connections of lineage members to their place of birth in Nanjing village.<sup>18</sup> He wrote,

The village houses, the enveloping fields and vegetable gardens, the ponds and ditches and streams, the interspersed fruit trees, and the graves on the hills wove out a picture that the Chinese for centuries have come to call “t’ien, yuan, lu, mo” (fields, gardens, houses, graves), a classical expression signifying “homeland” or the roots of life. These were the primary elements in which the deep and continuous roots of the community life of Nanching (Nanjing) were anchored. With these elements the community became a place where people were born, struggled for sustenance, and died, leaving behind descendants to carry on the recurring cycle. And the village became the ku hsiang, “the old homeland” with which the traditional Chinese identified the material interest and sentimental attachment of his entire social existence. It is plain that such a community as Nanching was not the result of a sudden conglomeration of immigrants from many sources. Rather, it was a product of a centuries-old process of marriage and reproduction on the same plot of land,

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<sup>18</sup> Though native place ties are not unique to Nanjing Village, Yang (1959) claimed that Guangdong province has been historically characterized by the residents’ assertion of political autonomy against centralized authority.

and the foundation of the community organization rested on the tightly knit kinship group (1959: 10-11).<sup>19</sup>

In the years prior to the Communist Revolution, as Yang (1959) documented, socio-economic stratification in Nanjing was primarily determined by access to land ownership. Only five lineages, most of which belonged to the dominant Wong and Lee groups, traced their lineage origins back to the Sung dynasty and owned over twenty-five percent of village land.<sup>20</sup> These five families made up only 2.18 percent of the village's 230 families. Accordingly, about twenty families, which constituted only 8.7 percent of the village's 230 families, possessed no land, while the remaining majority of landowners possessed only one to three *mu* of land.<sup>21</sup> These statistics therefore underscored the extreme discrepancies in landed wealth among the village's land-owning residents. These inequalities were exacerbated by the presence of temporary residents working as agricultural laborers, none of whom possessed land or homes in the village. As Yang noted, local lineage members regarded them as "floating elements," "sojourners," and "guests" since they could not legitimately claim their lineage roots there. Local villagers even referred to migrant laborers as "boat people," since many lived along the Pearl River and worked in the village

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<sup>19</sup> Other forms of village organization existed before the Communist Revolution in 1949. These were elder's clubs, brotherhoods, lion clubs, and self-defense brigades (Chen 2008).

<sup>20</sup> For more information on the roles on local elites on social life of the late imperial and Republican China, see Esherick's *Chinese Local Elites and Patterns of Dominance* (1990).

<sup>21</sup> 1 mu = 1/6 acre

during planting and harvesting seasons. Yang emphasized, “As a general rule, the village as a unit of permanent community life was closed to outsiders” (1959: 11).

Though agriculture served as the primary mode of subsistence for the villagers, residents, primarily women, supplemented their incomes by engaging in home industries. Merchants from neighboring Guangzhou subcontracted orders for various handicrafts, including basket weaving and silk embroidery, to these female villagers. According to Yang’s count, only thirty families engaged in this contract work, a minuscule number relative to other regions in Guangdong (Yang 1959: 64). Labor was paid at piece-rate and required skill, though the work was only seasonal and not continuous.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, the production processes among these home handicraft industries, as Yang described in his village study, served as a precursor to the craft-based mode of “just in time” manufacturing that exists today. Based on Yang’s account, an artist or designer would supply a design by sketching a stencil on silk or by providing a picture of the desired sample. Many of these designs included flowers, birds, landscapes, and historic pictorials. Once the design and materials were agreed upon, the embroiderers would fulfill these orders from home. The finished products were sold locally, though some were exported to Hong Kong, Southeast Asia, and even to the United States.

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<sup>22</sup> Yang (1959) further noted that with the introduction of industrial sewing machines from Guangzhou, the decline in labor demand induced jobless villagers to migrate into larger villages or into cities in search for work. Thanks to Nanjing’s smaller population engaged in handcraft work, this decline did not hurt Nanjing’s economy drastically.

The introduction of communist policies by the CCP in 1949 uprooted the existing power structures and wealth distribution in Nanjing. Peasants, who were officially upheld as the vanguard of the revolution, set the initial stages for class struggle, which entailed large-scale land redistribution and collectivization. They organized associations, which were guided by Party cadres and became the new nucleus of village power. Ironically, two residents with land-owning backgrounds, Wong Ping and Lee Sheh-an, were selected by Party cadres to lead the peasant associations, primarily because of their active involvement in village affairs (*ibid*). After on-going campaigns involving speaking bitterness, ousting renting-seeking bullies, demanding refunds from renters, and classifying class labels, Party leaders confiscated the properties of village landowners, the majority of whom claimed lineage membership and possessed over six mu of land. Their names were identified through lineage records. Some landless peasants also served as covert informants who exposed owners that listed their properties under more than one name. Despite protests among village residents, the seized land was eventually redistributed to 130 families among the poor peasants for use but not for ownership. The redistribution and subsequent collectivization of land separated the notion of legal ownership of the land from the administrative use-rights to it.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> As Katherine Verdery (2012) argues, these understandings of property and ownership are critical to analyzing property, class, and state relations under socialism and thereafter throughout the Soviet bloc. Several scholars, including You-tien Hsing and Chris Hann, have begun to explore these relationships in China in order to gain a more nuanced understanding of the contemporary post-socialist condition.

The material roots upon which land collectivization in Nanjing village relied rested squarely upon properties that were previously managed and organized through lineage members who traced their lineage ties to the land and their ancestors for centuries. Needless to say, the spatial transformation of the agricultural land was profound, as illustrated in Yang's reflections,

The complex lines of earth embankments which divided the village's fields into a huge jig-saw puzzle would be replaced by continuous open field; gone would be the dirt embankments which traced out a visible geometric design of the family farms and private ownership of land... Instead, there would be large production teams concentrated in certain work locations (1959: 262).

In order to garner peasant support and to ease the transition process from lineage-based ownership, redistribution, to collectivized sharing, Party leaders instituted mutual aid teams that resembled family farms as working units (Yang 1959). In addition, they established Youth Leagues and local chapters of The Women's Federation in order to mobilize youths and women (Chen 2010). The mutual aid teams were later consolidated into agricultural producers' co-operatives which collectively pooled land and labor resources. By the winter of 1955, 173 households constituted the village's eight primary co-operatives (Gao 2006). Co-operatives retained the formal recognition of land rights among their members, remunerated according to members' individual share of labor and land ownership. Lastly, these co-operatives were later transformed into higher level production teams whereby private

ownership was completely abolished (legally and administratively) and members' subsistence depended almost entirely on their labor on the land but not on any rent-seeking activities. By May 1956, six production teams labeled under the numbers 13-18 were consolidated under the authority of larger *Fenghe* Township (*ibid*). Two years later, these teams were integrated into the *Xinjiao* People's Commune, and *Fenghe* Township became a production brigade (*ibid*).

Although the majority of the 130 families who previously had no land became the beneficiaries of land collectivization and redistribution, migratory laborers, or "boat people" as they were colloquially named, received no land since they could not legitimately claim membership in the village (Yang 1959). These migrants included seasonal workers who lived and worked in Nanjing only occasionally. Because of villagers' opposition, these migrant workers were excluded from membership of village collectives and rights to land-sharing. Thus, discrimination against migrants and other "outsiders" remained strong even during the Maoist periods of land collectivization and redistribution. As Gao wrote, "mastery of the land of Nanching (Nanjing) demonstrates that they are members of the village" (2006: 62). Although discrimination against migrant laborers was primarily defined by exclusions from lineage membership prior to the Communist Revolution, tensions between village residents and state cadres during the Maoist era placed the central issue of land use rights, the villagers' primary source of economic survival, at the center of boundary-making schemes that delineated village members from so-called outsiders. Local exclusions against outsiders were exacerbated by the fact that despite the

redistribution of agricultural land to many landless peasants, the majority of residents remained poor. Production quotas enacted by state officials, as Yang noted, constrained many farmers from subsisting upon the fruits of their labor. After the establishment of large-scale communes, many village farmers eked out a living by sustaining themselves on leftover crops, including rice, fruit, and vegetables, after these quotas were fulfilled (Yang 1959, Siu 2007).

### **Rural-Urban Divides: The Hukou Household Registration System**

The dearth of literature on Nanjing village after collectivization reflected the larger socio-political calamities of the Cultural Revolution, which temporarily suspended scholarly access and attention to village life during the second half of the Maoist period.<sup>24</sup> Despite the relative absence of literature, a number of scholars have surmised that the introduction of the *hukou* or household registration system in 1958 not only severely restricted the mobility of peasants in and out of Nanjing village, but also instituted socio-economic inequalities and discrimination based on rural-urban divides. In light of the difficulties among district governments in providing jobs and social services to the rapidly expanding migrant population in the cities, the central government sought to curtail the mobility of the peasants. The *hukou* system classified citizens according to the following four categories: urban non-agricultural,

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<sup>24</sup> No scholars to my knowledge have conducted life histories among former residents in Nanjing village with the purpose of analyzing the experiences of the Cultural Revolution there. This topic might elucidate the daily life of agricultural collectives among managers and ordinary farmers during the Maoist period. I am also interested in the members' handling of administrative rights over land and their exchanges of goods with other collectives. These ideas might serve as a basis of a follow-up project in later years.

urban agricultural, rural non-agricultural, and rural agricultural residency statuses (Zhang 2006). Only those who possessed urban non-agricultural status received state-sponsored welfare through *danwei* work-units, which included housing, government jobs, education, health care, and pensions, while rural residents were excluded from any benefits. Consequently, the *hukou* registration system instituted discrimination and socio-economic inequalities by barring rural peasants from moving from the countryside to the cities.<sup>25</sup> Undocumented rural migrants who left their official residences in the countryside to work and live in the cities constituted the so-called floating population due to their illegal statuses. In the case of Nanjing village, the residents' source of subsistence after 1958 rested solely upon the productivity of their agricultural collective, restricting villagers from moving into neighboring cities.

### **Urbanization and the Emergence of Fast Fashion Production during Market Reforms**

The introduction of market reforms in 1978, particularly the designation of the PRD area as a Special Economic Zones that served as a testing ground for market socialism, brought about intensified industrialization and urbanization in the surrounding region. More importantly, the Party's economic successes of the SEZs

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<sup>25</sup> Prior to the enactment of the Household Registration System in 1958, the Detaining and Repatriating system in 1957 served as a temporary measure that granted local government agencies the authority to arrest and detain illegal migrants or so-called blind floaters (*mangliu*) before sending them back to their official residences (Gao 2006). After 1958, discrimination against undocumented migrants intensified through informal systems of surveillance among city residents with their neighborhood committees. Such forms of surveillance continue today and include random police inspections among suspected migrants. If suspects lacked the "three permits," specifically ID cards, temporary permits, and working permits, offenders might be detained and repatriated to their registered native places (*ibid*).



along China's southern coast have been critically facilitated by the tenacious labor among the country's migrant population. The experiences of market reforms among villagers in Nanjing are certainly no exception.

When the doctoral student from Sun Yatsen University, Hao Lingting, visited the site in 1983, he recorded that nearly 80 migrant families had permanently settled in the village, thereby increasing the local population to 2,495 residents (Hao 1983, Siu 2007). The loosening of government controls over agricultural production and population mobility fueled local commerce and small-scale industries there (*ibid*). Shortly after the introduction of market reforms, migrant vendors squatted underneath the Haiyin Bridge and sold spools of thread and scraps from second-hand fabrics among clusters of informal, open-air markets. This practice of informal street selling was locally referred to as *bai di tan*, which literally refers to the act of laying out goods for sale along the ground (Choi 2010). These enterprising vendors brought the supplies and fabric scraps by train from Dongguan and Shenzhen where state-owned garment factories produced clothing for Hong Kong, Taiwanese, and Southeast Asian clients shortly before these production sites were fully privatized under the management of independent entrepreneurs. Buyers, particularly young women and mothers from the surrounding Guangzhou area, procured these scraps to take back home, so that they could subcontract clothing and handicraft production from larger garment factories nearby. Clusters of small-scale garment factories which were operated by the former production brigade also sprang up on the western side of the village (Siu: 2007). Additionally, the growing supply of migrant labor intersected

with intensified lineage and friendship connections with Hong Kong manufacturers and brokers. These native place ties promoted the growth of factories that manufactured clothing, bags, and novelties for overseas export. By 1986, 510 migrant workers had settled in Nanjing village (Gao 2006). The gradual industrialization of Nanjing represented one of the thousands of factory towns that eventually developed around the PRD through blood ties to overseas Chinese based in the former colonies of Hong Kong and Macau.<sup>26</sup> These cross-border relationships and hefty financial investments facilitated Hong Kong's economic successes as an exemplar for quick and flexible production of Euro-American exports, while laying the early infrastructural groundwork for Guangdong's development as one of China's workshops of the world.

In 1987, Guangzhou city government officials aimed to banish enterprising vendors who squatted under the nearby Haiyin Bridge and sold raw materials for garment manufacture. Consequently, sellers moved to the south entrance of Zhongshan University, where flat agricultural lands provided fertile ground for their business activities (Choi 2010). As merchants from Hong Kong and various regions of China flowed into the area in search of raw materials, local leaders of village collectives staked financial gains in these profitable enterprises by constructing

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<sup>26</sup> The availability of low-wage migrant laborers in these cross-border factory towns relieved the pressures of inflation and rising costs of living in Hong Kong. In exchange, Hong Kong brokers and factory owners brought market knowledge in overseas exports to mainland China. Such knowledge in the realm of fashion included familiarity with various ranges of fabrics, styles, and consumer body types according to different niche markets. The passing of business expertise in turn enabled former employees on the Mainland to open factories of their own.

indoor markets using simple steel structures and wooden planks that served as informal retail outlets for the vendors. Migrant entrepreneurs also cooperated with the village collectives by contributing to the financing of these markets. Over the ensuing decade, similar markets sprouted throughout the area (*ibid*). These markets were largely tolerated by the municipal government, since it provided a critical means of living for many poor migrants. Larger factories employing up to a hundred garment workers developed in the area, testifying to the surge of economic growth in the district. Many family-owned enterprises established the well-recognized “*qian dian hou chang*” model of organization, in which informal workshops are situated behind storefronts that sell fabrics, accessories, and finished garments.<sup>27</sup> This layout enabled factory owners to monopolize the manufacturing and wholesale aspects of the garment supply chain. It also granted buyers the ability to source garments directly from the manufacturers, which promoted close ties between manufacturers and clients. Even today, factory owners often use the phrase “*qian dian hou chang*” in order to describe the centralized, family-based mode of production that paved the way for massive industrial towns throughout the PRD region.

By the 1990s, Nanjing’s village population swelled thanks to the flood of incoming migrant workers from the neighboring and interior provinces. Responding to Deng Xiaoping’s mantra, “To get rich is glorious,” an estimated 3 million migrant

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<sup>27</sup> According to several factory owners that I have interviewed in Dongguan and Foshan, this model of organization was popular among factory towns throughout the PRD during the 1980s and early 1990s. Once local officials recognized the fire hazards that were associated with this form of industrial production, regulators tried to implement stricter safety policies and have subsequently prohibited this model.

workers poured into Guangdong, fueling the migrants' imagination of the province as a fount of unprecedented riches. In fact, many migrants held the belief that "No matter where you live, you should go to Guangdong if you want to get rich! (*dong xi nan bei zhong, facai dao Guangdong!*)" (Gao 2006). This slogan reflected the central government's ambitions to develop the entire PRD region through market policies, which included designating the area in 1996 as the nation's second largest manufacturer of textiles and garments (Choi 2010).<sup>28</sup> The village infrastructure, including electricity and water, could not support the influx of new arrivals from the countryside. Garment workers, who mostly comprised of young women (*dagongmei*) and older housewives (*jia ting fu nu*), had to rotate labor shifts around the clock, even working during night hours when electricity was available (Choi 2010). Stories of entrepreneurial successes among some migrants who have settled in the area sealed the reputation of the former agricultural village as a legendary site of fast and easy money.

For example, according to oral histories collected by the CCP Social Legal Literature and History Committee which gathers and records local, place based histories, the commercial successes of the Zhongda and Changjiang fabric markets were partly owed to a female migrant street vendor from Chaozhou named Pan Guiying from who worked from 1988 to 1996.<sup>29</sup> As one of the first peddlers in the

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<sup>28</sup> This designation translated to the outpouring of funds from the central government to build factories, roads, and other forms of infrastructure necessary to develop the garment and textile industries.

<sup>29</sup> Source: [http://www.gzzxws.gov.cn/gzws/gzws/ml/69/200902/t20090206\\_11348.htm](http://www.gzzxws.gov.cn/gzws/gzws/ml/69/200902/t20090206_11348.htm)

area, Pan sold scrap wool out of two plastic buckets hung on either sides of a bamboo pole. The oral histories lauded her as a model citizen and pioneer. She had demonstrated her perseverance that sustained her through an initially difficult economic period before businessmen from northern China increasingly purchased her woolen fabrics. As demand for fabrics grew, vendors constructed stalls out of cheap wood and metal scraps, (which were colloquially referred to as *tie pi wu* to characterize the shabbiness of these booths), in order to facilitate the growing markets for fabrics and supplies for garment manufacturing. The oral histories also noted that stall-keepers at that time up-graded the construction materials of their booths from tin shacks to iron bed shelves, testifying to their gradual amassing of wealth around the area. Lineage leaders collectively pooled money to build multi-level markets known as Zhongda and Changjiang markets, the district's oldest wholesale markets for garment fabrics and supplies collectively commissioned by local villagers themselves (Choi 2010). Eventually, outdoor vendors moved their places of business inside these markets. Consequently, migrants' enterprising activities spurred renting-seeking opportunities for lineage members who hold use-rights to the land, further fueling the entrepreneurial ambitions of migrants and villagers alike.

### **Decentralization and the Household Responsibility System**

The inflow of migrant workers and the flurry of entrepreneurial pursuits in Nanjing village during the 1980s and 1990s fell in line with the policies of Party leaders who gradually instituted the household responsibility system as incremental phases toward the goal of economic self-responsibility. Through these policies, they

aimed to phase out collective communes characteristic of the Mao era in favor of small-scale household economies (Chen 2010, Gao 2006). While the commune to which Nanjing village once belonged previously governed the entirety of political, economic, and social aspects of village life, market reforms decentralized the governance of shared land, production materials, and political affairs relegating authority to segmented yet overlapping village collectives (also known as village committees) (*cunweihui*) and production teams which were first organized during agricultural collectivization in the 1950s (Gao 2006). Farming tools and land were reallocated from communes to peasant households which previously belonged to former production brigades, and the brigades themselves were divided and restructured into village collectives (*ibid*). The re-organization of village collectives during the early years of the Reform period marked a significant step towards the institutionalization of the household responsibility system by granting lower level village leaders the principal authority to administer collective land and other assets among their members (Chen 2010).<sup>30</sup> Village collectives were further subdivided into pre-existing production teams which governed the everyday affairs including mediating disputes as well as regulating security, sanitation, family planning, and migrant mobility (*ibid*). Local residents elected leaders of the production teams and village committees through recurring village elections, signaling the devolution of political administration from higher level communes (*ibid*).<sup>31</sup> Although Nanjing

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<sup>30</sup> In addition to collective land which was managed by village committees, households around the villages were allocated individual plots.

<sup>31</sup> See Chen 2010 for detailed descriptions of village elections in Nanjing village.

village was administratively transferred from the *Xinjiao* Commune to the urban management of Guangzhou city in 1986, most economic affairs there remained under the auspices of the local village collectives, specifically under production teams specific to their residential neighborhoods. To this day, these local organizations retain much of their administrative autonomy in regards to everyday business and security affairs. Neighborhood committees in Nanjing village maintain their collective assets and administrative bureaucracies based on agricultural production passed down from the Maoist era, even though the encroaching processes of urbanization have physically absorbed the village into Guangzhou city.

### **Industrializing Nanjing Village**

Since the early years of the Reform period, the organization of village collectives in Nanjing village has become a political channel through which local or *ben di* residents based on lineage membership and previous land-holding rights assert their bargaining power in the face of massive redevelopment schemes. These channels are significant, because even though residents can claim land use rights, their *hukou* or residential statuses as rural agricultural citizens disqualify them as rightful claimants to state welfare provisions that are granted to city residents. Members of village collectives assert their land use rights as a place-based tool of contestation against real estate corporations. These corporations have financial stakes in converting the area from a former agricultural village commune during the Maoist era to a thriving metropolis in today's post-Reform period. As I demonstrate below, the simultaneous expansion of the garment export industry during the 1980s and

1990s in Nanjing village has enabled residents to leverage their negotiating power through their land use rights in face of large-scale land grabs due to real estate speculation and redevelopment. Through this process, Nanjing village has witnessed the rise of the land-holding class among residents belonging to place based lineages, who scramble to erect five-to six storey rental apartments known as “kissing buildings” based on the close proximity in which they are built. Meanwhile, increasing numbers of migrant workers from China’s countryside constitute the growing class of renters in need of affordable housing. The subsequent expansion of the garment production industry in Nanjing village has deepened the historical and contemporary class-based cleavages between migrants who lack local land use rights as well as welfare provisions from the state, and local residents with lineage membership and ties to the land.

As garment production gradually expanded, members of village committees of Nanjing capitalized on the influx of migrant workers whose labor and ingenuity fueled the incipient garment industry by renting out residential and commercial flats to them. By the mid to late 1990s, as the area’s commercial successes continued to flourish, the spacious farmlands gave way to the frenzied sprouting of multi-storied residential and commercial buildings along with the numerous garment factories that eventually dominated these village spaces. Individual households defied local zoning laws by erecting dozens of five to six storey apartments. These families anticipated that they would eventually lose claims to their agricultural land due to state-led



confiscation, so they raised the value of their lots by building multi-storey residences with the aim to renting them out to working migrants.

During the late 1980s and early 1990s, a wave of migrants from the Chaozhou, Wenzhou, and Fujian coastal regions settled within the village communities around the Zhongda garment district and resided in the same kissing buildings that members of village collectives jostled to erect. Over time, some migrants established their own garment factories, warehouses, and stalls in the area, enabling the frenzy of garment manufacturing and supply sourcing to continue. Chaozhou, Wenzhou, and Fujian migrants gradually took up garment manufacturing and supply sourcing there. In their attempts to out-compete each other, these entrepreneurs established assembly factories, or *jiagongchang* (加工厂), that catered only to a specialized role along the production chain, such as the cutting of fabric, attaching buttons on denim, and making flower pin accessories. In the meantime, a wave of workers from Sichuan, Shandong, Hunan, and Hubei arrived in the villages, taking up temporary jobs in factories and in transportation around the area. The density of the villages' migrant populations along with the villages' crowded housing and factories caught the attention of the district government, whose regulatory authority over the area intensified under the banners of sanitation, fire safety, and civilian security from criminal activities

This development enabled members of village committees to gain from the windfall of profits that were earned by converting their shared land to residential and

commercial rental spaces for migrant workers and entrepreneurs engaged in garment manufacture.<sup>32</sup> As a result, the influx of migrants arriving in these villages enabled the local use-right holders to become rent-collectors almost overnight. As these migrants from Chaozhou, Wenzhou, and Fujian increasingly occupied the residential and commercial spaces throughout the villages, local landlords began to drift out of the area and occupied newer, more expensive housing outside Haizhu district. Some sold their garment manufacturing and supply sourcing businesses to these first-wave migrants in favor of more lucrative endeavors in real estate and stock market speculation. As the market for garment production and exchange blossomed, local residents quickly realized that investments in the real estate market racked up profits which far exceeded the gains earned through the risky and painstaking labor of running garment factories. Those who could claim land use rights through the village committees sometimes pocketed hundreds of thousands of dollars, particularly in neighborhoods close to highly profitable commercial sites such as the massive wholesale fabric market. In short, many village members with land use rights who

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<sup>32</sup> Similar patterns of village-level development via lineage organization occurred at this time in Dongguan, where lineage identifications among local residents were very strong. For a comparative perspective on the roles of corporate lineages in the economic development of South China, see Saich's *Chinese Village, Global Market: New Collectives, Rural Development* (2012). Whereas Saich's celebrates Dongguan's model of village-level development via lineages, I emphasize the growing class based inequalities that have emerged as result of these development schemes. As a case in point, lineage leaders in Dongguan today have become so economically and politically powerful since the early years of the Reform period that there are no county level administrative divisions there. In other words, village or township leaders govern directly under the city and the provincial level governments (Boy Luetje, conversation May 15, 2014). Currently, there are 32 township level divisions in Dongguan.

were former residents of Nanjing quickly became landlords and real estate speculators though the majority of them no longer reside in the area.<sup>33</sup>

As a case in point, in order to secure each member's profit shares, village collectives established the *fenhong* system of distributing profits or dividends accumulated through rent collection (Siu 2007, Gao 2010). Members divided the annual profits accumulated through rent, thereby converting village collectives into share-holding corporations.<sup>34</sup> The flood of profits gained from rent subsequently bred contestations among residents over the rightful claims to membership in the village collectives as well as rightful claims to individual profit shares (Siu 2007). Therefore, the hierarchical organization of today's *fenhong* system, which derived from structures along lineage ties, rests upon unequal shares among its beneficiaries, particularly between its administrative leaders and its common members. It also relied upon shifting the risks of capital accumulation gained from entrepreneurship in the fast fashion manufacturing sector to the migrant population with no legal or administrative claims to the land. As a result, the *fenhong* system served almost singularly as a managerial or administrative system in accumulating and dividing profits earned from rents passed on from migrant entrepreneurs.

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<sup>33</sup> As Chen (2010) noted, some members maintained relations with their lineage members by performing annual rituals and by visiting the few ancestral halls that remain in the area. From my knowledge, there were at least four lineage halls in 2012. When I asked about the fate of one lineage hall, an older male member casually responded that he anticipated the building would eventually be demolished. There was nothing he, or any of his fellow lineage members, could do.

<sup>34</sup> Some village collectives, such as Shuping Village as Hsing (2010) describes, have in fact changed their official titles to share-holding corporations. The question of whether these village corporations have legal and/ or administrative force as a corporation with respect to land rights and other obligations requires additional research.

While the resident population around the villages becomes increasingly diverse with the influx of migrants from all over China, local villagers maintain their land use-rights to collect rent as well as to develop other properties within the area. Specifically, the *fenhong* system of capital accumulation has also brought about the sprouting of land speculation in the area. Since land is technically owned by the state and its uses are leased to the individual, wealth is accumulated because of the increasing value of the buildings rather than the value of the land itself. Thus, as Hsing (2010) argues, the unsightly apartment buildings which jaggedly cluster along the dim and narrow streets serve as valuable political and economic assets to long-standing villagers. According to a student from Sun Yatsen University, real estate investments among village committee members are leveraged through three primary methods: 1) Those who maintain use-rights to the land lease those rights to investment companies which in turn oversee the construction and management of the buildings. 2) Holders of land use-rights directly rent out their spaces to their tenants. Village collectives that oversee these particular spaces must first determine whether these properties can be rented as commercial or residential spaces. 3) In fewer cases, owners pool together their own capital to independently leverage their own investments in re-developing their land. In the early 2000s, for example, a village collective based in an area along Xingangdong road has invested in modern residential high-rises directly beside the well-known fabric wholesale market, bringing in hundreds of thousands of dollars for individual members. The towering high rises that sit beside the fabric market are commissioned through the pooling of

investments by the Kanglecun village residents themselves. The village committee votes on the planning and architecture of the buildings based on decisions approved by a two-thirds majority.

Over the past decade, village collectives around the area have become politically powerful and economically profitable joint ventures as they continue to negotiate their land use-rights with representatives from real estate corporations, primarily those from Hong Kong, whose interests in re-developing the land ignited after witnessing the profitable windfall of the community's commercial activities. The rapid construction of these concrete buildings among local landowners protect their commercial interests by converting additional apartments into valuable rental properties as well as by selling shares of the members' use-rights to the land. To this day, rumors continues to circulate around the villages warning that the Haizhu district government plans to eventually instate tax regulations over the migrants' businesses activities and landowners' use-rights. In fact, in 2006, the Zhongda fabric market no longer operates outside of government regulation and is formally registered with the Haizhu district government.<sup>35</sup> After registration, a Hong Kong-based real estate company and the municipal government have jointly bought the use-rights to the site upon which the former fabric market, which was previously operated by the local village collective, is built. In its place, the corporation has converted the once shabby

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<sup>35</sup> Typically, the transfer of land from village committees to the government entails monetary compensation the collectives' members in exchange for their administrative use-rights. In the case of the Zhongda fabric market, the village collective with claims to the land upon which the market stands still collects dividends from rent collection though the specific percentage is not publically shared.

market into a full-service, multi-storied high rise with thousands of retail outlets, a Mc Donald's, convenience store chains, and glitzy showrooms that cater to overseas investors. To a certain extent, the mushrooming of these commercial and apartment buildings has secured the fate of the village collectives' control over their use-land rights, as the government officials at the municipal level become increasingly interested in securing their share of profits based on the commercial and rental activities there.

### **Social Cleavages along the Crossroads of Village Collectives and Export Manufacturing**

In the contemporary period, the social cleavages run along the following lines of inclusion and exclusion: 1) lineage-based and native place ties that separate locals (*ben di ren*) from so-called outsiders (*wai di ren*); 2) the socialist *hukou* system of population control that institutionalize rural and urban administrative inequalities; and 3) class-based inequalities in the control over land administrative rights and the claims to wealth upon which accumulation is anchored. The export-oriented networks of people and commodities assert its presence along the cramped corners and dark alleyways of the urban villages comprising the Zhongda garment district. In particular, the aura of fashion leaves its mark on the bodies of workers meticulously hunched over their sewing stations within the outmoded workshops and factories cramped directly against modern and sleek runway showrooms and fashionable boutiques. The visible contrasts in people and architecture in the area reflect the uneven development of the area's urban villages.

Rightful claims to membership in the *ben di* or local village collectives, which often fall along lineage lines, entail unequal gains to rent shares in the post-socialist period. In effect, village collectives have transformed from the primary mode of organizing social, political, and economic life on the basis of egalitarianism in the Maoist era to a critical administrative channel through which leaders and members accumulate and dole out profits collected from various rent-seeking activities.<sup>36</sup> In fact, many village collectives have been transformed and renamed as share-holding corporations or joint ventures in order to facilitate additional profit-seeking opportunities.<sup>37</sup> Their primary tasks currently involve reviewing leasing contracts, overseeing construction projects, managing neighborhood sanitation projects, and ensuring local security (Chen 2010). In other words, the activities of village collectives are justified as chiefly economic in order to appeal to the central government in its pursuit of national development. Furthermore, collectives are structured and operated hierarchically so that village leaders and long-standing members based on lineage descent stand to benefit from land entitlements.<sup>38</sup> In some ways, the rise of these hierarchical and corporatist village collectives mirror the

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<sup>36</sup> Certainly, as a number of anthropologists of China and the Soviet bloc have pointed out, the practice of “actually existing socialism” depended in many ways upon unequal access to resources and political power. Nonetheless, the organization of collectives during the socialist period at least strived to achieve some form of egalitarianism among members, even though its realization in practice varied depending on the specific context. In contrast, today’s collectives in the Zhongda garment district have transformed into instruments of institutional inequality, as demonstrated by their rent-seeking activities.

<sup>37</sup> In addition to rent extraction, village collectives provide various welfare benefits to their members, including health clinics, schools, and neighborhood security. Though these collectives support community welfare, rent-collection and distribution are nonetheless their primary roles.

<sup>38</sup> Follow-up research is necessary to further analyze the day-to-day structures and organization of particular village collectives in the present era.

lineage corporations that anthropologists of China, including Maurice Freedman (1958), David Faure (1986), Rubi Watson (1984), and others have observed during the Qing dynasty before the Communist Revolution (Faure and Siu 1995). In fact, Faure notes that “settlement rights,” which include the rights to build houses and to exploit common land and other resources, mark the distinctions between villagers and outsiders (*ibid*). Similarly, claims to collective shares parallel Faure’s description of settlement rights. Today’s claims to full or partial membership to village collectives, which imply administrative rights to rent-sharing, have oftentimes fueled contestations and ambivalence among the members.

Studies of Guangzhou’s urban villages as conducted by anthropologist Helen Siu and sociologist You-tien Hsing demonstrated such contestations and ambivalence. Siu (2007) cited one former resident who felt torn between transferring her *hukou* status from a rural citizen to an urban one (and subsequently losing her land use rights within the village collective) in exchange for giving up profitable dividends associated with her membership in her village collective. She also retold a story of mother whose daughter gave up her claims to profit-sharing via her former collective after she transferred her *hukou* residency from the village to the city. Unfortunately, the young woman was left unemployed as a city resident since the restructuring and privatization of state-run factories caused many former employees to lose their jobs. Similarly, Chen (2010) interviewed a woman who lamented upon losing her voting rights in the village elections after she surrendered her *hukou* residence status and became an urban citizen:



I care about such things as the (village) election. (But) we do not belong here, so our suggestions are not recognized. We do not even have the rights to say much. I do not have the right to participate in the election, so I do not think of it. When I chat with people, they say you do need not care about these things. In fact, Nanjing village has a good chance to develop. However, it did not work out. Although we have urban hukou, we are in villages inside the city. It is a bit awkward. When you want to do something (within the village collective), you cannot (do it). (Translated from original text) (*ibid*).

In contrast to Siu's narratives, Hsing (2010) conveys a similar sense of ambivalence toward the village collectives. For her, village collectives serve as a channel through which members can assert a form of territorial compromise in face of unprecedented urban expansion. Through its rent-seeking interests, residents organize to form grass-roots real estate operations that serve as extractive and distributive channels akin to share-holding companies. By naming these collectives as village corporatism, Hsing (2010) underscores the villager's collective initiatives that are cultivated from the bottom-up and are culturally rooted in place based lineages. She leaves open the question of whether the villagers' collective pursuits in real estate speculation represent a form of complicity or resistance. To be sure, while Hsing highlights the strengthening of collective identities among residents along lineage and place-based forms of organization, Siu emphasizes the sense of displacement villagers might feel by being administratively "fixed" as rural citizens by the *hukou* system in face of unprecedented urbanization.

Though both scholars elaborate on the social displacements and inequalities that the processes of unprecedented urbanization have brought to residents of Guangzhou's urban villages, I emphasize the role of market based commodity manufacturing in driving these social cleavages which exacerbate place based and class based inequalities. As in the case of the transformation of the former Nanjing village into today's Zhongda garment district in the contemporary post-socialist period, village collectives have become indispensable channels of negotiation among their members in face of unruly land grabs and other threats in uprooting their economic livelihoods, their lineage ties to the land, and their sense of political autonomy. Since villagers have no legal rights to ownership of the land, they leverage their administrative use-rights by raising the market value of their rental properties. More specifically, collectives and individual households construct valuable apartments and commercial buildings to facilitate the garment industry there, while simultaneously raising the real estate value of their land to the point where the municipal government cannot financially afford to buy them out.<sup>39</sup> As Chen (2010) astutely observes, "Many peasants no long nurture their land, but "nurture buildings" (2010: 1). In other words, members of village collectives have strategized to pool their financial resources and defy the threat of violent land grabs by using market mechanisms to leverage their commercial wealth and to financially and assert their

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<sup>39</sup> The process of transferring land rights from the village collectives to government agencies require buying out or compensating residents in exchange for their use-rights. Compensation often takes the form of monetary exchange and property units determined by the size of land per square meter. In some cases, government compensation packages in Guangzhou and Shenzhen have included hefty sums and several apartments that were eventually converted into rental units. Such cases have transformed former agricultural peasants to wealthy landlords overnight.

administrative use rights over their land. As Hsing (2010) elaborates, the dingy, cramped apartment buildings signify the villagers' ambivalent compromise with the encroaching forces of urbanization that surrounds them. Essentially, village committee members assert their property claims through their rent-seeking and extractive capacities from the land, in contrast to a strict definition of property possession. Their strategies reveal how capital accumulation and real estate speculation are interlocked with and facilitated by the infrastructural and administrative residues of the Maoist era.

Despite local villagers' assertions, undocumented migrant workers, whose industrial labor represents the engine of economic growth within the urban villages around the PRD, remains the primary site of monetary extraction through rent and fees. Though Siu and Hsing cogently draws out the sense of ambivalence that long-standing members of the village collective share in face of large-scale urbanization, I emphasize the critical roles that migrant laborers play in carving the sites for capital upon which village members rely for their bargaining power. Indeed, the everyday labor involved in transforming fabrics and raw materials into finished garments for transnational export are primarily provided by the work of migrant laborers. However, the institutional exclusion of rural citizens from state-sponsored welfare through the *hukou* system ensures the pool of low-wage labor that continues to drive this engine of extractive growth.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> I further elaborate upon the relationship between the biological reproduction of migrant laborers and the reliance of capitalism upon low-wage factory production in later chapters of my dissertation.

In particular, as I demonstrate throughout this dissertation, the structural features that characterize the fast fashion mode of production in the Zhongda garment district, namely the quick-turnaround of commodities and labor, reinforce the speculative schemes, the extractive measures, and the pervasive sense of uncertainty that have long defined this area. The temporary flows of migrants in and out of the factory spaces ensure a productive supply of laborers whose bodies might endure a few months or few years of low-paying industrial work. Their needs for low-cost housing also guarantee a steady stream of income through rents for local villagers with use rights to the land. At the same time, their administrative status as rural residents, coupled with their exclusions from any form of property rights in the city, reproduce their societal positions as low-wage workers with limited social mobility, thereby ensuring the flow of cheap labor. Furthermore, retail outlets including fashion boutiques have cropped up over the past few years in order to cater to the consumption habits of the migrant residents. Nightly street markets that line along the entrance of *Kanglecun* for example offer countless selections of low-priced shoes, accessories, clothing, and house ware for nearby university students and migrant residents. At the same time, the collective contribution of migrant business owners and wage workers in industrially developing the garment district serves as a means through which local villagers with land use-rights assert their negotiating power in face of powerful corporations and government agencies.

As a consequence of rapid urbanization, the Zhongda garment district remains suspended between the condition of a village and a city. Residents, workers, and

observers of the urban village express ambivalence about the impending re-development of the surrounding area. On the one hand, popular sentiments cast these urban villages as hotbeds of crime and filth. On the other hand, many villagers with long-standing use-rights to the land intend to negotiate with the district and municipal governments for as long as they need to, so that they can agree to monetary and real estate compensation. Meanwhile, migrant entrepreneurs and wage-workers continue to eke out a living through factory labor as for long as they can do so. However, it is not uncommon for migrant entrepreneurs to be suddenly evicted when landlords unexpectedly tear down their buildings or simply force their tenants out for undisclosed reasons. For example, I met a middle-aged migrant from Sichuan province who gave up his job as a construction worker in order to operate a workshop on the ground level of a dilapidated five-storey building. While his extended family lived on the second floor, six to seven hired women from the interior province of China clustered around a wooden table with heads cast downward as they meticulously glued plastic jewels piece by piece onto belt buckles and other jewelry. Within only a few months of our acquaintance, his business had unexpectedly closed after his landlord decided to tear down the building. Because of the downturn in the global markets along with rising rent costs, he could no longer continue this business. The uncertainties surrounding re-development projects, along with the frequent downturns in the global markets, thus make migrant entrepreneurship a risky business.

In conclusion, the historic specificities of the Zhongda garment district thus illustrate how local residents have high economic stakes in preserving low-wage

migrant labor in order to ensure the commercial value of their land due to rapid urbanization. Moreover, this case also reveals the nestled hierarchies of market speculation and exploitation that structure the everyday workings of garment export production there. Migrant entrepreneurs take on the heavy financial risks of operating factories and businesses that must anticipate and respond to the fluctuations of global fashion markets. By institutionally excluding migrants from any rights to the land around the garment district, outsiders face discrimination and must also live solely upon the wages of their labor. Though the commercial successes of the Zhongda garment district certainly enriched a number of migrant entrepreneurs, their rural *hukou* statuses leave many vulnerable to undue fines, identification checks, and discrimination.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> During the course of my field research, I have witnessed several cases in which neighborhood security officers unexpectedly closed down migrants' market stalls at the Changjiang Accessories Market. The officers cited that the owners' illegal statuses and lack of proper identifications and permits justified their right to close down their businesses for good. The officers' actions seemed arbitrary to me, since it is common knowledge that undocumented migrants are ubiquitous at this garment district. Few people around at the time would dare to inquire or talk too much about these incidents.

## **Chapter 2: The Flexible Factory: Space and Temporality in the Age of Fast**

### **Fashion Production**

As shades of dusk gracefully cast their silhouettes over the towering concrete buildings above us, a number of pedestrians enjoyed their after-dinner stroll through the neighborhood streets. They admired, and even gawked at, the piles of bright, colorful fabric stacked upon the front table of the Wongs' factory workshop. Not surprisingly, most of the admirers were mothers carrying babies or bringing groceries home. Many observers directly approached the front table to feel the fabric, examine the dress design, compliment us on the beauty of the dresses, and even ask whether they were for sale. Almost always, their questions were followed by a "No" from one of us. On one occasion, I asked Mrs. Wong whether some manufacturers would discreetly sell their clients' garments behind their backs. Mrs. Wong responded some would and some wouldn't (which I assume was based on contracts and business ethics). Some middle-aged men dressed in professional slacks and shirts approached the table to analyze the fabric and design of the dresses as if to brainstorm or pick up an idea for their next business pursuit. One man directly approached me that night as I was working on a dress laid out on the table in front of me. Without a word, the man came from my left hand side and tugged on the sleeve of the dress that I held in my hand. I immediately felt uncomfortable, so I tugged back indicating that I disapproved of this stranger's awkward gesture. After he acknowledged my discomfort, he silently retreated and disappeared into the crowds. Immediately afterwards, I asked Mr. and Mrs. Wong who were silently working at the table with me when the strange

encounter occurred. I then asked, “Doesn’t it bother you that strangers come up and watch or observe the dresses we work on? Aren’t you afraid that someone would steal an idea or a dress?” Mrs. Wong then replied that they wouldn’t feel bothered. I was surprised by their answer though I knew that their tolerance did not stem from ignorance or from indifference. Rather, the openness with which they shared the fruits of their labor served as a means to extend their clientele, a necessary strategy in this cut-throat industry. As factory workers, the Wongs took pride in displaying their creativity and industriousness to the public. They believed that maintaining an open, sharing attitude toward their entrepreneurial venture would extend their business networks. At that moment, I realized that my assumptions about market competition perpetuated a closed and secretive business culture. Perhaps the Wongs felt that sharing was the only way to survive in the competitive market. In other words, they might feel that they had nothing to lose.

