

The Labour Politics of China's Rural Migrant Workers

Authors:

Jenny Chan (The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Hung Hom, Hong Kong)

Mark Selden (Asian/Pacific/American Studies Institute, New York University, New York, NY, USA)

Accepted for publication:

Globalizations

2017

Vol. 14, No. 2, 259–271

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14747731.2016.1200263>

ABSTRACT

This article analyses the Chinese rural migrant workers' collective struggles within a framework that highlights the deepening of contradictions among labour, capital, and the state. At times of labour crisis, aggrieved workers have taken legal and extra-legal actions to defend their rights and interests in the absence of leadership by trade unions. From 1 January 2015, Guangdong provincial government was compelled to enforce new collective bargaining regulations to regulate labour relations, when an increasing number of workers leveraged their power to disrupt production to demand higher pay and better conditions within the tight delivery deadlines. In addition to discussing the workplace bargaining power at the key nodes in global supply networks, we highlight the impact of demographic changes on the potential increase of the marketplace bargaining power of workers.

Keywords:

Chinese rural migrant workers, the state, labour laws, workplace bargaining power, marketplace bargaining power, ACFTU (All-China Federation of Trade Unions)

Introduction

By early 2016, 277 million Chinese rural migrants had been drawn into industrialisation and urbanisation, an increase of 52 million from 2008, when the National Bureau of Statistics (2014, 2016) began to monitor the work and employment conditions of the rural migrant labour force in the wake of the global financial crisis. China's economy was hit hard, as exports had constituted one-third of gross domestic product in value, but it recovered quickly in the latter half of 2009 following the rollout of a 4 trillion yuan fiscal stimulus plan over 27 months (Wong, 2011, pp. 2 – 3). In 2014, by some measures, China surpassed the United States to become the world's largest economy (Morrison, 2015; Naughton, 2014; Whyte,

2014). Although its extraordinary growth rates have begun to slow, China's trade, investment, and construction will continue to have significant regional and global impact.

Over these past four decades, with a shift in manufacturing from the developed countries of North America, Europe, and East Asia to the emerging economies, China has become not only the workshop of the world, but also the epicentre of labour unrest. Yet, even as the size and complexity of China's working class grow, class contradictions sharpen, and social protest proliferates, the language of class has largely disappeared from Chinese discourse. As Lee and Shen (2009, p. 110) demonstrate, under dual pressure from the state and academic institutions, many scholars who study workers in post-Cultural Revolution China 'shun class analysis and define away labour issues as those of mobility, migration, and stratification'. In contemporary China, the word *jieji* (class) connotes antagonism and confrontation in the Marxist sense, eliciting dark memories of violent social struggles throughout China from the mid-1960s to the early 1970s. It is an image that is out of step with the 'harmonious society' and the 'Chinese dream' that contemporary China's leaders proclaim. Its replacement in social analysis, the concept of *jieceng* (strata) elides class conflict and highlights social mobility predicated on enhanced human resource capital through continuing education and skills training. Policy-makers and academics working in a social stratification paradigm analyse data on household income distribution, educational attainment, and occupational rankings to document the rise of a middle class, or various middle-class strata, while downplaying durable and deepening structures of class inequality (Anagnost, 2008; Andreas, 2012; Friedman, 2014; Goodman, 2014; Guo, 2016; Lee & Selden, 2008; Pun & Chan, 2008; So, 2013).

In this context, this article discusses the Chinese rural migrant workers, particularly their precariousness and collective struggles, within a framework that highlights the deepening of contradictions among labour, capital, and the state. With the influx of foreign direct investment and the relaxation of state restrictions on rural-to-urban migration since the late 1970s, successive cohorts of internal migrant workers have become the core of China's new working class. We examine the role of local governments in drawing in businesses and investments, and the specific conditions of rural migrants' production and reproduction in the contemporary political economy. At times of labour crisis, aggrieved workers have taken legal and extra-legal actions to defend their rights and interests in the absence of leadership or mobilisation by trade unions. What then are the prospects for Chinese labour to strengthen its power at the key nodes of transnational manufacturers? The answer will hinge not only on changing labour–capital relations, but also on the ways in which the government prioritises worker interests versus those of international and domestic capital, and on the impact of demographic changes on the growth of workers' marketplace bargaining power.

A New Generation of Chinese Rural Migrant Workers

China's economic rise spurs dreams of success from all walks of life. 'Wage work in the city', comments Sargeson (1999, p. 219), 'became the means for self-actualisation [of women peasant-migrants] in family and village'. For nearly all, however, it was transient; many among the first generation of rural migrants drawn to the urban labour market up to the 1990s returned to their villages to marry, settle, and raise children. The returned migrants and their families have access to village-allocated subsistence plots of land. The Rural Land Contracting Law, revised and implemented in March 2003, upholds the '30-year no-change rule' to household-contracted farmland for rural people, including those who have already migrated to work in earlier years. For rural migrants, agricultural land tenure is a form of insurance in the event of

lay-offs or return to the home village, and a basis for subsistence for returned migrants whose access to health care and retirement benefits remains limited (Whyte, 2010). Given the precarious dependence on rural land, residents continue to draw on remittances from their (male) family members who have migrated to work in the city (Chuang, 2015a). Sporadic efforts towards cooperative rural construction and alternative development initiatives aside, sustainable farming, and lucrative non-farm work opportunities in the remote countryside are scarce.

