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# **Migrant Workers in China**

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# MIGRANT WORKERS IN CHINA

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## I. Introduction

*[please note that the following paper was written for a Conference in 2011 and is published here at the request of the organisers. It was meant to illustrate the position of rural migrants working in southern Chinese factories. Much has changed since then, though the material conditions of the interviewees remain a poignant reminder of who actually made China the 2nd largest economy in the world, and their position in society has not changed at all.]*

At least 140 million migrant workers in China work more than six months away from their official permanent residence. These people travel from their original province or locality to work in urban areas along the eastern coast and increasingly urban centres in central and western provinces. Most go to the Pearl River delta area and form a permanent feature of urban labour markets. This movement represents the largest movement of labour in peacetime conditions anywhere in the world (Roberts et al. 2004: 49). Even within the context of the huge geography and dense urban population, this movement has had significant impact on the cities receiving such labour and the communities from which the labour comes. Such labour forms its dualistic position in China, as a relative elite (both educationally and financially) in their rural community (Roberts et al. 2004: 55-8) but the lowest segment of the working class in urban areas (Mackenzie (2002).

This paper explores the livelihood of the migrant labourers working in southern China. Much of the findings reinforce and update existing research on attitudes and experiences of labouring (Chan 2001) but also greatly extends and integrates this more thoroughly with the organisation of work these migrants experience. The research concentrates on women migrants, although they form the slight minority in rural-urban migration in China due to their strong presence in manufacturing industry. In this connection, we will question the reserve army argument, which is often used to marginalize the significance of such labour both to the overall labour market and the centrality of such work to many women's lives.

## II. Changing Views of the Role of Migrants in China's Development

Migrant workers have become a focal point of many calls for changes in the way workers are treated in Chinese society, and the 'migrant question' has been discussed significantly within the Chinese literature (Shenzhen Daily 2005). Whilst many scholars outside China concentrated on the disadvantaged position of migrant workers in terms of either labour rights (Kahn, 2004, Tilly 2002) or social welfare, (Taipei Times 2005) mainland writers tended to analyse migrant workers from the reserve army of labour perspective (Zhang 2003, Zhang et al. 2002). With the labour rights perspective, relative or absolute benchmark standards are used to assess whether workers are treated in ways that meet these standards, which emphasizes the universality of labour and labouring rooted in western

liberal traditions of equality and individuality. The welfare analysis concentrates on work in a social context, emphasising the social context of the migrants working in urban areas and seeks to redress the social costs that they must endure. This approach is informed by religious moralisation that underlies the development of western welfare states. In China, the structuralist view of Marxist political economy implicitly understood the movement of labour from peasantry to urban industry with the reserve army of labour viewpoint, in which migrants form a permanent buttress to economic development, but their contribution could be marginalised in industrial relations terms, because it constitutes part of a much bigger social issue. This issue, rather than being related to gender (as in the usual view of reserve army arguments), is the development problem of peasantry and rural underdevelopment. In this way, migrant labour issues were articulated as rural issues rather than central features of urban development, in the same way that gendered arguments about the reserve army of labour marginalised the importance of gender when situating women workers.

Whilst the reserve army mindset remains, there are increasing signs that migrants' labour is industrial labour. The change has not been an intellectual enlightenment but necessitated by the increasing dependence of urbanites on such labour and the increasingly recurrent collective actions of migrant worker protests and demonstrations over such issues as non-payment of wages and dangerous working conditions. Roberts et al (2004: 50 & 64-5) indicate that women migrants are increasingly likely to be married in their late 20s. Therefore, migrant worker issues have entered the mainstream of debate over the course of China's developing capitalist system. Increasingly, migrants are playing a major role in Chinese economy and debates as to whether and, if so, how to improve such workers' rights have become heated up in China.

