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**Handbook on Class and Social  
Stratification in China**

*Edited by*

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Culture, University of Sydney, Australia*

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## Preface

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Social and political analysis in the English-speaking world began to toll the death of class both as social phenomenon and as analytical concept as early as the 1950s. The 'death of class' is attributed to new developments in modern industrial societies including national democracy, the welfare state, economic and social pluralism, the rise of institution-based divisions, an ever-widening educational front, ethical individualism, occupational differentiation, rising affluence, market fragmentation, and so on and so forth. Coupled with these are various flaws that critics find in the class concept, methodologies of class analysis and class theory. Perhaps the most devastating blow to the class concept is its loss of ideological significance and political centrality following the decline of Marxism, the collapse of Soviet communism, and the resultant waning appeal of socialist ideologies and class radicalism.

A similar decline of interest in class took place in China in the late 1970s, as the concept gradually lost discursive legitimacy after the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) embarked on the systematically transformative programme of 'reform and opening'. The programme can be characterized as a conscious abandonment of the Party's decades-long revolution and class struggle in favour of economic development through comprehensive marketization and partial privatization. It was motivated by the antipathy to class struggle and references to class which prevailed in China in the wake of the Cultural Revolution among the rank and file of Party-state cadres and in society at large. Against this backdrop, Chinese analysts and commentators rejected class analysis en masse and went further to disarticulate class and subvert Marxist class theory. Indeed, the slogan of 'farewell to revolution' rang loud in the greater part of the 1980s. What was meant by 'revolution' was, more than anything else, the CCP's communist revolution, which Mao Zedong described as the violent act of one class overthrowing another. It was this revolution, as was widely believed in China in the early days of 'reform and opening', that had caused the loss of millions of lives in the country and suffering to even more Chinese citizens. Hence, a consensus emerged among all walks of life about the need and desirability of rejecting class in toto; it was not in the least an issue whether class was a useful concept or an actual social reality that should be analysed and understood.

However, the claims about the 'death of class' have been proven wrong. In the People's Republic of China (PRC), in particular, class has made a remarkable comeback in the last two decades, while social stratification, the transformation of the PRC's class map and class relations have attracted enormous attention in Chinese academia and mass media. The surging interest in the subject obviously has much to do with the dramatic socio-political change in the reform era. A result of 'reform and opening' is the emergence of greater inequality than has ever been experienced in the PRC and even in advanced capitalist systems. By the Party-state's official accounts, China's Gini coefficient in 2014 stood at 0.469, although the index had been dropping for six years in a row since it rose to 0.491 in 2008 from 0.412 in 2000, when the National Statistics Bureau first began to publish the index. As a consequence of massive social stratification and rapid class differentiation since 1978, what social and political commentators in the PRC used to describe as the de-stratified Chinese society under Mao, comprising two classes (workers and peasants) and one stratum (intellectuals), has evolved into an unprecedentedly complex structure and intricate web of social relations. The PRC's status order has been transformed as well.

Research on China's social stratification and class formation began to gather momentum within the country in the 1990s and outside the country about a decade later. The contributors to the handbook have been at the forefront of the research, some having been actively engaged for years or decades. I would like to thank them all for agreeing to join the project and bringing their rich expertise to the handbook. In Australia, David Goodman has played a leading role in the inquiry into China's new rich and questions of class not only through his publications but also by bringing interested colleagues together and organizing reading groups, seminars and workshops. Five of the contributors here participated in the Seminar on Class which David organized at the University of Sydney between 2009 and 2011, and about half of the contributors presented at his invitation at the 2011 workshop on Class and Class Consciousness in China. I have benefited greatly from David's inspiring work and exceptional leadership. The conception of this handbook is largely a result of the seminar, the workshop, other related projects, and numerous conversations and debates with him.

Most of the chapters of the handbook were presented at a workshop held at the University of Technology, Sydney in December 2013, which was generously funded by the university's China Research Centre. Stephen Frenkel, Jonathan Hassid and Jonathan Marshall acted as discussants and made detailed and insightful comments on the chapters they discussed. Mark Selden, Sally Sargson, Terry Woronov and Joel

Andreas suggested very useful ways of structuring the handbook and dealing with various themes. Anita Chan, Jon Unger, Chen Guangjin and You Ji chaired sessions at the workshop and provided invaluable feedback on the papers. Clare Moore took good care of the visitors' flights and accommodation, catering and every other aspect of the workshop. Frances Guo and Selene Martinez Pacheco painstakingly combed through the manuscripts for errors, stylistic inconsistencies and missing or incomplete references. I am deeply grateful for everybody's contribution at every stage of the project. Without their participation and support, the handbook would not have been possible.

