

# **Body Politics in the Global Contexts**

## **– A Case of One Chinese Women Workers' Dramatic Troupe**



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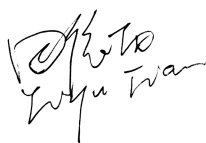
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### Abstract

Under the background of the Reform and Opening Up, female migrant workers emerged as a large people group. The bodies of women workers, as the objects of powers of the government, capital and the patriarchal culture, are experiencing intense negotiations with power relations. Recently, in Shenzhen, the city of the World Factory in China, appeared several women migrant workers' dramatic troupes, and some of them came up with the issue of women's bodies. The reasons why these dramas appeared and what body politics issues they were trying to discuss and address are questions worth answering.

On the basis of this background, this research has the following problem formulation: **How do women workers discuss the issue of Body in the “Women Are the Best” Dramatic Troupe?** To be more specific: How do women workers create the drama in the “Women Workers Are the Best” Troupe? What are the local and global inspirations for them? What kind of power relations are reflected and challenged in the drama of the “Women Workers Are the Best” troupe? What are the potential effects/contributions for the issue of the Body and gender equality brought about by the drama of the “Women Workers Are the Best” troupe?

The major method is literature studies of the drama scripts. Besides, in order to get necessary information, the author also conduct fieldwork of one month with the “Women Workers Are the Best” troupe, and carry out interviews during the fieldwork with 11 people who are related to the creation and performance of the drama.

The conceptual framework in this research is a combined view of Michel Foucault's body politics theories – especially its feminist perspectives - and Situated Knowledge theories in the process of theory travelling.

Body politics theories are used in the analysis of the changing discourses and power relations in creation and performance of drama, and the research emphasizes the subjectivity of women workers. The research analyzes two scenes of body politics in the drama, namely “freedom of marriage” and “contraceptive rings”. Through the

analysis, we can see that these workers are discussing topics of freedom in marriage and contraceptive rings that are closely related to their lives. In these issues, powers of the government, the capital and the patriarchal culture all want to control and tame their bodies. However, the way that they present this drama shows that women workers are also trying to challenge and existing power relations by creating new discourses.

In the analysis of creation of the drama, the research will always maintain the angle of Situated Knowledge, and will emphasize the importance of the situation and localization of a western theory in the Chinese contexts. These women workers get to know the theories of body politics through the active external communications, and they manages to create the drama and perform it with the help of the Shanquan Troupe originated in Sun Yat-sen University. However, these body politics theories are not the origins of women workers' activities. They situate the western knowledge in order to create their own knowledge. In the case of this dramatic troupe, the women workers have already understood the essence of body politics in their life experiences, and these western theories only offer them with inspirations and helped them to express their needs clearly. The "situation process" has to be considered as the interaction between the existing local knowledge and the new western theories of body politics, rather than a one-direction of theory travelling.

## **1. Introduction**

After the Reform and Opening up in the late 1980s, China started to become an integrated part of the global capitalist world. In this process, the once dominant National Socialism was gradually given up, and capitalist system of production was taken in. (Pun, 2005) Under this background, many peasants migrated from their hometown in rural areas to cities, and “migrant worker” emerged as a new group. (Pun, 2005)

Migrant workers in China is a huge people group with young women as the majority.<sup>1</sup> Many young female women in the rural area entered the cities, and became female migrant workers. They “dominate in some sectors of the economy, including domestic service, prostitution, sanitation, textiles, and the toy and electronic industries” (Jacka, 2006, p7).

Yet we need to understand that these women are not considered as official residents in the city. The term “floating population” is used to describe them, because they moved away from their hometown, but they do not have official household registration in the city. Without it, the local government does not have the obligation to provide them with welfare benefits, which are enjoyed by urban residents. Besides that, extra fees are charged if their children want to go to school in the city. There are various other kinds of differentiated treatments that migrant workers face compared with local residents. These people are literally “floating” like water.

Dramatic performances, as being direct in expressing demands and reflecting living situations, have been one important way for women workers to express their political demands.

Women workers' lives have also been a huge topic in workers' dramas. In 2011, The Didinghua Troupe were set up in Beijing, and they create and perform dramas reflecting housekeeping workers' life. (Jia, 2014) The Mulan Community Troup

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<sup>1</sup> By the end of 2005, the “floating population” of migrant workers reached more than 147 million in China. and in 2010 the number was more than 261 million; an increase rate of 81%. The fifth Demographic Sampling Survey in 2000 shows that women outnumbered men with a rate of 100:91.3. This report also shows that 69.9% of this group are between the ages of 15 to 49. (The data is from government report of the 5<sup>th</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> national demographic research.)

was set up in 2014, also with creating dramas about women workers' general living situations as a main task.

Worth noticing is that there started to be dramas about women workers' talking about the body issues in the recent years.

In 2013, The Hand-in-hand Workers' Service Center in Shenzhen performed a short drama called *The Menstruation Monologues*, which expressed women workers' pain and struggles due to overtime work in their menstrual period. Since then, they have been calling on the government and factories to publish policies for paid menstruation break every month. (Han, 2013; The Hand-in Hand, 2014) So is a comparatively new women workers' drama troupe called "Women Workers Are the Best", which belongs to The Firefly Workers' Service Center. In the three-scene drama, they discussed issues of freedom to choose one's spouse, issues of left-behind children and the policy of contraceptive ring.

Compared with common topics in other dramas, these dramas have very clear gender consciousness, and they express women workers' concerns with their positions of bodies in the process of modernization and globalization. They are using the form of drama to raise workers, especially women workers' consciousness about body politics, and express women workers' specific demands from the state mechanism and the production system.

Both the form they are using and the contents they are expressing are of significance. Even of more interest are the questions of why and how they choose this form and focus on these specific issues in the globalized world. In order to answer these questions, we need to bear in mind that the issue of body is not an old topic in China. How the theories travel into China, and travel all the way to these women workers' troupes is an interesting process. Yet researches on this topic are rarely seen. Besides filling this empirical knowledge gap, the thesis aims to examine and enrich body politics theories in the Chinese context.

## **2. Problem Formulation**

On the basis of this background, I have chosen the following problem formulation for the project:

**How do women workers discuss the issue of Body in the “Women Are the Best” Dramatic Troupe?**

In order to address this problem I have formulated the following research questions:

1. How do women workers create the drama in the “Women Workers Are the Best” Troupe? What are the local and global inspirations for them?
2. What kind of power relations are reflected and challenged in the drama of the “Women Workers Are the Best” troupe?
3. What are the potential effects/contributions for the issue of the Body and gender equality brought about by the drama of the “Women Workers Are the Best” Troupe?

### **3. Methodology**

This chapter describes the reason for my problem formulation. Based in this, I choose my methods. I will detailedly my methods and reasons to choose them. Due to the limit of time and pages, my thesis has some biases. I will also mention them here as reference for future studies. As Wolinsky and Sprinz mentioned, methodology means “systematically structured or codified ways to test theories” (2002, p.10).

#### **3.1 Consideration on the Area of Study**

The aim of my research is to how women workers in the Women Are The Best Troupe discuss the issue of body and understand body politics theories, and how are western theories influence them.

The focus of the thesis is the agency and subjectivity reflected in the creation and performance of the drama. The exploration of their inspirations helps to understand why these women workers’ understand body politics in the certain way. I understand

that the dissemination of any theory is complicated, so this article will not aim at tracing all the way back for the whole process. Therefore, I formed the question as “how they learn body politics theories”, rather than discuss more detailed question such as how are body politics theories disseminated into China etc.

I choose workers' drama as the topic because drama is a major way of workers' activities in China. Besides, dramas can be viewed as a kind of literature that directly reflects workers' living and working situations. Workers tend to express directly and intensively their problems and demands in dramas.

I pick women workers as my research objects due to several reasons. Firstly, the powers of the government, the capital and the hierarchical culture all want to control women workers' bodies and tame them. Women workers' bodies are the “battlefields” for various discourses and power relations. Secondly, the discussion of body politics has become more and more obvious among women workers these years. Just as Emily Martin maintains, working class women tend to break away from discourses regarding women's bodies, because it is more difficult for them to benefit from reproduction. (Emily Martin, 1987)

The “Women Workers Are The Best” troupe is chosen because it is a troupe which belongs to one of the most influential workers' NGOs – The Firefly - in Shenzhen. With the help of NGO workers, the drama deals directly with the body issues.

### **3.2 Theoretical Approach**

In the choice of theories, since the drama is about body politics, my major theory is body politics theories. I give a brief review of body politics theories, and then combine Situated Knowledge theory to form my own conceptual framework.

In terms of body politics, Michel Foucault's bio-politics theories fit my topic, because it discusses the control of the authority on every individual bodies. Judith Butler's extended Foucault's theory and added feminism perspectives into it, which works as decent theoretical measure for my research since mine is about gendered

body politics of female migrant workers.

In studying the creation and performance of the drama, I have to use theories that can explain the process of theory dissemination, since these dramas are influenced by western theories. However, the influence cannot be summed up in a single picture. We have to take women migrant workers' subjectivity in adopting theories into consideration. This is why I mentioned Travelling Theory and Situated Knowledge Theory – to study how they situate the learned body politics in the Chinese contexts.

