The making of a new working class? A study of collective actions of migrant workers in South China*

Chris King-Chi CHAN and PUN Ngai

Abstract
In this study, we argue that the specific process of proletarianization of the Chinese migrant workers contributes to the recent rise of labor protests in the mid 2000s. Most of the collective actions engender workers’ conflict with management at the point of production, while simultaneously entail labor organizing and collective actions at the terrain of daily reproduction at the workers’ dormitories and communities. The lived space including both workers’ dormitories and migrant communities facilitates collective actions organized not only on bases of locality, ethnicity, gender and peer alliance in a single workplace, but also attempted to nurture workers’ solidarity in a broader sense of a labor oppositional force moving beyond exclusive networks and ties, and sometimes even cross-factory strike tactics. The nature of these collective actions is mostly interest-based, accompanied by a strong anti-foreign capital sentiment and a discourse of workers’ rights. By providing two detailed cases of workers’ strikes in 2004 and 2007 respectively, we suggest that the making of a new working class is increasingly conscious of and participating in interest-based or class-oriented labor protests in the long run.

Introduction
Due to China’s thirty-year reform, today China has become a “world factory” providing the sense of pride to the nation, which was once conceived as a developing country and now poses as a challenge to the global economy. What is less concerned is the making of a new working class whose life struggle has been continuously constitutive of the process of making China as “world factory”. The specific process of the proletarianization in reform China has contributed to a new working class which is

* The authors are grateful to Prof. Simon Clarks, Chris Smith, Kim Koss, Peter Evans, Ruth Milkman, Greg Chin and the three reviewers for providing valuable comments to the earlier version of this article. We would also like to acknowledge the funding support of Warwick Postgraduate Research Fellowship, RGC’s project on “Making a new working class: A study of collective actions in a dormitory labor regime of South China” (2007-2009), and the large-scale research project on “The formation of working class community in China” supported by APSS, Hong Kong Polytechnic University.
now increasingly conscious of and participating in various forms of collective actions. Spontaneous strikes of migrant workers in South China have been mounting since the mid 1990s.\(^1\) Even though it is difficult to estimate the number of collective actions of migrant workers, official statistics still reveal that between 1993 and 2005 the number of mass incidents had risen dramatically from about 10,000 to 87,000 - a 20 percent annual increase on average, among which 75% of these protests were launched by workers and peasants.\(^2\) According to national statistics on labor disputes at arbitration, the number soared from 135,000 in 2000 to 314,000 in 2005, with an average increase of 18.4 % per year. In 2003, the number of employees involved in labor arbitration reached 801,042.

Through looking into the collective actions of migrant workers in the Pearl River Delta, this article sets out to make sense of the realities and complexities of the making of a new class. We argue that most of the recent collective actions engendered workers’ conflict with management at the point of production, while simultaneously entailing labor organizing and collective actions on the terrain of daily reproduction at the workers’ dormitories and communities. The nature of these collective actions is mostly interest-based, accompanied by a strong anti-foreign capital sentiment and a discourse of workers’ right. These collective actions were organized not only on bases of locality, ethnicity, gender and peer alliance in a single workplace, but also attempted to nurture workers’ solidarity in a broader sense of a labor oppositional force moving beyond exclusive networks and strong ties, and sometimes even cross-factory strike tactics inviting workers from the same industrial region to participate in marches, street protests or highway blockages.

In this study, we study the recent development of collective actions providing two cases of labor strikes of migrant workers in 2004 and 2007 respectively. By analyzing the detailed processes of workers’ protests, we suggest that the making of a new

---


working class is increasingly conscious of and participating in interest-based or class-oriented labor protests in the long run.

**Labor Collective Actions**

With rich insights from various studies of collective actions of laid-off state enterprise workers in North or Central China, we learn that “workers’ identity”, “class-consciousness” and “labor struggles” are highly contested notions, requiring further sophisticated theorizing based on in-depth historical and ethnographic studies. According to E. P. Thompson, “class happens when some men, as a result of common experiences (inherited or shared), feel and articulate the identity of their interests as between themselves, and as against other men whose interests are different from (and opposed to) theirs.” In the new industrial zones of China, where the language of class was subsumed and where collective actions are still lacking a formal political agenda working against the state and capital, it does not mean that there is no “interest-based”, or “class-oriented” collective actions germinating in this rapidly shifting society.

This study is based on our longitudinal fieldwork in the industrial town of Shenzhen (深圳) between 2003 and 2007. During the period, we conducted intensive research into migrant workers’ working life and social life in the town by participant observation, interviews and documentary research in dormitories, migrant communities and

---


workers’ centre. In this article, we chose two cases of strikes and protests for comparison. Factory A, having a strike in 2004, is a Taiwanese-owned factory while factory B, owned by a German company, experienced a strike in 2007. Despite the differences in capital composition and in time of the strikes, there were many similarities between these two factories. In the same electronics sector, both of them were set up in the same town in the early 1990s and soon expanded rapidly into giant factories, having subsidiary plants in other parts of the Delta. Situated in one of the most strike-prone areas in the region, these two plants are only separated by a highway. The wage levels in these two factories before the strike were among the best in the town. However, both strikes had encouraged a series of strikes in other factories spreading out substantial effects and wage increases within the town. We selected these two factories because they are in the frontier of dynamic changes in labour relations in the Delta. The three year gap from 2004 to 2007 also made it possible to compare the changing patterns of labour conflict and predict future potential.