Following China's accession to the World Trade Organisation in 2001, farm workers experienced ever more intense market pressures, one of the factors accelerating migration. Despite the elimination of agricultural taxes in 2005 and the extension of local insurance schemes (Chen, 2014; Frazier, 2014; Hsiao, 2014), much of the countryside has remained stagnant as youth have left en masse for the cities and jobs in industry, construction, and services. Some 'left-behind' villagers have leased or transferred their land-use rights to boost income. Others have no choice but to search for non-farm, low-wage, temporary jobs as a result of rural land grabs involving state– capital collusion resulting in windfall profits for cadres and loss of land rights for those who had tilled the land throughout their lives. They become new proletarians in the socialist market economy (Chuang, 2014, 2015b).

Still, the majority of Chinese rural migrants have experienced incomplete proletarianisation, in that they possess agricultural land-use rights as a birth right while working for wages as hired urban labourers to make ends meet (Chan & Selden, 2014; Friedman & Lee, 2010; Lee, 2016; Pun & Lu, 2010). Poverty alleviation officials have facilitated labour out-migration. The goal was to obtain remittances and ensure the development of marketable skills in young migrants while supporting China's export-oriented industrialisation. This cohort of officially registered 'rural migrants' includes tens of millions who were born, and even have spent their entire lives, in and around cities, yet retain 'rural household registration' in perpetuity. In effect, internal migrant workers are denied equal citizenship and welfare rights.

As of 2013, 46.6% of those classified as rural migrant workers were born after 1980, and the majority (60.6%) of these young people had completed nine years of formal education. An additional 20.5% are high school graduates (National Bureau of Statistics, 2014). They express a desire to broaden their horizons and experience a modern life and cosmopolitan consumption in megacities such as Shenzhen, Shanghai, and Beijing, as well as other fast-developing cities in inland provinces. A migrant worker in Beijing commented, 'If I had to live the life that my mother has lived, I would choose suicide' (Yan, 2008, p. 25). Growing corn and wheat on tiny parcels of land and keeping a few pigs and chickens may not leave her hungry, but getting ahead and moving upward is nearly impossible if she seeks to eke out a living on the small family plot. The second and third generations have their eyes firmly on the cities. 'Birds, don't be silly, no one cares whether you're tired from flying. People only care how high you fly', mused a 19-year-old migrant worker. Coming from a village in central China, she hoped to secure a better life for her mother and herself in Shanghai (Chan, 2013a). While some migrants are entranced by rosy dreams of entrepreneurial success, the high aspirations of these workers face acute problems in a society characterised by soaring income gaps, and the commodification of social services, such as housing, education, and medical care.

Capitalist Development, the Chinese State, and Global Capital

With the consolidation of profit-making state-owned enterprises, China's industrial system has been divided into three segments 'consisting of large, central-government firms; hybrid local and foreign firms; and small-scale capitalism' (Naughton, 2010, p. 441). To this, we add the

dominance of gigantic, wholly owned foreign-invested manufacturers, which have access to cheap land, human resources, and numerous privileges from local governments across China. For a notable example, Taiwanese-based Foxconn Technology Group, founded in Taipei in 1974, has risen to become China's largest employer with more than one million employees. It is a leading player making possible China's emergence as the 'electronics workshop of the world', capturing over 50% of global market share in consumer electronics (Chan, Pun, & Selden, 2013, 2015a). As a leading Global 500 firm, Foxconn occupies a central place in transnational manufacturing, wherein workers can potentially achieve strong workplace-based power in collective bargaining. A labour strike at such a key point of globalised production may cause huge losses not only to the company, but also to brand buyers who are heavily dependent on it. Hence, these brands may push to settle in favour of workers. 'Workplace bargaining power', in the words of Silver (2003, p. 13), 'accrues to workers who are enmeshed in tightly integrated production processes, where a localised work stoppage in a key node can cause disruptions on a much wider scale than the stoppage itself'. China's manufacturing workers—most of them rural migrants in their late teens and 20s—have repeatedly used their structural workplace power to make primarily economic claims.

Foxconn's extraordinary growth is built on its cheap, big, fast, and efficient production model, and the subsidisation by the state at all levels. It manages production tasks and inventory logistics, resulting in ever-stronger interdependent relations between 'big buyers' and 'big suppliers' in the high-tech electronics supply chains (Appelbaum, 2008). In many cities throughout China, Foxconn runs multiple manufacturing facilities. In 2010, more than 500,000 employees worked in two Foxconn factories in Shenzhen city, on the northern border of Hong Kong (Foxconn Technology Group, 2010, p. 1). Subsequently, tens of thousands of workers were transferred to lower wage production sites in western, central, and northern China. By early 2016, Foxconn had 30-plus manufacturing complexes in all 4 provincial-level municipalities (Beijing, Tianjin, Shanghai, and Chongqing) and in 16 provinces throughout the country. From raw material extraction to processing to final assembly, Foxconn has built a network featuring vertical integration and flexible coordination across different facilities and 24-hour continuous assembly.

On the factory floor, the change in production requirements from iPhone 5c and 5s to iPhone 6 and 6 Plus, and the increase in output targets, placed Foxconn workers under intense stress. Thus far, Apple has refused to disclose to the authors the specifics of its iPhone contracts. Jacky Haynes, senior director of Apple's Supplier Responsibility Program, responded in a 18 February 2014 email concerning our question about the company's purchasing policies as they affect Chinese wages: 'Over the years, we have increased the prices we pay to suppliers in order to support wage increases for workers. Confidentiality agreements prevent us from providing the data you're requesting'.¹ Stated differently, Apple, the world's most profitable technology company, provided *no* evidence to substantiate its claim of increasing unit prices in order to facilitate higher wages at its independently owned suppliers. Although claiming to exercise corporate social responsibility in global supply chain management (Litzinger, 2013; Locke, 2013), Apple has never acknowledged its own culpability in squeezing suppliers and workers by imposing tight delivery schedules and high-quality demands at presumably ever lower prices.

