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# ‘Classes of Labour’ at the Margins of Global Commodity Chains in India and China

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## ABSTRACT

This article deploys the concept of ‘classes of labour’ to map and compare non-factory labour relations in the garment chain across Delhi and Shanghai metropolitan areas. It contributes to commodity studies by unpacking the great complexity of mechanisms of ‘adverse incorporation’ of informal work in global commodity chains and production circuits. Field findings reveal the great social differentiation at work in informalized settings in the two countries, and suggest that while the margins of garment work are characterized by high levels of vulnerability, they may also open up new possibilities for workers to resist or re-appropriate some degree of control over their labour and reproductive time. While these possibilities depend on regional trajectories, informal labour arrangements do not only result from capital’s quest for flexibility. Workers actively participate in shaping their own labour geography, even when exposed to high employment insecurity. The conclusions more broadly discuss the merits of comparative analysis to study labour in global production circuits.

## INTRODUCTION

This article maps realms of production and labour relations in non-factory segments of the garment industry in India and China: in the National Capital Region (NCR) around Delhi, and the Greater Shanghai Region (GSR). It finds similarities and differences among the distinct features of the industry in each site. These ‘peripheral’ realms of production at the margins of the

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[Correction added on 2 May 2018 after first online publication: The article’s copyright line was updated to reflect OnlineOpen: CC-BY.]

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Global Garment Commodity Chain (GGCC) are highly informal hubs. Our comparative analysis shows that they are not characterized by homogeneous labour relations and practices; rather they are diverse and complex, reflecting the great social differentiation at work in informalized settings, and its variability across the world economy. Moreover, the analysis shows that while generally the margins of garment work are characterized by vulnerability,<sup>1</sup> they may also conceal new possibilities for workers to resist, or even re-appropriate some degree of control over their labour and reproductive time. These possibilities greatly depend on distinct regional trajectories.

The article theorizes non-factory labour in the two locations by drawing on Henry Bernstein's (2007) concept 'classes of labour'. This concept, embedded in political economy, can enable commodity studies to more systematically engage with the study of labour. It is a useful analytical as well as heuristic tool to map labour relations and social differentiation across Global Commodity Chains (GCCs), Global Value Chains (GVCs) and Global Production Networks (GPNs). Specifically, attention to the multiple 'classes of labour' at work in global production circuits across different regions of the world can significantly contribute to the literature on labour informality in GCCs, GVCs and GPNs, and to recent theorizations of 'adverse incorporation' (Phillips, 2011). This comparative approach based on 'classes of labour' resists making overly direct links between 'the informal' and 'the vulnerable', thereby sidestepping the limitations of linear understandings of labour vulnerability premised on the 'placement' of workers along a vertical employment ladder shaped by the global chain and/or network. Secondly, it helps deepen and refine our understanding of the interplay between informality, vulnerability and 'adverse incorporation' in global chains and networks, by showing the many possible meanings of these terms in different contexts. Finally, it also suggests that informal labour relations and arrangements are not only the result of capital's quest for flexibility. As originally argued by Andrew Herod (2003), workers also actively participate in shaping their own labour geography (Carswell and De Neve, 2013; De Neve, 2014a, 2014b; Ruwanpura, 2016; Selwyn, 2012, 2013; Werner, 2016), even when exposed to high vulnerability and insecurity.

The remainder of the article is organized into four sections. The next section discusses the relevance of non-factory labour in the garment industry. It introduces Bernstein's concept of 'classes of labour' and illustrates how this contributes to commodity studies by tempering the concept of 'adverse incorporation' in relation to informal workers in globalized circuits. The following two sections then present the empirical material, before the concluding section reflects on the relevance of social reproduction in structuring 'classes of labour' in the two locations, and on the virtues and perils of comparative analysis.

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1. Vulnerability here refers to the lack of security characterizing informal, precarious work, resulting in great exposure to economic risk (Standing, 1987, 2009).

The empirical evidence analysed here is based on the field findings of a comparative research project carried out during 2012–13 in the NCR and GSR. The fieldwork deployed multiple methods, ranging from semi-structured interviews in the context of repeated field visits, to semi-quantitative tools of analysis. It focused on both workers and employers, with a broad scope to encompass the complex layering of production and work. In India it included 30 interviews, and in China 34, with various garment producers. In both settings, interviews were also held with key informants such as representatives of unions and labour NGOs, the labour inspection departments and garment industry associations. This was complemented by qualitative observations by the authors. A semi-quantitative questionnaire was administered to a sample of 70 workers in each country. Beyond collecting quantitative information on workers' social profiles, wages and social entitlements, the questionnaire involved a number of open-ended questions on the nature of work and labour relations. The selection was purposive, aimed at including distinct types of non-factory workers engaged in the multiple garmenting activities identified during the mapping process. The mapping process, the semi-quantitative survey and field observations all constitute an inseparable whole in the research presented here. Moreover, the analysis builds on insights based on the authors' long-term knowledge of the sector in the two countries, consonant with Burawoy's (1998) 'extended case study method'. When presenting original findings, this article refers to some of the joint research project reports.

### **THE GARMENT CHAIN, THE SWEATSHOP AND NON-FACTORY 'CLASSES OF LABOUR'**

The garment industry is one of the most globalized in the world, and is organized in a complex commodity chain or production network spanning the world economy (Esbenshade, 2004; Ramaswamy and Gereffi, 2001). Numerous studies reflect on the footloose nature of the industry and bleak implications for labour (e.g. Hale and Wills, 2005; Hoskins, 2014; Seabrook, 2015). Processes of relocation of the industry have always been linked to a quest for new reservoirs of cheap labour across the world — to the formation and reproduction of the sweatshop. Moreover, the rise of neoliberalism signalled a shift to a policy regime in which poor working conditions stopped being a policy priority and came to be perceived as a 'comparative advantage' (Bremner, 1995), 'good for development'.

The reproduction of poor working conditions in the industry — its supposed 'advantage' — is the outcome of a complex process of labour informalization. This involves the 'informalization of the formal' (Chang, 2009), whereby factory work is subject to deepening casualization (Srivastava, 2012). It also involves the subsumption of informal production and labour structures into production circuits (Mezzadri, 2008). Indeed, drawing from

Marxian analysis, when it comes to the garment sector one has to take into account processes of both 'real' and 'formal' subsumption of labour (Banaji, 2010), as the industry banks on both. Worldwide, a section of the garment workforce is packed into factories in export processing zones, special economic zones or industrial parks. However, another considerable part of this workforce inhabits more informal production circuits, situated outside factories or 'organized' production spaces. In short, the garment sweatshop is a multi-faceted social relation characterized by a production architecture articulating across factory and 'non-factory' realms (Mezzadri, 2014a).

The relevance of non-factory work in garment production is widely acknowledged. Historically, the very concept of 'the sweatshop' was linked to activities taking place outside factories (Howard, 1997). The 'home' was conceived as the crucial non-factory production space (Boris, 1994). Since the first consumer mobilizations (Frank, 2003), homeworking remained at the centre of the debate on working conditions. Studies emphasized its highly gendered features, based on patriarchal structures confining women to reproductive (unpaid) work inside the household. Women represented the majority of homeworkers in the USA (Boris, 1994); in Europe, across industrial districts (on Italy, see Murray, 1987); in Latin America (on Mexico, see Benería and Roldán, 1987); and in South and Southeast Asia (Doane, 2007).