### **3.3 Methods**

The major method in the thesis is qualitative research. The major part of the thesis is a case, and the materials don't include much statistics. The logic of the thesis is inductive.

Since the research target is the dramatic troupe, the study on the script of the drama is important. Literature studies will be one of the main methods. I will analyze the script of the drama, and use body politics as my analysis tool.

However, simply conducting a literature studies on the script can omit much important information. The drama is created by women workers, and the process of creation is important. Therefore, in order to get a holistic picture, I have to conduct field research and interviews.

#### **3.3.1 Field Research**

Fieldwork was originally the method of anthropology at the beginning; it aims at observing, recording and collecting data by fieldwork. The use is now not limited to anthropology. The target of fieldwork is to let researchers better understand the inter-personal, socio-cultural and spacial or geographical aspects of the subject. (Lassiter, 2008)

I spent one month as an intern in The Firefly from January 5<sup>th</sup>, 2015 to February 9<sup>th</sup>, 2015. In this process, I found close relations with the chief as well as women workers in this troupe. In the end, they opened up their minds and talked a lot about

the drama with me.

### **3.3.2 Sampling and Interviewing**

Qualitative study often bases on theoretical sampling. Theoretical sampling comes from Grounded Theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), with an aim to found and develop theory. The goal of theoretical sampling is to gain a deeper understanding of analysed cases and facilitate the development of analytic frame and concepts used in their research. (ibid) The standard of sampling is not fixed; the researcher can adjust the standard of sampling with the target of better understanding the case.

In this sense, the author maintains that theoretical sampling as the proper method for the research. The author will also maintain the principles of theoretical sampling, with the development of field research, the author will try to take in samples in different positions in the troupe, NGO workers, feminists who are in touch with the NGO, scholars etc. I interviewed 11 people, including 5 troupe members, 4 scholars who support the troupe, and 3 people who have contributed to the creation of the drama, such as NGO workers. During the interviews, I firstly introduced my research. I asked their permission to use the records of the interviews for my research, and except for NGO workers and scholars who allowed me use their real names, the names and other information of the migrant workers are made anonymous in the analysis.

Interviews will be conducted with the sample. The major method of interviewing is semi-structured interview. Before interviewing, the author will provide an outline of questions. During the interview, the author will adjust the specific questions and the order of asking questions. The author will encourage the participants to recall and talk about more details. Upon the allowance of the participants, the researcher will record the interviews and transcribe them before further processing.

### **3.4 Bias and Limitations**

In the period of 5 months, I have to get in touch with women workers in the



dramatic troupe and conduct fieldwork, and I have to finish the analysis of the materials and write the thesis. The process is time-consuming. I covered half of China, travelled from Beijing to the field of Shenzhen. Though it is necessary for the composition of the thesis, the limit of time and energy constricts the depth of my article.

Besides, I am also intrinsically biased due to my class. As a woman raised in a middle-class family, my view is biased due to my class. Issues that they take for granted costs me time to understand. In such a short period, it is not possible for me to really understand the life and work situations of working class women.

My role in the field is also one reason for the biases. I worked as an intern for The Firefly, which gave me the convenience to get information. However, even though that I earned the trust of women workers gradually, I am always an inside outsider.

Another bias lies in the theories that I choose. In the analysis of a social issue in China, I mainly use western theories. Though I adjust the theories so that they fit my topic, still the theory might not fit in the situation in China.

With the evolvement of the study, I understand the complexity of the topic more and more deeply. I have chosen a case to make the analysis more focused, but a case is not representative enough to give a holistic picture for such a topic. This is the major limitation of my study.

#### **4. Theory**

In order to discuss the issue of the female body, we must have a brief understanding of body politics. Body politics means the interaction and negotiation between the power and the bodies. It includes two aspects: the taming and controlling of power towards the bodies and the bodies' resistance. (Lennon, 2014) I will start with the understanding of the Body by feminists, and then move on to Michel Foucault's bio-power theory, which focuses on power relations, and then I will expand the theory with the gender elements as contributed by other scholars.

My research is about how women migrant workers discuss body politics in their drama and how they create this drama. Since these theories are originally western theories, in order to have a holistic picture of how they discuss the issue of the body, I cannot shed the discussion of how do they learn western body politics theories and how do they localize and situate them in their drama. Living in a global city of Shenzhen, and through the NGO of The Firefly, they get access to western theories on body politics. However, they are not mechanically accepting these theories. Their understanding of these theories are based on their living situations, which is reflected in the drama and the process of its creation. In order to study this, I have to use theories that are about the dissemination of theories. I will introduce Edward Said's Travelling Theory and Donna Haraway's Situated Knowledge Theory.

Women migrant workers are influenced by various discourses of the female bodies, and they are creating a drama, which can be considered as the reflection of discourses, to challenge the discourses and underlying power relations that they find unfair. In other words, they are creating new discourses and knowledge to challenge the existing power relations.

Since I am discussing body politics, I find theories on body politics as a useful lens. Body politics theories have many schools. I plan to firstly give a review of the origin and schools of body politics. For this research, theories on discourses and power relations are especially useful. Michel Foucault's theories have a clear focus on power relations and discourses. However, it does not have clear feminist perspectives. Since I am discussing women's issues, I will also discuss feminist scholars' extension of Foucault's theories in the direction of feminism. Among them, Judith Butler's theory on discourses and the gendered bodies is useful for the analysis of women workers' and their creation of the drama, and I will give a detailed introduction of it.

In short, in this chapter, I will use body politics theories to analyze the discourses and power relations as reflected and challenged in the drama of "Women Workers Are the Best" troupe. The introduction of Travelling Theory and Situated Knowledge Theory will be used in the analysis of the inspirations for these women workers and

the process of the creation of the drama. Through the analysis by the application of these theories, I intend to examine and enrich the body politics theories and discuss the new potentials for the issue of the body and gender equality brought by the drama.

#### **4.1 Body Politics Theories**

##### **4.1.1 The Body in Feminist Perspectives – A General Review**

In a long period of history, the body is only considered as a biological being. It is only a matter to separate one people from another. Bodies need to be instructed by minds, and misbehaviors must be corrected.

Yet this kind of binary between the mind and the body is problematic. In fact, historically, separating the mind from the body is actually separating femininity from masculinity. Women are considered as defined by their bodies, which means that women's abilities to pursue spiritual goals are limited. "Women are somehow *more* biological, *more* corporeal, and *more* natural than men" (Grosz, 1994, p14). This leads to the controversies on sexed differences. Feminism scholars challenge sexed differences by challenging the binary between minds and bodies, and discussing the relations between subjectivity and corporeality.

Women and gender issues have been long ignored in the Political Science/IR area. "The citizen, soldier, leader, worker was presumed to be male." (Pettman, 1997) Feminist political science theory and feminist IR theories have "deconstructed dichotomies and hierarchized opposition encapsulated in mind-body, culture-nature, public-private". (ibid) The public sphere is described as male, and women are believed to belong to the private sphere. "This smoothed the move from male to universal, a move that normalized masculinity and erased women." (ibid)

Women's bodies have been the concern of feminists and feminist theories, such as issues of "choice concerning whether or not to marry, have sex, have children, or an abortion" (Pettman, 1997). Women's bodies have become the "political battle-grounds for different kinds of projects, especially those against the secular state, and in reactive state-legitimizing politics." (ibid)

The origin of feminist discussion of body politics is *The Second Sex* by Simone De Beauvoir. She reviews the data of biology such as women's weights, strength etc., and claims that there is no significance in these characters themselves. These phenomena only make sense in social contexts. Through the book, Beauvoir maintains that women's bodies are lived objects in situation. Women gradually lose the autonomy of their body in the gaze of others, or in her words, "education and surroundings" (307). Such remarks are the reasons that Beauvoir is considered as the initiator of the dichotomy between sex and gender, which was of great significance in the feminist discussion in the 1970s.

Following Beauvoir's ideas there came the discussion of sexual difference in the 1970s and 1980s. The aim of the discussion was to build a positive image of the female body. The discussions can be concluded in two categories. The first category is called Anglo-American radical feminism. Scholars such as O'Brien, Rich and Ruddick emphasized the power of the female sexuality, and they praised the maternal bodies of women. Women's role in reproduction was considered as "a respect for the natural world" (Lennon, 2014), and women's bodies were therefore celebrated with pride rather than being treated with shame.

The second strand is represented by Luce Irigaray, who challenged Lacan and Freud's theories on psycho-analysis (1985). Male bodies were considered by Lacan and Freud as powerful and authorities and were therefore accepted as the "norm" of bodies, while female bodies were defective male bodies. Therefore, Irigaray criticized psycho-analysis theorists such as Lacan for the dominant masculinism in their works. She argued for the need to reconstruct the image of the female body, to think of the female body as the starting point of its own, rather than adopting the male body as the norm without questioning the standard.

However, both the two strands are based on the assumption that sexual difference is "fundamental and immutable" (Kennon, 2014). This is the reason why they were criticized by post-structural theorists as essentialism. This kind of criticism

is the main link between scholars who emphasize on sexual difference and post-structural feminist theorists mainly under the main influence of Foucault and Derrida.

