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VIEWPOINT

Something more to Xiaoying's pain

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This short article concentrates on various representations of Xiaoying, a seriously injured survivor of the Zhili Toy Factory fire of 1993 in Shenzhen, China. Visual materials including a music video by the Hong Kong band, Noise Cooperative, TV documentaries by Radio Television Hong Kong and Phoenix TV, and written literary reports, such as 'Bloody Tracing: a Recent Report on the Victims of the Zhili Toy Factory Fire in Shenzhen on November 19, 1993' by academic researchers are analyzed. This is my close reading of a single exploited rural woman's story of pain and my understanding of her constraints: global capitalism, destructive modernization, and gender hierarchy. Xiaoying's painful experiences also prompt questions about the future of rural society.

Keywords: gender; subaltern; development; peasant worker; rural China

In her book *The body in pain: The making and unmaking of the world*, Scarry (1985) remarks, 'Physical pain has no voice, but when it at last finds a voice, it begins to tell a story ...'. The telling of pain is a question of politics, as it requires us to listen to the story of *the other's* suffering. If we echo the feminist slogan that the 'personal is political', or Cynthia Enloe's phrase 'the personal is international' (Enloe 1989), then not one single issue of a woman's painful experience should be dismissed. Jenny Sharpe reminds us that 'the story that cannot be told is the one of a subaltern woman who knows and speaks her exploitation. The story that must be told is the text of her exploitation' (Sharpe 1993, 18–19). Sharpe invokes the ethical question of how an intellectual relates to a subaltern woman, and of how she narrates the story of exploitation. This is my reading of Xiaoying's story of pain and it represents her text as *a rural subaltern woman*.

On 19 November 1993, a horrendous fire broke out at the Zhili Toy Factory, Shenzhen, China, which had been subcontracted to make toys for the Italian multinational, Artsana S. P.A./Chicco. Eighty-seven workers, mainly rural women from Sichuan and Henan provinces, were killed and a further 47 were badly burned. Since the dormitory windows were covered with iron bars and the fire escape doors and exits were locked, the charred remains of the victims were found piled up at the exits. After the tragedy, the victims received little compensation from the government, while the factory owners were sentenced to only nine months in prison.

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Later that year, a coalition of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) in Hong Kong, such as the Hong Kong Christian Industrial Committee (CIC) and the Asia Monitor Resource Centre (AMRC), got together to raise public consciousness and concern about the issue of workers' health and safety. The coalition started an international campaign called, 'Our Children Don't Need Blood-Stained Toys', as well as issuing a Charter on the Safe Production of Toys. Under this pressure from labor and human rights groups, Chicco finally agreed to pay a compensation of just 300 million lire (around USD 220,733.5 in today's terms). This compensation fund was temporarily held by Caritas Hong Kong while a full list of victims was being compiled. As none of the official channels were able to provide a complete list of names, coalition activists went out in search of the identity of the victims in the relevant rural areas and collected their names and addresses. However, in spite of this hard work, the activists found that resources from the fund were diverted to other projects, including one dealing with artificial limbs and a school building. None of the victims received any money for desperately needed medical treatment until two years later. As for the factory owners, they are now running another toy factory in Dongguan, a manufacturing base in southern China. The factory continues to make products for the Chicco label.¹ The Zhili Inferno was one of the most serious industrial accidents in China since the introduction of the economic reform policy (1978), and this aroused public attention and controversy. Hong Kong NGOs, including CIC, AMRC, Asia Migrant Center (AMC), and Oxfam Hong Kong, launched campaigns to help the victims fight for social justice. Within the publications by these NGOs, Xiaoying is always portrayed as the typical example of an exploited migrant worker in Mainland China because of her serious injuries. Her deformed body is the focus of the stories, for example, *Hands and feet – oral histories of injured workers in Shenzhen* (CIC 2001), *Fluctuating lives – the Asian people in globalization* (Oxfam 2002), and Tai's (2003) *Mirror and mirage: A photographer's look at trade and responsibility* which raises issues about the labor movement and consumer campaign.