Data for factory A was collected in late 2005 and early 2006. We spent around one year interviewing workers, observing their working and social life and visiting their workplaces, dormitories and private rented homes. We interacted with more than 100 workers, with 20 deeper interviews or follow-ups. Our research of factory B was also begun in 2005 as part of an electronics industry labour conditions research project and continued later under a dormitory research project. Our fieldwork in August 2007 coincided with the occurrence of the strike in factory B. We used the contacts we had built up and maintained from 2005 to observe the development of the strike, conduct workers’ interviews. 50 workers were interviewed. Our research of these two factories also extended into their subsidiary plants in other towns or cities. We visited the subsidiary of factory A in the city of Huizhou (惠州) in March 2006 and conducted out of the factory interviews with workers in a subsidiary of factory B in August 2007 in a town close to the international airport of Shenzhen.

Regarding to the complexities of the making of a new working class in China, we ask: When, where and how will workers develop collective actions? Drawing on rich

---

6 The factory A was based on Chris Chan’s community-based fieldwork from 2005 to 2006, which composed of the major part of his doctoral study on industrial conflicts in South China. Data for the factory B was collected alongside a dormitory research project led by Pun Ngai since 2003 and joined by Chris Chan in a later stage. Our approach was to study the unique labour regime in China’s global factories, starting from the reproduction sphere and extending into the production sphere. The authors would like to thank our friends and colleagues who shared with us important information which formulated this paper.
ethnographic findings, we argue that at critical junctures – often when discontents and grievances are shared – the migrant workers in question tend to take oppositional actions against capital in a collective form, transgressing the barriers of locality and ethnicity to generate an interest-based or class-based industrial struggle.

We then move on to ask: When the workers’ discontents and grievances are shared, what causes them to be likely to engage in collective actions? What resources are available for the aggrieved workers to use in resistance and protest? Scholarship on Chinese labor suggests that Maoist discourse, new-found legal mechanisms and localistic networks are useful potential resources available for workers in protests. Maoist legacy and the government’s legal reforms have opened up discursive space and institutional channels for workers to frame their collective interests as rights, but these channels will not limit their capability of transforming into interest- or class-based struggles at a later stage. Without effective assistance from the Chinese trade union system, the workers have no choice but recourse to their own pre-existing localistic networks to build cultures of solidarity, but once the workers’ solidarity is built, workers are capable to articulate their aggregate interests along the line of class. We will further explore the creative forms of workers’ resources and mass mobilization at the workplaces and workers’ living spaces and what internal contradictions will possibly develop. We understand that all these resources for action and collective mobilization, nevertheless, are double-edged swords. Labor laws set the limits of

---


compensation claims and outcomes. Localism suggests boundary-drawing and social exclusions between sub-groups of workers. Dormitories are also strategic sites of managerial control’s extension beyond the shop floor, tightening control over workers in their living space. As a response, workers in the privileged position escaped the rigid control from the dormitories provided by the factories and reactivated their activism in the urban migrant communities. In a word, the migrant workers contest to safeguard and to fight for their own interests vis-à-vis the local state and global capital.

Production, Reproduction and Proletarianization of Migrant Workers

The specific process of proletarianization of the Chinese migrant workers is shaped by the spatial separation of production and reproduction of labor by China’s household registration system and rural-urban chasm, and a spatial re-combination of these two dimensions by a dormitory labour regime. The emergence of a dormitory labour regime in China is not new as dormitory use for labour has a long history either in a western or eastern context of industrialisation. What is interesting here is not the recurrence of an old form of labour use in global production, but the reconfiguration of hybrid forms of work-residence for the daily reproduction of labour and the embodiment of labor control and resistance in contemporary China. Since the role of the state is almost missing in providing the support of collective consumption to the new working class in the industrial cities and towns, the provision of dormitories for the accommodation of millions of migrant workers becomes a necessity for enterprises that produce for the global market, and hence take up the role of the daily reproduction of labor power. The specificity of the Chinese dormitory labour system is the widespread use of dormitory labour in all newly industrialised zones in China, irrespective of capital, sector, industry and factory.

