

Domestic Workers in the Panoptic Home

Wanning Sun

Curtin University of Technology

Since the early 1980s, up to 120 million people have left home to seek work in China's prosperous rural areas and cities. Often referred to as the 'floating population', 75% of them move to seek jobs in the city, and among them the six most common types of employment undertaken by them are: manufacturing, service and hospitality, construction, cottage-style garment processing, garbage and scrape collecting, and finally domestic workers, or *baomu* (Solinger, 1999). Paid domestic work, a line of employment which has re-emerged in urban China since the economic reforms, is in the parlance of both popular media and economists, a 'burgeoning growth industry' (*zhao yang chai ye*). Increasing number of households in urban China are in need of domestic help, and becoming a domestic worker in the city has become, for a rural woman leaving villages to seek income in the city, a most viable employment option.

The demand for qualified domestic workers in the city has been on the steady rise. Although it is difficult to estimate the exact number of rural migrants who work as domestic workers, statistics do suggest that more and more urban families are employing domestic help and the number of vacancies urgently in need of filling is forever growing. Many young families need child-care for their young child; a growing number of Chinese families with old people need domestic help to care for the old. Currently China has 0.13 billion people over the age of 60, and this percentage is growing at the rate of 3% each year.¹ In Beijing, as many as 200,000 households are using domestic help, and within the next few years, about 230,000 families are expected to need full-time live-in maids, whereas another 220,000 families will need part-time and casual domestic help.² It is estimated that about 100,000 positions for domestic help are waiting to be filled in urban Beijing.³ Statistically, this need translates into one in ten families in Beijing are needing or employing domestic help in some shape or form.

While once upon a time, during both pre-socialist and to a much less extent, socialist eras, a *baomu* lived with her employer's family, and cooked, cleaned and looked after the children, nowadays, a domestic worker can be live-in, part-time, or casual. The definition of domestic work also has

evolved to include a range of activities in addition to standard housework, such as caring for the new mother in her first month after childbirth (*yue sao*), nursing hospitalized patients (*hu gong*), and looking after pets. The image of the average employer of a *baomu* has changed as well: first, there was the feudal master/mistress in pre-revolutionary times (Lu & Wang 2004); next, a small handful of privileged high-ranking government officials and scholars in the socialist era in Beijing and Shanghai (Liu 1999); and now, a considerable proportion of families in Chinese cities of all sizes from most corners of the country. These include both the socio-economic elites and families with typical middle-class incomes and professions, ranging from as professors, doctors, public servants, to teachers, self-employed owners of small businesses, retirees, and bank clerks.

It's difficult to be exact about a maid's wage, since it depends on many variables, including geography, the type of work, employers' socio-economic status, and the origin of domestic workers themselves. Domestic work is more expensive in large cities and provincial capitals than in small or medium-sized cities. Urban local domestic workers – they are very small in number – usually command a higher wage than their rural migrant peers, whereas those working for foreign and transnational employers and families can expect to earn a lot more than those in Chinese families. In 2005-6, a live-in baby-sitter in Beijing would usually get around 600 to 1,300 yuan a month, with most receiving 600 to 850 yuan, whereas in Shanghai, most live-in maids were paid 700 to 900 a month, with the exception of local domestics who may earn up to 1,400 yuan a month working for transnational families.⁴ Part-time cleaners may charge on an hourly basis, and again the rate varies depending on the factors mentioned above. In Beijing, a part-time cleaner may earn 6–8 yuan an hour, but those who work as employees of cleaning agencies may be paid as little as 3–4 yuan an hour, with the company paying for food and accommodation.⁵ Like rural migrants working in factories and on construction sites, most *baomu*, especially rural women, are members of one of the most poorly paid and disadvantaged socio-economic groups in the city, facing discrimination and marginalization both as individuals and as a group (Gaetano & Jacka 2004, Sun 2004, Jacka 2006). In a national survey conducted by China Academy of Social Sciences only a few years ago, more than 2000 urban residents in 63 cities were asked to rank professions according to their judgments of respectability. The result is telling: mayors, government ministers and university professors, judges and high-tech engineers top the list, whereas domestic workers and construction workers fall to the bottom (Zhao and Li, 2004).

The wide-spread phenomenon of outsourcing domestic work has profoundly altered the household life-styles of urban families and reworked the division of labor at home. Its benefits to urban households are sundry and self-evident. Both the state and the market recognise that rural women's labor has come to be essential in urban households, and so both parties encourage and facilitate their entry into the city. It is estimated as that as many as one in every five urban families are prospective and current employers,⁶ with around 85% of these families in need of help either for childcare or care for the elderly⁷. Currently more than 80% of the domestic workers in Beijing are migrant workers Beijing⁸, many of whom came to the city alone, as live-in maids. The large number of migrant domestic workers in the Chinese cities is closely related to the urban-rural gap and the continued salience of hukou that perpetuates that gap even as the new hukou system allows millions of rural residence people to flood into the cities (Wang Fei-ling 2005). The extent to which the former depends on the labour and service provided by the latter is by no means indicative of the degree of 'harmony' (*he xie*) and civility between the two groups. In fact, the phenomenon has also generated an historically unprecedented but concealed tension and conflict between urban, many of whom, middle class, residents, and migrant workers, many of whom of rural origin. In fact, social harmony and civility are recognised as of paramount importance by the state and thus touted as the most desirable moral attributes to be gained by its people⁹ precisely because the dire lack of them is seen to be potential trigger for social disability and even unrest. I want to suggest here that, unfortunately, the daily crises in the maid-employer relationship are but symptomatic and metonymic of the general tensions and conflicts in the sociality of people across class, gender and place of origin in urban, post-Mao China.