The scene above illustrates the intimate contours of an entrepreneurial world that is budding within a factory enclave in Guangzhou. Here, migrants’ shifting relations of labor and changing identifications as workers articulate with transnational sub-contracting practices. In light of the proliferation of small-scale, independent contractors across the PRD region, former and current factory wage workers are struggling to define for themselves the meanings of entrepreneurial freedom and enterprise. Collectively, they color the everyday relations of business and labor through temporary, self-employed work within a migrant enclave that is marked by extreme inequalities and is increasingly connected to transnational networks of



commodity manufacture and exchange. While many factory bosses and their employees declare their freedom and control in dictating the terms of their labor and investments, including for whom they wish to work and how much they are paid, itinerant wage-workers drift in and out of nearby factories, seemingly unencumbered by monotonous work schedules, oppressive labor conditions, and stifling regulatory policies by factory managers.

Their experiences of labor illustrate the blurring of boundaries between migrant entrepreneurs and wage workers within home-based industrial workshops in China. Post-socialist transformations of employer-employee relations stem from flexible production processes, as well as changing notions of personhood and labor. As Dunn (2004) demonstrates in her study of a baby food factory in post-socialist Poland, the transition of industrial production from a state planned economy to a market-oriented economy involves transformations in the ways in which labor and personhood are understood. Namely, the privatization of industrial processes entails the refiguring of labor such that wage workers become individual “entrepreneurs” their labor capacities.

In this chapter, I depart slightly from ethnographies of factory labor in post-socialist contexts where institutionalized settings clearly delineate the class positions of managers and employees (Ong 1987, Lee 1998, Dunn 2004, Pun 2005, Kim 2013). Within factory workshops of Guangzhou’s garment district, the logic of entrepreneurialism pervades the everyday experiences of labor such that factory

owners and temporary wage workers consider themselves self-employed agents and even “owners” of their labor. They sell their work time as a commodity that can be bought and sold in the marketplace. Borrowing from Strathern’s (1988) notion of partible personhood, Dunn explains that commodification of work is only possible when labor is thought to be divisible from the person in order to be bought and sold in the labor market. As so-called owners or entrepreneurs of their labor time, wage workers appear to dictate, to a limited extent, the terms and conditions of their wage labor (primarily either through participation or non-participation). By selling their labor time as a commodity in the marketplace, temporary wage workers attempt to maximize their quality of life, while employers maximize their profits by keeping their employees’ wages low (Dunn 2004).

Over the past few decades, the persistence of household factory workshops around the world has served as a topic of scholarly discussion. In her extensive study of small-scale garment workshops in Taiwan during the late 1980s and early 1990s, Hsiung (1996) uses the term, satellite factory system, to describe the transformation of family living rooms into factories. As she notes, the term satellite or *weixing* in Chinese, underscores the cultural and geographical connections among these family-based manufacturing sites to markets around the globe. As export manufacture intensifies in Taiwan during the 1980s, family-based production to support overseas sub-contracting practices directly in their living rooms by manufacturing specialized parts aspect along a supply chain of garment mass manufacture. Like the family-based workshop I describe below, many household garment factories in Taiwan exist

in semi-residential neighborhoods located along the fringes of rural and urban. The movement of wage workers from large factories to small, family-based ones exacerbates the exploitation of women who must bear the double-burden of productive and reproductive labor under a single roof.

Piore and Sabel (1984) assert a more optimistic outlook toward the mushrooming of these household workshops across the Pacific Rim. They argue that the emergence of these forms of small-scale mass manufacture linked along transnational production chains signals the rise of innovative, flexible specialization through transnational sub-contracting practices, a historically specific mode of industrial production which has replaced Fordist types of large-scale factories that organize mass assembly along vertically integrated lines. This development, along with the associated rise of small-scale entrepreneurs ushers, what they call, a “second industrial divide.” This so-called new era of industrialism introduces innovative alternatives to large-scale mass production by connecting small-scale firms that rely on simple hand-held technologies and draw from long-standing traditions of family-based labor. Moreover, cultural traditions based on craft and kinship offer flexible alternatives to large-scale, institutionalized modes of Fordist factory production by promoting the sharing of knowledge, skills, and profits among market participants at the community level. In short, Piore and Sabel’s (1984) contribution has opened up inter-disciplinary debates that have proposed different theorizations of culture and the economy.

Since then, growing numbers of sociologists and anthropologists have studied kin-based forms of sociality and changing relations of labor organized around small-scale factory workshops. Their analyses have primarily focused on how capital is accumulated and how inequalities emerge through the reproduction of desire and shared experiences of intimacy and work time. Others have examined the social effects of de-industrialization upon agricultural communities, as well as the politics of microenterprise within post-colonial cities. Overall, these works challenge Piore and Sabel's representations of culture as static and discrete from the economy. They demonstrate the linking of capitalist practices with intimate practices of making and organizing work life. They also show how articulations of market practices with craft-based manufacture are historically situated processes that are constantly negotiated and contingently reproduced through unequal relations of power.

For example, feminist scholars have critiqued Piore and Sabel's comparisons between craft-based workshops in Italy and those along the Pacific Rim by illustrating the gender, generational, and class-based inequalities that color workers' relations of labor within these household factory spaces. Drawing from her work on family-based silk production firms in Italy, Yanagisako's (2002) critiques Piore and Sabel's assumption that household factory workshops are historically unique to the contemporary era of transnational sub-contracting practices. She argues that family-owned firms in Italy have long utilized this mode of business organization. By emphasizing gender and human sentiments, Yanagisako's (2002) ethnographic study of the Como silk industry during the early 2000s shows how male capitalists' desires

to extend their wealth inter-generationally along the family line serve as powerful forces of capitalist motivation. In other words, she argues that so-called economic interests cannot be abstracted from the intimacies of social life, human sentiments, and belonging.

Meanwhile, Hsiung (1994) argues that craft-based practices of cooperation, collective resolution, and profit-sharing, which Piore and Sabel attribute to the successes of industrial development in Italy, are not prominent features of the satellite factory system in Taiwan. Rather than celebrating the satellite factories in Taiwan as symbols of flexible specialization, Hsiung (1994) views the household workshops as spaces of intensified exploitation of factory women who must juggle household responsibilities with factory labor. Their double-burden absorbs the social risks that are entailed in transnational sub-contracting practices by enabling paternalistic methods of managerial control by local factory bosses in Taiwan. Ultimately, the emergence of family-based workshops in Taiwan signifies the large-scale fragmentation of worker resistance there.

Meanwhile, Elyachar's (2005) study of craftsmen in factory workshops that are funded by transnational NGO agencies in Cairo, Egypt shows how structural adjustment policies have refigured the meanings of craft-based production. She argues that representations of craft based labor and workshop life among the poor have been transformed from symbols of cultural strength and nationalist independence to resources of competitive profit-making. By tracing the transition of

former craftsmen into micro-entrepreneurs, she unpacks how NGOs advance a particular type of social actor in the marketplace that is, an “individualized agent of short-term gain” (2005: 10). In other words, Elyachar argues that NGO development projects have refigured craft-based relations of labor and exchange into sources of capital accumulation and market dispossession.

Narotsky and Gavin’s (2006) examination of the socio-political effects of de-industrialization in a small town in southern Spain traces how workers, including stay-at-home mothers, grapple with continuing recession and increasing unemployment as flexible production transforms home-based workshops with long-standing histories of shoe production into informal sweatshops dependent on low-wage labor. In light of the pervasive sense of alienation and insecurity their interlocutors face, Narotsky and Gavin argue for “ethnography of the present” that pushes against theories of culture that fail to engage in political projects that seek to understand unequal opportunities of livelihood (2005: 8-9).

These anthropological works have shed light on the social relationships and types of personhood that drive various forces of production and profit-making activities in an age of flexible production. While these studies have underscored unequal relations of power in the everyday operation of industrial workshops, these studies have tended to downplay how the spatial and temporal aspects of commodity mass production in home based factories blur the categorical boundaries between worker and entrepreneur in an era of transnational sub-contracting. Indeed, though the

spatial fluidity of the home based factory allows the speedy movement of people, commodities, and capital to float in and out of the factory space, the temporal demands of the production process diminish migrant factory owners from adequately disciplining their hired workers and controlling the rhythms of the assembly line. This chapter adds to this literature on industrial relations and fast capitalism by examining how the movement of factory spaces into home-based workshops within the context of transnational fast fashion production and exchange, shapes people's engagements with export manufacturing in post-socialist China.

### **Uneven Processes of Fast Fashion Production**

Along the fast fashion supply chain, identifying who the “bosses” is difficult. Techniques of the self, in this case the entrepreneurial subject, raise questions over who governs whom, as mechanisms of power and discipline are increasingly individualized and self-regulated through audit practices, including quality standards and tight production deadlines.<sup>42</sup> These measures trickle downward among “bosses” or intermediary agents along the supply chain, the majority of whom remain far away from the physical sites of production. Sub-contracting practices, which off-shore production away from sites of consumption enable multinational corporations and their intermediary agents to govern the production process without any direct face-to-

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<sup>42</sup> Scholars who have examined neoliberal governmentality underscore the processes of turning organizations and persons in to self-activating agents through various normalizing processes. As Dun (2004) shows in her case study of a factory undergoing privatization in post-socialist Poland, employees are identified and categorized as “bundles of qualities” (2004: 118). Audit cultures in these workplaces are cultivated by requiring employees to constantly perform self-evaluations such that each worker is accountable to her performance. These evaluations effectively become tools of self-discipline. See Strathern (2000) for an anthropological theorization of audit cultures.

face contact with the manufacturers on whom they rely in order to produce the commodities they sell. Through the use of digital technologies, companies capture the trans-continental movements of commodities and capital in real time. Furthermore, these powerful players assert their influence over the daily operations of the assembly line by hiring independent contractors to mediate communications with manufacturers and by establishing certain quality control standards of the finished goods.

By controlling the quality of the finished products, corporate agents attempt to manage the minute operations of the manufacturing process itself, thereby coloring the everyday encounters between employers and employees on the shop floor. As Hardt and Negri observe, “Control of laboring activity can potentially be individualized and continuous in the virtual panopticon of network production (2000: 297).”<sup>43</sup> Though corporate managers, to a large extent, are able to regulate the temporal operation of the manufacturing process through quality controls, the everyday encounters between employers and employees are constantly subject to negotiation. Their relationships within small-scale factory workshops often shape the ways in which migrant entrepreneurs and their hired workers experience factory labor and formulate their worker identities. For example, as the Wongs learn to transition their labor from wage work to that of bosses, temporary wage workers simultaneously

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<sup>43</sup> Hardt and Negri draw from Deleuze’s (1992) “Postscript on Societies of Control.” In his piece, Deleuze describes the reorganization of societies in the post-war period from disciplinary societies based on spaces of enclosure to control societies that operate through certain information technologies. These instruments of control uphold hegemonic notions of freedom and individuality while enacting practices of neoliberal governmentality.



assert their autonomy by floating in and out of factory spaces within the garment district and by taking up temporary labor based on piece-rate wages. Thus, wage workers and entrepreneurs negotiate their dependence and autonomy in relations to one another.

To be sure, both groups encounter the contradictions that self-employment and entrepreneurship entail. Namely, as the Wongs work to achieve financial freedom and stability by becoming owners of their factory, they gradually realize that they have minimal control over the timing of the production processes. Meanwhile, migrant wage workers claim their individual autonomy through temporary labor, but they gradually find that their modest piece-rate wages often binds them to the factory floor. Unforgiving deadlines, intensified by the rapid turnover of fashion styles, confine both employers and employees to their workspaces. In fact, in the time I have spent with the Wongs, I have often seen them laboring alongside their employees for hours during the day as they juggle other tasks in coordinating materials, workers, and machines. Conflicts between employers and employees often arise directly through failures of the production process itself, which occur when machines halt, materials go missing, and workers talk back or refuse to work. When disagreements over the workmanship of garments surface between employers and employees, wage workers verbally disagree or simply leave the shop floor.

Overall, the ethnographic vignettes that I describe in this chapter illustrate the privatization of industrial processes in a post-socialist urban village in Guangzhou.

Using the Wongs' intimate experiences of factory labor as a case study, I detail the fluidity and mobility that characterized many garment workshops in Guangzhou. While Dunn emphasizes the commodification of labor time as a means through which wage laborers in post-socialist Poland think of themselves as enterprising, self-employed workers, I add to her analysis by considering the spatial organization of factory workshops. By describing the overlapping assemblages of factory spaces and work-time that facilitate the quick-turnover of fashion commodities for international export, I argue that the demands of flexible production characteristic of fast fashion in Guangzhou increasingly rely on spatial openness and mobility, which operate in tandem with temporal regulation over bodies and relations of labor.<sup>44</sup> Makeshift and temporary workspaces grant factory owners and wage-workers a certain degree of mobility and freedom. Such reconfigurations of the factory space confirm Harvey's (1985) crucial insight that the circulation of commodities and capital inherently eliminates spatial barriers to its circulation process. He draws from Marx's (1973) formulation of "the annihilation of space through time" (Brenner 1998: 433). An analysis of the temporal dimensions of fast fashion production from the point of view of workers, however, reveals how time works to situate and "fix" laborers in place despite the temporary nature of their work. In other words, the circulation of commodities through the annihilation of space through time is only possible by

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<sup>44</sup> A number of anthropologists have studied time as an object of inquiry in order to examine how certain political structures, kinship descent, gift exchange, experiences of work, collective histories, and narratives are constructed among social groups. See Munn (1992) for comprehensive review of the anthropology of time. Furthermore, Hertz (1998), Miyazaki (2008), and Wolf-Meyer (2012) have elaborated on the temporal ordering of sleep and market activities in the construction of particular capitalist subjects.

“fixing” workers in time and space for the duration of the production cycle. The relentless demands for quick turnover of commodities and oppressive production schedules regulate workers’ bodily demands and control the rhythms of factory work. Meanwhile, flexible specialization requires minute surveillance of the temporal flow of products, as well as the quality standards of the finished goods. These modes of labor discipline mirror Foucault’s description of the prison, where invisible techniques of surveillance materialize through prisoners’ own conduct. In light of these techniques of control, I underscore the critical roles of space and time in organizing relations of work and in cultivating entrepreneurially-minded workers within home-based factories. The temporal ordering of garment production processes emerges as the mechanism of social and bodily governance, through which disciplinary tactics and worker exploitation are exercised. These mechanisms of control, however, are continually contested and reinforced by the relative mobility of the wage workers, redefining the relations of labor among clients, factory owners, and wage-workers. Moments of disorder and contestation ultimately reveal the blurred ambiguous boundaries that separate factory owners from wage-workers.

### **Factory Living**

The factory sits along a narrow alleyway lined with countless eateries and storefronts that lead to one of the back entrances of the towering Zhongda fabric market. Sandwiched between a mobile phone store and a fabric warehouse, the 50 square foot factory sits semi-exposed to the outside world through a large, drawn metal gate. A red signpost hanging beside the front metal gate advertises the services

that the factory couple offers, including pattern-making, design, and mass production. On any given day, the monotonous buzzing of the sewing machines collides uneasily with the tiresome recording of a shrill female voice blaring from next door, beckoning shoppers to buy a phone. “Forty kuai! (buzz) Forty kuai (buzz) for a mobile phone. Quick! Get it while you can....” The passing of speeding bike riders, crying children reaching out to their young mothers’ arms, oversized vans blowing black smoke onto encroaching traffic, and exhausted grandmothers resting along the steps of abandoned warehouses create a spectacle of city life from the vantage point of the factory’s confined space. At the same time, the semi-enclosed factory space delimited by three standing walls stages a spectacle of its own to curious on-lookers strolling by. On especially busy days, it not unusual for a few pedestrians to stop dead in their tracks with hands wrapped behind their backs as they observe the lines of sewers industriously working at their stations while taking note of the intricate garment production process. Young mothers in particular often approach the front worktable, eagerly caressing and admiring the colorful piles of finished clothing stacked around the front gate. Sometimes, floral dress patterns of red, fuchsia, pink, yellow, and blue serve as the only splash of color and visual delight in an otherwise dreary and grey neighborhood. The unusual combination of smells emanating from urine, garbage, and enticing food sold by street vendors further animate the sights and sounds of the surrounding urban village.

Indeed, regulating the flows of people, aromas, and objects that drift across the threshold of those factory gates is difficult to control. In some instances, I find

myself feeling rather uneasy when eager on-lookers expectedly snatch a piece of garment from the worktable in order to admire the visual and tactile qualities of the finished clothing. “Not to worry,” Mrs. Wong assured me. She then further encouraged the admirers by asking, “Aren’t the colors pretty? No, sorry. We don’t sell these clothes piece by piece. We make them for our client.” At that moment, I realize that she uses the products of her employee’s labor as a means of promoting their work in the hopes of attracting additional walk-in clients.

In fact, these metal gates that stage the internal factory space to the outside world have successfully attracted several long-time clients, reliable workers, and even foreign researchers like me. At the same time, the factory’s exposure to passing thieves has resulted in stolen bikes and clothes. In addition, the factory’s display to the outside world has also enabled strangers, including the neighborhood police and other officials, to take stock of the owners’ financial success when business is good. Over the course of my field research there, I have witnessed inquisitive surveyors and money collectors dressed in various uniforms demanding payment of a variety of sanitation and fire safety fees. In one instance, a middle-aged female officer with whom the factory boss was not familiar approached the front worktable while surveying the piles of brightly-colored girls’ dresses filling the interior workspace. While the officer examined the clothes with her inquisitive eyes, she asked, “Wouldn’t they make lovely gifts?” Suspiciously, Mrs. Wong boldly but calmly replied, “No, that idea has never crossed my mind. I’ve never heard of such a thing!” Her reply subsequently prompted the official to quietly leave the premises.

Over the course the two years I have spent with the Wongs, those industrial factory gates also served as a symbolic reminder of their fluid way of life and relatively unguarded orientation to the wider world as newly emerging migrant business owners in the Zhongda garment district. As newly established business owners of a modest factory in Guangzhou, the Wongs lacked an existing network of personal contacts in the city, so they must rely on walk-in clients in order to build their customer base. As the Wongs slowly secured their business contacts, I saw them struggle with a number of unpredictably difficult clients, manage a handful of demanding and money-grubbing officials, and employ over a hundred people in a factory that facilitates fewer than twelve workers at one time. At the same time, the small industrial workspace in which anyone could pass in and out with relative ease also served as a home for the migrant couple and their son. Undoubtedly, the absence of physical partitions separating the exterior world from the interior factory, as well as the lack of walls delimiting their industrial workspace from their place of residence, revealed the fluidity and precariousness of the working and living conditions among many producers of Guangzhou's fast fashion industry.

### **The Factory Space**

The Wongs' 50 square foot, two-level factory houses three parallel rows of twelve sewing machines, six are lined against the left-hand wall and six stationed along the two center rows that face each other. These two center rows divide the factory space neatly in half. Four rows of sewing stations which sit side-by-side occupy the shop floor. Long wooden benches accommodate workers as they sit at

their respective stations. The white interior walls that enclose the workspace on all three sides show signs of age and wear with the gathering of black cob-webs and dust. Random scribbling of phone numbers and names on the grimy walls reveal traces of the factory's former occupants. An industrial-sized iron faces the two sewing machines, allowing just enough space for one person to pass through to enter the enclosed kitchen and toilet area in the right-hand back corner of the factory. Inside the combined kitchen and toilet space, a metal partition divides the cooking area from the bathroom. This partitioned room in the back corner serves as the only walled –off space in the factory. Inside, iron bars hug the tiny window along the right-hand corner of the room. The window remains draped in black dust-bunnies and thick cob-webs. It opens up to the five-storey apartment building immediately next door, making the room feel as if it was nestled tightly among dark, towering buildings along all corners. Beside the window, an electric burner and a massive rice cooker sit on top of a rectangular wooden table. Chopsticks, rice bowls, and other cooking utensils are stored underneath along the lower shelf. A faucet installed along the back wall of the room faces the wooden table. In lieu of a formal sink, plastic buckets are placed beneath the faucet, where dishes and vegetables are cleaned on a daily basis. Dirty water runs down from a floor drain attached to metal pipes running beneath the ground. A squat toilet directly across the kitchen serves as the only object that comprises the informal bathroom. Hot water is prepared by using an electric bulb-like device attached to a long cord. The bulb placed in a pool of water in a simple plastic

bucket. A V-shaped metal mantelpiece is installed in a corner to hold toiletries and towels.

On the far right side of the floor space, a steep metal staircase resembling a tall ladder leads to the upstairs portion of the factory, where the Wong family live. A large metal worktable with an attached industrial saw nearly occupies the entire second floor attic. The den stretches out to only half of the factory area length-wise and has no walls, so that one could lean over a short partition and capture a bird's-eye view of the factory floor below. Using simple cardboard and duct tape, the Wongs have erected a make-shift wall to separate the second-floor workspace from their bedroom. The narrow, semi-enclosed bedroom is only big enough to fit a desktop computer and a plastic car seat that seats two people. At night, Mr. and Mrs. Wong recline the back of the coach horizontally, so that it can serve as a bed for two. The factory owners keep their cash in a tin canister beside their computer, along with a medium-sized notebook in which they tabulate their accounts and other notes and figures. When their sixteen year old son lives with them, he sleeps on a cardboard mat directly under the massive industrial table. On hot summer nights, an electric fan placed beside him cools the air while blowing the floor dust away from his body.

### **The Uneven Processes of Flexible Production**

Although the fluidity and the openness of the factory layout facilitate the flows of people and objects which seem to glide easily in and out of the premises, the actual labor entailed in flexible production takes much painstaking time and effort on



the part of the workers. In what follows, I detail the cumbersome and arduous coordination of clients, workers, and raw materials in the complex orchestration of garment mass-manufacture. Drawing from Lefebvre's (1992) argument that social spaces are created in conjunction with processes of capitalist production, I demonstrate how the particularities of fast and flexible garment production rely upon a diversity of uneven temporal pulses and makeshift factory spaces characteristic of quick-paced garment mass production within small-scale factory workshops. These tensions challenge the assumption that flexible production entails the shrinking and homogenization of temporal scales. Rather than centralizing upon a single site of power, flexible production constantly shifts the nodes and configurations of power, while blurring the lines between factory capitalists/ owners and temporary wage-workers. The movements of laboring bodies and objects are regulated and ordered according to the rhythmic demands of fast fashion manufacture, shaping the ways in which these modalities of power are constantly interrupted, negotiated, and contested.

The typical production process begins when Mr. and Mrs. Wong receive orders from walk-in clients, many of whom happen to stumble upon the factory premises. To my surprise, I have learned during the course of my research that the Wongs do not simply accept orders from anyone who happen to pass through. In fact, from my observations, the owners oftentimes refuse the clients' orders upon their initial request. "Sorry, we don't have time," the Wongs often declare.

One explanation for their frequent refusals to clients stems from the fact that they have discovered over the course of their limited experience as factory owners that they cannot subsist on merely producing single samples for individual clients at one time or producing garment batches that are too small in quantity. Mrs. Wong once stated, “It’s much easier (in terms of time coordination and production preparation) if we produce one style at high volumes such as a thousand at a time, but it’s much more difficult if we produce several styles at only a couple hundred pieces at one time.”

She often complains about clients who in the past have requested that the Wongs create samples but then bring that sample to a competing factory in the neighborhood for mass-production. Rather than merely serving one-time customers, the Wongs prefer expending their time and effort in ultimately building a stable and reliable client base. In one instance, Mrs. Wong complained about a young female client who had apparently used her persuasion tactics in order to urge Mr. Wong to create several samples for her. Ultimately, as Mrs. Wong suspected, this young woman failed to place any long-term orders in the end, leaving the Wongs feeling cheated and short-handed. When the woman unexpectedly returned to the factory one day, Mrs. Wong glared at her from the corners of her eye and suspiciously whispered to me, “I knew she’s up to no good. I don’t trust her.”

Essentially, the difficult procedure of selecting walk-in clients for their business entails the time-consuming exercise of trust-building, which is often fraught

with the risks of unreasonable working conditions and unpaid orders. At the same time, their ability to decline clients' orders depends on the fashion production cycles as well as the broader business environment. When business is good, the Wongs enjoy the luxury of selectively choosing their clients. However, when times are bad, they have no choice but to acquiesce to their clients' demands simply for the sake of making ends meet. The pressure for the Wongs to secure fair and trust-worthy clients who can provide regular production orders becomes all the more crucial when the global export economy takes a downturn. Factory owners like the Wongs in the surrounding garment district can feel and predict such downturns, much like an impending rainstorm, when clients are few and businesses lie idle. Establishing a reliable client base through trusting and stable client-manufacturer relations therefore becomes a means to weather variable economic storms.

Because of the unpredictability involved in the processes of selecting their clients, Mrs. Wong repeatedly emphasizes the necessity of reading clients' intentions. According to her, the practice of reading people or *kan ren* stems from years of business experience, during which her previous boss who operated a garment export factory in Dongguan had taught her through hands-on experience. She explains that as a young line-worker in a factory in Dongguan, her former boss took her to meet various clients. From her experiences in meeting clients from different walks of life, Mrs. Wong believes that she can confidently "read" or tease out those clients who are trust-worthy, reliable, and honest.

On many separate occasions, Mrs. Wong commented about prospective workers whom she believed were lazy or unreliable, or about potential clients who were too cunning and untrustworthy. For example, a young woman with a black sequined top stopped by the factory one day to inquire about a job. Overall, she appeared well-dressed and relatively well put together. She asked Mrs. Wong if she could work two hours in the mornings and two hours in the evenings. In reply, Mrs. Wong appeared exasperated and rejected her outright on the basis that she was not the type of person to make this kind of money because the kind of work they do is *xin ku* or entails struggle. After the prospective worker left, she then retold the story about a woman who had tried to apply for a job in a garment factory where Mrs. Wong was previously employed. Mrs. Wong described the woman as having shiny, gelled hair slicked back in a neat bun, while wearing a nice dress, and high heels. When the factory boss saw her, he immediately asked, “What do you think you can do here?” Mrs. Wong echoed laughingly. She then asked whether the students at Sun Yatsen University dress the same way at school, somehow implying that workers and students would never dress in as modern or as flashy a manner. This moment thus revealed Mrs. Wong’s conceptions about workers through an “us versus them” discourse that cuts through differentiations in dress, class, and gender.

In another instance, Mrs. Wong expressed reservations about trusting business people in general. One day, while the two of us were engaged in our usual conversation, I brought up a female client from Fujian who had recently hired the Wongs to produce batches of women’s contemporary shorts. When I had mentioned

that the client always seemed to be polite and pleasantly friendly, Mrs. Wong added, “Yes, that’s how many business people are. They know how to act and say the right things, but you don’t know what’s truly in their hearts.” Certainly, their previous confrontations with demanding clients taught them to become more cautious towards unfamiliar clients. For instance, the challenges they faced with difficult clients who operated in the *Shi San Hang* wholesale market in Guangzhou left the Wongs feeling bitter and cheated because of their arduous labor. The exercises of reading potential clients and trust-building thus served as integral aspects of flexible production. Though factory labor and manufacturing might flex across time and space, the building of client-manufacturer relations proved to be tricky in the fickle, rapidly-changing business context of fast fashion.

### **Coordinating Materials**

Once the terms of the production orders regarding styles, deadlines, prices of the garments per piece, and types of fabrics and other materials have been successfully negotiated, clients then furnish the garment sample and fabrics in preparation for mass-production. As with most cut-and-sew or assembly factories (*jiagong chang*) in the Zhongda garment district, clients must provide all the necessary materials for production, including fabrics, buttons, pins, zippers, and bags for packaging. Though many of the materials are sourced from the nearby wholesale markets, some clients travel as far as the neighboring cities of Foshan, Dongguan, or Xiqiao, where most of the fabrics and accessories are mass-produced. While woven

fabrics and denim are produced in factory clusters in Xiqiao, knits are manufactured in the industrial cluster of Daliang.

Oftentimes, the clients' need to source different fabrics and materials from various localities involves the difficult procedure of coordinating time, delivery, and payment. Supplies bought from the nearby fabric and accessories wholesale markets are usually delivered to the factory by roving bike-drivers who operate pedi-cabs around the neighborhood. They provide the logistical platform for the critical movement of people and materials around the district. Larger orders from distant places are hauled via vans or oversized trucks. Truck drivers make daily rounds from the Zhongda garment district to industrial clusters in Dongguan and Foshan in the late afternoons as well as in the middle of the night. Since the downturn of the export economy, transport companies have either slashed their routes or have closed down altogether, forcing many migrant drivers out of their jobs and back to their home villages. Consequently, intermediary traders, including clients of the Wongs, must retrieve fabrics and other accessories on their own, adding to their pressures of garment design and coordinating materials. I expand on their roles in garment design and manufacture in the next chapter.

Usually, clients arrange payment with the fabric or accessory wholesaler in advance of delivery. However, if for some reason clients fail to pay, the Wongs often have to bear the burden of paying for the raw materials out of their own pockets, a thorny situation the factory owners prefer to avoid. Alternatively, the Wongs return

the delivery back to the sender, thereby delaying the entire production order. I have witnessed instances in which the Wongs reprimand clients for their failures to pay or deliver the necessary fabrics or materials in time.

In other instances, clients would buy the wrong type of fabric for a particular style thereby stalling the production process. One time, Carmen, a regular client of the Wongs, and her business partner had apparently failed to order a type of lining in time for a particular order of girls' dresses, since Carmen had just recently returned from a trip to Vietnam and had missed the order by just one day. Mr. Wong explained to them that the fuchsia-colored flower fabric that they had bought for the dress failed to sew well, since the delicate material tended to slip off the needle of the machine. He explained that once this type of fabric, which is colloquially called *sha mian*, ran through the machine it fell sideways past the needle, thus producing uneven stitches. Afterwards, Mr. Wong advised them to buy a different type of fabric though it sold at a higher cost – about 15 RMB per square meter. Meanwhile, Carmen explained to Mrs. Wong, “I had just come home from Vietnam two days ago, and I had to spend one day to rest. That’s why I missed the order.” In order to express her compassion for Carmen’s dilemma, Mrs. Wong responded, “Yes, yes, I know. But, if we hadn’t heard from you last minute we would have started our Humen client’s order. We weren’t about to wait, you know.” Mrs. Wong’s comment served as a gentle negotiation with Carmen, serving as a polite reminder that the Wongs could not wait for Carmen’s delayed response in order to keep their production rhythms running. Their exchange also highlighted the significance of keeping up with the cut-throat

pace of production, which included the task of coordinating all the necessary fabric and materials in time in order to prepare for the final steps of garment manufacturing. As Carmen and her male business partner discussed their difficulties in finding the appropriate lining fabric at the right price per meter, her partner politely nudged Mr. Wong by saying, “You know you could have bought the lining for us. You know more about the type of fabric we need and you know where to get it.” His comment suggested that he expected Mr. Wong to take the initiative in supplying the necessary lining himself so that the production of the current dress order would not have been delayed. With a polite chuckle, Mr. Wong flatly stated, “Where would I have gotten the money to do this?” suggesting that he probably did not want to take the risk at spending his own money to supply what Carmen needed.

### **Coordinating Workers**

While clients hastily coordinate all the necessary materials for production, the Wongs assemble their work team based on the number of workers they need per order. Usually, they hire five to seven workers at one time, and build their work teams based on existing contacts. After orders have been placed, the factory owners call upon their friends and family members for help. Since Mr. Wong’s older brother operates a separate factory in the neighborhood, he often sends workers from the other factory when business tapers off. Another brother who works in the neighborhood as an ironer sometimes comes by with his wife to lend a hand. In the past, Mrs. Wong has also invited her family friends from her home village in Guangxi to live and work with the couple for several months at a time. However, when new workers are needed,



the Wongs sometimes post advertisements on a small chalkboard that hangs by the front gate of their factory. At other times, Mrs. Wong would walk over by a pedestrian bridge in the neighborhood, where unemployed workers informally gather in hopes of securing temporary jobs.

Occasionally, Mrs. Wong would casually point eastward towards the direction of Zhongda University whenever I asked where she found her workers. “Over there, by the bridge,” she would repeatedly inform me. For the longest time, I assumed that the bridge to which she referred was the pedestrian overpass that crossed the main artery of *Xingangdong Lu* just outside the village gates. I was consistently left feeling befuddled, since I rarely see workers gathering around the bridge. Only when I mustered enough courage to venture through the interior pathways that penetrated the garment district did I discover the chaotic but systematic flows of people, traffic, and objects that criss-crossed the urban village jungle. Along one of the main boulevards that cut through and connected several adjoining villages in the area, factory managers or workers set up simple wooden stools or chairs in order to publicize the hiring of workers needed for particular garment orders or projects. Several advertisers from various competing factories in the neighborhood would congregate in semi-circles while holding sample garments in their hands in order to demonstrate the specific skills they required of their workers. Crowds of curious spectators, mostly consisting of young mothers with children in tow, would often encircle the advertisers hoping to catch a glimpse of the announcement while meticulously inspecting the

garment sample on display. Serious applicants inquired for further details regarding pay, working hours, laboring conditions, and specific skill sets.

The clients' terms of agreement regarding garment styles, price, and production time determined the working wages and conditions of labor among factory workers. Though the Wongs deal exclusively with woven fabrics and garments of various natural and synthetic fiber types, different garment styles dictated the particular skills demanded of the workers. In one instance, a middle-aged man came by the factory to inquire about a position as a sewer. Mrs. Wong replied by describing the type of girls' dresses that they usually produce. She then proceeded to ask him what type of garments he was accustomed to make (*Ni zuo shenme huo?*) The man modestly responded by declaring, "Japanese styles (or *Ri ben ban*)", in order to emphasize his ability to work with embellishments and other fine details. Mrs. Wong then added, "Oh we handle all different types of styles here as well. Just last year, we made a silk-like wrap around in the Japanese style for one of our clients." I was struck by the identification of clothing styles through the nation-based classification of market-niches and styles. However, the man's use of the term Japanese styles (*Ri ben ban*) to describe his skills as a garment worker struck me as particularly meaningful. More specifically, the discursive use of nation-based styles, samples, or *ban* served as a conceptual mapping or categorization of his sewing abilities as well as his or her knowledge or familiarity with garment construction and production processes. The use of the term *ri ben ban* therefore served as a discursive and conceptual resource through which he could situate and market himself as a skilled

and experienced laborer familiar with the particularities of garment manufacturing for international exports.

### **The Fashion Cycles' Broader Strokes of Time**

Daily work in the factory involves overlapping temporal scales. The everyday work rhythms are punctuated by regular encounters among residents from the surrounding neighborhood. As the Wongs and the workers begin their daily work days around 10 o'clock in the morning, the streets remain relatively calm and empty. Storekeepers and restaurateurs gradually draw their front gates, indicating the start of their business hours. Upbeat pop music emanates from a pair of second-hand loudspeakers nearby, while bike drivers loudly blare out their favorite tunes as they cruise by.

The pace of life around the neighborhood picks up after the workers' lunch and occasional afternoon nap. Clients from the local wholesale market sweep through the neighborhood as they frantically scour the fabric and accessories markets in preparation for the following business day. Some may drop by the factory in order to place additional orders or to follow up on existing orders. By 3 or 4 o'clock in the afternoon, life in the factory and in the surrounding neighborhood accelerates at full speed as children accompanied by their parents return home from school, bike drivers traverse through the narrow streets bringing goods from warehouses to the factories, grandparents visit the wet market to buy groceries for dinner, and workers from other nearby factories trickle into work ready to begin yet another 12-16 hour night shift.

In the late afternoon, several scavengers who regularly comb through the neighborhood streets in search of old, unused car parts, electronics, home appliances, and other metal tools gather beside the Wongs' factory with their wooden bike-wagons to chat or play a match of Chinese chess. Speaking in local dialects, these "lao xiang" or fellow migrant workers examine each other's found treasures and collectively gauge the estimated value of their new-found items. Meanwhile, the men would boisterously tell jokes or stories about their home villages, while holding lit cigarettes with their smudged hands. Every day, a reticent and solitary woman with wide-rimmed glasses sweeps past the men as she scrubs through the neighborhood street corners with a large plastic bag in one hand and a dust pan in the other hand. She wears a military green and yellow uniform from head to toe, along with a matching cap, indicating that she is employed by the village committee. Occasionally, she picks up and carefully flips through an interesting magazine or brochure she finds on the ground, and may even place it in her plastic bag for further reading or for recycling. At approximately 5 o'clock in the evening, a young, tanned man with a round face and a buzz cut brazenly announces his presence at the Wongs' front gates. Curiously, he asks for the boss lady (*laoban niang*) of the factory so that he can greet her and wishes all of us a pleasant day.

Though seemingly mundane at first glance, these regular rhythms of everyday activity around the surrounding neighborhood mark a stark contrast to the irregular pace of work inside the factory. Soon after the delivery of fabrics has been completed and the workers have been assembled, Mr. Wong and his son begin the arduous task

of fabric cutting (*lai bu*) on the second floor. Once the fabrics arrive, Mr. Wong painstakingly lifts the long and heavy bolt of fabric and rests it upon his right shoulder. Because of the sheer weight of the fabric bolt, the entirety of his strained body sways in whatever direction the heavy object leans. He must grip the walls and the side handlebars of the steep staircase with his left hand as he slowly ascends to the second floor. He then unrolls the fabric bolt on the large industrial table, while he and his son slice the ends with a mechanical saw that zips vertically from one end of the table to the other. As each piece is cut, Mr. Wong and his son stack the fabrics on top of one another on the table so that they form a mound that stretch several inches tall and about five feet wide.

After the fabric pieces have been cut and stacked, Mr. Wong then begins the highly skilled and meticulous process of arranging and cutting garment pieces according to pre-arranged stencils made out of cardboard. This task of cutting the garment patterns require the highest amount of skill and experience because arranging the pattern pieces by size that utilizes the least amount of fabric by surface area is one of the most challenging tasks in garment manufacture. During this process, he must also take into account the direction in which the threads fall (warp and weft) as well as the ways in which fabric patterns are displayed after garment pieces have been cut.

Once Mr. Wong cuts the separate garment pieces, they are then distributed to each worker according to the sizes for which they are responsible. Each sewer is usually assigned three or four batches of about 22- 30 garments (ranging from 60-120

total garments per order), depending on the order. In general, five or six workers would take about 3-5 days to complete an order of 1000 garments. They are paid at a piece-rate of about 4-5 kuai a piece. Together, they collectively follow the production process of assembling each garment piece depending on the particular style. For example, workers that mass-manufacture dresses that button-up in the front must first assemble the two front flaps with the back piece before the top portion can be sewn with the bottom skirt piece. Though some workers sew faster than others, all of them more or less follow the same process of garment construction collectively. Once their assigned batches of garments are completed, they are paid in cash and are free to leave the factory.

Because the garment construction process follows particular chains (*lian*) of collective assembly, the delivery, preparation, and coordination of every single garment piece and accessory affects the entire garment production process. Oftentimes, once the workers complete one aspect of the garment manufacturing chain, they would cry out for Mr. or Mrs. Wong to retrieve the next portion of the garment identified by size and number. “*Laoban (boss) or laoban niang (boss lady)*!” They would cry out. “I need number 10, size 8.” I would also frequently witness workers assisting each other in the retrieval of necessary garment pieces and in demonstrating certain methods of sewing and garment construction. When garment pieces or accessories fail to be prepared or delivered on time, workers often express impatience, since the time during which they are left to wait could be spent by earning wages in another factory nearby. When workers must reluctantly stall the

sewing process, they leave the factory to run household errands or find short-term employment in another garment factory in the area. Many workers juggle several jobs in different factories at one time. Workers who run their own small businesses in the area and moonlight at the Wongs' factory in order to earn extra money often return to their shops when they encounter production lulls.

Since production schedules among workers in the factory follow the broader temporal flows of the seasonal fashion cycles, the pace of work during certain monthly periods are more frantic than others. Generally speaking, overall garment production around the Pearl River Delta slackens during the summer months from June to August, a period of rest colloquially referred to as *dam gui* or off season in Cantonese. Early September marks the beginning of the fall fashion season, a hectic period known as *huang gui*, or high season. The flood of production orders continue up to days leading to the Chinese New Year, when manufacturing completely halts for two to three weeks, before picking up again and slowly tapering off during May and June.

Throughout the intensive production period, the factory's work tempo and regularity of orders are difficult to predict and control. In fact, the temporal pulse among workers within the factory walls swings between two extremes. Once orders arrive and production proceeds, workers often have to rush to complete last-minute orders that may last from a few days to a few weeks. However, these periods of intense production are often followed by long intervals of idling or unemployment.

Once, during a week-long idling phase between orders, I suggested to Mrs. Wong that she take the time to catch up on sleep and rest. She then immediately responded, “You don’t know what it’s like in our line of work. We can’t take breaks because we don’t know where our money will come from.” Her statement reveals the challenges she and her workers must face in balancing demanding work schedules, during which garment production consumes every waking hour, with their concerns for earning enough money to cover their living costs and family expenses during idle periods.

Market observers, including workers and wholesalers, often associate erratic weather conditions and environmental disasters around the world with the fluctuations of the garment and fashion industry. One market stall owner from Korea, for example, mentioned the unusually early arrival of the summer heat to explain why business this past year slowed dramatically particularly from February to April. “We had no spring season this past year,” he explained. “That’s why we can’t successfully clear out our winter clothes now. People want summer clothes, but we’re still selling winter stuff. Shoppers won’t buy anything until the weather stabilizes.” Other market participants cite Japan’s nuclear crisis to explain the decline of overseas wholesalers, the slowdown in the delivery of fabrics and accessories from Japan, as well as the dwindling of new and fashionable Japanese styles. At the same time, the skyrocketing of cotton prices of 2011 also led to the radical drop in export orders, along with the jump in the market prices for fabrics and other raw materials.



## **The Irregular Pace of Factory Work**

Even when full-scale production in the factory proceeds, the pace of work is difficult to control. This is particularly the case when clients serve as intermediary brokers for overseas wholesalers. Brokers often have to adjust production details according to the whims of their fickle clients. This includes the tagging position of the labels, attaching the tags to the garments correctly, the printing of specific stock keeping unit (SKU) numbers, the addition or elimination of embellishments or accessories, and the coordination of necessary fabrics and materials. All these details affect the condition of labor for the Wongs and their workers.

