

Gender and Class: Women's Working Lives in a Dormitory Labor Regime in China

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The thirty years since *Women on the Line* has witnessed great achievement in the literature of gender and work both in the West and Global South.¹ There was a booming literature since the 1970s and 1980s in the fields of sociology, anthropology, women studies, and cultural studies—most of them excellent works that touch upon sophisticated debates on the interplay between gender and work, production and reproduction, dominance, and resistance in an increasingly globalized context.

Over the past thirty years, a rapid extended reproduction of capitalism on a global scale, in Rosa Luxemburg's sense, contributed to a dramatic remaking of class and gender relations in the world. A farewell to "class analysis" has not made class relations in the West obsolete but has further transplanted them into the Third World societies in which gender relations are part and parcel of the rapid transformation of class relations. Inspired by the labor historian Prof. Alice Kessler-Harris, I would like to argue that class and gender are not parallel dimensions of social analysis.² Instead gender is central to the formation of the working classes in history and in contemporary contexts. The classical English working class had been represented by a male worker who was the breadwinner of the household, a skilled laborer at the workplace, a potential militant in strikes, and a trade unionist. This image of the traditional working class has been greatly challenged by the rapid expansion of mass production, transnationalization of production, the feminization of labor use in the Global South, and the rise of new service economies in the West. Today any discussion of a new working class is unimaginable without the presence of female workers.

Gender is not only an issue of identity attached to the formation of the working class. Gender ideology, gender relations, and gender structure are all central to the making and remaking of the working class. Like Miriam Glucksmann, I spent seven months working on the line in an electronics assembly plant. Some of my experience on the line paralleled that of Glucksmann. The typical examples are the gendered division of labor at the workplace and the Taylorist methods of organizing production. Some of the differences reflect the new global context of industrial production. For instance, the global production in China was characteristic of a dormitory labor regime, and hence all the workers, including myself, had to stay at the factory dormitories while Glucksmann was able to live at home. Studying and working with Chinese women workers in the Shenzhen Special Economic Zone in 1995 and 1996, I argue that the demand for cheap and productive labor to fuel transnational capital accumulation requires a gendering process of the working class, more

specifically, gendered class subjects as well as a gendering process in the realm of production and reproduction. Gender and class are always mutually constituted.³

Taking inspiration from *Women on the Line, Made in China* argues that sexualizing the subjects is the project of capital that serves to kick off the process of recommodification of laboring bodies in reformed China. An asexual image of a socialist worker has to be resexualized and, hence, qualified as a capitalist worker—subject to produce and consume. Chinese femininity, claimed to be destroyed in Mao's revolution, has to be reinvented and renurtured in order to create an obedient and nimble-fingered working class that can meet the needs of transnational production in the urban export-processing zones.

The gendering process in the production and reproduction of labor use involves a specific dormitory labor system within which the lives of women migrant workers are shaped. In parallel to Glucksmann's study of globalization and gender, I further understand this dormitory labor system as a *gendered* form of labor use to fuel global production in new industrialized regions, especially in South China. The new export-oriented industrialized regions dominated by foreign-invested companies have witnessed a systemic use of the dormitory labor system. In order to expropriate the labor of Chinese rural migrant women, all enterprises, irrespective of their industrial sectors, have to provide accommodation for their workers in order to keep their laborers. Combining work and residence under the dormitory labor system, production and daily reproduction are reconfigured for the sake of global capital, with the daily reproduction of labor entirely controlled by foreign-invested or privately owned companies, tightening up the level of control on the workers since the period of *Women on the Line* in the 1970s.

The distinctive nature of the Chinese *dormitory labor system* is also for short-tenure migrant labor within the factory compound or close to it. The focus is on maximizing the utilization of labor of the temporary, migrant, and contract laborer by controlling the daily reproduction of their labor power. A hybrid, transient workforce is created, circulating between factory and countryside, dominated by employers' control over housing needs and state controls over residency permits.

Gender is central to this specific embodiment of Chinese dormitory labor system and the formation of the transient working class.⁴ For the past three decades, among the exodus of internal migrant workers into the industrial cities, young rural women are among the first to be picked up by the new export-oriented industries. As with Lowell Mill girls in the United States a century and a half ago, their gender, in addition to their youth and rural migrant status, is an integral part of China's export-led industrialism facilitating global production for the world market. It was not until the early 2000s, with a shortage of young and single female labor in the coastal areas of China, that factories recruited more and more men and married women into the export-processing industries. A more nuanced and complex composition of gendered subjects can be seen in today's Chinese working class.