The latest twist in the argument has come amid significant labour shortages in industrialised areas of the eastern seaboard and in the Pearl River Delta (especially Guangdong). This shortage is very shocking in China, particularly because there is no clear explanation for it (Coonan 2005). Chinese newspaper reports abuse of migrant workers by foreign employers (as collated and translated by Chan 2001). The irony of this development is that it tended to reinforce faith in market principles (Yardley and Barboza 2005) rather than to question the system that encourages systematic exploitation.

### **III. The Research**

The paper draws on series of field research activities conducted between 2000 and 2004 involving three stages. The research started with interviews among trade union cadres from the All China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU) to understand their views of what the unions are and should be doing for migrants as a specific category of workers (i.e. with needs and interests separate from the usual needs of being a 'worker'). The second stage involved interviews with managers in selected enterprises on human resource strategies, which have a relation to migrant workers. The third, and most important stage as regards this paper was a two-week participant observation, with a follow-up visit to one enterprise near Guangzhou.

Within the context of this evolving research agenda with a wealth of research data, two cases were identified as illuminating and typical to demonstrate the general organisation and experience of migrant

workers in China. One case was accessed as a result of researching a Korean company, which inadvertently provided access to a Chinese labour gang working in the cargo loading area of one of its plants in Dongguan. The second case study involved a Hong Kong textile firm that had at least two factories in Guangdong Province for which the interviewer (my research assistant) had made contacts with as a former employee of a Hong Kong garment trading company.

#### *a. Labour Gang<sup>1</sup>*

During a visit to a large European owned food company's Dongguan plant, an encounter with a group of men loading and unloading materials and products for the factory provided us with access to a labour gang. In a follow-up investigation, the hut in which the workers lived was tracked down, and a series of interviews spreading over several days took place at the workers dwelling complex, which was a rundown farm-house and out-buildings sitting on a hill overlooking the factory where they worked. Group interviews and occasional conversations with the gang's 'boss' took place in an informal setting, and the atmosphere was highly unstructured and highly contextual. For example, the appearance of the wife of one of the workers bringing food provided an opportunity to discuss their family life and expectations, comparisons with life of their home in the countryside they left behind. The gang consisted of migrant workers, mainly from eastern provinces, though the 'boss' was from rural Guangdong.

This was a labour gang, which provided a rather hand-to-mouth existence. The work organisation was set by the nature of the job, which was mainly to lug heavy boxes for irregular hours and pay. Work was done for an average of 10 hours per day, and extra workers were recruited as needed, depending on the number of boxes to be transported. The gang comprised of a core group of eight workers including a supervisor. This group was supplemented with varying numbers of temporary workers drifting in and out of the labour-gang. Itinerant labour came because information about the gang spread through word of mouth. There were also competing labour gangs at other factories, and the 'boss' (Lo) appeared to maintain at least one other gang at another location working for another factory invested also by European enterprise. The workers and supervisor had no evidence of the other gang but appeared sure of its existence. Lo for his part, simply ignored questions concerning the existence of another gang. I suspected that the secrecy was due to higher pay by the other gang, which probably resulted from a more lucrative contract with the employer.

Lo subcontracted the work to a Sichuan man who employed seven workers to work with him. "I do not know exactly how much the big boss Lo gets from (the company) and how much our little boss gets from Lo, but I am sure that we workers get the least" a worker explained. He complained further:

Everywhere is the same. Lo does nothing but gets the biggest portion only because he can get the contract from (the company). For example, I think when Lo gets 15000 Yuan from (the company), he will give our little boss six or seven thousand Yuan; of course, the little boss gets

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<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to May Wong, who conducted the field research described in this section, and who now works at Asia Monitor Resource Centre in Hong Kong. [Now founder and director of Globalisation Monitor - <http://www.globalmon.org.hk/> ]

another larger portion and pays us much less. What is more, Lo paid 1000 Yuan a month to his elder brother to 'supervise' our work. But what he does is watch us while we are working with the small boss (the Sichuan man).