In the excerpt below, I describe one instance in which a Korean broker fails to successfully retrieve the necessary materials on time, thereby exerting downward pressure upon the Wongs and their workers to delay production time, while obliging them to meet their negotiated deadline at the last minute:

In the meantime, the client for whom the lace tops were made came by to negotiate a new shipment deadline with Mrs. Wong. Apparently, the lace fabric had also run out but the client would not be able to deliver it to the Wongs until two days later. Though the client spoke fluent Putonghua, I could tell from his accent that he was in fact Korean. Based on his appearance, I had the impression that he was a young, up-and-coming designer. After he explained that the deadline would have to be pushed back because the workers were missing the additional lace fabrics and trimmings, Mrs. Wong reprimanded him for asking his assistant to aggressively push

the Wongs and their workers to meet the afternoon deadline that day. She cried out, “Why on earth then did you have that guy rush us? He was like, rush rush rush!!!” The client subsequently apologized and explained that his assistant had pressured the Wongs only because that assistant was getting pressure from him. The client felt embarrassed and reasoned that the deadline could be pushed back until the day after. For some time, the client had explained in Putonghua that he was having trouble retrieving all the necessary fabrics and materials for the next batch of lace hoodies. He was thinking out loud about how to best retrieve the garments from the Wongs after they were made. In response, Mrs. Wong suggested that he simply had to hire a motorbike driver to deliver the goods, but the client wanted to rent a van instead because it was more reliable (and comfortable for that matter). Mrs. Wong replied that hiring a van was logistically unnecessary and more expensive. The client then answered that the money came out of his boss’ pocket so it did not matter how much money he would need to spend to deliver the goods. The client later explained that he and his boss (also probably Korean) worked out of Zhongshanba, where they had a warehouse to store the garments before they were exported to Korea. He then informed Mrs. Wong that she did not need to fit the hoodies in plastic bags or tag them with labels after they were folded, because his company had already hired workers to complete the job. (Perhaps the packaging and the tagging of the hoodies would have to be done in secret for some reason). In any case, after chatting with Mrs. Wong for a while, the young client dashed over to the convenience store across from us and brought over a dozen Red Bull drinks for all of us at the factory to quench our

thirst and renew our energy from the scorching heat of the day. When he presented his gift to Mrs. Wong, he apologized for the confusion about the deadlines, and acknowledged that garment labor was difficult because he had personally experienced the struggles since he was young. Mrs. Wong felt embarrassed by his kind act, and politely refused by stating, “*Bu hao yisi.*”

### **Temporal Materiality**

The material aspects of commodities, as they are signified by judgments in quality, dictate how workers execute their labor tasks and how they experience the passing of time along the assembly line. For the sewers in the factory, their calculation and experience of work time overlap with the team’s collective production time. Since the workers are paid on a piece-rate system, their working hours and pay rates are based on the specifics of the production process itself. In other words, the styles of the garments and the corresponding procedures required to construct the particular clothing dictate the laboring hours and conditions of the workers. Whenever I asked workers how much time remained before they could end their work day, they often turn to their baskets and count the number of unfinished garments they have to complete. If styles are particularly time-consuming or intricate, workers may be paid slightly more. Those who sew more slowly, make mistakes, or are unfamiliar with certain techniques in garment construction must stay behind to complete their batches.

In the Wongs' finishing department where I worked, an elderly couple in their late-50s occasionally helps in cutting loose threads off of finished garments. At night, they endure 12 – 16 hours of labor doing the same task in another larger factory nearby that produces clothing for the *Shi San Hang* wholesale market in Guangzhou. In both factories, they are paid less than 2 cents for every piece they complete. At the end of every shift, they would proudly announce the number of garments they completed to Mrs. Wong, declaring the work they accomplished as well as the wages they earned before returning home for supper. Quite frequently, sewers would call out for Mrs. Wong at the conclusion of their sewing task, summoning her to count the number of completed garments so that they could be paid. The practice of counting fabric pieces, finished and unfinished garments, money, and time thus served as everyday experiences of labor among workers in the factory. The passing of time as well as the specific conditions of labor for the workers, however, adhered to the specific dictates of the garment manufacturing processes.

Since garment styles and the specific procedures in garment construction determine workers' labor time and conditions, certain sewers voice preference in working with certain fabrics over others. Whenever Mrs. Wong encounters clients with garment samples made out of silk, chiffon, lace, or other delicate materials, she either charges them higher prices or rejects them altogether. In her mind, the loss of a potential client or a particular production order is outweighed by the technical difficulties in producing certain garment styles in the first place.

## **When Machines Fail**

The pressures among workers to meet production deadlines become more palpable at times when the machines that critically carry out the garment production processes unexpectedly fail. When production failures occur, the workers' dependence of the machines that sustain their source of living becomes all the more exposed.

One night, Mr. and Mrs. Wong were racing against time to finish packaging 800 T-shirts so that they could have a full night of sleep. While the couple juggled various tasks that afternoon, Mr. Wong's frenetic work pace indicated the high level of stress that penetrated the atmosphere. He even nagged Mrs. Wong to call a temporary worker to help out with the task of packaging. His urging eventually led to an argument with Mrs. Wong regarding what tasks (packaging some t-shirts now or continuing tagging) should be prioritized at that moment. As I quietly snipped the loose threads off of the finished tops, the iron with which Mr. Wong had worked suddenly blew out. I shifted my seat beside the iron in order to avoid being injured from a possible blast or electric surge from the ironing machine. Mr. Wong immediately stopped his routine to inspect the large machine. He pulled the side control in the shape of a large rectangular box in order to survey the plugs and pipes from behind. As Mr. Wong repeatedly attempted to test the machine, he declared out loud that the main control switches had failed to capture the steam that powered the iron. All the while, loud hissing sounds spewed from the metal iron though no visible steam or heat was released. As I diligently continued snipping off loose threads, I

could hear and feel the pounding of Mr. Wong's movements as he moved and tested the large ironing machine. In the meantime, everyone in the factory, including Mrs. Wong, their son, and me, kept nervously silent, while the deafening tension from Mr. Wong's failed attempts to fix the machine intensified around us. Everyone once in a while, Mrs. Wong gently acknowledged Mr. Wong's dilemma by stating, "So the machine's not working right now? That's going to be rather inconvenient for us right now (*hen ma fan*)."

After several failed attempts Mr. Wong finally rushed out on his bicycle in order to find the local repairman. Meanwhile, Mrs. Wong occasionally telephoned Carmen keeping the client up-to-date on the status of their packaging work. At one point, Mrs. Wong had expressed to Carmen how difficult and time-consuming the process of securing the cardboard tags was. At a later point in their conversations, Mrs. Wong calmly and politely explained to Carmen that the iron had stopped working by saying, "We're encountering some minor problems with the iron right now but Mr. Wong is getting it fixed now." As the hours wore on, Mr. Wong had hastily returned only to announce that the local repairman was busy with another task and could not help them at the moment. At that point, Mr. Wong's level of stress and nervousness became more visible to me. He paced back and forth between the repairman's storefront and the ironing machine in the factory while lighting up a cigarette every fifteen minutes. The smoke from his cigarettes suffocated the workers as the silent weight of the pervading stress left us feeling heavy, tired, yet agitated.

## **Labor Discipline through Techniques of Quality Control**

Labor discipline within home-based garment workshops materializes not only through the spatial and temporal dimensions of mass manufacture but only through signifiers of quality. Evaluations of product quality increasingly govern how techniques of manufacture, particularly in the ways that workers operate machines. By instilling quality controls and production deadlines, workers' bodily movements are intricately organized and timed. The speed at which a worker's sewing machines buzzes often indicates how fast she works. As Dunn (2004) points out, the term, quality control, is exemplary of flexible specialization techniques, since "just in time" manufacturing principles derive from scientific models of Total Quality Management (TQM). TQM is designed to enhance management control over worker output along every stage of the manufacturing process. Key to TQM techniques is the principle of ensuring continuous flows of commodity production and worker feedback. These techniques operate by regulating labor practices and techniques of commodity production. This is done by blurring the boundaries between people and objects such that workers become abstracted as objects possessing distinct qualities or categories and can be subject to self-evaluation and control by management (Dunn 2004). As the following vignettes show, judgments of the quality of objects become instruments of control over the rhythmic labor of machines and workers' bodies. By governing the outcome of the production process through the commodity, management essentially dictates the flow of the manufacturing process, primarily by abstracting people as objects that can be evaluated, disciplined, and controlled.

In one instance, I passed by a middle-aged male boss on the street who was enthusiastically advertising his factory which was based in Huadu, a suburb about an hour outside of Guangzhou. He was already engrossed in a conversation with a prospective female client who inquired about his factory's services. As I casually joined their conversation, he was discussing his worker management techniques. He stated,

Look, I know how workers think. They don't like to work with chiffon because many complain that it is difficult to work with. Nowadays, they simply don't want to take the extra time to make the garments. They want to make fast money. With chiffon, you have to work with a #9 needle because the thread count of chiffon is very fine. The workers' hands must be precise and stable when the needle hits the fabric. Otherwise, the fabric will slip off the needle sideways.

I then asked the boss to what extent the quality of machines, rather than the workers' skill or enthusiasm for labor, determined the outcome of the finished garments. To my surprise, he responded by explaining that none of the aforementioned factors matter. Rather, he stressed that the garments' quality and workmanship were determined by how the factory boss organized the labor process in terms of technique as well as worker discipline. In other words, he emphasized that management of the production team and worker discipline determined the quality and craftsmanship of the finished products. As a case in point, he recounted his previous



experience working as a budding employee in a garment factory. There, the factory boss decided to shorten the time-consuming and labor-intensive process of making A-line skirts by drawing patterns, sketching lines, and cutting fabric pieces before carefully assembling them. Instead, the chiffon A-line skirts were cut straight down on either side, sewed together along straight lines, and hung around a mannequin before the skirt was cut around the edges to create an A-shape all around. This construction was reflected in the way that the skirts fell unattractively on a woman's body. His story thus highlighted the short-cuts in garment construction that garment producers often took in order to save costs at the expense of garment quality and superior workmanship.

The boss' reference to quality control over people and objects along the assembly line highlights the blurring of boundaries between people and objects. Techniques of quality control highlight unequal relations of power over people and objects, upon which sub-contracting practices rely. Drawing Deleuze's (1992) theory on contemporary societies of control, Hardt and Negri (2000) have argued that geographical dispersal of manufacturing is accompanied by intensified auditing over certain aspects of commodity production. These facets include the management of finance and inventory through the use of elaborate computer information systems, as fast fashion models of corporate management demonstrate. Through computerized auditing techniques, workers' activities along assembly lines essentially become informational data, or what Deleuze calls "codes," that are abstracted from workers' experiences of mass manufacture. Through timing and quality control standards, sub-

contractors along each link of the supply chain can extend its disciplinary power downstream by keeping their employees accountable for the products they make while minimizing the financial and social costs of labor management. Bosses can also use these informational logs to trace commodities and capital as they circulate across time and space. Fast fashion corporations and contractors thus accumulate profits and govern its production chains through the highly variable circulation of money, workers, and goods. In other words, the movement of people and commodities is subject to control.

### **The Incommensurable Contours of Flexible Production**

Though relatively infrequent, disputes between the Wongs and their workers over the quality of the clothes reveal the ways in which the boss – worker hierarchy is constantly re-negotiated. Despite the fluctuations of the boss – worker categories and relationships, the painstaking work in collectively sustaining the relentless production process remains the ultimate priority among all participants. In simplified terms, the Wongs must sell the products of their hired employees' labor in order to sustain their business. At the same time, the workers must somehow endure the exploitative nature of their temporary work, including the long hours, monotonous labor, and low wages. In sum, the structural conditions dictated by the mode of flexible production ultimately make the Wongs' interests as factory owners necessarily contradict those of their workers, regardless of their shared experiences of work and their overlapping identities as migrant laborers. In other words, the Wongs' and their workers'

divergent roles within the production process essentially conflict, leading to heated arguments and sometimes even outright confrontations on the factory floor.

I have personally witnessed how these incommensurable conflicts of interests between the Wongs and their hired workers, shaped by the production process itself, sometimes sever the fragile and tenuous bonds created over long periods of time through their shared experiences of factory work. After about a two month absence from the Wongs' factory, I returned only find the shocking presence of many young migrant men and women at the sewing stations. The workers looked to be at most in their late teens. Some of them alternated between working at larger factories along the periphery of Guangzhou, and in smaller, informal factories like the Wong's factory around the Zhongda garment district. When I stepped inside the factory, I overheard Mrs. Wong chatting with one of the younger female worker. Mrs. Wong asked about the working hours in the larger factories. According to the young worker, she was allowed only one rest day a month. At that moment, Mrs. Wong expressed her sympathy for the young worker, acknowledging the difficulties in enduring such a grueling work schedule.

Then, I was suddenly struck by the marked absence of the Chus from their usual work stations in the back corner. The Chus were an elderly husband and wife couple who had migrated from Sichuan to Guangzhou years ago with their grown children in order to find work. During my first year in the factory, the presence of the Sichuanese couple along the back left-hand corner of the factory remained a stable,

comforting fixture for me in an otherwise highly fluid and unstable environment. That day, their sudden absence concerned me. So, I queried Mrs. Wong about their whereabouts, and whether they would come back. Mrs. Wong hesitantly replied that they had returned to their home village and added with an odd, trembling voice. “Yes, eh, I don’t know. They may or may not come back.”

Later that day, after I had inquired further about the Chus, she discreetly revealed to me that Mr. Chu had left under the most unpleasant circumstances. She explained that one afternoon Mr. Chu left the factory to rest for lunch. During that time, as Mrs. Wong explained, their client rushed the Wongs to finish an urgent order. Subsequently, Mrs. Wong ordered a young man to sit at Mr. Chu’s station temporarily to help finish the stitching on a sleeve. Coincidentally, Mr. Chu returned in time to discover that the young man had sat in his station. Mr. Chu interpreted the young man’s act of sitting at his station as a sign of disrespect towards him, a signal that Mr. Chu would simply be replaced. He subsequently reprimanded the Wongs for hiring too many inexperienced teenage workers, a management decision Mr. Chu vehemently opposed. Mr. Chu then blazed out in a fury, taking his wife with him, never to return again. As Mrs. Wong retold her story to me, she remarked, “You know how Mr. Chu is. He’s got a hot temper.” In her voice, I could not help but notice a tinge of sadness and regret, particularly because I had personally witnessed the special rapport the Wongs shared with Mr. Chu. In fact, everyone in the factory, including the Wongs, addressed him respectfully as Chu Shifu, a title that accorded him honor and respect for his skills, experience, and hard work. After I heard her

story, I felt Mrs. Wong's grief for their loss of their friendship. I then recalled a moment I had witnessed months before when Mr. Wong bonded with Mr. Chu. When Mr. Wong paid Mr. Chu his wages after a few days of labor, Mr. Wong at that time didn't have necessary change to pay Mr. Chu the remaining 3-5 RMB owed to him. Out of their mutual respect and honor, Mr. Wong offered to hand him a 10 RMB note, but Mr. Chu insistently refused. During their exchange, I observed the mutual smiles and eye contact that acknowledged their close relationship. With a quick and unforeseen incident, it seemed that the foundations of their friendship had unexpectedly crumbled.

After Mrs. Wong's revelation, I tried to imagine the unfolding of events in my mind. I couldn't help but imagine the insult Mr. Chu must have felt when he discovered that he had simply been replaced. Since Mr. Chu embodied the figure of honor and pride in factory labor, he must have been quite perplexed by how a young man could unexpectedly replace him at the station. Mr. Chu's fury highlighted for me the unevenness of class identifications and conceptions of work along the generational spectrum of workers who must confront each other when they work elbow to elbow along the factory floor. Mr. Chu's act of storming out the factory doors gestured an absolute rejection against the changes that characterized the emergent form of flexible production that the Wongs and the workers must embrace. Mr. Chu's sudden absence embodied the message that he would not accept those uncomfortable changes, nor would he participate in it. His rejection also affirmed that neither he nor any worker could be simply replaced. His non-participation in flexible

production underscored the reality that such form of fast production was not as acceptable to him. One could not forget the fact that every worker brought to the sewing table their life histories, life experiences, dreams, expectations, and most of all dignity and sense of pride in their labor.

Later, I wondered whether Mr. Chu's break away from the Wong's factory floor meant a loss for Mr. Chu as much as it meant for the Wongs. When Mrs. Wong recalled the incident she regretfully commented that he could easily find another position at another factory in the neighborhood. After all, other owners and workers in the neighborhood knew Mr. Chu, signaling that he had established an honorable reputation for himself in the surrounding neighborhood. In fact, Mrs. Wong stated, "You know, he can find a job anywhere among the factories here." Her comment thus registered a sense of loss for them. At the same time, however, Mr. Chu's interpretation of the incident as personally offensive must have meant that the young man's presence signaled a threat to him – that somehow that Mr. Chu's labor and life history could be easily erased. I was certain that Mr. Chu's interpretation of the events as offensive were woven with a sense of loss tied his honor and pride in his labor. If in fact Mr. Chu found another factory job, would his relationships with the boss be the same or similar with his close friendship with the Wongs? Would he be confronted with the same sense of alienation in his work and identity as a factory worker? Would he be equally valued for his work and dedication elsewhere? How did this confrontation affect his conception of labor and identity as a factory worker? Finally, Mr. Chu's act led me to wonder about the countless moments of resistance

that occur in the thousands of hidden workspaces and factories around the neighborhood. The fluid, temporary nature of the garment manufacturing processes certainly makes attempts to collectivize difficult to accomplish among the workers. It also makes it difficult to cast light on the ephemeral moments of workers' resistance.

As the above cases demonstrated, the labor of creating and negotiating the boss – worker relationship operated within the particularities of the flexible mode of garment production. These processes, in turn, highlight the divergence of interests among factory owners and wage workers. As small-scale factory owners producing low-cost, standard-quality fashion, the Wongs' maintain interests in securing a portion of profits from the workers' labor time. Meanwhile, workers express concerns over the conditions of their labor. Their shared and intimate experiences of work and home life were abruptly interrupted when workers threatened the fluid operation of the garment production processes through resistance, non-participation, or shoddy work. Thus, though the specific mode of production facilitated the shared experiences of space, work, and time, it was also from the production process itself that the Wongs must assert their authority as boss and must occasionally reject their affinity and mutual identification as workers.

### **Suzhi (Human Quality) and Growing Ambivalence toward Factory Labor**

In post-socialist China, the question of who is “boss” among self-employed wage laborers and independent contractors along the supply chains is conditioned by discursive judgments on human quality or *suzhi* as a historically specific mode of

social engineering and evaluation. Though generally indefinable, ideas about human quality exist as a social fact, engendering prescriptive norms and value judgments of *zuo ren* or being human (Yan 2008, Kipnis 2006). In particular, as Anagnost (2004), Kipnis (2006), and Yan (2008) assert, *suzhi* mobilizes the language of modernization and economic development by casting the urbanized, middle-class consumer as a figure of capitalist aspiration and desire in contradistinction to the relatively backward migrant laborer. It does so by privileging cities as the locus of modernity, while signifying the countryside as a wasteland of backwardness (Yan 2008). In effect, *suzhi* discourses govern the migration of rural people into Chinese cities by eliciting their desires to become urban citizens. Thus, just as commodities are subject to assessment and control, *suzhi* discourses subject personhoods to evaluative criteria according to distinctions of high and low as well as categories of possession (Kipnis 2006). The term acquires discursive power by reconstructing personhood as possessive individuals (Strathern 1988), who can acquire certain qualities or characteristics through consumption, education, childhood nurture, and skills acquisition (Anagnost 2004). Through qualities of civility, self-discipline, and modernity, *suzhi* links the concepts of market value and the language of economic development with interiorized reconstructions of the self (Yan 2008).

While some anthropologists have examined consumption and education as means of acquiring *suzhi* (Pun 2003, Anagnost 2004, Kipnis 2006), others have analyzed how *suzhi* discourses color the work life of migrant workers in the cities (Yan 2003 and 2008, Pun 2005). Drawing from the works of Pun and Yan, I argue



that assessing the quality of people disciplines the movement of temporary migrant laborers in and out of factory spaces, just as the politics of quality control govern the movement of commodities. In other words, discourses of *suzhi* and human quality operate much like the mechanisms of control over the quality of commodities. To be sure, the cultural work of mobilizing low wage labor en masse from the countryside to the factories entails the commodification of personhood that can be attained, bought, and sold in the marketplace.

For many migrant workers, factories represent sites of sociality, upon which rural migrants can acquire *suzhi* and learn to become urbanized citizens. In practice, however, once they arrive in the factories, migrant laborers must confront evaluations of *suzhi* by managers and urban residents in and out of factory settings. Their assessments are quantified by wage labor (Yan 2008), since low wage (migrant) labor indicates the possession of low *suzhi*. Thus, by folding these discourses of self reconstruction into the wider projects of neoliberal economic development, *suzhi* directs people's ongoing desires along a linear trajectory with no clear and definable goals. It is through these ambiguities that *suzhi* mobilizes power by generating continuing desires toward a largely indefinable and unattainable end point. Furthermore, migrant workers' means of acquiring *suzhi* rest predominantly on selling their laboring bodies, skills, and time on the job market. Their means of acquiring characteristics of human quality depend on the commodification of their time and labor capacity in the factories, the very sites in which evaluations of human quality are engineered to create productive bodies in the marketplace.

By signifying rural identities and low wage labor as the undesired “other,” migrants within the migrant enclave in Guangzhou struggle within the intermediary condition of being suspended between the categories of rural or urban, as well as entrepreneurs and wage workers. Much like the urban village itself, images of “the factory” represent a stepping stone from which a wage worker can elevate her status to that of an entrepreneur. Here, the politics of *suzhi* color migrants’ ambiguous relationships between the categories of wage worker and entrepreneur. As small-scale factory owners like the Wongs struggle to define themselves as entrepreneurs, their status as migrants keeps them stigmatized as backward people with low *suzhi*. Meanwhile, wage workers must negotiate the conditions of their temporary labor with the needs of making financial ends meet. In other words, migrant entrepreneurs and wage workers alike must labor to cast off their identities as so-called country bumpkins with low *suzhi*, while being equally subjected to judgments of quality by urban outsiders. These dynamics of power and discipline further blur the ambiguous positions of migrant wage worker and entrepreneur.

Moreover, the association of low wage labor with low (human) quality, coupled with unfavorable working conditions, has increasingly compelled migrants within the urban village to perceive factory work either as a temporary stepping stone to employment in the service industry or as a dead end, a mere means of fulfilling their financial obligations. My conversations with wage workers around the Zhongda garment district point to a growing ambivalence toward factory labor. In this final section, I retell how workers within the Wongs’ factory-workshop describe their

experiences of garment manufacture, in light of low wages, stigmas associated with factory work, and the downward pressures they face in fulfilling last minute production deadlines.

To my surprise, a number of workers in the industrial workshop, both young and old, have openly expressed their dislike for garment manufacture and view entrepreneurship as a means of achieving freedom from the physical confines of factory. Some youths, for example, voice their hopes for pursuing their dreams of prosperity and entrepreneurial success. Meanwhile, older workers, if they are physically able, engage in temporary factory labor as a source of extra income to weather financial storms. Many of the older laborers that I have encountered complain how their bodies have been worn down from decades of hard work. Overall, inter-generational workers tend to favor more lucrative and favorable jobs in the service or business sectors, which they believe offer more opportunities for wealth and more freedom to dictate the terms of one's own labor.

One such worker is Xiao Dong, a family friend of Mrs. Wong whom she helped raise in their home village beginning when she was twelve years old. The twenty-three year old bachelor arrived at the Wongs' factory last year to provisionally assist the couple with their production orders. In the meantime, he explored the city on his days off by riding the metro trains around town. After living and working at the factory for about four to five months, he traveled to Shenzhen where he found service work at a local restaurant. When I asked him about his work history one day,

he elaborated that he started off in a toy factory in Jiangmen about five to seven years ago when he was 17 years old. Looking back on his early days in the factory, he recalled fragments of very undesirable memories. He described his work in the factory as difficult (*xin ku*), since he only earned about 300 RMB a month working twelve-hour shifts with only one or two holidays a month. Though the company names of the manufacturer and the clients remained unknown to me, he said that the factory produced plastic dolls and toys that resembled machine-like superhero figures. When I asked about the safety of the workers, he stated that the factory was relatively safe, with possibly several workers falling ill due to skin allergies from the plastic chemicals that were utilized in the production processes.

Recalling his factory days with bitterness, he stated, “No one wants to work in a factory anymore. It’s too much of a struggle (*tai xin ku*).” Rather, he explained he prefers working in a restaurant instead. He further elaborated, “Most jobs nowadays depend on a mutual friend for introductions,” thereby implying that good-paying jobs with reasonable working conditions require introductions from a trusted friend or family member. He continued, “Now, my job’s ok. As with most jobs, if you just do your work day in day out, the boss just leaves you alone. That’s just how it is.” As the afternoon wore on, he loitered around the factory aimlessly as if he had nothing better to do on his day off. When I suggested that he should go out for a walk to recharge and enjoy some fresh air, he seemed uninterested possibly because he didn’t feel comfortable with the idea of roaming alone in an unfamiliar environment. As I continued working, he placed his head beneath his wrapped arms on the table with a

deep sigh. Then, he suddenly cried out, “Ah, it’s so boring here. If you ask me to come back to work, I would refuse. I don’t know how I could go back to doing this type of work.” His comment suggested that he has moved on from the tedium and monotony of factory work and is unable to return. He added, “At least at the restaurant, there are people to talk to and always something to do so the time passes by faster.” Finally, out of sheer frustration, Xiao Dong finally gave in, picked up a few dresses, and started to cut loose ends from the finished garments. When I asked him, “So, you’ve decided to work after all,” he answered, “Yup, I couldn’t help it. I’m too bored!”

At times, older workers in the factory perceived the pursuit of entrepreneurship as an opportunity that was reserved only for the young and able. On the days that the elderly couple from Fujian came by the factory when they made their daily rounds through the neighborhood taking up temporary jobs here and there, the wife almost without fail pulled a chair beside me and chatted incessantly about money as we both snipped away at the loose ends of finished garments. One day, as Carmen came by to discuss an order with Mrs. Wong, the Fujianese wife speculated on the prospects of Carmen’s business. According to her, Carmen raked in handsome profits from every dress that passed through the workers’ hands. She speculated, “She can make a fortune selling these by the piece. These dresses go through many, many bosses (*tong guo hen duo laoban*) before they are sold at the final price. You can flip these like crazy (*chao si le*)!” The Fujianese wife later added that the economic conditions in China today were much better than those of the Maoist period because

people weren't as poor. She stated, "Now it's a matter of self-responsibility (or depending on one's self)" (*kao ziji*). One must make money for one's self in order to ensure a good living." She later qualified her statements by pointing out that as a result of the market economy, some people today were very rich and some very poor. She added "There are rich people and there are poor people. That is how it is today." Her comments not only emphasized the class inequalities that pervaded Chinese society today, but she also highlighted those excluded from the enviable ranks of the aspiring entrepreneur like her and other members of her generation. Later, she complained about the difficulties of earning a living at her advanced age. She described her body as worn by years of labor, and said that she could no longer work as efficiently or as strenuously as the younger workers. Over time, her body could only endure the more slow-paced labor such as cutting thread, despite the fact that these tasks paid significantly less than sewing and other more physically demanding jobs. During dinner, she revealed to the workers in the factory that she had actually stolen work time (*tou gong zuo*) from her regular job at the fabric store so that she could earn a little extra money on the side. She added that in the past hour of snipping loose threads, she had only earned 3 kuai because some clothing styles were so difficult to work with.

Another middle-aged mother from Guangxi reflected on her labor as a garment worker by stating, "I've been doing this for a long, long time...." I then asked her if she would often make her own clothes but she fell silent as the machine buzzed with fervor. Afterwards, I added that I hoped to learn how to sew my own

clothes someday. In surprise, she immediately rejected the idea by saying that a student like me does not (and should not) have to learn how to make clothes. “Why would you want do this? It would be a waste of time for you. I’ve been doing this for over twenty years! Sometimes I get so tired at the end of the day and just want to give up doing this. But I think to myself and wonder what else I could possibly do. Then I realize there’s nothing else. So I just give up and keep up with this (work).”

In short, the unfavorable experiences of factory employment within Guangzhou’s fast fashion sector have led some wage workers to express their growing ambivalence toward factory labor. Certainly, the pressures of meeting tight production deadlines and of facilitating the rapid turnover of fashion commodities have tested the limits of the well-being and bodily capacities of inter-generational factory workers. Although the informal organization of garment production characteristic of the Wongs’ factory-workshop grants wage workers a certain degree of mobility, they nevertheless face long working hours, low wages, and monotonous working conditions. Consequently, they tend to view their temporary labor as a stepping stone to entrepreneurial ventures or permanent retirement from wage work.

To conclude, this chapter shows how the specific spatiotemporal dimensions of fast fashion manufacturing blur the distinctions between factory owners and wage-workers. While the relative ease with which people and objects float in and out of the factory premises characterizes this emerging entrepreneurial world, migrants’ laboring bodies and temporal rhythms of work are regulated through strict quality

control and unforgiving production deadlines. By narrating the daily tempo of work in a garment factory workshop, this chapter reveals the everyday negotiations of labor discipline, which are often punctuated by moments of relative mobility and freedom. Specifically, I show how migrants' experiments in self-employment entail trial and error negotiations in determining who the "bosses" are along the chain of labor discipline and command. These processes, in turn, shape how market participants experience labor in the realm of garment manufacture, particularly their movements in and out of the factory premises and the social relationships that constitute this migrant community.



### **Chapter 3: Charting Desires and Risks: A Walk through Guangzhou's**

#### **Wholesale Markets**

A stroll through the corridors of Guangzhou's wholesale markets for fashion is rarely an effortless journey. The dizzying assortment of prints, colors, styles, and fabrics assaults the senses. One must stop dead in her tracks just to skim through the countless wall displays featuring the latest fashion designs. Within moments, an impatient shopper pushes a passer-by from behind, as another bargain hunter stumbles upon a storefront advertising countless styles, prints, and colors. Amidst this staggering spectacle, certain familiar patterns or recognizable styles quickly begin to emerge. The pink heart-shaped pattern set against the solid background of midnight blue bursts forth in the form of a sleeveless A-line dress with an elastic cinched waist. Next door, that same pink and blue heart pattern materializes as a pair of trumpet-shaped pant that sits loose on top and gradually narrows downward, tightly hugging the ankles. Young women sporting identical printed tees with prints of the pop icon Lady Gaga pass by each other through the streets of Guangzhou while the latest Versace-inspired multi-colored paisley print set against a solid orange and red background explodes on the fabric and garment scenes. An ocean of paisley prints that decorate the walls of nearly every stall at the Zhongda fabric markets can also be found in the form of pants, dresses, and tops at the Shi San Hang market, the Huimei market, and on popular fashion websites and in department stores throughout North America.

This chapter describes the emergence of self-employed, enterprising wholesalers, market intermediaries, and aspiring designers who capitalize on their consumption practices in order to become producers and entrepreneurs in their own right. With modest amounts of starting capital, young men and women of the post-1980s generation converge upon the streets, wholesale markets, and retail outlets of Guangzhou in order to buy and sell fast fashions. Their self-professed claims to consumption expertise lead them to aspire to become self-employed entrepreneurs despite limited prior knowledge about fashion design, garment construction, and merchandising. As a generation of youths who have come of age after Deng Xiaoping's introduction of market reforms during the late 1970s and the first generation of internet users in China, these young consumers serve as the targeted audience of heavy consumer advertising endorsed by multinational corporations. Rather than becoming the passive, alienated observers of the consumer spectacle as Guy Debord (1967) assumes, many of these members of the post-1980s consumer youths are experimenting to convert their consumption habits into an alternative means of capital accumulation by reselling fashion. These hopeful youths scour through the internet and exchange ideas through fashion blogs, thereby using the Web to create virtual platforms upon which they can pursue their entrepreneurial aspirations.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> The use of the internet as virtual and alternative spaces for an emergent participatory culture has served as a basis of research for scholars and writers on digital media. Writer Axel Bruns (1997) has further elaborated on Toffler's (1980) notion of prosumption by introducing the concept of produsage, a type of virtual creation by web users. These creations include blogs, Wikipedia, and open source software. He argues that the networks of prosumption consist of a loop of unidirectional connections

Independent wholesalers among Guangzhou's numerous markets for low-cost garments, shoes, and accessories, such as the Shi San Hang and Huimei markets, encompass diverse groups of entrepreneurs whose ages span from 18 to 45. They claim various national identities and ethnic origins including Chinese, Korean, Nigerians, Senegalese, etc. Their positions as intermediaries between the local manufacturers and their retail distributors along the garment production chain in Guangzhou collectively serve to provide consistent flows of new designs destined for local and transnational markets. They also manage orders placed by transnational clients from faraway places. These cultural and market brokers commonly take down orders (*xia dan*) from their foreign clients, while they simultaneously create new designs in order to develop their own labels. The profits generated from their intermediary work as agents, or "jobbers" as they are colloquially called, help to support their enterprising ventures such as opening their own retail store, working as high-end stylists, or developing their own fashion lines. The continued growth of the garment and fashion industries in Guangzhou over the past ten years has thus engendered a myriad of business possibilities for agents and other intermediaries

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from producer to distributor to consumer and back to producer, rather than the bidirectional exchanges with which we are familiar today (2008:13). He emphasizes that the presumption model as well as other models based on continuing and inherent distinctions between producers, distributors, and consumers are no longer viable (*ibid*). The breakdown of these distinctions includes the making of physical products as well, a subject that I investigate in the case of fast fashion. The topic of digital media as entrepreneurial sites of capital accumulation remains to be explored.

In China, popular sites include instant messaging and shopping websites such as Taobao, QQ and Weibo, which operate much like Ebay and Twitter in the US. Weibo, in particular, emphasizes the use of photos so that users can share their thoughts quickly through visual techniques. QQ offers virtual chatrooms where netizens can share tips and opinions about the styles that are popular, as well as which local manufacturers are reliable and trust-worthy.

along the production chain as migrant entrepreneurs from all corners of the world flood the city's market spaces for fast fashion. Since these entrepreneurs usually possess little to no formal training in fashion design or merchandising, they must learn the details about how the markets operate through experimentation and on-the-job practice.

By examining the relationships between these market intermediaries and garment manufacturers, this chapter details how risks and losses are mutually constructed among intermediary buyers within the city's wholesale markets, as well as by manufacturers and wage-workers within the garment factories for fast fashion. I argue that the rapid turnover of stylistic trends leads market participants to assess and hedge potential risks and losses through the speculative flipping of fashion objects and real estate. In effect, the speedy and unrelenting cycles of fast fashion transform market spaces and determine the social relations upon which the circulation of fast fashion depends. In this chapter, I draw upon my previous discussion of workers' temporal experiences of labor in order to elaborate on how the materiality of fashion styles, as well as the temporal cycles of fashion in and out of the wholesale markets in Guangzhou change factories and market spaces, while shaping market desires and risks are accessed among intermediary agents, factory owners, and wage-workers.

I begin this chapter by describing the roles of market intermediaries and agents within Guangzhou's fast fashion sector. I provide a theoretical overview of fast fashion as an example of flexible accumulation. I then detail how market

intermediaries' attempts to hedge risks and profit losses determine the speed and paths through which fashion commodities circulate. I highlight, in particular, their profit-driven and speculative practices in the reselling of fashion commodities and commercial real estate, which intensify competition and exacerbate already unstable market conditions in Guangzhou. In the second half of this chapter, I link these exchange activities with the conditions of garment mass manufacture, underscoring the ways in which factory workers similarly appropriate consumerist desires through the language of fashion. This consumerist orientation, in turn, enables workers to position themselves with the global commodity links for fast fashion and to negotiate the terms of their exploited labor. Overall, these ethnographic snapshots illustrate how market participants' divergent desires and perceptions of market risks along each link of the supply chain intimately connect and transform the spaces and relations of production and consumption..

### **Market “Jobbers”: The Intermediary Links between Production and Consumption**

Because of the relentless cycles of trends and fashion, small-scale entrepreneurs and wage-workers labor to keep pace with demanding production schedules. Designers, agents, and manufacturers must constantly anticipate future trends in order to make profits and weather extreme market fluctuations. Fashion forecasting websites and fashion magazines from China and abroad have become engines of market information that enable various participants along the commodity chains to quickly identify future trends and compete to become the first to capitalize

on the latest fads. On-line forums enable netizens to exchange questions and advice on garment design and manufacturing. Participants also share reviews and experiences about particular manufacturers throughout the PRD region, thus facilitating an open-source platform for the distribution of valuable market information. Informal bookstores offer shelves of pictorial catalogs showcasing the ideas for future trends. Many shopkeepers informally set up tables stacked with fashion magazines along sidewalks adjacent to the colossal Zhongda fabric market. Private companies, which offer on-line subscription access to the latest couture fashion shows around the world, have also sprung up along the walkways leading to the wholesale markets around the garment district. Despite the technological advancements in photography, the internet, and design applications that enable consumers to dictate the terms and the scheduling of the production processes, market participants must constantly anticipate possible losses in profits and entire business ventures in face of extreme market fluctuations, while fulfilling entrepreneurial and consumerist desires.

In order to sustain extreme market swings, small-scale entrepreneurs have devised speculative practices that shorten production schedules. Wholesalers and designers purchase merchandise from one retail outlet, retag the items, and resell them as their original products. Oftentimes, these market intermediaries side-step the retagging process and simply resell garments as their very own. In one instance, I have observed a high-end couture designer swap out a tag on a garment in order to pass it off as his unique design at over ten times its original cost. In fact, the practice

of reselling among the garment wholesale markets throughout Guangzhou is so pervasive that locals describe the act as flipping or *chao huo*, whereby goods travel, or quite literally “flip” (*chao*), from one market and are resold in another. Indeed, as the term suggests, flipping implies the act of speculation or the accumulation of fictitious capital, since no physical means of production has been applied to alter the materiality of the goods.<sup>46</sup>

Other agents and manufacturers in Guangzhou’s fast fashion niche attempt to quicken the processes of design and production by downloading images from magazines or from the Web and modifying them according to what they imagine their consumers desire. These market participants mirror in many ways the DIY (“do it yourself”) stylists that Luvaas (2012) illustrates through his ethnographic accounts of digitized youth culture in Indonesia. While Luvaas views DIY practices as potential outlets for creative personification and artistry, I emphasize how the seemingly democratizing effects of DIY culture are often curbed by risky and speculative exchanges among market participants. Like the DIY youths in Indonesia, the stylistic interpretations among the entrepreneurial fashionistas in China are not passive reflections of what their consumers demand. Rather, their design translations require synergistic processes of actively reading various looks, developing a personal language of fashion, and anticipating future market trends. By scouring fashion

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<sup>46</sup> In *Capital* [(1867) 1992] Karl Marx broaches the subject of fictitious capital in his critique of the capitalist political economy. Though his discussion centers on intangible forms of capital, including legal titles, money, stocks, and securities, I aim to show that reselling fast fashions operates under similarly speculative schemes.

magazines and internet consumer platforms, these agents and manufacturers attempt to leverage their consumer-oriented practices of assessing market trends. On various occasions, agents and manufacturers remark that their most difficult challenge is analyzing and brainstorming new looks in time for up-coming fashion seasons. Their claims to fashion expertise rest upon their possession of a personal taste for fashion and a keen eye on what looks good. Their imagined roles in the marketplace exemplify what Horning (2011) describes as emergence of the so-called design ideology, in which public identities are anchored upon brands and other insignias of an overheated consumer culture. Driven by the visual signifiers and aesthetic judgments from the art and design worlds, these market intermediaries carve a place within the fast fashion niche in order to capitalize on their abilities to out-predict their market competitors.

### **Dimensions of “Just-in-Time” Delivery of Fast Fashion**

As the name “fast fashion” implies, temporality plays a critical role in the constant remaking of this market niche as an end-in-itself. Unlike couture fashions, fast fashion relies on the quick and ongoing turnover of stylistic trends within shorter production cycles. From a theoretical perspective, the manufacture of fast fashion based on quick turn-over and a widening diversity of styles intensifies the temporal cycles of market supply and demand. These market cycles in turn necessitate a ceaseless temporal re-ordering of consumer desires through the subjective constructions of scarcity and excess. Citing Walter Benjamin’s notes on fashion in The Arcades Project (2002), Michael Taussig (2012) explains that the cycles of



fashion styles and trends reflect the ritualistic metaphors of life and death, whereby the shorter shelf-life or relevancy of a particular style (its “quick death”) ensures the creation or (or re-birth) of another style which in turn sustain the reproduction of “newness.<sup>47</sup>” In other words, constructions of “the present” (by declaring what styles are “in”) become ever more truncated and elusive. What gets counted as “the present” is quickly thrown into the dustbin of the constructed past until its fragments become appropriations for future reproductions and translations. Thus, fast fashion’s play on temporality makes the ephemerality of the present so elusive that it collapses the boundaries that once delimited the ordering of the past, present, and future. As industry insider, Sharon Graubard from the popular fashion forecasting site Stylesight once announced, consuming fast fashion breaks from the temporal restrictions of fashion, since the sheer diversity of styles in the market frees up the entire vocabulary of the history of fashion (for example, what gets counted as “vintage” or “classic”) and enables consumers to re-construct their so-called “authentic selves.”<sup>48</sup>

Thus, styles have become unfixed from any specific historical period to the extent that the former classifications of styles as retro or vintage no longer apply. For Graubard, fast fashion has become unmoored from any temporal anchoring. In other

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<sup>47</sup> Joseph Schumpeter’s (1994) concept of creative destruction is applicable here in that he argues that business cycles are perpetuated out of destruction of a prior economic order. More specifically, capitalism must devalue existing forms of wealth through crisis and economic bubbles in order to create new sources of wealth. The constant turnover of stylistic trends characteristic of the fast fashion industry would be an example of creative destruction.