These gendered worker-subjects are often called *dagongmei/zai*, an identity produced at the particular moment when private and transnational capital converged in post-socialist China. Female proletarianization was an outcome of the change in gender ideology and gender roles in the rural communities caused by the decollectivization of land in the early 1980s. The loss of land rights and limited educational opportunities for women contributed to massive rural to urban migration. Young rural women, beginning in their late teens, had no choice but to go work in the cities. These rural migrants, however, are identified as temporary residents who work in a city and who lack formal urban residency rights. The state was shirking its obligation to provide housing, job security, and welfare to rural migrant workers. China's overall economy, while it needs the labor of the rural population, does not need the city-based survival of that population once demand for rural-to-urban migrants' labor power shifts in either location or emphasis. This newly forming working class is not permitted to form permanent roots and legal identities in the city.

Being extraordinarily dislocated in the cities, migrant labor is distinguished by its transient nature. A worker, especially a female worker, will usually spend three to five years working as a wage laborer in an industrial city before getting married. In order to get married, most of the women have to return home because of their difficulty in searching for a marriage partner in the city. The reproduction of labor of the next generation is hence left to the rural villages, which bear the costs of industrial development in urban areas.

Under the dormitory labor regime, management within the foreign-invested or privately owned companies has exceptional control over the workforce. With workers not having a residence independent of the enterprise, working days can be extended to suit production needs. This permits a flexible utilization of labor time and means employers can respond to product demand more readily than in situations where workers' time is regulated by the state or the workers.

The entire ethic of the dormitory regime was not just to impose severe discipline and punishment, but also to create a discourse on self-discipline, which was often emphasized at the workplace. Self-management of dormitory rooms was also expected so that the women workers could learn how to behave themselves as proper "modern" workers. In short, creating a well-trained female workforce with discipline, fitting to the maximization of production, is the political technology of the dormitory labor regime.

Despite its systemic and near-total domination of laborers' lives, the Chinese dormitory labor regime, on the other hand, opens up space for struggle and resistance. In the dormitories, the women workers—already joined to one another along gender lines—further cluster themselves along kinship and ethnic lines, linked to widespread networks outside the workplace setting. There are forms of intensive intimacy and solidarity that, by building bonds among women, interfere with management control over workers' lives on the shop floor and at the dormitories. They also participate in localized dormitory

networks that generate intensive information exchanges about external job opportunities and that thereby create and strengthen workers' mobility power.

In the midst of a crisis or a strike, the dormitory space serves as the bedrock for organizing women. In a number of cases, petition letters were circulated from dorm to dorm and easily collected many signatures in a single night. The relative ease with which workers could use the dorm setting to organize their common cause against management derives, in large measure, from the limited space that dormitories offer opponents of collective action. On strike, workers efficiently and spontaneously organize themselves, receiving little or no formal organizational help from trade unions or labor organizations. The compression of time that, in the dormitory labor regime, is necessary for production in turn works in favor of collective worker organization by accelerating consensus building and strategy development therein.

Echoing *Women on the Line*, gender is central to the formation of the working class in a global context. In China, the gendered dormitory labor regime is embedded in an increasingly globalized context, reinforcing a new international division of labor.

The battle for this new working class requires struggles against both capital and state. Against the state, the migrant workers have to launch a struggle for urban citizenship rights in order to be able to settle down in the industrial cities and towns and create their own working-class community. Against capital, the women workers need to look for an alternative way of organizing since traditional trade union struggle is not effective in a dormitory labor regime in China. Dormitory-based organizing along the gender lines that help generate sisterhood solidarity among workers hopefully will be one of the alternative struggles. This is why the women workers strove to set up the Chinese Working Women Network in the mid-1990s after my field work. Like *Women on the Line*, my work is also an attempt to link up field research and organizing women in the context of transnational globalization.

NOTES

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1. Miriam Glucksmann aka Ruth Cavendish, *Women on the Line* (London, 2009).
2. Alice Kessler-Harris, *Gendering Labor History* (Urbana and Chicago, 2007).
3. Pun Ngai, *Made in China: Women Factory Workers in a Global Workplace* (Durham and Hong Kong, 2005).
4. Pun Ngai, "The Dormitory Labor Regime: Sites of Control and Resistance for Women Migrant Workers in South China", *Feminist Economics*, 13 (2007):239–258.