#### **4.1.2 Foucault's Theories of Body and Power and Their Feminist Perspectives**

Michel Foucault's theories of the body and power relations, though originally not about women and gender equality, have inspired many feminist scholars since the 1990s. (Foucault 1979, Bartky 1990, Bordo 1993). Michel Foucault's bio-power theory is essential to the understanding of body politics, and I will give a brief introduction as follows.

Biopower is the term of Foucault to describe the diffuse, knowledge-based forms of power focusing on the individual body (at the microlevel) and on the population as a whole (at the macro level). (Rivkin-Fish, 2000)

In *Discipline and Punishment: The Birth of the Prison* (1979), Michel Foucault explains the relations between body, politics and power. By a chronological study of the birth of prison, Foucault set up the micro-level of power relations. According to Foucault, power "centered on the body as a machine: its disciplining, the optimization of its capabilities, the extortion of its forces, the parallel increase of its usefulness and its docility, its integration into systems of efficient and economic controls, all this was ensured by the procedures of power that characterized the *disciplines*: an *anatomo-politics of the human body*." (1978, p90)

Following that, Foucault raised the concept of "bio-power" and biopolitics in *The History of Sexuality*. (1978) Biopolitics is the politics of taming the human bodies in the modern Western societies, practiced in daily life and language use that people take for granted. For example, we would not question the "official" knowledge of women's reproductive health, the believed standard of a proper size of the family, or the guidelines to live a healthy and long life.

It is by setting up this kind of knowledge and discourses that the authorities in the modern times manage to control the human bodies. It is through the biopolitics that

the modern society produce gendered bodies. To be more specific, bio-politics covers areas of “propagation, births and mortality, the level of health, life expectancy and longevity” (Foucault, 1978, p139). The power realizes its control and supervision through a series of regulations. This may be called “a bio-politics of the population”. (ibid)

However, in Foucault's eyes, politics is not simply hierarchical and oppressive. On the contrary, bodies in politics are fluid. They are the battlefields of discourses and power. Just as Wendy Harcourt views, the language and practices of biopolitics makes the bodies “an interesting set of objects and subjects of study” (2009, p21).

Bio-power is a useful concept to understand biopolitics. According to Foucault, “bio-power” means the state organization of the population to secure its control, welfare and productivity (1978, p141-147). This form of power is practiced “through social techniques and human sciences that penetrate into the nooks and crannies of everyday life” (Ong, 1990) .

Compared with “disciplines” which treat the human body as a machine, bio-power and biopolitics “focused on the species body, the body imbued with the mechanics of life and serving as the basis of the biological processes” (Foucault, 1978, p139). To be more specific, it covers areas of “propagation, births and mortality, the level of health, life expectancy and longevity” (ibid). The power realizes its control and supervision through a series of regulations. This may be called “a bio-politics of the population”. (ibid)

To sum up, in body politics, the human body, power and politics are a holistic system. No matter it is in the family sphere, the school, the hospital, the military or the prison, as long as there are relations between the power and the human body, there exists body politics.

According to Foucault, in the understanding the power relations, we must examine the discourses. We should ask questions of “the expanding production of discourses...in the field of multiple and mobile power relations” (1978, p97-98). To be more specific, we must examine these questions: What are the most direct power

relations in case? What kinds of discourses are performing in the case, and how are they supporting the certain power relations? How are the power relations being modified and changing in the local practices, and how are they linked to one another in the whole system “according to the logic of a great strategy” (ibid)?

### **Judith Bulter's Enrichment of Foucault's Theory**

However, Michel Foucault's theory is not gender-specific. Body politics by Michel Foucault has been enriched and examined in political science theories and IR theories, by feminists and gender scholars all over the world, such as Moria Gatens, Elizabeth Grosz, Jan Jindy Pettman etc.

Among the scholars who are inspired by Foucault, Judith Bulter's theory is most worth mentioning. Judith Butler is an American theorist. In her book *Gender Trouble* (1993), she rejects essentialism in the sense that she doesn't agree that gender differences are caused by biological differences of the two sexes. She emphasizes the method of discourse analysis in studying gender differences, and asks us to look at why people tend to think that gendered identities and differences are closely related to biological sex. In her views, the distinct characters of the two sexes are not natural; they are constructed. They are embedded in everyday practices and use of language: after uncountable times of repetition of these behaviors, they “appear” to be natural, and the distinction between the male and the female is thus constructed. To this extent, Foucault's biopolitics theories are of great significance in the survey of female embodiment.

### **4.2 The Travelling and Situation of Theories**

Because what I am discussing is the situation of body politics in China, to be more specific, among women migrant workers, I have to study the aspect of the dissemination of theories and their influences. Therefore, I will introduce two theories, namely Travelling Theory by Edward Said and Situated Knowledge Theory of Donna Haraway. By introducing these theories and combining them with the theories of body

politics, I will set up my own conceptual framework for the thesis.

#### **4.2.1 Travelling Theory**

“Like people and schools of criticism, ideas and theories travel – from person to person, from situation to situation, from one period to another.” (Said, 1984, p226) When a theory travels to a new environment, the process of its situation and localization “necessarily involves processes of representation and institutionalization different from those at the point of the origin.” (ibid)

According to Said Edward, the process that one theory travels can be divided into four stages. Firstly, there has to be an origin, or source of the theory, where the theory comes into existence. Secondly, in travelling, of course there will be a distance that the “travel” has to cover as one idea is disseminated from one point of time and location to another. Thirdly, there are a series of circumstances that “confronts the transplanted theory of idea, making possible its introduction or tolerance, however alien it might appear to be” (Said, 1984, p227). Fourth, the idea is transformed in the new place by its new application.

The aim of Travelling Theory is “to specify the kinds of movement that are possible, in order to ask whether by virtue of having moved from one place and time to another an idea or a theory gains or loses in strength, and whether a theory in one historical period and national culture becomes altogether different for another period or situation.”(Said, 1984, p226)

“... theory has to be grasped in the place and the time out of which it emerges as a part of that time, working in and for it, responding to it; then, consequently, that first place can be measured against subsequent places where the theory turns up for use.” (Said, 1984, p247) We should notice that situations and contexts vary in time and space, and “no system or theory exhausts the situation out of which it emerges or to which it is transported”. (Said, 1984, p241)

In a word, the travelling of theories is a map of the territory covered by the dissemination, communication, and interpretation of the original theory. (Said, 1984)



#### **4.2.2 Situated Knowledge Theory**

The author is inspired by the view of “situated knowledge” and its application in the discussion of body politics of female migrant workers.

Situated Knowledge is a concept put forward by Donna Haraway, which views knowledge as partial, located and embodied. According to Haraway, “objective” knowledge is a “god trick”, and the social construction of impartial scientific knowledge should be challenged and criticized. (Haraway, 1988) However, Haraway also calls for the application of feminist empiricism. When talking about knowledge, different visions and positions should be included. In summary, Situated Knowledge enables more critical thinking and the understanding of science as “transcendental” is replaced by a view that science consists of nothing but “partial and politicized knowledge claims” (Warf, 2006, p432).

In her book *The Women in the Bodies*, Emily Martin analyzes and challenges the discourses of women’s bodies and argues that a proper scientific result must be based on the voices of a broad sample, including the oppressed groups of people, or in most of the cases, women. (Martin, 1987) Martin discusses the tactics women use to resist medical control, and argues that working-class women are even more alienated from these discourses than middle-class women because it is harder for them to get the benefits from reproduction, and they tend to have more potential to resist against them, and create new knowledge and challenge the unfair power relations (Ibid.)

The Situated Knowledge Theory from women’s perspectives is very inspiring for the author. Yet the existing studies are either based on experiences of countries other than China or not thorough enough. As there is a vacuum for this kind of research in China, this research aims to fill in the gap of how women migrant workers in China situate knowledge of body politics among themselves as reflected in their dramas after they learn it through various ways.

#### **4.3 Body Politics in Situation – The Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework in this research will be a combined view of Michel Foucault's body politics theories – especially its feminist perspectives - and Situated Knowledge theories in the process of theory travelling. In other words, in the analysis of body politics, I will always maintain the angle of Situated Knowledge, and I will emphasize the importance of the situation and localization of a western theory in the Chinese contexts.

When we talk about theories of body politics, no matter which school we are focusing on, we are always using theories of western scholars, such as Michel Foucault or Judith Butler. However, I am discussing the body politics of female migrant workers in China, which means new place and contexts for the theory, which makes the study on the situation of theories significant. China has special contexts: it is a socialist country. The market economy in China is called “market economy with socialist characteristics”, which means capitalist and socialist figures coexist in Chinese economy. Besides, as a country with a long history of feudalism, the Chinese culture is still influenced by feudalism to a large extent, especially regarding the social positions of women. Women workers are under the influence of all these elements, and their bodies are the battlefields of all these factors. These are all the specialty of body politics in China.

Therefore, when studying the issue of the female embodiment of workers, I have to maintain the angle of Situated Knowledge.

Besides, the object of my research, the “Women Workers Are the Best” troupe, belongs to a NGO, The Firefly. It has active communication with civil society organizations and academic fields both from home and abroad. Body politics theories travel in their communications. This makes it an issue of theory travelling.