<sup>48</sup> This reference is taken from the webinar, Fall/ Winter 2013 Runway Roadmap, on stylesight.com. Stylesight has a branch office on the upper floor of the Zhongda Fabric market, where the research for this dissertation is based.

words, fast fashion has no linear progression from the past to the present. In effect, these intensified turn-over of so-called “new” styles artificially propagate an enduring culture of commodity scarcity with no beginning and no end. As Taussig claims, “Scarcity is not the mark of so-called primitive society but instead of so-called affluent society, where, as the craze to consume spreads ever wider, enabling capitalist growth, so does the feeling that one never has enough, combined with the even greater feeling of having to consume more (2012:22).” By perpetuating the fuel of ongoing longings, commodity scarcity evokes and reproduces mass consumerist desires as an end in itself. Though the range and customization of styles are wide ranging, inventories are kept at small-scales in order to keep up with consumer demands for new and differentiated looks. As Horning (2011) concludes, the multiplication of new looks through shorter production cycles perpetuates consumers’ desires for constant shopping. For him, the globally-recognized fast fashion chain, Forever 21, serves what it purports to deliver; that is, never-ending desires among its targeted female consumers to achieve or maintain perpetual youth through constant shopping (*ibid*).<sup>49</sup>

As a case in point, Ling, a young Chinese woman from nearby Foshan, once operated a stall on the second floor of the Shi San Hang market, a wholesale outlet that supplies fast fashion to retail shops around the world. One day, she explained to

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<sup>49</sup> Horning (2011) goes on to theorize on the figure of the accidental bricoleurs who emerge as a result of fast fashion’s emphasis on consumption by offering constantly changing trends. Thanks to the technological advancements offered by the internet, including programs such as Facebook, Weibo (China), Instagram, Tumblr, and Twitter, consumers can now become the co-authors of their own online identities by downloading photos of themselves and by creating their online profiles.

me in detail the processes by which she chooses and copies her clothing styles for sale in the mass markets. Agents and stall owners who, like Ling, design and sell women's contemporary fashions begin by flipping through popular fashion magazines geared toward young, female, and mostly urban shoppers. They comb through noted fashion publications including Vogue China, Marie Claire, ViVi and Oggi magazines in order to survey the latest colors, fabrics, patterns, and styles. Localized editions of transnational magazines such as Vogue China are tailored to reflect the specific tastes among various fashion market segments. However, many agents from the Shi San Hang and Huimei markets such as Ling draw heavily from the Euro-American, Japanese, and Korean markets, since their brands are considered the most accessible and recognizable among mass consumers across Asia. Internet sites also provide a pool of visual and market information for their readers. QQ is a very popular site among young entrepreneurs in the local garment industry. QQ *qun*, or groups, parallel America's MSN, in serving as a virtual platform for informational exchange among their members, who collectively share details about where to find particular fabrics and factories throughout China. Members also share recommendations on local manufacturers or suppliers throughout the PRD region. They may even share information on fashion forecasting, including news about upcoming trends.

Those with access to other parts of the world bring garment and accessory samples from distant parts of the globe, thereby enjoying a competitive edge over other sellers by bringing more unique, exceptional goods to the local garment circuits.

Their excursions highlight the pathways through which images, clothing, and fabrics travel in and out of the city. For example, two young Congolese women in their late twenties, Adrian and Nadine, have arrived in Guangzhou six years ago in 2006 to learn Chinese, study fashion design, and try their hand in fashion retail. Their mothers and friends in the Congo would send them clippings and samples of the hottest trends among young female shoppers there. Adrian and Nadine would then translate the designs according to their imagination and hire Chinese manufacturers to mass produce garments based on their designs. Afterwards, Adrian and Nadine sell these garments to Congolese women in their boutique back home. Though the two entrepreneurs emphasize certain quintessential “African” kente-inspired fabrics and styles as their sources of inspiration, Nadine admits that she has been influenced by the construction of the *qipao*. During our conversation, Nadine pointed to the bell-bottom shaped denim overalls she wore that day, which she proudly designed herself. Eagerly tugging upright the edges of the collar, she explained that the collar closely resembled the straight lines and the curvy shapes of the *qipao*, thereby highlighting the influences of traditional Chinese dress on their own artistic endeavors.

Another friend, Helen, a vibrant 28 year-old business woman from the Dongbei region operates a showroom selling printed T-shirts on the upper floors of the Shi San Hang market. She often travels around the world in search of samples to copy or re-design. According to her, she travels to Korea and Japan twice a year, Hong Kong at least three times a year, and Italy once or twice a year to retrieve samples. The loud, colorful prints that she brings from Europe have been bought and

redistributed via her wholesale clients to all over China and other parts of Asia. Her overseas journeys have instilled in her a cosmopolitan outlook toward her business ventures. She consistently brainstorms with her foreign colleagues in the fashion industry about establishing transnational business ventures that would endow her with financial independence so that she could easily glide in and out of China.

Aided by modern technologies including the Internet, mobile phones, iPhones, and iPads, sellers from the Shi San Hang and Huimei markets as well as from all over the world bring selected images with them as they scour the Zhongda fabric market in search of the most appropriate fabric and accessories, raw materials that enable the reproductions of their envisioned designs. Agents then bring these materials to garment factories and workshops around the fabric market, which are often referred to as *jia gongchang*, or assembly factories such as the Wong's industrial workshop. There, these production sites rely primarily on temporary work provided by the city's migrant population, whose labors are divided along the garment production chain in which their factories specialize. For example, *da ban gong* or sample-making factories create paper patterns and produce the necessary garment samples before they are sent to larger factories for large-scale manufacture.

The term *jiagong chang* or assembly sites refer to factories that specifically provide the added value of human labor in garment manufacture and assembly at a scale usually ranging from a hundred to two thousand pieces per order. Specialized labor is divided among these production sites, because certain types of fabric require

particular labor techniques and machines in garment manufacture. For example, certain *jia gongchang* only specialize in particular kinds of fabrics such as denim, chiffon, or synthetic silks, since their production requires specific machines and human skill. Additionally, because embellishments including the placement of zippers, buttons, elastic, jewels, and sequins on the garments require extra labor power, larger *jia gongchang* often sub-contract these tasks to more specialized assembly sites nearby. *Jia gongchang* also do not provide any fabrics or raw materials for the customers in order to maintain their cost-effectiveness and efficiency. The organizational division of labor among their low-paying garment workers facilitates the small to medium-scale manufacture of low-cost clothing, as well as the quick turn-around of styles. Furthermore, the costs of raw materials are passed from the manufacturers to the agents or market sellers, who must provide the fabrics and other raw materials themselves. After the mass manufacture of garments is complete, the finished products are then whisked away to the wholesale markets around town for distribution and sale.

### **Tracking the Temporal Cycles of Fast Fashion**

Bringing samples to local manufacturers for mass-production requires agents to manage costs as well as make careful assessments of time. While time is primarily spent scouring through magazines, internet sites, and other market stalls for new clothing styles, Ling elaborates that buying or picking up fabrics and other raw materials consumes much of her time, since she must often wait for two to three hours at the fabric market while the materials are retrieved from storage. She must also

invest time and energy in carefully inspecting her merchandise before she sells it on the open market. She recounts a time when she had to return her order to the manufacturer because the quality of workmanship was poor. In order to run the daily operations of her stall, she hires a worker who looks after her stall two or three times a week.

The circulations of images, people, raw materials, and garments in and out of these production sites and through the market spaces follow strict annual cycles of fashion trends. During the months of August and September leading to the Guangzhou's famous trade show, the Canton Fair, most international clients filter through Guangzhou in search of the newest fall trends. In fact, the show in September marks the beginning of the fall season, coinciding with Fashion Week in New York, Paris, and London. Many factories that handle garments for direct export to Euro-America receive production orders in July in preparation for the following spring collection. March and April mark the beginning of the spring season, while the period from June through August, a term known locally as *dam gui* (off-season), is characterized as the slowest business period in the year. Unlike the months of February and early September during which most merchandise are cleared out at discounted rates (a process referred to as *qing huo*), the months of June through August mark the slowest business period for manufacturers and wholesalers in yearly fashion calendar. During this time, business in the markets slows down dramatically, and many garment factories temporarily close, forcing migrants to retreat to the home villages.

Carmen, a 26-year-old Guangzhou native who produces children's clothing for her overseas clients, operates a spacious showroom in Zhongshanba, Guangzhou's largest wholesale market for children's clothing. Following in the entrepreneurial footsteps of her father and her late mother, she develops and sells her own line of children's clothing while, at the same time, she manages orders for her transnational clients based on their specifications for designs, fabrics, and measurements. Throughout most of the fashion year, she cycles tirelessly between working as an intermediary producing garments based on her clients' requirements, and as an independent designer creating patterns and styles based on her own taste and sense of style. While handling the stream of clients' orders, she simultaneously works to create one style every two weeks for her collection. In light of her hectic schedule, she welcomes the fashion off-season period, which grants her a break from the annual cycle. During this time, she has the rare opportunity to travel around Southeast Asia in search of garment samples so she can gradually develop her own brand. This period of research and experimentation provides critical training and experimentation for her, since she has never studied fashion design even though she took over the family business shortly after her mother's sudden death two years ago. The challenges of becoming an independent designer and an entrepreneur thrill her, though she admits that much of her creative labor relies on the extra stream of income she earns from her work as an agent. At the same time, however, she feels pressured to jump-start her independent pursuits since her job as an agent does not guarantee a stable job. Carmen therefore balances the annual cycles of fashion with her own



timeline aimed at nurturing her career. In her mind, these plans are set against the imminent flight of foreign clients and investments from Guangdong to other developing countries in Southeast Asia or to other regions in China. For her, entrepreneurship not only fulfills her sense of duty or honor to her family members, but it also offers her the chance to dictate the terms of her labor in spite of the seemingly uncontrollable fluctuations of the global market.

### **Calculating and hedging of risk**

As the proximity of garment production sites to the well-known Zhongda fabric market demonstrates, “speed to market,” that is, the ability to deliver consistent flows of new styles within short periods of time, proves to be a critical key to success among the market’s ambitious entrepreneurs. Because of the intense competition and the pressures to make quick money, stall owners emphasize the speed at which clothes must be translated from the pictorial image to the actual finished garments. The entire process, starting from placing an order with the local manufacturer, choosing the appropriate fabrics and accessories, mass manufacturing, to final assembly in packages, involves only about two to three days turnaround. For this reason, stall owners who occupy the nearly one thousand stalls on the first three floors of Shi San Hang market witness and experience rampant design copying. Each owner must feature thousands of new styles nearly every week. In fact, by the time the popular fashion magazines are out on newsstands, the pictorials have already been pre-distributed around China via the internet and copied for reproduction one week earlier.

For agents and stall owners, the processes in choosing garment samples almost always entail a certain degree of risk, because there is no guarantee that a certain style will sell. Ling explained that she tends to choose simpler styles for her clients. For her, styles that are too complicated or too flashy are too risky, so they are “not worth making.” In fact, she stated with confidence that upon seeing a competitor’s merchandise, she has the ability to guess the approximate cost and price of the seller’s garment based on the fabric and design alone. After two or three weeks of unsuccessful sales, she can identify the new directions the consumer market has taken, and subsequently pick out styles within her collection that can or cannot sell.

Many bosses at Shi San Hang, Huimei, and the Zhongda fabric market blame the global economic crisis for the downturn in business by citing several pivotal events whose deleterious effects trickled down to Guangzhou’s garment industry. For example, sellers blame the drought in northern China for causing increases in the price of cotton, which in turn, indirectly pushed up the prices of other types of fabric including silk, chiffon, and polyester. The jump in the price of raw materials consequently raised the costs associated with each stage of garment production chain including that of rent and human labor. Another wholesaler from Chaozhou who sells men’s slacks and suits blame the Arab Spring as well as the clashes between the U.S. and Iraq between 2010 and 2012 for the downturns of his long-standing business. Throwing his hands up with a long sigh, he uttered, “What can I do? My clients keep going to war with one another.”

The ripple effects of certain world events shape the daily business operations in Guangzhou's wholesale markets including Shi San Hang. In addition to the rising prices of fabrics and other raw materials, rents in the wholesale markets have skyrocketed over the course of the past several years. As Ling explains, rents have nearly doubled over the past two or three years, making her former business impossible to sustain. Since the 2008 financial crisis, she has seen fewer customers, including *shui fei jie* or walk-in clients. Those include foreign clients, who before the 2007 - 2008 financial crises have previously placed orders in massive quantities at a time. Those who continue to shop at Shi San Hang now spend less. She recalls encountering clients, who before 2007 thought that the price of 200 RMB for a top was affordable. Now, she adds, clients unfailingly try to negotiate for a better deal at any price. The 2007-2008 stock market crash in the U.S. marks a turning point for Ling as a fledging business owner. She recalls friends who have lost their investments in the stock markets in China. They include former clients of hers, who eventually have cancelled their orders for her garments. When clients cancel orders before they receive the actual shipment, many bail out of the order after paying only 50%. To this day, Ling still owes the other 50% to the local manufacturer. She candidly admits that she still owes other factory owners money from her unsuccessful sales.

Others also mentioned the 2011 earthquake and nuclear crisis in Japan, events that rippled their effects to Guangzhou across the Pacific Ocean. As one seller elaborates, many of the copy designs are taken from Japanese fashion websites and magazines. Since the crisis, there have been fewer clients traveling to Guangzhou

from Japan. The turn-over of fashion styles in Japan has also slowed down, and the range of styles has become more limited than before the crisis. According to Ling, the styles today are not as fashionable or as tasteful as they once were. She once asked me, “Didn’t you notice? The styles are not as attractive anymore, and the choices are more limited. No one wants to take the risk of experimenting with new styles and selling them in the marketplace. Even the fashions styles in the Japanese and Korean magazines aren’t as nice as they once were.”

Market sellers thus rely on the practice of design copying as an attempt to hedge investment risk, since many avoid taking the risk of creating novel styles. The widespread prevalence of copying collectively undercuts the stability and vibrancy of market relations as a whole by offering fewer styles to other intermediary agents who in turn are pressured to deliver a wide diversity of trends to merchandisers and retailers. As a result, since the global economic downturn in 2008, fewer foreign clients who usually request large shipment orders have passed through the front doors of Guangzhou’s wholesale markets. The rising costs of cotton and other raw materials since 2010 have thwarted sellers’ abilities to provide desirable garments of top quality. As a means of evading these economic risks, numerous sellers in the highly competitive Shi San Hang market have resorted to copying in order to stay financially afloat. In fact, Ling explained, fights among market competitors at Shi San Hang occur regularly around the issue of copying. When I asked her whether she has personally experienced someone copying from her, she concedes that she encountered this dilemma before. “What can you do?” she commented in response. “By the time,

someone copies you the styles would have already changed anyways,” she continued. She then adds, “Business is business. That’s how it goes.” (*lei xin wei yun*). As Ling noted, direct copying is more common when business declines. She admits that copying is a pervasive practice among individual market stall owners, and speculates that copying at a mass-scale eventually hurts the larger group of competing business owners. Copying intensifies the competitive atmosphere among them while clients are offered fewer choices at lower quality.

The highly competitive Shi San Hang wholesale market provides as case in point. Edwin, an investor of a clothing boutique an urban village not far from the Zhongda fabric market and a former wholesaler in Shi San Hang, describes the cut-throat atmosphere of the wholesale market. He explains that once business owners become privy to a certain style or design that sells well in the market competitors quickly copy the exact design within two to three days. By that time, one can see that several store-owners have already sold that very same design, and one must consistently create new styles in order to remain competitive. As Edwin emphasizes, the fact that a competitor has copied your design implies that that business owner has achieved success and admiration from others. His statement seems to suggest that, contrary to Ling’s opinion, copying is advantageous for wholesalers because in many ways, the practice of design copying wins recognition from market competitors. In his view, success as a wholesaler secures financial freedom, while also eliciting acceptance and admiration from others. Though he admits that he does not like selling women’s wear because of the intense competition within this market niche, he

continues to pursue his business in this industry because he believes women's fashion is where entrepreneurial opportunity lies. His ambition is to eventually own several boutiques around the city, while in the meantime he slowly develops his own line of women's wear and learns the ropes of fashion design.

Practically speaking, he reasons that the preponderance of copying among local markets bear witness to the fact that the wholesale niche cannot facilitate a slow, reflective response to the market. The volume of new fashions that rotates in and out of the wholesale markets moves too quickly to nurture and facilitate the necessary time and creative space for sellers to reflect upon the changes market and respond accordingly with new designs. Even retailers, the clients of the wholesalers that I discuss here, often complain about neighboring competitors who attempt to copy their tastes by choosing the exact same merchandise to sell. I once overheard a young seller in a retail market complain about her competing neighbor in the next stall, "Now if you compare her clothes (*huo*) with mine, what differences are there? She had explicitly promised me to not worry because she wouldn't pick up my style and taste." Her sympathetic companion expressed her support for the distressed woman by saying, "Yes, the clothes that you picked up depend on your discerning eye (*yan guang*) and feel for fashion" as if taste was endowed as a talent or skilled cultivated by years of learning and experience. Their exchange unveils the contentious discourse around copying and the painstaking efforts among industry participants in claiming and authenticating one's taste or social standing as the purveyor of fashion.

In practice, *guanxi* or relationships between market sellers/agents and local manufacturers help to minimize risk by ensuring trust and confidence in the production of the garments. Many market bosses emphasize that communication with the manufacturers is crucial to the success of their business, since they must ensure that manufacturers do not sell copies of their samples to competing clients. In fact, garment manufacturers, particularly those of smaller factories around the Zhongda fabric market, tend to maintain only a few familiar clients at one time in order to guarantee a steady, in-coming flow of production orders. Factory owners also prefer to handle fewer styles at higher volumes, since manufacturing new styles require more preparation time and effort. Exclusivity benefits sellers too, since trusted manufacturers tend to ensure timely production and high-quality workmanship. Above all, when agents must handle last minute orders, manufacturers tend to prioritize their most trusted clients by interrupting the production flow of their other clients, a practice often referred to as *jap huo* (intervention in commodity production) in Cantonese. Though some sellers believe that manufacturers have an interest in protecting the long-term relationship with the clients I have heard instances in which factory owners would undercut the agents by engaging with the agents' clients directly and charging them lower manufacturing costs.

### **Chaohuo: Speculating on Commodities and Market Spaces**

Oftentimes, as I browsed through the more expensive garments at the trendy Huimei market, I would often hear friends complain, “The clothes here are so overpriced. Did you know that the clothes here are actually flipped (*chao*) from Shi

San Hang (the wholesale market)?” Since I was privy to the fact that that Shi San Hang name carries the connotations of relative out-datedness and inferiority, characteristics that clash with Huimei reputation for trendiness and style, I initially disregarded their remarks as unfounded speculation. However, over time, I caught on to the widespread use of the term among market observers of fashion and of other industries, so I began to take notice.

In fact, in order for stall owners to catch up to the unrelenting fashion cycles, bosses would by-pass the time-consuming efforts in drafting new clothing designs by simply buying garments from less expensive clothing markets and reselling them at other venues for much high prices. This process of buying for the purposes of quick reselling in exchange for higher profit margins is often referred to among Guangzhou locals as *chao* or flipping. With the recent housing inflation within China and Hong Kong’s real estate markets, local observers often use the verb *chao* or “to flip” in order to describe the upsurge in prices of real estate and commodities such as garments, iPhones, and iPads, due to speculation and quick resale. The term is most often used to describe sellers who buy and resell electronics, clothes, house ware, and other commodities on the Internet for profits, specifically on China’s *Taobao*, a website similar to Ebay or Amazon. The speculative practice of *chao huo* differs from the methods of retail distributors and wholesalers who travel far distances to shop in Guangzhou’s garment markets, since retailers compete in a different market niche from garment wholesale, and wholesalers traveling from far-away places tend to purchase clothing in bulk. In contrast, speculators within Guangzhou’s garment



wholesale business purchase garments in smaller volumes solely for the purpose of reselling them at a higher price so that they can make hefty profits and hedge market risk. For example, since many bosses operate stalls in both Shi San Hang and Huimei markets, many of the same clothes are sold in both markets though at different prices. Most garments, however, are originally bought at the Shi San Hang market and then resold in Huimei at higher prices. Clothes sold at the Huimei market can demand higher prices, since rents are generally higher and many foreign clients shop there. Once the clothes arrive at Huimei from Shi San Hang, sellers simply re-tag the labels on the garment in order to appeal to more cosmopolitan and high-end customers. Of course, sellers have no guarantees that they would profit from their flipped or resold garments. Nonetheless, the term *chao huo* underscores the practice of speculative pricing among garment wholesalers when certain garments are bought in one wholesale market with its associated clientele and resold in another for higher profits.

The speculative processes of flipping thus enable garments to circulate by passing through multiple intermediary sellers. From the market sellers' point of view, fast fashion's ceaseless production of new styles within shorter periods of time requires rapid inflows of new trends and capital, as well as outflows of old inventory. In fact, the circulations of time, garments, people, and money play a critical role in the local sellers' conception of the markets as well as their respective roles in them. Sellers often use the term *ya huo* (to pawn) in order to describe unsold clothing that is static and inert before it is eventually bought by clients or discounted as unsold inventory. The character *ya* (押) generally means to mortgage or to pawn objects. In

other words, the term *ya huo* refers to garments that are immobile, unable to convert to liquid capital. They sit in the warehouse waiting to be sold over time, while the capital that would have been spent to produce other garments remains unusable and blocked from supporting other investments. In other words, market sellers rely on consistent conversions of material garments and liquid capital, flows of commodities and cash that balance their business ventures. To this end, agents such as Carmen find substitute sources of income in order to support her other on-going investments. Through her work as an agent, she receives profits from her overseas clients in order to supply her with alternative sources of liquid capital and to support her own clothing line. As she explains, she cannot rely solely on her overseas clients for liquid capital, since she stated “They can leave at any time (depending on the fluctuations of the market).” Due to these uncertainties, she must slowly build up her own brand so that she can eventually develop a solid, stable, and independent source of capital and profit.

Market sellers designate the term *mei huo* or “tail goods” to describe the few remaining styles or garment pieces towards the end of the fashion cycle. Those with unsold goods often advertise their *mei huo* on the street in the attempt to evade huge losses from their excessive inventory. In general, the term, *zou gui* or “fleeing ghosts,” refers to the street vendors around Guangzhou, who sell commodities such as food, novelties, gadgets, clothes, and accessories without a license on the city streets. In order to curb tax evasion among street vendors, municipal governments have made the act of selling items on the street without a license illegal. The *cheng guan*, or city

police patrol the city streets in search of these illegal street vendors. Their primary duty is to govern (and sometimes extort money from) their commercial activities. Oftentimes, street vendors warn other sellers by announcing the presence of a *cheng guan* officer with a secretive sound or signal. With a flick of a light switch, the vendors immediately leap up from their sitting or standing positions and stealthily round up their goods in their tarp canvases so as to avoid confrontations with officers. In a few instances, I have seen officers threaten the sellers by violently beating their batons upon the vendors' wooden carts.

Finally, sellers describe unsold, off-season merchandise as *si huo* or dead goods, garments that failed to survive through the short-lived fashion cycle. These clothes, often the leftover pieces of a collection, are often discounted below cost. They are frequently found in loose piles by the front doors of showrooms with other unwanted garments. The terms, *ya huo*, *mei huo*, or *si huo*, thus demonstrate the sellers' conception of the markets as composed of moving fashion objects and money. In fact, as wholesalers, their intermediary roles between the garment manufacturers and retailers require garments and capital to move in and out of warehouses, wholesale markets, and even city streets in order to sustain the production of new garment styles. As fashion seasons wind down only to restart again, sellers rush to sell off their remaining goods in order to secure a source of liquid capital. This money is used to reinvest in future projects. Thus, fast fashion's incessant speculative cycles of forecasting upcoming trends, searching for new styles, and creating new fashions critically depend on the out-flows of static, unsold merchandise in order to maintain

steady streams of money and other forms of liquid capital, which in turn are used to produce additional commodities.

### **Speculating Time, Speculating Spaces**

These flows of money and commodities, however ephemeral and mobile they might be, are paradoxically tied to the spaces and places that materially constitute these wholesale markets. Within the market stalls and showrooms displaying the latest trends and fashions, wholesalers' speculative activities surrounding fast fashions are based on equally speculative activities around Guangzhou's commercial real estate market. Sellers often complain about the rising rents at the city's wholesale markets, particularly Shi San Hang, Huimei, the Zhongda fabric market, as well as other venues surrounding the railway station. Inflated rents within the commercial real estate market make the garment wholesale industry more difficult to compete in raising the overhead costs among its tenants.

The rising rents at Shi San Hang, Huimei, and other wholesale markets resulted in a rapid turnover of commercial tenants, because the costs of operating a stall made survival in the industry nearly impossible. For example, Ling closed her stall only after two years of business because of the exorbitant rent at Shi San Hang. Even her former boss from Hong Kong who ran a market stall at the highly profitable Baima garment wholesale market close to the Guangzhou railway station eventually moved to Beijing in order to escape the highly competitive garment industry in Guangzhou. The fashion off-season starting from June to the end of August often

marked the peak season in which tenants who failed to renew their leases must forfeit their business and commercial spaces to their former competitors.

The rising rents are also mapped onto the materiality of the market spaces. During the summer off-season, the Huimei and Shi San Hang markets temporarily close once a year, so that the remaining tenants can renovate their interior spaces. Oftentimes, the building management requires tenants to make minor repairs and major renovations to their showrooms or stalls regardless of the associated costs. At the same time, management charges for these changes. A long-time wholesaler of garment accessories at the Zhongda fabric market once remarked, “They (the management) don’t care whether you can afford it (the rent increases) or not, they’ll just raise the rent. If you can’t pay, then you’ll have to leave.” Indeed, the incessant sights and sounds of remodeling within the market’s interior spaces have led to discussions among shoppers and tenants about how the rent increases are determined. A factory owner who handles the production of many garments sold at Shi San Hang once stated, “Many of my clients complain to me how difficult it is to do business there, because the rent’s too expensive. Do you think that just by remodeling they’ll really upgrade (the market)? They (the management) will just fix a light fixture here or nail something there and they’ll charge you double the rent for it!” To be sure, a construction company owned by a wealthy Guangzhou real estate investor occupies a large office space on the ninth floor of Shi San Hang, indicating the regularity of speculative remodeling as required by building management. Helen, whose showroom occupies the ninth floor, has once informed me that any building repair

must be handled by management for a fee, since the building management monopolizes both minor repairs and major renovations. She states, “If they change a light or even hammer a nail on the wall, management would charge you 300 RMB for the job.” Other shoppers speculate that undercover shoppers regularly scope the markets to observe which stalls have the most clients. If management sees that a stall owner’s business succeeds, then management fees will increase accordingly. One professor at Sun Yatsen University has also observed that the building management speculates on the fluctuations of the fashion market as well as that of the local real estate market in order to determine the prices of rent. Shi San Hang’s informal business association among several of the market’s long-time bosses collaborates with building management to negotiate rents, as well as to discuss the variations of the fashion and real estate markets.

The process of flipping or reselling fast fashions is thus linked to the speculative activities of the real estate industry, as demonstrated in inflationary rents and the constant repairs and remodeling of the market spaces. Broadly speaking, the notion of flipping garments or *chao huo* entails the traveling of objects through a hierarchical chain of market spaces, thereby revealing the material processes associated with the creation and speculation of value. Because of historical ties to world markets during the Qing period, Shi San Hang maintains its reputation as one of Guangzhou’s commercial centers for fast money.<sup>50</sup> For this reasons, clients from

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<sup>50</sup> The site of the Shi San Hang market served as the birthplace of what scholars describe as the globally-recognized Canton Trading System in Guangzhou (Perdue 2009). From approximately 1700-1842, Guangzhou served as a vital center of the Canton Trade System which served markets to the

all of China, Southeast Asia, and other parts of the globe swarm into the market in search of the latest low-cost fashions. However, few participants of these garment circuits know that many of the items of clothing at Shi San Hang are actually flipped or resold from another market nearby, including Sha He, an immense garment wholesale hub in the Tianhe business district of Guangzhou that is known for its cheap and low-quality clothes.

Few Shi San Hang shoppers acknowledge the fact that much of their clothing originates from the low-end Sha He market, since Sha He is often excluded from the realm of fashion. Shi San Hang sellers and other garment manufacturers would oftentimes remark that Sha He clothes, generally priced from 30-100 RMB, probably last through two washings at the most. In addition to sustaining a very limited lifespan, the clothes are meant to be quickly produced as well. The garments tend to have straight, simple lines that facilitate easy and quick assembly by unskilled and low-paying sewers. Sha He's garment pieces (called *choi pin*) thus often have straight-forward lines and low quality cuts. The shoppers that frequent the Sha He markets are often assumed to be poorer migrants from the countryside outside Guangzhou, who lack the cosmopolitan, sophisticated quality to belong to the

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Middle East, Europe, and the Americas during the Qing dynastic rule. This maritime network was founded upon the administrative and shipping infrastructure that was already built nearly 1000 years prior when Arab and Persian traders had lived in the city's foreign quarters and exchanged silk and spices during the 8<sup>th</sup> century (Perdue 2009). Situated at the head of the Pearl River, Guangzhou (historically named Canton by early British colonial traders) featured the Canton Trade System during the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. Through its geographic proximity to the South China Sea, Guangzhou flourished as a vital confluence of commercial and cultural exchange among Chinese traders and Euro-American seafarers. China's southern coastline, sampans, rivers, and steamboats attested to Guangzhou's historic orientation to the world through its maritime legacies.

exclusive world of fashion. Like the Zhongda garment district, the Sha He markets are perceived as chaotic (*luan*) and dangerous. A number of locals have warned me of potential thieves who apparently linger around the area, though I have never encountered or witnessed any criminal acts there.

When I asked my friend Sofie, a Guangzhou-born university student who assisted in her garment family business at Sha He, why few people knew that many of Sha He's merchandise were "flipped" to the more expensive, highly competitive Shi San Hang market, she replied that most market sellers and shoppers simply attached the Shi San Hang name to its glorified commercial history. Because of its long-standing reputation, Shi San Hang's demand for higher rents caused sellers to pass the inflated value onto the garments themselves through higher prices. Shi San Hang's garments, in turn, were then resold in the even more expensive Huimei market, where the presence of international clients, as well as the fashion discourse of *hanban*, justified the even higher rents and prices there.

The everyday circulation of garments, fabrics, people, and designs through these spaces highlights the hierarchical processes by which prices are determined. Through the practices of *chao*, or reselling, the speculative activities of garment wholesale articulates with Guangzhou's unequal and highly volatile fluctuations of the real estate bubble through the highly contentious practice of rent. As the pressures of rising rents continue to increase, along with the intensifying demands of quickly changing fashions, market sellers scramble to minimize market risks by buying lower



priced garments from one market and re-selling them for higher prices at another, thereby revealing flows of market sellers, garments, and styles along a hierarchical path of abstracted value and rising prices. This path generally starts at the low-end migrant cluster of Sha He. It then leads to highly competitive and profitable market of Shi San Hang, before passing through the fashionable and cosmopolitan corridors of the Huimei market and out to the world markets. Shi San Hang's legacy of commerce and colonial trade, and Huimei's contemporary links to the outside world enables these markets to demand exorbitant rents and higher prices for their garments. These pathways of traveling people and objects also demonstrate how these capital flows and price speculation are grounded upon the materiality of the market spaces, as well as the histories and people that make these market spaces.

### **Imagining Spaces, Global Encounters on the Shop Floor**

While agents and stall owners jostle within the hallways of Guangzhou's wholesale markets for garments and fashions, factory owners and wage workers in the Zhongda garment district who produce the very garments they sell assess the risks of disappearing clients, unpaid orders, and exploitative working conditions. In order to minimize their exposure to market risks and exert control over the production process to the best of their ability, they situate their geographic and subjective orientations to the world of fast fashion through the experiential processes of garment production. Their constructions of "the global" are made specifically within the context of fast fashion production in China. As the manufacturers and sourcing agents within one of the globe's largest production networks for garments and fashions, they

must persistently calculate the limits and possibilities of their specific roles as production and consumers of fast fashion and correspondingly negotiate the risks and exploitative effects of market exchange. In other words, the transnational circulations of people and fashion objects in and out of the factory space, shapes how factory owners and wage workers imagine their roles within the chains of fashion production and exchange. They must assess the possibilities and limits of dictating the terms of their factory labor. The discourses of low wage labor and unpaid orders or “*zou dan*” (literally meaning fleeing orders), along with the languages of quality and style, reveal the uneven terrains that constitute the world markets for fast fashions through the eyes of those who make and manufacture the very goods upon which fast fashion depends. Factory owners and wage-workers appropriate the consumerist language of desire through fashion in order to negotiate their emplacements as low-wage laborer. They adopt a conceptual “mapping” of the world markets for fast fashions in order position their roles within the global commodity chains and to attempt to dictate the conditions of their exploited labor. These maps highlight how relationships of trust and affect among intermediary agents, factory owners, and wage-workers are shaped by the unequal terms of market exchange.

### **Charting Possibilities and Risks of Small-Scale Enterprise through Garment Manufacture**

One balmy afternoon, I plopped myself next to Mrs. Wong. Hunched over one of the sewing machines, Mrs. Wong cheerfully sang the praises of Carmen, her primary and most favored client throughout the two years that her factory has been in

operation. She was attempting to replicate a garment sample out of jagged pieces of cut fabric. While she was doing this, Mrs. Wong declared, “I deeply respect her. For a woman at the young age of 26, it is really impressive that she has already succeeded in her business. She can speak multiple foreign languages. She travels around the world. She truly has courage. You have to have courage just like her.” In Mrs. Wong’s view, Carmen encompassed the rare and enviable combination of both local and foreign characteristics. A native of Guangzhou, Carmen left home to attend college in New Zealand. After only two years of studies at the university, she returned to China to take over her family’s garment business shortly after her mother’s sudden death. Since Mrs. Wong and Carmen had met two years ago, their professional rapport had developed into a sort of fictive kinship between mother and daughter, despite the underlying exploitative conditions that typified most manufacturer and client relationships.

In many ways, Carmen’s cultural fluidity, transnational experiences, and business acumen represents for Mrs. Wong a foregone vision of an imagined self that she can never completely embody. Carmen’s ability to traverse the global circuits of fast fashions through her active participation in the design of these fashions contrasts with Mrs. Wong’s migrant journeys out of Guangdong’s countryside into the megametropolis of Guangzhou as a factory worker before becoming a factory owner in her own right. Indeed, her role as a factory owner implants her firmly within the confined spaces of her garment production site with a span only as wide as a household garage. Day in and day out, she touches each and every garment that passes through her

hands before they are sent to different corners of the world, only to imagine how these places look and feel. Oftentimes, Mrs. Wong would ask me what flying in an airplane feels like or how long an airplane ride from China to the United States takes, revealing her curiosity about seeing and experiencing a wider world.

As a witness to the rise of Carmen's fledging business venture to a thriving enterprise, Mrs. Wong proudly elaborated, "Her business has certainly grown. At first, the dresses she sold did not do so well but look at the number of (international) orders and clients she has now!" Above all, she told me that one of the clients from Thailand had noticed that Carmen's garments are distributed to many different wholesale markets throughout Bangkok. I responded by speculating that a number of agents and wholesalers in Thailand must have passed these dresses along as they traveled to other markets across city, township, and national boundaries. All the while, the retail prices of the dresses must have skyrocketed through the passing of each distributor positioned in various market niches. "Of course!" Mrs. Wong stated. "They (the dresses) travel (*zou*) from large markets to the smaller ones," she added (*you da huo zuo dao xiao de*). That is, in Mrs. Wong's view, smaller markets spiraled out of Guangzhou's garment production center. As Mrs. Wong stated, "This (Guangzhou) is the center (*zhong deem or zhong dian*)" thereby placing Guangzhou as the central site of garment and fashion production. She then further elaborated, "She (Carmen) relies on volume for her business." In other words, Mrs. Wong explained that as the direct wholesaler, Carmen, relied on selling large volumes of clothing, rather than solely on a diversity of styles, in order to achieve business

success. She acknowledged that Carmen's participation in the global exchange of fashions enabled her to travel to countries such as Vietnam, Thailand, Indonesia, and New Zealand, while her overseas experiences afforded her the privileged position as a globe-trotting agent and fashion entrepreneur.

Upon reflection, I was surprised to hear Mrs. Wong's orientation of Guangzhou as the center of the world's garment and fashion production, while she did not mention the mainstream staging of world-class cities such as London, Milan, Tokyo, New York, Paris, or Shanghai as the centers of the fashion world. I initially wondered whether she implicitly drew the conceptual distinctions between garment manufacturing and creative design, so as to place Guangzhou as the hub of garment manufacturing while reserving more cosmopolitan cities as the global sites of fashion designs. However, over time, I began to realize that through her everyday experiences, her conceptual distinctions between garment design, construction, and manufacture had always been blurred. In fact, in the two years that I observed her work in the factory, she repeatedly emphasized the conceptual labor involved in running a full-scale garment factory. Once, she had complained that as clients increasingly brought in new, unfamiliar designs to copy, she and her husband must overcome the challenge of constantly imagining and sketching new patterns that correspond to these latest designs. During the off-season (*dam gui*), I would often catch Mr. Wong, the in-house sample-maker, hover his entire upper body over his worktable, while he busily constructed original garment patterns and experimented with new T-shirt and dress designs which he would eventually bequeath to his wife to serve as his model and

muse by wearing them and providing feedback on the garment patterns. More frequently, I would observe the couple advising their clients including Carmen on how to best reconstruct the garment samples they wished to replicate, as well as which fabric types would be appropriate for a specific pattern or design. Based on his wide-ranging knowledge and expertise in garment construction and manufacture, Mr. Wong therefore identified himself as a designer (*shejishi*) though far from the globe-trotting, educated, and cosmopolitan fashion designers most people would commonly imagine. “I’m a designer,” Mr. Wong declared with utmost certainty during our initial introductions. Indeed, the thought-labor entailed in their work as garment manufacturers compelled Mrs. Wong to describe her work as conceptual. As she once emphasized to a friend visiting the factory for the first time, “Our work requires much thinking and planning. You must first think about what you have to do, and how you’re going to do it. Our work is conceptual.”

The couple’s self-identification as garment designers as well as manufacturers marked them as unique among other factory owners that I encountered around the Zhongda garment district. Whereas most factories in the area oversee merely one aspect of garment production, the Wongs’ capacity to command an independent, full-scale garment factory that operated all the production processes under one roof from sample-making, assembly, to packaging induced them to plot other entrepreneurial pursuits related to garment design and manufacture. In fact, Mr. Wong once acknowledged that he was learning to become a fashion designer through experimentation and other methods of self-teaching. In another instance, I had

overheard Mr. Wong brainstorm with a client from Shi San Hang about the pros and cons of creating a line of counterfeit goods to sell in the wholesale markets. Since competition among stall owners had become increasingly fierce, the client was struggling to sustain his fledging business. With an air of resignation, he had sought Mr. Wong's expertise regarding the conditions of the garment trade in order to rationalize the risks and rewards in pursuing a counterfeit fashion line. Upon overhearing the men's conversation, Mrs. Wong openly rejected their idea by declaring, "Of course, that's a bad idea! By the time you copy someone else, that trend has already passed. Everyone knows that you have to sell original designs in order to make yours unique!"

By discursively claiming Guangzhou as the world center of garment manufacturing, the Wongs paradoxically acknowledge their limited positions along the fashion and garment production hierarchy, while using their skilled labor, hard work, and client networks to connect themselves with these transnational circuits of garments and fashion. These connections enable the Wongs to extend their social worlds beyond the everyday confines of their factory. During the two years that I worked with the couple, they bequeathed countless samples of their work for me to bring back to America. Besides their immeasurable generosity, they pride themselves on the fact that the products of their unwavering dedication and hard work are gifted to faraway worlds beyond the spatial limits of the factory and beyond their emplaced roles as garment manufacturers. Through their everyday encounters with traveling clients, garments, and designs which float in and out of their factory space, they

embody the discourse and practices of garment production and fashion-making in order to imagine and construct themselves as part of a wider world.

### **Mapping Places through the Discourse of Styles**

Certainly, images of the glamorous tree-lined boulevards of London, Milan, or New York rarely enter into the daily vocabulary of the Wongs and their factory workers, because the garments that make up the discursive and material fabric of their everyday lives are linked to different areas of the globe, which lie outside of these bounded places. Though Mrs. Wong's role as a garment manufacturer undoubtedly places her within the spatial limits of the small factory where she and her husband and older son live and work every day, she and her workers conceptually chart out a map of the world through the everyday language and materiality of styles they encounter. The workers' visual and tactile experiences of producing the garments upon which the various circulations for fast fashions depend create a conceptual understanding of the wider world through the sensuous and diverse language of fashion. As the fabrics, designs, and clients pass through the factory gates before they are distributed out into the global channels for fast fashions, the bodily experience of producing a wide spectrum of styles for international export impresses upon them a conceptual understanding of the wide-ranging diversity of world markets. The materiality of the fabrics, garment construction, and styles that drift in and out of the factory shape the workers' categories and imaginations of the places to which these garments are destined to travel. By inhabiting the language of fashion and styles, the



workers articulate their mapping of the world that reflects their bodily experiences of garment manufacture.

For example, Mrs. Wong had once expressed to me her confusion regarding the clothing styles sold to the Japanese markets. “Have you noticed how strange (*qi guai*) Japanese styles are?” she asked. Mrs. Wong then recalled the pink and cream-colored silk wrap-around top that her husband had previously given me as one of the inventory overflows they had produced the previous year. “Wasn’t that garment strange?” she asked me rhetorically. “It’s like what we would call *mo ju nu* (or geisha style) from the movies!” she exclaimed with a hearty laugh. She then opined about the strangeness of Japanese fashions with its contrasting colors and patterns, a style that apparently seemed to make no sense to her.

Later that day, I sat beside Mrs. Wong who was working among the sewers at one of the workstations along the back wall. I asked Mrs. Wong to which country the girls’ dresses were shipped. Mrs. Wong replied that dresses would be sent to Carmen’s clients in Thailand and Singapore. She then explained that these dresses suit the markets in Indonesia, Thailand, and Singapore because women in both countries prefer such bright colors, including red, pink, blue, and yellow. In contrast, as Mrs. Wong explained, Chinese consumers would deem these patterns and colors too bright and eye-catching and instead prefer colors that are a bit darker and more subtle. Besides, as Mrs. Wong continued, consumers in the Southeast Asian markets preferred the so-called *mo nu zhuang*, or the matching mother and little girl outfits,

which she viewed as odd and even comical. Mrs. Wong implied that Chinese consumers tended not to prefer these styles. However, she continued to explain that these flashy and eye-catching trends and styles offered Carmen the opportunity to segue into the realm of women's fashions through her experience of designing children's clothing. Though Carmen's client base remained in Southeast Asia, perhaps Carmen's growing business and knowledge of the markets enabled her to turn to the emerging domestic market. In any case, through Mrs. Wong's experience in garment manufacture, she developed her personal knowledge base about the faraway countries, markets, and peoples these garments served. Her impressions of Thailand were further concretized through her statement, "It doesn't cost much to fly to Thailand from here," thereby further attesting to that fact that Mrs. Wong organized her knowledge of faraway places around the world through her imagined experience of airplane travel.

In another instance, I was sitting along the left-hand side of the front work table, diligently snipping loose threads off of stacks of finished girls' dresses. The older Guangxi female worker was sitting closely behind me at the end station, lightly elbowing me every now and then as her hands swayed monotonously front and back while guiding the fabric underneath the rapid movements of the needle on the sewing machine. Yang Yang, the teenage worker from Hunan, settled at a surge machine beside the woman in order to sew borders along a batch of light blue denim skirts with dark blue embroidered flowers along the hem. Suddenly, she gushed with excitement, "These dresses must be for Africa! I know Africans like loose-fitting

styles (*pang pang de*).” I then asked how she knew this, and she responded that she had seen African styles before (possibly because she had been exposed to similar pieces in other garment factories before).