In this paper, I discuss a range of practices, both material and discursive, which inscribe the notion of risk onto the maid's body. This inscription, I suggest, involves the active process by which the body of the maid comes to be constructed as unruly and associated with sexual transgression, criminality and disease, and therefore a potential threat to the family she serves. The maid, therefore, is often perceived, from the point of view of her employers, domestic work agencies, law, medical and public health institutions alike, to be in need of sanitisation, surveillance, and domestication. I will also demonstrate that the desire for control and domestication translates itself into a set of everyday practices and strategies of controlling and regulating the body. Such desire for domination, which is

borne aloft by and in turn further reinforces the fear and desire surrounding the paradoxical figure, also has the adverse effect of generating a range of everyday tactics on the part of domestic workers, whose action, as I show, often speaks louder than their words in their struggle for equality, dignity and respect.

Research presented in this paper comes from two extended periods of ethnographic interaction in 2005 and 2006. In the months of May to July 2005, I lived among local residents in a *xiaoqu* (residential neighborhood) in Chaoyang District, eastern Beijing. I rented an apartment on the 13th floor in one of the many – around ten – high-rises (20 floors) in our compound. Again, in the months of June to September 2006, I rented an apartment on the 20th floor in one of the 6 tall buildings (25 floors) in Haidian District, western Beijing. The two *xiaoqu* are quite different in demographic and sociological senses, the second one in Haidian District being more upscale, more spacious, quieter, and is equipped with more recreational facilities, commanding a real estate value that doubles, if not triples, the first one in Chaoyang District. My access to domestic workers mostly took one of two forms. The first was in-depth interviews with individual domestic workers, in the form of informal conversations with maids within a mostly open-ended structure, simulating the methods of oral history, which allow for a flexible, personalised, and thus more productive inquiry. The second form of access took the form of talking to, observing, traveling with, and interacting with a small number of maids – for instance, cooking, shopping, watching television, child-minding – at repeated intervals over an extended period of time, adopting what I call ‘time-lapse ethnography’.

The regime of the workplace

In her ethnographic study of the migrant women turned factory workers in southern China, Pun (2005) considers the ways in which the migrant body comes to be inscribed by the ‘discursive, spatial and institutional practices’ of the factory regime. She demonstrates that the disciplinary machine operates both spatially – through spacing of the body on the assembly line – and temporally – through timetabling, both of which aim to transform ‘unruly’, ‘uncivilized’ peasants into modern, industrial workers with docile bodies and nimble fingers. In contrast, domestic workers in urban homes find themselves in a workplace which is marked by an absence of timetabling and clear division between work and recreational spaces. However, it is precisely this lack of clear demarcation in both spatial and

temporal terms that accounts for the sense of stress experienced by domestic workers, especially live-in ones. A number of factors account for this stress. Unlike factory workers or other lines of employment, domestic workers, live-in ones or part-timers, are not protected by labor law to have guaranteed time off or leave from work, nor are they entitled to various kinds of fringe benefits (Gaetano 2005; Jacka 2005). Although Beijing's Domestic Workers Association recommended to employers that live-in maids should be given at least two days off in a month, and no less than eight hours' sleep per day, and extra pay on public holidays and new year day, such recommendations do not have legal binding force, so are left to the discretion of employers. Some employers are aware of these leave recommendations, but can opt to negotiate with employees to override them with an incentive for a bit of extra pay. Often, domestic workers agree to forgo leave for extra bit, since they do not have alternative accommodation and a social network in the city. As a result, it is not uncommon that in practical terms, live-in maids can be called upon to work twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. This can be particularly taxing for live-in nannies who have to sleep with babies and young children in the same bed – a common practice among urban families, and who have to wake up a number of times each night to comfort the waking baby. More than once, nannies look haggard and tired the next day, with bags under their eyes, because they cannot go back to sleep after they put the baby back to sleep again. To make it even harder, some are still expected to carry out housework duties during the day, following a bad night, with little and often interrupted sleep.

Xiao Gu¹⁰, a 23-years old woman from Heze County, Shandong Province in the playground was one of many women who are not in the position to separate work from her own time off.¹¹ Although Gu had already been in Beijing for more than 6 years, during which time she had worked as a nanny in three or four families in various suburbs of Beijing, she hadn't seen much of Beijing. When I first met her, she had only started on this job for ten days. She said that in Beijing she did not know many people from her hometown, and in any case, she could not socialize with them, as she could not bring people to her employers' home. Her job, a full-time nanny for the 11-month old baby, was 24 hours a day and 7 days a week so she had no time to get out. She told me that there were two bedrooms in the apartment, with her employers sleeping in one, and she and the baby sleeping in another – together in one bed. I asked her if, apart from having to get up to attend to the crying baby at night, she could sleep well with a young baby at her side.

