



Beyond Proletarianisation

The Everyday Politics of Chinese Migrant Labour

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In China as elsewhere, labour studies typically focus on visibility, organisation, and collective endeavours taken on by workers and their organisations to improve the collective situation of the labouring class as a whole. The privileged site remains focussed on urban areas in general, and on manufacturing work in particular. In this essay, Thomas Jakobsen argues that this view is reductive, in that it only takes migrant labourers seriously as political actors once they enter the urban workplace. This risks neglecting the reality of hundreds of millions of workers who live between the farmlands and the city.

'Different Dusk,'
PC: Mingjia Zhou.

In the aftermath of the Global Financial Crisis of 2008, labour scholars focussing on China have started questioning the modernist narrative of the movement of peasants from farm to factory. The migrant condition in contemporary China has been reconceptualised as a form of politics of disillusionment, replacing 'the old promise of formal or continuous employment' (Smith and Pun 2018, 44), and with precarious employment being characterised as the 'new normal' for Chinese workers (Lee 2016). This urges us to reflect upon the opportunities for alternative political visions for Chinese rural migrant workers. Familiar narratives concerning labour politics typically focus on visibility,

organisation, and collective endeavours taken on by workers and their ‘political arms’, such as labour unions or political parties, to improve the collective situation of the labouring class as a whole. The privileged site for these overt manifestations of labour movement politics remains focussed on urban areas in general, and on manufacturing work in particular. This is probably the reason why rural migrant workers toiling in the workshops of foreign subsidiaries in the industrial Sunbelt of southeast China have taken such a prominent position in academic and popular discourse on China’s working class (Chang 2009; Pun 2005).

Yet, little evidence of a self-assertive labour movement at a higher level than the single workplace exists in contemporary China (Lee 2016). If the political imaginaries attached to the path of proletarianisation give rise to the political aim of mobilising around the imagery of the ‘proper job’, then scholars and activists need to raise the question of what emergent political imaginaries arise from the ‘new normal’ of precarious work. In this essay, I first argue for the need to look beyond proletarianisation as a prism for understanding the politics of labour migrants from the countryside to urban China. Building from this, I then suggest that everyday practices of mobile precarious labour provide a fruitful point of departure for sketching emergent political imaginaries. Finally, based on fieldwork in Yunnan province, I focus on a young generation of smallholders to highlight how autonomy *from* wage work becomes central to the formation of their aspirations.

Beyond the Inherited Class Maps

‘Old’ ideas (Ferguson 1999; Rigg 2012) about the transition towards capitalism linger as an often-unspoken background element in the debates among labour scholars over the scope for labour mobilisation and the development of a working-class consciousness among Chinese migrant workers (e.g. Frenkel and Yu 2015; Pun

and Lu 2010; Solinger 2012). That is, both in the literature on Chinese migrant workers and in the international literature on smallholders who move from farm to city, there is a tendency to perceive short-term work arrangements and precarious labour as a temporary phenomenon. Informal work used to be perceived as probationary, something to be overcome on the inevitable path towards proletarianisation, industrialisation, and urbanisation (Breman 2013; Huang 2011). Peasants typically enter the mainstream of labour studies only as they become ‘true’ workers, proletarians, motivated to improve their lot through collective action in the workplace (McMichael 2008). What is problematic about this way of perceiving labour mobilisation and working-class consciousness is that it only takes migrant labourers seriously as political actors once they enter the urban workplace. This risks neglecting the reality of hundreds of millions of workers who live between the farmlands in the countryside and the workplaces of the city (Day and Schneider 2017). Significantly, China’s household registration system (*hukou*) contributes to these arrangements, as most of the workers who enter Chinese cities from the vast rural hinterlands are unable to get a permanent residency in the city.

However, the ‘new normal’ regime of precarious work suggests that simply removing the barriers to permanent urban citizenship will not spontaneously produce an urban working class. While there is no conclusive research on how the Global Financial Crisis affected the labour mobility of smallholders, data suggests that the ‘new normal’ regime of precarious work also affects workers’ aspirations. This is seen as rural migrants now travel shorter distances for work than they did a decade ago (Loyalka 2012). Significantly, many—if not most—rural migrant workers who became unemployed in the aftermath of the Global Financial Crisis returned to their smallholdings (Chan 2010). While this was a temporary arrangement, it threw into stark relief the continued importance of the smallholding for the reproduction of labour in

China (Jakobsen 2018). This highlights the fact that, for the foreseeable future, the Chinese peasant working class will continue to be produced *between* farms and urban workplaces.