Yang Yang’s passing comments made an exceptional impression upon me, not only because her statement revealed her sense of ordering the various countries and places around the world through the language and materiality of clothing styles, but also because of how the fragmented process of production and its resulting process of abstraction served to create specific impressions of Yang Yang’s ordering of the world through the consumerist language of fashion. Her comments impressed me in particular, because I knew that Carmen’s order of these denim dresses were meant for markets in Southeast Asia, not Africa. Yang Yang’s comment represented the discontinuity in the workers’ understanding of the very production process that they critically serve. In other words, garment workers imagined but perhaps could never discover for whom the clothes were meant and to where the garments were going.

### **Mapping Limits: Charting Guangzhou’s wholesale markets**

The workers’ imaginations of distant places as articulated through the consumerist discourses of fashion, as well as their experiences of garment manufacture, reveal the risks of connecting with the wider circuits of garments and fashions, particularly when they encounter extreme forms of labor exploitation. More specifically, their struggles in producing garments for Guangzhou’s local wholesale

markets inform the workers of the hyper-competitive and money-oriented environments of Shi San Hang and Sha He without even having to step foot inside these market spaces. At the same time, the workers in the factory attempt to resist the dominating and merciless effects of the price regime that governs the market exchange for fast fashions.

In light of Shi San Hang's notoriously competitive atmosphere, as characterized by its rapid turnover of styles and its under-priced garments, the Wongs refused clients whose garments were sold directly to this wholesale market. The couple's refusals stemmed from their experiences of being crudely mistreated by demanding clients who worked out of Shi San Hang. One husband and wife duo once commissioned the Wongs to produce batches of women's trendy shorts to sell at the Shi San Hang market. They submitted daily orders for women's shorts, each with different styles and at small volumes of two to three hundred pieces at a time. Because new styles required the labor-intensive work of drawing patterns and sample-making, the clients' flood of orders demanded disproportionate time and effort of over sixteen hours a day of labor, even though the pay-back for the workers' hard work was exploitatively minimal. (The owners received about 5 RMB per garment while workers were paid only 2-3 RMB per piece). In addition to these oppressive conditions, the clients rotated around the factory space in order to monitor the workers' movements day in and day out. In one instance, the clients penalized the Wongs by deducting their pay without negotiation after flaws were discovered in one of their batches. After about three months of toil, Mrs. Wong admitted to the heart-

breaking struggles of their back-breaking labor. She stated, “We can’t endure this any longer. We can’t eat. We can’t sleep.”

Since this bitter experience, the Wongs learned to filter their prospective clients’ requests by mapping the places to which their garments were sent. Their strategy became apparent to me one afternoon when a male prospective client approached the factory doors to inquire about a garment sample. He carried in his hands a bag that contained a hot pink dress with bright golden buttons attached symmetrically as decorations on its front centerpiece. The man asked whether Mrs. Wong could create a sample based on the dimensions of this garment along with specific modifications. As he tried to describe the modifications he pictured in his mind, Mrs. Wong interrupted him and suggested that he should bring in a sample that displayed his specifications, so that she could visualize his requirements and contribute her input on the design. She then proceeded to ask him where he intended to sell his merchandise, adding that they refused any orders to the Sha He and Shi San Hang wholesale markets. In reply, the man asked why Mrs. Wong would care whether he sold his goods in the Sha He or Shi San Hang markets. Mrs. Wong then piped up, “Because the clothes that are sold there are too cheap! We can’t make any money with each garment priced at 3 RMB. That price doesn’t even cover the cost of hiring workers here. We pay them (the workers) at least 5 RMB. What can we make with that low price?!” The man then asked what kind of orders the Wongs’ factory handled. Mrs. Wong immediately answered, “Exports (*waidan*).” Afterwards, he left without a word, though Mrs. Wong continued a barrage of complaints about

producing garments for the Shi San Hang and Huimei markets. She repeatedly grumbled, “Right, that’s why we don’t do business with any clients dealing with Sha He and Shi San Hang. We can’t make a living with those prices.”

Shortly afterwards, another potential client, a younger, more petite-sized man with glasses, arrived with a cream and burgundy long-sleeved, laced woman’s dress. Before the man had a chance to explain his specifications, Mrs. Wong immediately jumped in by asking, “Where do you intend to sell your goods (*shemme huo*)?” The man replied that he intended to sell his goods overseas to Thailand. Immediately upon hearing the word Thailand, Mrs. Wong softened her tone of voice and cheerfully replied, “Well, the dresses that we’re making here are going to Thailand.” She then went on to explain that the dresses they produced are for children’s fashions, though they also manufacture women’s clothes as well. As this prospective client elaborated his specifications, Mrs. Wong beckoned him to wait upstairs in the second floor living space until Mr. Wong returned from his grocery trip. Mrs. Wong’s welcoming tone contrasted sharply from her diffident stance towards the previous client.

When a third prospective client came in that day with a long, floral-patterned summer dress, Mrs. Wong approached him with the same biting question of where he intended to sell his clothes (*shemme huo*). When the stranger replied that he works in the Sha He market, Mrs. Wong immediately declined his offer, saying that they refuse any business that deals with Sha He. Baffled, he stumbled out of the factory floor, confused and dumbfounded by Mrs. Wong’s abrupt refusal in handling his requests.

As Mrs. Wong turned away from him, her gaze met mine. She immediately flashed a smile, comically acknowledging her hasty rejection of the perplexed man.

After this series of encounters, I reflected upon Mrs. Wong's links between her work in the factory and the geographical locations of the various wholesale markets around Guangzhou. Since the prices of the garments ultimately determined the cost and labor of manufacturing them and vice versa, her conceptualization of these market places was mapped along overlapping indexes of price, quality, rent, and geographic locations. As a former wholesaler from Shi San Hang had previously explained, insiders within the local garment industry knew that the Sha He market featured garments with the lowest quality at the lowest price. Moreover, insiders of Guangzhou's garment industry knew that the exorbitant rents at the Sha He and Shi San Hang markets contributed to the hyper-competitive business practices in these markets, including the extreme practice of undercutting garment prices among the stall owners. Thus, the low prices of Sha He and Shi San Hang clothing in turn determined the garment processes by squeezing the profit margins of the workers and manufacturers' labor as tightly as possible. As the Wongs experienced first-hand, the Shi San Hang couple attempted to limit their overhead by maintaining strict oversight over the Wong's production processes. The clients often stayed with the Wongs into the late hours of the evening, governing how each garment was assembled and packaged so that every fraction of their cost was tightly controlled. The quick turnover of the styles in these markets also added more pressure to the Wongs' already tedious manufacturing process to the point that Mrs. Wong claimed that they could

not eat or sleep if they continued to manage their orders for Shi San Hang. As a result, Mrs. Wong believed that Shi San Hang orders were simply too difficult to handle, a common reality for producers of Guangzhou's fast fashions.

Mrs. Wong's preference for producing exports (*wai dan*) over garments for the local wholesale markets reveals the couple's strategic orientation towards specific market niches that enable them to manage their work lives in the face of harsh exploitative practices. Producing exports not only connects them to wide-ranging networks of diverse markets, but geographic distance also demands larger production volumes and slower turnaround time for different styles. As they once explained to me, the Wongs prefer a steady flow of export orders which for the previous year had supported their business. Mrs. Wong also attests that Carmen's orders for girl's dresses have been the most manageable, since many of her orders are repeated styles or copies from previous orders, referred colloquially as *fan ban* (or turnover of samples). As she explains, *fan ban* or in this case repeated orders are the most manageable types of orders for them since they don't have to waste time and effort in familiarizing themselves with different garment styles. As garment manufacturers, the Wongs also receive higher returns from exports, since these goods often demand relatively higher prices.

The Wongs' categorizations of markets based on prices, styles, and geographic locations demonstrate how their mapping of the global market places for fast fashions determines their strategies for minimizing the painful effects of labor



exploitation while sustaining their dreams of entrepreneurship. As migrants originating from China's countryside, their connections to the wider world are enabled by their participation in the diversity of fast fashion markets as low-end and small-scale garment designers and manufacturers. However, their precise role as manufacturers along the hierarchical garment production chain places them within the confines of the factory while exposing them to the vulnerabilities associated with market fluctuations and various forms of labor exploitation. Their strategies for market survival in face of these market inequalities reveal the situated ways in which manufacturers negotiate the tensions produced by their desires for mobility and by the emplacements they confront as low-wage factory laborers. Consequently, they conceptualize the world markets for fast fashions and position their roles in them based on their readings of garment styles, prices, and market places.

### **Charting Losses: The Discourse of *zou dan* and Conflicts Over Quality**

Sourcing agents who serve as intermediaries between manufacturers and consumers along the fashion supply chains engage in a similar process of mapping the world's markets for fast fashions in order to situate their particular roles and positions within them. As in the case of manufacturers, sourcing agents' mapping practices reveal the uneven terms of exchange upon which the global markets for fast fashions are situated. Through their discursive categorizations of place, quality, and styles, they strategically position themselves based on careful approximations of temporal cycles of trends, price, and client credibility.

Fanny, an experienced sales representative for a long-standing Chinese trading company that sources women's contemporary shoes to consumers in markets all over the world. As a wholesale agent, she negotiates with countless overseas and domestic clients who travel to Guangzhou in order to browse through the expansive showrooms displaying the latest designs in women's low-cost shoes. At my initial meeting with her, she immediately lays out a mapping of the world markets for women's shoes, primarily determined by geographic regions. As she explains, there are four main consumer markets for the world's shoes for women. They are: 1) Africa, 2) North America, 3) Middle East, and 4) Europe. These regional distinctions index the discursive categorizations of styles, clients, and business practices that comprise these distinctive markets.

For example, Fanny explains that her company prefers working with clients who serve the European markets. In contrast to the United States, the markets for women's shoes in Europe seem comparatively stable and profitable for her company's business interests. In particular, she describes her company's involvement with the annual trade shows in Dusseldorf and in Milan. As she elaborates, participation in the trade shows enables her company to achieve greater exposure in the global markets for fashion. Her company uses these trade shows as a form of marketing and advertising in order to attract new clients. Later in the conversation, she elaborates that since the company relies heavily on its long-term clients with whom it already have familiar relationships ranging from four, six to ten years, the company has recently deliberated whether participation in these trade shows is a

worthwhile investment. She further elaborates that styles for the European market are more simple and sophisticated, so they require lower production costs, thereby allowing higher profit margins. Interestingly, her designation of Europe refers exclusively to Western Europe, particularly Spain, Italy, Germany, and France. She contrasts these countries with those that comprised the former Soviet bloc. According to her, these markets remain unstable primarily due to government corruption and the black market. Interestingly, she cited the case of the Ukraine, whereby businesses often have to deal with sudden changes in government policies that pertain to the taxation of imports, including women's fashions and gold. At any time, corrupt governments may disallow the importation of certain commodities such as gold or raise exorbitant taxes to the point of rendering the importation of such goods unprofitable.

Fanny stresses that her company avoids cooperating with American clients, because of the high risks involved in entering into business deals with them. She describes a recent case in which the company has lost a male American client, with whom they had positive relations for nearly three years. During the course of those three years, he has successfully placed three orders of 3 – 5 containers of shoes, with nearly 40,000 pairs of shoes in each container. As a general policy, this company does not usually assist clients in shipping the containers once the goods are lifted onto boats and once they depart from ports in China. Goods are then declared Free On Board, designating the client's financial responsibility of the products. As a side note, I have learned that the company usually charges clients a 40 % deposit before the

goods are shipped and then charges the remaining 60% sum once the client receives his or her shipment in his or her home country. As Fanny explains, the American client has dutifully submitted all his payments for his first two orders. However, during the course of his last order, the client has simply disappeared (a practice colloquially referred to as *zou dan*), neglecting to submit nearly 60% of his bill for the last five containers of shoes (nearly 200,000 pairs). As she describes, “We simply could not understand what happened. He paid us properly during his first two orders, but after his last order he just disappeared (*zou dan*). I just don’t know why.” His disappearance has coincided with the U.S. credit crisis that began in 2008, so she speculates that the downward fluctuations of the global market must have negatively affected the client’s shoe business. As a result of this troubling incident, Fanny’s company has lost nearly 60% profits from the client’s order. As a precaution, the now refuses to accept credit and maintains a cash only policy towards overseas clients, particularly those from the United States.

Though fragmented and incomplete (she remained reticent about the African and Middle Eastern markets), Fanny’s discussion on the regional specificities of the fast fashion markets underscores the difficult business strategies and market environments that contextualize the particular localities of place. Her company’s position as a wholesaler for shoes in the global market enables Fanny to occupy the critical vantage point in assessing market risks by deciphering the regional markets for shoes based on geography, client groups, and business practices. These variations in turn make up her company’s conceptual mapping of uncertainties along spectrums

of market volatility.<sup>51</sup> Fanny and her company's direct encounters with clients' demonstrations of unaccountability, disappearance, and sudden financial losses shape their own business practices in navigating through the uneven conditions and practices of trust-building and exchange. These events also inform Fanny and her company of the world's changing economic landscape, inducing them to strategically calculate the constraints and possibilities of their participation with these regional markets from the position as wholesalers along the fashion supply chain. For example, the company attempts to hedge unpredictable clients and unstable market conditions by requiring 40% deposits and by mandating a cash only policy. In addition, they handle fewer quantities of shoe orders for new clients and bill the clients for the production costs at the end of each stage of the production process rather than bundling the costs into a single lump sum. Furthermore, Fanny stresses her company's long-standing relationships with clients based on face-to-face interactions.

My conversations with other wholesale suppliers for garments and shoes echoed similar sentiments regarding the risky business of dealing with overseas clients, particularly those from Europe, the U.S., and Hong Kong. One manufacturer who operated a denim factory in Xintang, China's so-called "jeans city," once explained to me the challenges he faced when foreign clients used the quality of their merchandise as justification to reduce payments or to abscond from paying altogether. He observed that since the global economic slowdown in 2008, overseas clients

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<sup>51</sup> At the time of this conversation, the political and economic instabilities in the Ukraine during 2014 had not yet surfaced in the international media. Therefore, at that time, Fanny assumed that the socio-economic environment in the Ukraine was more stable than that of the US.

frequently disappeared without submitting full payments or canceling orders on short notice. He explained, “If clients say that the quality is bad, then they just simply won’t pay.” He recalled one specific client from France who requested a voluminous order of women’s jeans online via the website Alibaba. While in the process of preparing his order, the European consumer market slowed down, inducing the client to realize that he could not sell his merchandise in time to catch up with the fashion seasons. Fearful that he could not cover his financial obligations, the client returned all the goods to the manufacturer, citing poor quality in the dyes or wash of the jeans. The client subsequently refused to pay the remaining 60% of the 500,000 RMB deposit, even though production of the remaining jeans already began in full swing. The French client eventually disappeared, leaving only a fictitious company name and a non-existent P.O. Box number. Left in mounds of debt from the costs of producing those jeans, the manufacturer remained near bankruptcy for the next 4-5 years. After narrating his story to me, he retorted, “I wish we (as manufacturers) would someday be in the position to flee from an order!” His comment reflected the vulnerabilities he faced as a garment manufacturer along the hierarchical supply chain for fast fashions. Despite the signing of contracts, he acknowledged the harsh reality that there was no guarantee that clients, particularly those from overseas, would pay as promised. In order to minimize the risk of fleeing orders, the manufacturer subsequently required overseas clients to pay in increments every three months before production in the factory commenced.

During the course of my research, similar cases of disappearances, unaccountability, and fleeing orders from overseas clients occurred, highlighting the ways in which the discourse of quality became pretexts for renegotiating the terms of exchange and financial obligations, often through unfair and sometimes coercive means. One friend who worked for an American wholesale company based in Guangzhou, which designed and sourced shoes for well-known retail chains in the U.S., described a case in which a high-end department store chain deliberately canceled an order on short notice after it failed to meet a retail deadline. After deliberating on a collection of women's shoes for some time, the department store chain missed the trend cycles for particular styles. With full knowledge of its miscalculations, the department store chain canceled its production orders for a large volume of shoes, leaving the wholesale company responsible for paying the entire costs of production to the local manufacturers. In an effort to protect its own financial liabilities, the wholesale company simply canceled all the orders it placed with the local manufacturer on short notice while complaining about the poor quality of its shoes. Enraged by these displays of unaccountability along with the piling up of outstanding balances, owners of the local factory later sent a number of hired security guards and workers to the offices of the American shoe company in order to protest using picket signs and rally slogans. At one point during the demonstrations, some of the hired guards barged through the office doors of the American company threatening to inflict acts of violence upon its targeted boss and employees.

In conclusion, while the previous chapter traced the trial and error processes through which factory owners orchestrate the necessary details of garment manufacture, this chapter incorporated the movements of intermediary agents and wholesalers in and out of market spaces in Guangzhou in order to highlight the layers of contingencies and coordination upon which fast fashion exchange relies. I underscore the dimensions of commodity exchange as the objects of fast fashion rapidly circulate through wholesale markets, factories, and street corners of the city, while blurring the realms of production. As I show, commodity flows are created through market participants' assessments of desires and risks along the supply chains, which often result in profit losses, strategic calculations, and missed connections.



## **Chapter 4: Engendering Freedom: Performing Masculinity and Uncertainty in Post-socialist China**

As the car swerved the corner, my heart raced in anticipation for what was to come. Earlier in the day, the driver, Ah-Geet had kindly accompanied me on a fascinating interview with a prominent fashion designer of a nationally-recognized chain of up-scale boutiques. The designer was a tenant of a massive factory on the outskirts of Guangzhou in southern China, which was owned by a local real estate tycoon named Mr. Cai, with whom I was acquainted. I naively breathed a sigh of relief for having completed my first substantive interview shortly after my arrival in the field, but as I sat in the passenger seat on our way to the restaurant for dinner with Mr. Cai, I had no idea that my research had only just begun. Deftly maneuvering his car, Ah-Geet tried to prepare me for what was to come. “Do not say anything,” Ah-Geet warned me as the tone of his voice changed from lighthearted to stern. I sensed the gravity of the situation from the weight of his abrupt silence.

The route to the restaurant was a familiar one. After all, I had frequented the place for weeks after Mr. Cai had hired me as a personal English tutor for his thirteen year-old daughter Gigi. My male classmate from Sun Yatsen University, who had previously worked as Mr. Cai’s English tutor, had recommended me as an appropriate teacher for Gigi, because my fluency in Cantonese and English allowed me to effectively communicate with her in both languages. Over the course of my acquaintance with Mr. Cai, our relations remained strictly professional. I had followed my instincts on what I thought were the unsaid rules of *guanxi* or reciprocal

relationships in China. I openly conveyed to Mr. Cai my desire to connect to fashion designers in Guangzhou in order to fulfill my research goals. As a powerful and wealthy real estate investor, legal practitioner, and entrepreneur, Mr. Cai knew he was well-positioned to assist me. As an investor in several hotels, restaurants, banks, public utilities, and private residences, he represented one of Guangzhou's wealthy elites. In exchange for his help in connecting me to fashion designers in Guangzhou, I intended to inform him on American ways of life. My personal knowledge and experience of American culture were of interest to him, since he had been planning to move his family to Canada or the United States for quite some time.

As I sat at the restaurant table, I rehearsed in my head the dinner etiquette that was expected of me. Truthfully speaking, I was unsure of my role within his complex business and family networks. As a tutor, I dealt primarily with his wife Eva and Gigi. Together, we read stories in English and even went shopping together on Gigi's days off from an exclusive boarding school outside of Guangzhou. As I gradually gained the family's trust, Mr. Cai allowed me to sit in his law office five days a week to observe various business dealings and to interview his employees who comprised China's emerging professional class. In fact, merely two days prior to that memorable evening, I sat precisely at the same table with Mr. Cai, Eva, and Gigi over a scrumptious meal of rare delicacies, which was a typical dinner for many of China's well-to-do families. The meal included snake, ginger milk, bird's nest over papaya, and shark's fin soup. Tonight, the same dinner menu would be served again. Only this time, Mr. Cai's family would be his eight year-old son and his second wife.

I was attuned to popular discourses surrounding the resurfacing of polygamy across Hong Kong and China in recent decades, but the incident was my first face-to-face encounter with a second wife. That night, I fought every compulsion to peel myself away from the dinner table, because by then, my friendship with Eva and Gigi had grown to the extent that I personally felt betrayed by Mr. Cai. I did not believe that Eva, Gigi, and even his second wife agreed with being in a polygamous family. Despite my personal objections, however, my inquisitiveness about the second wife kept me hooked. Unsurprisingly, Mr. Cai exuded an air of nonchalance, loquaciously chatting in his rapid-fire speech, while his much younger second wife quietly gazed at me suspiciously from the corner of her eye, perhaps too shy to ask any questions about me. Mr. Cai's endless chatter indirectly acknowledged our collective uneasiness toward the situation and made my discomfort nearly unbearable. His attempts to dominate the conversation deflected any possibility for me to get to know his second wife.

With fairer skin and a willowy build, the second wife was a younger and more conventionally attractive woman than Mr. Cai's first wife. However, based on my limited observations of her, she seemed to lack a certain degree of self-assuredness and maturity that Eva exuded. For instance, while the adults around the table spoke Cantonese, she remained awkwardly silent with eye cast downward, excluded from our conversations in the local dialect. I quickly realized that she must have been a migrant from a province outside of Guangdong, and wondered about how she became involved with Mr. Cai. Curiously, Mr. Cai and his second wife seemed emotionally

distant that night, while he lovingly doted on his rambunctious son. At that moment, I wondered about the nature of their personal relationship. Was the second wife merely a so-called trophy wife, a woman who served to display Mr. Cai's wealth and political power? Or was she a (second) wife of convenience, a woman who could bear a son in Mr. Cai's name in outright defiance of the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) one child policy and its ban against the practice of polygamy? Was I unknowingly being groomed to become Mr. Cai's third wife of convenience, one who bridged China and the United States in the building of his would-be trans-continental empire?

Although I never saw Mr. Cai's second wife again and was not able to uncover definitive answers to the questions, these inquiries reflect a particular socio-historic moment in China's rapid rise to global economic prominence after the CCP's introduction of market reforms. They point to the gender and class-based inequalities that have emerged since China's intensified participation in transnational commodity and investment networks. While anthropologists, historians, and sociologists of post-socialist China have cogently observed the ways in which market practices operate through gender and class differences, their early works tend to focus on migrant women's consumption practices. They emphasize rural migrant women as actors and agents in China's urbanization projects, and highlight women's migratory experiences as opportunities for them to assert and negotiate their patriarchal family relations in their native places (Jacka 1997, Chan and Zhang 1999, Gaetano and Jacka 2004, Davin 2005, Chang 2008). Others have extended these debates by questioning the extent to which consumption and migration has engendered people's assertions for

agency, individuality, and personal freedoms, thereby posing challenges to the governing capacities of the central state (Solinger 1995, 1999, Goldman and MacFaquhar ed. 1999, Davis 2000, Zhang 2001, Lanthem 2002, Farrer 2002, Feuchtwang 2002). While these scholars critically underscore the social inequalities that migrants and women in China face, their studies conceptualize inequalities as rooted within China and view market activities as tools of contestation that are driven by external forces. In other words, their works have tended to theorize the mushrooming of capitalist practices in China and their associated effects as responses to the external dictates of global capitalism, rather than as cultural dynamics that are constantly remade by ordinary people in China.

Drawing on the work of China scholars who emphasize people's active engagements with market exchange (Watson 1997, Smart 1999, Hsing 1998, Ong 1999, Hsu 2007, Hanser 2008, Mathews 2010), this chapter examines how men's performances of masculinity articulate with their everyday participation in capitalist practices.<sup>52</sup> Through ethnographic vignettes, this chapter extends this literature on gender and post-socialism in China by analyzing how social inequalities emerge through men's participation in capitalist practices.<sup>53</sup> It highlights how the masculinization of market risk and uncertainty articulates with divergent performances of freedom as they are linked to specific labor practices and

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<sup>52</sup> My use of encounter as a conceptual tool draws from Faier's (2009) conceptualization of the cultural relations of production through which Filipina domestic workers appropriate ideals of "Japaneseness" through their intimate encounters with Japanese men.

<sup>53</sup> Like Zhang (2012), I see social actors as actively re-formulating neoliberal ideas and practices for their own ends.

manipulation of space.<sup>54</sup> As Tsing (2005) and Moodie (2013) assert, global discourses of market risk are gendered such that financial investment strategies, such as frontier capitalism or casino capitalism, are signified by performances of masculinity, while reproductive labor is frequently coded as feminine. I extend their arguments by applying their analyses of gender and risk within the context of post-socialist China, where market risk-takers are personified through the roles of male bosses, while the biological reproduction of the family, upon which China's low-wage workforce depends, falls within the domain of women's work.<sup>55</sup>

A number of anthropologists have examined the link between performances of corporate figures and market risk in their ethnographies of corporate capitalism, finance, and gendered labor. In his study of derivative traders in Japan, Miyasaki (2012) underscores the significance of traders' imaginations and interpretations of their roles in constructing visions of capitalist utopia via financial markets, which in this case pertain specifically to arbitrage theories and practices. He traces how trader's theories of minimizing market risk through arbitrage paradoxically contribute to unsuccessful, risky deals.<sup>56</sup> Ho's (2009) study of corporate life on Wall Street

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<sup>54</sup> I draw influence from Lefebvre's (1992) theories of space and subjectivity in order to underscore how places and aspirational roles, such as the "boss" figure, mutually engender particular ideas of personhood through market practices. I also echo Megan Moodie's (2012) argument that discourses of market risk are gendered. Specifically, the biological reproduction of low-wage labor among members of the global south falls within the domain of women's work, while risky financial investment strategies, as such casino or frontier capitalism, are represented as masculine endeavors (*ibid*).

<sup>55</sup> I expand on the issue of motherhood and women's labor in Chapter 5.

<sup>56</sup> In the introduction, Miyasaki (2012) discusses the "self-canceling" tendency of arbitrage practices, including the way "arbitrageurs exploit and eliminate arbitrage opportunities and ultimately themselves" (pp 20-21).

builds upon the emphasis on performing market theories by exploring how investment bankers' individual personifications of the flexible, risk-taking employee increase their shareholder value in the short term but contribute to the ongoing cycles of unemployment and crises in the long term. Ho shows how, in practice, bankers' individualized performances as high stake risk-takers lead to the ongoing boom and bust cycles characteristic of Wall Street corporate culture. Her account thus highlights the ongoing construction of a so-called "liquid" (or easily liquidated) employee. To account for gender dynamics among white-collared workers, Allison's (1994) study of hostess bars in Japan demonstrates how women's service as hostesses, who provide sexual talk to male customers, privilege and glamorize the figure of the white-collared "salaryman" (sarariman) in Japanese corporate culture. The atmosphere of relaxation provided by female hostess enables men to perform masculinity, bridge connections, and broker business exchanges. Women's labor in appealing to men's desires for pleasure and sex by lighting cigarettes, flirting, and pouring drinks thus serves to alleviate the risk of brokering unsuccessful business deals.

The emergence of the male "boss" figure within post-socialist contexts has captured scholarly attention among anthropologists who examine how market practices operate through gender and place-making. For example, Harms (2013) documents the spatial mobility of male financiers in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. Through their movements in and out of Westernized cafes, spas, and modern offices, they embody what Harms calls "the spatialization of class distinctions" (2013: 165).

More specifically, he describes how Vietnamese male bosses manipulate city spaces in order to visually reveal or hide their wealth, a practice he calls conspicuous invisibility (*ibid*). Liu (2002) and Osburg (2013) both address how businessmen in contemporary China negotiate the moral ideals of patriarchy, masculinity, and ownership in face of growing socio-economic uncertainties. While Liu (2002) highlights how the title of “boss” or *laoban* signifies an emergent image of a commander and agent of market and capital in post-socialist China, Osburg (2013) documents the everyday practices of businessmen in order to emphasize the broader gendered and class-based stratifications that are emerging within contemporary China. While these scholars contribute valuable insights into the world of masculinity and entrepreneurship within post-socialist contexts, their works focus exclusively on the elites classes, whose wealth and political clout afford them the titles of ownership and authority typically bestowed upon bosses.

Drawing from these works, I explore the emergence of the male “boss” figure in China as a mode of performing market activities, as well as a means through which men construct and assess market risk. At the same time, I argue that these performances must be necessarily gendered, since they reflect gendered divisions of productive and reproductive labor. To this end, this chapter presents a broader, comparative view of the cultural significance of the aspirational “boss” figure. As Liu (2002) contends, divergent notions of personhood are made meaningful only in relations to one another. A comparative analysis of this figure across divergent classes in post-socialist China exposes the unfolding of gender and class-based



inequalities among migrant families (domestic and transnational) as they increasingly encounter market risks through their engagements with transnational relations of financial investment and commodity exchange. This chapter compares men of different class backgrounds who enact the aspirational figure of the entrepreneurial “boss” through their divergent declarations of freedom: the patriarch of an elite transnational family; the migrant owner of a small-scale factory-workshop; and a temporary factory wage-worker. Through these comparisons, I demonstrate how this figure mobilizes various personifications of freedom as aspirational forces among men of dissimilar class positions. As Liu (2002) writes,

The person who pays is in charge; the person who is in charge owns; the person who owns takes responsibility for what happens; the person who takes responsibility for what happens is *laoban*. It does not mean that this term of address cannot be used, as a metaphor, by someone who addresses a person in charge, such as an official calling his superior, but in the story of (capitalist) development, particularly in South China, the word’s connotations are determined by the emergence of an image of someone who is in charge by virtue of ownership (2002: 37).<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Liu (2002) goes on to apply the master-slave dialectic through the figure of the *laoban*. He writes, “The master owns the company; the master decides who is paid and how much; the master takes responsibility for the growth of wealth... This was the significance of the *laoban* character. Economic reforms gave birth to the character of the *laoban*.... The moral image of this agent in everyday imagination is presented by someone who by virtue of paying and owning decides and cares for those working for him. In this sense, those who are paid by a *laoban* become his servants” (2012:44).

Miyasaki (2012) describes the emergence of a similar entrepreneurial type championed by economic reformers in Japan during the 1990s. This strong individual (*tsuyoi kojiri*), as he illustrates, embodies a company man who takes risks and accepts responsibility. Miyasaki (2012) quotes from a Japanese newspaper, the company man “can withstand the burden of freedom...and acts on the basis of short-term and long-term rational calculation aimed at the maximization of profit, rather than on the basis of social obligations” (2012: 93). I extend perspectives of this entrepreneurial individual by deconstructing the *laoban* as an allegorical and culturally significant figure in the context of post-socialist China. Like the Japanese company man, the Chinese *laoban* underscores the engendering of class-based inequalities and market uncertainties. As I illustrate below, this figure embodies a man who amasses wealth, makes deals, mediates requests, and acts as a provider among networks of personal dependents. As a self-made man, he attempts to defy administrative oversight by state powers and accountability by family members, while commanding respect from his peers and overcoming market crises through his attempts to gain access to global markets. Furthermore, this figure appropriates the trope of an American-brand of rugged individualism, yet is firmly rooted within the widening gender and class-based disparities that characterize China’s post-socialist transformations. In other words, the *laoban* or “boss” personifies a person who takes charge of his fate in face of increasing socio-economic uncertainties, which are marked by the simultaneous retraction of state-sponsored welfare and global market crises. At the same time, it mobilizes people’s dreams and aspirations for a better life in spite of growing socio-

economic uncertainties. Undoubtedly, as the following ethnographic encounters illustrate, this figure is riddled with contradiction.

### **Performing “The Boss”**

During the four months I spent in Mr. Cai’s office, I witnessed first-hand the daily enactments of a powerful boss in Guangzhou. At first glance, his law office typified the average white-collar workspace in any major city of the world with standard computers, paper-strewn desks, and water coolers. His company consisted of ten full-time male and female lawyers and other legal professionals ranging from twenty-five to over fifty years of age. Depending on their title, they sat either in open-space cubicles or in private rooms perched comfortably along all four corners of the office. As one would expect, Mr. Cai sat behind an elaborate desk made of solid rosewood in the most grand and spacious room. Although he regularly floated in and out of his office at a moment’s notice, his secretary, a petite, slender woman in her late forties served as the guardian of the room by keeping the door securely locked whenever he left the premises. Mr. Cai’s ability to command possession of his large, private office made visible his position as the company’s boss.

Although his employees steadfastly kept regular 8-6pm Monday through Friday work schedules, Mr. Cai’s work rhythms varied according to his whims. My observations led me to believe that he rarely dealt with any substantive lawyerly matters, but rather spent his work hours managing his properties and investment partners. In fact, documents rarely sat on top of his pristine desk, and he rarely turned

on the computer. In fact, Mr. Cai never received any formal legal training or even an university education. Rather, as a former police officer, Mr. Cai probably established his company through personal connections with the local government as well as through hands-on experience with matters pertaining to the law. Essentially, Mr. Cai's power as a boss derived from his ability to mediate *guanxi* or relationships among his clients and associates by fulfilling one person's needs by asking favors from another.<sup>58</sup> Meanwhile, he then formed networks of dependents that rely on Mr. Cai on an on-going basis for financial loans, mediation over personal disputes, and obtaining construction permits. I frequently observed numerous visitors each day filtering in and out his opaque glass door. On days that I accompanied him on his meetings, Mr. Cai and his visitors would exchange knowledge about the stock markets and real estate prices. On other occasions, guests would elicit advice on problems with evictions, property disputes, and investment downturns. Sometimes, I would even catch glimpses of strangers delivering stacks of cash to his office, uncovered and in plain sight. The lively pulse among his employees somehow muted the air of mystery that pervaded his office every day. In truth, no one dared to ask too much about Mr. Cai's dealings. On the day that the puzzling stacks of cash unexpectedly appeared on his desk, his assistant and manager of his properties asked humorously, "So, today's pay day, eh?" The fact that Mr. Cai once confessed he had

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<sup>58</sup> For more extensive analyses on *guanxi* practices in China, see Yang (1994, 2002), Kipnis (1997), Gold (2001), Guthrie (1999), and Wank (1999). Although their research methods and arguments differ, these studies underscore how the meanings and practices of *guanxi* among state officials and entrepreneurs have changed over the course of China's early post-socialist transition. Here, I use Mr. Cai's *guanxi* practices in order to demonstrate how the personification of the figure "boss" is enacted on an everyday basis.

witnessed countless executions on duty as a police officer for crimes including bribery and corruption intensified his aura of mystery and unrestrained power, however truthful or fabricated these stories might be.

Paradoxically, his insistence that his circle of dependents, including me, were considered rather nonchalantly as “friends” (*peng you*) added to his mystery.<sup>59</sup> Indeed, whenever I observed his meetings with his guests, I was often struck by the ambiguous boundaries that blended friendship with business relations, personal interests, reciprocity/ mutuality, and self-interested gain. Visitors would arrive unannounced at his office and would casually chit chat over tea and cigarettes for hours on end. He and his guests often wore solid-colored polo shirts and plastic sandals to the office. Their collective performance of informality thus facilitated the manner and extent to which trust and reciprocity were bridged. One day, I became embarrassingly aware of the unassuming manner with which business partners dealt with one another when Mr. Cai remarked with exasperation that I had been too formal or polite with him. In his eyes, my politeness created an awkward distance between us. Repeatedly, he and his business associates explained that among business partners in China, friendships override any formal business relationship. In Mr. Cai’s words, “Friends come first, then business.” His statement implied that personal relationships (*guanxi*) in any kind of exchange relied primarily on trust. In other words, the boundaries between formal business partners and casual friendships were never

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<sup>59</sup> Arguably, Mr. Cai’s references to his dependents as his “friends” (*peng you*) mirror what anthropologists of China (Zhang 2006 , Yang 2002) describe as *renqing* or human intimacy.

discrete, since trust governed the nature of personal relationships. However, over the course of my observations, I eventually realized that trust did not necessarily signify transparency in Mr. Cai's circle and business dealings, yet his performance of openness and informality through the interpellation of his circle as "friends" enabled him to establish his network of confidants and dependents.

Much of his performance as a "friend" depended on his personification of freedom. Undoubtedly, Mr. Cai relied on his circle of friends and family in order to perform the freedom to float in and out of his office at will and the freedom to traverse beyond the national boundaries of China. I was fully aware that I was strategically included in his personal network as a cultural translator to the United States, but the extent to which I was expected to help him troubled me. Admittedly, I had much to gain (in terms of cultural capital) from Mr. Cai's personal networks, but I often felt uncomfortable because of my financial status as a graduate student, which paled in comparison to his wealth and social capital. Over time, I realized that his role as the (male) provider rested on his network of dependents. Mr. Cai undisputedly provided economic security to his families, with the potential to gain wealth and status overseas. In my case, he provided me research access to his employees, along with introductions to well-recognized fashion designers in Guangzhou. The role of provider thus served as a crucial nexus through which his wealth was accumulated and distributed among close friends and intimate circles. It also offered traction to his personification of freedom, a role that he unabashedly claimed when he once declared to me when I asked him about the future of his cross-border marriages, "No one,

including my wives and children, governs what I do or what I say. Those closest around me know that they are in my heart and I will take care of them. But no one governs me!”

### **“The Boss” as a Spatialized Mode of Capital Accumulation**

The gendering of market anxieties is evidenced through people’s manipulation of both labor relations and investment strategies across city spaces and national borders. As a case in point, my acquaintance with Mr. Cai revealed the complex articulations of gender inequalities, capital accumulation, and state regulatory regimes in the cross-border scaling of transnational families. As the patriarch of his households, Mr. Cai served as the fulcrum upon which the families hinged. Specifically, Mr. Cai planned to have his first wife Eva and daughter Gigi move to Canada or the U.S., while his second wife and son would stay in China. Meanwhile, he intended to shuttle back and forth between the two families (which are colloquially termed “satellite” families), situated on their sides of the Pacific Rim (Ong 1999).<sup>60</sup> His strategy would not only draw affective distances between the households, but would also serve to facilitate key nodes of capital accumulation. While his son from his second wife would inherit and oversee Mr. Cai’s estates in China, his first wife and daughter would expand his entrepreneurial ventures overseas in North America.

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<sup>60</sup> In her ethnography of transnational citizenship, Ong (1999) describes well-to-do families from Hong Kong who hold multiple foreign passports and possess homes in different countries around the world. For Ong, these so-called astronaut families are constantly on-the-go and dispersed among various places in the world. They therefore exemplify the idea of flexible citizenship, whose accumulation strategies exceed the boundaries of the nation-state in the contemporary period of late capitalism. Here, I draw parallels to Mr. Cai in order to highlight the similarities between transnational families from Hong Kong and those that are emerging among elites in Mainland China.

Thus, Mr. Cai's intention to "fix" or situate his legal residences on both sides of the globe via his wives and children would enable him to flexibly travel and shuffle his assets throughout China, the U.S., and Canada. His ability to accumulate his wealth abroad seemed significant, since he had repeatedly mentioned to me that the Chinese government could only guarantee the use-rights of his multiple properties in China for up to seventy years. No one knew what would happen to his assets thereafter. Thus, Mr. Cai's financial stakes in safeguarding his investments under the (male) family name critically depended on his business ventures overseas. These investments ranged from exporting kitchenware and transporting animal fur from Russia, to establishing a cross-oceanic recycling business. His uncertainty surrounding the protection of his wealth in China seemed to be a primary motivation for his plans to establish an "astronaut" family halfway across the world.

When I asked him about his immigration plans, Mr. Cai often kept silent about his trans-national business dealings. Instead, he openly articulated his desires for freedom (*zi you*), which depended, to a large extent, on his ability to flexibly leave and return to China as he wished. On several occasions, he took great pains to express his discontent with the Chinese government, signaling his desire to out-manuever the tax and regulatory limits exerted by the nation-state in extending of his personal wealth and mobility across national boundaries. Although he often echoed discourses of democracy and individualism, I began to realize that his worldly aspirations were firmly rooted in his experiences of growing up during the early years of China's massive experiments with the market economy. As a young man who came of age



during the early period of *kaifang* or “opening up” to the dictates of global capitalism, Mr. Cai belonged to the first cohort who converted from the principles of socialist egalitarianism to capitalist wealth and entrepreneurialism during the post-Reform period. Within the four decades of his life, he and Eva, who grew up as childhood friends, had catapulted from poverty to extreme riches. In other words, his personal history was marked by extreme economic unevenness. His ability to perform freedom and amass capital across national borders seemed to suggest an act of distancing himself from his own past. At the same time, these efforts undoubtedly depended upon the simultaneous emplacements of his wives and children in China and abroad.

Indeed, his narrative often overlooked the perspectives of his wife and daughter in regards to their plans to immigrate. Consequently, I was often left to speculate on Eva and Gigi’s views on these familial matters. For them, the chance to immigrate to Canada entailed a negotiation between establishing a better quality of life for themselves and learning to habituate to a way of life in a foreign country independent of Mr. Cai. In fact, their everyday lives in Guangzhou seemed to suggest that they had already been accustomed to running a household without Mr. Cai’s presence. For example, Eva performed all the familial duties without her husband’s assistance. She handled all the chores and household errands and oversaw my work schedule and pay as Gigi’s tutor. As a former real estate agent, she also managed the accounting and administrative aspects of Mr. Cai’s properties. When Canadian lawyers visited Guangzhou in order to consult with Mr. Cai’s on their immigration plans, Eva entertained the female translators and assistants, while the men discussed

their business plans separately. From my observations, I occasionally wondered whether perhaps Eva's freedom depended on her ability to remain physically and emotionally distant from Mr. Cai.

Mr. Cai's story highlights how the scaling of capitalist networks across provincial and national boundaries entails spatial and subjective transformations through which patriarchal figures emerge within transnational families. To be sure, scholars of transnational or "satellite" families have aptly captured the cosmological, affective, and imaginative aspects of human agency that serve as the subjective push/pull forces of transnational migration among divergent Chinese diasporic populations (Ong 1999, Chu 2010, Krause forthcoming). While their works highlight the flexible strategies and disciplinary regimes associated in the crafting of multiple and shifting transnational Chinese subjects around the world, these scholars tend to overlook the gender dynamics involved in these transnational modes of flexible accumulation. The case of Mr. Cai illustrates how performances of freedom among some of China's aspiring transnational entrepreneurs privilege men's attempts to negotiate the terms of their respectability in the face of economic and political uncertainties, while silencing the ways in which such social inequalities affect women. Masculine performances of entrepreneurial mobility in China emerge and firmly depend on gendered displacements and class-based disparities.

