

Disposable Women and Other Myths of Global Capitalism

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Disposable Daughters and Factory Fathers

The object before us, to begin with, [is] material production.

Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*

That matter is always materialized has, I think, to be thought in relation to the productive and, indeed, materializing effects of material power.

Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"*

In this essay, I combine the tools of feminist discourse analysis with a Marxian critique of dialectical materialism to investigate how a group of corporate managers extends their firm's operations into southern China while, at the same time, furthering their own careers on the basis of their skills as modern "Chinese" managers. Fundamental to their endeavors is the myth of the disposable third world woman. The story establishes a standard for measuring the efficiency of their operations and the extent of their own skills as international managers at a time of corporate downsizing when executives are determining which of the overseas operations to sell. As part of their efforts to keep their jobs and facilities in operation, the Chinese managers deploy the myth of

the disposable third world woman to illustrate that they, in contrast to their U.S.-American colleagues based in Mexico, are more adept administrators due, in large part, to their ability to control the disposable cycling of their female labor force. In effect, they rely on the story and on its materialization in everyday practice to demonstrate their own skills and value to the company as they compete for their jobs and careers in a cutthroat global economy.

I conducted this study in the Chinese and Mexican facilities of a U.S.-based corporation I call “On the Water” (OTW). OTW manufactures motors, boats, and other water-sporting equipment and has factories in the United States, Mexico, Brazil, Hong Kong, and mainland China. One facility is a manufacturing operation located in Dongguan, China, on the Pearl River Delta in Guangdong Province. A second facility is located in Hong Kong. It is the administrative complex for the Dongguan factory as well as a manufacturing facility that has been drastically downsized with the transfer of operations into southern China. I refer to both the Dongguan and Hong Kong facilities as “Asia on the Water” (AOTW). Some supplemental material for this study derives from my more extensive research in the Mexican facilities of this firm, which I call “MOTW” for Mexico on the Water. It is situated in Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, in northern Mexico.

As I followed the company’s production circuit, first into Hong Kong and then into southern China, I relied upon a team of managers and engineers who referred to themselves as “Hong Kong Chinese” or “Chinese” to set themselves apart from the U.S. managers and executives. Three individuals—the general manager, the production manager, and the head engineer—provide the bulk of material for this chapter.¹ These three people all spoke English and presented the corporate environment to me. The general manager, Howard Li, was a second-generation Hong Kong Chinese citizen whose family had originated in southern China. By 1993, he had worked in OTW for fifteen years, where he had started as an engineer and then worked his way up the corporate ladder. He had received his Master’s degree in mechanical engineering in Canada and had plans to send his daughter to college in the United States. The production manager, Harry Chen, also was a second-generation Hong Kong Chinese citizen, and he had started his career at AOTW as a line supervisor in 1984. He had received a technical degree from a Hong Kong polytechnic. The head engineer, Stephen Chan, said his family had long lived in Hong Kong. He had started his career at AOTW in 1990 when he moved back from California with his family. He had also worked for corporations in Tokyo.

Each of these informants expressed a belief that because I was from the United States, I would be critical of the labor practices in southern China. Yet each also expected that I would see their facility as a reasonable and decent workplace where there was, as Howard Li said, “nothing to hide.” While their different jobs and backgrounds informed this study in various ways, these three informants agreed with each other and with their other colleagues whom I also interviewed that the female workers on the line were, for a variety of reasons, disposable. My research in AOTW focused on how and why these managers and engineers tried to convince me of this disposability. I examine the myth of female disposability here as directly linked both to specific AOTW requirements for labor flexibility and labor quality, as well as to the inevitable wear and tear that workers experience after long hours of repetitive work.

In the case of AOTW, as is the case with virtually every multinational firm in the electronics industry, managers hire women to work on the assembly line on the assumption that they are the best electronic assemblers because of their famous “dexterity,” “docility,” “patience,” “attentiveness,” and “cheapness” (Elson and Pearson 1989; Salzinger 2003). At the time of my research, the women workers at AOTW—who earned 11 cents per hour—represented one of the world’s best bargains. And a manager who dismisses one of these workers before her coveted qualities were fully exploited is inefficient and wasteful. AOTW, again like most electronic manufacturers, assumes a month-long start-up period for their workers and does not expect electronic assemblers to reach full speed until after three months on the job. However, employing a worker beyond her prime opens up the company to the risk of maintaining a labor force whose fingers have stiffened, whose eyes have blurred, and whose minds wander. Contemporary electronic assembly work around the world is typically organized into cycle times during which workers perform the same tasks within a delimited time frame. At AOTW, the cycle time for assembly work is twenty-six seconds, over which time workers perform numerous tasks on as many as five hundred units a day. People in this line of work commonly experience injuries from repetitive stress, such as carpal tunnel syndrome, tendonitis, shoulder and back pains, and eyestrain. Depression due to the lack of future opportunities and advanced training is also considered a prevalent factor in producing less productive labor forces. Moreover, those assembly line workers with more tenure and experience in the industry are more likely to organize grievance committees, subversive tactics, and work stoppages. Consequently, managers face the challenge of devising a strategy for keeping women electronic assembly

workers just long enough to extract the value from their dexterity, attentiveness, and docility before the processes of injury, illness, and anger overcome them.