The gang lived in three rooms making up an old semi-derelict farm, with an additional toilet. One man lived with his wife in one room; the other two rooms were shared by the other seven workers and the Sichuan supervisor. Lo lived elsewhere, but apparently nearby. The atmosphere at the huts was one of quiet tiredness. The workers sometimes sat around and talked in the alleyway between the buildings, which also served as the kitchen, or sat on a low cement wall overlooking the factory where they worked and ate their food quietly. It appeared their entire existence was set around work, and the gang was their main companionship. This was akin to a rural community, although drudgery of work added to the paucity of the men. The wife of one worker who also cooked their meals was even quieter, reinforcing the general sense of resignation to low status and endless hard physical labour. Lo paid for the food, and allowing the wife to be accompanied for one of the workers was seen as his attempt to ensure that the workers were looked after.

This enterprise had no union, and the workers were genuinely ignorant of unions. The interviewer was asked to explain what a union was, and the workers were puzzled by the answer. Whilst there is some ambiguity, there is probably no legal requirement for this enterprise to establish a union, so the question is perhaps irrelevant to their lives. However, it does reflect the workers' ignorance about legal and other rights. Instead, the men appeared highly dependent on their supervisor and Lo. Apart from personal disputes resulted from close proximity in a stressful environment, which occurred even during interview periods, the only major 'decision' for the workers was whether to leave or stay with the gang. Decisions whether to work on a particular day or not were not considered, for absence from work merely added workloads on the others in the gang. The workers could make changes only if they coordinated an effort to push for more share of the income from Lo. This was never attempted, and it was clear that not all the workers were resentful of the share of the income that Lo took. The main criticism, instead, was that Lo was not as clever as some of the other gang bosses in negotiating with the enterprises who gave them work.

### ***b. Textile Factory<sup>2</sup>***

Based on a contact with a manager in Hong Kong who worked most of the time in a factory near Guangzhou, research was conducted through a series of interviews and a two-week period of observations and conversations in the factory. The research created a wealth of material, only some of which can be presented here. The factory was owned by Hong Kong investors, and was one of at least two factories they owned in Guangdong Province. The factory employed around 250 workers producing garments for local and export markets in Asia (including Hong Kong and Singapore). Another factory produced for European and North American markets and was subject to periodic Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) monitoring. The factory investigated, however, was never monitored. As a result,

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<sup>2</sup> I am grateful to Carmen To who conducted the research in the Textile factory. Carmen is now an independent writer in Hong Kong.

the working conditions, pay and physical environment of the two factories were very different. It appears that for this reason alone, the Hong Kong employer ensured no one from the Guangzhou factory ever saw or had hard evidence of the Dongguan (monitored) factory. The following analyses, therefore, refers only to the Guangzhou factory.

The Guangzhou factory is very much isolated from the outside world. There is only one another garment factory in the village. Apart from that, there are three small stalls selling different kinds of daily necessities such as toiletries, drinks and snacks at decently cheap prices. “They weren’t here a year ago,” Ah Ha, a female worker from Wu Nan, aged 28, explained. “They are the only places the workers can hang out after work chatting with friends. It’s a place where the workers can relax a bit and get something to eat after work.” The workers, while many of them grown up in rural communities, were used to village life, however, this was not their village, and the villagers’ interests were aligned with the employers, not their workers. The security guards appeared to come from the village, although unlike the cases found by Chan (2001), the guards did not appear to abuse the workers.

### *c. Factory Environment*

In addition to the two garment factories, the other major economic contribution to the village came from two solid waste deposit plants. The smell of the chemicals and waste was very strong, especially in the summer, and stench drifted over the entire village. Further out, the main road and the surrounding area could be seen as nothing but endless deserted land and ponds. Even on a motorcycle, it took more than 15 minutes to the nearest neighbouring village. Adding to the air of foreboding, rumours circulated among the workers that outside the village there were gangs who would rob them of their money and mobile phones.