She smiled and said, ‘Often the baby would change sides and move around the bed, so I have to sleep carefully.’

The untold stress and strong sense of alienation experienced by a domestic worker is a result of both temporal and spatial arrangement of her workplace. The most obvious difference between factory workers and domestic workers, of course, is that for the latter, her workplace is someone else’s home, which is usually designed to maximize the comfort and good-living of those who live rather than work in it. Although the housing condition has improved dramatically over the last decades or so in urban China, this does not necessarily translate into a comfortable work environment for the live-in maids and nannies. Ding Ayi was in her 40s and was employed by a family of four – a couple and two teenager children – in the same *xiaoqu* as me. Her main job consisted of preparing three meals a day for the family, cleaning the apartment – more than 200 square meters in total – and carrying out other housework duties, and walking the three Chihuahua dogs twice a day – once in the early morning and once in the late afternoon. As the family have ‘fussy taste buds’, Ding spent most of her time during the day in the kitchen. As is known to all, the kitchen – many of which having no window – in summer is the hottest place in the apartment, with generally no air-condition or fans. Designed – usually by men – with spatial economy and efficiency rather than comfort in mind, it is seldom furnished with chairs or places to sit down or relax. Ding Ayi, having to cook three meals and then washing up, had to be on her feet most of her time. When I met her walking dogs in the morning and in the evening, she often complained of having a sore back and stiff legs. ‘It may not occur to most employers sitting at their air-conditioned dining-room that the delicious food was cooked in the kitchen by the maid often drenched in perspiration’, said Zhang Xianmin, the general manager of March 8th Domestic Service Centre in Beijing.¹²

Sleeping is not necessarily relaxing as one usually expects. Sleeping conditions for live-in domestic workers vary, depending on the housing condition and generosity – or the lack of it – of employers. Zhang Xianmin, general manager of the March 8th Domestic Service Center general manager in Beijing, comments,

Some families make their maids sleep in unacceptable conditions, for instance, in the same room – and sometime in the same bed – with the invalid person they care for. Some even make their maid sleep on the sofa in the living room, and have no enclosed space for privacy. This

can be quite embarrassing for rural migrant women, especially young, unmarried ones, who are not used to sharing private space with people of opposite sex.¹³

New and recently designed urban housing has indeed taken into consideration the need and likelihood for some urban families to employ live-in maids, hence the increasingly common storage room/maid's bedroom (*chu chang jian/baomu fang*) in most newly built apartment buildings. These are usually a pokey small room¹⁴, often in the middle of the apartment, thus no window, and fitted with cupboards and storage spaces, the top of which can also function as a bed base. Ding Ayi, mentioned above, slept in one of these rooms. Although she could have privacy by closing the door, she often had bad sleep due to the sheer discomfort.

The bed is very hard and narrow, so I have to be careful turning my body otherwise I may fall out of bed. It is also so stuffy and hot (it has no window and air-condition does not reach there). As my male employer lives in the same apartment, I have to sleep with the door closed at all time. Sometimes the only way I can cool down and get some sleep on hot nights is to sleep on my side and put my back on the wall. That is why I have this cold which never gets any better.¹⁵

These temporal and spatial arrangements of workplaces, however inhospitable, are usually not the most important sources of stress and alienation expressed by many domestic workers. Rather it is the reality of living under the intangible yet ever so present gaze of the panoptic home that leaves many domestic workers' feel chronically oppressed (*ya yi*) and anxious. Although I have yet to meet a domestic worker who personally complained of having to work in the presence of a surveillance camera installed in the house, it is widely known that surveillance via camera, though not widely practiced, is indeed adopted in some households, especially where baby-sitting is involved.¹⁶ Another time when I met Xiao Gu in the playground when she took the 11-month old out for some fresh air, she looked a bit preoccupied, as the baby girl was not eating well and was not putting on weight. 'She does not eat solid, only meshed food. And she hasn't started teething yet, which is a bit late for her age'. The baby's parents are worried about the child. 'She is difficult to care for, as she is a fussy eater. Maybe I should start looking for another job'. Although I pointed out to her – more than once – that the girl's not eating well may not be her fault and she did not need to feel guilty, she replied a couple of times

by saying, ‘but I am getting paid by them to do the job, and I can’t take their money in good conscience if the baby is not eating well’.

The story of Gu points to three largely unacknowledged aspects of the regime of workplace experienced by many live-in domestic workers. Their work is extremely demanding not just because of the heavy workload and long hours, but more importantly, because of the lack of distinction between work and free time. In addition, due to a routine lack of personal recreational time and opportunities to socialize with people other than her employers, the live-in domestic worker may be subject to untold emotional and psychological stress overload. In comparison with migrant women living in the dormitories, live-in domestic workers have fewer opportunities on daily basis to commiserate and debrief a day’s stress. Furthermore, since the domestic worker is now operating in an environment which may differ considerably with the habitat she is familiar with, both her body – some say that they have to keep reminding themselves to lower their voice when speaking – and mind may have to endure a punitive process of alienation and compulsory assimilation. It may be therefore no exaggeration when Meng Xianfan, a feminist sociologist in Beijing made this remark about the life of live-in domestic workers, ‘For twenty-four a day, they are immersed – totally and completely (*quan fang wei* – literally meaning ‘from every angle and perspective) immersed in a culture that alienates them’ (quoted in Feng, 2004: 27). Equally importantly, the fact that Xiao Gu’s anxiety stems from her own sense of inadequacy rather than from her employers’ overt criticism points to the effectiveness of panoptic control. It works, not through active threats of punishment, but through self-regulation, whereby individuals internalize managerial gaze (Sturken and Cartwright, 2003: p.98).