In the process of travelling, women migrant workers situate the knowledge of body politics in their drama. Through this process, they are creating new discourses to confront the existing unfair discourses, which support the current power relations.

In other words, in this research, body politics is considered as fluid rather than a fixed theory, and the creation of knowledge is not defined as a mission limited to the

people group of scholars. I will emphasize the subjectivity of women workers in their application of theories and their challenges of dominant discourses of the women's bodies.

## **5. Analysis**

### **5.1 Introduction of the Dramatic Troupe**

The "Women Workers are the Best" Troupe is not an isolated organization. It belongs to an NGO in Shenzhen called "The Firefly Centre of Workers' Service". Therefore, in order to study this dramatic troupe, the research will start with an introduction of "The Firefly".

The Firefly, also known as "The Little Grass", was set up in 2003 by Huang Xiao Yong. Huang suffered from career diseases as a printing worker. During the process of defending his rights, he set up The Little Grass with the help of Labor Education and Service Network, an NGO in Hong Kong. In 2012, The Little Grass changed its name into The Firefly Worker's Service Center.

It has been 12 years since The Firefly was set up. Now the organization is one of the most influential workers' NGOs in China. It has four departments, focusing separately on women workers, the publication of labor laws, the issue of workers' pensions, and workers' collective actions. The organization has active external communications with other NGOs, scholars and lawyers etc. both in home and abroad. The Firefly workers actively take part in trainings, conferences and seminars of various levels, and are often invited as guests to academic and non-academic activities to share their experiences. Besides, since they helped to set up the organization, the Labor Education and Service Network has been acting as the major co-operator of The Firefly. Members with the Labor Education and Service Network work as permanent attendants in the Firefly, participating in regular meetings and giving suggestions and advices. Currently, the two members are Su Xiang and Lao Zhu. They are in every regular weekly meeting, and they instruct the activities of The Firefly. Their suggestions are valued by The Firefly.

In 2005, the Sisters' Group was set up. The major aim of the group was to help women workers to build up confidence and raise awareness of gender equality. The "Women Workers Are the Best" dramatic troupe was set up in Nov 2014, and it was set up on the basis of The Sisters' Group. In the study of this troupe, we must bear in mind that it is not an isolated organization. On the contrary, it is based on a network of women workers cultivated and educated by the Firefly. In other words, "Women Workers Are The Best" is an interest group belonging to the department of women workers in The Firefly.

There are mainly 6 members in the troupe, including Ding Dang, who is the founder of the group. She works as an NGO worker in the department of women workers in The Firefly. The other 5 members are all women migrant workers. The direct reason for setting up the troupe was to participate in the Migrant Workers' Spring Festival Gala<sup>2</sup>. Though their drama was not picked for the gala, Ding is not disappointed. She has her own plan:

"I have been planning to set up a dramatic troupe for a long time. The Spring Festival Gala is only an opportunity for me to put it into practice. I have been working as an NGO worker for 9 years. At first, it was very difficult to carry out activities for women workers. Chinese women are shy, not to mention women migrant workers. Therefore, we devoted a lot of efforts on the cultivation of women workers' confidence. There is one problem in doing so: these activities cannot build a network. You know, women workers are 'fluent', when people leave, or find other jobs in other parts of the city, we will lose an experienced participant. But a dramatic troupe is different. Performing dramas calls for confidence, which some women already have after several years' experience of participating in our activities, so we don't have this problem now. Besides, a dramatic troupe is a network, linking people together. People with the same interests will stay with us. That is why we set up this troupe. "

(Personal interview)

After its foundation in November 2014, the troupe gave a public performance in

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<sup>2</sup> Workers' Spring Festival Gala: A gala organized by Beijing Ground Band. It selects programs all over the country performed by migrant workers and show them in Beijing.

December to celebrate the New Year in Shenzhen. My analysis will be based on the version of transcripts that they use for this performance.

## **5.2 Inspirations for the Drama**

The whole drama has three scenes, namely freedom of marriage, the use of contraceptive rings, and left-behind children. The three topics are all closely related to women workers' lives. The five women workers, plus a student who is interested in their activities and participate continuously, acted with confidence. Some of these topics, though being important, are not commonly discussed, especially in the public. So here comes the question: What are the inspirations for them to create and perform this drama, and how do they manage to create it?

A part of the answer lies in Ding's reply that I quoted before: "I have been planning to set up a dramatic troupe for a long time." Dramas have been one of the major workers' activities in China. It is a way for workers to express demands and catalyze for changes. For example, *The World Factory* is one influential workers' drama. In *The Firefly*, performing dramas has also been an important measure to organize workers' activities and help them to express ideas. In 2010, one drama called *The Road*, which is about workers' path of life after the Reform and Opening Up, was performed publicly in Beijing.

However, the tradition of performing dramas in the working class cannot answer the question as asked in the beginning of this chapter. This drama is very special – it is a show focusing on women workers' resistance against the control of their bodies. In other words, as a women workers' drama about the female embodiment, it has great significance in the research of women workers' life and work situations. This is not a question that can be simply answered by "We have this tradition" or "I have been planning to do this for a long time".

### **5.2.1 External Communications**

As I mentioned before, *The Firefly* has various ways of communications with

scholars, university students, and other NGOs etc.. As the chief and founder of the dramatic troupe, Ding Dang's direct knowledge of gender and feminism theories are worth studying. Ding told me that commonly she participates in trainings and conferences 3 to 4 times per year. These topics of these activities are not limited to the issue of gender, but as the chief of the department of women workers in her organization, she is mainly participates in activities that are related to gender issues. For example, in September 2014, she was invited to the 5<sup>th</sup> Sino-Nordic Women and Gender Studies Conference, which focuses on gender and communication. In 2014, she also participated in the training of Marxism Feminism Theories and its application in women workers' activities held by Hand-in-Hand, another service center for workers in Shenzhen. In April 2015, she was invited as a guest to view in the public show of the record film *The Cotton*<sup>3</sup> to share her experiences of organizing women workers' activities in the after-cast discussion.

This part will discuss two examples of Ding's participation in gender trainings and conferences to show the influence of western body politics theories on the "Women Workers Are The Best" troupe.

Ding got access to gender theories 6 years ago. Back at that time, activities aiming to raise gender awareness were hard to carry out in Shenzhen. In order to address the problem, Su Xiang with the Labor Education and Service Network organized a training camp for NGO workers in Shenzhen on the applications of gender theories in their work. According to Su Xiang, the aim of the training was to adopt gender theories in NGO's work. (Personal interview) With her instructions, NGO workers firstly discussed the issue of women workers' lives that can be viewed from a feminist perspective, and then they learned some basic gender theories.

When I asked Su how body politics were discussed and taught, she answered me:

"The issue of body is very subtle sometimes. Regarding women workers, teaching them body politics theories in an abstract way makes no sense. Women workers' bodies are under multiple exploitations of capitalism, government

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<sup>3</sup> The Cotton is a record film by Zhouhao. A record on the embodiment of the commodity chain starting with cotton picking in Xinjiang Province and ending with exported clothes in China.

mechanism and patriarchal culture. If we are going to address their body issues, it is going to be closely related to their special life and working situations.” (Personal interview)

Ding Dang also recalled this training like this:

“The aim of the training was to discuss detailed problems and find a better way to encourage women workers participate in our activities. Besides that, we also discussed some theories. The trainers might have mentioned some big names of theorists, but I remember none of them. Yet I remember clearly an example, which I tell women workers all the time: There is Xiao Ming, who is a boy, and Xiao Hong, who is a girl. They start at the same level at school and they have the same social position in the society. Xiao Ming gets more encouragement from parents, and he thus has more resources. Gradually he becomes confident and brave. On the contrary, Xiao Hong is told to behave herself all the time, because she is a girl. She is told that it is no good for her to have too much education, and she has to be tender, otherwise nobody will be willing to marry her. Xiao Hong becomes shy and timid. She becomes a woman.” (Personal interview)

Anybody who is familiar with gender theories will immediately understand that what Ding Dang talks about is the anti-essentialism feminism ideas. In other words, gender differences are not determined by biological sexes; they are constructed under all kinds of social discourses. The biological bodies do not determine our gender roles. Just as Judith Butler maintains, there is no core in the norms of gender. It is like an onion rather than a peach, if you want to trace it back to the origin, you will find many “layers” of constructed discourses rather than a core. (2004)

Though Ding didn't know the names of theorists, she suddenly realized the significance of the theory for her work. She understands that it is the contents of the theories that matter, rather than the names of the theorists or a systemic knowledge of gender. Her subjectivity is thus reflected. She situated the theory by choosing the significant parts and ignoring the useless parts.

A second example is the 5<sup>th</sup> Sino-Nordic Women and Gender Studies Conference. Professor Bu Wei with the China Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) is one of the council members of The Firefly. She is the organizer of the conference, and she invited Ding to share her first-hand experiences of organizing women workers' activities in China on the conference. Ding gave a presentation on the work of the department of women workers in The Firefly. Such activities include a competition called "Women Workers are the Best", in which women workers participate and described one thing in their life that they thought could make them "the best". She showed the positivism and bravery of women workers in the demonstration of these activities.

