

Book Review

**Pun Ngai (2016) Migrant Labor in China. Cambridge: Polity Books
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China commenced its unprecedented economic transformation, reform and open-up policy in the early 1980s and gradually developed into the workshop of the world, reinforcing its status after the 2008 financial crisis. Undoubtedly, the global economic crisis certainly came with uncertainties regarding China's internal business environment, and a growing number of lay-offs. In order to improve this situation, China turned itself into a dreamland for capital inflow and investment, providing cheap land resources, efficient transportation facilities and government support. However, the *hukou*¹ system and the state-driven revitalisation strategy came with serious repercussions for social reproduction and social protection. This paradox brought about the consequence that workers were in great demand but at the same time treated with downgraded and differential social welfare. That is to say, the interests of the indispensable migrant labour played a marginal role compared to the interests of investors and their exponentially soaring wealth. Accompanied by the massive capital accumulation of investors, Chinese migrant labourers – the peasant-workers (*nongmin gong*) – developed an identity as neither peasants nor workers. This group became active as an emergent working class and has conducted struggles over the past three decades against the unfair, illegal treatment by corporations and local governments. Furthermore, scholars like Pun Ngai consider that class consciousness among migrant labour gradually awakens and evolves. As the national environment changes, migrant labour's struggles reveal evolutionary characteristics from the first generation to the second one, from relatively docile to militant.

Pun Ngai, a leading expert on factory labour in China, spent over five years carrying out several research projects on migrant workers. Her persistence and insight enable her to probe into the nexus between the state, transnationals and a new workforce that lacks rights and social protection, and to reflect upon the suffering of millions of peasant-workers in post-socialist China.

The most impressive argument in this work is Pun's reintroduction of class analysis to dissect the contemporary and future labour movements which comprise intra-provincial rural migrants and the urban poor. This unexpected, marginalised force has become an unstable political resistance during the past thirty years when China consecutively incorporated itself into the neo-liberal world and "abandoned its representation of the interests of the peasantry and working class" (p. 28). Besides, Pun proclaims that this repressive form of government and the lack of workers' consciousness of their class status further suffocated the Chinese workers' discourse and their living space. During the 1980s and 1990s, the Chinese government implemented a range of regulations to accelerate a transformation in the composition of labour and the business environment for investors. Furthermore, labourers in the construction industry and in light industry, which are different in nature, are focal points in Pun's

¹ *Hukou* is a system of household registration, officially identifying a person as a resident of an area, as well as the person's information, such as name, parents, spouse and date of birth.

book. Concretely, construction workers carry out their struggles only upon the completion of the construction work, which reveals the disturbance is outside the sphere of production and does no harm to the production process, while any strike in factories can affect the profits of the firms (p. 146). In the construction industry, the labour subcontracting system consists of a pyramid in which the property developers, construction companies, contractors, subcontractors, labour-use facilitators and workers are situated from top to bottom, leading to workers not being paid until a project is finished and subcontractors have received their rewards. This situation impedes construction workers from gaining consciousness of their situation, resulting in the unique phenomenon that labourers appeal to companies or local governments for morality and justice rather than the rationale of legal practices once payment arrears take place. In the light industry sector, the dormitory labour regime places tight control over migrant workers by confining their spatial activities and cutting their bonds with families and communal affairs, which aims to exploit workers' reproduction. From Pun's perspective, the dormitory labour regime, contrary to the subcontracting system, provokes workers' resistance and arouses their consciousness and the will to participate in the everyday micro-politics of life.

Pun's work comprises seven chapters. To illuminate the significance of peasant-workers in the contemporary China, she starts her book with an analysis of the composition of labour and the overall social context in the past three decades. Considering that China's rise as the global workshop and labour's disadvantaged situation appear simultaneously, such a paradox remains mysterious in post-socialist development, especially under the framework of a prevailing recognition of the "end of the working class" in Western academia (pp. 2–3). Based on China's condition, Pun puts forward that the language of "class" is still applicable to understand the contradictions of contemporary capitalism. Also, she points out that China's economic revolution cannot ensure the whole nation's interest, which is considered as a loophole in China's economic miracle. For instance, severe economic disparities show up in exchange for advancement and prosperity in some cities. And a small proportion of the population accumulates wealth at the cost of the working class.