The managers at AOTW confront this challenge by devising a strategy of corporate kinship that binds them to their female labor force via a discourse of Chinese daughters and factory fathers. Over the course of my research, these managers attempted to demonstrate to me how they represented a *new kind of Chinese manager* within the global corporate structure who, unlike their U.S. counterparts, both understands the rigors of the global market while also knowing how to navigate the murky world of a transitioning Chinese capitalism that is still couched in a strange context of Communism, Confucianism, and regional parochialism. To demonstrate their diverse capabilities, these managers claim that the female workers whom they prefer to employ for assembly work are like traditional “Chinese daughters” who, in need of strong patriarchal guidance, regard their managers as “factory fathers.” By referring to a common cultural Chinese heritage that connects them to their workers, the Chinese managers claim that their paternal duties justify draconian disciplinary measures for controlling their labor force as well as invasive procedures for monitoring female workers’ mobility and sexuality. While this discourse of factory daughters and patriarchal fathers is not unique to industrial history, what is remarkable about its use here is that this factory family converges around the value derived from the wasting of daughters. These are not families that receive something in exchange for their daughters through marriage or other kinship relationships. Instead, this family actually thrives on the disposing of its daughters. The disposability or eventual worthless status of the daughter is the source of this family’s tremendous wealth.²

My focus here is on the managers: on their verbal explanations of their beliefs, actions, and decisions, and on my observations of them at work. As becomes clear in the following sections, their descriptions of their identity assumed both a difference from me, on the basis of ethnicity, culture, and gender, as well as a sense of common understanding: we were all professionals; we were all “well educated”; we all had traveled internationally; we all spoke English, as either a first or a second language; and we all were familiar with factory systems. This assertion of cultural, gender, and ethnic difference, on the one hand, and sameness based on other qualities, on the other hand, constantly figured into the research and paralleled a similar dynamic that my informants described as pertaining to their relationship with their U.S.-American colleagues. Navigating this tension between difference and sameness was something that the

Chinese managers frequently mentioned as they explained their daily strategies for managing their facilities and their international work relationships.³ As such, the Chinese managers construct local identities around conceptions of kinship that recreate capitalist relations of production and the disposable labor force so crucial to its operation. And, yet, the story's productive effects do not end with the recreation of this labor force at the intersection of local work sites and global capitalist circuitry. As this case demonstrates, the Chinese managers' own value depends upon the clear materialization of the disposable third world woman since evidence of their worth pivots on their ability to both produce and manage her most valuable labor. And as I accompanied them throughout their days, I constantly focused on how and when the story of female disposability was told, how it developed as a believable description of "reality," and how corporate practices based on this tale appeared rational and justified.

Throughout this research, though, I was not given direct access to the women workers. As a result, my research does not explore the experiences of young women and girls who are described by the discourses I present. And so this analysis is not about workers' work experiences. Nor is my intent to claim that the workers are helpless against the managerial machinations for working them as hard and as long as possible. Several scholars and journalists have found that many Chinese women experience an independence and renovated sense of their own worth as a result of their employment beyond the family purview (Farley 1998; Lee 1998; Gilmartin et al. 1994). And there are many studies of global manufacturing operations that demonstrate how even though women endure humiliating and oppressive managerial policies, they nevertheless use creative and effective forms of subversion (Pun 2005; Ong 1987; Salzinger 2003).

The Capital of Female Disposability

This discourse of factory kinship provides a framework for controlling the rate at which workers come and go, or, as I elaborate further in chapter 4, how they "turn over" throughout the factory complex. In this chapter, I examine how the couching of turnover within this kinship discourse provides a localized idiom for generating a global supply of disposable labor. Toward this end, I break the concept down into two related dimensions, which I define as "corporate turnover" and as "labor turnover." "Corporate turnover" refers to the coming and going of workers into and out of particular jobs, and indicates the percentage of workers who have left particular jobs within a given period of time. The determination of "high" versus "low" turnover

depends upon a calculation of whether the turnover rate is inhibiting or fostering the production of capitalist value. According to my interviews in OTW, the optimal turnover rate in both the Mexican and Chinese facilities is an annual 7 percent, which guarantees a certain degree of flexibility within the labor supply.

“Labor turnover,” by contrast, measures the amount of time that each individual employee remains with the corporation. The optimal level of “labor turnover,” according to my interviews and to other research in multinational manufacturers, for assembly line workers is two years;⁴ the optimal rate is much higher for “skilled” employees.⁵ In other words, companies prefer to have, on average, a constant turnover rate of 7 percent every year across the spectrum of jobs and a constant labor turnover rate of two years among unskilled assembly workers, such that workers who have more than two years’ tenure represent a numerical minority. The desire for a two-year labor turnover rate reveals the belief that unskilled workers operate on a trajectory of diminishing returns. At some point (in this case, within two years), the replacement of these workers is regarded as more valuable to the company than their continued employment. The challenge for managers is to keep these two turnover rates in proper alignment so that the two-year time frame does not disrupt the 7 percent figure. In other words, they do not want their workers leaving en masse, every two years. Such a pattern of turnover would lead to total disruption of the labor process. Instead, they desire a steady rate of attrition, so that the 7 percent of turnover derives from the departure of workers who have entered the period of diminishing returns.

This combined concept of turnover reveals the devastating logic of capitalist value production that captured Marx’s attention and led to his proclamation that the more riches workers produce, the poorer they become.⁶ He captured this logic within his description of workers as “variable capital,” as the kind of capital whose own value varies from the value that they create through their labor. In short, by identifying workers as “variable capital,” Marx exposes how the worker is socially produced as a subject whose labor (which is sold as a commodity) is evaluated separately from the laborer’s own reproduction, such that there exists a difference in value between the laborer’s worth and the worth of the labor produced by this very worker. And this variation in value between the worker’s value and the value of this worker’s labor is the critical ingredient for the creation of capitalist profit. When the logic of worker as variable capital is extended, we can see that if workers are cheapened while the value of their labor remains constant or increases, then profit grows. The

greater the variation between workers' value and the value of their labor, the greater the profit.

