

## *Local/Global Encounters*

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# Chinese Women Migrants and the Social Apartheid

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**ABSTRACT** *Au Loong-yu and Nan Shan examine the conditions of the women among the 150 million migrant workers who have left the rural areas in search of jobs in China. They underline that fierce social regression has accompanied Chinese enormous economic growth where women migrants particularly are exploited in 'the 'world's greatest sweatshop'. They argue that hukou system or household registration has proved to be as useful to 'capitalist construction' as it once was for 'socialist construction'. It now acts a powerful force for pressing down the wages of rural migrants and preventing them from getting better jobs in the cities.*

**KEYWORDS** *hukou; export trade zones; state sector; resistance; social divisions*

### Introduction

China has experienced high growth rate for more than two decades.<sup>1</sup> The achievement, however, has been made at the expenses of the environment and the working people. The capitalist market reform resulted in a thorough shake-up of the economy, especially the state sector. More than 30 million workers in the state sector were sacked, a scale never seen in history. Over the past ten years, the active urban working population has grown to 200 million, but its composition has changed greatly. The number of workers in SOEs (state-owned enterprises) shrank from 112 million in 1995 to 69 million in 2003. The number of workers in collective enterprises declined from 35.5 million in 1995 to 9.5 million in 2003.<sup>2</sup> The old working class declines in both numbers and strength.

At the same time, 150 million rural people have left the land and roamed the country as migrant workers in search of employment, the overwhelming number of them ending up working in EPZs (export processing zones) with wages so low that workers are barely able to sustain themselves, and with little social security.

This great social transformation can be summed up in this way: good, secure jobs have been eliminated and replaced by bad and insecure jobs. This represents a great social regression. At the same time, a new working class is born that have immense implication for China.

In the face of such a tremendous social regression, women workers are doubly pathetic. As early as 1987, when the first wave of downsizing in the state sector began, women workers accounted for 64 percent of those sacked. Accompanying the downsizing was a fierce propaganda campaign to portray women as an inferior sex because of their ability to bear children – it is simply economically not viable to employ women, claimed the elite. Not only were women workers sacked, but young women, including recent college graduates, have been repeatedly rejected for interviews with employers simply because they are women. Even if they are able to find employment women's wages are lower than those of men. In 1990, wages for women were only 77.5 percent of those men, and in 2000 it was further lowered to 70.1 percent. In the northeast, once a major industrial centre but now an area of severe economic conditions, unemployed women workers often become sex workers in order to raise their families. For each transaction, they may only receive 50 yuan<sup>3</sup> because of fierce competition, a result of the oversupply of sex workers.

### **Working conditions in the EPZs**

There are some 800 EPZs all over the world, employing approximately 30 million workers. The Chinese EPZs employ approximately 20 million, accounting for two-thirds of the world total. The Chinese figure speaks for the fact that China has become the favourite investment haven for transnational corporations (TNCs). Foreign direct investment (FDI) flows to countries where wages are exceedingly low, which implies a high rate of profit. Chinese wages are very low, even lower than India's, although China's GDP per capita twice that of India. China was awarded the title of 'world factory' for its huge exports. The title should read: 'the world's sweatshop'.

The 150 million migrant workers who have left the rural areas in search of jobs constitute a new working class that has formed alongside the old, and many of the new migrant workers are women.

In EPZs workers work from 12 to 14 h per day. In times of rush orders, it is not unusual for workers

to work from 8 am to 10 pm, and in some cases, they may work until 2 am. Many workers only have 1 or 2 days off per month, and some none at all. This of course greatly exceeds the maximum legal working hours.<sup>4</sup> Workers find it hard to cope with such hard labour, but refusing to work overtime will result in firing. Only young workers in their late teens and early 20s can endure such inhumane hardship. When they reach their late 20s they will find it hard to continue, forcing them to resign on their own account, thus releasing management from the burden of paying any compensation if the latter fire them.

In EPZs the number of women far exceeds number of men, making it difficult for women workers to find male companions. Even if a woman does find a male companion, her family may oppose her choice if the man does not come from the same county, or for whatever reasons, and parents of migrant women generally discourage their daughters from finding partners in the cities. Moreover, some factories have rules that force women workers to resign if they marry. It is common for married couples who come to the same EPZ to live separately, each staying in their own factory's dormitory. Even when the couples work in the same factory, they still have to live in separate dormitories, making normal sex life impossible. If women workers get pregnant, very often the only choice is resignation, because they simply cannot continue to do such hard work, and management rarely transfers pregnant workers to less taxing jobs. The employers then need not pay any maternity leave, although workers are liable to such pay according to the law. In a word, women workers are seen as simple tools for the process of 'adding value', not as humans.

