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# **Gendering Dormitory Labour System: Production and Reproduction of Labour Use in South China\***

**Pun Ngai (潘毅)**

## **Introduction**

In this article, I discuss a specific Chinese labour regime – the dormitory labour system under which the lives of women migrant workers are shaped by the international division of labour. With a gender perspective, we understand this dormitory labour system as a *gendered* form of labour used to fuel global production in new industrialized regions, especially in South China. Since the set-up of four economic special zones in South China in the early 1980s, the new export-oriented industrialized regions dominated by foreign-invested companies have been witnessing a systemic use of the dormitory labour system. Due to the expropriation of labour use among Chinese rural migrant women, the foreign-invested companies, irrespective of their industrial sectors, must all provide accommodation for their workers in order to keep their labourers. Combining work and residence under the dormitory labour system, production and daily reproduction are hence reconfigured for the sake of global capital use, with daily reproduction of labour entirely controlled by foreign-invested or privately owned companies.

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This dormitory labour system regime in China is not a new arrangement under capitalism. The dormitory use for labour has a long history both in a Western and Eastern context of industrialization (Pun and Smith 2007). However the Chinese dormitory labour system is unique in the way that dormitories are available to all workers and industries regardless of factor conditions, and the widespread availability of industrial dormitories not only constrains the mobility of labour, it also facilitates it. The distinctive nature of the Chinese *dormitory labour system* is also its usage by short-tenure migrant labour within the factory compound or close to it. In China, the state still plays a very substantial role in shaping labour markets, regulating labour mobility from rural to urban industrial areas and providing housing accommodation to migrant workers. In most of the new industrial towns, the Chinese state initially provides the dormitories for the factory owners to rent. As housing provision is not for families, there is no interest among employers in the reproduction of the next generation of labourers. The focus is on maximizing the utilization of labour among temporary migrants and contract labourers by controlling the daily reproduction of their labour power.

The political economy of providing accommodation close to the factory is beneficial to both the state and the capital. Since the migrant working class is deprived of citizenship rights to stay in the city, the state through residency allows labour mobility as long as workers have an employment that provides temporary residence. Dormitories facilitate the temporary attachment or capture of labour by the companies, but also the massive circulation of labour, and hence the holding down of wages and the extensive lengthening of the working day, as working space and living space are integrated by the employer and state. A hybrid, transient workforce is created, circulating between factory and countryside, and dominated by employer controls over housing needs and state controls over residency permits.

Gender is central to this specific embodiment of the Chinese dormitory labour system and the formation of the transient working class. For the past two decades, as part of the exodus of internal migrant workers to the industrial cities, young women are among the first to be picked up by the new export-oriented industries. Young women constitute a high proportion of the factory workers, above

70% of the total workforce in garment, toy and electronic industries (Lee 1998; Pun 2005a). Their gender, in addition to their youth and rural migrant status, is an integral part of China's export-led industrialism that facilitates global production for the world market.

Gender inequality is embedded in this specific process of proletarianization of China during the globalization period. In the process of incorporating China into the global economy, we have seen a recurrence of the dormitory labour system as embodying the gendered *dagong* subjects, or women migrant workers in the post-socialist period. It echoes a feminization of labour use and the growth of new factory-towns in Latin America and Asia (Nash and Fernandez-Kelly 1983; Ong 1987; Kondo 1990; Lee 1998). In this study we will require a more micro and in-depth examination of the relocation of production and how this influences the production politics in specific production sites, where the macro field of global economy meets with the micro field of local politics, the labour market, gender relations and workplace relations.

This article, drawn from a case study of an electronics factory in Shenzhen, Guangdong in South China, from 2003 to 2004, provides detailed discussions on the dormitory labour regime of which the new Chinese working class of rural migrant labourers is a part. We also look at dormitories as sites of control and resistance, and show how the dormitory labour system simultaneously provides workers with opportunities to resist management practices and achieve some victories in improving working conditions. Ultimately, the ability of workers to fundamentally challenge the conditions of work and dormitory living is limited by the temporary nature of their employment contracts and their disempowered status as temporary urban residents. We also hope to shed light on the operation of the dormitory labour system based on internal migrant female labour that underlies the booming of China's export-oriented industrial production, which has been further boosted by its accession into the WTO.

### **Situating women in the dormitory labour regime**

China is already well known as a "world factory", attracting transnational corporations (TNCs) from all over the world, especially from Hong Kong, Taiwan, Japan, the USA, and Western Europe. The Guang-

dong province of southern coastal China is an industrial hub for global production. In 2004, China attracted USD 60.6 billion in foreign direct investment (FDI), a 13.3 percent rise over 2003, of which Guangdong alone absorbed a record USD 10.1 billion (Ministry of Commerce of the People's Republic of China 2005). With reference to Chinese garment exports, Guangdong is the largest production base, creating labour-intensive jobs for Chinese workers, particularly for women migrant workers in major cities such as Shenzhen, Dongguan, Foshan, Zhongshan, and Guangzhou.