For Mr. Cai, the accumulation of his wealth through his multiple commercial and residential properties in Guangzhou reinforces the pre-communist legacies of

male lineage in southern China by protecting property under the family surname traced through the male line (Watson 1985, Faure and Siu 1995). However, his story alone fails to credit women's successes in the accumulation of family wealth and property holdings, a point I address in chapter 5. Second, Mr. Cai's contemporary polygamous family enables him to extend his wealth abroad and protect them from uncertainties pertaining to property use rights in China. His practice of polygamy underscores the articulation between patriarchal practices of lineage and kinship organization, which are rooted in the cultural practices of southern China and transnational capital accumulation strategies.<sup>61</sup> These dominant patriarchal practices tend to overshadow alternative accumulative practices, particularly those that underscore the work of female migrants who cross transnational borders and send remittances back home. Third, his personal connections, his authority within local government bureaus, and his business enterprises meet the needs of his business partners and associates, while providing livelihoods for them and their respective families. Mr. Cai's capacity to extend his patronage to his business and legal associates accrues him respect, while they potentially manage his real estate properties and financial investments in China while he lives abroad. Finally, his role as the male provider endows him with sexual access to women who in turn safeguard

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<sup>61</sup> There are exceptions to these patriarchal practices throughout the Pearl River Delta region. For instance, Janice Stockard (1989) discusses marriage resistance and delayed transfer marriage practices among young unmarried women (colloquially named "self-comb women") during the period 1860-1930. During the course of my research, I have learned that members of the "self-comb women" lineage continue to reside in the Zhongshan area.

his properties in China under this surname via his son, while his daughter can expand his business ventures overseas. However, Mr. Cai's declarations of freedom fail to acknowledge his first wife's role in establishing the wealth and prestige he enjoys today. After all, they had grown up together as classmates in an elementary school close to where Sun Yatsen University stands today. Although I never spoke to Mrs. Cai about her husband's other wife, I am certain that the material comforts that they possess resulted in no small part from her own hard work and dedication. The extent to which she knows about Mr. Cai's second wife and her views on the matter continues to bewilder me to this day.

### **Performing Freedom in the Factories**

My focus on Mr. Cai in no way attempts to essentialize upwardly mobile men in contemporary China. Rather, the specificities of gender and class-based inequalities which entrepreneurs' performances of freedom signify vary widely by context. For example, over the course of my research, I gradually discovered the paradoxical echoing of freedom within the walled confines of garment factories in the manufacturing district of Guangzhou. Despite the back-breaking and emplaced labor among factory owners, the expansion of the fast fashion industry as a historically-particular mode of flexible production has enabled former wage-workers to become small-scale independent factory bosses.

The contradictions tied to their declarations of freedom as entrepreneurs become all the more apparent when some manufacturers and sub-contractors begin to

realize that their roles as bosses entail not only personal freedom but also encounters with demanding clients along hierarchical chains (*lian*) of command. These class-based contradictions unfold through the formation of global supply chains, which usually consist of clients who deal with intermediary agents. These intermediary parties then pass on work orders (*xia dan*) to manufacturers and sub-contractors down the hierarchical chain. The manufacturers in turn hire workers, often youths, to fulfill these orders at low wages, thereby reproducing exploitative practices down the chain of command. Factory bosses frequently express to me how they perceive and handle their unequal relationships with their demanding clients. A factory boss once stated after he encountered a number of overseas clients who have failed to pay him on time, “Someday, I wish I could be in a (financial) position to “run away” (*zou dan*) from an order.”

Historically, over the course of the past three decades of market reform, many among the first cohort of migrants who once flooded the factories within China’s Special Economic Zones (SEZ) have now taken over the jobs of overseas bosses from Hong Kong, Taiwan, and other countries, thus filling the ranks of factory bosses in their own right. These migrant workers have not only gathered the technical skills and business acumen of “just in time” production processes, but they have also appropriated the discourses and *habitus* of the entrepreneurial boss. As a case in point, manufacturers in China who produce low-cost goods based on copy-designs, like fast fashion, are often described colloquially as *shanzai*, or copycat. Though the label misleadingly suggests a lack of creative energy, their spirit of entrepreneurial freedom

is in fact reflected in the historical significance of the term, *shanzai*. Specifically, *shanzai* conjures up the ancient Chinese tale, *Outlaws of the Marsh*, written in the fourteenth century by novelists Shi Nai'an and Luo Guanzhong. This story tells of a mountain hamlet composed of a gang of impoverished male bandits (Wu 2012, Hua 2011). Their unruly acts of thievery denote a collectivized sense of freedom, masculinity, and resistance against control by the imperial authorities during the dynastic era. Today, the term *shanzai* in popular Chinese culture playfully refers to a myriad of low-cost consumer commodities including fast food, household items, mobile phones, clothing, handbags, and toys that imitate or counterfeit established brands. In a way, *shanzai* producers imagine their work as translating and making accessible exclusive, globally-branded commodities to mass consumer markets in China. One *shanzai* producer of counterfeit CDs and DVDs in Shenzhen once declared to me, "Look, for the past century, Britain and France have taken our (China's) resources. Now it is time for China to reclaim its (national) glory!" The term thus denotes a collective, if not outright nationalistic, sense of freedom, masculinity, and rebellion, but one that gestures toward the unequal balance of colonial power and a sense of historical injustice and redemption that reasserts China's place in the world economy.

I was initially alerted to migrants' declarations of freedom, much like the rebellious spirit of the *shanzai* bandits, when I conducted my research in a workshop factory owned by a migrant couple, Mr. and Mrs. Wong, within Guangzhou's garment district. One evening, I assisted the owners and their employees with a

particularly grueling work order for a client based in Hong Kong. The order required us to churn out thousands of finished girls' dresses while following meticulous instructions on tagging, folding, and packaging. Five temporary sewers labored in their respective stations, while Mrs. Wong, her son, and I squatted around the front worktable, preparing the packaging of the finished pieces. As the colors of dusk swept through the neighborhood, Mr. Wong lingered in his usual work station on the second floor. An itinerant wage worker had paused from his ironing task to enjoy a few long puffs of his cigarette. With his body leaning against the corner of the front metal gate, he turned to Mr. Wong beckoning him to exchange a few words of masculine camaraderie. The worker jokingly hollered, "A boss like you doesn't need to worry about making a few pennies here and there like me. You make the big money!" Mr. Wong casually leaned over his left elbow from the second floor attic and replied, "You know, the money I make now is about the same as when I worked for someone else in a factory in Dongguan. I operate my own business now because I have freedom (*zi you*)."

The certainty with which he expressed his paradoxical declaration of freedom surprised me, particularly because we had shared countless nights of arduous factory labor that extended well into the late hours of the evenings and early mornings. What did he mean by freedom? How did he **know** he was free? How did the apparent contradiction between his announcement of freedom and his emplaced labor in the factory make sense to him?

Indeed, Mr. Wong's declaration of freedom echoed the discourses of market liberalization as they were promulgated by the CCP during the early years of market reform. Mr. and Mrs. Wong, who were members of the first waves of undocumented migrant workers, were lured by the prospect of unprecedented wealth in China's coastal cities. Many poured into the factories of Shenzhen and became the primary agents of these large-scale experiments with market practices. As migrant entrepreneurs, the Wongs, who in many ways struggle as much as wage workers due to their financial uncertainty and arduous factory labor, encountered numerous social exclusions associated with their *hukou* statuses as undocumented residents of the city. Their spatial and subjective exclusions from critical state welfare underpinned their desires for economic freedom so that they aspired to supersede the limits of their economic precariousness. The couple desired to join the ranks of the wealthy elites in Guangzhou, but their statuses as outsiders and wage workers excluded them from the monetary rewards of China's opening-up policies. Through their tenacity and hard work, Mr. and Mrs. Wong followed in the footsteps of their Hong Kong factory boss and joined the managerial class while learning the technical skills required in cutting fabric, constructing garments, and overseeing production lines. Eventually, the couple left the confines of the garment factory in Dongguan and arrived in Shenzhen to experiment in a few business ventures for several years. Their attempts included an outdoor snack shop and wholesale trading of plastic flowers and other novelties, which took place out of their home. After a few unsuccessful enterprises, Mr. Wong



joined his older brother in Guangzhou and opened his own small-scale factory in the garment district.

Their life stories in the factories of Shenzhen and Guangzhou exemplified how the CCP's call for citizens to "get rich quick," coupled with the exclusions from state welfare via the *hukou* household registration system, operated spatially and subjectively through Mr. Wong's performances of entrepreneurial freedom. For instance, thousands of small-scale workshops and warehouses in Guangzhou's garment district continue to facilitate globally-oriented garment production and trade based on design copying in low-volume batches, thus resembling a return to craft-based production. Together, they collectively labor to create the globally-oriented fast fashion economy; that is, the low-cost, small-scale, flexible, and "just in time" delivery of designer-inspired fashion around the world. Nearly one thousand factories with simple machines and technology produce about twenty percent of China's annual garment manufacture for export and domestic consumption. Many of these home-based factories are fragmented so that some workshops have workers that specialize only in constructing samples, dying fabric, cutting fabric, attaching buttons on denim, sewing flower pins, or assembling garment pieces. Nearly every one of these factories is family-based and independently owned. This fragmentation of factory spaces and production processes has engendered male bosses' declarations of entrepreneurial freedom, despite the uncertainties of their business ventures.

For example, during my research in the Wongs' factory, I observed Mr. Wong's performances of freedom, however ephemeral and irregular they might be. On days when I visited the factory, I regularly found Mr. Wong working alone in the second floor attic while Mrs. Wong and the wage workers labored along the ground floor in their respective sewing stations. When production orders from clients arrived, he handled the exhausting task of measuring and cutting fabric pieces in preparation for mass assembly. When business slowed, he spent his free time surfing the internet, napped, or experimented with garment construction based on his creative inspiration. Usually, he would blast high-energy dance music from his computer or watched foreign films online. Over time, I discovered that he particularly enjoyed watching violent gangster films that portrayed the masculine sense of authority and brutality embodied by "The Godfather". On two separate occasions, Mr. Wong and I watched "King of New York" and "Van Damien's Land," two extremely raw and violent films that appealed to viewers' appetite for murder and suspense. When I asked him why he favored violent dramas, he replied that only such exciting and graphic movies were enjoyable to watch when he is alone.

During one of the films, I wondered about the extent to which he aspired to play the role of the domineering "boss," much like the characters in the movies. Certainly, claiming the title of *laoban* or the owner of his own business already afforded him a level of respect in the eyes of his workers and his clients. Male clients, friends, and relatives typically stopped by and chatted in privacy upstairs with Mr. Wong, collectively performing the building of *guanxi* or personal relationships.

Neighborhood factory bosses would sometimes ask Mr. Wong for technical advice on garment construction or operating machines. Whenever Mrs. Wong argued with their workers on the factory floor, he would lean over the wooden railing, peep downstairs, and intervene on his wife's behalf if necessary. On days that their waged workers were sent offsite to their clients' factories, Mr. Wong would lead the team while Mrs. Wong stayed behind. He typically was the one to venture around the neighborhood when the couple had to scour through the fabric markets and pick up raw materials in order to fulfill a client's order. In contrast, Mrs. Wong usually remained in their factory, leaving their factory/home only to buy groceries at the nearby market or to pick up sewing supplies during exceptionally busy hours.

Reflecting on the comparisons between Mr. Wong and Mr. Cai allowed me to realize how class differences colored the ways in which the two men divergently pursued and performed what they imagine as freedom, entrepreneurialism, and masculinity. In other words, their divergent, class-based enactments of freedom not only shaped the way they perceived themselves as desiring subjects but also exposed how class and gender determined their respective aspirations for new possibilities. For Mr. Cai, wealth endowed him with the possibility to exceed the regulatory limits of the Chinese state and enter into the ranks of the global elites in the hopes of securing his capital abroad. At the same time, the transnational accumulation of his wealth relied on the reproductive labor of his two wives, labor that he aspired to span the Pacific Ocean. In contrast, Mr. Wong's claim to freedom by performing the role of the factory boss conferred him respect among his clients, family members, and

employees, regardless of how unprofitable or unstable his business venture might be. To a certain extent, Mr. Wong's title as factory boss enabled him to display his ability to negotiate the terms of his own exploitation even though the reproduction of the oppressive factory regime paradoxically depended squarely on his declaration of freedom. Meanwhile, his independent factory offered him the hope of aspiring or desiring more wealth and freedom. Whereas Mr. Cai aspired to supersede the boundaries of the nation-state, Mr. Wong desired to overcome the spatial and subjective exclusions imposed upon him and his family members through the hukou system.

Despite their class differences, the men's stories highlight the workings of gender inequalities through their enactments of entrepreneurial freedom. Mr. Cai's case reveals how wealthy, polygamous families that aspire to geographically span national boundaries serve as primary nodes of capital accumulation. More importantly, it showed that the building of his transnational empire firmly depended on them, even though Mr. Cai's publically claimed the title of "boss." Meanwhile, the daily operation of Mr. Wong's small-scale family rested on the arduous labor of Mrs. Wong, who manages their clients and their workers through fictive kinship ties. I expand on Mrs. Wong's affective and material contributions to the factory in chapter 5.

In short, Mr. Wong's and Mr. Cai's life stories uncover the simultaneous class and gender inequalities through which capital accumulation and labor exploitation

operate through the subjective figure of the male “boss.” Through the specificities of their divergent performances, I demonstrate how the figure of the male boss underscores the desires and aspirations that structural inequalities produce through the social boundaries and exclusions imposed by the *hukou* system and by the regulatory measures of the nation-state. In turn, the hopes and desires as illustrated by Mr. Wong and Mr. Cai reveal their attempts to redefine the possibilities for their future because of and in spite of these territorial and subjective limits.

### **Freedom and Its Reverberations**

After my acquaintance with Mr. Wong and Mr. Cai, I became acutely aware of the variegated enactments of freedom during my stay in China. I was particularly struck by men’s declarations of freedom within the most unexpected contexts. For example, a homeless man in his sixties had taken shelter outside my apartment in Guangzhou’s central business district during my second year of research. He found a nook several feet away from the back gate of my apartment building, and built a makeshift bed using an old mattress, umbrellas, blankets, and even a used teapot set. He lived in his nook for several months and had even weathered the severest typhoons I had ever witnessed. After my roommate and I finally gathered our courage to speak to him, the gentle man with a slow gait and slightly crooked spine explained his personal circumstances to us. His wife had apparently kicked him out of his home because of his addiction to alcohol. As he explained his life story to us, he proudly declared, “Well, now at least I have my freedom!” He then related his precarious situation to his life experience as a young soldier in Shandong battling in the

Communist Revolution alongside a national hero. The man seemed to convey to us that we need not pity him, for his life as a homeless man was better than that of a man encumbered by his family. Several weeks later, we found out that security officers of our apartment building had asked him to move. “Don’t worry about me!” he boasted. “The government has secured a comfortable apartment building by the military hospital. I can go anytime.” The veracity of his words troubled me, since months later, I saw him roaming the streets and digging through trash.

His life story left me to wonder whether his declaration of freedom echoed in any way the dreams of socialist liberation for which he battled in the name of the CCP. As Rofel (1999) illustrated in her study of factory women in Hangzhou, the voices of his generation found collective pride as the laboring vanguard of the Communist Revolution. Over the course of the Party’s ideological reversal within the last few decades, this homeless man represented a segment of China’s aging population silently left behind by the Party’s race towards national development. Without the financial support of his family and welfare services provided by the government, he was left to fend for himself on the city streets. His claim to freedom signaled to me his sense of ambivalence toward the state-sponsored rhetoric of socialist liberation and the contemporary discourse of self-responsibility (*kao ziji*), both of which had obviously failed him. His story exemplifies the sense of ambivalence that some people who came of age during the Maoist period have in face of China’s market reforms.

When I began my research in the garment manufacturing district of Guangzhou, men's declarations of freedom reverberated around the factory spaces. There, freedom was paradoxically voiced and performed among migrant entrepreneurs and wage workers. Although these different groups of laboring migrants articulate various notions of freedom, the diversity of these performances signal the very fracturing of these class and gender-based collectivities through performances of masculinity. Ultimately, they stem from the gradual retreat of the government-sanctioned collective discourse regarding class-consciousness to the extent that the emergent neoliberal discourse emphasizing individual freedom and entrepreneurship has begun to capture the desires and imaginations of the migrant workers. In particular, men celebrate the sense of freedom they enjoy from temporary work.

During the course of my visits to the Wongs' factory, I met an itinerant man, Jin Dong, who came once in a while to help out with the ironing. The young man looked to be in his mid- to late thirties with spiky wild hair, dark complexion, a lean and small frame, and a mischievous smile. One Monday afternoon, he was wearing a bright red T-shirt emblazoned with "Levi's 2011" in a wooden font, a pair of beige military shorts, and sneakers. Shortly after I arrived he blared out with his usual gregariousness, "Hey so you've come today! When I'm here, you're here!" Mrs. Wong, the owner, was amused. For a few minutes the two of them began a running joke that seemed to be shared only among the three of us, though the performance was staged in front of everyone in the factory. Mrs. Wong joked in her usual child-

like manner, “Haha, why is it that when you (Jin Dong) come, she comes as well! She hasn’t come around in a long while (about a week).” “Are you following me?” Jin Dong piped up. “No, it must be that you’re following me!” I responded. Again, Mrs. Wong seemed quite amused by our exchange and was eager to join in the banter. After wards, Jin Dong drifted off into silence while he diligently continued on with his ironing of the red and pink flowered dresses. He first grabbed a dress from a pile lying on his left hand side, laid it flat on the large ironing board, and proceeded to press the steaming iron down, beginning with the collar, the front, and then finally the bottom layers. When he finished, he laid the newly ironed dresses on top of one another in piles to his front right hand side. As the two of them were working, Mrs. Wong initiated small talk by asking about his son. Since Jin Dong had proven to be quite amusing, I think Mrs. Wong enjoyed passing the time by shooting the breeze (*liao tian*) with him.

She asked him, “Hey how old is your son?” When she raised the question, I was surprised to find out that he had a son, since he looked rather young.

“He’s 2 years old,” he casually responded.

“When was the last time you saw him?” she asked him.

He then replied, “Oh, about 2 months ago.”



“Well, aren’t you worried that your wife will find another father to replace you?” she jokingly proposed. “What happens when another man steals your wife and son away from you?”

Humorously, he then answered that another man would just have to give him 10,000 RMB to make an even exchange. “Wow, 10,000 RMB for your son...” she replied, probably feigning shock at his cold and calculating remark. He then followed up with, “With money, you can do anything!” After he acknowledged that the comment could be interpreted as oddly inappropriate despite their light-hearted exchange, (particularly in the presence of an audience comprised of wives and mothers), he then added, “That son is mine, and will always be mine. No one can take him away from me...” With that, Mrs. Wong seemed satisfied.

Fifteen to twenty minutes later, Jin Dong decided to take a short smoking break beside us at the front table. As he squatted across from us, Mrs. Wong insistently inquired, “Don’t you miss your wife and son?,” eagerly trying to challenge his bold remark by situating him back into his role as husband and father. Instead, Jin Dong replied proudly, “She doesn’t control me. I give her money and that’s enough,” implying that monetary exchange fulfilled his duty as a husband and father. Mrs. Wong then added, “You know how difficult it is to find someone to help us iron when we need one?” Jin Dong seemed to understand the implied meaning behind her statement. Apparently, Jin Dong knows, and is friends with, another itinerant worker who comes occasionally into the factory to iron. Jin Dong then added that whenever

the other worker gambles away his money, he never fails to ask Jin Dong for cash. Mrs. Wong seemed to know about this already and added, “Yeah, every time we hire him to help us iron, his wife comes looking for us. Every time!”

Their exchange, though light-hearted and humorous, suggests the overlapping circles in which these workers circulate even though their labor capacities, spatial situatedness, and social encounters are oftentimes fluid, mobile, and temporary. The members that comprise this migrant community including residents and temporary workers, often return to this garment district and cross paths within similar social circles. Though they are socially situated, however, they are still very much on their own. This paradox begs the following: What influences these circles of migrant workers to prefer such precarious line of work in temporary garment manufacture? Why do they choose this line of work rather than situating themselves in a fixed and firm place that they can safely call home?

I tried to solicit an answer from him by suggesting how difficult it must be to find steady work by laboring in a factory (*dagong*). He then explained that he doesn't like to be cloistered in a factory, clocking in from 8 am to 10 pm day in and day out. His remarks suggest that he enjoys his alone time as an itinerant worker, while fulfilling his financial obligations back home. He then asked about my work as a student and where I lived. I told him that I was a student at Zhongda, and that I lived on campus. As he wrapped up his work that day, Mrs. Wong paid him 160 RMB for his ironing time, which must have begun in the morning and ended around 4pm. She

then jokingly suggested that he should buy me a drink now that he's been paid. He then picked up my McDonald's cup and shouted, "As long as she's finished with this drink, then I'll buy her a new one! Will she finish soon? I don't think so!" Soon after, he stepped out of the factory floor and into the outside world. I saw his head disappeared into the crowd as my gaze followed his footsteps. Shortly thereafter, I saw him suddenly turn around to walk back to the direction of the factory. I quickly turned away and realized that he had walked into the tiny convenience store directly across from us. He chatted with the cashier lady and returned to the front table carrying two plastic bottles of peach tea. He dropped off one, probably signaling that he felt guilty for denying Mrs. Wong's request that he gives me a treat. He modestly left with a glowing smile, delighted by his pleasant surprise. I was happily surprised by his kind gesture. Later, Mrs. Wong explained to me that itinerant workers in that neighborhood are referred to as "*dou zou*," meaning that they drift to any place where they can find work.

As my exchange demonstrates, the itinerant worker derives his sense of masculinity from his ability to travel in and out of factory spaces without being held accountable to any boss. He enacts a demonstration of pride as he touts his travels in and out of the factories in Guangzhou at his will, free of any constraint asserted by factory bosses or even by his wife. His absence from his family as well as his ability to drift from one factory to another without being held accountable to any single boss endows him the ability to perform the image of solitary and rugged individualism. His performance of masculinity, mobility, and freedom from familial ties are

paradoxically made possible by the conditions of his precarious labor. As an informal wage-worker, the contradictions inherent within his declarations of freedom are even more apparent than that performed by Mr. Wong. The structural inequalities between factory owner and worker are made painfully apparent through the exchange between Mr. Wong and his itinerant worker, Jin Dong, even though they both publically echo their personal freedom. Their declarations of freedom expose the class-based inequalities upon which their owner-worker relationship is determined.

This chapter has explored how demonstrations of freedom are variously performed through the figure of the male “boss.” By comparing displays of freedom among the patriarch of an elite transnational family; the migrant owner of a small-scale factory-workshop; a homeless man and a temporary factory wage worker, I illustrate through the above ethnographic vignettes how the “boss” emerges as an aspirational figure through which labor and capital are mobilized among men of divergent classes. My emphasis on the male “boss” by no means suggests that it is the only figuration of labor and capital accumulation at play within contemporary China and within the links of supply chain capitalism. Indeed, scholars (Tsing 2009, Morton 2009, Tiqqun 2013) have shown within cross-cultural contexts that a variety of figures employs gender, class, national, and ethnic differences, such as “the young girl” and “the servant leader,” in divergent strategies of labor and capital accumulation. These figures, including the male “boss” engender dreams and aspirations that are necessary to the making of divergent life projects that articulate with people’s engagements with capitalist practices (Rofel 2007, Anagnost, Arai, and

Ren 2013). They highlight the diverse assemblages of desires, personhood, and gendered identifications that contingently articulate with people's participation in capitalist exchanges.

At the same time, I emphasize the historic and spatial specificity of the emergent "boss" figure as post-socialist China intensifies its participation in the global capitalist economy. As these case studies demonstrate, the spatial scaling of capital across national borders and the fragmentation of small-scale factory spaces underscore the spatial and subjective transformations within China's post-socialist society, as gender and class collectivities continue to fracture and social inequalities gradually deepen. As income disparities and social exclusions institutionalized through the *hukou* household registration system influence the practices of urbanization, migration, and labor in China, the contradictions between freedom and risk emerge even more clearly through men's enactments of the boss role. Indeed, freedom and risk are becoming popular tropes through which men across various classes in post-socialist China find meaning through their diverse engagements with global capitalism. Specifically, these tropes appeal to men's desires for a better life, while paradoxically exposing them to the negative effects of market exchange.

## **Chapter 5: Global Commodity Chains of Risks and Desires**

While men perform masculinity through the role of the “boss,” many migrant women must negotiate their desires for entrepreneurship and freedom in respect to their prescribed roles as mothers, wives, and caretakers. As Federici (2004) asserts, capitalist practices create the figure of the housewife to service the male (factory) worker. Their non-waged household labor in the domestic realm enables other forms of productive labor in the public domain, including factory wage work. In the case of Guangzhou’s garment district, the emergence of an entrepreneurial world largely driven by self-employed migrants has been made possible by the contribution of migrant women who must balance wage work with non-waged household labor. Their double-burden within the household workshops blurs the realms between public and the private domains, as well as between household and industrial labor. At the same time, household workshops require the disciplining of female workers within dual spaces of the household and the factory (Hsiung 1994). These gendered methods of labor discipline include the cultural work of naturalizing housework and situating desire within the domains of the private and the feminine.

As a case in point, one afternoon, I strolled through the dark and musky alleyways that zigzagged through Guangzhou’s garment district. After I arrived at the Wongs’ workshop, I came across a community magazine that was intended for a mass audience of female migrant workers. A romantic photo of a model posing as a cheerful, young bride dressed in a long and white gown donned the front cover of the magazine. She was pictured gently caressing the cheek of her kneeling groom. Her

pose caught my attention as I picked up the magazine off the dusty shop floor of the factory, possibly dropped amid the heap of torn fabrics, industrial scissors, and stray threads. The periodical addressed various issues concerning women's physical and emotional well-being, including questions related to abortion, dating, and disease. Sponsored by a neighborhood hospital that was operated by a village committee, the magazine was widely distributed by volunteers reaching out to female migrant workers from the countryside who were employed by garment factories throughout the surrounding district. Across the first page, a young woman dressed in a nurse's uniform from head to toe posed smilingly next to the title of the magazine, which was written in soft pink characters. The images conveyed an aura of scientific, even clinical, expertise. Yet, rather than presenting sterile accounts of mainstream topics pertaining to physiological fitness and health, a brief article beside the photo poetically described the sentiment of *qian gua* or concern for a loved one far away. *Qian gua*, or an unrequited sense of yearning and concern for someone, as the article claimed, evoked sadness among anyone who experienced its influence. It wrote, "Longing for a distant love is a source of blessing and admiration, but it is also a cause of pain. On the one hand, holding a place in your heart for a loved one offers a kind of hope and a sense of mystery about the other person, like a beautiful dream. When you're constantly thinking about someone far away, you may be overwhelmed by admiration, love, concern, and fantasy about another person. On the other hand, longing can be a source of anxiety and worry, since only you would know whether the object of your affection felt the same way about you."

A philosophical reflection of this particular human condition seemed to implicitly acknowledge common struggles among female migrant workers who experienced this sense of unfulfilled longing as wives, lovers, and even as mothers. To be sure, the article described a condition which many female workers in the area collectively shared. During my time spent with workers in a garment factory in the district, I often overheard women from various regions of China who found common ground based on their shared complaints and worries about their loved ones who stayed behind in their native villages. Frequently, they found mutual support by narrating out loud the details of their family troubles while they toiled at their respective sewing stations, however temporary their jobs might be. While some women openly aired their complaints about the rising costs of education in the city and in the countryside, others unburdened their emotional concerns about the well-being of their loved ones, or narrated their attempts to run away from family conflicts or domestic abuse.

By drawing upon the figure of concern and unrequited love, the article called upon, or interpellated, its readers to imagine themselves as collective agents of ongoing desire and longing for another someone far away. Longing, as this emotionally charged publication concluded, was a shared source of aspiration and pain. What did the author's public rumination over *qian gua* as a shared sentiment reveal about contemporary China's post-socialist transformation and its intensified participation in the world's commodity production? How did this specific article reflect the ways in which migrant workers' lives and experiences were intricately



woven into these transnational relationships and China's experiments with post-socialist transformation? How did changing gendered divisions of labor inform understandings of family, migration, and womanhood?

By placing migrant women at the center of its analysis, this article conjures the language of desire to situate migrant women within the domestic sphere as wives, mothers, and daughters.<sup>62</sup> The author of the magazine article addresses women's desires to a community-wide audience so as to craft what Rofel (2007) calls, "desiring subjects," within the public sphere. At the same time, the author attempts to situate women's desires within the private sphere via the home and naturalize them as feminine. Indeed, the cultural work of placing migrant women's desires within the private realms of the family and the household is critical to the mass mobilization of a feminized, low-wage workforce based primarily on women's labor. Consequently, as a number of anthropologists have examined, young women who have migrated out of their homes in the countryside continue to negotiate their individual autonomy (Jacka 1997, Solinger 1995, Gaetano and Jacka 2004, Davin 2005). Their yearnings to

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<sup>62</sup> This cultural work bolsters Federici's (2004) argument that capitalism created the figure of the housewife as a mode of primitive accumulation. She argues that since housework is non-waged, women's labor in the domestic realms tends to be naturalized that not considered productive labor. In practice, however, unpaid housework and domestic work, which include child care, cooking, and cleaning clothes, are essential to the productive work in capitalism. Without these forms of non-waged labor performed primarily by women, no other forms of production could take place. Federici (2004) writes, "In the same way as god created Eve to give pleasure to Adam, so did capital create the housewife to service the male worker physically, emotionally, and sexually, to raise his children, mend his socks, patch up his ego when it is crushed by the work and the social relations (which are relations of loneliness) that capital has reserved for him. It is precisely this peculiar combination of physical, emotional and sexual services that are involved in the role women must perform for capital that creates the specific character of that servant which is the housewife, that makes her work so burdensome and at the same time so invisible" (2004: 17)

experience urban consumption and to inhabit middle-class, cosmopolitan lifestyles exemplify what Rofel (2007) describes as “desiring China,” a contemporary moment in the nation’s post-socialist transformation, whereby desire is increasingly imagined, discussed, and expressed through public culture (2007: 2). The desiring subject, she argues, emerges in China as a figure of aspiration, through which new ways of conducting one’s self and normative ideas about being human in today’s world, are imagined and practiced through people’s transnational encounters with mass media, changing attitudes toward gender and sex, and consumption of globally recognized brands. This figure engages with neoliberal assumptions about entrepreneurship, freedom, and emancipation by enabling Chinese citizens to reconfigure their ideas of personhood and social relationships in the post-socialist world (2007:3).

The magazine’s reflection on unfulfilled longing appropriates the public discourse of desire, and calls upon its readers, female migrant workers, to assume their interpellated roles and positions as desiring subjects. By mobilizing female readers’ desires, the article naturalizes the gender and class-based struggles, as well as emotional toils that female migrant workers must undergo in face of widening rural-urban inequalities. It does so by calling upon the female factory worker (the *dagongmei*) as the central embodiment of China’s so-called workshop of the world, while attempting to neutralize the gender and class-based inequalities that are necessary to the construction of this figure.<sup>63</sup> As Pun (2005) argues, women’s bodies

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<sup>63</sup> Hsiung (1994) noted that a critical aspect of Taiwan’s rapid industrialization during the 1980s was the Kuomintang’s (KMT) two campaigns, “Mother’s Workshops” and “Living Rooms as Factories.” These programs were designed to motivate married women to contribute their wage labor in the

bridge the domains of production and reproduction by ensuring the biological reproduction of China's low-wage workforce. Consequently, while risk-taking ventures in the public domain, including the business and financial worlds, are figured as masculine, desires and risks constructed within the domains of the family and the household are naturalized as feminine. Meanwhile, migrant women's bodies also reproduce the affective dimensions of the family, as Dunn (2004) observes in her study of Polish factory women who reinforce their roles as mothers on the shop floor through various feeding practices. In China, migrant women's roles as primary caretakers are also performed in the household factories through feeding and childcare practices. Thus, despite the fragmentation of the migrant family unit in China due to women's absences from their native places, female workers continue to serve as the central guardians of family and home life. This contradiction is also documented by Hsiung (1994), who draws parallels between factory women in Taiwan and in Narasapur, India. She argues that factory women in both countries engage in piece-rate, temporary work in the factories in order to balance wage work with their household chores. Their roles in bridging the realms of production and reproduction force many factory women to drift in and out of wage work, which accommodates the fluid and so-called "flexible" processes of fast fashion manufacture.<sup>64</sup> In short, rather than questioning the broader inequalities and struggles

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interest of the nation's economic development, while they maintained their prescribed roles as wives, mothers, and caretakers. These campaigns attested to KMT's public politicization of women's labor that was commonly assigned to the private realm.

<sup>64</sup> The topic of balancing wage work with house work among female factory laborers has also been widely documented by scholars who study women's work in India, the United States, Mexico, and

that female migrant workers must endure, the article attempts to neutralize the political significance of desire and normalize feelings of longing and concern as human sentiments that are presumed to be natural and feminine. It addresses the risks that women take up as migrant laborers, while, at the same time, obscuring them by appealing to their feminine desires for a loved one faraway.

In the following analysis, I add to anthropological theories of kinship, gendered labor, and desire by drawing upon Rofel's conceptualization of China as an emerging site of post-socialist experimentations with desire as a cultural practice. While her work emphasizes discussions and performances of desire in public culture, this chapter adds to this literature by arguing that female migrant wage workers and entrepreneurs' longings entail ongoing assessments of desire and risk in the overlapping public and private domains of business and family. They include rural migrants from China's countryside, as well as foreign migrants from countries in the global south who have relocated to Guangzhou. Indeed, female migrant wage workers and entrepreneurs bear the burden of bridging the realms of private and public, as well as the household and the factory. Small-scale enterprises that depend on the family as the primary agents of production and capital accumulation map entrepreneurial desires and risks onto kin relations. In effect, women, who bear the double burden of sustaining the daily activities of their businesses and households,

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Latin America (Mies 1992, Beneria and Roldan 1987, Sassen 1989, Stepick 1984, Fernandez-Kelly and Garcia 1989, Portes, Castells, and Benton 1989, Rofel 1999). According to Werlhof (2008), the feminization of low-wage factory labor, which he calls "housewifization," undermines the negotiating power of trade unions or labor laws, since workers are casually hired as part-time and thus are not subject to state regulation over working conditions.

must negotiate their desires for enterprise and financial autonomy with their role as primary care-givers in their families and homes. They must constantly reassess their desires as they negotiate ongoing encounters with freedom and loss. Their entrepreneurial dreams and desires for autonomy often lead to circumstances that threaten their sense of financial stability and emotional security by rupturing friendship and familial ties that once served as primary sources of emotional safety and security. These circumstances often entail heartbreak, exploitation, and the giving up of other desires among female market participants, which lead them to re-examine their aspirations as they work through the meanings of entrepreneurship.

In her study of family-based textile firms in Italy, Yanagisako (2002) addresses gender, capitalist motivations, and desires as human sentiments. By challenging structuralist divisions between the categories of culture and “the economic,” she theorizes sentiments, which she describes as “emotional orientations and embodied dispositions,” as forces of capitalist production (2002:10). She critiques Eurocentric assumptions toward rational “interest,” as embodied by the figure of the “economic man” based on Enlightenment principles of rationality and calculation by arguing that feelings and emotions incite human action and produce social relations (*ibid*). Yanagisako thereby disrupts the cultural parameters of “the economic” by challenging common tendencies to naturalize and universalize “dispositions, desires, and subjectivity” in order to uncover why male managers of family firms in Italy seek to accumulate capital and expand their family enterprises. In short, she disrupts a foundational assumption that underlies many theories of

capitalism by emphasizing the contingencies and complexities of social relationships that the concepts of calculation and rationality cannot contain, but which critically evoke transformative action.

While Yanagisako's work theorizes desires and sentiments as forces of capitalist production, Faier's (2009) study on Filipina migrant workers in Japan contextualizes desires within social relations through which people mutually produce and transform meanings and practices across relations of difference. Specifically, she argues that one crafts her sense of self by engaging in cross-cultural intimacy with others including friendships, dating, and marriage, which are forged through unequal histories, national identities, forms of belonging, and dynamics of power. Everyday encounters and interactions across cultural differences thus facilitate the contingent and relational formations of desire and power. By highlighting how Filipina women in Japan shape their sense of identity and belonging, Faier (2009) underscores how migrant women rework the boundaries of exclusion as a marginalized group, while they forge their identities and realize their dreams through intimate encounters.

This chapter adds to the literature on capitalism and desire by linking these works with anthropological and sociological studies of risk in order to demonstrate how migrant women encounter ongoing entanglements of desire and risk, which are commonly experienced as entrepreneurial freedom and social displacement. As Beck (1994, 1997) writes, the dismantling of Fordist modes of organizing work and home lives, as characterized by job security and rising living standards, has broken up

collectivized structures of family, community, and labor. He argues that the turn to individualization, as signified by the decline of class and family as markers of social identity, personalizes planning and decision-making to the extent that people increasingly experience anxiety toward an uncertain future. Furthermore, he further contends that processes of individualizing risk break social bonds within communities and disconnect people from their places of birth and geographical proximity to their families. Though Beck sheds light of the social effects of societies that have taken up practices of self-management, he tends to assume that the processes of individualization and fragmentation of social collectivities are total and complete. He tends to overlook the ambivalence and contradictions that people such as migrant women encounter when they are confronted with circumstances that force them to resolve their entrepreneurial desires and autonomy with their expected roles as mothers, wives, and daughters (Mythen 2004).

I draw from Beck's analysis of risk by showing how desires are entangled with risks as migrants work through the paradoxes of freedom by becoming entrepreneurs and temporary wage workers. Following in the works of Siu and Chan (Siu 2011), along with other historians and anthropologists who have studied women's long-standing participation in commercial life along the Pearl River Delta (PRD), I examine how women's entrepreneurial activities and temporary wage labor contribute to Southern China's commercial legacy in the contemporary period. I contribute to their analyses by emphasizing rural women's experiences of migration in shaping their entrepreneurial aspirations in Guangzhou. Specifically, rather than

locating women's agency through their participation in the business sector, I demonstrate how desires draw female entrepreneurs into situations that expose them to risk, revealing the ways in which everyday entanglements of desire and risk are negotiated. Furthermore, I argue that what counts as risk entail gendered divisions of labor, whereby financial risks taken in the public sector are often coded as masculine and the labor of caring for the home are coded as feminine.

I begin this chapter by illustrating how desires for meaningful connection with others compel many female migrants to participate in transnational commodity production and exchange. I then show how their struggles in ascending the social ladder as aspiring entrepreneurs remain fraught with gendered and intra-familial tensions that tear the fabric of kinship, friendship, and intimacy, bonds that once served as the most assessable and invaluable source of care and cooperation in face of possible market downturns and exploitative labor conditions. The vignettes that I present narrate events that unsettle market participants' expectations of entrepreneurial freedom and temporary labor, leading them to constantly redefine what autonomy and profit-making pursuits mean to them. Drawing from Yanagisako (2002) and Faier's (2009) call to re-conceptualize production as dynamic and contingent relations, this chapter examines workers' gendered and dynamic motivations for participating in the global chains of production and entrepreneurship. It traces how participants' desires alter in face of social insecurities, emplacements, and market loss, producing ongoing and entangled processes of desire and risk. Migrants' aspirations for better lives frequently expose them to the unequal and



exploitative effects of market activities, leading them to face disappointments, and emotional toil. Their stories demonstrate how desires operate not only as forces of capitalist accumulation but also as a means of encountering and negotiating inequalities and discontentment. These ruptures underscore the discrepant forms of desire and risk that shape among migrants' experiences of labor as they intensify their participation in global commodity production and exchange.

### **“Going Out into the World”: Eliciting Emplacements and Desires**

Over the course of my research in the Wongs' factory workshop, my conversations with Mrs. Wong revealed how her work in a factory facilitated encounters with foreign clients and objects that comprised the transnational links for fast fashion. The relations of commodity exchange, in turn, elicited and shaped her desires and perceptions of the world beyond the physical confines of the factory. She would often wonder about the places and people situated far away from the factory premises by inquiring about my experiences flying on airplanes or how landscapes in California look. Her closest and most beloved client, a twenty-six year old Guangzhou native, Carmen, represented the figure of the globe-trotting, cosmopolitan young woman Mrs. Wong never had the chance to become. Mrs. Wong would frequently inform me of Carmen's whereabouts whenever the young client traveled abroad, as if a part of Mrs. Wong lived vicariously through her journeys. Mrs. Wong would proudly tout Carmen's university education in Australia and her fluency in English.

Perhaps Mrs. Wong's curiosity about the world and her desire to travel to distant places did not transpire entirely by chance. Rather, her desires might have grown from her experiences working in the factories in Dongguan, as well as the couple's early trials in running their own businesses in Shenzhen, during which Deng Xiaoping's calls to "get rich quick" unleashed a flurry of entrepreneurial dreams among migrant workers. The whirlwind of market activity during the early years of establishing China's Special Economic Zones (SEZ) must have ignited her desires for worldliness and entrepreneurship. This observation occurred to me on the day that I began my field research. As I took my place beside the metal worktable which stood by the main front entrance, Mrs. Wong beckoned me to sit beside her at one of the sewing stations, so that I could observe her dexterous fingers glide a piece of fabric under the roving needle of a shuddering machine. Her enthusiasm for my project calmed my nerves as I found myself in an unfamiliar environment. Without hesitation, Mrs. Wong astutely advised, "The key to success in our line of work (running a business) is having the courage to take on new opportunities by meeting people and starting new ventures. Don't be afraid of taking risks. Go out into the world!"

As our friendship gradually blossomed during my frequent visits, Mrs. Wong would often echo her personal desires to "go out into the world" (*zou le shi jie*) by confiding her personal experiences to me. One day, she wondered aloud, "I'm not sure why, as a young and single (factory) girl, I always stayed in and watched TV during my days off. On the weekends, my girlfriends (at the factory) would always beckon me to go out, but I only wanted to stay in and lie around. Looking back, I

should have gone out with my friends to shop, eat, or watch movies. Now, as a grown woman (that is, as a wife and mother), I can no longer enjoy those things with my friends any longer.” Later, after a particularly grueling workday, she continued rather somberly, “You know, I could have seen more places around the world. I might have married a Hong Kong business man. I might have ended up elsewhere (other than this factory).”

Mrs. Wong’s recollections signaled a collision of her future-oriented desires in the present with the recollections of her past experiences. Her regret at staying indoors and watching TV when she could have explored the city outside her factory workspace signified not so much a deferment of her dreams as a personal awareness in her adult life of her sense of confinement within the physical quarters of the factory. That confinement fueled her desires to visit places and to capture experiences far beyond the spatial and temporal factory worlds along the Pearl River Delta (PRD). Mrs. Wong’s recollection of her past revealed a deep sense of regret for not having had more ambitious dreams.