Within such logic, we can see clearly the value of disposable workers. Since, under capitalism, profit increases when the difference between the cost for reproducing workers and the marketed cost of their products expands, workers whose labor circulates through the circuitry of production and consumption simultaneous to the depreciation in the cost of their own reproduction represent a most valuable form of labor power. Consequently, the "disposable third world woman worker"—whose social worth is located on a continuum of diminishing returns—is the most valuable kind of worker, so long as her labor contributes to the making of commodities.

The managers at AOTW combine their discourse of factory kinship with the corporate imperative for producing just the right amount and rate of turnover among their assembly workers in order to maximize the variation between workers' depleting value and the appreciating value of the commodities that they manufacture. By putting their workers into the position of daughters who by custom must and do obey their fathers, these managers justify the most invasive sorts of procedures for monitoring their workers' rate of decline in a setting where "disposability" turns on a calculation that measures the worth of discrete bodily functions against each other—but only in the bodies of female workers. While the workers are hired according to the assumption that all women workers in southern China possess the valuable combination of docility, dexterity, and attentiveness (noted above), they are monitored according to the equally widespread assumption that their reproductive cycles and sexual desires will eventually turn their productivity into waste. AOTW managers believe it critical to monitor their workers' reproductive organs, their menstrual cycles, and their sexual behavior on the theory that such monitoring is key both to their role as factory fathers, who are in charge of their daughters' integrity, as well as to their management of commodity production. Ironically, though, the integrity that they endeavor to protect is that of the continuum by which these factory daughters are turned into corporate waste.

In this case, we see how this local discourse of kinship combined with a corporate imperative for disposable labor generates a smoke-screen for the attrition caused by illnesses and injuries that plague assembly workers, particularly women, throughout the corporate world. What we see instead is a worker who needs to be turned inside out so that we can evaluate the ratio of her worth, as a laborer, to the value of her labor. Based on this story and on the working subject it produces, the AOTW managers have devised numerous policies that

function as a speculum for opening up the private parts of women's bodies to public inspection.

AOTW

In 1993, Asia on the Water opened a factory in the municipality of Dongguan, a metropolitan area along the Pearl River Delta of Guangdong Province. In the 1990s, Dongguan was one of the fastest growing export-processing enclaves in southern China ("The Comeback Kid" 2000) and it confirmed the growing significance of foreign direct investment (FDI) for the post-Mao Chinese economy (see also Gallagher 2005). By 1995, AOTW occupied several, contiguous buildings and had expanded factory production from one to three product lines with a labor force of about seven hundred. Women, between the ages of eighteen and twenty-four, represented 70 percent of the labor force. All hourly waged employees lived and worked in the company's factory complex. AOTW's was one of many new factories in one of the city's industrial estates, and identical buildings, all housing workers' dorms and work spaces under a single roof and owned by dozens of different companies, surrounded it on all sides. AOTW's top managers and engineers commuted weekly from Hong Kong and stayed in managerial quarters within the male workers' dormitories.

At the time of my study in 1993, the AOTW managers were concerned about the company's poor market performance in the previous two years. By 1997, this concern had turned into alarm over the corporate board's decision to "downsize" by selling off either the Mexican or the Asian facilities to a competitor. The AOTW general manager, Howard Li, explained that this decision came on the heels of a protracted internal battle between the AOTW managers and the U.S.-American managers in Mexico (MOTW) over corporate resources and product lines. Howard Li referred to this period as a "civil war" between the Chinese managers in Hong Kong and the U.S.-American (Anglo) managers in Mexico (see Wright 2001). The U.S.-American team had opposed the opening of the Dongguan facility and its subsequent expansion on the basis that the Chinese managers were not qualified—due to cultural limitations—to oversee this operation. When the AOTW operation did expand into Dongguan, the Chinese managers were subject to racial slurs and other forms of hostility by their U.S.-American colleagues. "I was called an 'Asian spy,'" said Howard Li, "and locked out of the office [in U.S. corporate headquarters]." This tension between the American and Chinese managers intensified during the company's financial crisis in the late 1990s. OTW had fallen into dire financial straits: flagging sales of its engines began in the late 1980s and continued into

the following decade; there was an erosion of its market across the board against Japanese competition. In addition, internal political upheaval within the firm had shaken investor confidence, and the company's stock lost about 40 percent of its value between 1995 and 1997 without subsequent recovery. In response to this financial crisis, the corporate executive board decided that the company had to scale back production and seek subcontracting relationships with other firms. This decision meant that either the Chinese or the Mexican operations would be sold to a competitor. And this, in turn, meant that a number of long-term American and Chinese employees would be laid off and left to their own devices for securing their jobs with their new employer. As Howard Li said in 1997, "It is between us and Mexico."

The OTW executive board had decided to leave its decision to the outcome of a comparison between the Mexican and Chinese facilities. The Mexican facility had been in business for almost thirty years; it manufactured the components for the gasoline-powered engines that were assembled in Georgia and marketed in the United States and Europe. They produced the company's signature engine, and the retail price of one of those motors generated more profit than the sale of twenty-five of the small electrical motors manufactured in AOTW. By contrast, the Chinese facility was still largely untested in 1997. It was on the edge of the world's potentially largest industrial labor force as well as its biggest retail market, but its labor process, unlike its counterpart in Mexico that had proven adept at manufacturing quality products, was plagued by high defect rates and erratic production scheduling. Chinese managers had to pay ever increasing bribes to local officials. Still, with these problems, there was a sense of urgency about getting into China and being prepared for the opening of the market and the maturation of not only the largest but also one of the least expensive labor markets in the world (see, for instance, Powell et al. 2001; Whelan 2000).