Techniques of discipline

Equally ironically and poignantly, it is not just the domestic workers who cannot relax. Employers also express considerable degree of anxiety and stress. Indeed risk minimization seems to be the name of the game when it comes to the business of recruiting and managing domestic workers, and for this reason, it is a common practice for employers to keep their employees’ ID card and paperwork in case they ‘do a runner’. One only has to peruse Chinese media cursorily to sense the urgency behind many employers’ plea to agencies and government to set up databank of all domestic workers, complete with their record of the history of employments and misconducts, to be made available to potential employers and the public on the Internet.¹⁷

In most cases, however, strategies differ among individuals how best to exercise caution and control and minimize risk.

Mr Sun, a construction engineer who had employed no less than ten live-in domestic workers since his son was born, professed to be quite experienced in selecting reliable maids.

We usually look for those first timers. It does mean that we need to train them a bit but as long as they are quick to learn, they should be OK. Ideally it is a woman from outside Beijing but who has no relatives or connection with people in Beijing. We usually go for women who have simple social relations. This is because you have no control over what kind of friends she has. If they collaborate to steal from your place, and if you happen to be home, there is danger of them wanting to kill you since you know them and they don't want to be caught. Or they may make elaborate plans to steal or kidnap your child.¹⁸

Mr Sun did not question the source of, but merely accepts the authority of, the discourse of risk. What is important to note is that while such perception of danger and fear for the worst may or may not be substantiatable, the severity and relentlessness of measures of control and discipline imposed on the material bodies is real. Domestic workers are discouraged or even prohibited from socialisation outside the home she works for. Many live-in domestic workers told me that they did not feel free to spend too much time talking with people outside the house, or using employers' telephone to call someone, or inviting their own friends or relatives to visit. In some cases, such understanding is formalized in the contract signed by the employers and domestic workers; in other cases, it is a case of employers stating or hinting their preferences. The rationale for such practice is simple: employers value their privacy and do not want their private life to become the conversational fodder of maids and neighbors. More importantly, allowing maids to socialize freely with the outside world may not only bring unwanted 'criminal elements' home; it may also risk the maid becoming less docile and more demanding, as she may learn from others about her rights and entitlements. And indeed, as I observed many times, domestic workers do, when they can, talk to each other, compare their employers, workload, wages, and working conditions, as well as exchange ideas as how to effectively bargain and negotiate with employers for better conditions and/or more pay.

Many employers expressed the view that when it came to the supervision of domestic workers, 'you could never be too careful'. Sichuan migrant worker Xiao Wang had cleaned houses for people for a few years. She told me that after a couple of years, some people still wanted to be present when she was cleaning the apartment. Indeed, when a resident in the building first put me in touch with Xiao Wang when I was looking for a cleaner when I first move to my apartment in 2005, she said that Xiao Wang should be safe enough because she also had a job cleaning the whole building and she had been around for a couple of years. On the other hand, she insisted that I under no circumstances should leave her alone in the apartment. 'You need to understand this and act like a local on this matter, or you may end up regretting it. You are in China, not overseas'.

The domestic worker: who is on her side?

Domestic work is often perceived to be safer than other lines of employment for rural women, since it is usually in the homes of urban residents—that is, in domestic rather than public places (Jacka 2006; Gaetano 2004). However, domestic workers can be particularly vulnerable specifically because they work in the informal sector, which is marked not only by the absence of a legislative framework that ensures her labor and civic rights, but also, and equally importantly, by a dearth of industry spokespeople and policy advocates who are in possession of genuine power to bring about substantive change, or who would see the pursuit of this as in their interests. As a result, domestic workers are particularly subject to exploitation, discrimination and sexual harassment (Jacka 2006). While workers' unions in China are generally non-existent or weak, informal sectors such as domestic work are completely un-unionized. To be sure, a number of organizations claim to represent domestic workers and work to protect their interests, but none is in a position to bring about substantive change in the legal arena, let alone abolish the *hukou* regime that all migrant workers are subject to.

The Migrant Women's Club (*dagongmei zhijia*) is an NGO (non-government organization), is one of the most established advocacy group of this kind. Staffed by a small handful of employed workers and volunteers, and housed in a temporary flat in the old downtown area of Beijing, the club receives financial support from UNESCO and Oxfam Hong Kong. Advocacy groups such as the Migrant Women's Club have played a prominent role in giving voice to domestic workers, representing those in need of legal aid, and offering them both financial and psychological support.