The following chapter is devoted to the birth and trajectory of the Chinese labour market, which was shaped and driven by the state. As China incorporated into global capitalism, the market economy reshaped the capital–labour relationship by generating a massive labour surplus, creating a great demand for workers and arranging labour migration. Meanwhile, the government removed its attention from ensuring peasant-workers' wages and welfare, which became a trigger for the ensuing struggles and labour movements in China.

Chapter Three places a spotlight on construction workers, one typical type of workforce, often victims of payment arrears and heavy casualties. Their poor working conditions and rewards generate massive labour conflicts. Pun ascribes this notorious career image to the labour subcontracting system which separates management from labour, and capital from industry.

Chapter Four demonstrates that workers have developed into a new social class, though the conception of "class" has been abandoned by a majority of specialists. To support her view, Pun digs into the changing history of the status of Chinese workers; she draws the conclusion that the Chinese working class lost its privileged position and even slid into a disadvantaged situation after Deng Xiaoping's reforms. Thus, the generations of migrant workers came to deepen their realisation of class position and the necessity of collective actions.

Chapters Five and Six draw attention to factory workers' conditions and the nexus between politics, capital and labour. Chapter Five illustrates how the dormitory labour regime influences spatial politics, and Chapter Six lays out a theoretical foundation for an explanation of labour movements in

Foxconn.² The dormitory labour regime provides a place which contains both daily production and reproduction space. This regime is also considered as a solution to accommodate millions of migrant workers, avoiding the appearance of slums in China's industrial cities. Chapter Six dissects the inner factory regime of Foxconn. This regime is also a manifestation of monopoly capital in China. Pun attributes the rise of Foxconn and its counterparts to China's economic transformation and corporations' deepening ties with government at the local level. Furthermore, the victory of Foxconn meant the defeat of migrant workers, showing that companies were allowed to turn a blind eye to labour law to a considerable extent.

The last chapter centres on the struggles and collective actions of the new working class which consists of rural migrant workers and the urban poor. As their consciousness as members of the working class awakens, they begin to strengthen the organised alliance and attempt to increase actions in daily life in order to safeguard their rights. Throughout the history of labour struggles, only when they increase participation in meaningful and democratic labour unions or organisations can they pursue and defend labour rights like higher wages, more comprehensive social welfare and favourable working conditions.

However, when it comes to "class consciousness", I doubt whether today's Chinese peasant-workers are struggling for demands based on universal rights. In my opinion, their main concerns are still their own personal and immediate economic rewards rather than a breakthrough into a unitary class consciousness. Scholars like Anita Chan and Kaxton Siu hold similar views. From their perspective, the majority of Chinese migrant workers are still "waging isolated and uncoordinated rights-based protests and strikes" (Chan and Siu, 2012: 82). They also point out that the process of class formation and class consciousness takes longer than one or two generations, despite the popular expectation that the second generation of Chinese migrant labour, with higher education and more articulated demands, bears the responsibility for making great progress in the area of class consciousness.

To sum up, Pun Ngai's book contributes to depicting the panoptic picture of China's rise as the workshop of the world and its working people in some particular industries. Thanks to Pun's relentless effort to observe migrant workers' overall living conditions in these years, she offers a specific perspective to re-evaluate China's extraordinary economic achievements and the existing social problems.

REFERENCE

Chan, A. and K. Siu (2012) Chinese Migrant Workers: Factors constraining the Emergence of Class Consciousness. In *China's Peasants and Workers: Changing class Identities*, edited by B. Carrillo and S.G.D. Goodman. Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar.

² Foxconn is a multinational electronics contract manufacturing company headquartered in Taiwan. today, the company is the largest private employer in China.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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