Everyday Politics

Where does this leave us in terms of conceptualising the politics of labour? The intervention of Partha Chatterjee (2006, 40) provides a particularly important contribution here, as he advances the idea of a ‘political society’ that he distinguishes from ‘civil society’ or the politics of right-bearing. Considering that political society involves claims to habitation and livelihood by ‘groups of population whose very livelihood or habitation involve violation of the law’, Chatterjee argues that the politics of a migratory peasant labour force are ‘political in a way different from that of the elite’ (2006, 39). This is suggestive, as it opens up space for conceiving politics as a broader category of action than overt forms of mobilisation. Rather, the ‘covert, informal and often individual acts ... attempted to maintain or better their position’ (Walker 2009, 295) are brought into purview. These practices are political, in the sense that they are engaged in by workers similarly situated as a precarious mobile workforce who deliberately struggle to bring about a different kind of everyday life (Das and Randeria 2015).

This notion of everyday politics is instructive for two reasons. First, it expands the scope of class struggle beyond the industrial proletariat and thus does not see the urban workplace as the only site of class formation. Second, it breaks with the tendency to only recognise the struggles of workers as a form of politics during overt forms of collective action, such as strikes or demonstrations. Moving beyond proletarianisation means broadening our repertoires of interpretation in order to articulate the not-yet-articulated political imaginaries found in the street and in the fields.

Thus, the practices, aspirations, and livelihood arrangements of migrants become important, as they provide the seeds for alternative political imaginaries under the ‘new normal’ of precarious work. And while wage work might have become the most important source of livelihood for many—if not most—Chinese peasants, from a household and individual perspective, land, labour, and social benefits still make up a patchwork of livelihood resources allowing for the everyday and intergenerational social reproduction of the household to take place. From this point of view, a multiplicity of unfinished or unarticulated labour politics is highlighted, where minor acts of defiance, avoidance, friendship, as well as a multiplicity of livelihoods, emerge as political projects where autonomy *from* wage work is but one possible trajectory.

Mobile Lives and Multiple Livelihoods

In the countryside adjacent to Kunming where I undertook fieldwork for this essay, families rely on a mixture of subsistence production and cash crop cultivation. In the villages of Kaoyan and Baicai—which I named after the localities’ main cash crops, tobacco and Chinese cabbage respectively—emigrating for work was very uncommon before the mid-1980s, and even in the early 1990s only a few unmarried men left the villages to work. These pioneers typically graduated from primary school, worked a few years on their parents’ plots, and when the time for marriage was approaching or other siblings started working the land, they left for Kunming to look for employment. Kunming is conveniently positioned about two hours away by car making it possible for migrants to work seasonally. When these men later married, they typically settled down on the farm and lived the whole year in the village, waiting until their offspring

grew up to resume their seasonal migrations to the city. In the early 1990s, some unmarried women also started leaving for work.

Looking at today's younger generation—roughly those between 16 and 30 years old—a very different life trajectory emerges. These youths usually spend three more years in school than their parents, before either completing or abandoning middle school to start working outside the village. Once they start middle school, few of them return to work on their parents' farm, as they live at the school during weekdays and only return home during the weekends. When they start working, few of them adopt the seasonal mobility patterns of the previous generation. Rather, they remain in Kunming or other cities the whole year, unless there is some special occasion to go back home. However, in spite of their prolonged absence from the countryside, they still remain very much dependent upon their villages for long-term material support. When they became sick, exhausted, or unemployed, they return to Baicai or Kaoyan to recuperate and reduce their dependence on commodity markets, as they can survive through home-grown food and rearing livestock. Moreover, when they get married they typically return to their village to raise children for a few years, before once more leaving to work in the city.

Against the background of these shifting mobility patterns, there is the gradual emergence of capitalist relations in the villages. First, in the 1980s villagers saw increasing costs for farm inputs, as these were 'liberated' by allowing them to operate based on the price mechanisms of supply and demand. Second, in the 1990s, heavy taxation pushed smallholder farming to its limits, a situation that lasted until 2006, when the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) phased out these taxes in the aftermath of widespread protests. More recently, since 2008 the CCP has been promoting policies for a 'new-style agriculture' (*xinxing nongye jingying tixi*). This signalled a shift away from food security being achieved through initiatives aimed at making peasants stay on the land to produce grains, towards

a modernisation of agriculture through scaled-up and input-intensive farming. These policies are part of a larger focus on urban-rural integration (*chengxiang yitihua*), which emphasises investment into the human capital of the countryside in order to transform the rural populace into 'proper' urban subjects and provide increased opportunities to compete in urban marketplaces.

Urban-rural integration is manifested through initiatives aimed at bolstering education, initiating a rural medical insurance system, and direct cash transfers to end users, such as pensioners, disabled people, or poverty-stricken families. As a result of these agricultural and human capital policies, guided by the imperative of letting the market set the 'correct' prices in rural areas, labour and land are becoming increasingly commodified. However, land is not abandoned, and family members who have emigrated still regularly return to their homes during transition periods or times of crisis. More recently, government cash transfers for poverty alleviation have fed into the mixed strategies employed by rural households to support themselves and their next generations. This multiplicity of livelihood strategies, combining wage work with smallholder farming and government transfers, provides families with some autonomy from the ups and downs of the labour market, especially if compared to communities where farmland has been expropriated (Chuang 2015).