In all, the environment created prison-like conditions. However, workers had three forms of communication with the outside world. Most workers carried mobile phones, which were used primarily to communicate with family and friends in their home communities. Once a month after payday, the workers were taken to Guangzhou city centre for the day, which many of the workers, especially single ones, looked forward for all month. The factory management provided a bus, which was not only a free service to the workers, but also acted as a way to control their time, as it would return to the factory at a fixed schedule in the evening. Finally, the workers had access to television. A single television set, which was located in the managers’ dormitory was taken out once a week to the canteen so that workers could watch it on their Saturday evenings after work. However, the channel was always from Hong Kong, using Cantonese, which was not the native tongue of most of the workers, and some would not be able to understand enough to enjoy the programmes.

When not working, workers were free to move in and out of the factory compound, although there was a curfew of 23:30, after which the factory gates were locked. Barbed wire and high walls added to the prison-like atmosphere. Behind the factory was a highly polluted river, which also reeked in the summer.

Inside the factory gates, the environment was equally depressing. With the exception of the managers' quarters, the place was dirty, and no one appeared to be responsible for cleaning anywhere. The women's toilets were permanently blocked with sewage, and both the men's and women's toilets were unsanitary. Managers blamed the workers for being too stupid to use the toilets properly, but it was also clear there was major under-capacity in the number of toilets, and nobody was assigned to maintain even basic cleaning. The food in the canteen served spoiled meat, and the menu was different for managers and workers. Finally, to give an impression of the state of hygiene, most new workers took several weeks to get used to sleeping in the dormitories because rats ran along the roofs of the dormitory buildings all night, which most newly arrived recruits took time to get used to.

In the dormitory, 10-12 workers shared a room. The workers could not move around from their beds or change their rooms without permission, or they risked being warned or punished. The supervisor arranged all bed allocations, although married couples usually were allocated in their own room.

The production site was a three-storey building, which, like the rest of the complex, was in a need of immediate repair. Production took place on the first and the second floors, while the third floor was used for material storage.

#### *d. Work Organisation*

The factory employed more than 250 workers from several provinces, and there were about 40 percent male workers. Work was from 8:00am to 11:00pm or as late as 1:00am. There were two breaks in the day, a lunch break from 12:00-13:30 (September – March) or till 14:00 (April - August) and a dinner break from 18:00-19:00. Thus, workers worked around 10 hours a day and seven days a week. The only time-off they had in a week was on the Saturday night. There was only one day-off every 28 days normally after the payday. The long working hours resulted in frequent industrial injuries, which were addressed by sending the workers to the nearby hospital, and for which the company would pay medical expenses. However, due to the wage system, it also meant workers lost potential earning time during the accident and for the period of the subsequent recovery. Au Hang explained that for her and the workers on her line:

We are all very tired. We wake up around 7:00am every day, grab a bite to eat and get ready to work at 8:00. We work till the lunch bell rings at 12:00pm, then we eat and take a nap afterwards till 2:00pm and we start to work again till 6:00pm, and one-hour break for dinner till 7:00pm. Some workers take their time to wash their hair and their clothes before they have to work again.

Ah Yung added:

Actually, we have no time to do our laundry whatsoever. We have too little free time. Sometimes we work till 11:00pm or 12:00pm when we have lots of orders from the overseas companies. By the time we finish work, it's already 12:00 at night, and what we can do is to

take a quick shower and wash our clothes if possible and finally we go to bed at 1:00am. We only sleep for a few hours and then we have to go for work again.

Clearly this was exhausting work, and some workers appeared to work even longer hours on occasions. Au Ha explained what she did in her spare time:

Sleep, of course. I don't have enough sleep since working here. ... Too little personal time and space since working here. ... We have only one holiday every month, which we can go to the City Center to relax and shop.... The best time of the month.

In their spare time, the men played ball games after lunch break and in the evening, whilst most women washed their hair in buckets in the yard, just outside the side door of the factory. There they can use hot water and the steam irons to iron clothes.