Looking into China’s history, as noted by Chris Smith (2003), factory dormitories were first introduced in the early twentieth century on a limited scale. In a study of cotton and silk workers in Tianjin in the period from 1900 to the 1940s, Hershatter (1986) notes that dorms were introduced to lower labour costs through feminization and use of

---


rural workers in foreign-owned companies. Another similar study by Emily Honig (1986) of female cotton workers in Shanghai in the 1930s also notes that contractors hired thugs to guard the dormitories and accompany women workers. One characteristic of China’s foreign-invested plants since 1978 is the housing of migrant workers in dormitories attached to or close to a factory’s enclosed compound. Management within the foreign-invested or privately owned companies would appear to have exceptional control over the workforce under the system. Within a dormitory labor regime, working days are extended to suit production needs, resulting in a flexible utilisation and prolonging of labour time and a greater breadth of control into the working and non-working day of the workers. In the dormitories, the workers – already joined to one another along gender, locality, kinship and ethnic lines – are linked to widespread networks inside and outside the workplace setting. To escape the disciplinary control within the factory-provided dormitories, some higher paid workers rent temporary settlements in the communities near their factories. These communities continue to nourish gender, locality and peer networks in connection with the dormitories. It has been widely noted that kin and ethnic networks facilitate migration flows, job searches, and the circulation of work information and that they strengthen workers’ capacity to cope with factory life and the hardships of the city. With the development of a new generation of migrant workers who were born after the 1980s, we also observe that exclusive locality networks and gender lines could be surpassed and transgressed to create a broader sense of “workers’ networks”. It is clear that workers’ cultivation of a collective spirit reveals the powerful influence of kinship, ethnicity, and gender, but at the same time it showed an interest-based orientation, especially in times of struggle against capital.

Workers who find themselves in the midst of a crisis or a strike easily transform these “soft” supports—the kinship networks, the ethnic enclaves, the spirit of sisterhood, and the personal relationships—into “hard” resources for industrial struggle. In a number of cases, we recorded the presence of petition letters that, circulating from dorm to dorm, were subsequently taken to the authorities. These efforts to mitigate hardships and to challenge the power of management were sometimes successful in the short term, but often led to a deterioration in relations between workers and management. The struggle for better conditions was often intertwined with the struggle for recognition of workers’ identity and rights. The dormitories, with their tightly controlled environments, provided a context in which workers could assert their rights and challenge the authority of management. In this sense, the dormitories served as a site of resistance against the power of capital, as workers sought to maintain their autonomy and control over their lives. The interactions between workers and management within the dormitories were therefore not simply a reflection of the hierarchy of power, but also a arena for asserting workers’ rights and challenging the authority of management.
dorm, effectively collected many signatures in a single night. The relative ease with which workers could use the dorm setting to organize their common cause against management derives, in large measure, from the limited space that dormitories offer opponents of collective action. On strike, workers efficiently and spontaneously organize themselves, receiving little or no formal organizational help from trade unions or labor organizations. The compression of time that, in the dormitory labor regime, is necessary for production, in turn, works in favor of collective worker organization by accelerating consensus building and strategy development, therein. On the other hand, a significant number of migrant workers, especially the skilled and supervisory workers, rented the private leasing rooms in the local community which was called ‘peasant- workers’ village’ (min gong cun 民工村)\textsuperscript{16}. The newly rising peasant workers’ community was also potential to give rise to a new form of workers’ militancy despite internal divisions and conflicts.

To see whether the reproduction space facilitates workers’ mobilization, we provide a detailed analysis of two strikes, one in 2004 and the other in 2007, in the same industrial city of the Pearl River Delta. In both cases, most of the ordinary workers lived in the factory provided dormitories, while the skilled and supervisory staff tended to live in private rented rooms and shared flats in the local villages\textsuperscript{17}. In Factory A, more than 30\% of the workers gave up the dormitories and rented private rooms in the village. The rent ranged from 150 to 250 yuan per month in 2006. There were many corner shops in the village, most of which were run by workers or ex-workers. Besides selling wines, drinks, cigarettes and cooking sauces, the shops rented instruments for playing ‘Ma Jiang’ (麻将), a traditional Chinese game with four players. The shops provided one of the major social spaces for migrant workers. In Factory B, until 2006, the factory subsidized 50 yuan to those production workers living outside. Skilled workers, supervisors, and managers received higher subsidies. The subsidy for line supervisors for example was 200 yuan. As a result, most of the skilled workers and supervisors lived outside the factory. Workers’ living space has a significant impact

\textsuperscript{16} It was reported that 48.7\% of the migrant population in Shen Zhen live in privately let ‘peasant’ residences, see Guo Wu Yuan Yan Jiu Shi Ke Ti Zu (State Council Research Institute Project Team) Zhong Guo Nong Min Gong Diao Yan Bao Gao (The Report on Chinese Peasant Workers). (Beijing: Zhong Guo Yan Shi Chu Ban She, 2006). [in Chinese].

\textsuperscript{17} For a portrait of migrant workers’ urban temporary community, see Zhang Li. Strangers in the city: Reconfigurations of space, power, and social networks within China’s floating population. (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2001).
on the strategies and consequences of workers’ struggle.