However, within the complex production networks of the garment industry, non-factory production realms are far more differentiated than the category 'homeworking' signals. The home is only one of the sites of production hosting informal wage-earners, and especially petty commodity producers. These can also be based in micro-workshops and 'home-like' spaces (Raju, 2013). They can combine functions of capital and labour (Bernstein, 2007); work as 'disguised' forms of wage labour (Oya, 2010; Rizzo, 2011); act as 'disguised' forms of capital (Mezzadri, 2016a); or reproduce as a distinct category altogether (Harriss-White, 2014). In order to understand petty commodity production in regional contexts, one has to study the functions it performs in the circuits of capital it is embedded into (Mezzadri, 2016a). The complexity of the social relations at work in non-factory, informalized settings can only be captured through analyses stressing social differentiation, both of spaces of work and of labour arrangements, as embedded in their regional political economies. In fact, even the home-based segments of non-factory labour may differ substantially, depending on regional trajectories.

Focusing on labour relations, non-factory realms are constituted of what Bernstein (2007) defines as multiple 'classes of labour', which can serve a proletarian function under distinct 'guises' or avatars. Notably, the role of these classes within the wider economic circuits into which they are drawn is also linked to the social profile of the groups in question; in terms of caste, gender, ethnicity, age or geographical provenance (Harriss-White and Gooptu, 2001; RoyChowdhury, 2015). Social differentiation thus

works both in relation to the multiple economic functions performed by ‘classes of labour’, and to the social (reproductive) profile of such classes (Mezzadri, 2016b).

Despite a number of recent exceptions (mainly focusing on ‘the home’, e.g. Dunaway, 2014), the recognition of the heterogeneity and social differentiation of non-factory based ‘classes of labour’ is still underdeveloped in studies focused on global commodity chains and production networks. Originating in World System Theory (Hopkins and Wallerstein, 1977, 1986), the study of commodity chains has evolved into a literature aimed at capturing the evolution of the global governance involved in the making of global commodities and products (here the emphasis is on *global commodity chains*; Gereffi and Korzeniewicz, 1994), or the functions exercised and value commanded by different agents/processes within the chain (here the emphasis is on *global value chains*; Sturgeon, 2008). Since the early 2000s these studies have been systematically criticized for their lack of attention to labour (Bernstein and Campling, 2006; Taylor, 2007). Some recent contributions have tried to address this gap. Some have shifted attention from ‘the chain’ to ‘the network’ — from GCCs and GVCs to GPNs (Coe et al., 2008). Others have moved to reintegrate political economy concerns — like labour and class (Carswell and De Neve, 2013; Selwyn, 2012, 2013), but also accumulation, dispossession, and inequality in general (Bair and Werner, 2011; Palpacuer, 2008) — within chain analysis, or have simply tried to call the study of chains back into the broader framework of political economy (Mezzadri, 2014b; Smith et al., 2002).

Parallel to these systemic critiques, a rising number of empirical studies are now paying far more attention to labour practices and relations within global chains and networks (e.g. Barrientos, 2013; Lund-Thomsen et al., 2012; McGrath, 2013). Within this literature, a few have tried to also address concerns linked to the different types of incorporation available to workers along chains and networks, either by stressing the role of key players for recruitment or labour control, or by focusing on mechanisms of inclusion or exclusion. For instance, Barrientos (2013) highlights the role of labour contractors in mediating the entry of different sets of workers into globalized production, and Phillips (2011) maps how global informalization is driven by distinct dynamics reproduced in chains and networks through mechanisms of ‘social exclusion’ and ‘adverse incorporation’. According to Phillips (*ibid.*: 383), ‘adverse incorporation’ into GPNs is a type of inclusion into the social process of global production ‘generating and reinforcing diverse forms of vulnerability and poverty among groups of poor workers’.

Building on Hickey and du Toit (2007) and Mosse (2007, 2010), Phillips’ attention to mechanisms of ‘adverse incorporation’ of labour into global circuits is an important contribution to commodity studies. Phillips argues that labour informality cannot be equated with vulnerability, due to the ‘structural blending’ of formal and informal activities. According to Phillips, the dynamics of ‘adverse incorporation’ into global circuits are both

'top-down' — that is, shaped by capital and the state — and 'bottom-up' — shaped by 'local conditions' of informality, poverty and vulnerability.

However, it is problematic to separate the two dynamics in this fashion and maintain a *relational* understanding of informality and/or working poverty that is central to the very conceptualization of 'adverse incorporation' (Bernstein, 2006; Hickey and du Toit, 2007) as a process of 'engagement into social life' (labouring, in this case) 'on adverse terms' (Mosse, 2007: 4). Moreover, while Phillips' framework is detailed in its engagement with 'top-down' processes of informalization — arguably in line with classic commodity studies — it explains 'bottom-up' aspects of informalization in less depth. For this purpose, a focus on labour relations and their social differentiation in the context of informalized realms — that is, a framework aimed at identifying the distinct 'classes of labour' of such realms — can provide useful insights. It unpacks the informal economy in given regional settings, it fleshes out overly linear schemas that make too direct a link between informality, vulnerability and working poverty, and explores the ways in which 'adverse incorporation' into globalized circuits takes place in concrete settings, and what its links are to different labour relations. Finally, it also provides room to sketch some of the ways in which distinct sets of workers — or indeed 'classes of labour' — experience, cope with, but also challenge or re-appropriate the mechanisms of 'adverse incorporation', participating in shaping their own geography (Carswell and De Neve, 2013; De Neve, 2014a, 2014b; Herod, 2003; Ruwanpura, 2016; Selwyn, 2012, 2013).

To summarize, in this analysis the potential 'adverse incorporation' of 'classes of labour' into global production circuits becomes a matter for empirical enquiry, rather than a truism. On the other hand, given the astonishingly high rates of informal employment worldwide (see ILO and WTO, 2009; and Vanek et al., 2014 for country-based global estimates), the degrees of vulnerability implicit in informal work (Standing, 1987, 2009) cannot be assumed as homogeneous. This is particularly so in contexts characterized by huge, reserve armies of labour, where informal, non-factory workers sweat in homes or tiny workshops. Is it always the case that these workers at the periphery of production circuits are the most vulnerable? To what extent and in which ways are they 'adversely incorporated'? Is vulnerability experienced in similar ways by different non-factory 'classes of labour'? Can 'the marginal' ever gain 'core' advantages, and if so in what ways?

The following two sections compare non-factory production and work in the National Capital Region (NCR) in India and the Greater Shanghai Region (GSR) in China. They illustrate their similarities and differences, map their great social differentiation, reflect on issues of vulnerability and marginality, but also highlight cases in which 'the margins' may provide room for manoeuvre to regain some form of control over labour and reproductive time. What emerges from the case studies further informs the theorization of 'classes of labour' in global chains and networks.