Besides giving presentation, Ding also had the opportunity to learn from renown theorists. Famous feminist scholars, such as Raewyn Connell, Qi Wang and Zhao Yuezhi all participated in the conference. Presentations covered gender and communication in globalization, anti-terrorism wars, gender education and empowerment and feminism activities in Beijing etc.. With a translator, Ding could learn from world-renown feminists directly. How did Ding make use of these opportunities and learn from theorists at conferences?

Q: You have been to many great conferences, how have theories inspired you?

"Frankly, I don't know much about theories. Theories are for schools, not for practices. It is interesting to hear these discussions, but it cannot help me with my work directly. For example, there was one student who came to our organization. I asked her to help women workers to warm up before the activity. She said, 'now let's do some desensitization practice.' I didn't what 'desensitization' was, nor did other women workers know. But if you tell the workers that, say, now we are going to do some exercise in which we say many times a thing that we are too shy to say, and we will overcome the shyness, they will understand."

Q: So how do you think these theories have benefited you?

"Well when I hear some theories that I think will be useful, or sometimes I hear concepts that can accurately describe something that I try to explain, I will remember



these theories. For example, the notion of ‘power relations’, I think can best describe the situations of women workers. But I remember them only for the convenience of my expression. I won’t organize an activity for the sake to use of some theories. The theories should serve my activities, rather than the contrary situation.”

From the perspective of theory dissemination and travelling, western theories of body politics “travel” directly from the west to the “Women Workers Are the Best Troupe” via Ding Dang, through international academic conferences and NGO training camps. How these theories are situated and localized is worth studying. From Ding’s answers, we can see that she acts as a major bridge in the process of the situation of body politics theories. As an experienced NGO worker, she chooses and situates western body politics theories according to her first-hand experiences of the organization of women workers’ activities.

Ding’s words show that she is clear in targets of learning theories. One of the results of her clear-mindedness is that the drama of the troupe is closely related to women workers’ life and is therefore able to reflect the real situations of them. In this sense, we can say that body politics theories “travel” to NGOs in China, and NGO worker Ding learns them. After that, Ding lets the theories travel to women workers by applying them in the drama. In this process, she situates them and enriches them.

### **5.2.2 The Creation of the Drama**

Through the analysis of the last part, we now know that “The Women Workers Are the Best” is influenced by western body politics. On this basis, how is the drama created? In my fieldwork, I got to know that Shanquan Troupe, a NGO founded on the basis of a students’ troupe in Sun Yat-Sen University in Guangzhou, Guangdong Province offered them significant help in the creation of the drama. Peirong, a member of Shanquan, helped these women workers during the whole process of the creation and the rehearsal for the drama. From November to December 2014, Peirong helped to organize 6 times of workshops and rehearsals for the drama.

Shanquan Troupe is a troupe to create, rehearse and perform the drama of *The Vagina Monologues*. *The Vagina Monologues* is a drama created in 1996 by an American feminist and writer Eve Ensler. The play breaks the boundary between the public and private spheres and challenges negative associations with the female bodies. The drama, and its affiliated organization V-Day have made great contributions in the global battles against sexual violence against women. (Milwertz and Bu, 2012) The first time that *The Vagina Monologues* was shown in China in the local language was in Sun Yat-Sen University in 2003 with the help of Professor Ai Xiaoming, a professor of the Chinese Department of the university. (ibid)

10 years after that, in 2013, students in Sun Yat-Sen University organized an activity called “Vagina Monologues to the End” to celebrate the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary. After a lot of interviews, they created 10 scenes of drama about women’s bodies, including topics of abortion, birth-giving, rape etc.. After the activity, professors in the Chinese Department, such as Song Sufeng and Ke Qianting helped the troupe to register as an NGO. Today, this NGO’s main activities include drama performance of *The Vagina Monologues – The Shanquan Version*, and holding of some public gender courses etc..

Professor Song Sufeng is from Taiwan, and she teaches in Sun Yat-sen University. She emphasizes the importance that universities students should serve the communities. Therefore, she has been sending backbones of the group to trainings of applied drama and forum drama, which are dramas that can serve the community and inspire people more efficiently than common dramas.

Then how did the Shanquan Troupe and the “Women Workers Are the Best” troupe get in touch and make the cooperation on the creation of their drama?

According to Peirong and Ding, they met in a drama workshop in Guangzhou, when Shanquan played a scene called *The Fear of Contraceptive Rings Before Marriage*. Ding was inspired and asked Peirong to help her.

As I mentioned above, pushed by Professor Song Sufeng, Shanquan has been focusing on carrying out drama workshops and public gender courses. In September,

2014, Peirong helped to hold an activity called “The Communities Have Power” in a NGO called the Gongming (which means justice and brightness, the pronunciation of the word is similar to “civil” in Chinese, 公民, pronounced as gongmin) Center Guangzhou, Guangdong Province. This activity invited a lot of social workers. Shanquan performed one scene of drama on the fear of contraceptive rings, and then asked people to join in the discussion of this topic. As I mention in the last part, NGO workers in The Firefly have many opportunities to communicate with the external world, and this time Ding was also invited. This scene caused Ding’s attention naturally, since she had been opposing the idea of contraceptive rings.

According to Peirong, the story in this scene is about the fear of young girls in the cities of contraceptive rings. It narrates the process of how one ring is put into a woman’s body, and how the pathological changes happen. Eventually, it causes severe female hygiene problems. After performing this drama, Peirong asked NGO workers present to participate in the discussion of the topic, which most Chinese women have or will experience.

This experience inspired Ding a lot, because she herself was troubled by this issue. She doesn’t want to go through the operation, but in order to achieve the target of birth control and see the clear numbers of the achievements, the government has linked contraceptive operations with the social welfare system. Therefore, because she doesn’t want to have a ring put in her body, her mother-in-law criticized her for being “too selfish”. In this activity, Ding shared the story with other participants.

After 3 months, when Ding wanted to set up a women workers’ dramatic troupe and create a drama about women workers’ life, she thought of Peirong. With community service as one of the agendas of Shanquan, Peirong willingly took the task and went to Shenzhen, another city in Guangdong Province, and helped to found the “Women Workers Are the Best” troupe.

In the interview with Peirong, I understand that the process of creation is as follows:

“Firstly I let everybody sit in a circle and asked them some questions. It is

important that everybody attend the discussion. I asked questions such as ‘when talking about women workers, what are your first impressions?’ and ‘if you are going to tell a story of your life, what are you going to tell?’ And then I divided people into groups based on the answers, such as the group of mothers, of unmarried girls and married women who concerned about the matters of contraception. I then let people continue discussing the issues that are related to the topic. For example, moms concerned about the issue of their left-home children, and young girls concerned about the issue of free choice of marriage. Telling story is important. I just let everybody tell their story, and let Ding write them down and arrange them into scripts.”

Through these measures, Peirong helped everybody to realize the unfairness and injustice in their everyday life and directed them to think about power relations and discourses. Some phenomenon, such as the link between contraceptive rings and birth control policies, became a “natural” part of the everyday life after numerous times of repetition. Commonly people are used to the discourses and forget to challenge the unjust power relations underlying them. If people just take their body experiences for granted, they can never challenge them. However, what Peirong did in the creation of the drama was leading people to reflect on the social discourses and helping people to create their own ones to challenge the existing power relations.

The fact that Peirong didn’t come with chosen topics but let people picked their own topics after discussion is interesting. It is actually the reflection of Shanquan’s own experiences on the situation of knowledge. As I mentioned before, in the creation for *The Vagina Monologues – The Shanquan Version*, the group didn’t just take over Eve Ensler’s play and performed it. They conducted interviews with many women and came up with their own version. What Shanquan members have been doing is already the situation and localization of global knowledge of body politics. By letting women workers choose their own topics in the drama, Peirong was actually **sharing her experience in the situation of knowledge** in Shanquan Troupe.

Then how do women workers benefit from this way of drama creation? I also conducted interviews with all the five members in the troupe. All women, except Ding, have never heard of the play *The Vagina Monologues*, nor could they use terms such as “power relations” or “body politics” as Ding did. However, they all felt passionate about the drama. Peirong’s way of story telling reminded them of their life experiences, and helped them to express what they felt unfair. Peirong was helping them to deepen their understanding of body politics in a local way.

The understanding of gender equality of the four other interviewees can be summarized as a sentence of Fen, a 39-year old woman worker, “I think gender equality means that whatever men are capable, women can do that, too. Whatever women do, men can do them, too.” Without academic knowledge of body politics, they understand the essence of female embodiment anyway: gender difference is not necessarily a result of sex differences, and essentialism should be challenged.

The active external communications of The Firefly helped Ding to get in touch with the Shanquan Troupe and Peirong, and invited Peirong to help them in the creation of the drama. Peirong inspired Ding in the topic of contraceptive rings, and gave Ding courage to carry out this controversial topic. Without Peirong’s help, Ding could have been able to set up the troupe and manage to give public performance in such a short time (2 months). Besides inspiring Ding in topics, Peirong also helped Ding to achieve the situation of body politics theories that Ding learned in the drama.