Yingjie Guo  
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June 2015

## 18. China's rural migrant workers and labour politics<sup>1</sup>

Jenny Chan and Mark Selden

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 (Anagnost 2008; Lee and Selden 2008; Andreas 2009; Guo 2009; Chen, M. and Goodman 2013; Goodman 2014). As Ching Kwan Lee and Yuan Shen (2009: 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 (Lu 2002). Policymakers 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. In this context, this chapter discusses the Chinese rural migrant workers (*nongmingong*), particularly their precariousness and individual and collective struggles, within a framework that highlights the changing face and 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 1980s, successive cohorts of internal migrant workers have become the core of China's new working class in transnational manufacturing. By 2013, some 268 million

Chinese rural migrants had been drawn into industrialization and urbanization, an increase of 44 million from 2008, when the National Bureau of Statistics (2014a: table 1) 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 (GDP) 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 – jointly funded by the government and state and non-state enterprises – which was 'equal to three times the size of the United States effort' (Wong 2011: 2–3). In 2014, by some measures, China surpassed the United States to become the world's largest economy (International Monetary Fund 2014). While its extraordinary growth rates have begun to slow, China's trade, investment, and construction now have significant regional and even global impact.

Supplementing the official statistics with field research data, we examine the role of local governments in drawing in businesses and investments, and the specific conditions of Chinese rural migrant workers' production and reproduction in the contemporary political economy. We document the ways in which, 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 mobilization by trade unions. What then are the prospects for Chinese labour to strengthen its associational power against the backdrop of privatization of state enterprises and the emergence of rural migrant workers at the centre of a new working class? The answer will hinge not only on changing labour-capital relations, but on the ways in which the local state prioritizes worker interests versus those of international and domestic capital and on the impact of demographic changes and geographic shifts of production on the growth of workers' bargaining power in the workplace and the marketplace.

### CHINESE RURAL MIGRANT WORKERS

With China's structural transformation over the past four decades, economic growth spurs dreams of success from all walks of life. 'Wage work in the city', comments Sally Sargeon (1999: 219), 'became the means for self-actualization [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 (Hsing 1998; Lee 1998; Davin 1999; Rofel 1999; Solinger 1999; West and Zhao



2000; Gaetano and Jacka 2004; Pun 2005; Jacka 2006; Murphy 2009). 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 welfare and retirement benefits remains limited (Whyte 2010; Zhan and Huang 2013). Sporadic efforts toward 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 Organization in 2001, villagers and 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, much of the countryside has remained stagnant as youth have left en masse for the cities and jobs in industry, construction, and services (Chen, G. and Wu 2004; Chen, A. 2014). Some villagers, including rural migrants, have leased or transferred their land use rights to boost income. Others have no choice but to search for non-farm 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 (O'Brien and Li 2006; Chuang 2014). They become new proletarians in the socialist market economy.

Still, the majority of Chinese rural migrants have experienced incomplete proletarianization in that they possess agricultural land use rights as a birthright while working for wages as hired labourers to make ends meet (Friedman and Lee 2010; Pun and Lu 2010; Selden and Wu 2011; Chan, J. and Selden 2014; Chan, K. 2014). This cohort of '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 (*hukou*) in perpetuity while being denied equal citizenship and welfare rights. Rural surplus labour has been channelled to urban areas through social networks as well as government development policies. Poverty alleviation officials and the All-China Women's Federation, for example, have facilitated labour out-migration in accord with Deng Xiaoping's call to 'let some get rich first'. The goal was to obtain remittances and ensure the development of marketable skills in young migrants while jumpstarting China's export-oriented industrialization. As a Sichuan Communist Party secretary put it, 'We consider migrant labour

to be a kind of cooperation between eastern and western parts of the country' (Solinger 1999: 71). Since the turn of the millennium, Beijing leaders have sought to rebalance the economy by initiating the 'go west' project, through which financial and human resources were channelled to underdeveloped central and western provinces (Goodman 2004; McNally 2004; Tian 2004; Ross 2006; Li, C. and Chan 2012). The 2013 government survey data clearly show that the east coast was still the primary destination for rural migrant workers nationwide, but the most rapid increase in investment and GDP are centred in the west. As enterprises build new factories in the hinterland in accord with national policy, central and western China have narrowed the gap in employment: 162 million rural migrants worked in the eastern region, 57 million in the central region, and 50 million in the western region (National Bureau of Statistics 2014b). The young people 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 (All-China Federation of Trade Unions 2010; Wang, T. and Zhai 2012).