**NON-FACTORY ‘CLASSES OF LABOUR’ IN INDIA: MULTIPLE FORMS OF VULNERABILITY**

Recent decades have seen rising levels of informal employment, both across developing and emerging economies as well as across the so-called developed bloc. As argued by Breman and van der Linden (2014), labour informalization has become the mode of regulation of capitalism at a global level, showing — in a reversal of linear development models — that it is the ‘West’ now following the ‘Rest’ with regard to (precarious) labour relations. Global estimates suggest that India has the highest levels of informal/informalized labour (ILO, 2013; ILO and WTO, 2009). Labour informalization is rampant, also inside factories or more ‘formal’ production spaces (Srivastava, 2012), and has quickly spread to a number of capital-intensive industries, like cars (Barnes et al., 2015; Monaco, 2015) and steel (Parry, 2013). The Indian case confirms how labour informalization should be understood as a twofold process involving both the subsumption of informal economic activities into wider economic circuits, and the spread of informal labour relations across supposedly ‘formal’ production realms (NCEUS, 2007; Srivastava, 2012, 2016). The relentless rise of labour informalization in India has been facilitated by the massive presence of structural inequalities — primarily caste, but also gender, age, mobility and geographical provenance (Harriss-White, 2014; Harriss-White and Gooptu, 2001). It has also been enabled by a systematic rise in labour contracting arrangements (Srivastava, 2015), many of which have adapted and evolved from colonial and post-colonial recruitment methods (Breman, 2013; De Neve, 2014a; Kaur, 2014; Mezzadri, 2016a). The state has not been a passive ‘shadow’ actor; rather, it has often opted for regulations directly incentivizing informality (Basile and Harriss-White, 2010; Mezzadri, 2010). The recent relaxation of the Contract Labour Act is a case in point (Bhowmik, 2015). Informalized labour relations organized in distinct ‘classes of labour’ dominate across India (Lerche, 2010; Pattenden, 2016), including across the garment industry (Mezzadri, 2008). Its organization and features lend themselves to great industrial and labour fragmentation, further reproducing the historical footloose nature of the industry across the globe.

India became an important node of the global garment commodity chain (GGCC) in the 1980s. Production is scattered across the subcontinent and highly fragmented, organized in clusters of small and medium enterprises (AEPIC, 2009; Tewari, 2008). Each cluster shows clear patterns of product specialization. Womenswear and niche products are generally manufactured in the north and east of the country, which can bank on craft-based tailoring or textile production, while the mass production of basic items and t-shirts largely takes place in the south (Mezzadri, 2014b). The NCR is the most significant northern industrial area. It encompasses Delhi and areas located in the neighbouring states of Uttar Pradesh (UP), Haryana, and now also Rajasthan. The core segments of the NCR for garment activities are Okhla

(Delhi), NOIDA (UP), and Faridabad and Gurgaon (Haryana). Many garment employers own units across all these areas. High fragmentation relates to Delhi's history of small-scale tailoring, a legacy reproduced through state policies, and compatible with a product specialization largely geared towards complex, 'embellished ladieswear' items (Mezzadri, 2010).

Industrial activities organize in a complex production network, which can be categorized either on the basis of size, market access and positioning, or according to activity. These two axes of categorization overlap partially. Based on size, access and positioning, the NCR can be subdivided into three layers. At the top, we find a tier of garment employers owning large factories with direct access to final markets, either through global buyers/manufacturers or via an increasing number of Indian buying houses/retailers. These actors, which tower over the entire industrial formation, are generally only involved in export. A second tier of garment units is composed of medium and small factories, and is quite complex. Units can have direct access to final markets, but also be deployed as subcontractors for larger factories. They can work for export or domestic markets, or both. These two tiers make up the factory realm of production, where spaces of work are more formal and organized. However, some of the units at the bottom of this spectrum may be unregistered and work across the formal/informal divide — particularly small factories practising high levels of subcontracting and organizing production in putting-out systems.

Moving to the third layer, we enter the vast non-factory realm of production. This layer is defined by workshops, generally working as subcontractors and providing a key flexible reservoir of manufacturing capacity to direct exporters. As domestic markets rise in importance (Mezzadri and Srivastava, 2015; Tewari, 2008), these workshops have increased their activities and reach. Different processing units articulate across these three layers, as some activities, e.g. washing and dyeing, generally take place outside the garment units, which focus on core tasks. A sub-segment within this layer, at the bottom of the production ladder, is composed of a vast world of 'peripheral' actors in highly informalized settings. Some engage in ancillary activities, particularly embroidery, crucial to the regional specialization in 'embellished' womenswear. Embroidery is by machine or by hand, with the latter highly diversified, particularly in *adda* work (carried out on a handloom) or *moti* (sequin) work (Mezzadri, 2008). Other types of peripheral actors engage in activities that are ancillary only across some market segments. For instance, 'button-holing' is generally carried out inside garment units for standard-market segments. However, in low-market segments and/or less organized domestic production circuits, it is decentralized to specialized operators. Finally, a third type of peripheral actors may own very small stitching units with two or three machines. They mainly sell in domestic markets.

This brief analysis suggests the composite nature of non-factory realms of production in the peripheral segments of the garment chain in India. Across



these realms, there are different sets of labour relations, and workers are organized into three distinct ‘classes of labour’. These classes are defined on the basis of: relations to the means of production and space of work; recruitment patterns, remuneration and working conditions; and reproductive arrangements. The first type of class of labour involves a clear separation between workers and employers. Work takes place in production units that are effectively informal factories. These are not ‘proper’ factories but less organized and more informal units. These workspaces are also not homes — neither of the employers nor the workers. This is the case both in larger and smaller workshops. Workers represent a ‘class of labour’ of informal wage earners. They are recruited informally, mostly via labour contractors who also work across factory segments (Barrientos, 2013; Barrientos et al., 2010; Mezzadri, 2008, 2012; Singh and Kaur Sapra, 2007), where they operate in combination with forms of direct recruiting (Srivastava, 2015). Contractors can be either proper intermediaries or workers in key positions (see also De Neve, 2014a, on Tamil Nadu). Across workshop segments salaries are primarily based on piece rates, with the incidence of this over other forms of payment (weekly, monthly) increasing down the chain. Workshop labour experiences high intensity of work; overtime is considerable, with workers working 12–14 hour days (Mezzadri and Srivastava, 2015). In the small workshops, particularly, workers may sleep inside the work unit, via living arrangements blending productive and reproductive time.

Across the entire spectrum, workshop labour is a male preserve in the NCR; only the factory realm contains a small sub-segment of feminized labour, so far limited to a few large factories (Mezzadri, 2015a). The majority of workers are male migrants from UP and Bihar (Barrientos et al., 2010; Mezzadri, 2008, 2014a; Srivastava, 2015). They rarely settle in Delhi, but engage in longer or shorter spells of circular migration, and a significant proportion of them still own land in their place of origin. Living conditions in the NCR are harsh, with many workers sharing tiny rooms in filthy industrial or residential colonies. Workers themselves report wanting to return home during lean seasons to spend time in what the overwhelming majority of them perceive as their primary residence. It should be noted that the social profile of workers in this labour category does not substantially differ from that observed in factories. Some differences apply to contractual arrangements and social security contributions, more often found in the factories (Mezzadri and Srivastava, 2015).