**Case I: Taiwanese Factory Strike in 2004**

Factory A, which produced small household appliances, was set up in 1992. At its outset, the factory had only 20 to 30 workers. It had been expanded to a workforce of 9000 workers in 2004 with a two-factory complex. The factory operated two shifts and their workers had to work 7 days a week 12 hours per day including two meal breaks of half an hour each. The local minimum wage in 2004 was 480 yuan per month for a 40-hour working week. The legally prescribed weekday overtime pay was 1.5 times, and weekend overtime was 2 times the normal working rate. But workers were paid below the standard. As a production worker, one’s basic salary was 450 yuan covering eight hours work from Monday to Saturday. Overtime work out of the eight hours and on Sunday was paid at an hourly rate of 2.4 yuan. Production workers earned from 700 to 1300 yuan, dependent on hours of overtime. On top of the basic salary and overtime pay, which were universal for all, there were extra subsidies dependent on departments and posts. The line supervisor had a 400-500 yuan post subsidy, and the workshop supervisor 700-800 yuan, while their overtime pay was the same as production workers. The factory provided dormitories for all of the workers, and deducted 50 yuan per month from their salaries for rent and bills.

In April, 2004, the factory began a new policy which triggered off the strike. During the half-hour lunch break from 11:00am to 11:30am, workers were requested to punch their attendance cards two times, in and out. This brought trouble for most of the production workers as a long queue appeared behind the punching machine. Hence grievances and discontents were mounting and spreading among the workers.

On 10 April, the strike began in one of the production departments on the 5th floor of the factory building. It quickly spread to the whole factory the next day. Other than picking up the punching issue, workers requested that their salary be increased from 450 to 480 yuan, and overtime pay from 2.4 to 3.5 yuan per hour. In the morning, a notice calling for a strike was stuck up in every department. 100 to 200 workers from the initiating department then walked out from their factory to block a national highway. They were either stopped and persuaded back by their managers or driven off by the police. The police also arrested seven of them who rushed into the frontline and detained them in the police offices separately.

**Labor Mobilization in Workplace and Living Space**
A group of young male workers from the initiating department then ran off to different departments and turned off or broke down the general electricity switches. The older and experienced workers in the department, however, acted behind to support them. Most of the workers, both male and female, stopped work and walked out from the production lines. Thousands of workers stood outside the factory to stage a strike. The town officials and police showed up at the factory as soon as the workers gathered. At noon, the factory requested the workers to elect their representatives. There was no formal election, but ten male workers stood out voluntarily to be workers’ representatives, five of whom were veteran workers in the initiating department. The negotiation was held in the afternoon. Workers gathered outside the meeting room to wait for the result. However, at the end of the meeting, the ten representatives were sent out of the factory by van and then disappeared.

In the evening, some of the workers were annoyed enough to rush into the administrative office, broke the computers and drove the Taiwanese general manager and local factory director off to the entrance of the factory, where thousands of workers were gathered. The furious workers attempted to beat the Taiwanese manager. Two security guards then dragged the manager back into the factory. A witness described the scene:18

There were 2000 to 3000 workers on the scene of the factory entrance who requested the Taiwanese lao(佬), Taiwanese guy, [the general manager] to come out and explain. The Taiwanese lao finally came out at 9:00pm. As soon as he appeared, those standing out of the entrance pushed inwards, while those inside crowed out, all were screaming and shouting. Someone shouted, “kill him! kill him!” Four or five security guards promptly dragged the Taiwanese lao into the factory, and closed the gate of the factory. By then, most of the workers had come out of the factory compound. Roaring with shouting, furious workers managed to climb over the gate. Others flung out cigarette butts, water bottles and rubbish onto the body of the Taiwanese lao. Half a bottle of water was just thrown down on the head of the Taiwanese Lao.

Constraining his temper, the Taiwanese said, “Don’t throw this stuff, don’t throw stuff. Wages can be raised.” One of the workers cursed, “You Taiwanese guys do not treat us [mainland Chinese] as human”.

The Taiwanese responded, "I treat you equally. We are the same."

18 Interviews in December 2005 and March 2006.
Workers shouted, “Raise the wage according to the law!”
He said, “I agreed. I promised to raise your salary…”
Workers continued debates with him. Around 100 workers stayed on overnight to block the factory and stop the factory sending products and goods off.

It is crystal clear that the workers had been united together, formulating a strong oppositional force against the management. Even though the language of class was never used in their actions, workers’ awareness of their oppositional position against capital in the production realm was acutely apparent and the quick mobilization power was highly facilitated by the intense linking between production realm and reproduction space. In action, workers were effectively tied, and there was strong oppositional sentiment against capital, sometimes even involved moments of violence. A framework of legalism was also transgressed when we observed the strike on its third, fourth and fifth day – when the workers staked their claim moving beyond a legal standard wage to their demand for the release of the workers’ representatives and staging a petition to the city government. 

In the morning of the third day, a notice was posted out by the factory stating that the wage would rise to the minimum legal standard. Workers, however, installed a big board card behind the attendance punching machine, informing workers to sign a petition to the city government for the return of their representatives. Two to three thousand workers then walked from their factory to the national highway again in the morning. They were stopped when they walked 10 minutes along the highway where hundreds of police, military police, and government-employed security guards stood by together. The labour bureau officials persuaded them to return to their factory, and promised that they would come to the factory to help negotiation, ‘as long as you go back, we can talk about any conditions on the table.’ Workers, then, walked back to the factory.