Foxconn shocked the world when the '12 leaps', the suicides of rural migrant workers aged 17 – 25 who leaped from factory dormitories in Shenzhen, took place during the first five months of 2010 (Chan, 2013b; Chan & Pun, 2010; Pun et al., 2014; Pun & Chan, 2012, 2013). Foxconn union chairwoman Chen Peng, special assistant of CEO Terry Gou, not only failed to investigate the workplace factors responsible for worker depression but also made

insensitive public comments that ‘Suicide is foolish, irresponsible and meaningless and should be avoided’ (*China Daily*, 2010). Not unlike their peers in other workplaces, and perhaps in an extreme form, the million-strong Foxconn workers are not collectively represented in a meaningful way. Five years on, in February 2015, the head of the All-China Federation of Trade Unions’ (ACFTU) legal department Guo Jun criticised Foxconn, among other companies, for imposing illegal overtime of ‘more than ten hours every day’ on workers, in some cases resulting in ‘deaths and suicides’ (*China Daily*, 2015). But the practice of compulsory, illegal overtime labour on this scale was well known to government leaders throughout the years. If the central-level official union staff were really interested in building ‘harmonious labour relations’, they had failed to reform the management-dominated unions at Foxconn and other firms (Chan, Pun, & Selden, 2016a, 2016b). The dependence of the grassroots unions on management, and the limits on their activity posed by the state, severely undermines the capacity of enterprise unions to represent the workers. In the words of Anita Chan (2011, p. 42), the unions are ‘an integral part of factory management’ and ‘worse than weak’.

Legal Activism

Corporate management has prioritised labour controls, with an emphasis on profit, organisational flexibility, and production efficiency, transforming China’s industrial relations in the era of economic globalisation. Between 1978 and 1995, under the promotion of the ‘rule of law’, 49 labour laws and regulations were enacted, including the national Labour Law, which came into force on 1 January 1995 (Thireau & Hua, 2003, p. 85). The provisions of a written employment contract, minimum wages, overtime premiums, rest days, occupational health and safety, and social benefits have inspired citizens to file claims through fast-expanding labour dispute arbitration committees and courts. Lee (2010, p. 76) observes that, as the state seeks to channel labour conflict away from the street, ‘the law has become the pivotal terrain of labour politics’. Arbitration committees are grassroots state organisations that bring together labour and management to resolve labour conflicts. In 1993, the State Council promulgated the Regulations on the Handling of Enterprise Labour Disputes, enabling employees of all kinds of enterprises to raise complaints to local labour dispute arbitration committees. The significance was that, while the 1987 Provisional Regulations on the Handling of Enterprise Labour Disputes in State Enterprises stipulated the rights to arbitration of state employees only, the 1993 Regulations for the first time granted workers in private and foreign-invested firms, the majority being rural migrants, equal access to arbitration (Harper Ho, 2003). But not all incidents of labour disputes fall within the domain of arbitration and the courts. Workers know that government arbitrators do not accept demands such as those for wage increases above the legal minimum.

Companies face increasing pressure to raise wages and improve conditions to retain workers, particularly a young cohort, who frequently change jobs in an attempt to get higher pay and benefits. Equally important, pressures from below together with state efforts to boost incomes between 2008 and 2012 led to average annual increases in statutory minimum wages of 12.6% (China Briefing, 2013). The government reported that average total income of rural migrant workers had risen steadily following the economic recovery in 2009, reaching 3072 yuan per month in 2015, a 7.2% increase from the previous year (National Bureau of Statistics, 2016). However, the high cost of living in large cities has remained a source of stress and frustration for low-income workers. Conflicts over non-payment or under-payment of wages, as well as inadequate compensation as workers were laid off following the shutdown, privatisation, or relocation of their factories, have become explosive.

Aggrieved workers ‘mobilised the law’ by quoting specific clauses of legal protection when their rights were violated (Chan, 2009; Gallagher, 2006; Hurst, 2009; Lee, 2007). Official statistics show that, in 1996, 48,121 labour disputes were accepted for arbitration, the total spiralling to 120,191 in 1999, involving more than 470,000 labourers as numbers soared in the context of massive lay-offs of state sector workers. The upward trend continued from 2000, reflecting widespread incidences of rights violations as the non-state and restructured state sector expanded. Labour cases further skyrocketed to 693,465, involving more than 1.2 million labourers nationwide in the economic crisis of 2008. Following the economic recovery and government intervention, newly accepted arbitration cases fell to 600,865 in 2010 and further to 589,244 in 2011. In 2013, however, the total number of labour dispute cases rebounded (665,760), despite greater responsiveness on the part of the government and its trade union offices to resolve problems at the grassroots level (China Labour Statistical Yearbook 2014, 2015).

In 2012, agency workers (also known as dispatched workers)—who engaged in labour relations directly with agencies but provided services to client companies—registered 17,000 cases to claim their social insurance benefits and wage payments as well as rights to labour contracts (China Labour Net, 2014). These contingent workers were long excluded from national legal protection prior to the implementation of the Labour Contract Law, effective from 1 January 2008. Under the new law, hiring agencies and client firms share joint legal responsibilities and agency workers are entitled to receive the same pay for doing the same work as directly employed workers. Moreover, they are assumed to take only ‘temporary, auxiliary, and substitute’ posts, thereby placing certain limits on informalisation while maintaining labour and organisational flexibility. However, huge discrepancies exist between workers’ formal employment rights and the enforcement of these rights (Cairns, 2015; Gallagher, Giles, Park, & Wang, 2015; Xu, 2014; Zhang, 2015).