A second type of labour relation present in the non-factory segments of the NCR is what the informality literature refers to as ‘own-account work’ (Rakowski, 1994); that is petty commodity production in Marxian terms (Bernstein, 2007; Harriss-White, 2010, 2014; Leys, 1975). This category is often placed under the rather vague and analytically frail label of self-employment, which is composed of family/household units and micro-entrepreneurs. In the NCR there used to be a substantial amount of own-account work before the end of the Multi Fibre Agreement (MFA), the

Table 1. Daily and Monthly Earnings, Peripheral vs. Factory Workers, NCR

Type of labour	Daily wage, based on 8-hour working day (INR)	Monthly wage, based on 8-hour working day (INR)
Factory work <sup>a</sup>	247	6,709
Own-account work <sup>b</sup>	265	7,071
Worker in contractor micro-unit	231	6,089
Homeworker	72	1,256
Total non-factory labour	183	4,621

Notes: <sup>a</sup>This estimate includes all categories of factory work. For tailors, monthly factory wages are set at 7,479 INR.

<sup>b</sup>For own-account work, earnings are calculated as income minus production expenses.

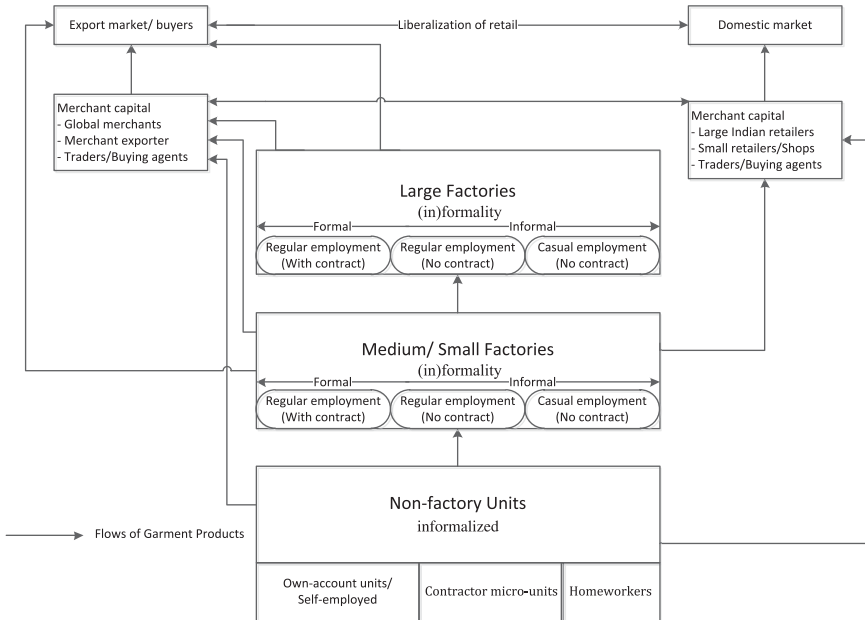
Source: Based on field findings, and adapted from Mezzadri and Srivastava (2015: 125, Table 2.53; 217, Table 3.19b).

international agreement that, until its phasing out in 2005, established export quotas. This is because, in India, the principles of quota allocation effectively promoted industrial fragmentation (Mezzadri, 2010). Own-account work is still present, but its relevance and incidence is nowadays higher in domestic production, and its features are changing. Fieldwork findings reveal that export-oriented circuits do not deploy the 'self-employed' (nor micro-units) as part of their systematic subcontracting strategy, except for selected activities like embroidery. Moreover, this form of production and work, involving the self-exploitation of proprietors and their families, is also under pressure from rising land prices in the NCR. Newcomers are less likely to have the initial capital to invest in a house big enough to have a dedicated production segment.

Unlike labour in workshops and micro-units, own-account work combines capital and labour in the same person (Bernstein, 2007; Harriss-White, 2010, 2014), and hence constitutes a fairly different 'class of labour'. Self-employed — or at least self-exploiting — workers within this 'class of labour' often own some means of production: some looms or stitching machines. However, they often do not earn significantly more than a dispossessed wage-worker — 15 per cent and 5 per cent more on average than wage-workers in micro-units and factories respectively, as highlighted in Table 1. More crucially, they experience a type of subordination that is consistent with wage work, although the labour relation is disguised (Mezzadri, 2015b). The great majority of these workers are male; however, women participate in activities as family aids, often unpaid. Interviews and survey results show that this group experiences high levels of under-employment, particularly in lean seasons. In this regard, it should be noted that while Table 1 compares peripheral and factory wages for a supposed eight-hour working day, many peripheral workers endure long spells of under-employment.

The third type of labour relation is composed of homework, also classified as 'outwork' (Carr and Chen, 2001; Srivastava, 2012). This type of labour

Figure 1. The Garment Production and Labour Chain in India



Source: Adapted from Mezzadri and Srivastava (2015) to include peripheral workers.

takes place in homes, where individual workers take on specific production tasks. Homeworkers represent a third ‘class of labour’ in the NCR non-factory segments (Figure 1). Homeworking activities are connected to either embroidery or thread-cutting. The latter is practised as a homeworking task only in very low-end garment production in the NCR (and elsewhere; see Rairikar, 1999) while embroidery is more widespread. Homeworkers in the NCR also experience high under-employment. Interviews reveal that high intensity of work is an aspiration rather than an occupational problem, unlike the case of workshop labour. For homeworkers, the paucity of working opportunities is exacerbated by limited mobility.

Unlike other categories of non-factory work, homeworking is a female preserve, and not surprisingly in the Indian context, gender not only results in occupational segregation, but also in extremely poor piece-rate payments. Women homeworkers earn less than a third of workers in micro-units and own-account workers (Table 1). Also, homework is organized by different types of contractors. Work is accessed through acquaintances while contractors are generally considered the actual employers. The majority of workers live in informal colonies and slums where life is harsh and workers engage in resource pooling to ameliorate their scarce access to basic services (Mezzadri, 2015b).

Our findings indicate that work insecurity is extremely high across all non-factory realms of production, despite many workers engaging in activities (like embroidery) upon which the NCR region has built a specific competitive advantage. Virtually no worker has a written contract, and all are informally employed. All non-factory workers in the NCR can be easily ejected from or re-incorporated into production circuits on the basis of production requirements. However, vulnerability is also greatly mediated by the social differentiation of the workforce and their positioning on the employment ladder. Women homeworkers are the worst off, also in relation to wage rates and access to employment. Own-account workers fare slightly better in terms of wages — although not much better than informal wage earners — but less well in terms of access to continuous employment. In fact, field findings also indicate that while non-factory production realms have generally been expanding (since the 1990s; see Unni and Rani, 2008), own-account work seems instead to be in slight decline. It has become an unviable option for newcomers to the city, given rising rents and land prices. Informal wage earners fare better in terms of continuity of employment, although their housing arrangements are harsh, with many young male migrants sharing living spaces inside contractors' units. Hence, while overall one can state that all non-factory workers are exposed to some form of 'adverse incorporation', one should also acknowledge that in practice this process entails different forms of vulnerability for different 'classes of labour'. Social differentiation, always embedded in regional trajectories, is crucial to understanding working poverty, including when the latter is subsumed into global circuits. This is because working poverty is always relational (Mosse, 2007, 2010), and cannot be typified and oversimplified as an outcome primarily created by global processes.