The board informed both managerial teams that they would be compared on the basis of product quality and turnover rate. Product quality was measured in terms of the percentages of defective products for every batch manufactured. Product quality was linked directly to turnover rates in several ways. For instance, high turnover rates—above 7 percent—meant that workers were leaving prematurely, before their "on-the-job training" had been fully utilized. New recruits did not perform as well, on average, as seasoned workers. As the production manager, Harry Chen, explained, "New girls have more problems. They make mistakes." However, product defects could emerge also from turnover rates that were too low if

workers were still employed “past their prime.” Workers who suffered from illnesses and injuries, for instance, also made mistakes. As Howard Li put it, “This is not work they do for years. . . . You want fresh workers, with fresh eyes and fingers.” Quality was considered to derive from the monitoring of the rate of turnover so that fresh workers are constantly cycling into the labor process.

This connection between turnover and product quality meant that the AOTW managerial team was even more keen on demonstrating that they could manage the “right amount of turnover” as they were competing for their jobs against the U.S.-American managers in Mexico. This competition raised many of the old battles that the Chinese managerial and engineering team had fought for years within a company where systematic racism had denied them promotions and access to corporate resources allowed to the U.S.-based employees. While Howard Li admitted that the Asian team had made some gains against racism in the early 1990s, this most recent competition gave rise to further anti-Chinese sentiment as U.S. employees realized that they were at risk of losing their jobs. And Howard Li knew that part of his challenge would be to prove to his overseas bosses and colleagues that the Chinese people were qualified managers, against a racist legacy that gave preference to U.S. and Anglo employees, and that the Chinese factory was well situated to move the company ahead into the next century. He said, “The Americans don’t think we can do this here. They think China is backwards. But China is changing very fast. And Chinese people work very hard. . . . If we fail here, then they will say ‘I told you so.’ And they would say that. I tell you the truth.”

At stake in this competition, then, against the U.S.-American managers of MOTW was the ability of the Hong Kong Chinese managers to counter the racism that had been used against them for years within OTW. Toward this end, the AOTW managers relied on a strategy for segregating workers according to sex difference throughout the factory and the division of labor, which enabled them to monitor the most intimate details of their female workers’ lives as a fundamental process for controlling the labor process. They paid particular attention to the female workers’ reproductive cycles and sexual drives to help them determine how to keep assembly workers for the right amount of time, in order to maximize the value of their dexterity, patience, and docility before the wear and tear of production tipped the balance toward diminishing returns. This managerial strategy was, in essence, a procedure for making use of the rhythm of the workers’ reproductive drives to accommodate the company’s time frame for extracting value from a disposable labor force.

Managing Feminine Waste

The sexual segregation of the Dongguan facility reveals the centrality of sex difference to the organization of production and of labor. The facility consists of two buildings known as Plants I and II. Plant I houses the administrative offices and inventory supplies, both male-dominated areas. On the upper three floors, women assemble motors through various steps, including wire splicing, electrical assembly, and final assembly. Across the street in Plant II, male workers paint and package the motors for final shipping. Like most manufacturing facilities in the city's industrial estates, both buildings house worker dormitories. Female workers sleep in Plant I, and male workers and managers in Plant II.

This mapping of sex difference throughout the facility allowed for a sexual distinction in the practice of supervision. In the female-dominated work areas, supervisors are quickly noticed. The workers are all seated at their stations, where they perform their tasks by reaching up to overhead bins for the supplies that they use on a tabletop. Talking is strictly forbidden, as is any pause in work, a bathroom break without permission, or any other disruption to the continual flow of work. The only voice heard is that of the supervisor, who occasionally makes comments on the work. The supervisors in Plant I oversee the work of between twelve and fifteen laborers at any one time, and their evaluations of workers are publicly posted on each young woman's station so that her production figures can be easily seen by other managers and her coworkers.

By contrast, the supervisors in Plant II oversee the work of about thirty-five employees. The male workers in this facility work in teams of three to five. Those working in the painting section move around their area of the plant in order to restock their supplies. The workers in tooling and packaging also are free to move at will within their work spaces. The supervisors in Plant II walk through the work areas but do not stand watch over each individual worker as they do in Plant I. Worker evaluations are not publicly posted, and since they are evaluated as teams, their individual performance is not isolated from the rest.

The dormitories also were supervised differently. The female workers in the Plant I dormitory were forbidden from leaving the building at any time and on any day except for Sunday. The male workers in Plant II, however, walked between the two facilities on a regular basis. Since the canteen was located in Plant I, they had to cross the street in order to eat, and those who worked in materials management and in maintenance frequented both buildings. As a result, the male workers had access to the street and to the activities

there. Street vendors sometimes passed with food, cigarettes, and sometimes clothing. The male workers took breaks outside the doors, where they would smoke cigarettes and talk until a manager walked through, when they would head inside. But the managers did not seem to mind these occasional breaks. Women workers were never seen standing outside the factory doors. As has been documented by other researchers in Chinese facilities, AOTW's rules are not anathema to the export-processing zones (see Woo 1994; Hsing 1998; Chan 1997). Prohibitions on talking or walking, bans on leaving the compound without permission, as well as restrictions against pregnancy, marriage, or engagement are commonplace (see Chan 1997).⁷ Indeed, AOTW's restrictions could seem tame when compared to those of some other corporate facilities, where beatings and torture have been documented by journalists (see Chan 2001). In the vast majority of these cases, women workers are singled out for particularly severe policies regarding their behavior, social activities, and sexuality.