In their own words, we can hear the aspirations of this new generation. A migrant worker in Beijing commented, 'If I had to live the life that my mother has lived, I would choose suicide' (Yan 2008: 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 (Chan, J. 2013a). Coming from a village in central China, she hoped to secure a better life for her mother and herself in Shanghai. While some migrants are entranced by rosy dreams of entrepreneurial success, the high aspirations of low-wage migrant workers face acute problems in a society characterized by soaring income gaps (Chen, J. et al. 2010; Knight 2014; Li, S. and Stoular 2014; Whyte 2014) and the commodification of social services, such as housing, education, and medical care (Davis and Wang 2009; Zhan 2011; Ming 2014; Wu et al. 2014).<sup>2</sup>

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 (Gallagher 2005; Pringle 2011; Friedman and Kuruvilla 2015). Many small and medium state firms went bankrupt, were privatized, or were restructured, throwing an estimated 35 million to 60 million urban workers out of work (Lee 2007; Hurst 2009, 2015; Solinger 2009;

Andreas 2012; Zhang 2015). The 'iron rice bowl' of life-long job security and accompanying welfare was shattered as state firms were oriented to make profits and cut costs in intensified market competition (Kunruvillia et al. 2011). In recent years, 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' (Ernst and Naughton 2008; Naughton 2010: 441; Huang 2012). To this we may add the dominance of gigantic foreign-invested manufacturers, which have access to cheap land, human resources, and numerous privileges from local governments across China (Chan, J. and Selden 2014; Chan, J. et al. 2013, 2015).<sup>3</sup> Corporate management has prioritized labour controls, with an emphasis on profit, organizational flexibility, and production efficiency, reconfiguring Chinese industrial relations in the global economy.

### THE CHINESE STATE, LABOUR, AND CAPITAL

The Communist Party recognizes the only official union organization, the All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU) and its branches, across all levels. In the three years from 1997 to 2000 alone, the union bureaucracy, whose strength had been centred in state-owned enterprises, lost at least 17 million members in the wave of privatization or corporate restructuring (Traub-Merz 2012). Many newly founded enterprises ignored official guidelines to establish unions. In response, the government-run union bureaucracy targeted large foreign-invested companies such as Foxconn and Wal-Mart to unionize. By December 2009, unions had been set up in 92 percent of the Fortune 500 companies operating in China, and this trend has continued since (Liu 2011: 157). By 2012, the centralized Chinese trade union organization claimed a total membership of 258 million nationwide (*China Labour Statistical Yearbook 2012* 2013: 405–06) – surpassing the International Trade Union Confederation global membership of 176 million workers in 161 countries and territories excluding China. Among Chinese union members, 36 per cent (94 million) were rural migrant workers, the fastest-growing segment of the union and the labour force since the early 2000s (*Xinhua* 2012). The number of union members is impressive, but in terms of the purpose of serving worker interests we may ask: to what end?

The dependence of the unions on management, and the limits on their activity posed by the state, severely undermines the capacity of enterprise unions to represent the workers (Chen, F. 2009; Kong 2012). In the

words of Anita Chan (2011a: 42), the unions are 'an integral part of factory management' and 'worse than weak'. During our fieldwork in Guangdong province, we learned about the response of Foxconn Trade Union – China's largest industrial union, with more than 1 million members – to the tragedy of employee suicides. Foxconn shocked the world when the '12 leaps', the suicides of young rural migrant workers who leaped from factory dormitories in Shenzhen, took place during the first five months of 2010 (Chan, J. and Pun 2010; Pun and Chan 2012, 2013; Chan, J. 2013b; Pun et al. 2014). 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, Beijing-based ACFTU legal department head Guo Jun criticized 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, Wal-Mart, and other firms (Chan, A. 2011b; Chan, C. and Hui 2014; Hui and Chan, C. 2015).

In the face of rising labour protests outside the structure of the official unions, China's leaders have sought to impose order and stabilize production by initiating a series of legal reforms. Between 1978 and 1995, 49 labour laws and regulations were enacted, including the national Labour Law, which came into force on 1 January 1995 (Thireau and Hua 2003). The provisions of a written employment contract (including an open-ended one), minimum wages, overtime premiums, rest days, occupational health and safety, and social benefits – under the promotion of the 'rule of law' – have inspired citizens to file claims through fast-expanding labour dispute arbitration committees and courts (Diamant et al. 2005; Gallagher 2006; Lee 2007; Ngok 2008; Chen, X. 2012; Liebman 2014). Ching Kwan Lee (2010: 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'. Aggrieved workers 'mobilized' the law by quoting specific clauses of legal protection when their rights were violated. In recent years, governments at all levels have