If the three 'classes of labour' identified in the NCR are exposed to distinct forms of 'adverse incorporation', they also try to fight it — or at least resist it — in distinct ways. Studies suggest that, where a large reserve army of labour is available, workers rarely engage in direct and organized forms of resistance. This is definitely the case in the NCR, where our large and socially segmented reserve army of labour — mainly migratory — does not engage in acts of open resistance. However, our 'classes of labour' do develop their own different coping mechanisms, and engage in acts of 'labour resilience' (Katz, 2004), which span realms of production and reproduction (Carswell, 2016; Ruwanpura, 2013). Our fieldwork showed that, for instance, contract workers cheat 'exclusive agreements' with contractors by working for multiple parties. Own-account workers may keep samples and engage in domestic trade once export orders dry up. Women homeworkers located in slums in Delhi's crowded residential areas may engage in resource pooling, while also finding ways to get free access to basic public amenities. A common practice we observed was the diversion of roadside electricity wires for personal consumption, particularly during cooking time. Overall, patterns of 'adverse incorporation'

of non-factory classes of labour in the NCR varied and so did workers' responses.

### **NON-FACTORY 'CLASSES OF LABOUR' IN CHINA: REGAINING CONTROL OVER INDUSTRIAL LIFE?**

Unlike India, China had low levels of informal employment until relatively recently. In the 1990s informal employment was at 15 per cent (ILO, 2002). Only in the 2000s did estimates rise. By 2013 the ILO (2013) estimated informal employment in China at 33 per cent of the total urban workforce. Earlier low estimates may have been due to methods in the assessment of what constitutes 'informal' or 'informalized' employment. Admittedly, discrepancies in definitions and methods, including the changing international consensus, affect all cross-country comparisons on this issue (Charmes, 2012).

This notwithstanding, scholars agree that much has changed in China since the 1990s. This period is considered the start of an era of labour informalization (Kuruvilla et al., 2011). In 1978 data suggested an insignificant 15,000 employees outside the formal sector. By 2006 this figure had leapt to 168 million out of a total urban workforce of 283 million. In short, by the early 2000s employment outside the formal sector in China already accounted for 59.4 per cent of the total in urban areas (Huang, 2009: 406). Moreover, between 1995 and 2005, the percentage of China's undocumented urban workforce also grew, from 9 per cent to 36 per cent, further supporting a picture of rampant informalization (Park and Cai, 2011). This substantial change in labour regime is due to a number of factors, including the rise of rural–urban migration; the layoffs of millions of formal, state-sector workers between the 1990s and early 2000s; and the growth of private sector employment and the service sector (Park and Qu, 2013: 618). As in India, these changes did not take place in the shadow of the state. Informalization was influenced by the Labour Law of 1994 and Labour Contract Law of 2008, which 'formalized' the system of labour contracting (Park and Qu, 2013).

The majority of China's informalized workers are migrant *nongmingong* ('peasant-workers'). These workers bear the brunt of the *hukou* system — a system of local registration that used to manage (prevent) internal mobility, and which still establishes 'status' and de facto regulates work entitlements (see Chan, 2000, on the changing role of the system with rising informalization). Unlike migrant workers, local workers — male local workers in particular — are far more likely to be in formal occupations (Sharma et al., 2012). Obviously, being an informalized worker in China is a different experience than in India, given the higher rates of formalization of the economy, of urbanization, and of manufacturing employment (ibid.). However, the two cases share a surprising number of similarities, particularly across globalized labour-intensive sectors, exposed to international pressure for low costs. The garment industry is one such example. In China, as in India, the structure and

organization of garment production is complex, and its 'classes of labour' greatly socially differentiated, particularly in non-factory realms.

China, like India, was not one of the early garment-producing countries in Asia. Production rose massively in the 1980s as a result of the relocation of production from Hong Kong and Taiwan. However, unlike India, the sector grew at astonishing rates. Since the end of the MFA in particular, Chinese garment production has dominated across the world system. Since 2006 China has graduated to a garment-producing empire. By 2012 it contributed 37.8 per cent of world garment exports. Guangdong Province in the Pearl River Delta — the workshop of the world — was the original export garment production hub. However, the GSR metropolitan conglomerate has now overtaken it. By 2013, Guangdong province contributed 20.7 per cent of all garments produced in China and the GSR contributed 30 per cent (China National Garment Association, 2014; Lerche et al., 2017; Pun et al., 2015).

The analysis of the garment industry of the GSR challenges many of the stereotypes at the heart of the new, fear-based, mythology of Chinese production. According to this mythology, China is today's 'world threat' — a sort of 'economic bogeyman' (Choi and Smith, 2010) putting everyone out of business, unsettling global financial stability (Cooper, 2013), and reducing drastically the development prospects of many poor regions of the world. According to the same mythology, China is represented as a land inhabited only by giant factories, with thousands of workers on vast shop floors sharing the same daily living arrangements; a sort of industrial version of Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon (1791/2008). Interviews revealed that many Indian companies buy into this mythology. Their competition anxieties have turned China, and not necessarily the systemic logics of global capitalism, into the 'real' enemy to fight.

Some aspects of this picture may be somewhat true. For instance, Pun and Smith (2007) illustrate the disquieting integration between shop floor and non-shop floor mechanisms of social control of the workforce within the 'dormitory labour regime' in the electronics industry. However, when it comes to garment production in the GSR, production and labour arrangements are more differentiated. Firstly, as observed by Lüthje et al. (2013), the Chinese garment industry is composed of medium size factories. Like in India, clustering plays an important part in the sector. There are 50 garment-manufacturing clusters in China: of these, 10 are in Guangdong Province and 16 in the GSR (China National Garment Association, 2014). Product specialization plays an important role in clustering; it is a crucial factor for the location of the industry inside China. For instance, Xintang, a town in the Zengcheng district in Guangdong, specializes in jeans. The rural 'community' of Datang, a town of Zhejiang Province, which is part of the GSR, has gained a reputation as the world capital of socks (Lüthje et al., 2013). Across the GSR other regions also show distinct patterns of product specialization. Huzhou specializes in children's clothing and silk, Haining in leather products, Hangzhou in womenswear (Fan, 2016), and Ningbo in menswear

(China Industrial Map Editorial Committee, 2006: 26, in Pun et al., 2015). Moreover, specialization seems to have evolved on the basis of final markets, with areas like Pinghou focusing on export and others, like Shengzhou, targeting domestic markets (Pun et al., 2015).

Like the NCR, the GSR garment industry is a complex production network. This articulates across Shanghai city (the logistical centre for design and trading), and the numerous satellite peri-urban and rural areas mentioned above, which follow distinct patterns of specialization. Across producing areas, different organizational forms are present, ranging from 'full-package production' to 'assembly-subcontracting' (on this distinction see Bair, 2009), with companies often adopting multiple models on the basis of industrial needs. Subcontracting rates are considerable across the entire region, although they depend upon market range (Lüthje et al., 2013).

At the top of the production network, as in the NCR, is a tier of garment employers owning larger factories, with direct access to final markets. While in India local family businesses dominate in the garment sector (Mezzadri, 2015a), here ownership is far more differentiated. Private Chinese companies dominate in number, but some of the first tier factories are subsidiaries of large global brands, or joint ventures, which do not compete for orders as they are part of larger, established producing conglomerates (Pun et al., 2015). For those that are not subsidiaries, but independent businesses, access to final markets may take place via global buyers and large global and/or national buying houses, but also via local retailers and brands. The domestic market is more developed than in India. Organized retail is an important segment of the industry, and large factories do not focus only on export, unlike the NCR.