In AOTW, the managers explain the stricter surveillance of their female employees by describing their roles as those of a parent with an unpredictable teenage girl who requires a strong patriarchal hand to keep her under control. Howard Li said, "We have naïve girls. Here we are like their parents. They have to obey us. . . . When workers make problems, we find other girls." Stephen Chan said, "Their parents trust us to protect their daughters from the trouble they can find in this city. That is part of my job too." And Harry Chen added that his own knowledge of Chinese culture and his own experience as a father meant that he was particularly suited for his job as production manager over a young female Chinese labor force: "The Chinese raise their daughters to be very obedient," he said. "The family is strict, more strict than in America. . . . The girls, sometimes, do not know what to do when they move away from their family. They can lose their obedience. They are naïve. I have two daughters, and we are very strict with them. I am like that here because Chinese daughters are good daughters, but you have to protect them from dangerous things in the city." When I asked Harry Chen to explain why the workers were not allowed out of the facility after work hours, he said, "It is not right for the girls to go out at night. It is not safe."

This discourse of the "dangerous" city that might tempt the ingénue daughter resonates with depictions in the business and popular press of southern China's rising problem of prostitution that preys on young female workers. For instance, a businessperson is quoted in a *Business China* ("New China, Old Vice" 2000) article as saying, "Shenzhen's [the export-processing] economy is based on sex," and then the article goes on to quote a "charity worker" as saying,

“Many young women working in factories actually earn substantially less than [US\$66 per month]. . . . Many only ear[n] around Rmb 200–300 (US \$24–36)—and that’s with two or three hours’ overtime a day. Many factories simply do not obey the law.” That creates incentive for women to move out of the factory dormitory and into another trade. The AOTW managers are careful to guard against such dangers, not by adjusting their salaries but by locking the female workers into the factory/dormitory complex for six or often seven days a week, a practice not uncommon in the export-processing zones of southern China (Chan 1997, 2001; Hsing 1998).

On my initial introduction in 1993 to the AOTW dormitories, Howard Li repeatedly stressed his parental duties to the workers. “In China, the girls are far from home for the first time. We give them a home, a place to sleep and eat and make friends. We are their family here. We tell them, we are their boss and their parents. We are here to take care of them.” As we looked into one room that had eight bunks, four to a side and stacked in two tiers, and with just enough space for one person to walk down the middle of the room, he noted that one of the posters on the wall was of the same Chinese singer that his own daughter had on her wall in Hong Kong. “Here they are like our daughters,” he said. The belongings of his PRC “daughters” were few. The bunks in each room were topped with a thin pad, and a pillow was the only place the residents had to store their personal belongings. One bunk held a suitcase, a pair of folded slacks, a brush, some hairpins, and a green, metal pencil case. A single blouse hung from the bottom rung of the upper bunk.

Yet, the kinship described in this story of factory fathers and daughters is one of a temporary relationship that daughters move into and out of over a relatively short period of time. Howard Li elaborated, “When it is time for them to go, we ask them to leave. We have new girls everyday.” When I asked how the right time for their departure was determined, he said, “It can be many reasons. Someone does not like the work. Or someone wants to have her own family. It is easy to know because when a worker wants to leave, she can cause problems.” He did not explain the kind of problems in detail, but through various conversations, I learned that typical “problems” included a range of events, such as a worker’s attempt to question a regulation as well as a worker’s efforts to see another worker romantically. “You have to watch them, and when it is time for them to go, we know,” he said. And, at that time, this worker will be tossed out of this family and replaced by another determined to be just like her. Therefore, linking daughters to problems is a key concept in AOTW, where efforts to decrease problems in production hinged largely on

controlling the problems associated with their female workers. And once the problems detected within the female workers outweigh the benefits of keeping them within the family fold, they are dismissed like “disposable daughters” from this corporate family. Therefore, the task of determining how long to keep workers at AOTW was presented in terms of keeping the “good daughters” until they turn into “bad ones.”

Daughters and Defects

AOTW managers had a number of regulations that facilitate this balancing of good daughters against bad ones in the management of the turnover rate. Like most facilities in China’s export-processing zones, AOTW required a two-year labor contract from workers who, upon signing, paid an initial deposit that would not be returned if the worker left or was justifiably dismissed before its termination (see also Chan 1997). The terms for justifiable dismissal included injury, illness, laziness, pregnancy, or sexual immorality. Dismissing a worker for bad health, such as injuries or illnesses (incurred on or off the work site), was justified on the basis that it was for the worker’s own good. Harry Chen explained, “These girls do not know how to take care. . . . We give them medical advice. If they are sick, we make them go home, and their health improves.” He then resorted to the *in loco parentis* concept by saying, “We treat them like our own daughters. If my daughter is sick, I make her stay in bed. Here, one sick girl can make everyone sick, so we make them go home to their families.” Likewise, dismissing a worker for moral impurity was justified on the basis that this worker could influence the other female workers and turn them into “bad” daughters. Howard Li also employed *in loco parentis* to explain why: “Some of the older girls are more disobedient and they try to influence the young ones. It is like an older daughter who disobeys her parents. Then it is time for her to leave the family and marry.”