Xiaoying's story of pain is also evident in the following visual and written materials. These include a music video, called *Goodbye, Fireflies*, produced by Noise Cooperative, a Hong Kong band of four activist members who made this video for social campaigning, demonstration, and fund raising purposes. There are also two visual texts produced for the 10th anniversary of the Zhili Fire. The first of three is *The story of Xiaoying – remembering the Zhili toy factory fire 10 years ago*, an episode of Hong Kong Connections, a well-known documentary TV program by Radio and Television of Hong Kong. The Chinese version of the program was screened on 12 October 2003 and the English version on 18 November 2003 on prime time. The second visual text is called *Xiaoying, the survivor (parts 1 and 2)*, from the four-part series *Funeral of flowers* made for *Warmth and cruelty of life*, a long-running show by Phoenix TV, whose target audiences are overseas Chinese. The whole program of *Funeral of flowers* was screened in November 2003. The written text is a literary report called 'Bloody tracing: A recent report on the victims of the Zhili toy factory fire in Shenzhen on November 19, 1993', written by Tan Shen, a sociologist of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), working together with six postgraduates from universities in Beijing. This literary report, published in 2001 over two issues of *Frontier*, a magazine of popular literature and literary criticism, is used by *Frontier* for social research, highlighting the entire list of victims for the purpose of claiming compensation.

All the above socio-cultural products represent Xiaoying as a victim of an industrial accident, by focusing on her crippled legs and chronic pain that reproduce a space for moral and public judgment. Questions such as: 'could we bear another's sufferings?',

or ‘could we allow another girl such as Xiaoying to appear again?’, or ‘who should bear this responsibility?’ are distributed to target audiences or readers.

Xiaoying’s visible and prolonged pains are represented as a testimony of the exploitative global economy. Her complex agency is a product of different subject positions in the process of negotiating structures of violence: victim, witness, and agent. She is portrayed as a victim of capitalism, a witness, or accuser of a horrendous industrial tragedy and then an agent of social movement. The above-mentioned texts of Xiaoying’s pain certainly raised the question of politics and ethics.

On the one hand, the above texts engage the Zhili issue by focusing on her horrific injury, as a means of introducing the public to an exploited subaltern woman. The victimhood has become an overwhelming element in their narration about Xiaoying’s exploitation. Yet, we need to have a deeper understanding of such questions: what made Xiaoying endure such working conditions and suffering without a word of complaint until the outbreak of the fire? And how does Xiaoying now make sense of her decision to support her brother’s education?

Being a responsible and dutiful daughter and sister, Xiaoying preserves, more or less, women’s subalternity. Here, subalternity means accepting oppression as a norm, and without having the will to envisage the possibility of change. As the song reminds us, Xiaoying’s reason for supporting her brother’s education is advanced with no thought for herself. It is the only ‘natural’ thing to do:

One day she heard her brother crying
For no money to go to school
She then carries a bag with some clothes
‘Dad, mum, and brother, goodbye!’
The fifteen-year-old baby faced rural working girl

This is echoed by the first part of the Phoenix TV documentary *Xiaoying, the survivor*, which fully covers how Xiaoying suffers from pain. In this section, there is a scene which highlights how women have internalized constraints working against social transformation. Set in a courtyard in Xiaoying’s village located in Sichuan Province, this scene depicts an interview, composed of alternate shots, between Chen Xiaonan, the hostess from the city, and Xiaoying, a rural victim. Chen has slightly curly short hair, wears make-up, and is dressed in blue jeans, blue jacket, and sports shoes. Meanwhile, Xiaoying wears dark purple clothes and a pair of black shoes. Talking about the reason for going to the city, Xiaoying discusses issues of literacy among rural women, gender hierarchy, and women’s ‘natural’ responsibilities as she perceives them.

The hostess presupposes that rural women are oppressed by rural men, thereby making rural women objects of male exploitation. However, Xiaoying’s answer provides us with a more complicated picture that illustrates not only that she is the object of male exploitation, but that she is also its subject: ‘I don’t blame either my brother or my parents. I think I need to live up to my responsibilities and duties. This is what *a girl* should do.’ Xiaoying considered the duty of supporting her brother to enter the educated class as a natural duty.