A second tier of factories consists of companies with relatively flexible, medium-to-small manufacturing capacity. They employ 50–100 workers, and represent the lower limit of factory-based production. The third production layer, signalling the entry into non-factory realms, is composed of small garment workshops, often deployed as subcontractors by second-tier factories when extra capacity is required to complete orders. In the GSR these workshops are used primarily for domestic production (Pun et al., 2015), which may allow lower quality standards. The bottom sub-segment of this layer is composed of unregistered, home-based units and more individualized forms of homeworking.

The mythology of the giant Chinese factory Panopticon does not hold here, and one finds a number of surprising similarities with the NCR. There are also a number of glaring differences. Besides a more complex structure of ownership, the GSR is also substantially different from the NCR in terms of registration. In the GSR only the fourth layer of production is composed of unregistered, informal units. In contrast, lack of registration in the NCR also applies to a broader spectrum of small factories, which organize production according to putting-out systems, and which can have access to export too. Moreover, in GSR the stratification of the commodity chain is only

partially informed by activities and tasks. Some unregistered units specialize in garment parts — collars, for instance — while larger establishments engage in assembly processes. Others may carry out the entire spectrum of core garmenting activities. Manual (as opposed to machine-based) activities are primarily carried out through homeworking (Fan, 2016). This is a key difference with the NCR, where the last, most informalized, production layer is heavily task dependent.

Diversity also applies to labour relations, which in the GSR case too, reveal the presence of different 'classes of labour' defined on the basis of means of production and spaces of work; recruitment, remuneration and working conditions; and reproductive arrangements. As for the NCR, we start from an analysis of workshop labour. In effect, in China, workshops host two distinct types of labour relations. A first segment is neatly separate from capital, as in the factories. However, the labour relation is characterized by higher degrees of informalization of contractual positions, payment systems and working arrangements than in factories. This type of workshop labour is organized under what we define as a contractor-management system, orchestrated by labour contractors who are proper labour 'gangmasters'. Like India, China has a long history in labour contracting. According to Perry (1993), the system can be traced back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when it played a key role in labour politics. Unlike in India (see Breman, 2013; De Neve, 2014a; Mezzadri, 2016a), the system has not been the subject of much research in contemporary studies of Chinese labour. However, our field findings reveal its crucial role in garment production.

Contractors are in charge of organizing the garment workforce — mainly rural migrants — into gangs; they may devolve this task to gangmasters, generally from the workers' native places. Workers often have a strong attachment to contractors, both in and outside the workplace. In this type of production system there is a clear distinction and hierarchy between employers and workers, between contractors and workers, and between work and living arrangements (Fan, 2016). Workers, who constitute a first non-factory garment 'class of labour' of informal migratory wage-earners, may live in dormitories but also in informal colonies and hamlets close to the place of work. They are employed in groups of 10–20, depending on the size of the workshop. Contractor-based workshops are more likely to stitch full garments. Notably, workers can be men or women; in this case, gender does not work as a defining social trait to identify this labouring class. Contractors may ensure workers' discipline through kinship or neighbourhood relations. In factory settings they may also deploy violent means, relying on male gangmasters (Fan, 2016).

A second segment of workshop labour is employed in family units. Here, the labour relation presents both similarities and differences with the one analysed in the paragraphs above. Family-run, home-based workshops (producing full garments or components) employ a mix of family and non-family/hired workers (generally fewer than 10 of the latter; Fan, 2016).



Proprietors of units and their families work alongside hired labour. Non-family members are subject to a similar kind of hierarchy as in contractor-based workshops, and they are also generally rural migrants. Hence one may say that they fall into the same ‘class of labour’. Living arrangements, however, are often shared, with workers living in the building where they work, together with family members. The family often does not own but rents the building, particularly in cases where both the family and hired workers are migrants.

Family labour represents a second ‘class of labour’ in the GSR. It differs noticeably from the one inhabiting similar spaces of work in the NCR. In the NCR the family units, classified as own-account work, are de facto proletarianized. Despite still being partially in charge of the means of production — hence not necessarily dispossessed — the family performs functions that are consistent with wage-work (Mezzadri, 2014a, 2015b). This point is also supported by evidence on wage levels, which are not substantially higher than those of informal wage labour. In the GSR, findings seem instead to suggest that family-run workshops provide the families concerned with business opportunities and access to what Meagher (2006) calls ‘networks of accumulation’. For instance, these units generally hire labour on a continuous basis (Fan, 2016). In this sense, in China the function of family units within the garment production circuit is more complex than in India. It cannot be simply characterized as disguised wage work, as it combines functions of capital. The differences between the NCR and GSR in relation to own-account work/family units confirms the need to understand petty commodity production in terms of the functions it performs within broader global and regional economic circuits.

A third type of labour relation found in the Chinese garment industry in the GSR involves individual homeworking. Carried out in workers’ homes, it may involve stitching full garments, but more often only involves the stitching of components, knitting, beading or thread-cutting (Fan, 2016). These activities, as in India, are a female preserve. Workers either homework separately in their own dwellings, or as a group in someone’s home. They represent a third ‘class of labour’. There is far less literature on Chinese than on Indian homeworking. To an extent this may reflect the wider spread and resilience of homeworking across production circuits in India. In China, historically many craft industries dried up following the centralization of production activities (Emerson, 1965; Eyferth, 2003; Jacka, 1997; Putterman, 1997). However, it is also because far less attention has been paid to informal home-based work in China. Evidence pointing to a return to homeworking and what Jacka (1997) defines as the ‘courtyard economy’ in China, particularly but not only in rural areas, can be traced back to the late 1990s. According to some estimates, there are at least 34 million homeworkers in China today (Vanek et al., 2014).

The return of homeworking seems to be due to a variety of factors: the closure of unprofitable state-owned enterprises (Homeworkers Worldwide,

2003); the expulsion of women from agriculture (Jacka, 1997); and the breakdown of commune-based forms of employment (Putterman, 1997). In the early 2000s Homeworkers Worldwide carried out an initial mapping in rural areas of Hunan and found considerable numbers of older women (aged 30 and over) engaged in homeworking. The relationship between homeworking and own-account work is quite tight (Fan, 2016), but also rather complex, further complicated by the fact that in Chinese the words for 'home' and 'household' are deployed synonymously (Li Zhang, 2000; see also Entwistle and Henderson, 2000). Our field findings suggest that homeworkers are mainly incorporated into garment production circuits through own-account and family units, which in turn decentralize work to individual homeworkers in their neighbourhoods. This means that in the GSR there are complicated interplays between distinct 'classes of labour' as, unlike in India, some still also perform (petty) capitalist functions. Women homeworkers — our third 'class of labour' in the GSR — are not necessarily at the bottom of the employment ladder as in the NCR. They may experience work insecurity based on their highly informal status, or depending on the tasks performed. In fact, this category hides further social differentiation, on the basis of skills and tasks. Women homeworkers able to stitch the whole garment may earn reasonably well, unlike those only engaging in ancillary activities. Unlike in the NCR, not all homeworkers are exposed to under-employment, nor do they all endure the lowest wage levels among informal workers.