Research in 2009 – 2011 found that disgruntled workers again and again rejected arbitration decisions and appealed to higher courts when they perceived arbitrators’ awards to be significantly below what they believed the Labour Law guaranteed them (Chen & Xu, 2012). Within 15 days of an arbitration ruling, workers have a right to apply for a trial of the original dispute. Such appeals have become increasingly common. If either side is dissatisfied with the verdict, it can appeal to a higher court, where a second trial is final. In recent years, governments at all levels have directed workers to resolve conflicts through mediation in order to reduce case-loads (Fu & Cullen, 2011). Outside of state-sanctioned dispute resolution paths, workers have also taken direct action to advance their rights and interests. The oscillation between legal and extra-legal avenues has at times fuelled activism by some, but others have become depressed and embittered.

Labour Challenges and Trade Union Reforms

As market reforms accelerated in the 1990s and thereafter, the fragmentation of labour and the diversification of ownership in the hands of Chinese and international capital profoundly challenged both workers and trade unions. In the three years from 1997 to 2000 alone, the ACFTU, whose strength had been centered in state-owned enterprises, lost at least 17 million members in the wave of privatisation or corporate restructuring (Traub-Merz, 2012, p. 28). In response, the government-run union bureaucracy targeted large foreign-invested companies such as Foxconn and Wal-Mart to unionise. By December 2009, ‘unions had been set up in 92% of the Fortune 500 companies operating in China’, and this trend has continued since (Liu, 2011, p. 157). By 2013, the centralised Chinese trade union organisation claimed a total membership of 288

million nationwide (Chinese Trade Unions Statistics Yearbook 2013, 2015)—surpassing the International Trade Union Confederation global membership of 176 million workers in 161 countries and territories excluding China. The number of union members is impressive, but in terms of the purpose of serving worker interests, we may ask: to what end?

In 2013, the government estimated that only 28.5% of 166 million rural migrant workers were covered by work-injury insurance, 17.6% by medical insurance, 15.7% by old age pensions, 9.1% by unemployment benefits, and 6.6% by maternity insurance (National Bureau of Statistics, 2014). A significant example of worker protest erupted in spring 2014 involving over 40,000 workers from all production departments at the world's largest footwear supplier, Taiwanese-owned Yue Yuen in Dongguan city, Guangdong, whose sneakers are sold to Nike, Adidas, Timberland, and other global brands. Workers demanded entitlement to employment benefits that the company had denied them. When worker–management negotiations broke down, a factory-wide strike closed the plant between 14 and 25 April, compelling municipal human resources and social security officials to mediate. On 1 May, senior management—under pressure from stability-obsessed higher level governments concerned about the blatant denial of state-mandated labour benefits—promised to provide insurance premiums in accordance with workers' current wages. They refused, however, to pay the 'historical debts', that is, unpaid welfare benefits owed to employees for previous work. In the absence of strong pro-labour government and union support for the full set of demands, workers accepted the partial victory and returned to work (Chen, 2015).

If large-scale strikes such as that at Yue Yuen sometimes win victories which could reverberate to the advantage of workers employed elsewhere, the critical question remains whether workers can secure the fundamental rights to collective bargaining and effective representation in the face of unified action by capital, the company unions, and the local state. Officials at the city and township levels have fostered a flexible labour regime wherein central government rules are bent to the investors' advantage. Gallagher and Dong (2011, p. 44) conclude that employers systematically 'ignored the law with impunity because of the lack of effective implementation and enforcement by local regulatory or supervisory organisations, including the trade union, the local labour bureau and the courts'. The state–capital nexus is indeed powerful even as specific, workplace-based grievances surface in lawsuits and collective protest of various kinds. Regional competition to secure and hold foreign investment in their domains—across the coastal provinces and between the interior regions—is very intense.

Local disruptions of global capitalism, however short-lived, enrich our imagination of possibilities for labour resistance. In May 2010, 1800 workers including a large number of 'student interns' at Honda participated in a factory-wide strike to demand an 800 yuan per month pay rise in Nanhai district, Guangdong. The worker representatives also insisted on reforming their union (Butollo & ten Brink, 2012; Lyddon, Cao, Meng, & Lu, 2015). In August 2010, Kong Xianghong, vice-chair of the Guangdong Federation of Trade Unions, presided over the direct election of shop-floor union representatives and subsequent collective wage bargaining in 2011. Many workers were disappointed, however, that the discredited factory union chair was permitted to remain as head of a partially reformed union and the two 'elected' vice-chairs were top-level managers, reflecting continued managerial control. Moreover, while the company was forced to yield on the important wage issue under pressure from the provincial trade union, in the name of restoration of 'industrial peace', it was able to ignore all other worker demands, including those for women's rights and improved welfare benefits (paid maternity leave and a one-hour meal break among them). As a result, the union committee quickly lost the confidence of rank-and-file workers.

Bargaining through workers' direct actions, in the form of strikes or demonstrations, has been and remains a viable way to address workers' shared grievances (Elfstrom & Kuruvilla, 2014). The official slogan of the ACFTU is 'When there's trouble, seek the trade union'. Worker leaders, again and again, only found company unions unresponsive to their plight. Indeed, worker solidarity frequently dissipated when leaders were intimidated, arrested, or bought off, or when state-brokered settlements provided workers with limited gains, while leaving the power structure and fundamental patterns of inequity and injustice intact. Tim Pringle (2011, p. 162), in assessing the future of Chinese union reforms in light of growing labour challenges, stresses the need not only for 'more accountable enterprise-level union chairpersons and committees' but also for 'more supportive, interactive and, at times, directive relationships between the higher trade unions and their enterprise-level subordinates'. To maintain governance legitimacy, the state continues to search for mechanisms for resolving labour conflicts and managing social discontent.