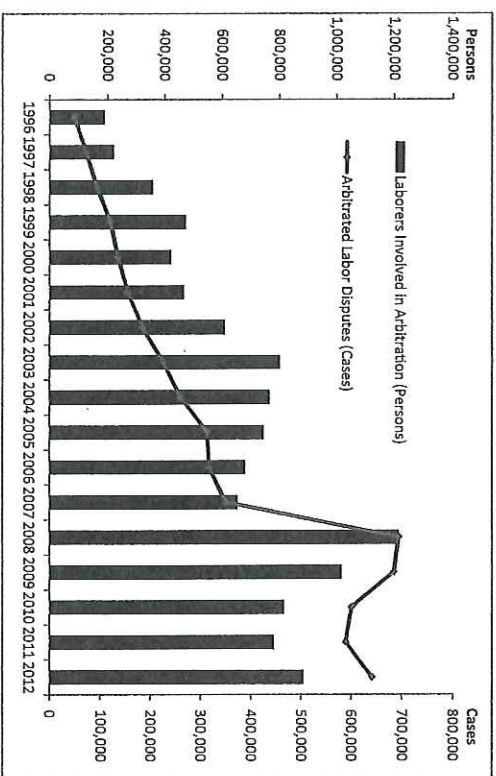
directed workers to resolve conflicts through mediation in order to reduce arbitration caseloads (Fu and Cullen 2011; Gallagher and Dong 2011).

Arbitration committees are grassroots state organizations 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). Effective from 1 May 2008, the Labour Dispute Mediation and Arbitration Law made arbitration free of charge for all parties, and extended the statute of limitations for filing cases from 60 days to one year, thereby encouraging workers to bring their cases to arbitration. Unpaid workers were the greatest beneficiaries of extending the time limit for filing claims (Halegna 2008; Chan, J. 2009; Harper Ho 2009; Wang, H. et al. 2009; Becker and Elfstrom 2010). 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 per cent (*China Briefing* 2013). The National Bureau of Statistics (2014a: figure 1) reported that average total income of rural migrant workers had risen steadily following the economic recovery in 2009, reaching 2609 yuan per month in 2013, a 13.9 per cent increase from the previous year. 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, privatization, or relocation of their factories, have become explosive.

Labour disputes submitted for arbitration and litigation have spiralled since the mid-1990s, paralleling the rising number of worker protests. 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 2012, however, the total number of labour dispute cases rebounded (641 202), despite greater responsiveness on the part of the government and its trade union offices to resolve problems at the grassroots level (see Figure 18.1).



Source: *China Labour Statistical Yearbook 2013* (2014: 348–9).

Figure 18.1 Arbitrated labour disputes in China, 1996–2012

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 informalization while maintaining labour and organizational flexibility. However, huge discrepancies exist between workers' formal employment rights and the enforcement of these rights (Cui et al. 2013; Cheng et al. 2014; Gallagher et al. 2015; Zhang 2015: chapter 7). Negotiations over compensation for overtime work and damage to health, for example, remain contested and fraught.

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, F. and 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. 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

Labour's right to strike was recognized in China's constitution in 1975 and 1978, only to be revoked in 1982 and in subsequent constitutions. But this legislative change has not stopped workers from going on strike. Labour unrest has been growing, fuelled in part by a younger and better-educated cohort of workers<sup>4</sup> who are less tolerant of injustice and highly motivated to demand higher wages and better benefits (Pun et al. 2010; Pringle 2013; Becker 2014; Elfstrom and Kuruvilla 2014; Friedman 2014; Zipp and Blecher 2015). In times of crisis, when causes of discontentment are shared and articulated, workers have repeatedly taken multiple forms of collective action to secure their rights and interests. Below we consider the role of the state in containing and dispersing the growing number of labour protests.

Under the Chinese Labour Law, employers are legally required to provide five types of social insurance, that is, old age pensions, medical insurance, work-injury insurance, unemployment benefits, and maternity insurance, but the vast majority of those classified as rural migrants lack rudimentary coverage of welfare benefits. According to the 2013 statistics, the government estimated that only 28.5 per cent of 166 million

rural migrant workers were covered by work-injury insurance, 17.6 per cent by medical insurance, 15.7 per cent by old age pensions, 9.1 per cent by unemployment benefits, and 6.6 per cent by maternity insurance (National Bureau of Statistics 2014a: table 11). 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 (Chan, J. and Selden 2014). 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.