Overall, in the GSR, as in the NCR, 'adverse incorporation' manifests itself in complex ways for the different 'classes of labour'. For informal workshop workers, it manifests through harsh patterns of labour control crossing productive and reproductive time and space, and lower remuneration. Workshop owners' family members do not experience such harshness, although they may be exposed to pressing work rhythms and a blending of their productive and reproductive time. In general, however, the working family as a whole in China cannot be assumed as always proletarianized, as also suggested by levels of remuneration. If engagement in homeworking — fully feminized, as in the NCR — may be the result of economic distress (Jacka, 1997; Putterman, 1997), it does not seem to always place women at the bottom of the employment ladder in terms of wage levels. Ultimately, in China, in terms of remuneration, the worse off seem to be wage-earners working for others, with factories paying even lower wages than workshops (see Table 2).

Crucially, in the GSR the home also 'hides' another, fourth type of labour relation (Figure 2) whose equivalent cannot be found in India, which seems less exploitative than all those reviewed thus far (Fan, 2016) — although it should not be over-romanticized. This fourth type of labour relation emerging from our study of garment production in the GSR is based on cooperative teams composed of skilled workers who self-organize to maximize their bargaining power vis-à-vis employers, while also managing to escape

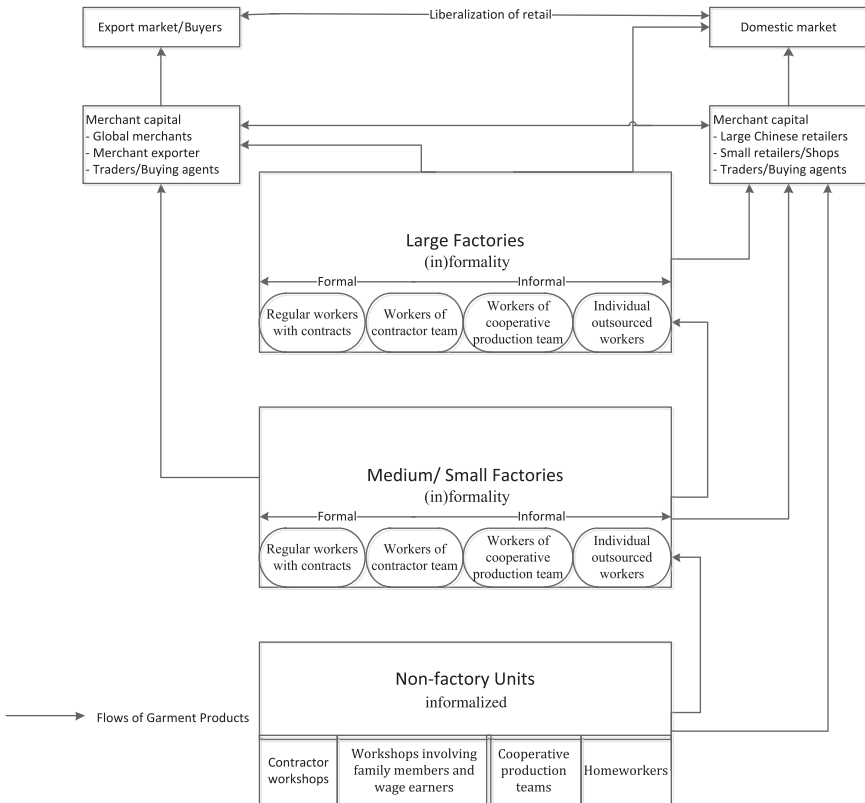
Table 2. Daily and Monthly Wages, Peripheral vs. Factory Workers, GSR

Type of labour	Average daily wage, based on 8-hour working day (RMB)	Average monthly wage, based on 8-hour working day (RMB)
Factory workers <sup>a</sup>	66.10	1,586.40
Cooperative production team	132.00	3,168.00
Family-based workshops	120.80	2,899.20
Contractor workshops	89.60	2,150.40
Homeworkers	92.00	2,208.00
Total non-factory workers	100.10	2,402.40

Note: <sup>a</sup>Based on a survey of garment workers in the GSR (Pun et al., 2015). All estimates based on 24 working days per month.

Source: Based on field findings.

Figure 2. The Garment Production and Labour Chain in China



Source: Adapted from Pun et al. (2015) to include peripheral labour.

the authoritarian system characterizing factory work in China (Pun et al., 2015). Often, this 'escape' from the factory is part of workers' 'mobility struggle' (see Smith, 2006). It serves the purpose of resolving work–life conflicts, particularly when factory work clashes with reproductive activities. Cooperative team members are generally older women workers who have previously worked in garment factories acquiring high levels of skills in sewing and other tailoring activities. Unlike men, women rarely access technical positions in the garment industry. The teams observed during the field phase were composed of middle-aged women. Many of them had gradually lost their land, due to the 'Two for Two policy' (in Chinese *Liang Fen Liang Huan*) involving 'voluntary' (read 'forced') land acquisition by the local province for industrial or development projects. Hence, unlike workers subject to the contractor-management system, workers in cooperative teams are generally local workers whose access to land as a source of social reproduction has been severed by new state policies, and who are therefore fully proletarianized and 'free' from any other means of subsistence beyond stitching.

The organization of work in cooperative teams, unlike under the contractor-management system, implies horizontal relations based on mutual trust and reciprocity. Many team workers know each other well. Besides sharing a similar social profile in terms of gender and dispossession, workers often share an industrial past. In fact, many team networks start developing during the time women workers spend in garment factories. In these cooperatives workers share the fees obtained from their work. Cooperative teams may either produce garments in home-based settings to orders commissioned by factories, or temporarily move inside industrial premises to work on specific orders. Unless relations of trust are established with employers, teams only deliver goods after full payment. Goods retention is an effective strategy during peak seasons (Fan, 2016).

One may argue that cooperative team members represent a fourth 'class of labour', fighting against 'adverse incorporation', poor wages and third-party based contracting by developing their own work terms and conditions and re-appropriating control over labour time, rates and pace of work. These workers opt out of Fordist models of production and their alienating rhythms to re-appropriate some of the benefits of work flexibilization, which, although more insecure, also allows for greater freedom (see also De Neve, 2014b on Tiruppur, India; Prentice, 2017 on Trinidad).

The considerably higher bargaining power of cooperative teams vis-à-vis other 'classes of labour' in the GSR can be fully understood only in relation to the interplay between patterns of social reproduction and the features of China's current industrial trajectory. Unlike many workers employed in workshops and subject to the contract-management system, and homeworkers, members of cooperative teams are often dispossessed of their land, and fully rely on wage work to subsist. On the other hand, their power also results from the tightening of labour markets in China (Cai, 2013; Liu, 2011).

Across coastal regions, a labour shortage started in 2003. By 2010 China's national demand/supply ratio in the labour market exceeded 1 (Cai, 2013). In coastal areas, labour shortages are severe: by 2013, in Jiaxing the demand/supply ratio for cutting and stitching was 2.45. Men made up 53.18 per cent of all applicants, indicating possible changes in the gendered nature of work.

The increasing scarcity of female workers of 'factory age' (18–25 years), due both to China's one child policy and to women's greater involvement in family reproduction activities, is one factor determining labour shortage in the sector (Fan, 2014; Liu, 2011). This increases the bargaining power of these women, particularly of highly skilled workers. For many women who have prior experience in garment production, the move to more informal types of labour can be a liberating experience. First, it can translate into greater freedom from the harsh rhythms of the factory, where absenteeism or any form of activity hampering the strict shop floor routines are heavily sanctioned. Second, it implies higher wages (Fan, 2014, 2016; Liu, 2011), as our findings also suggest. On the other hand, unlike the NCR where underemployment is the norm, in the GSR daily working hours are extremely high across all non-factory segments of the industry.