Howard Li’s concern with workers’ sexual thoughts, in addition to their sexual deeds, resonated with other managerial remarks that diagnosed the problems in production as emerging from the reproductive drives and cycles internal to their workers’ bodies.⁸ Harry Chen explained, “The problem is you cannot trust these workers. They are like children in the toy store. They tell you they will behave and do their work, but they think about boys and do not do their work.” Stephen Chan linked these distracting thoughts to workers’ desires for getting married and having children, “These girls are normal. They are young and full of ideas about getting married and having children. They hear that biological clock . . . and we tell them they

still have time for a family, but first they can make some money and work here, and then they can have their families.” Howard Li corroborated Stephen Chan’s view of the biological clock when he said, “These girls are eighteen and nineteen. They are becoming women . . . their bodies are telling them to have children. We want them to concentrate on their work here for two years and then they can go and start a family. If we can keep them concentrating on the work, for just two years, then we can improve our ratings here in the company. I know it.” On the issue of pregnancy, the AOTW managers uniformly agreed that pregnant workers should return home to have their babies. “That is everyone’s policy here,” said Stephen Chan. When I asked why they simply did not write that workers who did not perform up to standard would be dismissed, Howard Li explained that firing someone for not doing her job well would leave the company open to fines but firing a worker for bad health, immorality, or pregnancy was regarded by local authorities as acceptable. In other words, being a “bad daughter”—or a female worker who questions authority, or becomes ill or pregnant—more easily justified dismissal than the mere determination that a worker was not performing work up to standards. This way, the focus of the evaluation was on the integrity of the worker as a subject—as one worth or not worth keeping—rather than on the work itself when questions regarding work rules, cycle times, and ergonomic issues might arise.

When I asked how male workers were evaluated for dismissal, the managers explained that they did not have the same kind of issues as with the female workers and that, as a result, the turnover rate among male workers was substantially lower. “They [the male workers] do not create the same problems. They concentrate more on the work,” Harry Chen explained. And for this reason, Chen continued, they did not require as much surveillance as the female workers. “Discipline is not our concern [with the male workers],” he said as he described how only rarely were male workers dismissed. Typically, turnover within that population resulted from personal decisions to leave and seek employment elsewhere. “They find a better job and leave,” said Howard Li.

This different emphasis on male and female supervision illustrated a distinct approach between female and male areas of the facility regarding the connection between the production process and workers’ bodies and attitudes. Male workers did not undergo the same degree of scrutiny over their attitudes (that is, obedience), sexual habits, or even illness that the female workers did, and their turnover rate was not considered to represent an issue of concern for the managers, who believed that male workers would come and

go as other opportunities presented themselves. Their turnover rate was not a reflection of their worth as laborers, simply a reflection of external circumstances. Likewise, if problems arose in the male areas of the production process, managers did not tend to explain them in terms of problems residing intrinsically within the workers. For instance, Stephen Chan told me, "Sometimes we have problems with the paint. That is a very hard operation. So we have higher defects there." Howard Li also corroborated this view that defects in the painting area resulted from the difficulty of the work, rather than from the difficulty of the worker: "We expect problems in painting. We train the workers. New ones make more mistakes, but they learn. It is hard work."

By contrast, defects and problems in the female areas of the facility were regularly explained as emanating from the workers themselves, rather than from the work, and as having a direct correlation to their status as good or bad daughters. For instance, on one morning in 1997, as Howard Li and I walked through Plant I, he explained, "We have problems with quality in Plant I. That is where we have our biggest problems." To emphasize his point, he held up a partially assembled 1.5-horsepower motor, its unattached wires dangling as evidence of its uselessness. He placed it back on the shelf, next to several motors in the same shape. "Many problems. Too many," he said, and then, ensuring that I understood how the problems in the motors had to do with the problems on the line, he directed my attention to a woman who used a pair of pliers to twist two wires together before attaching a plastic cap. "This girl is good here, but there was one before her. She always thought about her boyfriend, always wanted to talk with him, so we told her to leave. We cannot have workers like that and make a good product." Harry Chen backed up this assessment when he said, "We have too many defects in Plant I [the female areas]. The girls do not concentrate. They think of other things. We always have to watch them."

By presenting the issue of defects in Plant I as having origin within the workers while discussing problems in Plant II as emanating from the work, the managers lay out the justification for a differential system of supervision. And since they were under pressure from their corporate headquarters to reduce defect rates in order to win the competition against their U.S. colleagues, this gendering of defects such that those in Plant I were seen as arising from "daughter or female trouble" meant that they turned their attention to ferreting out the sources of this trouble. The male workers, consequently, did not come under the same scrutiny since the problems in their areas were determined to be inevitable consequences of a difficult work process.

For this reason, the AOTW managers justified the most invasive procedures for monitoring the female workers, who were, they reasoned, always on the verge of turning into bad daughters who created bad products. Since hormones, reproductive cycles, and disobedience were identified as principal sources of “bad daughter/bad worker” behavior, these represented the sites for concern. Consequently, periodic pregnancy tests were required of all female workers. Howard Li explained, “All companies do that. . . . We cannot keep pregnant workers here. That is against the rules.” These rules, as Stephen Chan told me, reflected, again, the managers’ responsibilities to protect the moral integrity of their labor force in addition to keeping them focused on the work, “We have these tests so the girls will know that if they do get pregnant, we will know. . . . We are like their parents, we know everything about them, and it is for their own good.” Howard Li further explained, “One pregnant girl will cause problems for everyone. Other girls will think it is ok, and then we will have more problems in production. We cannot have them here.” So pregnant workers are summarily dismissed and replaced just like any disposable worker.

