

The Chinese Worker Goes Abroad

China's increased global engagements in recent years have been the source of unending controversies. While public attention generally focuses on geopolitical, economic, or even environmental issues, labour also plays an important part in emerging narratives surrounding the 'spectre of global China'. The media in countries that have received a significant influx of investment from mainland China has often complained about 'invasions' of Chinese workers, who are allegedly snatching away job opportunities from local workers. In many places, there are pervasive rumours that Chinese workers are nothing less than convicted felons sent abroad by the Party-State to expiate their crimes, which would explain why they seem to work without interruption day and night, at a pace that some believe no free person would deem acceptable. This has also led to concerns that workers from China are playing an important role in driving down labour standards in countries where institutions are weak and legal enforcement lacking. Inflows of Chinese workers have also been associated with surges in crime and prostitution that supposedly have wrought havoc on local communities. In the best of circumstances, these narratives flatten the figure of the Chinese worker abroad into that of an agent unwittingly promoting the agenda of the Chinese Party-State abroad; in the worst, they frame these overseas Chinese labourers as criminals. In so doing, the complex dilemmas that these workers face, their inner conflicts, and the rights violations that they themselves are subjected to go unnoticed.

The special section of this issue includes eight essays that we hope will contribute to overcoming these prejudices and provide

some glimpses into the subjectivities and the plight of Chinese workers toiling abroad today. **Nyíri Pal** recounts how the globalisation of capital from the People's Republic of China has been accompanied by a growing range of human flows. Since the late 1980s, flows of small traders selling consumer goods, labour migrants working on state projects, and students have expanded to much of the world and have been joined by expatriate managers and technicians, tourists, and lifestyle migrants. **Miriam Driessen** describes how increased mobility from China to Africa over the past two decades has given birth to the figure of the 'Africa drifter' (非漂). Employed and driven, yet restless and plagued by the lack of a sense of security, many Chinese who move to Africa for work, especially those attached to large-scale infrastructure projects, find themselves afloat, caught between remaining and returning. **Cheryl Mei-ting Schmitz** challenges popular accounts of the expansion of Chinese capital in Africa as a rapid and exciting process of furious movement and violent transformation, showing how the experience of Chinese construction workers in Angola reveals repetitive rhythms of monotony and boredom. **Zhu Ruiyi** draws on her fieldwork at a Chinese-owned fluorspar mine in Mongolia to shed light on the tension between bilingual and monolingual Chinese workers in the Sino-Mongolian industrial sphere. **Ivan Franceschini** delves into the plight of Chinese construction workers in Sihanoukville, Cambodia, after a sudden ban on the online gambling industry led to the collapse of the local economy. **Jamie Coates** reflects on the experiences of Chinese people in Japan to offer some insights into how we should understand international labour migration in East Asia today. **Elizabeth Krause** draws on her ethnographic research among Chinese migrants working in the fast-fashion sector in Prato, Italy, to trace the contours of what encounters between the 'Made in Italy' and 'Made in China' labels have produced. Finally, **Aaron Halegua** and **Ban Xiaohui** examine the legal mechanisms available to protect the labour rights of overseas Chinese workers.

The issue also includes a forum titled ‘Transformations of Shen Kong Borderlands’ edited by **Mary Ann O’Donnell**, **Jonathan Bach**, and **Denise Y. Ho**. This collection of essays offers historical and ethnographic accounts of the Shenzhen–Hong Kong borderlands as sites where cross-border policies, situations, and aspirations continue to inform and transform everyday life. **Denise Y. Ho** recounts the dramatic political changes witnessed along the border over its 99-year history. **Alice Du Liangliang** explains how this process was not only administrative, but also entailed moving islanders to the mainland and settling boat-dwellers in harbours, offering critical insight into how the border increasingly came to anchor identities. **Taomo Zhou** focuses on the experience of the People’s Liberation Army Engineering Corps in Shenzhen to draw attention to the way multiple borders intersected in the embodied labour of this unusual group, which was transferred from the Third Front to help build the city. **Na Fu** explores how the border myth shapes daily life on both sides, arguing that the border should be interpreted as a web of meaning that is not reducible to its observed function. **Dodom Kim** examines how cross-border mobility operates in Shenzhen, focusing in particular on the structure of discourse that renders mobility a morally salient defining feature of the identity of the city. **Sben Korsh** offers a brief account of the recent history of the Hong Kong Stock Exchange’s trading hall, showing how this physical structure is an integral space within the economic border of mainland China—a border crossing facilitating the movement of corporate ownership between China and global financial markets. **Sun Xin** tracks how Chinese and Hong Kong nationalisms have materialised at the border, focusing on increasing efforts to make political allegiances visible. **Jonathan Bach** and **Mary Ann O’Donnell** conclude the forum with a reflection that conceptualises Shen Kong through the analytical lens of the border as sluice.

The issue opens with an op-ed by **Shui-yin Sharon Yam** on how the new Hong Kong National Security Law poses a threat to education and intellectual freedom that goes well beyond the boundaries of the city. In the China Columns section, **Xiao Tan** and **Tianyang Liu** offer a take on the phenomenon of ‘medical disturbances’ in China through the lens of patient activism, while **Yueran Zhang** revisits the Chongqing Model one decade after its demise. Finally, we conclude with conversations with **Manfred Elfstrom** and **Rachel Murphy** about their recently published books on labour unrest and left-behind children in China. ■

The Editors

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