In the city of Shenzhen, near Hong Kong, the minimum wage for 2006–2007 was 700 yuan per month for the outer EPZ and 810 yuan for the inner EPZ (for 2005–2006, it was 580 and 690, respectively). Though these are the highest minimum wage levels nationally, they are still shamefully low. Yet, the majority of migrant workers in China do not even get this level of wages – some may get as low as 300 yuan, which is not even enough for decent food.

### Some special features of rural migrant workers

Although all women migrants face the same difficulties in the EPZs, there is little awareness among them of the need to organize to defend themselves. The main reason is first and foremost the repressive state, which we will later examine in detail. But apart from this external factor, there is an internal factor that we should recognize. Rural migrant workers, though better educated than average rural residents, are still less educated than average city dwellers. As such, many not only lack self-confidence, but also lack some basic knowledge that should be required for all workers – for example, most of them have no idea about the labour code, and many tend to obey illegal and dangerous instructions from their employers. Secondly, while SOEs workers have some kind of collective identity due to their common experience built up over years in the *danwei* (workplace), migrant workers generally have no prior collective experience whatsoever. They very much inherited the individualism characteristic of individual farming households, particularly because most migrant workers were born during the 1980s after the last trace of communal life was dismantled. When this generation of young rural residents comes to cities, they are absolutely atomized. Many come from different provinces, and even when they come from the same provinces they may come from different counties with different regional dialects. When young migrants make friends, they incline towards finding those from their home counties or at least provinces. When friendships are confined within these dividing lines, provincial prejudices can develop which in turn further damage worker solidarity.

### The beginnings of resistance

In spite of the repressive capacity of the government and factory owners, workers are beginning to resist. According to the Guangdong ACFTU (All China Federation of Trade Unions), every year, there are more than 10,000 strikes breaking out in Guangdong province.<sup>5</sup> Another source reveals that it may be as many as 20,000 and according

to our contacts, unreported strikes are common. One Guangzhou<sup>6</sup> worker told us: 'in our factory strikes are very useful and very effective. Whenever there are arrears of wages or the management introducing bad measures we will strike and it works'.

In the past, the mechanisms of state despotism and factory despotism were exceedingly effective in curbing worker protests. Today, however, these same mechanisms are beginning to produce the opposite effect. We may argue that it is precisely the extremity of these repressive measures that are driving workers to fight back. In the cases of which we are aware, worker strikes are always the result of super-exploitation that has far exceeded the physical and psychological limit of the workers. In the Computime case, workers struck because they were paid 40 percent of the minimum wages for ten years! In the Juxi case, workers struck because of more than three months of forced overtime, during which they were forced to work late into the night. In the GP case, workers have struck because they were repeatedly lied to concerning their being poisoned by cadmium. There is a popular saying among workers:

Big struggle big gain; small struggle small gain;  
No struggle no gain.

In most cases, workers have first approached local labour departments with the hope that the latter would intervene on their behalf, and only when officials have repeatedly ignored their pleas have workers gone on strike. But most of these strikes have occurred spontaneously without prior planning. Well-planned strikes assume prior organization, but given the repressive regime from the central government down to the neighbourhood committees and factory security guards, worker's organizations are too difficult to sustain. Prior organization work becomes an easy target for the management and local authorities. Countries where there are traditions of independent trade union movements and the existence of a layer of union cadres and activists may be more equipped to conducting prior organizing work without being easily targeted. In China's case, the lack of such a tradition and experienced activists

makes organizing efforts doubly dangerous. Therefore, planned strikes are rare. Often strikes are being triggered by particular incidents or affronts, and break out spontaneously. However, although it is common that these strikes are able to get concession from the employers, they rarely become a starting point for self-organization of the migrant workers.

### **Hukou – the regime of spatial and social apartheid**

The underlying reason for the lacking of self-organization among workers in general and migrant workers in particular is the one-party state and its whole system of social control, which has been kept intact through the reform process. Workers are denied the basic rights of association, strike and freedom of the press, and are thus robbed of their main weapon for self-defence from unscrupulous employers and corrupt local governments. On top of this, rural migrant workers are further repressed by another aspect of state control that amounts to a social apartheid directed against rural residents, which is often overlooked by analysts. As such, any analysis of the condition of workers in China cannot avoid an investigation into the state's *hukou* system. The liberal discourse of *hukou* tends to be limited to human right – the right of free movement – it seldom broaden the topic to look at how *hukou* helps the ruling elite in restoring a barbaric capitalism and in enriching a few through the spatial and social apartheid of *hukou*.