Pregnancy tests, administered on-site, were not the only means for monitoring the labor force and creating a de facto supply of disposable workers. Howard Li also described a policy (enacted in 1997) for regulating workers’ menstrual cycles by scheduling them for regular physical checkups. He explained this new policy as the company’s response to pressure from municipal governments to enforce the government’s policy, as part of the “one-child” policy, for restricting the number of children to one per family. The one-child policy’s enforcement is based at the county and municipal levels and includes, among other measures, the monitoring of women’s bodies to ensure against “illegal” pregnancies.⁹ Howard Li described the one-child policy as disruptive because some officials from northern provinces required that female workers return home once a year for an annual evaluation. According to Howard Li, the workers had to pay for these trips out of their earnings and they also lost pay for the time they were gone. In an effort to reduce the disruption caused by these trips and to minimize the costs for workers, Howard Li had worked with some local officials to arrange regular exams in Dongguan so that the workers would not have to leave the municipality. He described this situation as beneficial both to the worker and to the company, since the exams did not significantly interrupt the labor process and were less expensive for the workers.

However, Howard Li’s description of the one-child policy and of its enforcement did not correspond to the typical government

policy, which was oriented toward married women.¹⁰ Since AOTW would not hire married women and forced married women to leave their employment, the one-child policy enforcement that Howard Li describes and his solution to it were directed also at monitoring the reproductive organs of single women.

Despite the disjuncture between the usual enforcement of the one-child policy and AOTW's interpretation of it, the policy of mandated physical exams reflects a longheld suspicion intrinsic to various labor codes within China that reproductive organs weaken women. Therefore, their menstrual cycles should be regulated as part of the regulation of the labor process (see White 1994; Furth 2002). Harry Chen made this connection when he said, "We have many girls come here and sometimes they are very poor. They can be sick. And then they cannot do the work. If they are sick, we make them go home." Howard Li explained that female workers are more vulnerable than males for illness due to their reproductive cycles: "Females are more sensitive. They get sick." When I asked if he meant that the women workers were susceptible to illness due to their reproductive organs and cycles, he nodded and then said, "They will not say anything to you, so you have to get the doctor to look at them, make sure they are all right."

Combined, the pregnancy tests, physical exams, and segregation and mobility policies subjected women workers to the utmost discipline and surveillance in the name of parental duty and for the benefit of quality control. The information gathered by medical staff during the forced examinations was given directly to the AOTW managerial staff in the event that the worker demonstrated illness, injury, pregnancy, or another condition that would be seen as adversely affecting her job performance.¹¹ "Sometimes," said Howard Li, "there is something wrong. We want to know." When I asked what sorts of things, in addition to pregnancy, could be wrong with the workers, Howard Li mentioned that injuries were common among the assembly workers. While he did acknowledge that injuries, such as carpal tunnel syndrome, did affect some workers, he did not know to what extent, and he denied that the problem was prevalent in his facility. However, anecdotal evidence indicates high rates of workplace injuries in southern China's export-processing zones (see Chao 2002; Eckholm 2001). Longitudinal studies of repetitive stress disorders have not been published, if even conducted, for these facilities. Still, such studies conducted in electronic assembly operations in other parts of the world have shown that repetitive stress disorders are commonplace, especially in environments like AOTW, where basic safeguards such

as worker rotation, regular rests, and wrist supports are not implemented (see Lin 1991).

Meanwhile, at AOTW, managers who receive information from medical personnel regarding the health and fitness of their workers decide if their employees are unfit, whether due to pregnancy or to repetitive stress disorders. If a young woman is deemed unfit for employment as a result of one of these exams, she is easily dismissed and replaced without the company being held accountable. That worker's turnover simply contributes to the continuous flow of female workers through the revolving door of disability. All the managers have to say, if questioned by local authorities (a rare event, according to AOTW managers), is that they were working in her best interests, just as any good parent would do for their own child. Workers who do pass these inspections of their organs, attitudes, and digits and who perform up to standards are held to the letter of their two-year contract—if they leave before the time limit, they will lose their deposits and face potential fines and difficulty finding work elsewhere. Their disability is thus inevitably guaranteed by the two-year contract if they manage to maintain their value to the company during that period of time.

All of the AOTW managers in charge of the Chinese facility explained that keeping workers beyond the two-year time frame was not prudent. Their explanations regularly combined concerns over the wear and tear of the work itself with certainties that the reproductive clock of the female laborers could not be kept in check forever. Howard Li put it this way: "Girls line up outside the door everyday. They are young and healthy. This work is hard on the hands and eyes. No one should do it for a long time. Two years is enough. . . . And that is ok with the girls here. They want to start their families. I could not keep them longer if I wanted to." While I have not been able to find long-term studies on repetitive stress disorders in southern China's export-processing zones, the anecdotal evidence supports the findings of studies conducted in facilities located in other regions that repetitive stress disorders are a costly malady that affect a significant percentage of the manufacturing labor force. Harry Chen did not use the words "repetitive stress disorder," but he described its effects when he said, "The girls always slow down after two years. Then it is time for them to go."

The right time for turnover then is when the "girls" slow down. Some take two years, and some less, but whatever the reason for the slowness—the onset of injury, illness, or pregnancy—the AOTW managers have a sure system in place to catch this slowness before it translates into expensive defects, slower production rates, and

corporate liability. When a young woman does slow down, there is always another young woman to replace her. With luck, these young women make it for their entire two years; without it, they may find that their health has deteriorated or their bodies pained or even crippled by injuries, at which time they will be declared “unfit” for employment and summarily replaced. Such is the cyclical journey of the labor turnover that the AOTW managers dedicated so much energy and thought to controlling.