Han Huimin, who is involved in the day-to-day running of the club, says that the role of NGOs such as the Migrant Women's Club is important yet limited. 'Since there is no adequate legislative infrastructure which protects the rights of domestic workers, they are vulnerable to violations of their rights as both workers and human beings. We are here to assist them and give them support in whatever shape and form we can, but there are severe limitations on what we can do for them in the absence of clear legal backing. If there existed adequate legal and industrial relations legislation protecting the rights of these workers, then our jobs would be much easier, or we might not even need to exist'¹⁹. The Club also has difficulties accessing migrant women in need of help, as usually neither employers nor domestic service agencies are prepared to admit the existence of problems. The Club holds regular get-togethers for rural migrants who work as domestic workers in Beijing, but the turn-out is usually low and unpredictable, because it is difficult for live-in maids to take time off work or get permission from employers to leave home.

Fulian (Women's Federation), an arm of the government which is dedicated to women's work (*funu gongzuo*), also has had a very complex role to play. The Women's Federation at various levels has been crucial in the recruitment and training of rural women for domestic service, especially Fulian at grassroots, county and township levels in the sending zones. In fact, the nationwide pattern and the sheer numbers of rural women coming to the city to work as domestic workers in the market economy would have been inconceivable without the Women's Federation—initially as the 'midwife', and then as the 'maiden parent' throughout the process. However, most rural women's relationships to Fulian are tangential, and few rely solely on the mechanisms set up by Fulian and its subsidiaries in order to come to the city, find employment, and seek help in times of need and distress, nevertheless, various Fulian publications promote the idea of Fulian as the guardian of rural women, providing not only practical support but also moral and psychological guidance. Rural women are encouraged to regard Fulian as their 'maiden home' (*niang jia*). However, the frequent use of the metaphor 'maiden home' is very telling, both of Fulian's desire to position itself as the emotional anchorage for domestic workers, and of its limited capacity to 'look after' the 'married daughter' once she 'leaves home'. Furthermore, the advice from the maiden home can sometimes be too 'parental'. For instance, rural women are usually advised that they suffer from a *suzhi* deficiency, and that they should therefore work hard to become 'strong' (*zi qiang*), independent (*zi li*), and confident (*zi xing*).

Similarly, the Ministry of Labor and Social Security has set in place a standardized accreditation system according to which the quality of domestic work can be assessed, and has established guidelines and quality control mechanisms for the training of domestic workers. The All China Professional Association of Domestic Service, established several years ago, also sees its main brief as producing recommendations and guidelines for the industry.²⁰ While these top-down measures have to some extent increased the respectability of domestic work in theory, they have done little to improve the quality of life and daily working conditions of domestic workers in practice.

Subversion and elision: tactics of the weak

During my times living in two *xiaoqu* in Beijing in 2004 and 2006, while I did occasionally come across live-in maids who had worked for the same employer for more than one year, most of them were either new to the family and still adjusting, or already thinking of leaving after a couple of months. In many cases, most domestic workers resort to quitting, or threatening to quit, rather than negotiation, to resolve disagreements or conflicts. Similarly, when they announce their intention to quit, few actually tell the truth as to why they are leaving, instead, they often cite non-offensive excuses such as ‘we are building a new house in the countryside so I need to go home’, or ‘my mother-in-law is getting sick so I need to attend to her’. Very often, while listening to domestic workers’ blow-by-blow accounts of their grievances about their employers, I asked if it would be a good idea to communicate their thoughts to the employers. Ding Ayi, for instance, complained that she couldn’t sleep well, as she had to sleep in the hot, stuffy and windowless maid’s chamber in summer with her door closed. Jing Ayi complained that her employers often brought guests home for meals but never thought of letting her know in advance, thus forcing her to scramble for food for extra people. It was my – naïve – belief that unhappiness and dissatisfaction of both parties may be reduced if two sides could work to communicate frankly and clear possible misunderstandings. For instance, Ding Ayi could ask if she could sleep in the spare room which is vacant in summer instead of the window cubicle, and if Jing Ayi could ask her employers to make a point of giving her as much notice as possible about dinner guests. Time and again, live-in maids shook their head at my suggestion, replying, ‘You don’t understand. You don’t do that. There is only one option for people like us: you put up with it, or, if you can’t, or

leave'. This suggestion of mine, upon reflection, is blind to the structurally unequal power relations underlying domestic workers and employers. It is not that domestic workers are bereft of capacity or negotiation skills for conflict resolution; it is that most domestic workers believe that the structurally unequal relationship precludes favorable outcomes. 'Of course, every one wants to find a good employer and stay with that family. Like employers, we don't like changing jobs frequently, but what can you do if you find yourself in a unhappy situation? You can only go and hope that the next family would be better employers'.