When workers arrived at the factory, the Taiwanese managers all escaped to a neighboring Taiwanese factory. Workers found they were deceived. Discontent was widespread among workers all over the factory. In the evening, a bigger mobilization was formed throughout the shop floors, dormitories and village with support from skilled workers and supervisory staff who acted as organizers. Some workers spontaneously prepared their own slogans. In many corners of the village, workers discussed and made preparations for the demonstration the night before the big confrontation.

---

19 The right to strikes for the Chinese workers was banned in the Constitution of 1982.
In the early morning of the fourth day, a message was widely spread out among ordinary workers. ‘In dormitories, private buildings, and even street corners, there were people asking others “go to the city government”.’ a worker recalled. Later on, two big banners hung out, stating slogans of ‘Return our ten workers’ representatives’ and ‘Factory A violates the labour law, doesn’t raise wage!’ Here we evidenced the essential role of reproduction space in labor organizing.

**Marching to the City Government**

At 8:00am, 4000 to 5000 workers then departed the industrial district to the highway. The protest was better organized, planned and coordinated than the one the previous day. This time the police were well prepared to block the demonstrators at the highway entrance. Instead of confrontation with the police at the first junction, workers adopted an alternative strategy. As soon as the mass arrived at the junction, a leader announced with an amplifier, ‘listen, we don’t walk into the main road.’ Then workers began to flood onto the pavement. However, hundreds of policemen and security guards still tried to stop workers from moving further forward on the pavement. Workers were then surrounded by the police, local militia and security guards sent from the city government. But the latter were severely resisted by the workers who threw bricks, stones and grass over.

Beside the two high rising big banners, there were at least three amplifiers, several cameras and fund-raising boxes. On the surface of the boxes was written, ‘for our common interests, please put in your money.’ The boxes were soon full of money. The cameras were only used to take pictures when workers were beaten by policemen. Banners were held up in the hands of younger workers, rather than skilled workers and supervisors, who only showed up to give directions at critical moments. Not long after workers arrived at the edge of the highway, policemen were mad at the workers raising the banners, ‘Put it down! Put it down!’ The young workers who were holding banners stepped back, and some older workers walking behind the banners helped take them away to avoid conflict with the police.

A cross-factory strike gradually evolved when more and more workers from other factories in the same industrial district also joined in the march along the way, to show support, or only for fun. At 1:00pm, five hours after they had left the district, protestors, whose number had reached as high as 7000 to 8000, were heading to the city government.
Policemen and workers confronted each other. The police used a water hose to drive away the workers. As soon as the water shooting stopped, the workers lobbed stones and bricks at police. Workers saw a supervisor standing in the centre of the workers, calling with an amplifier for others to push forwards. About eight workers who had more physical conflict with the security guards were arrested. Thirty workers were sent to hospital.

On the fifth afternoon, workers were informed to attend a meeting in the factory canteen. District labour bureau officials, the police, the general manager and factory director all came to the meeting. The general manager reassured workers that both lunch and dinner times would be extended to one hour, and promised the factory’s policy would fully comply with the law. The curtain then fell on the protest, although without either the immediate release of the arrested workers, or the return of the representatives to the factory.

Hundreds of supervisors and skilled workers were sent out to Huizhou to help set up a new factory after the strike and they spread the story of the battles in this workplace. After the maiden factory-wide strike in Factory A, workers in both sides of Shenzhen and Huizhou staged cross-department-based strikes from time to time. Strikes became a culture endemic in factory A.

**Case II: German Factory Strike in 2007**

Factory B is a German capital enterprise which produced batteries, power cords and other components of mobile phones. Since it was set up in 1993, it had expanded into two large plants at two industrial towns of Shenzhen, one of them located in the same town as Factory A. Both employed about 8000 workers, of which 80% were women between 18 and 30. Similar to Factory A, the wage level in Factory B was comparatively better than some other factories around. The minimum hourly wage rate was basically observed and social insurance was provided for all of the workers. The factory operates in two shifts. The day shift is from 7:00am to 6:30pm with a one-hour lunch break, while the night shift is from 7:00pm to 6:45am with a 45-minute midnight break. Ordinary workers usually work six days per week and their monthly salary is from 1000 to 1400 yuan.

In this factory, production workers are called *yuan gong* (员工), employees, while others, including managers, supervisors, engineers, technicians, office clerks, are
collectively called *zhi yuan* (职员), staff. Most of the workers, *yuan gong*, live in the factory-provided dormitories where 8 or 12 workers share a room. 30 yuan is deducted from wages as rent. The factory pays an accommodation subsidy from 200 to 300 yuan per month to *zhi yuan* to rent private rooms out of the factory.