Mary Gallagher (2014, p. 87) stresses the role of 'the activist state' in which the Chinese government 'has struggled to maintain its labour system through more direct management of labour disputes'. As China's officials make extensive use of their discretionary power to resolve major labour disputes, rather than enabling workers to exercise fundamental rights to freedom of association, it is unclear how long this government interventionist strategy will remain viable, particularly when workers' basic rights and interests are routinely violated. The immediate result is that, in many cases, workers' individual grievances are partially addressed and collective actions broken up. Time and again, settlement of high-profile worker protests through direct government mediation is undertaken to restore 'social harmony' (Chen, 2012; Liebman, 2014). Indeed, officials have skilfully developed a wide array of 'protest absorption' techniques to settle labour disputes at the scene, with the goal of maintaining socio-political stability, such as lowering workers' 'realistic' expectation of claims to compensation, pressuring management to grant some economic concessions to adversely affected workers, and simultaneously manipulating workers' familial and social relations to silence the resistance (Deng & O'Brien, 2013; Lee & Zhang, 2013; Su & He, 2010).

The state-society relationships are contentious, requiring ever more legislative efforts, media advocacy, and direct involvement in labour management by government officials. Wang Tongxin, vice-chair of the Shenzhen Federation of Trade Unions, for example, called for 'power to the workers' and supported a municipal plan to facilitate union elections at 163 enterprises (each with more than 1000 workers) whose union committees were up for re-election in 2012 (Shenzhen Daily, 2012). This suggests the possibility that a directly elected union leadership could emerge in some localities within a 'Party-state-led model' of dispute mediation and unionisation in the workplace (Hui & Chan, 2015). In October 2013, the Guangdong Provincial People's Congress released for public discussion the Regulations on Enterprise Collective Consultations and Collective Contracts (Revised Draft). The overarching goal was to establish an effective negotiation system so as to harmonise labour relations or, to put it more directly, to reduce the incidence of strikes. The regulations specify that employees can initiate a 'collective consultation' process and management must present a point-by-point written reply within 20 days of receiving the notice. In response to strong opposition from major business associations, the provincial government weakened the critical provisions and, on 25 September 2014, passed the Regulations on Enterprise Collective Contracts in Guangdong, effective from 1 January 2015. Article 18 stipulates that over 50% of the workforce must endorse the formal call for compulsory talks to take place, a formidable obstacle to worker actions. Even if negotiations do happen, Article 24 prohibits workers from engaging in a work stoppage or slowdown. The

long-term impact of the regulations on the role of trade union and workers' power is to be carefully observed (for an early bleak assessment of the Guangdong regulations, see Halegua, 2015).

Conclusion

China's emergence as a global economic power could not have occurred without the painstaking efforts of successive generations of rural migrant workers. A substantial number of rural (local) labourers are now being recruited from within or sent back to their home province, in some cases close to their hometowns, where they may draw on local social networks for support. With a greater sense of entitlement associated with belonging to a place, and perhaps greater social resources to bring to the fight for their interests, the result could be enhanced working-class power in factories and worker communities. At the same time, factories are relocating inland and offshore in the search for cheaper labour, land, and other resources, weakening further workers' generally short-term, localised solidarity actions. In these successive 'spatial fixes', the crisis of capitalist accumulation deepens. 'Realize the great Chinese dream, build a harmonious society', reads a government banner. To realise individual and national dreams, however, workers will have to secure justice and dignity, which in turn will require the institutionalisation of worker power.

Demographic changes have slowed the growth of the working-age population at a time of general ageing, potentially increasing the marketplace bargaining power of workers (Davis, 2014; Eggleston et al., 2013). Chinese fertility is presently 1.6 children per woman, down from more than 6 children in the 1950s and 2.5 in the 1980s. The number of labourers aged 20 – 24 is projected to decline from 125 million people in 2010 to around 80 million in 2020 (Gu & Cai, 2011). China's 2010 Population Census, moreover, showed that the age group 0 – 14 constituted 16.6% of the total population, down 6.3% compared with the 2000 Census data (National Bureau of Statistics, 2011). All of these indicators suggest a reduction in the labour supply in the coming decades. But employers are not going to sit idle. Recent research has shown that 'student interns', who are recruited from vocational schools and paid less than minimum wages in so-called 'internships', have become a new source of contingent cheap labour at the bottom of China's labour market (Chan, Pun, & Selden, 2015b; Martinez, 2015). As the backbone of the nation's export-oriented industrial development, young workers today have higher expectations than the first wave of rural migrants. They aspire to develop technical skills, earn living wages, enjoy comprehensive welfare, and hold the full range of citizenship rights in the towns and cities they inhabit.

At the key nodes of production, the integration of large manufacturers in transnational supply chains and tight delivery schedules for consumer products potentially enhance workers' bargaining power at the workplace level. With workers' growing awareness of the opportunities presented by the fact that giant corporations face pressures to meet quotas for new models and holiday season purchases, they have repeatedly come together at the dormitory, workshop, or factory level to voice demands or to stage protests. Access to internet and social networking technology also enables workers to disseminate open letters and to tweet urgent appeals for support. If suicide is understood as one extreme form of labour protest chosen by some to expose an oppressive production regime in which rural migrant workers are deprived of dignified work, many more workers are organising on their own, bypassing management-controlled trade unions. They call on wide-ranging policy changes at both industry and governmental levels amid the deep tensions being played out among labour, capital, and the Chinese state in global transformation.