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. Mary Gallagher and Baohua Dong (2011: 44) conclude that employers systematically 'ignored the law with impunity because of the lack of effective implementation and enforcement by local regulatory or supervisory organizations, 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 (Kim 2013). 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 and ten

Brink 2012; Chan, C. and Hui 2014; Friedman 2014: chapter 5; Hui and Chan, C. 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 (Lau 2012; Wang, J. and Shi 2014).

Bargaining through workers' direct actions, in the form of strikes or demonstrations, has been and remains a viable way to address workers' shared grievances. The official slogan of the ACFTU is 'When there's trouble, seek the trade union' (*you kunnan, zhao gonghui*). 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: 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 '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.

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' (*ba quanli jiaogei gongren*) 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 unionization in the

workplace (Chen, F. 2010; Chan, C. and Hui 2014; Wen 2014; Hui and Chan, C. 2015). But if open and fair trade union elections have taken place in the surveyed enterprises, the results have never been publicly communicated.

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 harmonize 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 (Standing Committee of Guangdong Provincial People's Congress 2013). 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 per cent 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 (Standing Committee of Guangdong Provincial People's Congress 2014). 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).

Mary Gallagher (2014: 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'. 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 (Su and He 2010; Chen, X. 2012; Deng and O'Brien 2013; Lee and Zhang 2013; Lee 2014).

## CONCLUSIONS

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 home towns, 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. 'Realize the great Chinese dream, build a harmonious society' (*Shixian weida Zhongguo meng, guannian jianshe hexie shehui*), reads a government banner. To realize individual and national dreams, however, workers will have to secure justice and dignity, which in turn will require the institutionalization 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 (Eggleston et al. 2013; Davis 2014). 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 and Cai 2011). China's 2010 Population Census, moreover, showed that the age group 0–14 constituted 16.6 per cent of the total population, down 6.3 per cent 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. 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 organizing 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.

## NOTES

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2. The data for 2013 indicate that China's Gini is 0.47 (internationally, a Gini coefficient of 0.4 or above is considered high) – a level comparable to that of Nigeria, and slightly higher than that of the United States (0.45), where income inequality has also risen steadily over decades (*Economist* 2013).
3. For example, Taiwanese-based Foxconn Technology Group was founded in Taipei in 1974 and incorporated in Shenzhen in 1988. It has risen to become China's largest employer, with more than 1 million employees, a key player making possible China's emergence as the 'electronics workshop of the world', capturing over 50 per cent of global market share in consumer electronics (Chan, J. et al. 2013, 2015; Chan, J. and Selden 2014).
4. As of 2013, 46.6 per cent of those classified as rural migrant workers were born after 1980, and the majority (60.6 per cent) of these young people had completed nine years of formal education. An additional 20.5 per cent are high school graduates (National Bureau of Statistics 2014a).

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## 19. A predictable end? China's peasantry as a class, past, present and imagined future

Sally Sargeson

Theorists of class have long predicted the end of the peasantry. Marx (1954: 667–95), Hobsbawm (1994: 289–99, 415) and Bernstein (2001, 2009) have all argued that, in the transition to capitalism, peasants would be either transformed into individual specialized commodity producers (commercial farmers) or forced into wage labour by fragmentation of their land holdings, and dispossession, debt and impoverishment. On the other hand, these theorists have been uncharacteristically ambivalent about whether or not the peasantry constitutes a class. Marx (1852: 62), for example, argued that, although peasants' economic exploitation and political and social subordination placed them in an antagonistic relationship with other classes, they lacked any consciousness of, and capacity to articulate, their common class interests, much less organize politically. Pointing to the uneven, contradictory impacts of globalized agriculture and consequent differentiation among agriculturalists, Bernstein, too, cautions that "the peasantry" is hardly a uniform or analytically helpful social category in contemporary capitalism ... The same stricture necessarily applies to any views of peasants as a (single) "class" ("exploited" or otherwise)' (2001: 32).

Many Chinese political leaders and scholars also have predicted the eventual end of the country's peasantry. Mao Zedong believed that differentiation among the peasantry would be eliminated through the creation of collective ownership and socialist relations of production in the countryside. Eventually, with the transition to communism, full public ownership would efface material and political differences between town and country, workers and peasants, mental and manual labour (Communist Party of China Central Committee 1958). Post-Mao liberal writers have tended to emphasize demographic transition and markets as forces stratifying the peasantry and shifting peasants into non-agricultural occupations (Wang 1990; Zhang, R. 2012). Despite envisaging different paths to de-peasantization, both Maoists and post-Mao liberal scholars viewed the end of the peasantry as imperative for China's modernization and rise to global power (Yan and Chen 2013). In Qin Hui's words, 'If China is to be modernized and its peasants are to become modern