In July 2005, when the minimum wage rate in Shenzhen was raised to 580 yuan, the factory adjusted the salary accordingly. The minimum wage was further increased to 700 yuan in 2006. Workers in Factory B also got a pay rise accordingly. After two years’ consecutive pay rises, however, the factory steadily began to increase the work quotas of the production line and units. If workers cannot finish the quota set up unilaterally by the management for 11 daily working hours, they are requested to perform extra work the next day without payment. The practice creates conflict between experienced workers with a higher efficiency and the inexperienced, as well as between the front line supervisors, who announced the new quota and forced their subordinates to work faster, and the production workers. Therefore, ‘too exhausted’ rather than low pay is the most common discontent in the factory. Many workers quit the factory after a few months or a year, but most of them were not permitted and there was always a long queue for those who applied to leave. For those without proper ‘permission’, the factory will confiscate their salary and they are prohibited from re-entry to the factory within half a year.

A special rationalization reform was also made to lower the wage cost of the *zhi yuan* by restricting their overtime working hours in March 2007. From July, the maximum overtime hours of *zhi yuan* were set at 72 per month. They would not get extra pay even if they had worked more than that level. The impact for front line supervisors was that they had to take care of more lines when other supervisors were on leave. For technicians, a smaller number was on duty in each shop. As with factory A, repair technicians in the workshop are on stand-by. Some of them just leave the factory after punching in their attendance cards and ask others to punch out for them. To constrain the abuse, a new punching machine was installed in the main entrance of the factory in August 2007, especially for controlling *zhi yuan*

The immediate cause of the strike was due to the wage policy of the city government. As mentioned, the city had significantly raised the minimum wage rate in July 2005 and 2006, workers generally expected a similar pay rise in July 2007, but the government finally decided not to raise the legal rate and maintained it at 700 yuan. A strike was immediately sparked off the second day after the workers got their July pay slip in August.
A Collective Action for Reasonable Wage

Workers got their pay slip on 16th August, Thursday. Workers’ salary was not raised. Furthermore, technicians and supervisors found their income was severely reduced due to the overtime restriction. For example, one of the technicians, whose salary was always well over 2000, only got 1400 yuan then. In the evening of Friday, when the managers who only work during the day had left the factory, a public letter was posted on the notice board of all of the workshops.

The letter was issued in the name of all of the Factory B workers and entitled ‘voices from zhi yuan and yuan gong’. It began by pointing out that the management had attempted to lower their salary from the end of 2006, and now their income had been reduced by 50% from the same period last year, while the work quota and living cost had doubled. ‘We have reasonable demands’, the letter stated:

1. To adjust our current wage standard. We all know the market wage standard now, and thus demand it should be adjusted to the following ways: yuan gong, 1500 yuan or more; second level zhi yuan, 2000 yuan or more; third level zhi yuan, 2500 yuan or more; fourth level zhi yuan, 3000 yuan or more; the above does not include any subsidy.
2. To raise the accommodation and food subsidy for living outside.
3. To improve the welfare conditions, provide reasonable allowance for high temperature, toxic, outdoor and occupational disease-prone posts and regular occupational disease and body checks.
4. To provide night shift subsidy and snack allowance for those working on the night shift.
5. The company should buy unemployment, maternity, medical care and all of the other insurances requested by the labour law.
6. To solve the hygiene problem of drinking water.
7. To improve the reasonability of the overtime work.
8. The trade union should function appropriately and its core members should invite the grass roots zhi yuan gong (职工) to participate in it.

The letter ended up stating that they requested the company to answer these demands in written form and they would not accept an oral reply from anybody, including the company CEO. News began to circulate among the workers that the technicians would start a strike soon.

Leading Role of Male Technicians in the Strike

On Monday morning, 20th August, soon after the production workers as usual walked to their workshops at 7:45am and prepared to begin work, the electricity was turned off. Supervisors told workers that there was a strike, asking them to leave the workshop. The newly installed card-punching machines for zhi yuan were broken. Thousands of workers stood around the main entrance of the factory.

From the very beginning of the strike, it was the male technicians in the Engineering department directing the collective actions of the unorganized thousands of production workers. ‘A technician swung his work uniform (to attract attention) and several other technicians around him shouted: Go! Go! The workers then followed them in the direction they walked toward,’ workers recalled.

After more and more workers, mostly young women, joined in, the technicians then led the crowd onto a crossroads in the industrial town. It was not a busy road and not many cars came, several policemen just stood by the workers peacefully. ‘One policeman even told us that it was useless to stay there and we should go to the major national road’, a worker said. Half an hour later, the mass walked out to the national highway and occupied one half of the main road. Hundreds of forces, including patrol police, military police, transport police and local government security guards, came, followed by labour bureau officers, the town party secretary-general and the factory managers. The local party head, labour bureau representative and top manager spoke to the mass with amplifiers and asked them to go back to the factory for negotiation. Officers said that it was illegal to stand here and anything can be discussed in the factory while the manager asked the workers to elect their representatives. Some of the workers responded that we are all representatives or we have no representatives.