Acknowledgements

We thank Andreas Bieler, Chun-Yi Lee, Barry K. Gills, Yingjie Guo, Tom Fenton, Ngai Pun, and two anonymous reviewers for valuable comments on earlier drafts.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Funding

This publication arises from research funded by the John Fell Oxford University Press (OUP) Research Fund [ref. 152/015].

Note

1 Apple's five-page email correspondence dated February 18, 2014 is on file with the authors.

ORCID

Jenny Chan  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4980-4048>

References

- Anagnost, A. (2008). From 'class' to 'social strata': Grasping the social totality in reform-era China. *Third World Quarterly*, 29(3), 497–519.
- Andreas, J. (2012). Industrial restructuring and class transformation in China. In B. Carrillo & D. S. G. Goodman (Eds.), *China's peasants and workers: Changing class identities* (pp. 102–123). Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.
- Appelbaum, R. P. (2008). Giant transnational contractors in East Asia: Emergent trends in global supply chain. *Competition & Change*, 12(1), 69–87.
- Butollo, F., & ten Brink, T. (2012). Challenging the atomization of discontent: Patterns of migrant-worker protest in China during the series of strikes in 2010. *Critical Asian Studies*, 44(3), 419–440.
- Cairns, D. S. (2015). New formalities for casual labour: Addressing unintended consequences of China's Labour Contract Law. *Washington International Law Journal*, 24(1), 219–252.
- Chan, A. (2011). Strikes in China's export industries in comparative perspective. *China Journal*, 65, 27–51.
- Chan, J. (2009). Meaningful progress or illusory reform? Analysing China's Labour Contract Law. *New Labour Forum*, 18(2), 43–51.
- Chan, J. (2013a, May 29). *Who speaks for China's workers?* Labour Notes. Retrieved from <http://www.labournotes.org/blogs/2013/05/who-speaks-china%E2%80%99s-workers>
- Chan, J. (2013b). A suicide survivor: The life of a Chinese worker. *New Technology, Worker and Employment*, 28(2), 84–99.
- Chan, J., & Pun, N. (2010). Suicide as protest for the new generation of Chinese migrant workers: Foxconn, global capital, and the state. *Asia-Pacific Journal*, 37(2). No. 10. Retrieved from <http://japanfocus.org/-Jenny-Chan/3408>
- Chan, J., Pun, N., & Selden, M. (2013). The politics of global production: Apple, Foxconn, and China's new working class. *New Technology, Work and Employment*, 28(2), 100–115.
- Chan, J., Pun, N., & Selden, M. (2015a). Apple's iPad city: Subcontracting exploitation to China. In K. van der Pijl (Ed.), *Handbook of the international political economy of production* (pp. 76–97). Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.
- Chan, J., Pun, N., & Selden, M. (2015b). Interns or workers? China's student labour regime. *Asian Studies* (Official Journal of the Asian Studies Association of Hong Kong), 1(1), 69–98.
- Chan, J., Pun, N., & Selden, M. (2016a). Chinese labour protest and trade unions. In R. Maxwell (Ed.), *The Routledge companion to labour and media* (pp. 290–302). New York, NY: Routledge.