Feng Xiaoshuang, a sociologist who has conducted extensive fieldwork on the maid- believes that quitting, for instance, has become an effective strategy often practised by domestic workers. Her findings suggest that during the trial stage, domestic workers are usually eager to secure her job and hence have little room for maneuvers. However, once she passes the trial period and proves herself indispensable to the employers, she has a lot more bargaining power. Many domestic workers threaten to quit in order to secure better pay, better working conditions, or simply 'better employers'. 'Domestic workers have little to lose and everything to gain from quitting', Feng points out, since 'there are always more vacancies waiting to be filled so they can always find another job'. In addition, as experience and competence is highly valued in the job, her experience of having worked in more than three families has become her 'capital', with which she can pick and choose, bargain and negotiate effectively with prospective employers'. By contrast, employers have everything to lose and little to gain by losing a good employee. To start with, they have invested time and energy in training, and if they lose their current employee, they still have to replace her with another – possibly less competent and more demanding – one. Consequently, while the domestic worker 'hops' (*tiao* – meaning quit current job and find a better job) to a better position, the employer finds that yet again, they have to lower the standard in order to 'make do'. 'Frequent job hopping', Feng argues, is therefore the weapon – and effective, too – of the 'weak'(30).

My conversations with many domestic workers support Feng's point, however, I am careful to stress that such weapon is usually deployed reluctantly, and frequent deployment of such weapon is often evidence of the prevalent sense of unhappiness and frustration on the part of domestic workers rather than their ability to effectively bring about genuine improvement of their working conditions. Xiao Li, a domestic worker who had just quit her job and was waiting for the next one, had this to say,

Each time you quit your new job and look for a new employer, you lose income while waiting. People like us can't afford to wait too long in the city without a job. Agencies don't like us to quit jobs as that makes more work for them, so they punish you by making you wait, knowing that you will get desperate by day while waiting. And the next employer may be different but not necessarily better!²¹

Indeed, as I observed, it is not uncommon for both employers and domestic workers to terminate their relationship over a dispute or misunderstanding, but only to resume it sometime later. When Ding Ayi, mentioned earlier, received a phone call about her daughter's illness back in Hubei, she gave notice and packed up. In spite of her employer's willingness to keep her on upon her return, she told me that the trip would give her a good excuse to leave and 'there is no way I want to come back to work for them again.' Two months later, towards the end of my stay²², I was surprised to see her back to the old employer again.

Although commentaries about employers among domestic workers themselves are regarded unfavorably by employers as gossip, to be avoided at any cost, Feng believes that gossip among domestic workers provides a rare discursive forum for a socially disadvantaged group, 'another weapon of the weak' (2004: 37), much useful for forging solidarity and reclaiming their dignity and sense of self-worth. 'To make comments about one's employers, who have the double privilege of being a city resident and her employer is to exercise her right to speak', argues Feng. Since domestic workers have few rights to speak either about things in general or about their employers, 'gossiping about their employers therefore becomes their 'patented' (*zhuan li*) activity. Many of the domestic workers I talked to certainly testify to this. Xiao Wang the cleaner in our building would from time to time describe to me how impossibly dirty some of the apartments she had to clean. For urban residents who take pride in being clean and often associate rural migrants with dirt and lack of hygiene, this comment seems to me to be particularly pointed. For another instance, Xiao Gu, a young live-in nanny from Shandong whom we have met earlier in the paper, worked for a household in which the man works full-time and his wife chose to stay at home as the full-time housewife (*chuan zhi tai tai*). 'She does nothing but watch television or sleep all day. Of course, it's her choice not to work, but as a woman, I believe that it's not a good idea to depend on your husband financially. I need to work to feel independent.' Again, Xiao Gu's remark is a powerful

reminder that although privileged city people have the economic resources to employ the cheap labor of rural migrants, they by no means can expect to have unconditional respect from or feel morally superior to the people who serve them.

Some domestic workers also resort to gossiping as a way of communicating their needs and desires to employers, thus improving their work conditions, although it takes an 'enlightened' employer for this strategy to work. Dr Wang, a social science researcher and also a manager of an upscale childcare centre in Beijing, had this to say about her maid:

My maid is from Anhui and has lived in Beijing for quite a few years. She is really well networked, and seems to know every baomu in our neighborhood. She is always trying to help someone out, or putting someone in touch with someone else. I sometimes joke to her saying that she is the de facto director of the neighborhood committee! One baomu in our neighborhood is not getting two days' leave per month from her employers, nor is she getting extra pay for these two days' work, so our baomu complains to me couple of times, knowing that since I was friendly with that employer, I might help communicate this grievance. And I did, and pressured by 'public opinion', that baomu now gets what she is entitled to: two days leave per month.²³

Some domestic workers also resort to 'civil disobedience' in dealing with demanding or unreasonable employers. In the playground when I took my daughter to play, I often talked to Xiao Tang, a young mother who left her son back at home in Sichuan in order to work in Beijing. She complained to me that the boy's grandmother kept a very close eye on her and always found fault with the way she cared for the boy. 'She is very fussy and clean', she said of the grandma,

and she always gives me a hard time when the boy has soiled clothes when we return from playing outside. She does not approve of the boy picking anything from the ground for fear he will catch something. She treats the boy as if he is a delicate flower in a green house. I don't agree with her idea of bringing up a child. So whenever I take the child out when she is around, I will be careful and do as she likes, but when I go out alone with the boy, I let him play whatever he likes. Children should be given more freedom so that they grow up being independent and strong.