Some young workers, most of them female, stood in the front and had some physical conflicts with the police. The police arrested several of them. Workers then retreated back to the pedestrian way and shouted: ‘release people!’ Some of them were released on the scene while others were detained for around one week. Under control by the police, the workers just gathered around a petrol station and then dispersed peacefully. Hence, even though it was male technicians who controlled the leadership of the strike, female workers however were the militants who had direct conflicts with the police.

In the afternoon, the management called up all of the zhi yuan to have a meeting. However, as the factory requested those attended to sign up their names, almost all of the technicians and some supervisors left. Therefore, the meeting was basically held among department heads or managers. There was no formal notice but news was circulated that the meeting decided to increase basic salary from 300 to 500 for zhi yuan, dependent on position level, and only 30 for yuan gong. The supervisory staff was mostly satisfied with this offer and went back to work from the Monday night. But no single worker followed. Workers punched in and out their attendance cards as usual and then left the workshops. The workforce once united at all levels was divided, but the internal division of the workers did not stop the strike.

Female Production Workers’ Resistance in Dormitories

On Tuesday, the strike continued. A notice was posted by the factory to announce the above salary change and more. A 50 yuan subsidy was granted to those living outside. Night shift workers can have 1 yuan allowance per day. The managers and supervisors tried their best to persuade workers to go back to work. Some of them came to the dormitories. Despite its near-total domination of laborers’ lives, the Chinese dormitory labor regime, on the other hand, opens up space for collective resistance. Now the production workers, mostly female, began to recognize that the supervisory staff had ‘betrayed’ them. Some of them posted up slogans on the wall of the dormitory: Strike
to the last moment! One of the workers, who was forced to go back to work in the evening, recalled her story. When she punched out her attendance card, her shop supervisor and department head stood by the machine.

They asked me to work, I refused. They said that I can just sign up my name. I thought that it was no problem if I only signed a name. I went into the workshop to sign my name. But afterwards, they did not allow me to leave and soon the gate closed. There were not enough workers to run a single line. Around 10 workers just sat there for several hours with the lights on. After several hours, we were allowed to leave and we got pay for the full day of 11 hours. I felt very upset. I thought I had destroyed the solidarity of the workmates. So I did not go back to work on Wednesday. I just slept in bed unhappily. 21

In the evening, while the managers had ‘successfully’ pursued workers like this girl to go back to work, a well-typed pamphlet was circulated among the ordinary production workers. Some of them were thrown down from one of the dormitory buildings to the ground; some were distributed by workers outside the factory.

The pamphlet began by denouncing the zhi yuan and calling for unification of yuan gong:

All brothers and sisters of yuan gong,

We must be united. We don’t need to care about those shameful zhi yuan and don’t believe their lies. They have achieved their own goals. We, workers, don’t want to waste the time of both sides either. We have very clear demands: if any of the following items can not be accepted by the factory, we will definitely not walk half a step into the workshop. Our demands are:

1. Basic salary 810 yuan. Pay during leave should also not be lower than the basic salary.
2. No deduction of fees for living in dormitory; living outside should get appropriate subsidy.
3. Night shift should have a night snack allowance of 150 yuan paid on a one month base.
4. Give those workers in toxic and detrimental conditions an appropriate subsidy and subsidize the outdoor staff according to the Labour Law (150 yuan)
5. The drinking water of all workers should reach the hygiene standard.

If you want to be a piece of meat on a cutting board or a shameful Hanjian (汉奸), Han traitor, then you can sell your body before we get our wage demand! We believe absolutely none of us is this kind of person. Fellow compatriots, it is our most fragile moment as those zhi yuan have achieved their aims, and forgotten the interests of us yuan gong. Brothers and sisters of yuan gong of the whole factory, for the sake of our own interests, let’s unite together. Chairman Mao said: our revolution has not been successful, struggle should continue, insist! Insist…and insist.

From all yuan gong

Beside the pamphlets, workers also posted out posters on the wall of the dormitories and sent mobile phone messages to ask others to carry on the strike. Encouraged by all of these actions, most of the ordinary workers continued to strike on the third day. A significant moment came at noon of the fourth day. The company posted a new statement to announce that those who want to resign in three days could get back all of the compensations and salaries, but others should go back to work. Workers who returned to work in three days could get an extra allowance: 50 yuan first day; 30 yuan second day; 10 yuan third day. Otherwise, they would be seen as ‘absent’ and ‘quitting by themselves’, implying workers could not get back their wage as usual.

It was good news for many workers who were in the long waiting list pending to quit or preparing to do so. The strike bolstered workers’ determination to leave. Three thousand queued up in the administrative department to apply to leave the factory. The divisive strategy fatally shook the confidence of the workers who still wanted to stay on the job, in particular, those with family economic pressure. When the supervisors phoned to ask workers to work, the rest of the majority who were under economic pressure to keep their job, did not resist. At the same time, the factory provided distilled water in both dormitories and workshops. They promised to install air conditioning in workshops as well as a rest room with a TV set on each floor of the dormitories. The factory also promised a regular meeting with the supervisors and encouraged more suggestions from the production workers. Despite these achievements, production workers’ perception of ‘being betrayed’ by the supervisory staff was very apparent. Most of them did not take it as a successful strike.