- Chan, J., Pun, N., & Selden, M. (2016b). Labour protests and trade union reforms in China. In J. Drahokoupil, R. Andrijašević, & D. Sacchetto (Eds.), *Flexible workforces and low profit margins: Electronics assembly between Europe and China* (pp. 205–222). Brussels: ETUI (European Trade Union Institute).
- Chan, J., & Selden, M. (2014). China's rural migrant workers, the state, and labour politics. *Critical Asian Studies*, 46(4), 599–620.
- Chen, A. (2014). How has the abolition of agricultural taxes transformed village governance in China? Evidence from agricultural regions. *China Quarterly*, 219, 715–735.
- Chen, C.-J. J. (2015). Zhongguo weiquan zhengti xia de jiti kangyi: Taizichang dabagong de anli fenxi (Popular protest in an authoritarian regime: A wildcat strike in southern China). *Taiwanese Sociology*, 30, 1–53.
- Chen, F., & Xu, X. (2012). 'Active judiciary': Judicial dismantling of workers' collective action in China. *China Journal*, 67, 87–108.
- Chen, X. (2012). *Social protest and contentious authoritarianism in China*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- China Briefing. (2013). *China initiates new round of minimum wage increases*. Retrieved from <http://www.china-briefing.com/news/2013/01/04/china-initiates-new-round-of-minimum-wage-increases.html>
- China Daily. (2010, August 19). Foxconn rallies to end suicides by workers.
- China Daily. (2015, February 3). Foxconn's long hours causing workers' deaths: Union. Retrieved from http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2015-02/03/content_19477082.htm
- China Labour Net. (2014). *Laodong zhengyi chuli tongji shuju* (Statistical data of labour dispute settlement). Retrieved from <http://www.labournet.com.cn/ldzy/ckzl/ckzl2a.asp>
- China Labour Statistical Yearbook 2014. (2015). Beijing: China Statistics Press.
- Chinese Trade Unions Statistics Yearbook 2013. (2015). Beijing: China Statistics Press.
- Chuang, J. (2014). China's rural land politics: Bureaucratic absorption and the muting of rightful resistance. *China Quarterly*, 219, 649–669.
- Chuang, J. (2015a). Factory girls after the factory: Female return migrations in rural China. *Gender & Society*. doi:10.1177/0891243215621718
- Chuang, J. (2015b). Urbanization through dispossession: Survival and stratification in China's new townships. *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 42(2), 275–294.
- Davis, D. S. (2014). Demographic challenges for a rising China. *Dædalus*, 143(2), 26–38.
- Deng, Y., & O'Brien, K. J. (2013). Relational repression in China: Using social ties to demobilize protesters. *China Quarterly*, 215, 533–552.
- Eggleston, K., Oi, J. C., Rozelle, S., Sun, A., Walder, A., & Zhou, X. (2013). Will demographic change slow China's rise? *Journal of Asian Studies*, 72(3), 505–518.
- Elfstrom, M., & Kuruvilla, S. (2014). The changing nature of labour unrest in China. *ILR (Industrial and Labour Relations) Review*, 67(2), 453–480.
- Foxconn Technology Group. (2010). *Foxconn is committed to a safe and positive working environment*. 11 October. Retrieved from http://regmedia.co.uk/2010/10/12/foxconn_media_statement.pdf
- Frazier, M. W. (2014). State schemes or safety nets? China's push for universal coverage. *Dædalus*, 143(2), 69–80.
- Friedman, E. (2014). *Insurgency trap: Labour politics in postsocialist China*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Friedman, E., & Lee, C. K. (2010). Remaking the world of Chinese labour: A 30-year retrospective. *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, 48(3), 507–533.
- Fu, H., & Cullen, R. (2011). From mediatory to adjudicatory justice: The limits of civil justice reform in China. In M. Y. K. Woo & M. E. Gallagher (Eds.), *Chinese justice: Civil dispute resolution in contemporary China* (pp. 25–57). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Gallagher, M. E. (2006). Mobilizing the law in China: 'Informed disenchantment' and the development of legal consciousness. *Law and Society Review*, 40(4), 783–816.
- Gallagher, M. E. (2014). China's workers movement and the end of the rapid-growth era. *Dædalus*, 143(2), 81–95.
- Gallagher, M. E., & Dong, B. (2011). Legislating harmony: Labour law reform in contemporary China. In S. Kuruvilla, C. K. Lee, & M. E. Gallagher (Eds.), *From iron rice bowl to informalization: Markets, workers, and the state in a changing China* (pp. 36–60). Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Gallagher, M. E., Giles, J., Park, A., & Wang, M. (2015). China's 2008 Labour Contract Law: Implementation and implications for China's workers. *Human Relations*, 68(2), 197–235.
- Goodman, D. S. G. (2014). *Class in contemporary China*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Gu, B., & Cai, Y. (2011). *Fertility prospects in China*. United Nations Population Division. Retrieved from http://www.un.org/esa/population/publications/expertpapers/2011-14_Gu&Cai_Expert-paper.pdf
- Guo, Y. (Ed.). (2016). *Handbook on class and social stratification in China*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.

- Halegua, A. (2015, February 25). China's new collective bargaining rule is too weak to ease labour conflicts. *South China Morning Post*. Retrieved from <http://www.scmp.com/comment/insight-opinion/article/1723213/chinas-new-collective-bargaining-rule-too-weak-ease-labour>
- Harper Ho, V. E. (2003). *Labour dispute resolution in China: Implications for labour rights and legal reform*. Berkeley: University of California, Institute of East Asian Studies.
- Hsiao, W. C. (2014). Correcting past health policy mistakes. *Daedalus*, 143(2), 53–68.
- Hui, E. S., & Chan, C. K. C. (2015). Beyond the union-centred approach: A critical evaluation of recent trade union elections in China. *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, 53(3), 601–627.
- Hurst, W. (2009). *The Chinese worker after socialism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Lee, C. K. (2007). *Against the law: Labour protests in China's rustbelt and sunbelt*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Lee, C. K. (2010). Pathways of labour activism. In E. J. Perry & M. Selden (Eds.), *Chinese society: Change, conflict and resistance* (pp. 57–79, 3rd ed.). London: Routledge.
- Lee, C. K. (2016). Precarization or empowerment? Reflections on recent labour unrest in China. *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 1–17. doi:10.1017/S0021911815002132.
- Lee, C. K., & Selden, M. (2008). Inequality and its enemies in revolutionary and reform China. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 43(52), 27–36.
- Lee, C. K., & Shen, Y. (2009). China: The paradox and possibility of a public sociology of labour. *Work and Occupations*, 36(2), 110–125.
- Lee, C. K., & Zhang, Y. (2013). The power of instability: Unravelling the microfoundations of bargained authoritarianism in China. *American Journal of Sociology*, 118(6), 1475–1508.
- Liebmman, B. L. (2014). Legal reform: China's law–stability paradox. *Daedalus*, 143(2), 96–109.
- Litzinger, R. A. (2013). The labour question in China: Apple and beyond. *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, 112(1), 172–178.
- Liu, M. (2011). 'Where there are workers, there should be trade unions': Union organizing in the era of growing informal employment. In S. Kuruvilla, C. K. Lee, & M. E. Gallagher (Eds.), *From iron rice bowl to informalization: Markets, workers, and the state in a changing China* (pp. 157–172). Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Locke, R. M. (2013). *The promise and limits of private power: Promoting labour standards in a global economy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Lyddon, D., Cao, X., Meng, Q., & Lu, J. (2015). A strike of 'unorganised' workers in a Chinese car factory: The Nanhai Honda events of 2010. *Industrial Relations Journal*, 46(2), 134–152.
- Martinez, N. J. (2015). Servants of servers: Rights violations and forced labour in the supply chain of ICT (Information and Communications Technology) equipment in European universities. *DanWatch*. October 5. Retrieved from <https://www.danwatch.dk/en/undersogelse/servants-of-servers/>
- Morrison, W. M. (2015). *China's economic rise: History, trends, challenges, and implications for the United States* (Congressional Research Service (CRS) Report). September 11. Retrieved from <https://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/RL33534.pdf>
- National Bureau of Statistics. (2011). *Press release on major figures of the 2010 National Population Census*. April 28. Retrieved from http://www.stats.gov.cn/english/newsandcomingevents/t20110428_402722237.htm
- National Bureau of Statistics. (2014). *2013 nian quanguo nongmingong jiance diaocha baogao* (Investigative report on the monitoring of Chinese rural migrant workers in 2013). Retrieved from http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/zxfb/201405/t20140512_551585.html
- National Bureau of Statistics. (2016). *2015 nian nongmingong jiance diaocha baogao* (Investigative report on the monitoring of rural migrant workers in 2015). Retrieved from http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/zxfb/201604/t20160428_1349713.html
- Naughton, B. (2010). China's distinctive system: Can it be a model for others? *Journal of Contemporary China*, 19(65), 437–460.
- Naughton, B. (2014). China's economy: Complacency, crisis & the challenge of reform. *Daedalus*, 143(2), 14–25.
- Pringle, T. (2011). *Trade unions in China: The challenge of labour unrest*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Pun, N., & Chan, C. K. C. (2008). The subsumption of class discourse in China. *Boundary*, 2 35(2), 75–91.
- Pun, N., & Chan, J. (2012). Global capital, the state, and Chinese workers: The Foxconn experience. *Modern China*, 38(4), 383–410.
- Pun, N., & Chan, J. (2013). The spatial politics of labour in China: Life, labour, and a new generation of migrant workers. *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 112(1), 179–190.
- Pun, N., & Lu, H. (2010). Unfinished proletarianization: Self, anger and class action of the second generation of peasant-workers in reform China. *Modern China*, 36(5), 493–519.