The surprising part of the creation process is that, even without the academic knowledge of body politics, just with some help in the creation techniques, women workers still could manage to create a drama on the female bodies. In their long life experience with the struggle between the powers of hierarchical system, government’s agenda and capitalist mechanism, they already understand the essence of body politics in their everyday life – the female bodies are not determined by their biological sex, but the discourse and everyday practices. These discourse are not neutral, and the truth of women’s bodies need to be rewritten. This phenomenon shows that the

“origins” of body politics theories are not only in western countries but also among Chinese women workers. The “situation process” has to be considered as the interaction between the existing local knowledge and the new western theories of body politics, rather than a one-direction of theory travelling.

### **5.3 Body Politics in the Drama**

As introduced above, the drama created by women workers has three scenes. However, among them, the scene of left-home children is not closely related to body issues as the rest two are. I will focus on the two scenes of freedom of marriage and contraceptive rings to discuss how women workers address the issue of body in the drama.

#### **5.3.1 Freedom of Marriage**

Traditionally, China has a long history of arranged marriage. Arranged marriage means that parents and matchmakers pick marriage partners for the young couple. Child brides and polygamy were the norm for millennia. Within marriage women were regarded as little more than incubators for sons to carry on their husbands' family line. (Sun, 2011) After the *New Marriage Law* was published in April 1950, arranged marriage was discouraged, and freedom of love and marriage were protected as people's rights. However, long after the law was published, in rural areas, marriage is still “parents' order and matchmakers' words”. (ibid) Before 1980s, the phenomena of exchange marriage<sup>4</sup> and young bride<sup>5</sup> were quite common, especially in less-developed areas such as Henan Province, Anhui Province, the north of Jiangsu Province and mountainous areas in Shandong Province. (ibid) After the Reform and Opening Up in the 1980s, freedom of marriage became more and more popular in rural areas. However, matchmakers were still important in the making of marriages,

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<sup>4</sup> Exchange marriage: The phenomenon that because there are too many children in a family, girls have to get married with a man, in return, the boy in the family gets to marry a girl from the other family.

<sup>5</sup> Young bride: The phenomenon that a family adopts a girl from the young age, and after the girl grows up, the son of the family will marry her.

and parents' opinions were still important for young people.

After 2000, with the appearance of the people group of migrant workers, the former peasants became influenced by the urban culture of freedom of marriage. They try to break away from the traditional marriage model which is based on parents' opinions, and they want to pursue freedom of love and marriage.

Women workers have strong motivation to pursue the freedom of marriage. Most women workers are from the rural areas, besides the common influences of the traditional culture of arranged marriage on both men and women, they face special difficulties due to their gender roles. Many women leave home to raise money for their family. For example, they have to support their brothers to go for further education. (Pun, 2005) Though they leave the family for the time being, both themselves and their families have the expectations that they will return to the rural areas, and get married as a common village girl. (ibid) Their time in the cities is limited. Most women workers return to their hometowns before the age of 30. (ibid) Once they return to their hometowns, their marriages are again under great influence of their parents. This is the result of a patriarchal culture. Therefore, in order to break away from the patriarchal rural culture, women workers have a strong yearning for freedom of marriage.

The following case is a real story of one troupe member, Hong. This case can illustrate how women's bodies are controlled and considered as properties in the patriarchal system.

### **The case of Hong**

The story happened 20 years ago. Hong is born in a village in Hunan Province. When she is a kid, she envies those people who can go to the cities to be workers. However, her father has strict control over her, because he has bad impressions on women workers. He tells Hong that women workers in cities are bad women, "No matter how pure you are before you get out of the village, once you start your life as a woman worker, you will be a bad woman one day." Therefore, he sets a rule that as

long as he is alive, Hong cannot get out of the village.

When Hong is 18, a matchmaker sets Hong up with a boy, Jian. Jian is from a rich family, with two big houses. The two families get engaged. However, Hong finds out that Jian has a inclination of domestic violence. But the marriage arrangement is settled, and Jian's family has already delivered betrothal gifts<sup>6</sup>. Hong struggles. At this moment, Jian rapes Hong in a date. Hong becomes even more desperate, because in the view of the local people, engagement in marriage is also a kind of marriage. The woman becomes the property of the man's family once they are engaged. And in the culture of her hometown, there can be no rape within a marriage.

Hong thinks to herself that if she tells her parents, the wedding might even come earlier. After crying for a few days, she escapes from her village and goes to Fujian Province, where she meets Qi, her current husband. They gets married and have a baby.

Only after the baby is born, Hong dares to go back home. At first, her parents still don't agree on her marriage. Besides, Jian's family doesn't want to let it go. They want the betrothal gifts back. Hong's family give the money back, and gradually Jian's family ceases causing troubles.

In this case, the control of women's bodies in arranged marriage is obvious. Before his daughter gets married, the father takes her as his own property and controls her. After the marriage is arranged, the husband takes the women as his property. Therefore, with this logic, there can be no rape in marriage, and women have no way out if they face sexual violence. This case thoroughly illuminates how vulnerable a girl in the rural areas is in an arranged marriage. She cannot control her own body, and she is passed on from her father to her arranged husband as a property rather than a person, and her female body which is fertile makes the value of the property. In the story we can see the importance of a decent financial situations of the boy's family in the choice of marriage partners. Women are supposed to depend on the

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<sup>6</sup>Betrothal gifts: Money and gifts that a man's family have to give to a woman's family before the marriage engagement. It is a traditional custom in China.



men's families.

The new generation of migrant workers want to avoid such sad stories in their lives. They want to pursue freedom of marriage. This is shown in the scene of "freedom of marriage".

Mom: My daughter, I have something to tell you. Your aunt wants to introduce a boy to you. He is from a rich family with car and a house! Go and meet with him later.

Daughter: Mom! You already know that I have a boyfriend. We have been together for 4 year, why do you insist on letting me meet new boys?

Voice from the backstage:

Woman A: Arranged marriage? It is the 21th Century now!

Woman B: She already has a boyfriend! Why arranging her another?

Mom: We don't like your boyfriend. His hometown is too far away from home. If you get married with him, it won't be easy for us to see you. By the way, his family is not so well off. We don't agree on this marriage!

Voice from the backstage:

Woman C: It has been 4 years, and he still hasn't married you. He doesn't want to marry you at all!

Woman D: Just go and check it out! It will lead to no harm.

Daughter: Mom, the distance is no problem. We can use telephone and video calls. The transportation is convenient, we can travel by Express Railway, or airplane, and we get to see you often! Besides, you and my father got married through a set up by the matchmaker. But you two fight a lot! I have grown up, I wan to live my own life.

Mom: You are such a persistent kid! I am considering for your sake. When you suffer in the future, you will know!

Together: Freedom of love, freedom of marriage!

This scene is a common scene when women migrant workers return to their

hometowns in rural areas. Compared with Hong's time which is 20 years ago, parents still consider the economic situations as a core standard of the boy's family. Even the girl in the drama has a boyfriend, parents still think that it is worth meeting others, because the boy's family "have a car and a house". A woman is the dependency in a family, and she has to rely on a man.



The rehearsal of the Scene "freedom of marriage". Qin plays the daughter on the left and Ling plays the mother on the right. Photoed by Zhang Lizao.

Later, the daughter expresses the pursuit of marriage freedom of the new generation of women workers: "we can set up a family, and earn money and travel with Express Railway to visit you." Here the woman is not simply depending on the family, she is the creator of her new life. And she also reflects on arranged marriages: "you and my father got married through a set up by the matchmaker. But you two fight a lot!"

The girl in the scene is challenging the discourses, which support the model of arranged marriage by emphasizing the advantages of marriage freedom and pointing out its disadvantages. Women's bodies are treated as objects in arranged marriage, however, parents still think it is better for their daughters to jump into arranged marriages. This reflects the patriarchal traditions in rural China.

In feudal times, in order to maintain the stability of the society, women were

confined in the private sphere and men were considered to participants in the public sphere. An efficient way to ensure this model is to set people into arranged marriages in the society, and for the government at that time, the social orders and feudal systems could be maintained and regenerated. After thousands years of practice, the model has become a “natural” thing. Less opened to the world than the cities, people, especially parents in the rural areas, still tend to arrange the marriage of their children.

The performers in the scene are Ling and Qin. Ling and Qin joined the Sisters' Group 6 years and 4 years ago separately. They both have rich experiences regarding women workers' activities, and their gender awareness has been cultivated in this process.

Their experiences regarding the choice of marriage are interesting. Ling chooses her husband totally on her own. She met her husband through a friend rather than through matchmakers or parents' orders. Qin met her boyfriend 6 years ago by QQ<sup>7</sup> chatting. Qin is from Meizhou, Guangdong Province. She and her boyfriend have been together for 6 years. Her boyfriend is from Heilongjiang Province, which is in the northeast of China – very far away from her hometown. Her parents never agree on this relationship, and always want to set her up with other boys. Gradually, her parents seem to admit it, but still show discontent whenever they have opportunities.

Now we can see that this drama is totally about real experiences that are closely related to women workers' life. We can see that the pursuit of freedom in marriage in the new generation is quite obvious. This is the reflection of resistance against the control of the body in the patriarchal system. The logic of arranged marriage is the control of women's bodies. Women are not considered as human beings but as properties.