One of the significant features of this strike was that it also happened almost simultaneously at the subsidiary factory in a different town. The extent of improvement in wages, subsidy, welfare and conditions was, however, fully the same as at factory B.

**Concluding Remark**

In recent years, workers in foreign owned enterprises in coastal China more frequently resort to strikes to express their grievances and discontents.\(^{22}\) In this study, we argue that recent labor protests are mostly interest-based, purposively induced to improve working conditions and oppositional against capital, while they may or may not resort

---

to legal means either at the beginning or at the end of labor disputes. Without strong leadership or formal organization, most of the labor conflicts are triggered off squarely at the point of production, with the reproduction space as bedrock for labor mobilization.

In fact, power relationship within the production and reproduction spaces cannot be understood by separating from each other. In the light of the temporary nature of these urban settlements due to the constraint of household registration system, however, we pay attention to their similarities and differences with the factory provided dormitories as the labor organizing space and resource. In factory A, the street corner as an effective space of organizing was only made possible due to the power of skilled and supervisory staff in the factory and the community was pervasive. In factory B, from the second day of the strike, the dormitory blocks rose to be contested space for workers and management to manipulate. Women workers encouraged others to continue strike while the managers came to persuade workers return to work. Although migrant workers’ urban settlement is transient and temporary, their daily life and collective struggle is potential to give rise to more inclusive labor actions.

Echoing the finding of Perry’s (1993) study of the Shanghai strikes in the 1902s, both of our cases showed that technicians, skilled workers and line supervisors acted underground in the organizing of the strikes and protests. Labour historians have also suggested a similar prominent role of privileged groups in the early stages of workers’ struggle in the west.23 Confirming the findings of Lee (2007), the language of class was not used during the strikes. Instead, in both cases, terms based on place or nationality were used. However, it is also transparently clear that the patterns of workers’ strikes were highly permeated with a meaning of class interest or class division. The boss, the management and capital is still the first target of labor protests.

Studies on protests by state-owned factory workers in the north suggested that the memory of Maoism was repeatedly used as a workers’ weapon,24 but this was a sign of nostalgia rather than class consciousness. As the case of factory B showed, migrant workers also recalled the communist revolution and Chairman Mao to encourage further struggle at the ‘critical moment’, although they misquoted the last words of Dr. Sun-Yat-Sen as the words of Mao. Mao is still a cultural symbol of radical politics in the eyes of the new working class in China.


These political and cultural aspects of the collective actions might suggest a weak ‘class consciousness’ of the migrant workers at this stage. Nevertheless, these two cases also gave us hints of a potential labour movement in the future.

First, although they were still factory based, both strikes had a significant knock-on effect on other factories in the same community and the same business group. In our observation, the strike wave from 2004 to 2005 at least partially accounted for the dramatic rise of the legal minimum wage rate and the local state’s better labour law inspection. Moreover, compared with the 2004 strike, it was a breakthrough that organizers in factory B were able to coordinate workers in two factories to stage a strike together in order to enhance their bargaining power.

Second, the strike also accumulated experience to improve struggle strategy. The strike in factory A in 2004 was more militant and violent than that in factory B in 2007. However, factory B was better organized and their demands were articulated more clearly in written form.

Third, the workers’ strike waves created a dilemma for the local state. Lee (2007) pointed out that migrant workers’ struggle, individual or collective, always had a legal basis. As shown in our case, workers’ demands had gone beyond that. The immediate response of the local government to the workers’ strike was to pressure the factory management to abide by the law and increase the legal minimum wage rate. The wage adjustment has the effect of satisfying and pacifying workers. But continual rise of the legal wage would lower the ‘competitiveness’ of the city against other regions or countries. In 2007, when the legal minimum wage could not satisfy workers, workers’ struggle was radicalized to demand a ‘reasonable’ wage rate.

Fourth, despite their passive role in the strike, ordinary production workers were empowered during the strike. They well knew their own interests and were enthusiastic to take part in the strike. In factory A, even workers from other factories joined in the demonstration to show support or as a way to express their opposition to the ‘boss’ in general. In factory B, a woman worker who ‘pretended’ to work on the second day felt guilty and did not go back to work on the third day.

Inspired by Thompson (1965), we view the formation of a ‘class-for-itself’ as a historical and long-drawn-out process that involves innumerable day-to-day struggles in a specific cultural context. The collective actions we studied were attempted to nurture workers’ solidarity in a broader sense of a labor oppositional force moving beyond locality, gender and peer networks, and even involved cross-factory strike tactics. Workers’ dormitory and urban community, no matter how temporary they are, are potential to facilitate labor mobilization and collective consciousness building. Our research makes it clear that workers in the export-processing zones of China are able to be united along class line in times of crisis, sometimes even with strong anti-foreign capital sentiment and violence as shown in our cases.

(This paper was accepted by The China Quarterly on 10th Oct. 2008. Correspondence please direct to the first author Chris Chan at: sskcchan@polyu.edu.hk)