Aspirations

The youth born and raised in the countryside that I spoke to during my fieldwork, voiced their feelings of indeterminacy regarding their future in terms of work and citizenship. Although they were not optimistic about the prospects of returning to their farms as a means of earning a livelihood, they nevertheless chose to retreat to their hometowns whenever they got sick, exhausted, or went through life-course transitions such as marriage or

parenthood. These youths generally hesitated when confronted with questions over how they perceived their future homes and workplaces, thus revealing their ambiguous positions. As unofficial workers, non-urban subjects, and with diminishing opportunities of returning to the farm in order to live a satisfying life, their aspirations were short-circuited towards focussing on improving the present.

Part of their hesitation also stemmed from their difficulty in perceiving a future either as an urban working subject or a returned farmer. Unlike the army of *nongmingong*—a category applied to rural migrant workers in post-Mao China’s industrial heartland—the peasant workers whom I interviewed in Yunnan lacked any official category to facilitate their self-identification. This ambiguity in terms of self-perceived identity was evident in the story of Mrs Li, aged 22, whom I met in one urban village in Kunming. The village was inhabited mainly by rural migrant workers, and had some public buildings, including schools, a police station, and a post office. Mrs Li explained how, after five years of shifting between petty-capitalist workplaces characterised by low wages and intrusive management, she had doubts as to whether wage work would provide her with a satisfying life. She nonetheless felt that returning to the farm without other sources of income was not an option. She foresaw a future where she would return to the farm at some point, but in order to do that she felt the need to work hard in order to save up for the tough times to come. The pragmatic realism conveyed by this kind of testimony reflects an awareness among rural youth that there is no way to get ahead in the urban workplace, accompanied by an acknowledgment that smallholder farming has gradually been emptied of its symbolic and material value.

In terms of domination and resistance, their bosses usually controlled the workplace with a strict hand, illegally forcing the workers to pay a deposit that would only be reimbursed if the employee does not leave their job for an entire year. Moreover, many had experiences of being scolded for minor mistakes in workplaces

where workers seldom received proper training, were commanded to work outside of ordinary hours, and were frequently not paid on time. This situation fuelled resentment and sparked a yearning among these young workers for a livelihood not tied to a ‘proper’ job. The younger generation of interviewees typically constructed a sharp distinction in terms of levels of freedom between working for the boss (*da gong*) and working on the farm. They often explained how in their hometown ‘there are fewer restrictions and more freedom’ and that ‘people control you when you work outside, but when you are at home, you are at your own command.’ Nonetheless, they distanced themselves from popular ideas about the ‘rural idyll’ through elaborate stories of the drudgery and physical toil of tilling their parents’ plots.

This younger generation furthered its interests through individual acts of defiance, such as rejecting the commands of their bosses when these felt like a violation of their sense of fairness. There were also some tactics of avoidance, such as returning to the farm when their bosses make unreasonable demands on them. However, the most important tactic the interviewees employed was to ‘vote with their feet’ (*yi jiao toupiao*), by changing workplace frequently. While from a managerial point of view this is considered to be a problem of high turnover, I would argue that this kind of mobility needs to be understood as part of the repertoire of political acts of resistance for the younger generation of workers. This generation entered the urban labour market under difficult circumstances: on the one hand, with declining prospects for staying on the farm; on the other, against the backdrop of the ‘new normal’ of precarious work that individualises and pits workers against each other in a highly competitive environment.

In sum, the interviewees did not become subdued by the requirements of their work or ephemeral consumption desires. Nor did they retain a sense of nostalgia for smallholder farming. Rather, they demonstrated a desire for more freedom from the relations of work by claiming forms of subsistence autonomy within

a space of limited possibilities. This points to how the formation of expectations, while being informed by the experiences of yesterday and the constraints of the present, might involve limited openings for envisioning other possible futures.

Broadening the Horizon

In conclusion, the notion of working-class politics in contemporary China often tends to focus exclusively on its most visible manifestations, such as the appearance of strikes or riots in urban contexts. This rather constrained view of labour politics often leads to the assumption that we are witnessing a transition of Chinese peasant workers towards proletarianisation and increasing working-class consciousness. However, relying only on these narratives to interpret the current geography and history of class-making in China potentially distorts our understanding of its present trajectory. That is, by laying claim to what is possible in the future based on historical experiences—typically modelled on Western history—we risk losing sight of the emergent projects, aspirations, and common experiences that constitute the potential building blocks for different types of solidarity and resistance among rural migrant workers in China. ■

This text is taken from *Dog Days: A Year of Chinese Labour, Civil Society, and Rights*,
Made in China Yearbook 2018, edited by Ivan Franceschini and Nicholas Loubere,
published 2019 by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.

doi.org/10.22459/MIC.04.2019.13