However, this scene is a “safe” topic among migrant workers, since “male migrant workers don't like set marriages, either”. (Ding, personal interview) The next

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<sup>7</sup> QQ: A popular social network in China.

example is a more complex compared with this one.

### **5.3.2 The Resistance against the Use of Contraceptive Rings**

#### **A Review of the Family Planning Policy**

If we want to discuss the adoption of contraceptive rings in China, we must start with the history of family planning and one-child policy in China.

The family planning policy, also known as the one-child policy, is a series of population control strategies in China. The policy was published in 1978, and has been carried out by “Population and Family Planning Commissions” at every level of the government. (Dewey, 2004)

China’s family planning movement has managed to control the size of the population. However, outside China, the policy is controversial. It is accused of the violation of human rights, and also raises concerns about serious social consequences.

The success of birth control in China lies in the contraceptive measures that target at women’s bodies. The birth control in China happened in the background that too large a population is causing pressure for the country. Therefore, individual’s reproduction must comply with the country’s demands. The government’s birth control movement focuses on direct index. The local Population and Family Planning Commission must finish the tasks that their superiors assign them, which are commonly described in numbers. In order to finish the tasks, millions of women who are at their childbearing age are forced to go through operations and be put a contraceptive ring in their womb. The operations have side effects, and with such a large population, the side effects may cause a serious social problem.

In the 1990s, the national government realized the harm on women’s health of forced contraceptive ring operations. Therefore, the National Family Planning Commission passed a policy of “San Wei Zhu” (三为主, Three Focuses)<sup>8</sup>. However, statistics is still used as the major evaluation standard for birth control work, and forced contraceptive operations still existed. For example, in 2009, the local

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<sup>8</sup> San Wei Zhu: Three Focuses, namely focuses on publication, on contraception and on the daily work.

government in Jining, Shandong Province carried out a “mass birth control activity”. The target assigned by Jining government to Qufu local government was to check have a body check that covers 100% of the population, and 3000 cases of ligation, 9300 cases of contraceptive ring operation and 600 cases of abortions. Local governments that cannot acquire the task will be punished the next year. (No.10 File of Qufu Population and Family Planning Commissions, 2009) Under this background, it is not difficult to understand why there are so many forced operations.

### **The Discussion of the Harm to Women's Bodies**

Under this general background, the troupe discussed the issue of contraceptive rings. The direct discussion is on the damage that it has on women's bodies.

Everybody together: It is just a ring, why are you so upset?

Ding: It is easy for you to say. I have a friend, who has two periods per month because of the operation. Another friend has to go through this operation because she wants to enjoy the due welfare of the government to alleviate the family economic pressure. She told me that she didn't understand the whole thing. Why should we go through operations when we are not sick? She told me that she simply couldn't bear the pain. There are more examples of women workers who start to suffer from feminine hygiene diseases because of the operations. If I go through this operation, my body might get injured!

The topic touches upon the reality of health damage caused by contraceptive operations. The rate of complicating diseases caused by these operations varies from 3.3% (Wu, 2007, p36) to 2.098% (Chen and Qiong, 2007, p1437). However, these rates are based on a large population of all women at the age of fertility in China, and the effects may lead to a serious social issue.

In China, faced with the policies of contraceptive rings, migrant workers have their own life experiences. According to Ding, there are mainly two reasons which

makes women workers especially vulnerable compared with middle-class women:

Firstly, women workers have to do manual labor, which can be more intense than middle-class women. Therefore, the side effects caused by operations can be worse;

Secondly, regarding the birth control tasks in the local commission, which are described in number in every community, middle-class women can use their social connections to avoid these operations. However, as “floating population”, migrant workers barely have other options but go through the operations.

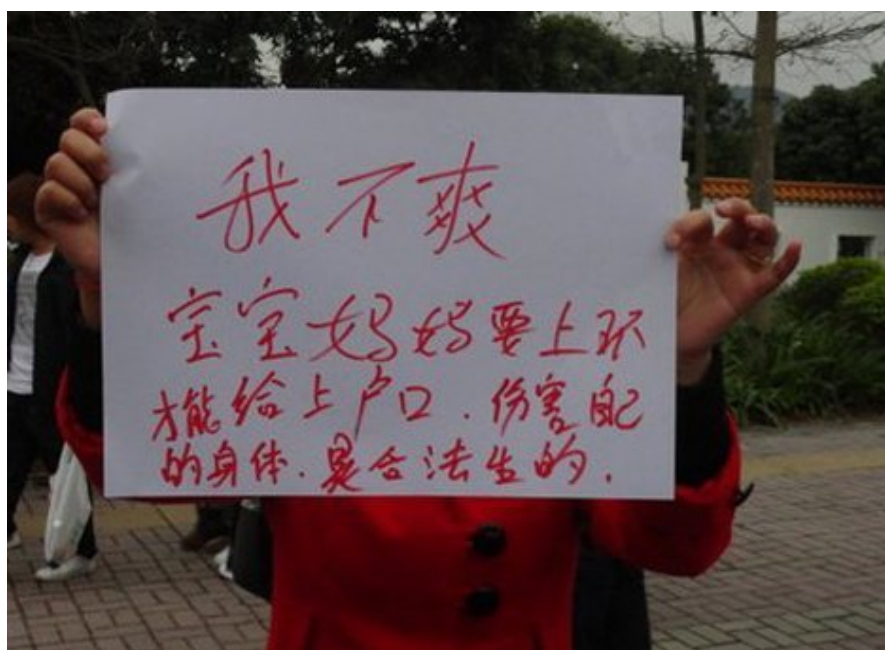
On the damage of contraceptive operations on migrant women workers' bodies, we can refer to the summary by Kong (2008). The author concludes the harm as “Three Mountains”: Firstly, many women suffer from complicating diseases and cannot bear to do physical labor anymore. They lose the ability to live on their own. Secondly, under constant pain, they are under heavy mental pressures. If they lose the ability to earn a living, their families may look down upon them. Thirdly, in order to cure the diseases, they have to spend a lot of money on medicines, which put more financial burdens on the already difficult situation in their families.

Women's attitudes towards this issue are complex. On earth, it is an issue of women's body, about the private parts, and sometimes it is about female hygiene diseases. Chinese women tend to shed these issues because they feel shy or degraded if they are involved in such problems. (ibid) Commonly, it is not supposed to be a public issue. This is exactly the kind of problems that involve body politics: women are considered as “imperfect” men, and women's issues are considered as secrets and shame.

However, “Women Workers Are the Best” troupe performed this issue in public. This is a breakthrough. The boundary between private and public spheres is broken, and a patriarchal culture is thus challenged. It shows the subjectivity of women workers. Women dare to challenge the power relations that exist commonly, and express their discomfort caused by it. This is the significance of claiming the discomfort caused by contraceptive diseases in the drama.

### The Criticism on The Forced Policies

In order to carry out the birth control policy, besides forced operations, the government also combines contraceptive operations with the social welfare system. Family planning not only transformed the reproduction culture, but also put women's reproduction role, which was a private topic as a public issue, and set it as the focus of government's work. (Hu, 2009) Whether local government officials are able to fulfill the assigned birth control tasks is closely related with the measurement of their political achievements. This motivates government officials to use every possible measure to ensure the application of the one-child policies, including linking contraceptive operations with the social welfare system.



A women worker holds a paper with words that read: I don't like it. I can only get my son's household registration done after I have the contraceptive ring in my body. It harms my health. Photoed by: Hand-in-Hand.

In the drama, this part is performed as follows:

Ding: People say that it is not easy to give birth to a baby. However, it is even more difficult to raise it. You don't believe me? Just watch this.

(Other women stand in a line)

Ding: Hello, I want to register the Hukou (residence permission) for my son.

Answer: Have you gone through the contraceptive ring operation?

Ding: Hello, I want to register for adolescent's health care for my son.

Answer: I need the proof of the contraceptive ring.

Ding: Hello, I want to apply for the kindergarten subsidies for my son.

Answer: I need the proof of the contraceptive ring.

Ding: I want to apply for the only-child document.

Answer: I need the proof of the contraceptive ring.

Ding: I want to apply to get into primary school for my son.

Answer: I need the proof of the contraceptive ring.

Ding: (sigh) Life is not easy. I have been in Shenzhen for 10 years, and my son was born here. But we don't belong here. We don't earn much, but we have to spend money everywhere. For example, one semester in a kindergarten costs at least 5000 yuan.

Voice from woman A: Doesn't the government have subsidies?

Ding: Well, it sounds nice. Yes migrant workers can benefit from some subsidies, but if you want your children to enjoy the free 9-year compulsory education, the mom has to have a ring in her womb!

This scene criticizes the reality that local governments always combine birth control with welfare systems such as household registration (the Hukou in China) and children's education. It is like "bundle sales".