Juxtaposing the techniques of discipline deployed by employers with the methods of resistance and subversion practiced by their employees on everyday basis point to the difference between what de Certeau refers to as the 'strategies' and 'tactics'. Strategies, according to de Certeau, require rules of governance, regulatory bodies and institutional spaces, and as such, lie behind political and economic rationality. Tactics, on the other hand, are calculated actions which have no 'proper' institutional spaces, so are often forced to take place in the territory of the other. They are opportunistic, always on the watch, and involve combining disparate elements to gain a momentary advantage. 'In short, the tactic is the art of the weak.' (de Certeau, 1984) According to de Certeau, a strategy is the movement of a relatively stable ideological apparatus, including a *place* that can be delimited as its own and serve as the base from which relations with an *exteriority* composed of targets or threats. Tactic, on the other hand, is a method of responding to a particular ideological space or place that requires appropriating the tools and materials at hand so as to refuse their proper function in order to make them personally useful. While strategies rely on the triumph of space over time, tactics reverse it. They work by taking advantage of opportunities and respond immediately. They require mobility, speed, and smaller goals. de Certeau likens tactics to poaching, and claims their emblematic qualities are guile and trickery.

To be sure, the victories of domestic workers – a modest wage rise, the permission to get out regularly – are typically small, partial, and some may say negligible. And her action, such as watching TV when employers are out, learning to use modern household appliances against employers' wishes, or declining to wear their old-fashioned 'hand-me-down' clothes, are indeed minuscule and insignificant. In fact, some may argue that apart from the threat to quit and gossiping, domestic workers have minuscule resources to bring about qualitative change to their life and working conditions. Here I suggest that the stories of many domestic workers' negotiation with their employers suggest that tactics are deployed in their everyday life, and modest as they may appear, they provide a sense of pride and sustain their struggle for dignity and respect in an otherwise mostly inhospitable city. While they are looking for opportunities to improve their situation in the space of the 'other', employers' home, the residential area they work in, and the city they come to survive in, they are also innovatively creating narrative spaces in the margin to 'talk back' to hegemonic voices.

A hegemonic discourse constructs the typical maid as unethical – pocketing the change after shopping for employers, unruly – gossiping with others about one’s employers or making phone calls on employers’ phone without permission, unprofessional – watching TV or slacking off instead of doing housework while employers are away, or unreasonable – declining to work for households that are not equipped with microwaves or washing machines or have elderly patients. Might it now be possible that these ‘misdemeanors’ are simply some of the tactical responses to the regime of the workplace as well as the strategies of domestication and panoptical control imposed on the weak? Indeed, might it not be possible that the domestic workers’ alleged tendency to be ‘rootless’, ‘on the move’, ‘do a runner’, ‘leaving without a trace’ are simply some of the ‘guerrilla tactics’, famously deployed by those who do not spatial advantages such as ‘strongholds’ and ‘headquarters’?

Conclusion

By focusing on a number of ways in which control is exercised and resisted in the everyday workplace of the domestic worker, I have not in this paper considered at length other structural forces which pose equal constraints on domestic workers, or what Pun Ngai refers as the ‘triple oppressions’. These include the state-imposed hukou system which creates a structural gap between the rural and urban, and between the urban residents and rural migrants, the logic of the capitalist economy which relies on but derogates the migrant labour force, and of course, the weight of patriarchal expectations which can never be easily shed by migrant women. These are forces which confront migrant women across the spectrum, whether they are domestic workers scrubbing floors in an urban apartment, or factory workers sitting on the assembly line.

It should also be clear now that although there is a world of difference in the ways in the migrant body is disciplined and regulated, both domestic workers and factory workers on the factory shop floor are equally subject to what Foucault refers to as the ‘techniques of discipline.’ The aim of disciplinary technology, as Foucault points out, is to produce a docile body that may be subjected, used, transformed and improved, and above all, rendered more serviceable to the demand of the market. At the same time, these practices of control also spawn an array of tactics and methods adopted by exploited and oppressed domestic workers wishing to undermine, circumvent, or even subvert these policies, strategies and practices. Finally, while these tactical moves on the part of the domestic workers are evidence

of an emerging class identity, and as thus, certainly expressive of individual migrant women's agency as individuals and their political, if somewhat inchoate, consciousness as a whole, they at the same time further feed into and help strengthen the discursive position which holds that that migrant women, being what they are, must be subject to the panoptic gaze of the state, industry, mostly insufferably, their urban, middle-class employers.