In Xiaoying’s case, her devotion and commitment to her family is of course a testimony of her unyielding spirit and productive power to cope with hardship, yet it is at the same time inscribed by systems of male exploitation making it, perhaps a hindrance to social change. Similarly, Tan Shen interprets Xiaoying’s unquestioned passion, as ‘perhaps, women migrant workers have never thought that this is a sacrifice; maybe it gives a sense of achievement through sharing parents’ burdens, which is the same as having a family honor when their brothers can go to university.’ Tan Shen continues: ‘behind the family policy and women migrant workers’ willingness, what we have found

is the trace of conventional gender division of labor' (Tan 1999). Tan problematizes women's self-sacrifice by implying that women act as the subjects of exploitation through a sense of satisfaction. Using Douloti, a fictional prostitute who is devoted to her family without any complaint, Gayatri Spivak argues that it is the women's complicity with patriarchy that separates women from organic intellectuality:

[O]ne of the bases in women's subalternity ... is internalized constraints seen as responsibility, and therefore the very basis of gender-ethics. Here woman's separation from organic intellectuality is a complicity with gendering that cannot but be perceived by many as sweetness, virtue, innocence, simplicity (Spivak 1995, xxvii).

Xiaoying's acceptance of a gender hierarchy as a natural duty is embodied through sacrifice, but it also has a sense of dignity and achievement, because it is she who takes up the responsibility of supporting her family. Women themselves accept this kind of beautiful sacrifice, willingly or unwillingly. This acknowledgement of women's internalized gendering should be considered if any social movement is to be able to successfully move on, in terms of questioning the 'taken-for-granted'. Paradoxically, a subaltern woman is normally deemed a lesser being, yet her sacrifice constitutes the lifetime for her family. In other words, her strength to change the lot of her family is inscribed within coercive institutions serving for their production and reproduction. Hence, the invocation of the strength of a subaltern woman is not meant for affecting transformation to the status but rather to maintain it. However, it is also the persevering strength to sacrifice herself for her family that brings the subaltern woman to confront the lies underlying the 'promise' that her sacrifice is supposed to realize, opening up a space for the questioning of the coercive institutions of the desire to sacrifice herself as a natural desire, as a destiny. In Xiaoying's case, the fire that threatened her life also disrupted the self that subscribed to institutions of coercion.

Xiaoying's story allows us to understand a single exploited rural woman's painful experiences and her constraints: global capitalism, a national policy of destructive modernization, and gender hierarchy. There is inscribed on and in her body a way of thinking and seeing that accepts the truth of her existence as being destined to sacrifice for her family. Hence, it is not simply a question of fighting for more adequate protection laws. The issue of a rural woman's self-renunciation, her perceived notions of responsibilities and duties, along with her conception of forgiveness, speaks of her strength to be reckoned with, rather than reducing her to a 'subject (object)' that invites sympathy or moral judgment. There is something more to Xiaoying's pain.

Apart from internalized constraints of gender, we need to acknowledge one other issue: the rural community. In the dominant discourse of development, it is hardly possible to imagine 'the rural' as an alternative to exported-oriented industrialization and an individualizing economy. Here, the figure of 'the rural' is used as a *temporal* name to cover experiences of marginalization and resistance to the global and patriarchal modernization. Using the image of the rural is neither a valorization of the country over the city nor an acceptance of a patriarchal village society. It is also certainly not a replica of the People's Commune that was imposed under the statist policy of industrialization, or the top-down model of forced collectivization. Rather, it is the practice of challenging the absolute urban and industrial priority, of improving the hierarchical rural-urban relation, of distancing oneself from the dominant values of privatization and competition, and of imagining a communal society that seriously takes both the subjugated groups into consideration.

Rural communities in China are very heterogeneous, but the economic restructuring and dominant market mechanisms from the late 1970s have hit them hard. In today's China, the experiences, meanings, and values generated from the coercive collectivization

in Mao Zedong's era may have become 'remnants' that cannot be substantially verified in terms of the dominant market-oriented culture, but they are nonetheless being lived and practiced in a *new* form at present.

There are mixed cultures: the dominant urban consumer culture, the residual 'compulsory/voluntary' collective practices, and the emergent working class culture and also the rural reconstruction movement. The dualist mode of individualist capitalism/authoritarian communism cannot grasp these mixed and dynamic cultures. What will happen if we go beyond the resistant (gendered) bodies in the metropolis? Would there be new possibilities if the flow of migrants were reversed, which is from the city to the country?