Unlike the NCR, where the resilience of non-factory realms is mainly functional to capital's needs, with workers largely excluded from sharing the gains of the production boom, in the GSR the expansion of some segments of non-factory, informal production seems partly to be the outcome of workers' exit strategies from harsh mechanisms of discipline and control at work both on and beyond the shop floor. This is an important point, which further complicates the relationship between informality and vulnerability in chains and networks. The NCR case presented above indicates the great variability of patterns of 'adverse incorporation' for distinct 'classes of labour' in socially differentiated, informal, non-factory realms. The analysis of the GSR case questions even more profoundly any linear relationship between informality and 'adverse incorporation'. In fact, in this case not only does vulnerability manifest in distinct ways for different 'classes of labour', it may also veil proactive choices made by workers to regain control over labour and reproductive time. Hence, it also shows how labour itself actively participates in crafting its own geography across global circuits (Carswell and De Neve, 2013; De Neve, 2014b; Herod, 2003; Ruwanpura, 2016; Selwyn, 2012, 2013; Werner, 2016).

#### **CONCLUSIONS: 'CLASSES OF LABOUR' IN GLOBAL CHAINS IN COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE**

The mapping of non-factory realms of production and work in the NCR and GSR yields interesting insights into the global garment industry, its structure and labour relations. The two cases present some surprising

similarities, some of which challenge present-day and established stereotypes; for instance, that of China as the land of Panopticon-like factories and homogeneous (if mobility-driven) proletarianization. The garment industry develops in complex ways in both countries, entailing multiple spaces of work and relations of proletarianization. We see that the evolution of the GGCC has allowed for the systematic reproduction of a highly variable 'sweatshop'; existing not as a homogeneous space of production and work, but rather as a highly flexible social relation of production cutting across multiple work and reproduction realms (Mezzadri, 2016b). Crucially, the similarities found in our cases couple with some fundamental differences, which can only be explained on the basis of the distinct regional industrial and labour trajectories of India and China.

By adopting an analysis premised around the concept of 'classes of labour', these similarities and differences within the GGCC can be revealed. This lens allows for an understanding of how differences in labour relations work at distinct levels of analysis. First, it allows for mapping the differences in types of labour relations at work in the garment chain at a more abstract level, and analysing which distinct — 'formal' and 'real' — processes of proletarianization can be identified. Second, it also allows for an in-depth study of the ways in which different 'classes of labour' present distinct regional features as locally embedded in the overall capital-labour trajectories of the two countries. Hence, the deployment of this framework to study labour in GCCs, GVCs and GPNs is useful, as it anchors the study of the labour dynamics at work in global chains to the distinct processes of proletarianization that can be observed both from the vantage point of the chain, and from the vantage point of the specific locale in which they unfold. This is crucial to avoid studying labour in global circuits in ways that may simply reproduce what Bernstein (1971) calls exercises in 'comparative statics', whilst at the same time maintaining the possibility for comparative analysis to inform our understanding of how 'the global' is regionally negotiated and co-constituted in manifold ways.

A comparative perspective centred on a study of 'classes of labour' in global circuits significantly contributes to our understanding of the mechanisms of informality, and of processes of 'adverse incorporation'. Across the two cases analysed, the process of 'adverse incorporation' that non-factory classes of labour are subjected to appears complex, multifaceted and contested. While to an extent one can argue that all these classes, in both cases, are 'adversely incorporated' (one might ask, isn't this always the case for labour anywhere, anyway?) this process of incorporation leads to substantially different outcomes. In the Indian case, if 'adverse incorporation' manifests in the high vulnerability of all non-factory classes of labour — informal workshop wage earners, the proletarianized family 'disguised' as work unit, and individual homeworkers — it also conceals distinct degrees and forms of vulnerability. These may be based on wage levels, under-employment, daily reproductive arrangements, or on combinations of the

above. Even in these harsh contexts, workers engage in coping mechanisms, on the basis of their belonging to distinct ‘classes of labour’. In the Chinese case, the study of the potential ‘adverse incorporation’ of non-factory classes of garment labour is a far more complex endeavour. This case highlights the need to avoid drawing facile, linear connections between ‘informality’ and vulnerability. Also in the GSR, garment production tasks in non-factory realms may often be performed by informal wage-earners. However, family units cannot be as easily classified as a homogeneous, distinct ‘class of labour’. They do not only perform a labouring role in production circuits. These units host two distinct ‘classes of labour’; hired informal wage earners and family members. In this case, petty commodity production remains a distinct organizational form (see Harriss-White, 2014), also performing capital functions.

Homeworkers also represent a distinct informal ‘class of labour’ in the Chinese case, although one far less exposed to systematic under-employment and the dreadfully low wages characterizing the NCR. Given China’s overall trajectory, tight labour markets, and current labour shortage, this is unsurprising. In the Chinese case the expansion of informal, non-factory spaces like the home may represent an actual alternative chosen by workers to avoid the asphyxiating rhythms of the factory. In fact, the fourth and final non-factory ‘class of labour’ found in the GSR is composed of cooperative teams who, working as units of labour along more horizontal organizational lines, can bargain not only around wage rates, but also around work and reproductive time. For these workers, the fight against ‘adverse incorporation’ into global circuits has paved the way back to the home, rather than to the factory.

Obviously, both cases speak about the distinct regional industrial trajectories of India and China. India still has the highest rates of labour informalization in the world, a massive reserve army of labour, and much lower levels of manufacturing employment than China (Unni and Sharma, 2013). In this light, the harsh and manifold processes of proletarianization in the garment industry epitomize India’s overall accumulation patterns — firmly resting on the shoulders of a highly socially segmented informal working poor. China’s patterns of proletarianization overall appear far more centred around factory labour (Pun et al., 2015). This does not mean that informalization processes have not been on the rise, particularly since the 1990s (Chan, 2000; Kuruvilla et al., 2011), deepening social divisions across the working class. These social divisions are structured particularly around migration and mobility. However, in sectors like garments gender also plays a crucial part. The organization of garment production and work in the GSR testifies to the rising complexity of patterns of informalization in China. It also testifies to the relevance of the tightening of labour markets, as this, together with the attempt by factory employers to expand labour control to spaces of daily social reproduction like dormitories — is pushing workers to find new escape strategies.

Finally, the 'classes of labour' approach deployed here informs debates on global (and regional) chains and networks. The analysis of how these classes are structured and cope in varied regional settings is of key relevance to understanding labour in contemporary 'supply chain capitalism' (Tsing, 2009). It shows how labour flexibility is not necessarily only a top-down process, steered by representatives of capital. Workers also negotiate it (Carswell and De Neve, 2013; Herod, 2003), even in contexts of great vulnerability, at the very least through acts of resilience based on their position on the productive ladder and their reproductive profile. In some cases, such acts of resilience may even turn into novel ways to resist the harsh rhythms of contemporary work regimes. Clearly, these novel ways are likely to be manifold, and differ on the basis of regional trajectories and landscapes of production, and their corresponding changing forms of exploitation.

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