Mrs. Wong’s momentary self-reflection illustrates the temporal and spatial fragments embedded within her scattered memories, particularly amid the historic processes of large-scale post-socialist transitions. It reveals the historic and public projects of desire in crafting of cosmopolitan, flexible subjects in China linked to the nation’s intensified experiments with global capitalism. Indeed, Mrs. Wong and her

husband's telling of their arrival in Shenzhen during the 1980s narrate an expression of longing for a better life based on their luck and hard work.

Lured by the prospects of wealth and material comfort, the couple joined one of the first waves of undocumented rural migrants who flooded the PRD region in search of low-wage factory labor. Upon arrival at the factory town of Dongguan, the migrant couple contributed to the building of one of China's first SEZs, which served as the first testing ground for market reforms, through their factory employment in the garment manufacturing sector. The migrant couple came of age at a time when Hong Kong investors travelled sixty miles north to Shenzhen to build large-scale factory towns that eventually served as China's workshops of the world. The intersection of low-wage migrant labor and investment capital provided by Hong Kong Chinese entrepreneurs changed the landscape of the surrounding area from an unadorned fishing village to a global metropolis that showcased the Party's achievements in developing "socialism with Chinese characteristics." Their work within the factories of Dongguan taught them the production processes, stylistic knowledge, and management techniques that ensured flexible accumulation in the global commodity chains for fast fashion. As migrant workers, they in turn, learned to meet the expectations demanded by state-sponsored projects in neoliberal experimentation.

Mrs. Wong's narrative about her personal transformation from a young factory girl to a self-employed entrepreneur is not merely one of a simple transition

from a rural country peasant to an urbanized, cosmopolitan subject. Her regret for not having had more ambition as a young person reveals how in the present, she openly asserts herself as a desiring subject, echoing the broader public discourses and experiments of personal longing that characterizes China's post-socialist transformations. Rather, her narrative demonstrates the ways in which her participation in the transnational links of commodity production, as well as the public discourses of desire, shape how she understands her emplacement and relative mobility as her perceptions of the world widen through encounters with the cross-cultural links of global commodity chains. While her experiences of wage labor and management in the factories facilitate exchanges with market participants from countries around the world, Mrs. Wong's position as a factory owner along the commodity chain leaves her physically and emotionally emplaced within the confines of the factory's concrete walls. On the one hand, Mrs. Wong's work in the factory provides her access to the transnational links of global commodity exchange. On the other hand, these cross-cultural encounters fuel her desires to travel far away from the factory and her sense of ambivalence toward her life there, thus intensifying her sense of emplacement relative to other globe-trotting market participants, such as Carmen.

Over the course of my visits to their factory, I realized the deep-seated tension between Mrs. Wong's desires to travel the world and her position as a small-scale factory owner. As time passed, I witnessed arguments between the couple that overwhelmingly tested their emotional bonds as husband and wife. In fact, I had

gradually become quite accustomed to their frequent bickering. Their disagreements would often erupt into heated arguments that sent ripples of discomfort to everyone in the room. On one occasion, I noticed that Mr. and Mrs. Wong looked worn out from overworking the night before. Based on the uncomfortable silence between them, I could tell that there was some residual tension between them. That tension suddenly came to a boil when Mrs. Wong complained out loud in front of all of the workers that Mr. Wong had mistakenly written and tagged the letter “A” onto a group of production labels that were attached to several hundred dresses. As Mr. Wong passed by in front of us, he glared directly into his wife’s eyes and yelled back in a furious tone of voice, “You told me to put the letter A! That’s what you get for telling me to do it!” His explosion of fury trumped Mrs. Wong’s display of annoyance. His fit of rage attempted to put Mrs. Wong in her place in front of everyone in the room. Because of Mr. Wong’s wrath, Mrs. Wong retreated a bit out of intimidation but continued to mumble under her breath in hushed irritation. “If you’re going to be so mean about it, I’ll just do it myself,” she declared. After that moment of rage, the entire factory floor turned silent. Only the low droning of the sewing machines, accompanied by an obnoxious recording of a woman’s voice selling cell phones from next door, punctuated the air. All of the workers in the factory, including me, remained silent, bowing our heads over the tasks that lay before us. We tried our best to ignore the uncomfortable fact that Mr. Wong’s fit of rage bordered on physical violence against his own wife. I kept to myself, feeling very troubled after witnessing a couple in obvious distress. I reminded myself that bouts of stress and overwork

often tore couples emotionally apart, particularly couples who live and work together in very close proximity for long, intense hours. However, a part of me continued to feel angry toward Mr. Wong for displaying his physical and emotional dominance over his wife. As these thoughts weighed heavily on my mind, Mrs. Wong continued to brood in silence.

Months after this incident, Mrs. Wong confided in me her struggles as a wife, worker, and mother. When I arrived at the factory one afternoon, I saw Mrs. Wong standing beside the worktable meticulously folding women's black office dresses before piling them into neat stacks. She welcomed me with her usual greeting. As I walked in to find my place beside her, I noticed that the space was oddly quiet and deserted. Only three workers were sitting at their stations sewing the last batch of office dresses – Mrs. Chu, the older migrant worker from Sichuan province, and a married couple from Hunan province. Mr. Wong was absent from his usual place upstairs. I commented on how quiet the workspace was, and Mrs. Wong answered that Mr. Wong had taken the rest of the workers to another factory to re-do the last batches of men's green polo shirts. Apparently, there were mistakes in the stitching of the front logo among the 400 pieces. Since the shirts had already been delivered before the mistakes were discovered, the workers had to travel to the factory where the shipment was sent. I asked Mrs. Wong where the factory was located and how big it was. She answered that she had never been there before, so she had no idea where it was.

Mr. Wong's absence enabled Mrs. Wong to enjoy a break from him, so that she could verbally vent her frustrations and resistance towards him. That day, I realized that she felt trapped in a life and in a space not of her own choosing. When she described her work as a struggle (*xin ku*), it was obvious that it was not only physically constraining, but was also emotionally draining for her. Initially, she seemed rather quiet even contemplative. Since the heat from the outside began to slowly wear me down, I sat next to a giant fan directly across from her at the table while Mrs. Wong kept silent. She passed me a pair of scissors, and we both began to snip away the loose threads from another batch of office dresses. I was familiar with the style of the dresses, since the Wongs had produced them for their client before. However, the satin-like material was new to me. Mrs. Wong complained about the black dye leaking all over the workers' fingers and even onto the sewing machines. Eventually, the dye leaked onto me as well. As I passed the garments through my fingers, I could feel a bit of stickiness. When I finally looked at the palms of my hands, I was shocked to find my hands completely covered in black. Even my orange polka dot purse, which was hanging from my shoulders and along my waist, bore the shadows of the leaking dye. I felt dismayed by my discovery, and tried to clean my hands and wipe the dyes from my purse and my body as often as I could.

As we began working at the table together, Mrs. Wong started to chat with the workers from across the shop floor, trying to distract herself from the weight of her own thoughts. The male worker from Hunan had mentioned about saving some money to buy a house, implying that Mr. and Mrs. Wong could afford to since they



were the bosses. Mrs. Wong mumbled in a frustrated tone of voice, “Ah, we’ll keep doing this for the next year, and then we’ll quit. This work is too hard (*tai xin ku*).” She then continued, “It’s only because my eldest son doesn’t like school. Otherwise, we would be doing something else.” Mrs. Wong suddenly drifted off into silence. Her statements implied that this line of work was not ideal to her. However, she and Mr. Wong must continue to struggle through it. They were obliged to support their sons through school and want to help them secure a financially stable life in their adult years. They were particularly concerned that their older son cannot get a high-paying job, since he was flunking out of school.

Shortly after this, she declared almost out of the blue, “You know, I can do anything if put my mind to it.” She then asserted, “If it weren’t for my son who doesn’t like to study, we (Mr. and Mrs. Wong) would have separated earlier before. It would have been better if we each went our own ways.” At that point, I was unsure whether she meant separation to mean divorce or to simply find an independent means of making a living while staying married to one another. Later on, when I further reflected upon this, it struck me that in order for a married migrant woman to leave her partner she would have to find her own source of income. Moments later, she continued on cue as if she anticipated by inquiries, “My older brother operates an electronics factory where I used to work. He (Mr. Wong) doesn’t know that I have learned everything about the production process. I could have gone to work for him, and my life would have been much easier.” Mrs. Wong then elaborated that shortly before they started their current business she had asked Mr. Wong if she could start

her own business (perhaps another factory) on her own. Apparently, Mr. Wong rejected the idea, which seemed to have caused a certain degree of regret and resentment towards her husband. Throughout Mrs. Wong's revelation, the workers kept silent at their respective work stations. I wondered whether another argument had broken out between the couple shortly before I arrived that day. The workers seemed to have kept to themselves, thereby avoiding taking sides and unintentionally insulting their employers.

That day, Mrs. Wong's displays of frustration and regret towards her husband and her life in the factory exposed her sense of emplacement as a wife and as a mother who, like Carmen and Mr. Wong, possessed her own dreams of self-enterprise and entrepreneurship. However, her roles as a migrant wife and mother conflicted with those independent, entrepreneurial desires, leaving Mrs. Wong vexed with resentment and anger. Her close friendship with Carmen, who in Mrs. Wong's eyes represented the female entrepreneur she was never able to become, embodied and perpetuated Mrs. Wong's unrequited desires for autonomy and cosmopolitanism. She vanquished those aspirations for herself, so that she could remain Mr. Wong's partner and devoted mother to her sons. From my close observations of Mrs. Wong and Carmen, I became certain that their friendship was not marred by envy and jealousy as one might assume. Rather, it was colored by deep admiration and appreciation for one another despite the exploitative conditions of their client-worker relations, a point to which I turn in the next chapter. Nonetheless, Mrs. Wong's narrative unveiled how she grappled with her desires, which unfolded as she learned to become a more

independent woman, while juggling her obligations as a wife and mother. These conflicted desires increasingly led her to realize the limits of her role as a partner in a husband-wife business enterprise. In particular, she became aware of the personal desires that she had unknowingly sacrificed in order to balance entrepreneurship with the gendered expectations of a migrant wife and mother.

### **Desires Unhinged ...**

Months later, the costs of the Wongs' entrepreneurial pursuits in Guangzhou became more apparent to me one day when I paid my regular visits to their factory. That day, I navigated through the webs of vehicle and pedestrian traffic that often clogged the concrete arteries leading to the Wongs' factory. When I arrived, I discovered Mrs. Wong's absence from the factory floor. The workers' stern faces and deafening silence penetrating through the dusty air signaled that something was unexpectedly wrong. I proceeded to climb up the steep ladder staircase to the second floor. Mrs. Wong was lying horizontally along the plastic couch with her eyes locked shut. She was resting on one side of her body with her arm stretched across her eyes in an attempt to block out the light. After I reached the top of the long staircase, I immediately greeted Mr. Wong, who was standing beside the worktable. He returned my greeting in a tired and spiritless tone. Sensing the lack of enthusiasm in his voice, I gently asked whether they had worked another late night shift. To my surprise, he replied no but did not provide any other explanation. He then tenderly nudged Mrs. Wong's shoulder to wake her. As she slowly lifted her heavy eyelids, she acknowledged my presence in a muffled and somber tone of voice, a sharp contrast

from her usual eagerness and zeal. Her eyes looked puffy and swollen from crying the previous night. With a slight air of shame and embarrassment, Mrs. Wong explained that her sixteen year-old son, Bun Bun, had spent the night at nearby hospital awaiting knee surgery. Apparently, Bun Bun had gravely injured his right knee as he hoisted a heavy bolt of fabric up along the steep metal staircase to the second floor a few months prior. For at least three full months, Bun Bun had kept silent about his knee, even though he could only drag his right foot as he walked. Everyone in the factory noticed his injury, but no one realized that his condition would worsen to the extent that he needed surgery.

With tear-filled eyes, she expressed her disappointment towards her son. Implicitly, however, her angst was directed primarily towards herself as a mother. “You know how is,” she poured out. “He is always so silent and hardly said anything to us even when he was in pain. If only he had told us about his condition earlier....” Mrs. Wong’s statement referred to Bun Bun’s reticent and apathetic attitude towards everyone in the factory. In fact, the majority of his time in the factory was spent with his eyes cast downward towards his mobile phone, through which he communicated with his friends back home via text messages or read anime novellas online. In my mind, I had noted the overt lack of communication between Bun Bun and his parents, but I never thought that their problem would culminate in such an outcome.

After she composed herself, Mrs. Wong and I returned to the front worktable downstairs where we sat to chat further. As a means of relieving her emotional

distress, she unburdened herself by explaining the difficulties of motherhood as a migrant worker. Her tear-filled release revealed the deep sense of regret that she felt for having left her sons behind as a migrant worker. She explained:

During the first four years of his (Bun Bun's) life, everything seemed normal. That's because we were always there with him. He could talk to us about everything. Only after we (Mr. Wong and I) left our home to work far away, he began to grow closer to his grandfather because he was always with him. It was still OK when we returned to see him (during our visits home); perhaps because he was still young. But when he turned thirteen, we began to see the changes in him. He simply stopped talking to us. Back home, he would have plenty of friends his age, and he would always go out with them. But when he returned to the factory (from home in the countryside) and saw us, he would have nothing to say. Something within him changed. I just don't know what it is. How can I blame him when we are gone most of the time?

Mrs. Wong then continued to explain that Bun Bun had refused to attend school, so barring any other viable alternatives the son joined the couple to work in the factory. After seeing the young man in the factory over the course of the past few months, it suddenly struck me how unhappy he was there. The hours of overworking day in and day out must have depressed him. Mrs. Wong added, "He was probably not used to working the hours that we do here. He was not used to this (factory) environment." She then explained that while he was here, he would maintain his

social network by chatting online with his peers, while occasionally visiting a young man at the convenience store across the street. I then recalled that I had seen the two young men exchanging playful banter with one another every once in a while. Upon reflection, those rare moments were one of the few times I had seen Bun Bun actively engaging with a peer, and one of the even rarer moments that I had seen him happy. Most of the time, Bun Bun would work silently with his head down, disengaged from everyone around him. “His grandfather was right,” Mrs. Wong added, “this (factory) is no place for a child to grow up.”

Perhaps the most heart-wrenching difficulty that Mr. and Mrs. Wong struggled over their son was the absence of communication between the parents and the child. I had witnessed countless times when the husband and wife would verbally argue with each other, particularly when the pressures of running the factory took a toll on their relationship. There were also moments when Mr. and Mrs. Wong vented their anger and frustration about Bun Bun’s laziness and lack of enthusiasm towards work. For example, Mr. Wong grew frustrated when Bun Bun gave up ironing a set of fabric collars and instead retreated upstairs to watch TV. Furious, his father lashed out, “Who does he think we are...some kind of peasant (*nongmin*)? Can’t he do anything for himself?”

These sporadic outbursts of anger from his parents must have emotionally affected him to the point that he couldn’t even inform his parents of the immense pain in his knee. Was he afraid to tell them of his condition for fear of being reprimanded?

How could he possibly have kept three months of immense pain silent from everyone around him? Was he distrustful of his parents or scared of them?

The visceral sense of guilt and disappointment that Mrs. Wong felt as a mother was certainly real and unmasked. Mrs. Wong expressed her sense of remorse for being separated from her son while she and her husband lived far away in another province to work for most years of Bun Bun's young life. "How can a mother not worry over her son?" she stated with a defeated sigh. Unfortunately, I had no answers for her but could only listen while she expressed her worries and her heartaches. "All those months that he was in pain, he kept it from us. If only he had just told us of his condition." It became clear to me that she was full of guilt. She added, "His grandfather called him earlier today and told him to go to the hospital." Her statement indicated that Bun Bun would only trust and listen to his grandfather who had been with him and had raised him consistently since he was born. Meanwhile, the parental role of Mr. and Mrs. Wong had taken a back seat in Bun Bun's eyes primarily because of their absence from his life. Was he punishing them with his distrust and silence? It saddened me to think that Bun Bun's cruel silence towards his parents would tragically damage his own well-being. Seeing Bun Bun's self-inflicted agony only exacerbated Mrs. Wong's sense of failure and guilt as a migrant working mother.

### **The Cost of Entrepreneurial Success: Managing Envy in an Age of Flexible Production**

The rapid turnover of clothing styles characteristic of flexible production mirror the quick pace with which clients and workers at the Wongs' factory come and

go. As the Wongs have demonstrated, sustaining fluid and efficient operations that facilitate flexible production requires intensive labor. Besides coordinating the intricacies of the production processes, running a small-scale factory that is responsive to the fickle demands of the fashion market entails the exhaustive labor of managing clients as well as managing workers. However, as the Wongs have quickly discovered, factory owners must also learn to manage competitors from the surrounding neighborhood as well. The extreme fluctuations of the market, along with the merciless demands of rapid production and the close quarters in which workers and competing business owners live and work, contribute to the intensification of competition among garment producers in the area. Though garment producers generally accept competition as a given feature of the fashion business, extreme acts of jealousy reveal the sometimes painful and traumatic effects of income inequality that have gradually proliferated across countless segments of Chinese society today, particularly those that reinforce differences in class, age, and gender.

Aside from balancing their roles as migrant entrepreneurs and as parents, the Wongs encountered challenges to their entrepreneurial pursuits from other family members as well. The couple realized this valuable lesson soon after they first opened their factory doors about two years ago. The fact that their competitors were members of their family, Mr. Wong's brother and his wife, made the effects of envy a particularly bitter pill to swallow. One afternoon, I arrived at the Wong's factory gates to find Mrs. Wong conversing with a round, middle-aged woman dressed in a V-neck white T-shirt and jeans. From the context of their exchange, it soon became



apparent to me that she was a garment worker in one of the factories nearby. As I overheard their conversation, I had quickly learned that she was employed at a factory that was co-owned by Mr. Wong's brother and his wife. The female worker complained about the bad attitude the boss' wife (Mr. Wong's sister-in-law) exhibited in her interactions with her and her fellow workers. The worker stated, "Why should I take her attitude towards me? There are plenty of factories here. I can just leave and work in another factory." The worker also complained about the long working hours. Later in the conversation, Mrs. Wong and the worker speculated how much profit her brother-in-law and his wife must regularly make in their factory. Mrs. Wong estimated that based on what she heard from Mr. Wong, the couple must have been raking in about 8,000 RMB a month, a relatively substantial amount in this modest factory district.

After the worker left, Mrs. Wong explained the circumstances that led to the relatives' bitter feud. I had learned that the Wong's most important client, Carmen, had initially come to Mrs. Wong to inquire about making little girls' dresses for her. At that time, Mrs. Wong declined Carmen's requests because the Wongs were too busy to take on new orders. According to Mrs. Wong, Carmen subsequently roamed around the neighborhood and found the factory owned by Mr. Wong's brother and his wife. After an exhaustive search, Carmen returned to the Wongs, imploring them to accept her order. Apparently, Carmen was impressed by Mrs. Wong's quality of work based on the very reasonable price they offered. So, Mrs. Wong accepted Carmen's order. Shortly afterward, Mrs. Wong's collaboration with Carmen got around the

neighborhood. Upon this discovery, the Wongs' sister-in-law grew jealous and confronted the Wongs face-to-face. As Mrs. Wong explained this story, her voice escalated to a shrill pitch while the resentment she felt toward the wife was clearly stamped upon her facial expressions. Mrs. Wong screamed, unaware of the workers' eyes fixated in her direction, "She had the guts to ride her bike over here in the early evening and yell at us by our front gate. She rode her bike over here and said that we stole this client from her." At that point, Mrs. Wong's bitterness toward her brother-in-law's wife came to a boiling point. She said, "How were we to know that the client had walked over to their factory and later came back to us? We had nothing to do with her decision." I then asked why this client meant so much to the boss' wife, especially since she already had money and that their business was doing well. Mrs. Wong then explained that Mr. Wong's brother and his wife did not really need this client. In fact, according to Mrs. Wong, they were simply competitive and territorial. Mrs. Wong asserted emphatically referring to Mr. Wong's sister-in-law, "Just because I am poor, and they a little bit of money, she treats me this way. I am not like her. Whether I have money I am this way. If I don't have money, I am the same. That's how I am. You never know what tomorrow brings. If one day you have money, you may lose it the next day." Her statement conveyed the fact that she was aware of their socio-economic precariousness, but she also affirmed that her sense of self exceeded merely being a money-grubbing factory boss.

That day, I learned that Mr. Wong had briefly worked for his older brother (the boss) in his factory before starting off on his own. It was unclear to me how long

he had worked there, and to what extent the younger brother had helped in establishing Mr. Wong's current business. Because of the Wongs' reliance upon the younger brother in jump-starting their business, the wife might have reserved a certain degree of arrogance towards them, thereby planting the seeds of Mrs. Wong's resentment towards her. Mrs. Wong then continued, "She had the guts to come here and blame us for losing a client. If I hadn't decided to save face for my brother-in-law, someone would have hit her." Mrs. Wong then explained that her sister-in-law had yelled at the Wongs by the front gate in front of all the workers. In Mrs. Wong's view, the wife's behavior was so brash and rude that under any usual circumstances, their verbal argument would have escalated into violence. Despite their conflicts, however, Mrs. Wong maintained profound respect for Mr. Wong's brother. She then repeated several times over, "When have I asked her to tell me how to run my family's business matters?" When the story wound down to its bitter conclusion, I asked Mrs. Wong whether she had heard from her brother-in-law's wife, or whether they had passed by each other around the neighborhood. Mrs. Wong stated no, and it seemed that their relationship had been put to a halt, at least for now. As in the case of the Wongs, such traumatic events not only exposed the fabric of precariousness that seeped through the migrant factory owners' lives, but they also revealed the emotional damage that occurred when competition and class disparities threatened familial bonds.

## **Doubly-Displaced Rural/Urban Displacements**

Temporary migrant workers' stories and daily ways of life that animated the Zhongda garment district showed how women constantly balanced family obligations with their wage-labor. They must also make sense of unexpected moments when family relationships became strained due to the pressures of migration, poverty, and wage labor. By balancing the demands wage-labor with household labor, female wage workers defined for themselves their roles as wives, mothers, and sisters. Despite the temporary and fluid nature of their work schedules, migrant female workers shared not only the same conditions of work and factory space, but also their shared their experiences of migration. Their collective status as members of the migrant floating population, who were drifting between rural and urban classifications, facilitated a shared platform from which the stories of personal hardship, structural inequality, and poverty could be collectively revealed and shared. Their fragmented memories of home in the countryside served as a platform for the workers' shared longings and nostalgia. Sometimes, these shared sentiments fostered a sense of camaraderie or mutual assistance among the migrants. For example, shortly before the Chinese New Year, as workers began their treacherous journeys back to their native villages, factory women directed newer arrivals on how to acquire illegal identification papers (*shen fen zheng*) that were needed to purchase train or bus tickets home. Fellow mothers also warned newly arrived migrants about the dangers of the neighborhood streets in order to keep their children from scurrying around carelessly in face of reckless drivers along the narrow alleyways.

On any given afternoon, the buzzing of sewing machines emanating from the Wongs' shop floor overlapped with the vibrant chatter of garment workers, creating a cacophony of human voices punctuated by the monotonous drone of industrial machines. Frequently, the harmony of multiple distinctive dialects filled the thick and heavy air. Young women from the Chao-shan region of Guangdong gossiped about their children's performance in school, or other exchanged tips on where to find the freshest and most inexpensive groceries. Several younger Hunanese workers, both males and females in their late teens and early twenties, complained about the difficulties they faced as newly-arrived migrants in Guangzhou. Older migrants from Sichuan discussed their cooking plans for dinner before they returned for their night shifts in the factory. Thus, the workers' native place divisions, most often signaled by their distinctive accents or dialects, served to foster bonds of trust and affinity among temporary workers upon the factory floor, though at other times they created moments of linguistic and cultural mis-understanding. It was not unusual for workers to mutually mis-communicate in Putonghua, or simply failed to successfully register an idea due to heavy accents or differences in linguistic styles or grammatical structures. Workers often said to one another, "I don't understand you" (*ting bu dong*). Alternatively, they highlighted such regional distinctions by explicitly stating how people with different native place affiliations were somehow distinctive from their own. For example, Mrs. Wong often warned me to not trust clients or workers based on their native place identities. When we brought up the subject of a Fujianese client, she said, "I don't know how she thinks or what's in her heart. She is not like us

(Guangdong locals).” Regional distinctions were thus made even among natives of the same province. During another occasion, Carmen was discussing with Mrs. Wong about her brother’s troubles in dealing with his factory workers in Zhanjiang in southwestern Guangdong. Mrs. Wong then replied that, in her view, natives from that region were difficult to deal with and not to be trusted.

Workers often bridged regional differences by venting about their familial problems in their home villages, alluding to the difficulties in maintaining stable family relationships across vast geographic and emotional distances. Some of the workers that I encountered in the factory complained about the problems of drug abuse, child-rearing, and domestic violence. Their stories highlighted women’s immeasurable contributions to the household even though they took up wage labor far away. During one of my early visits to the factory, I came across a loquacious mother of a lovely ten year-old daughter. Mrs. Ma, who appeared to be in her late thirties to early forties, had arrived from one of the villages around Taishan about three or four hours westward from Guangzhou. She had been living and working around the Zhongda garment district for past twenty years. Among her fellow migrant colleagues and neighbors, she was considered a local resident, since few migrant workers had settled there for so long. Along the factory floor, she was one of the few workers who remembered the sights of sounds of the surrounding urban village before factories and towering wholesale markets mushroomed around the neighborhood during the early 1990s. Ms. Ma once recounted to me how dangerous the neighborhood was twenty years ago. She used to be very fearful about returning home at the end of the workday,

for fear of being robbed and attacked by criminals in the area. She affirmed, “You would have to get home before dark. The streets here were so unsafe. Otherwise, you’d have to have some to take you home.” When I asked how the district developed, she answered that the garment factories were first built here and that migrant workers looking for employment eventually settled in the surrounding neighborhood because of work.

One day, after exchanging our usual greetings and comments about the usually cold weather, Ms. Wong and I trailed off into silence as Ms. Ma’s robust voice eventually dominated the shop floor. Speaking in Putonghua, Ms. Ma rambled about her husband for a few minutes before I finally understood the context of her discussion. She was complaining about the problem of drug abuse in her hometown. Apparently, the use of cocaine (*bai fun* or literally white powder) was rather common there. It was not usual, she said, to find people ranging from young to old, addicted to cocaine. It was grown as plants along fields surrounding her hometown, attesting to the prevalence of the drug there. Various local gang rings operated around her town, coaxing people both the young and the old to purchase and to use the drug in exchange for money. These gang members hung around various marketplaces and even come around people’s homes in the hopes of luring would-be users to become their regular customers.

As Ms. Ma openly shared with us, one of the gang’s customers was her own husband who lived back in her home village. When the factory owner Ms. Wong

asked Ms. Ma how she discovered her husband's stint with cocaine, Ms. Ma recounted with exasperation. She explained that he loafed around the village and practiced his usual boring routine day in and day out. Every day, he woke in the mornings, visited his usual dim sum restaurant, watched TV, took naps, and read occasionally in bed. She went on to describe his laziness and the aimlessness of his life, causing me to wonder the reasons why her husband was not gainfully employed. Ms. Ma continued to explain that one day she got into a physical fight with her husband, even while she was holding a baby in her hand. As his hand swept across her shoulder, some of the white powder dust landed upon her body. Apparently, her husband discontinued shortly after her discovery, an intervention which she perceived as a saving grace for her entire family. She stated, "Thank goodness that I discovered this (her husband's drug use), 'cuz once you start it's easy to become addicted. Otherwise, it would become a huge nightmare for our family." Ms. Wong echoed her sentiment. "My brother-in-law explained that he only tried it a couple times," thereby suggesting that he was not yet addicted and that drug use was merely just a passing experiment for him.

Once Mrs. Ma discovered the use of drugs in her family, no one dared to bring it back into the home. Even the gang members did not have the courage to come by the house for fear of her wrath. When I asked how these drugs were found, Ms. Ma answered that they were everywhere in her village. In fact, she explained, they are grown in fields surrounding her town. "You can see it everywhere," she said. Two years ago, the police caught a major ringleader of a drug-dealing gang in the village.



When Ms. Wong asked how her husband got involved in drugs, Ms. Ma answered that his close friend introduced her husband to it.

Her narrative seemed to suggest not only that she served as the family caretaker and breadwinner, but also that her work as a seamstress in the city kept her focus as a responsible member of her family while the other members of her village seemed less responsible and wayward. As I got to know Mrs. Ma and her daughter, I slowly began to realize why the mother often refused to return to her home village. It seemed that Mrs. Ma wanted to shelter her young daughter from the violence and drug problems that plagued her family members and fellow villagers. On separate occasions, I noticed that Mrs. Ma's ten year-old daughter sometimes assisted her mother by the sewing machines, demonstrating the child's familiarity with garment work. It then became clear to me that Mrs. Ma regularly kept her daughter by her side as the mother made her rounds around the factories in the surrounding garment district. During Mrs. Ma's time off, the mother-daughter pair would ride along the subway line that was newly built by the municipal government in preparation for the 2010 Asian Games. Together, they visited the airport, just so that they could watch planes fly in and out of the terminal.

The next day, Ms. Ma continued her ramblings about the cocaine problem in her hometown. She explained that even her 84 year old father-in-law admitted to using a (sex) pill, presumably Viagra or a variant of some kind. Her story seemed so unfathomable that I thought I had initially misunderstood her. When I expressed

surprise that an 80 + year old man would take such a mysterious drug, Ms. Ma agreed in disgust. “What is an 80+ year old man doing taking a drug that would endanger his health?” I asked. I pressed further by asking how he was able to find a source of this drug, she replied that this drug is everywhere (in her village). “It’s in the market streets (*dai pai dongs*). Ms. Ma explained that women (sex workers) hung around the alleys of the market stalls and offer sex in addition to the drugs, suggesting that her father-in-law was a regular visitor. In fact, he even recommended the drug to Ms. Ma and his own son! Breaking into laughter, Ms. Wong interjected, “What is an old man doing taking this drug? He can barely walk. How can he even press on (have sex with someone?)”

Many female workers on the shop floor openly articulated their sense of displacement from their family members in their native villages. Their departure from their native place indicated a geographic as well as an emotional distancing from the troubles from which they attempt to leave behind. Oftentimes, however, their memories unexpectedly surfaced on the shop floor. Some female workers often buried the worries and troubles in the deep recesses of their memories only to unburden them among fellow colleagues in the factory. Frequently, the issue of domestic violence against women recurred among workers’ conversations. One afternoon, I overheard Mrs. Wong discussing with her neighbor about a former worker who suddenly disappeared from the factory because she and her husband engaged in a violent domestic dispute. Apparently, the husband threatened to turn on the gas heater in an attempt to burn her while they were fighting. Mrs. Wong then

mentioned about another sewer in her factory who she had recently hired. According to Mrs. Wong, the worker was desperate to find a job because she had recently left her husband due to domestic abuse.

Later that day, when the workers were chatting openly about the issue of marriage and extra-marital affairs, an older Hubei woman asserted that she would have to follow her husband everywhere he went to order to make sure that he would not stray. With an air of slight indignation and determination, she stated, “Men and women are different. You don’t know how men think!” An awkward stillness suddenly gripped the air. Xiao Pang, a younger male worker in his early twenties from Hubei who was sitting calmly at the sewing station next to her punctuated the silence by responding in a gentle voice, “It’s really about the question of trust.” Unexpectedly, a Hunanese woman in her mid-forties brazenly added that she and her husband often engaged in physical fights with one another. She described rather curtly, “You know, he and I would hit each other!” The woman’s lively descriptions of her husband seemed to illustrate a dynamic and passionate, if not violent, relationship between them. At that moment, I was surprised to discover how honestly the women in the factory would openly discuss the violence that often colored their home lives among strangers and husbands alike. I also wondered the extent to which their open discussions and gossip among the women served as a form of emotional release and healing. Perhaps their practice of unlocking their domestic secrets in a space far from the pressures and obligations of their homes served as a form of quiet and subdued protest against their husbands’ abuse.

The women's departure from their troubled homes and families in the countryside as well as their entrance into the urban factories signaled variegated acts of attempted escape, defiance, and independence from the violence and inequalities caused in many cases by their oppressive patriarchal family relationships. Oftentimes, however, their aspirations for individual freedom through factory work often remained fleeting and temporary, since I rarely saw any workers remain in the factories for longer than six to eight months. Many women either returned to their families or floated to another factory for work. Unfortunately, for many of these women the cost for individual safety and freedom often amounted to financial precariousness and emotional instability.

### **When “Money Changes People”**

The intensification of China's participation in the transnational chains of commodity production and exchange has drawn many foreign traders from countries in the global south to relocate their families and businesses to Guangzhou. For many young male migrants, the city represents a place of desire and economic opportunity. These migrants often invest their monetary savings and their aspirations in the hopes that they can attain wealth and counter the financial instabilities that they and their loved ones often face in their home countries. In fact, family members in some African countries pool their savings in order to send their sons or other male relatives to China, primarily to conduct business (Diederich 2013). Since the early 2000s, thousands of traders from Nigeria, Senegal, and Ghana have established their livelihoods within cross-ethnic black and Middle-Eastern communities throughout the

city, including one colloquially dubbed, “chocolate city,” which has become a growing topic of scholarly research on issues of migration, economic development, race, and urbanization. African traders in Guangzhou, most of whom are male between the ages of 20-60, work as self-employed, intermediary agents who trade commodities to countries in Europe, Africa, and Latin America. Many rely on their family contacts in order to establish their transcontinental networks of trade. Most male traders depend on their children and extended relatives (male and female), who are geographically dispersed in countries around the world in order to establish contacts with local manufacturers, wholesalers, and other business agents. Other younger African traders in Guangzhou marry Chinese wives, thereby simultaneously bridging cross-cultural ties in the overlapping realms of business and intimacy.

Since there are far fewer women living in the African and Middle-Eastern communities of Guangzhou, women’s experiences of migration and integration in China are shaped by gender disparities. African women, most of whom are mothers, remain inside their homes and rarely venture in public spaces alone for fear of men’s sexual gaze (Diederich 2013). Consequently, many African women find solace amongst each other by building networks of trust and solidarity. Many women travel through the streets in pairs or in small groups with babies and small children in tow. Together, they buy groceries or shop for clothes in the markets and shops nearby. Others operate informal restaurants out of their homes, serving Nigerian and Senegalese cuisine to residents and visitors in the district, while other aspiring business women open small boutiques, providing intimate quarters as places of

feminine comfort and sociality. Many exchange gossip about other members of the community, share details about international current affairs, and update each other on the latest fashion trends.

Though relatively rare, public altercations involving African men and the district police reveal the racial tensions that brew under the surface of everyday living as foreigners in China. Uniformed Chinese officials routinely conduct inspections around the neighborhood in their attempts to curb illegal money exchange and drug dealing, as well as to arrest undocumented migrants. Such racial and gendered tensions cast a shadow of doubt among the growing numbers of young African women who migrate to China and aspire to become business women in their own right. Many, however, are forced to reassess the social costs and dangers of transnational migration and entrepreneurship. In addition to gender and racial inequalities that they encounter in Guangzhou, the everyday pressures of making ends meet clash among the aspiring women who must compete with one another in order to realize their establish their businesses in Guangzhou. These moments of reflection reveal how migrants discern the ethical boundaries between friendship, romance, and entrepreneurship. Specifically, in the course of defining the ethical parameters of entrepreneurship, they work through the meanings of entrepreneurship as they encounter various acts of jealousy, competition, and exploitation. These assertions signify attempts to make sense of and exert control over uncertainties that unfold as they learn to become foreign entrepreneurs in Guangzhou.

As a case in point, I narrate the experiences of Sylvianne, a twenty-six year-old entrepreneur from Senegal. Moments of conflict lead her to work through the ethical dilemmas that are entailed in becoming an entrepreneur in Guangzhou. As a migrant, she has resided in Guangzhou after following her father and cousins to China in order to master the skills of running her own business. Her father, the patriarch of a large transnational family whose kin networks extend from Senegal to China and Spain, operates a trading and logistical company in Xiaobei's Tianxia building, which facilitates the export of China-made commodities to France, Spain, Nigeria, the Congo and Senegal. For over six years, the father-daughter pair, along with several of Sylvianne's male cousins, has shared living and office quarters in Guangzhou so that they can collectively oversee the daily operations of the family business. Their overseas ventures intersect with Senegal's two decades of economic liberalization, as they were guided by former President Abdou Diouf in the 1980s and 1990s in tandem with policies enacted by the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

According to Sylvianne, the past years of hands-on business experience seemed to have personally paid off, not only in terms of monetary rewards but also in terms of learning to become a financially self-sufficient woman. At times when we discussed the challenges that were entailed in running her own clothing boutique in Guangzhou, Sylvianne would declare, "I love what I do (running my own business) because it provides me freedom!" Sylvianne thus openly exhibited pride in the financial autonomy she found through entrepreneurship. At the same time, however, her proclamation was also fraught with ambivalence about what freedom meant and

felt to her as a female entrepreneur in China. This sense of ambivalence surfaced one time when we casually joked about how little time we had been able to spend with one another because of her hectic schedule. Shortly after our exchange, Sylvianne answered a call from her client and joked to him over the phone, “Yes, when you’ve got time, you have no money. But when you have money, you have no (free) time!” Her statement suggested that much of her personal time once spent with family and friends has been occupied by the demands of her work.

Sylvianne’s public assertion of her economic freedom in no way refuted the implicit acknowledgement that she owed much of her entrepreneurial success to her family members. In fact, Sylvianne proudly described her journey to Guangzhou by following the footsteps of her father and her cousins. For the first few years of her life in China, she started out as a university student by enrolling in Chinese language classes and assisting in her father’s business full-time. Later, she rented a small retail space close to her home in Xiaobei and opened her own clothing boutique, which served as one of the scant numbers of contemporary clothing stores that catered solely to African women (whom local Chinese colloquially referred to as “African Mamas”). In order to supplement her income from the store, she doubled as a logistical agent for Senegalese traders who were generally unfamiliar with the Chinese language and the local business networks. Many of these clients were her father’s business partners, so Sylvianne’s role helped to extend her family’s business networks. She introduced numerous Senegalese clients, the majority of whom were male, to local Chinese manufacturers and logistic representatives. As a cultural broker and linguistic



translator, she also bridged trans-continental relationships among overseas traders from Senegal and manufacturers in Guangzhou.

In many ways, her multiple roles as a transnational intermediary trader would not have been possible without her father's guidance in fostering Sylvianne's entrepreneurial dreams. In fact, she often declared that her father's business acumen was the foundation of her entrepreneurial aspirations and pursuits. She fondly recalled the day when her older female cousins, who had served as her father's business assistants in Guangzhou, surprised the family with the purchase of their first car. With eyes beaming, she described the memorable scene, "They drove up in front of our apartment and proudly displayed their first car to my father. They wanted to thank him by displaying what they had earned from the years spent working for my father." Indeed, the family's affective ties were deeply rooted in and reinforced by each member's entrepreneurial dreams. She and her father and cousins often cooked, worked, and watched movies together. In short, Sylvianne's relationships with her father and cousins served as a key node upon which her personal desires and aspirations as a transnational migrant entrepreneur were tied.

However, in spite of her family's advice and support, Sylvianne regularly encountered racial discrimination and bureaucratic challenges in Guangzhou. These experiences led her to realize that regardless of her family's financial or emotional support, their help was not enough to overcome many of the difficulties that come with being a female migrant entrepreneur from Senegal. Sylvianne would incessantly

complain to me about the regulatory practices of the Guangzhou police around her migrant neighborhood of Xiaobei. For instance, she often complained about the bureaucratic difficulties and the exorbitant rates that foreigners like her must tolerate in order to secure a resident visa in China. These rates often skyrocketed to several thousand dollars, exorbitant amounts for struggling migrants like her. Sylvianne had also mentioned several occasions when the neighborhood police would unexpectedly shut down the mall for an entire day as they inspected the building tenants for illegally selling counterfeit goods. (Sylvianne and I suspected that the aim of counterfeit inspection was a cover for bribery or possibly other covert acts on the part of the police, because we were both aware that selling counterfeit goods was ubiquitous in the building. Besides, no one ever seemed to get arrested or charged for any crimes during these so-called inspections). Those unexpected closings frustrated her, since she would lose days worth of business revenue. In addition, she, her relatives, and business associates from Senegal would constantly encounter unexpected passport and visa checks on the streets and inside restaurants and other business establishments. In these inspections they often risked being heavily fined and sent to jail. On a separate occasion, while Sylvianne and I were enjoying a casual dinner over pizza and salad, a round of local police officers unexpectedly entered the restaurant and closed the shop for the night while they randomly checked passports and visas among the foreign patrons. Such delays and possible fines further inhibited her from running her business smoothly, exacerbating the stress and anxieties that often accompanied the pressures of making financial ends meet. For these reasons,

she constantly doubted whether her businesses could weather the financial uncertainties and bureaucratic hurdles that she often encountered.

Furthermore, Sylvianne's role as a female migrant entrepreneur from Senegal often left her feeling lonely. She rarely found the time to socialize. However, when she did, there were few African women to whom she could relate, since most residents in her neighborhood were men. In fact, Sylvianne seldom ventured beyond her home and her place of business alone, since African men's sexual gaze throughout the public areas of Xiaobei often left her feeling vulnerable and unsafe. Aside from men's intrusive stares, Sylvianne also mentioned occasions when she encountered acts of racism among local residents. Certainly, occasional cases of young male African traders in Xiaobei, who were violently beaten to death by the police and robbed by local thieves, caused feelings of insecurity, anger, and danger among transnational migrants in the area. Consequently, many young African women like Sylvianne attempted to establish their family and work lives in Guangzhou, while trying to overcome deep-seated feelings of isolation and vulnerability.

Moreover, Sylvianne's personal experiences as an entrepreneur in China enabled her to become privy to various acts of undercutting and manipulation among other participants in Guangzhou's business circles. These experiences deepened her sense of alienation as a foreigner making a livelihood in China. In one instance, Sylvianne encountered a shocking act of betrayal by a close friend who was vying for her business connections. One Sunday afternoon, while we were lounging in her store,

a young Chinese man from across the hallway of the mall peeped in through the dusty glass doors to spy on us. Apparently, he was curious about me, an unfamiliar Chinese-looking visitor who appeared to be on good terms with Sylvianne. As soon as we turned our heads in his direction, the mysterious man quickly dodged our glances and returned to his shop next door. With an exasperated sigh, Sylvianne exclaimed calmly, “See, these Chinese! I don’t understand them. They see you and they think that you are working as a spy for me. That’s the kind of thing that goes on around here. I just don’t understand it.”