Despite his efforts to present the AOTW facility as orderly and his policies as straightforward, Howard Li confessed one day that the pressures to cycle workers into and out of facility, at just the right rate, was difficult at times for him. One day while standing on top of the roof of Plant I in Dongguan, he told me a story of one of his workers, a young woman from a northern province, who had slit her wrists in the dormitory bathroom. She had only worked in the facility for about a year, and, according to Howard Li, she was a very good worker. He thought that she had attempted suicide because she had become pregnant and that the loss of blood had precipitated a miscarriage. Harry Chen, he said, had taken the young woman to the hospital and had called Howard Li, who was in Hong Kong at the time. Harry Chen had assumed that the company would pay for only one night in the hospital and then, per company policy, dismiss the worker and remove itself from liability regarding her well-being. However, in an apparent aberration from protocol, Howard Li told Harry Chen that he would keep her in the hospital as long as she needed to stay and not fire her. He said, “I even paid for her parents to visit her and stay in a hotel. My heart was breaking for them. I did not tell my company bosses. They would not think this was a good idea.” After she recovered, the young woman stayed at AOTW for the duration of her two-year contract. Howard Li said that if she had not been such a good worker, he would have dismissed her after her recovery. “I did not have to do that,” he said; “there is always someone else I can put in her place.”

Modern Chinese Managers

The Chinese managerial strategy for managing the labor turnover in their facility paid off in 1999 when the OTW board decided to sell the Mexican operations and keep the China factory. AOTW’s facilities had demonstrated that they could control turnover such that it would occur at a predictable rate, between 5 and 7 percent, over an extended period of time. This turnover rate was far superior to the almost 20 percent experienced by MOTW during the same period of time. Howard Li was very proud of his accomplishment and declared

that AOTW was “the company’s future” because it had a low-waged labor force that turned over at a constant and manageable rate.

As a result, two product lines, which were formerly in the Mexican facility, were in full operation in the Chinese facility by the end of the year. Howard Li and three of his managers received raises and, as Howard Li put it, “more respect.” The AOTW team made corporate history. They had overcome racial and cultural prejudices that had prohibited their vertical ascent into positions of authority over US-American personnel. And the decision represented a shift in the company’s strategy for focusing on the Asian market and the smaller fishing motors rather than the larger motors for the U.S. market that favors speedboats.

However, just over a year later, a private investor bought the majority of OTW’s stock and removed it from public exchange. The company had hovered on the brink of bankruptcy for over a year; its stock had continued to drop in value, and its market share had also steadily declined. A former vice president and former general manager of the Mexican facility explained that quality defects still plagued the company and contributed to its loss of market share across the board. Still, he admitted that the Hong Kong Chinese managers had proven their mettle in the internal competition for resources. “Those guys knew what they were doing,” he said. “They proved a lot of us wrong.”

The events at AOTW reveal the complex knots that bind discourses of social difference to the making of corporate strategists and corporate profit. On the one hand, the Hong Kong Chinese managers succeed in breaking the glass ceiling that had prohibited their ascent within a racist and ethnocentric corporate hierarchy that had safeguarded the stronghold of a U.S., Anglo, male managerial class. Howard Li, Stephen Chan, and Harry Chen—all with at least fifteen years of experience in this company—had endured racial stereotyping that segregated them, along with their other Hong Kong Chinese colleagues, into lower paying managerial jobs where they had to answer to U.S.-American bosses who, they believed, were set against their promotions and even against the success of their operations. Their accomplishments in rising through the ranks, while perhaps delimited by the overall corporate financial crisis, represent some progress in the dismantling of racism amongst the corporate elite. And then, on the other hand, these managers accomplish this feat, in large part, by deploying narratives of factory daughters, their filial obligations, and the entitlements of factory fathers. These narratives both justify their invasive managerial techniques as well as function as smokescreens for corporate policies that dismiss workers who become injured, ill, or pregnant during their tenure. These discourses

that set the female laborers apart from their managers on the basis of gender while establishing a common ground between them on the basis of the “Chinese family” are effective technologies for producing the materiality of an exploitable laborer: a young woman worker who must be patrolled for her own good. And these new managers emerge, in her contrast, as the good father who can take care of the simultaneously innocent and troublesome young daughter.

Had this study been conducted through a survey questionnaire or other nonethnographic means of inquiry, this investigation into how OTW decided to expand its operations in southern China would probably have yielded different findings. As we see in AOTW, practices designed to boost corporate profits and managerial acumen articulate with practices for distinguishing daughters from fathers, “old” China from the “new” one, “bad” daughters from “good” ones, and “Chinese” from “American” employees. The interviews that gave rise to these conclusions—via descriptions of racism and of the need to monitor female reproductive organs through forced physical exams—do not surface easily in formal interview settings. Rather, they arise in the day-to-day interactions when managers are asked to explain how their stated commitments to workers’ well-being seem belied by practices that treat young women like disposable workers. These are questions that require asking in a number of different ways and usually more than once, and the answers often need further explanation. These conversations are not always comfortable for either the researcher or the informant.

Yet only by asking such questions do we truly delve into the complex social relationships that create the domain of the economic. For while Karl Marx’s famous words that “the worker becomes all the poorer the more wealth he produces” are as relevant today as when he penned them in 1844, we cannot translate this abstract axiom into specific relevance without exploring the particular idioms by which labor’s poverty materializes through capital’s wealth. To be sure, we know that workers around the world are indeed facing more pressure to produce more work in return for less remuneration, and we know that women still earn a pittance, as they have for decades, on the assembly lines of multinational firms. But to know these things is not to know how this pattern is constantly recreated across the diverse terrain that is global capitalism.