Xiaoying was selected as one of Chinese representatives of 1000 women for the Nobel Peace Prize 2005, which is an international movement recognizing women's contribution to peace work at the ground level.² *1000 PeaceWomen across the globe* (2005) introduces 1000 peacewomen's stories, each containing a short written text as well as a black-and-white photo. Apart from her painful story, the book highlights that Xiaoying has set up a self-empowerment service center for the disabled in Zhongzhou Town of Zhong County of Chongqing Municipality.³ The center focuses on 'migrant workers, victims of industrial hazards, and the handicapped'. And a group photo shows us that Xiaoying stands confidently and determinedly at the center, together with the elderly and young volunteers wearing white T-shirts. It also narrates: she runs this service station on a voluntary basis and is happy that she has a chance to repay society. The victims of industrial hazards and the handicapped are largely coming from the rural areas. They can stay only in the rural society since they have no more labor power for sale in the city.

Xiaoying's story not only reminds us not to forget the 'losers in the capitalist competition', or the remaining majority on the land, but also testifies to the fact that the domination of capitalism in the production of modern urban subjects in the service of the production of value for profits and as consumers cannot be complete for it is transversed by contradictions and multiplicities, and the production of modern subjects is always at the same time a production of the marginalized and the minority. The rural is such a figure of the marginal and the minority, where the workings and failings of the forces of capitalism on the bodies of the subaltern more readily reveal their extreme forms, inviting not only outcomes and suspicions of its so-called success, but also constitute a site of contradiction for revealing the trajectory of destruction of the movements of capitalism by not only lending itself to radical and materialist criticism, but also constituting a site for the production of practices and thinking that contain signs of a different mode of existence other than that of capitalism.

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Notes

1. For details, see 'Zhili fire – wounds are never healed', in *Change*, December 1999, Hong Kong Christian Industrial Committee; 'The 6th Anniversary of Zhili Factory Fire', in *Dossier* no. 6, 1999, Asia Monitor Resource Center; 'Missing money, missing lives: Victims of the Zhili fire incident', in *China Rights Forum*, Winter 2000.
2. For details, see www.1000peacewomen.org.
3. For details, see <http://www.cqzq.org/>.

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ABSTRACT TRANSLATIONS

Hay algo más en el dolor de Xiaoying

Este breve artículo se centra en varias representaciones de Xiaoying, una sobreviviente del incendio de la fábrica de juguetes Zhili en Shenzhen, China, en 1993, quien quedó gravemente herida. Se analizan materiales visuales que incluyen un video musical de una banda de Hong Kong, la *Noise Cooperative*, documentales televisivos de Radio Televisión Hong Kong y Phoenix TV, e informes literarios escritos, tales como “Bloody Tracing: a Recent Report on the Victims of the Zhili Toy Factory Fire in Shenzhen on November 19, 1993” de investigadores académicos. Esta es mi lectura detallada de la historia de dolor de una sola mujer rural explotada, y mi forma de entender sus limitaciones: capitalismo global, modernización destructiva, y jerarquía de género. Las dolorosas experiencias de Xiaoying también despiertan preguntas sobre el futuro de la sociedad rural.

Palabras claves: género; subalterno; desarrollo; trabajadora campesina; China rural

小英的痛苦之外

本篇短文聚焦关于小英的各种再现——小英是 1993 年中国深圳致丽玩具工厂大火中身受重伤的幸存者。我所分析的视觉材料包含香港乐团“噪音合作社” (Noise Cooperative) 的音乐录像带、香港电台与凤凰卫视所制作的电视纪录片, 以及文学书写报导, 例如由学术研究者所撰写之“泣血追踪——原深圳致丽玩具厂 11.19 大火受害打工妹调查纪实”。这是我细读此一受剥削农村女性的苦难故事, 以及我所理解的加诸其身的约束——全球资本主义, 破坏性现代化与性别阶层。小英的痛苦经验, 同时对农村社会的未来提出了质问。

关键词: 性别; 底层; 发展; 农民工; 中国农村