Initially, I felt somewhat skeptical about that man’s intentions were Sylvianne had claimed. Could he have just been curious about seeing a Chinese-looking woman with an African woman? This encounter unleashed a flood of confusion and anger within Sylvianne. She began to recount stories of undercutting and cheating among local retail store and factory owners whom she had encountered through her business dealings in Guangzhou. One story involved Sylvianne’s childhood friend who had arrived in Guangzhou from Senegal to establish her own women’s fashion line. She enlisted Sylvianne’s help in establishing vital business contacts with local Chinese manufacturers for the production of her line. Sylvianne dutifully introduced her Senegalese friend to a local manufacturer with whom she thought she had good, trusted relations. This local manufacturer produced primarily jeans, which served the needs of Sylvianne’s friend perfectly. Upon seeing Sylvianne and her associate one day, the factory owner quoted them a certain price. This price was calculated based on the mutual understanding that Sylvianne, as the intermediary agent, received a

commission for her introductory services. However, when Sylvianne left the factory the owner apparently had chased her friend down without Sylvianne's knowledge and offered her a much lower price with the aim of undercutting Sylvianne's intermediary role. Apparently, the factory owner promised to uphold the discounted price if Sylvianne's friend would directly patronize their manufacturing services on a regular basis. Sylvianne had somehow gotten wind of these back-handed deals and had reluctantly ended not only her business partnership with the factory owner but also her friendship with her associate.

In another instance, Sylvianne recalled a time when a family of Chinese store owners next door were arguing viciously over a client. Apparently, a cousin of the store owner operated a competing store in the mall and would assist in the running of her cousin's business from time to time. One day, while her cousin was away from the store, the woman had successfully convinced a foreign client to place a large order of clothing and shoes at her store rather than at her cousin's shop. Once the cousin became privy to the woman's back-handed dealings, a dramatic argument ensued, causing their stall neighbors to witness the altercation in discomfort and horror. As Sylvianne retold these stories, she declared, "I don't know why, but money changes people!"

Hearing her statement, I was struck by how Sylvianne's experiences in China and perceptions of "Chinese people" were constructed within the context of migrant entrepreneurship, which was often marred by competition, cheating, and jealousy.

Although Sylvianne tended to cast “culture” and “Chineseness” as sources of moral wrong-doing, I interpreted her emotionally-charged responses as attempts to personally defy these unexpected acts of betrayal among her business competitors rather than rejecting any aspect of Chinese culture. In the course of re-narrating these accounts of cheating friends and swindling family members, Sylvianne distanced herself from these treacherous acts, implying that she would never engage in such cold, self-serving behavior. Her judgments hinted that, in her view, respect for family and friends superseded the need to make money. Desires for profit-making, from her perspective, should be delimited within bounds of right and wrong. These unexpected moments of rupture led Sylvianne to reevaluate the limits of entrepreneurship in relation to others, as well as to reassert aspects of her work and family life that cannot be negatively affected by the demands of profit-making and capital accumulation.

### **The Politics of Money and the Ethics of Migrant Entrepreneurship**

Sylvianne’s insightful comment resonates with Mrs. Wong’s bitter feud with her sister-in-law. Indeed, the financial and emotional constraints that migrant entrepreneurs in Guangzhou often face intensify the cut-throat competition that often accompanies the boom and bust cycles of fast fashion exchange. As market participants encounter unexpected moments of grief and loss, they are often forced to reassess their desires for freedom and financial security as they redefine what entrepreneurship means to them. As Sylvianne’s story above illustrates, these reflections also lead migrant entrepreneurs to reexamine the parameters of ethical behavior in face of market competitors’ exploitative behavior, including cheating and

swindling others out of money. In particular, Sylvianne's and Mrs. Wong's reflections on ethical behavior within the context of entrepreneurship signify attempts to maintain a semblance of dignity and uprightness within circumstances and market conditions that are clearly beyond their control.

One afternoon, as I walked up to the front steps of the factory entrance, I saw Mrs. Wong sitting beside the front worktable, a sight that I had not seen since she joined the sewers on the factory floor. With her eyes cast downwards towards the worktable in front of her, she took a stack of long, thick elastic bands in order to measure them along the table before cutting them into precise strips. Piles of carefully measured elastic strips with fabric strands gathered in the middle collected on the table in front of her. I settled onto the empty wooden stool sitting beside her and greeted her with a friendly hello. She grinned as she returned my greeting, but her smile felt tired and forced. It seemed as if her weakened smile served as a reservoir for a flood of emotions that brewed within her. She asked whether I had had classes at the university that day. When I told her that I had the next few days off from school, she remarked how wonderful student life must be. I nodded in agreement immediately before a lanky man with narrow eyes appeared beside me to bid farewell to Mrs. Wong.

The man was wearing a white T-shirt with a beige V-shape side pocket and a pair of fitted khaki pants cropped right above the ankles. As soon as I cast my eyes upon the man, I realized he was a new client in the factory. Mrs. Wong suddenly

hardened her tone of voice and reprimanded him by saying, “You have to understand. It takes money to pay the electricity and to pay our workers just to prepare an order for you. We’ve been waiting for over a month now and you owe us more than 10,000 RMB.” She then continued, “I’ve been in this (garment) business for over ten years, and I have never encountered a client such as you. Who doesn’t pick up their phone when they call? We have been trying to call you since yesterday afternoon, and you wouldn’t pick up. We kept calling you from yesterday afternoon up to 11 o’ clock last night. We then kept calling you this morning starting at 8 o’ clock in the morning. Your brother says that they were too busy to pick up the phone or that he was sleeping and didn’t know. Who does that? No one is ever that busy.” As she complained, the young man stood with his arms folded behind his back in silence. Mrs. Wong’s firm tone and harsh words left the young man standing utterly speechless. His silence implicitly acknowledged his irresponsibility and fault in the matter. “She then warned him, “I’m going to call your older brother and sister. When I do, they better come with the money. If they fail to repay, believe me. We will send my husband directly to your store. We will close it down and demand a repayment. We know exactly where you do business. Don’t think we’re incapable to doing this! I tell you: if you don’t pay us, we won’t handle any more of your orders. That’s that.” When Mrs. Wong finally finished yelling, the young client bowed his head down several times as a gesture of apology and shame. With courtesy, the man answered, “I’m preparing to leave now. I’ll communicate your words to my older brother, and he will get back to you as soon as possible.” The man turned to leave before trailing



off into the distance. As the man's figure slowly disappeared into crowds of pedestrians and cars ahead, I asked Mrs. Wong whether this client was new. Mrs. Wong answered that they had just begun to work with this client about a month and a half ago. She then explained further, "They just started this business a couple months ago. They just keep flipping one debt to cover another. That's not the right way of doing business. If you don't have enough money to start a business, then you simply shouldn't do it." She continued, "I knew that they were up to no good. At first, I refused to have anything to do with them since they worked out of Shi San Hang (the wholesale market). I had my suspicions about them the first moment I cast my eyes upon them. But they kept begging me. Finally, after a couple more refusals (from me), they simply sent their fabrics over to us." Her explanations implied that according to Mrs. Wong, the clients had forced the couple into complicity, coercing them into a professional relationship with them. I initially found the clients' coercion unusual and strange, though I am still unsure of the facts.

Standing between Mrs. Wong and the young man, I found myself in shock at how the contentious string of events and the uncomfortable conversation unfolded right before me. As Mrs. Wong continued to vent her anger toward the client, I listened in quiet acknowledgement that unfortunate events such as this seemed rather mundane in the garment production industry here. When Mrs. Wong threatened to show up at the client's store in the Shi San Hang wholesale market, I wondered whether such contentious disputes often ended in violence. Mrs. Wong then stated, "If they fail to show up with the money, my husband and I will show up at their store

and demand repayment and then and there. And if they continue to not pay, then I'll dial 0-1-1 (the local emergency number)." I then asked whether the police had any authority to meddle in private disputes such as this, Mrs. Wong replied, "Of course they do! This is clearly a case of one party owing money to another party. They are clearly in the wrong." Recalling the number of violent disputes that occurred within the chaotic premises of Shi San Hang, I warned Mrs. Wong and the people who work in the market are known to be very aggressive. In response, Mrs. Wong replied rather indignantly that she and her husband were equally capable of being just as aggressive in this matter.

Mrs. Wong often attributed such troubling events to the workings of fate (*yuan fen*), since she believed that fate facilitated her relationships with her clients, regardless of the happiness or pain they might bestow upon her. Thus, in her view, fate played a critical role in the operations of her factory. In fact, Mrs. Wong would often ascribe the overall success of her business to the work of fate. At the same time, however, Mrs. Wong's appeals to the notion of fate were often accompanied by her emphasis on the necessity of (economic) self-reliance (*kao ziji*) in securing a good life for one's self. For instance, she would often encourage me to bravely assert myself in order to take business risks and to find entrepreneurial opportunities around me as she had done herself. To what extent, then, did Mrs. Wong believe that entrepreneurial opportunities and relationships were pre-determined by fate or destiny? Were Mrs. Wong's ideas about fate and self-reliance necessarily contradictory? If not, how did those views complicate assumptions about individual self-enterprise and "interest"?

Mrs. Wong's theories of fate (*yuan fen*) and self-reliance acknowledge that she is connected to a larger world and situates herself within wider aspirations that shape her personal transformations. These moments of introspection demonstrate the extent to which her everyday labor, as well as her daily encounters with clients and workers in the factory shapes her conceptualizations of personhood within the wider world. More importantly, these moments of self-reflection evidence the ways in which her experiences of factory labor shape how she defines herself as a mother, friend, wife, worker, and factory boss. Meanwhile, she carves out socio-economic opportunities for herself despite the financial uncertainties she faces as a migrant entrepreneur.

These revelations came to me one day when I returned to the Wongs' factory to assist them in completing their production orders. Heavy rains pounded against the concrete buildings around us. We had spent the afternoon sitting on simple plastic stools by the front factory gates watching the rains pour down. Using a simple wooden broom, she swept the front steps brushing away the dirt and the grime from the passing of vehicular and pedestrian traffic. As the rain's pitter patter rhythms lulled the two of us into silence, she meditatively uttered to herself as if she was lost in thought, "Man doesn't know right from wrong, but the heavens know." (*Tian hui zuo. Ren bu hui zuo*). She had then mentioned how she enjoyed rain because the downpour relaxed her senses. She felt that the rain cleaned away all the dirt and pollution surrounding the neighborhood, thereby making everything anew. As I listened quietly, I somehow felt that her comment meant more than the rains simply

cleaning away the physical environment around us. In my mind, her thoughts gestured toward a sense of connection between herself and the wider world. More precisely, her statement acknowledged her orientation towards a wider world that extended physically beyond the concrete walls of this factory as well as beyond her socio-economic position as a factory boss or worker, a world constituted by forces beyond her immediate control. In a way, her reference to the heavens acknowledged the temporariness and precariousness of her work and time spent in the factory, thereby conveying the sense that she asserted herself more than simply as a factory boss or as a factory worker.

I then asked Mrs. Wong about her family's future plans to stay in this factory or their desires to pursue another line of business. She replied that they would likely continue their work in the garment industry, primarily because they did not know of any viable alternatives in making a living. I asked her whether she planned to return to their hometown soon, and she stated that they would likely not because it was very difficult to receive clients there. When I asked what industries existed in their hometown, she replied that there were many factories producing home appliances, an industry with which they were unfamiliar. To her, Guangzhou was a good place to make money. However, from the stories that I narrated in this chapter, it was clear that like Sylvianne, Mrs. Wong, was searching for more meaningful desires and for deeper connections to people and to a world beyond those that were solely defined by money.

## **Love in a Time of Low-wage Labor?**

The blurring of household and industrial spaces colors the everyday desires and losses that migrant entrepreneurs and garment workers in Guangzhou's fast fashion industry encounter. These doubling of household and industrial labor blur the conceptual boundaries that delineate public and private domains. The fluid movements of people, raw materials, and garments in and out of the factory space lend an air of informality and openness, which facilitates male and female workers to chat with one another for long periods of time. Despite these flows, however, women are still expected to recreate aspects of home life by performing kin-based practices of care in and out of the factory spaces. As migrant workers, their immediate family members are often geographically dispersed, so that their home is no longer is singular and stable place of co-residence. As a way of collectively relieving the burdens of migrant labor, female workers in the factory workshop often create kin-based spaces of care as a means of reproducing a sense home life within these industrial spaces, however temporary and precarious they may be. The intimate quarters of the factory workshop further facilitate close-knit relationships among factory owners and their workers. Romantic and fictive-kin ties, for example, often develop on the shop floor, shaping the everyday connections and experiences of labor among those who enter the quarters.

Female workers, particularly those who spend longer periods of time in the factory, have shown to cultivate particularly strong kin-based ties to one another. Assembly lines are organized in a way that enables female workers to fulfill their

tasks on the sewing machines while they converse with one another about their personal lives. Their conversations commonly lead to close friendships that include shopping with one another outside the factory work space. On particularly grueling work days, the Wongs provide dinners for their hired workers, which usually consist of stir-fried vegetables and meat over white rice. When young mothers bring their toddlers to the factory in lieu of finding day care, female workers keep an eye on each other's children by safeguarding them from minor dangers around the factory space or by distracting them from the monotony of the work day. Mrs. Wong often joins the women on the sewing floor, thereby bridging the gulf between employer and wage-worker. These women reproduce the mother-daughter relationships within the factory by openly performing and expressing acts of care for one another. Their relationship exemplifies how public expressions of love and concern within the industrial setting of a factory often fall within the domain of the feminine. Thus, women are more likely to divulge problems that they encounter in their personal lives and offer assistance to one another. They are also more likely to express mutual concern and appreciation for one another. In short, they tend to engage in the work of kin-based care for one another within the context of small-scale garment production.

The affective dimensions of the garment manufacturing process based on kin relations within the Wong's factory became apparent to me when a seventeen year-old female migrant from Hunan named Yang Yang arrived upon the factory floor. Over the course of our friendship in the factory, I had learned that Yang Yang migrated with her parents to each work around the Zhongda garment district. Her

mother worked as a janitor at the nearby wholesale market for fabrics and accessories, often working full-time and collecting recyclables in order to make some extra cash for the family. Her father worked as an illegal pedi-cab driver around the neighborhood transporting passengers and materials in and out of the area. Unfortunately, the local authorities confiscated his bike in June, causing him to temporarily “take a break” from wage work before he was able to find another job. Yang Yang started her young life in the factories in Hunan when she was only thirteen, an age that even surprised the other migrant workers in the Wongs’ factory. When an older female worker from Chaozhou asked her why she decided to enter into wage-work at such a young age, Yang Yang simply replied that she did not like school. “I didn’t like studying. That’s all,” she explained to us. Her early entry into factory work contrasted sharply from her older brother who was enrolled in a university in Dongbei. The money earned by Yang Yang and her parents essentially supported her older brother through school, a disturbingly common scenario among poorer, migrant families with a son.

Her youthful exuberance delighted Mrs. Wong as they gradually grew closer to one another, developing a fictive mother-daughter relationship in the workplace. There were times when Yang Yang would remind Mrs. Wong to carry out daily household tasks around the factory, such as washing her families’ clothes by hand or preparing the rice for supper, in addition to her own obligations upon the sewing floor. In exchange, the Wongs always welcomed Yang Yang and her parents whenever they stopped by the factory to greet us. In fact, during most afternoons, Yang Yang’s

mother would come by the factory in her bright gray and yellow uniform and leave massive bundles of recyclable cans, plastics, and glass bottles by the factory gates before returning to the market for overtime work. These recyclables served as an additional source of income for Yang Yang's family. According to Yang Yang's mother, the building management forbade any of their workers to collect and leave recyclables around the market premises. For this reason, Yang Yang's mother and her fellow colleagues would often lug massive bundles of recyclables wrapped around by an industrial tarp fabric upon their arched backs and leave them by the gates of the Wongs' factory. Whenever her mother came by, Yang Yang would jump up from her station and assist her mother with the load, while Mrs. Wong beckoned Yang Yang's mother to sit beside her in the factory so they could chat. During early evening, Yang Yang's father (before he lost his bike) would swing by the factory with his pedi-cab to pick up the load and bring the recyclables to the nearby recycling center.

The familial cooperation as demonstrated by Yang Yang and her parents strengthened the congeniality among the Wongs, Yang Yang, and her parents. Though their intimate relations facilitated kindred acts of cooperation, those well-intentioned feelings unknowingly worked to perpetuate the exploitative aspects of low-wage factory labor. For example, when the workers and I returned to the factory the day after the Chinese New Year, I saw Yang Yang refreshed from her vacation back home. When she saw me, Yang Yang exclaimed how happy she felt to be back in her home in Hunan, where she slept in and laid around the house watching TV throughout the day. She basked in the joys of being a teenager in the comforts of her



home while her mother cooked delicious food in the kitchen. Her return to the factory clearly marked the end of her glorious comfort and free time. When we spoke that day, she assumed that she could squeeze in an extra day or two of vacation before returning to her regular sewing work. Apparently, she had only come by the factory with her mother that day to pay her respects to the Wongs and to wish them a happy new year.

That day, Yang Yang and I climbed up to the second floor attic to greet Mrs. Wong who was upstairs watching television. When she and Yang Yang saw each other after a two week absence, the two women acted like young girls catching up on juicy gossip that they had been eager share. After a few rounds of joyous exchange, Mrs. Wong explained that her client, Carmen, intended to submit another order of children's clothing the next day. Since most of her workers had not yet returned from their native places for the New Year's, Mrs. Wong desperately needed Yang Yang to start work right away. While Mrs. Wong explained her situation to Yang Yang and her mother, the exuberance was written on the young girl's face immediately turned to dismay. With her eyes cast downward, she remained silent, almost refusing to acknowledge Mrs. Wong's request. Mrs. Wong then moved her body closer to Yang Yang on her right-hand side, while her mother stood beside her on her left. Sandwiched between the two adults, Yang Yang remained reticent. Mrs. Wong physically nudged her gently with her right arm, while her mother beckoned her quietly in her left ear with her soft words, "Come on..."

I was standing directly in front of the three women during this exchange. As I watched their discussion unfold before me, I could feel the anguish and disappointment that Yang Yang felt in unexpectedly losing her last days of leisure and sleep. Her silence and sadness signaled her desire to remain a carefree teenager, a critical aspect of her life that she must once again forfeit as she resumed those long hours of monotonous and dreary factory work. Yet, she seemed defenseless in face of gentle persuasion exerted by her biological mother standing on one side and by her fictive mother standing on the other.

That event, however ordinary it might seem at first glance, left an indelible mark in my memory as it played out before my eyes. In some ways, I empathized with Yang Yang's reluctance to forfeit her untroubled youth to the chains of industrial labor. At the same time, however, her role as the (fictive) daughter reinforced her reluctant obligations to resume work despite her unwillingness, so that she would fulfill Mrs. Wong and her biological mother's wishes. Her mother's quiet urging signaled that her family relied upon Yang Yang's wage-earning capacity as a critical source of income, a burden that seemed unfair to impose upon a young woman but perhaps absolutely necessary for their daily survival. That day, Yang Yang taught me the incredible sacrifices a young woman like her made for the sake of filial piety particularly within the context of low-wage labor. At the same time, I wondered the following: Were Mrs. Wong's affective appeals to Yang Yang considered coercive or exploitative? When mother-daughter intimacies were mobilized by the dictates of poverty and industrial labor, how did such affective

relationships change the conceptual terrain of family, parenthood, autonomy, and filial piety?

### **The Market Risks of Romance**

Finally, I extend Mrs. Wong's stories of friendship upon the factory floor to tales of romance as they are experienced by a young wholesale distributor, Helen, who runs a stall in the Shi San Hang wholesale market. I make comparisons between these two women in order to highlight how affective dimensions of love and romance are entangled with the demands of profit-making and commodity exchange within Guangzhou's fast fashion industry.

I met Helen during my first year of research when I began to explore the market stalls of Shi San Hang. When I met her, I was impressed by her vivaciousness and cosmopolitanism. I was drawn to her charismatic personality, and was not surprised that by her late twenties, she was already operating a highly successful T-shirt wholesale business out of the pricier upper levels of the Shi San Hang wholesale market, an accomplishment for a young woman who did not even speak the local Cantonese language. As our friendship deepened, she recounted to me how she gained a foothold in Guangzhou's burgeoning fashion wholesale industry as a young teenager. As a migrant woman from Dongbei who lacked any reliable social networks in Guangzhou, her accomplishment was a tremendous feat, particularly since she never received formal training in design and business. As a tenacious teenager, Helen began laboring as a wage-worker in a shoe factory in Dongbei, which was operated

by a Sichuanese businessman. After she had proven to the boss her willingness to work, she somehow encouraged him to enroll her in a shoe design program in Sichuan. She proudly asserted to me as she narrated her life story, “When I requested this from my boss, I convinced him by promising him that I would improve his business. And I did. Initially, he had no idea that I had so much drive and ambition. He merely saw me as a young girl – innocent and unmotivated. He didn’t know that I had a tireless ambition.” At that point, Helen declared to her mother that she decided to forfeit her university education to pursue her entrepreneurial dreams in the fashion industry. In reply, her mother admonished her daughter, “I will support her decision, but you must find secure source of income along the way.”

Helen spent several months in the design program before leaving Sichuan for the mega-metropolis of Guangzhou. Luckily, her arrival coincided with the rapid expansion of the garment production and wholesale industries throughout the early 2000s. During those early years, influxes of transnational migrants from Korea, Japan, and Nigeria swarmed upon the fashion scene in Guangzhou in order to establish trading and manufacturing networks there. As a newly arrived migrant, Helen fell in love an older Korean businessman who operated a shoe wholesale outlet near the well-known railway station in the eastern part of the city. Their romance lasted for about eight years, during which Helen had learned and perfected the skills necessary for running her own fashion wholesale business. Their relationship, however, was eventually mired by distrust and even jealousy between them. She elaborated,

Over the years, I had saved up vast amounts of money from our business without his knowledge. I did this because I had to protect myself and my family. I knew that he never believed in me; that I could succeed and eventually out-succeed him. The years that I had saved up money on my own, he continued to spend it all away. After our relationship ended, I used my money to start my own business. Years later, after he realized that I had become more successful than he, he begged for me to return to him. At that point, it was too late.

Helen's story described the life journey of a young migrant woman's rise to entrepreneurial success through her emotionally-charged involvement in a combined romantic and business partnership with her former lover. Her account impressed me not only because of the incredible drive and persistence she displayed as she strove to accomplish her entrepreneurial dreams, but also because of the subtle power dynamics that were underlying the romantic relationship between Helen and her ex. From her personal narrative, it became clear that throughout her life journey, she had encountered several businessmen who held positions of authority. Fully aware of her relatively vulnerable position as a young woman, she followed in the men's footsteps in order to gain the skills and knowledge necessary for running a fashion enterprise, but knew at the same time that out-compete them she would have to distance herself from them. Her personal ambition in establishing her own business might explain why she hid her money from her partner. At the same time, however, she admitted that she loved him dearly even though she was unsure whether he was the right life

partner for her. Thus, Helen's narrative thus begged the following questions: To what extent did their business activities interfere with Helen's ability to trust her partners, particularly when business desires were intertwined with romantic desires? How did she negotiate the terms of love, trust, and money in her relationship??

Unfortunately, I have never learned the answers to those questions during the course of my research. Nonetheless, Helen's story reveals the deep entanglements of entrepreneurial risk and intimate desires, particularly among couples who share responsibilities in running their own businesses. In Guangzhou, the risks of losing one's business are almost as uncertain as the risks of failed marriages and relationships. The highly competitive business environment in Guangzhou, where profits among small-scale businesses quickly come and go, heightens the sense of emotional and financial insecurity, which market participants face in their efforts to achieve wealth and financial independence. In Helen's case, struggling migrant entrepreneurs like her sometimes cannot differentiate between business competitors and collaborators. Furthermore, these tensions reveal underlying gender inequalities, especially in cases where men hold positions of relative wealth and authority. Bonds of trust with powerful men are difficult to bridge and sustain among migrant women like Helen, who has spent most of her life struggling to achieve financial independence.

In conclusion, these ethnographic vignettes demonstrate that desires among migrant wage workers and entrepreneurs are fluid and dynamic, particularly when

met with disappointments and heartbreak. These stories illustrate the intimate ways in which the production of the world's fast fashion penetrate and shape the affective contours of the participants' livelihoods. The journeys that these migrant women undertake in staking out a livelihood in Guangzhou are driven by their longings to achieve wealth as well as sense of urbanity, mobility, and cosmopolitanism. Yet, their desires become punctured by perceived acts of cheating, dishonesty, and inequality in their labor and business dealings, leading them to reassess what money, autonomy, and self-employment, and entrepreneurship mean to them. Collectively, they demonstrate moments when they refuse to define themselves singularly as migrants, temporary workers, and entrepreneurs. They understand themselves as connected to a wider world that extends beyond the immediate confines of their factory. As their stories show, migrant wage workers and entrepreneurs continually struggle to transcend these boundaries.

## **Conclusion**

This dissertation shows how migrants' wage labor and entrepreneurial activities serve as intermediary links upon which post-socialist transformations of property relations, personhood, and relations of labor in China articulate with transnational chains of commodity production and exchange. Suspended between the classifications of rural and urban, migrant laborers, as well as the material landscapes within which they work and live, expose the uneasy transformations of property relations, personhood, and relations of labor that are now underway in cities across post-socialist China. I contend that in order to capture the complexities of migrants' experiences of wage labor and small-scale entrepreneurship in China, rural and urban categories cannot simply be framed as dichotomous. Nor do they exist solely along a continuum. Rather, their identities shift and move within ongoing conditions of ambivalence and uncertainty. Migrant wage workers and entrepreneurs in Guangzhou's fast fashion industry regularly confront ongoing situations of mobility and displacement, along with autonomy and servitude. They must constantly work through the paradoxes of becoming entrepreneurs, leaving many market participants feeling ambivalent about what being "the boss" of one's own labor may promise for them.

The instabilities, paradoxes, and ambivalences that blur the categories of rural and urban, worker and entrepreneur, freedom and displacement lie at the heart of global capitalist processes today. In China, the conditions of ambivalence and uncertainties within which migrant wage workers and entrepreneurs move



demonstrate how transnational commodity chains link and de-link various production and consumption networks across the globe. Through their participation in the transnational chains of commodity production and exchange, migrants frequently encounter violence, loss, and disappointment, along with relative freedom and social mobility. Their struggles in grappling with what entrepreneurship might represent underscore the ways in which the social links that comprise the global networks of commodity exchange remain tenuous and unstable. In effect, global commodity chains draw people in by appealing to their desires for a better life yet simultaneously expose them to their exploitative effects.

This dissertation revealed how the paradoxes of entrepreneurial freedom unfolded as migrants experimented with business enterprise and temporary wage work. I argued that ambiguities in designating land and populations as either rural or urban served as a basis upon which production chains for export manufacturing articulated place based land, labor, and capital. It began with an analysis that traced the historical and spatial development of a cluster of urban villages in a southern section of Guangzhou. By surveying changing social orders of family, kinship, and local governance that once characterized this agricultural collective during the Maoist period, this project underscored the present-day divisions of class collectivities between lineage members with use rights to the land and migrant workers with no entitlements to the village land. Since the early years of the Reform period, migrants' needs for low cost housing and low wage labor spurred the mushrooming of home based factories that facilitated the speedy turnover of garments, workers, and capital

in and out of the urban villages. Thus, the formation of global commodity chains depended on social cleavages between rural and urban, as well as insider and outsider between lineage members and migrant workers.

The mushrooming of household factories that facilitated the export production of fast fashion within Guangzhou's garment district took place precisely within the ambiguous space between the rural and urban. There, migrants' experiments in self-employment as temporary wage workers and as small scale entrepreneurs blurred the divisions between wage work and factory ownership. The relative fluidity with which people and objects flowed in and out of home based factories led wage workers and their employers to declare and perform their relative freedom by dictating the conditions of their labor. However, the rapid turnover of garments often left temporary workers and their bosses emplaced upon the shop floor. In other words, market demands over the temporal rhythms of the manufacturing process diminished factory owners' abilities to fully command the intricate work flows of the assembly lines. The relative openness with which wage workers floated in and out of the home based factories also enabled temporary wage workers to talk back to their employers or simply walk out on the job. The spatiotemporal organizations of fast fashion production thus blurred the boundaries that delineated boss and worker.

Furthermore, this dissertation showed how the temporal and spatial dictates of flexible accumulation outside the household factories shaped the experiences of labor for all market participants along the commodity chain. For example, the movements

of people and goods in and out of Guangzhou's wholesale markets for fast fashion linked the perceptions of desire and risks among intermediary traders and factory workers. Rent speculation of wholesale markets and the rapid turnover of fashion styles created a circular sense of production and consumption, leading intermediary buyers to speculate on potential risks and losses. These speculative acts determined the specific styles production in a particular season, which in turn shaped the experiences of labor among factory workers. These workers formulated imaginary maps that linked the same fashion styles to marketplaces around the world in order to assess their own risks of financial losses and labor exploitation. Migrants' desires and risks reflected gendered divisions of labor such that male entrepreneurs, small-scale factory owners, and migrant wage workers alike publically declared and performed their so-called freedom, while women bore the most risks of losses and heartbreak by having to balance factory work with housework and care for their families. In summary, this dissertation illustrated how incomplete transformations of migrants from rural to urban and from worker to entrepreneur left low wage workers and small-scale entrepreneurs within ambivalent and contradictory sites of freedom and loss, as well as of desire and risk.

### **Coda: Migrants as Half City People**

Migrants' conditions of ambiguity lay at the heart of China's intensified participation in the transnational chains of commodity manufacture and trade. Moreover, their sense of ongoing suspension between the rural and urban pervades other facets of their family and work lives. As a case in point, a well-known airline in China has recently featured an article entitled, "Half City People" (*ban cheng ren* 半城人), which profiles several city dwellers who trace their life histories and administrative *hukou* statuses in the countryside (*xiang* 乡). The article serves as a response to the central government's push to reform the *hukou* system in the coming years. These plans include gradually easing *hukou* restrictions by granting more resident permits to migrant city dwellers already residing in mid-sized cities with the aim of increasing consumption levels and improving standards of living in urban areas.<sup>65</sup>

In the article, the author broaches one of the most critical questions informing Chinese society today: In light of the massive influx of rural migrants taking up residences and work in Chinese cities, what does it mean to be an urban citizen today? What are the criteria for becoming an urban citizen? To what extent do the rural/urban categorizations of personhood matter in their self-identifications as well as their sense of belonging with others? These questions are particularly relevant for migrants, both young and old, whose life memories are anchored in their rural native villages,

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<sup>65</sup> *Hukou* restrictions will continue to be enforced in mega-cities in Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou.

even though their bodily presence and means of living remain within China's urban concrete landscape. Upon introducing the profiles of several city-dwellers, the author uses the metaphor of the wheel to describe the migrants' transitory lives. In her view, the figure of the rotating wheel recurs as consistent metaphor among the intimate portraits of the migration experience. While the wheels of trains, cars, and trucks physically bring rural migrants into cities, the wheel also represents the Chinese Communist Party's push towards modernity, civilization, and progress. Like the movements of a rotating wheel, as the author concludes, the migrants' transitory lives remain in constant flux. In light of their unstable, transitory ways of life, the author asks the following: To what extent have the promises of modernity, progress, and economic development materialized for the migrants since their arrival into Chinese cities?

In the process of uncovering answers to these questions, the author interviewed a migrant couple who had complained about the difficulties in finding the right school for their child who was born and raised in the city, but lacked the proper *hukou* or administrative identification as a city resident. Rather than enrolling in local schools that were better funded and staffed with more qualified teachers, the child could only legally attend schools in the city that were established for students of migrant parents. To their disappointment, these migrant schools in general offered relatively fewer resources and subsequently a lower quality of education. According to the parents, the ideal conversion from a rural migrant to a complete urban citizen required full indoctrination from a local urban school that began in early childhood.

In other words, the transformation from a rural villager to a legitimate urbanite entailed the complete transformation of a person, including one's life history, memory, language abilities, bodily habits, temporal rhythms, personal aspirations, and worldviews.

While the societal effects of the *hukou* reforms remain to be seen, migrants' life stories and experiences of labor highlight how these policy proposals, though progressive in alleviating the growing gaps between the rich and the poor, fail to adequately address the ambiguities that are entailed in culturally defining locals from outsiders. These categorical instabilities continue to shape the social relations and relations of labor among Chinese citizens in the cities. For example, the influx of rural migrants into many of China's already over-populated cities has forced many native urban residents to rethink the meaning of local identifications (*ben di ren*). As in the case of one Guangzhou-native as featured in the article, the overwhelming presence of Putonghua speakers over local Cantonese-speakers in his office, makes his claims as a Guangzhou city native less outstanding and significant. In addition, the emergence of wealthy migrant entrepreneurs and landowners, along with the exorbitant rise in the costs of urban living, unhinged class divisions from a strict urban/ rural delineation. For example, a family friend of mine who proudly claims herself as a long-standing Guangzhou native expressed disapproval at a group of middle-aged adults dining at a table next to us in an up-scale restaurant. "Look at them," she whispered. "They might wear nice clothes and own several flats, but that's only because the (municipal) government compensated them handsomely and granted

them urban *hukous* for their apartments before their homes are torn down. They may be rich, but they are still peasants at heart. They have low education.” Although the lifting of rural and urban distinctions through the *hukou* reforms may hope to alleviate the growing class based inequalities that migrants continue to face in the cities, the ambiguities in defining one’s rightful claims to the city remain fraught with tensions and ambivalences.

In another article that has been recently published primarily for English speaking audiences, Gao (2014) emphasizes the deleterious effects of China’s rapid urbanization and growing income disparities. She argues that migrants have begun to popularize Joseph Heller’s well-known book title, *Catch-22* (1961), to articulate their sense of general sense of ambivalence toward their lives second-class citizens. One source of discontent stems from the endless bureaucratic challenges that migrant workers in China must undergo, including the countless number of licenses and permits they must submit, in order to deliver their grievances to the local officials at the village, district, and municipal levels. These administrative hurdles obfuscate migrant workers’ abilities to voice their complaints to authorities in the central government. Undoubtedly, the policies of the *hukou* have also placed migrant workers within conditions of ambivalence and self-defeat. In one instance, Gao cites a policy administered by the Kunming city government in April 2010. In it, the regulation forbids employers from hiring migrants without urban residency permits there. However, in order for migrants to obtain residency permits, they must paradoxically hold a steady job. Such bureaucratic red tape, Gao explains, leaves

migrants in self-defeating situations of “catch-22.” Thus, the use of the wheel as a metaphor for migrant workers’ ongoing conditions of displacement in the magazine article aptly describes what Gao refers to as “catch-22.”

In closing, this dissertation differs slightly from Gao’s perspective in that it considers more nuanced and complex experiences of migrant labor, that encompass both the joys and disappointments of living within conditions of uncertainty. I have collected numerous stories about their homes in the countryside, their challenges in raising children in the city, their dissatisfactions with married life, their dislikes toward rapid urbanization, and their aspirations for a financially stable way of life. Whether real or imagined, individual or collective, these stories reveal the complexities of migrant labor, whereby the conditions of flexible and low-cost garment manufacture offer these workers the chance to experience social mobility and relative autonomy at the cost of increasing income disparities. Their stories reveal not only the push and pull factors that lead migrants to the factories, but also their perspectives on life as migrant laborers whose memories remain in the countryside though their work experiences, temporal orientations, and visceral bodily senses are situated within the confines of the bustling urban village. As “half city people,” their perceptions towards city life, their familial organization across vast distances, their gendered mapping, and their travels through city spaces are colored by the specificities of their displacements as migrant workers. These narratives in no way celebrate the exploitative practices of low-wage garment labor and regulatory practices of the *hukou* administrative system. On the contrary, it is my hope that these



stories contribute to a growing scholarship on migrant laborers and entrepreneurs in China and abroad that rejects reductive dichotomies of individual choice and social structure, as well as victimization and hero-making. By tuning into the fragmented and multi-faceted features of personhood, these stories unveil the countless socio-economic contradictions migrant workers face as laborers who straddle between city dwellers and rural peasants. Their experiences of city life within the urban village illuminate the gendered, contradictory, and uneven landscapes that shape China's post-socialist transformations of city spaces, personhood, and relations of labor.

### **Looking Ahead**

In "Social Justice, Democracy and the Politics of Development: The People's Republic of China: in Global Perspective," Dirlik and Prazniak (2012) remind their readers that issues pertaining to political repression, environmental destruction, and widening social inequalities within China's borders, should be matters of global concern. Certainly, China's intensified participation in the trans-oceanic networks of export manufacture and trade highlights the significance of conceptualizing China through trans-regional frameworks that challenge the analytical boundaries of the nation-state. Collaborations among Chinese investors with their business partners in Russia, Vietnam, Zambia, and Brazil highlight the expansion of China's economic interests in regions far beyond the geographic limits of national borders. With this aim in mind, I consider how global commodity chains for fast fashion are bridged through Chinese migrants' encounters with intermediary traders from countries in the

global south, namely those from Korea, Senegal and Nigeria, who locate themselves in China for long periods of time.

While anthropologists and geographers have begun to explore how former European colonial powers are shaping the relations of global commodity exchange in the contemporary period (West 2012, Friedberg 2004, Chalfin 2004), many scholars tend to locate social mobility among corporate elites within the global north.<sup>66</sup> Few have analyzed how China's small-scale transnational migrant entrepreneurs from the global south are refiguring south-south relations, particularly manufacturing and investment linkages among diasporic populations from the post-socialist and post-colonial worlds including Africa and the Pacific Rim. Moreover, global public discourses tend to emphasize China's increasing presence elsewhere in the world, but what happens if we turn that view around and examine the entrepreneurs from the global south who locate themselves in China as part of their insertion into global commodity chains?

Chinese migrants' encounters with Senegalese, Nigerian, and Korean non-elite migrant entrepreneurs who live and work in Guangzhou call attention to the ways in which these south-south relationships link the transnational supply chains for fashion with China's post-socialist transformations of urban spaces and social relations of labor. Many diasporic groups from the global south learn Mandarin

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<sup>66</sup> Friedberg, Susanne (2004) *French Beans and Food Scares*, New York: Oxford University Press.  
Page West (2012) *From Modern Production to Imagined Primitive*, Durham: Duke University Press.  
Chalfin, Brenda (2004) *Shea Butter Republic*, Oxford: Routledge Press.

Chinese, settle in Guangzhou, and establish familial ties there so as to bridge the post-socialist and post-colonial networks of commodity trading. These transnational migrant traders attempt to capitalize on China's budding cooperation with developing nations in Africa and venture halfway across the world in hopes of realizing their entrepreneurial dreams. An estimated 20,000 documented migrants from Africa live and work in Guangzhou's Xiaobei district, most of whom are men. Countless others remain in the city outside the purview of the municipal government.<sup>67</sup> The majority of residents in Xiaobei have migrated from countries in West Africa, including Mali, Senegal, Guinea (Conakry), Benin and Côte d'Ivoire (Diederich 2013). Nearly half of these traders who eventually settle in Guangzhou work as brokers who mediate between Chinese producers and itinerant African importers that visit the city two to four times a year. Although importers purchase a range of China-made commodities including kitchen appliances, motorcycles, electronics, and toys, distributors generally order copies of branded luxury items, including garments, bags, and accessories.

Through their passage routes in and out of Guangzhou, encounters between transnational traders and Chinese migrant entrepreneurs reconfigure the city landscape. These spatial transformations highlight the fluidity of market spaces as market participants continually remake city spaces for capital accumulation. In fact,

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<sup>67</sup> This statistic does not account for the number of undocumented migrants from Africa who illegally entered China or remained in the country past their visa expiration date. Although population numbers are difficult to confirm, another 50,000 migrants from Africa live in the area (Mathews 2011, Bodomo 2012).

the global linkages for fast fashion, which intersect a diversity of places and people across the world's continents and oceans, converge precisely upon the area immediately surrounding Guangzhou's Railway Station, where migrants' dreams of fast money begin and end. With luggage and babies in tow, the newly arrived migrants from countries in the global south and from China's countryside float amongst a sea of other pedestrians as they slowly pass through the concrete arteries that lead to and from the station. The newcomers bump shoulders with migrant entrepreneurs from the Middle East, Eastern Europe, Southeast Asia, and Africa as they wander past the stifling traffic of pedestrians, buses, and cargo vans in search of the latest fashion and accessories. These migrant entrepreneurs drag behind them heavy bundles of clothing wrapped in black garbage bags while they scour through scores of multi-level wholesale markets for shoes, watches, and clothing produced specifically for consumers in Africa, Latin America, and across the Pacific Rim.

As the trans-continental movements of people, commodities, and capital in and out of southern China intensify investment and family ties across regions in the global south, the promises of wealth and social mobility that small-scale entrepreneurship hold for many migrants (transnational and domestic) seem increasingly risky and less certain. In the spring of 2014, large-scale labor protests across the Pearl River Delta (PRD) region have led observers to wonder about south China's economic future in light of rising wages and increasing discontentment among migrant wage workers. In the neighboring city of Dongguan, more than 10,000 – 45,000 employees of a

Taiwanese owned factory have disputed production of the world's athletic footwear for 10 days, marking one of China's largest and costliest strikes in decades (Qi 2014).<sup>68</sup> Meanwhile, workers across factories in Vietnam that produce commodities for Nike and Walmart have engaged in violent demonstrations against ethnic Chinese entrepreneurs there, many of whom are from Taiwan (Boehler 2014).<sup>69</sup> These workers protest against unfair working conditions and denounce what they view as China's increasing control over the disputed waters around the Paracel Islands in the South China Sea. Furthermore, racial tensions continue to brew surrounding Guangzhou's Xiaobei district after protests erupted in June 2012 among African migrants after the death of a Nigerian man who was held in police custody. Fluctuating profits within Guangzhou's fast fashion sector has also led many Korean migrants to move their offices and factories from China to Vietnam, Thailand, and countries across Central America where workers' wages are comparatively lower. Indeed, disruptions, uncertainty, and instabilities are increasingly becoming the normal order of business for many Chinese and non-Chinese migrant entrepreneurs. How they manage these risks and reformulate their ideas of entrepreneurship in light of these uncertainties remains to be seen and will serve as a basis of my future research.

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<sup>68</sup> The Wall Street Journal reports that the 2014 Yue Yuen strike cost as the Taiwanese company as much as an estimated \$60 million. See: <http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424052702304163604579528504234144092>

<sup>69</sup> Source: <http://www.scmp.com/news/asia/article/1514137/ethnic-chinese-live-fear-looting-and-violence-strike-vietnam-factories>

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