*Hukou*, or household registration, may seem unremarkable in that many countries have such registration policies. But the Chinese model is fundamentally different from, say, the systems in Taiwan or Japan today, as the latter systems do not carry discriminatory or carry any repressive implications, at least for the present day.

The *hukou* system has a history of over 2,000 years in China, and was established during the imperial era as a means of social control and to facilitate tax collection. When China entered into the modern period in 1911, first the 'warlord' governments and then the KMT (Kuomintang, or nationalist party of China) government continued

to maintain the *hukou* system. However, it is under the CCP (Chinese Communist Party) government that the *hukou* system's functions of political and social control grew to unprecedented levels. In 1958, after the policy of exceedingly rapid industrialization was inaugurated, the *hukou* system was greatly strengthened, eventually developing into a regime that systematically discriminates rural residents as second-class citizens. Residents are entitled to different kinds of rights according to their *hukou*, ranging from physical mobility from the rural areas to the cities or from one region of China to another, to the kind of social benefits different citizens may or may not enjoy. At the beginning of the decade, the *hukou* system was characterized by the following features:

1. It tied the residents to the city or the village where they reside. Changing the place of residence required prior permission from local authorities. *Hukou* practically became a life long or even hereditary identity for common people. Mobility between villages and between cities was highly controlled.
2. After the inauguration of the 'planned economy', all social benefits, including the provision of staple grains, housing, medical care and retirement benefits, fell under the power of the planning bodies, and all of these basic necessities were distributed to people only on the basis of their *hukou*. A person without a *hukou* was simply an outcast and had no means for survival whatsoever.
3. One of the chief roles of the *hukou* is to segregate the rural population from the cities, to bar the former from entering into cities, to keep them away from those social provisions and benefit that urban dwellers enjoy: the right to food, social security system, public housing, subsidized education, low priced consumer goods, etc.
4. *Hukou* is hereditary. Rural citizens and their children remain with rural *hukou* in almost all circumstances, except if they join the army or enrol in college. Further more, until 1998 the system would further discriminate against rural women. Children would inherit their rural identity from their mother rather than their

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father. The serious consequence was Chinese rural women were being robbed any chance of upward social mobility through marrying with an urban man. While a rural male migrant might be able to get urban residence permit through marrying an urban woman, a rural woman migrant could not. This was why urban men would resist marriage to rural women; otherwise, their children would inherit their mother's rural *hukou*, a severe decline in status that few would accept. This regime was particularly designed to exclude rural women and their children from becoming permanent urban residents, thus relegating them to the status of third-class citizens.

5. Household heads are responsible for keeping the 'household registration book' (*hukou bu*). This in practice gives the parents power to interfere into their children's affairs. For instance, when their sons or daughters have to marry they have to produce their *hukou bu* for inspection by officials. If the parents do not approve their son's or daughter's marriage, they can prevent it by refusing to produce the *hukou bu*. Given the tradition of patriarchy in China, daughters are more vulnerable in this situation.
6. Until 2003, there were serious penalties for migrants who violated *hukou* system, including being fined, jailed or being sent back home (at their own expense – those having no money were required to perform forced labour to pay for the travelling expenses). As was shown in the case of Sun Zhigang, sometimes failing to produce the proper documents could lead to physical assault and even death of the migrant.
7. People do not have the right to vote for local deputies to the People's National Congress if they do not have a local *hukou*, regardless of the fact that they may have been working or living in a given area for many years.

The *hukou* system has proved to be as useful to 'capitalist construction' as it once was for 'socialist construction'. It now acts a powerful force for pressing down the wages of rural migrants and preventing them from getting better jobs in the cities. It may not be able to stop them from resisting

exploitations, but it is able to prevent them from organizing. Coming as they do from diverse provinces, being discriminated against, having a low self-esteem, being acutely aware of being alien and aware of the fact that they will sooner or later return home, the workers who make up this great army of migrant labourers find it exceedingly difficult to involve themselves in any long-term organizing effort, let alone develop a class identity. While SOEs workers at least have local community networks that can provide some sort of support when troubles or difficulties arise, the mass of rural migrant workers who work in private factories do not have any such networks for support, thus the atomization of this category of workers is more severe than SOEs workers. Even if there are individuals who are ready to fight for their legitimate rights, the penalty faced by those attempting to independently organize workers is severe enough to deter most of them. To sum up, the *hukou* system have acted as an effective tool in promoting the bureaucracy's project of re-integration with global capitalism, and the process have enriched the bureaucracy and the new entrepreneurs at the expense of rural migrant workers.