- Pun, N., Shen, Y., Guo, Y., Lu, H., Chan, J., & Selden, M. (2014). Worker–intellectual unity: Trans-border sociological intervention in Foxconn. *Current Sociology*, 62(2), 209–222.
- Sargeson, S. (1999). *Reworking China's proletariat*. Houndmills: Macmillan.
- Shenzhen Daily. (2012, May 29). *Unions to promote direct elections*. Retrieved from http://szdaily.sznews.com/html/2012-05/29/content_2061431.htm
- Silver, B. J. (2003). *Forces of labour: Workers' movements and globalization since 1870*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- So, A. Y. (2013). *Class and class conflict in post-socialist China*. Singapore: World Scientific Publishing Company.
- Su, Y., & He, X. (2010). Street as courtroom: State accommodation of labour protest in South China. *Law and Society Review*, 44(1), 157–184.
- Thireau, I., & Hua, L. (2003). The moral universe of aggrieved Chinese workers: Workers' appeals to arbitration committees and letters and visits offices. *China Journal*, 50, 83–103.
- Traub-Merz, R. (2012). All China federation of trade unions: Structure, functions and the challenge of collective bargaining. In R. Traub-Merz & K. Ngok (Eds.), *Industrial democracy in China: With additional studies on Germany, South Korea and Vietnam* (pp. 11–51). Beijing: China Social Sciences Press.
- Whyte, M. K. (Ed.). (2010). *One country, two societies: Rural–urban inequality in contemporary China*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Whyte, M. K. (2014). Soaring income gaps: China in comparative perspective. *Dædalus*, 143(2), 39–52.
- Wong, C. (2011). The fiscal stimulus programme and public governance issues in China. *OECD Journal on Budgeting*. Retrieved from <http://www.oecd.org/gov/budgeting/49633058.pdf>
- Xu, F. (2014). Temporary work in China: Precarity in an emerging labour market. In J. Fudgeand & K. Strauss (Eds.), *Temporary work, agencies, and unfree labour: Insecurity in the new world of work* (pp. 143 – 163). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Yan, H. (2008). *New masters, new servants: Migration, development, and women workers in China*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Zhang, L. (2015). *Inside China's automobile factories: The politics of labour and worker resistance*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

Jenny Chan (Ph.D. in 2014) is an Assistant Professor of Sociology at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University. Prior to joining PolyU, she was a Lecturer of Sociology and Contemporary China Studies at the School of Interdisciplinary Area Studies, and a Junior Research Fellow (2015–2018) of Kellogg College, University of Oxford. She also serves as a Board Member of the International Sociological Association's Research Committee on Labour Movements. She is co-author of *La machine est ton seigneur et ton maître* (with Yang and Xu Lizhi, Agone, 2015) and of *Dying for an iPhone* (with Ngai Pun and Mark Selden, Rowman & Littlefield, forthcoming).

Mark Selden is a Senior Research Associate at the Asian/Pacific/American Studies Institute at New York University, Professor Emeritus of Sociology and History at Binghamton University, and Editor of the *Asia-Pacific Journal*. He researches the modern and contemporary geopolitics, political economy, and history of China, Japan, and the Asia Pacific. His work ranges broadly across themes of war and revolution, inequality, development, regional and world social change, social movements, and historical memory. His books include: *China in revolution: The Yenan way revisited*; *The political economy of Chinese development*; *Chinese village, socialist state*; *Chinese society: Change, conflict and resistance*; and *The resurgence of East Asia: 500, 150 and 50 year perspectives*.