#### *e. Wages*

Basically, the workers received pay in two ways: piece rate and hourly rate. Those on skilled jobs not closely tied to line production were paid hourly rates, and those in manufacturing processes were generally paid on piece rates. Standard wages varied so considerably among jobs that the rate for low skilled jobs such like zip sewing or button-holes was 60 cents for each piece. For sample room production, a highly skilled worker received RMB 4.5 per hour, however, with some variance for better quality of the work. A significant feature of the pay system is the variation in pay packets over time. Irregularities in production items required by management, machine break-downs, shortfall in orders, workers' individual health and fatigue all resulted in considerable difference in working hours and output. As a result, wages varied considerably. In the case of a skilled hourly paid worker, this could mean month end wage payments ranging from RMB 500 to RMB 1500. Posted on the Notice Board at the gate of the building, it clearly stated (and interviewees confirmed) that the workers had to pay RMB 80 for their meals and accommodation and RMB 15 for a management fee for their dormitory, which accounted for their 3 to 4 days' salary.

The workers still needed to pay RMB 20 as a deposit for their tools, and it would only be returned when they left the factory on conditions that the tools were well preserved. In addition, over the first three months RMB 50 was kept each month from their salary, and the money was returned only if they stayed in the factory at least for one year. The policy was obviously designed to reduce labour turnover, which stood at around 15 percent.

It is common for companies everywhere to act illegally, but in developing countries, where monitoring of companies is not sophisticated, tax fraud is extremely common. In this factory, a dual set of accounts was used in relation to wages. Workers officially received higher wages and then submitted partial amount of the wages to the factory claiming to offset against tax. We know this because the interviewer (research assistant) was asked to sign documents, which turned out to be the acknowledgment for the worker to the slips for wages, while clearly informative notices were not given to workers before they gave signatures.



### *f. Conflict*

Occurrences of conflict were claimed to be rare. The managers would talk about only two conflicts. One involved unskilled workers disputing the calculation of piece rates, which resulted in a small group of workers refusing to work for several days. The second, witnessed by the interviewer (research assistant), involved three young skilled technicians who had been transferred from the Dongguan plant to Guangzhou to work on some new highly-automated machines, which were later to be moved elsewhere (rumoured to be Vietnam) along with the technicians. The technicians refused to work in the dirty factory but were persuaded eventually by a Hong Kong manager.

In one case where a manager wished to break off a love relationship with a worker, the factory simply dismissed the worker. Other workers, rather than complaining, said that preferential treatment was given to some workers who were seen as 'loyal' to the senior managers. This underscored a sense that there was little 'workers' consciences, as the social network which was often destroyed by the hierarchy in employments.

Thus, the overall views of management were rather paternalistic deriving from the context of strict cost minimisation. There was no union, and while only a couple of the workers had experience with unions in previous employment, the workers had neither discussion nor perceived relevance of a union for this plant.

## **IV. Conclusion**

Because of the huge number of migrants working in the urban areas, especially in sectors such as garment manufacturing, rubbish recycling and construction, the reserve army of labour argument is no longer appropriate. Migrant issues are integral to the urban industrial labour process. Migrant workers' consciousness as a labour force, however, remains lower than their urban counterparts, and as such, acts as a latent division within what is emerging as an overall labour class (Taylor et al. 2003). Migrant workers in these two case studies suffered from squalid and unsafe working environments and long hours of laborious work.

These workers need unions, but they see no need for them under the present circumstances. The ACFTU, only in the last two years has acknowledged its responsibility for organising migrant workers as any kind of responsibility, and that the number of memberships most defiantly does not reflect the quality or organisational capability of such unions. The ACFTU acknowledges the need to improve its services to the existing and potential members. Fighting for unpaid wages is such a cause that the ACFTU is capable of championing, and this is of especially direct relevance to migrants. However, so long as the ACFTU is caught in the dynamics of needing to gain party support for its initiatives, it is likely to continue to see migrants as different or special in some circumstances, which derives from the continued perception that to some extent migrants are inferior labourers to the urban industrial working class. While this might change as the peasant label gradually is removed, it will be too late for millions

of workers, as they are enduring squalid work conditions with a continual and real fear that excessive fatigue will lead to painful and expensive (in terms of lost pay) industrial injuries.

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