Since the middle of 1990s the *hukou* system has been gradually relaxed. First, rural residents were permitted to buy a temporary (usually one year) urban residential card, which allowed them to work legally. The fees for such permits gradually decreased to a fairly affordable level. Beginning from 1998, parents have been able to pass down their *hukou* either through the father's or the mother's line, hence the triple discrimination against rural women has been alleviated. In 2003, after the uproar surrounding the death of Sun Zhigang<sup>7</sup> alarmed the authorities, the laws on jailing and repatriating 'undocumented' people (those failing to produce local *hukou*) were abolished. Thus the spatial aspect of the apartheid has now largely been eliminated. However, the substance of the social apartheid in general and the *hukou* system in particular remains intact. The permanent mark of being an outsider and second-class citizen remains, and prevents migrant workers from achieving significant upward mobility in cities. Most decent jobs are still reserved for people who possess local urban *hukou*. Migrants

can only get badly paid jobs. They still have no future in the cities, and may only work there for some years and then return to their home village. It is thus extremely difficult for them to develop long-term prospects in or perspectives on this alien environment. Although the *hukou* can now pass down to children either through the father or the mother, it is still very far from actual sexual equality. As child-bearing sex, many women migrant workers, after working some years in the cities, have to go back to their home villages when they get married to look after their husbands and children. It follows that these women must see their residence in the cities as something temporary, even more temporary than what male migrant workers conceive.

### The local paramilitary forces

In order to enforce the *hukou* system and conduct regular checks on the paper of the migrants, local governments find it necessary to run paramilitary forces, in addition to the regular police force. These paramilitary forces are run by the lowest level of local government – in cities it is the neighbourhood committee, or in EPZs that once were rural areas, the village committee. These basic governing bodies often have their own paramilitary forces and are closely connected to local police and criminal organizations in the neighbourhoods. They have no legitimate power to enforce laws, but in practice they perform the function of the police. It is these people who implement the regime of political and social control over local residents, especially the migrant workers. Though they are technically not allowed to bear arms, in fact they are generally armed with billy clubs, handcuffs, and even electric batons, and never hesitate to use them against migrants. The continuous growth of their numbers is a response of the local governments to the huge influx

of migrant workers. It is these people who make regular check on the papers of the migrant workers and seize any opportunity to fine them (whoever fails to produce the temporary *hukou* card will be fined). Unsurprisingly, they are most hated by migrant workers, and it is not uncommon for confrontations between the two sides to develop into riots.

### Perspective of workers' resistance

The *hukou* system makes migrant workers, and women workers in particular, difficult to envisage any long-term planning, since they have no roots at all in the cities. We can expect more spontaneous struggles among migrant workers, but for these struggles to become more organized, obstacles like the *hukou* system and the paramilitary forces must first be removed.

We can expect further relaxation of the *hukou* system in the direction of narrowing the social division of rural *hukou* and urban *hukou* in the medium term. But if the government is going this direction, it is also because it now finds the original system less useful as before. Until now, the *hukou* system has been very useful in helping the ruling elite to make capitalism reborn at the expense of the rural population. However, as the task is now completed, its usefulness is diminishing as well. We may even argue that as time goes by, the *hukou* system may be seen by the government as obsolete, as it gradually comes into conflict with a new capitalism that more and more demands the free flow of human resources rather than its restriction. While the elites only see the relaxation or even abolishment of the *hukou* system as a response to the new needs of Chinese capitalism, workers should take this as their first step in their struggle for basic civil liberties, trade union rights and economic betterment.

### Notes

- 1 This article is based on a much longer article, Chinese Women Workers Under the Chinese Social Apartheid, to be published by Committee of Asian Women.
- 2 China Statistical Abstract 2004, China Statistics Press.
- 3 1 yuan US\$0.13.

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- 4 That is, 40 h per week plus a maximum of 36 h overtime per month, approximately 9.72 h per day in average (8 h + 36 h/20.92 days/month).
- 5 The Plight of the Chinese poor, Huang Rutong, from [www.newcenturynews.com](http://www.newcenturynews.com).
- 6 The capital city of Guangdong province.
- 7 Sun Zhigang was a college graduate from Hubei province. He was in Guangzhou in 2003. After failing to produce his temporary residential card, he was arrested and then beaten to death by local paramilitary forces.

### Further reading

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