According to *The people's Republic of China Household Registration Ordinance*, Article 7, after one month of baby birth, residence records should be registered. This means that registration of Hukou is with no conditions. However, in the real cases, officials who are in charge of household registration always ask parents to go to the Population and Family Planning Commission for the proof that the one person of the couple has gone through contraceptive operations. Media has reported on such cases in Shandong Province, Zhuhai, Guangzhou Province and Wuhan, Hubei Province etc. (the Tecent Group, 2012)



In order to eliminate the pressure of the large population, the governments use unfair policies to tame women's bodies. Social welfares are very important for migrant women, and if the government link contraceptive operations with welfares such as household registration and their children's education, their bodies have to surrender.

### **Gendered Bodies in Birth Control**

Vasectomy is an operation on men's bodies, which prevents the sperm from becoming part of the ejaculated fluid. Compared with contraceptive measures on women, it is more convenient to conduct with lower rate of complicating diseases. (Kolsa, 2008) However, in China, contraceptive burdens are mainly carried by women. In 85% couples, women go through contraceptive operations rather than men. (The Center of Population and Development, 2007)

This phenomenon has several reasons. Firstly, in rural areas, men are the major labor. If men have complicating diseases, the whole family might fall apart. So many families choose to pick women as the bearers of the operation. On the other hand, women are the bearer of birth. Compared with conducting vasectomy on men, letting women have the operation is more efficient for the government to control. This is called the "militarization management" of the government centering on the control of the amount of the population. (Zhang, 2008)

The drama also touches upon the issue of gender inequality in contraceptive measure.



The Rehearsal of the scene “contraceptive rings”. The woman who sits in the front is Ding.  
Phototed by: Zhang Lizao.

Together: So you don't want to have the ring. Have you thought about your son?

Ding: What should I do?

Father-in-law (Woman B): It is your fault that my grandson cannot get the household registration done.

Husband (Women C): It is your fault that we cannot enjoy the subsidies.

Mother-in-Law (Women D): Every woman has to go through this. This is our fate.

Ding: I don't understand. It is easy for you people to talk, but it is my body that is harmed. I have to work every day, and I have to take care of the housework. I take no fewer responsibilities for the family than my husband do. Family planning is supposed to be the shared responsibility for both the husband and the wife. Besides, there are many other measures that can prevent pregnancy. Why indeed should my body be controlled?

However, the discussion of contraception ring operations is with controversies even inside organization of The Firefly. Once I was attending a regular meeting, and when Ding mentioned that they were going to introduce the issue of contraceptive

rings, a male NGO worker who is in charge of workers' collective activities expressed his discontent and confuse about this issue:

“Isn't it natural to put a contraceptive ring in woman's body? After we had two children, we thought it was enough. So my wife went through the operation. I think it is a way to protect women's bodies: otherwise, women just keep getting pregnant. Why are you so upset with this policy?”

The troupe is not able to win support inside the organization, not to mention to win support in a large scale. After a long history of the country pushing the movement of contraceptive rings in China, men are used to the fact that they don't need to bear the responsibilities in marriage. This is a discourse set up by the government, and people are influenced by it. To put it clearly, the government's interests and men's interests overlap on this issue. This is also why Ding cannot put it clearly to call on men to go through contraceptive operations in the drama.

Ding's consideration on strategies also reveals women's dilemma in contraceptive issues. This scene is positive in provoking reflection and thinking on this issue among workers, but it is not offering a clear solution. When asked why not call on men to take the responsibilities in the drama, Ding said,

“The gender equality I understand is about the same rights between men and women. Well, women don't like contraceptive rings, because it is not comfortable. So you ask men to take the responsibilities. Men are also human beings; they don't like it, either. It is simply not right to take off the pain from one person and enforce it on the other. So we just mentioned that we could use other contraceptive measures instead, such as contraceptive pills or condoms.” (Personal interview)

Traditionally in China, women's bodies were considered as the “natural” bearers of reproduction. Therefore, once there are responsibilities of contraception, women should be the main bearers of them. The fact that vasectomy is not the mainstream measure of contraceptive measures is the result of the co-effects of social traditions and social realities – the gender inequality in China.

However, in the control of the size of the population, the government wants more

than an obscure picture. It wants a hard and clear data, in numbers rather than in words. To control the number of contraceptive and abortion operations are measureable and efficient. This means that if people replace operations with pills and condoms, it is not measureable and therefore doesn't meet the requirements of the government. Women's bodies are, as illustrated in the case, in a dilemma between the government's interests and a patriarchal culture.

We should notice the significance that women workers actually take active part to present their concerns about contraceptive measures. Women workers are viewed as vulnerable, because they have a lower level of education, poor living conditions and lack sufficient knowledge of physical health. (Xie, Zhong and Zeng, 2006) Another Chinese research maintains that women tend to keep silent when their rights are violated. Besides complaining in private and crying, they barely have other measures to express their discontents. This author also describes them as "a large group of aphasic people". (Kong, 2008)

However, the "Women Workers Are the Best" troupe breaks the silence. They present the world with their originally created drama to challenge the unfair discourses and power relations, and they want their voice on the issue of birth control to be heard. To this extent, the drama is groundbreaking. It shows the subjectivity of women workers in the issue of the female bodies.

#### **5.4 Theoretical Discussion**

The parts above provide the answers to the two sub-questions in the Problem Formulation part. This part will try to answer the third sub-question: What are the potential effects/contributions for the issue of the Body and gender equality brought about by the drama of the "Women Workers Are the Best" Troupe? The answer has been reflected in the former analysis parts, and I will sum it up in this part.

Firstly, discussing the issue of the bodies as a clear topic is a new phenomenon in

the activities of women migrant workers. Actually, activities to help women workers build their confidence and break the binary between the two sexes that The Firefly had been organizing can also be considered as dealing with body politics by the general definition. However, the discussion of body politics as a clear issue intensively showed the experiences and achievements of gender awareness raising work that the workers' NGOs have been conducting. It is a good example in the study of body politics in the life and work of migrant workers in China.

Women workers are under multiple oppression of patriarchal culture, the government and capitalist production mechanism, and their bodies are going through the complex negotiation with all kinds of discourses. Under this background, the discussion of women workers' subjectivity is of great significance. This case illustrates the potentials of resistance and rivalry of bodies under unfair power relations. Just as Foucault maintains, bodies are not fixed objects; they are fluid. (1978) This case can help us to understand the oppressions that women workers face and their potentials to resist and create new discourses.

Secondly, the process of the situation of knowledge is worth studying. In the case of body politics, the travelling of theories is not a one-direction process as described in Said's Travelling Theory, and the origin of the theories do not necessarily lies in western countries. Women workers in the "Women Workers Are the Best" troupe face special contexts and experiences under the multiple oppressions, and they have understood the essence of body politics in their life and work. The western theories travel into this group through various ways, only serve as one of their inspirations rather than the origins of their activities. These women combine their personal experiences and western theories and create new knowledge about women's bodies. In the discussion of universality of body politics theories in China, or any other western theories, we must take the subjectivity of the people group who has first-hand experiences into considerations. The "situation process" has to be considered as the interaction between the existing local knowledge and the new western theories of body politics, rather than a one-direction of theory travelling.

## 6. Conclusion

Under the background of the Reform and Opening Up, female migrant workers emerged as an important people group. The bodies of women workers, as the objects of powers of the government, capital and hierarchical culture, have great academic significance of study. Recently, in Shenzhen, the World Factory in Guangdong Province, there appeared several women migrant workers' dramatic troupes, and some of them came up with the issue of women's bodies. The reasons why these dramas have been appearing and what body politics issues they try to discuss and address are questions worth answering.

Through the analysis, I solved my research problem. My main problem is: **How do women workers discuss the issue of Body in the “Women Are the Best” Dramatic Troupe?** To be more specific, How do women workers create the drama in the “Women Workers Are the Best” Troupe? What are the local and global inspirations for them? What kind of power relations are reflected and challenged in the drama of the “Women Workers Are the Best” troupe? What are the potential effects/contributions for the issue of the Body and gender equality brought about by the drama of the “Women Workers Are the Best” Troupe?

The analysis shows that these women workers get to know the theories of body politics through the active external communications, and they manages to create the drama and perform it with the help of the Shanquan Troupe originated in Sun Yat-sen University. However, they are not confined by western body politics theories or applying them mechanically. They situate the western knowledge in order to create their own knowledge. At the same time, we must notice that the process of the situation of knowledge is not in one single direction, from the Global West to the Global East. The origin of theories is not always in the western countries. In the case of this dramatic troupe, women workers **have already** understood the essence of body politics in their life experiences, and these theories only offered them with inspirations and helped them to express their needs.

These workers are discussing topics of freedom of marriage and contraceptive

rings that are closely related to their lives. In these issues, powers of the government, the capital and the hierarchical culture all want to control their bodies and tame them. However, the way that they present this drama shows that women workers are also trying to challenge and existing power relations by creating new discourses.

The analysis emphasizes the potentials of women's bodies. Besides, we must always remember that theories are not only generated in the west. Without learning about body politics theories, common people in China can understand the essence of gender equality in their lives, and the process of the situation of knowledge of the female embodiment can be process that western theories inspire people to express the ideas that they have long had. The "situation process" has to be considered as the interaction between the existing local knowledge and the new western theories of body politics, rather than a one-direction of theory travelling. These are also aspects that we should consider in the use of Travelling Theory and Situated Knowledge Theories.

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