This, I suggest, may be where the difference lies between factory workers and domestic workers in so far as their capacity and willingness for collective class-based action is concerned. Domestic workers live and work in individuated, even isolated work and living circumstances, and some with very limited personal freedom, and, in addition, they must negotiate a much more delicate and fraught power relation with their employers, hence they are less capable of participating in collective actions. Their subversion therefore must be more unorganised and 'undeclared', and so are their 'transcripts' more personal and hidden. Their negotiation with employers represent 'particular resistance to specific ways' (Abu-Lughod, 1990), and as such, can neither be dismissed nor romanticised. This also may partly account for the lack of visibility of domestic workers in public spaces – as is the case with Pilipino domestic workers in Hong Kong (Law, 2001) and Indonesian domestic workers in Singapore (Yeoh and Huang, 1998) – and public discourses of transnational movements, politics and activism. Hidden behind the closed doors of the urban homes, and mostly confined to *xiaoqu*, the figure of domestic worker in urban China does not attract international human rights activists' attention like her counterparts in the Chinese sweatshops or assembly lines of global factories. Although she is constructed as a perennial source of fear and anxiety in urban Chinese media, her everyday drudgery seldom comes under the spotlight of international media as does the factory fires²⁴ or construction workers' hunger strikes²⁵. Behind the glamour of transnational capital and success story of China's emerging middle-class, the 'humble maid' lives in the shadow-land, held ransom by modernity's darkest secret. As her struggles and resistance are important for us to study, not just because, as Abu-Lughod puts it, these people deserve dignity and respect or because we want to prove that control of them is not hegemonic, but to let their practices teach us about the 'complex interweaving of historically changing structures of power' (1990: 53). And as far as I can see, our challenge lies in, again, as Abu-Lughod puts it, giving 'these women credit for resisting in a variety of ways the power of those who control so much of their lives', without 'misattributing to their forms of consciousness or politics that are not part of their experience', or

'devaluing their practices as prepolitical, primitive, or even misguided (1990: 47).

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¹ See <http://www.cctv.com/news/financial/20020612/274.html> (accessed February 2004)

² 'Beijing baomu shichang duandang' (Beijing Baomu market supply too low'

<http://www.cctv.com/news.society/20031126/100610.shtml> (accessed February 2004)

³ Personal communication with Dr Li Tianguo, senior research fellow of the Institute for Labor, Ministry of Labour and Social Security, China, February 2004.

⁴ One US dollar is usually converted to around eight Chinese yuan (RMB).

⁵ These findings are based on my interviews with domestic workers, employers, and domestic service agencies. Statistics reported in the media support these findings. Of course, these data are subject to change, given that paid domestic work, after all, is a market commodity whose price fluctuates from time to time.

⁶ This estimation comes from unnamed experts, quoted in Yang Jie, 'Jiazheng ye cheng wei zhong guo xi na lao dong li de zhong yao qu dao' (Domestic work is becoming an important means of absorbing labour), accessed <http://www.cctv.com/news/financial/20020612/274.html> in May 2005.

⁷ This figure is provided by Li Dajing, the deputy director of Beijing Domestic Service Association. See Gao Youxin and Wu Wenjie, 'Jia zheng fu wu zhi yu hua zhi lu hai you duo yuan' (How far is the road to the professionalisation of domestic work?), *Jingji Ribao* (Economic Daily), May, 2, 2005, p. A11.

⁸ This figure also comes from Li Dajing. See note 9.

⁹ It is hard to ignore the ubiquitously displayed slogans in Chinese cities, often in the forms of billboard signs, street posters, and community notice board, calling for people to take part in the building of 'civilised community' (*wen min xiao qu*) and 'harmonious society' (*he xie she hui*).

¹⁰ 'Xiao Gu' literally means 'young Gu'. It is customary in China to refer to people younger than the self by sufficing the surname with word 'xiao'. I talked to Xiao Gu numerous times during the months of May to July 2005, mostly during the time she took the baby out for a walk.

¹¹ I had numerous conversations with Guo in the summer of 2005, mainly in the playground area, where she took the baby for her daily outing.

¹² Interview on July 21, 2006 in Beijing.

¹³ Interview with Zhang took place on July 2, 2005.

¹⁴ I have seen the 'maid's room' in a number of apartments Beijing. These rooms are usually no more than 4 square meters, and often have no windows.

¹⁵ 'Ding Ayi' means 'Aunty Ding'. In this paper, I identify my interviewees and domestic workers whom I talked to in same the way I called them. This allows me to ensure their anonymity, and at the same time reflect the specific relationship I had established with individuals. Ding Ayi complained about her sleeping arrangement almost each time I talked to her. I had numerous conversations with Ding Ayi in the three months of 2006 in our xiaoqu.

¹⁶ The use of surveillance camera was mentioned in public discussions about domestic work. See, for instance, a television program entitled 'Why is it so hard to find a good baomu', Tian Ya Gong Ci Shi, CCTV 4, December 9, 2006.

¹⁷ See, for instance, 'Jianli baomu xincheng zhidu' (Establishing baomu credibility databank), Qianjiang *Evening Post* (Qianjiang Wan Bao), March 6, 2003, from <http://www.chaic.com/news/aic/2003-03-06/1046930208.html>, accessed in April 2004.

¹⁸ Interview with Mr Sun on July 5, 2005, Beijing.

¹⁹ See note 18.

²⁰ Interview with Li Dajing, head of the Association, August 2006, Beijing.

²¹ I met Xiao Li at Migrant Women's Club in Beijing on the 15th of September 2006, where she came to seek advice from the Club about how to claim wages owed to her by her previous employer.

²² My four-month stay in a xiaoqu in Haidian, Beijing in the summer of 2006.

²³ Conversation with Dr Wang on September 2, 2006.

²⁴ I am thinking here of factory fires which killed many migrant workers in south China. See Pun (2005).

²⁵ For the last decade or so, migrant workers in Chinese cities, particularly construction workers, sporadically make news headlines – sometimes international headlines - for threatening to jump off tall buildings or go on hunger strike in protests over employers' failure to pay wages that is due.