Alongside this rapid expansion of export-oriented production came a sharp rise in jobs in private, foreign-owned, and joint-venture enterprises that now dot the coastal cities of China. The formation of a new working class of internal rural migrant labourers or the *dagong* class (Pun 2005a), in contrast to the Maoist working-class, has been taking shape in contemporary China. Since the late 1970s, the de-collectivization project has generated a massive labour surplus from rural areas. At the same time, the central government has facilitated an unprecedented surge in internal rural-to-urban migration by partially loosening up the restrictions of *hukou*<sup>1</sup>, or the household registration system. Most transnational corporations (TNCs) and their subcontractors recruit millions of these rural migrants in export-oriented industrial zones. Until the early 1990s, the consensus was that the number of floaters<sup>2</sup> was approximately 70 million nationwide. The Fifth

<sup>1</sup> The *hukou* system requires every Chinese citizen to be recorded with the registration authority at birth, and have his or her residential categorisation (either urban or rural) fixed. Location is decided by the mother's *hukou* rather than birthplace, so a mother with a rural *hukou* can only give her children a rural *hukou*, even if the children were born in the city and their father is an urban resident. Citizenship benefits are tied to one's *hukou*. Only through government authorisation can the *hukou* be changed. The system is designed to control population movement, and especially to keep peasant farmers in rural areas, or cut off from citizenship rights as migrant worker-peasants in urban areas (Solinger 1999). The system is designed to prevent unplanned urbanisation and overcrowding, which is typical of developing countries that lack statutory internal "passport" or "citizenship" controls

<sup>2</sup> Floaters refer to migrant workers who tend to float from one location to another, who have moved away, either for the short-term or long-term, from their registered place of residence and have done so without a corresponding transfer of *hukou*, the official household registration.

National Population Census of China, in 2000, estimated that there were over 120 million internal migrant workers in cities, while other estimates ranged from 100 to 200 million persons (Lavelly 2001, 3; Liang and Ma 2004; Gaetano and Jacka 2004).

Since the early 1990s the development of special economic zones (SEZ) and technology development zones across China, similar to the development of corresponding establishments in most other developing economies, was based on a massive harnessing of young workers, in particular of unmarried women, which is often the cheapest and most compliant form of labour (Lee 1998; Pun 1999, 2005a; Gaetano and Jacka 2004). The official statistical data fails to show estimates of the sex ratio of the migrant labourers as a whole as well as in different economic sectors, only disclosing that the sex ratio of the temporary residents between male and female is highly skewed. For example, in Shenzhen, the male to female ratio is 92.79/100 (Shenzhen Statistical Yearbook 2004).

These women migrant workers are often called *dagongmei*, which is a new gendered labour identity, produced at the particular moment when private and transnational capital emerged in post-socialist China. As a newly coined term, *dagongmei*, embraces multi-layered meanings and denotes a new kind of labour relationship fundamentally different from those of Mao's period. *Da-gong* means "working for the boss" or "selling labour", connoting a commodification of labour and a capitalist exchange of labour for wages (Pun 2005a). It is a new concept that stands in contradiction to Chinese socialist history. Labour, especially alienated (wage) labour, supposedly emancipated with the Chinese revolution, is again sold to the capitalists, and this time under the auspices of the state. In contrast to the term *gongren*, worker, which carried the highest status in the socialist rhetoric of Mao's day, the new word *da-gong* signifies a lesser identity – that of a hired hand – in a new context shaped by the rise of market factors in labour relations and hierarchy. *Mei* means younger sister. It denotes not merely gender, but also marital status – *mei* means unmarried and young, and thus often of a lower status (Pun 2005a).

Why have so many women left their rural homes in search of city-based waged labour? Any rigorous response to this question must unfold along two related levels of analysis. The first level of analysis is structural: owing to the deep rural-to-urban divide, rural authorities

have submitted themselves to the central government's direction and have therefore explored inter-provincial labour cooperation and coordination-program initiatives, so as to maximize urban economic growth (Solinger 1999, 94). From late 1991 onward, for example, the bordering provinces of Hunan and Guangxi have systematically exported their peasant labour to Guangdong. In exchange these provinces benefited from the remittances sent back by the rural migrant workers. This is also the case of the populous impoverished Sichuan province, which is considerably distant from Guangdong. Its migration policy also assures a continuous replenishment of internal migrant labourers to the global-production powerbases in the coastal cities of South China. State initiatives support the labour needs of industry and facilitate labour supply flow to the global production sites. The government's labour-management offices usually screen young, female applicants coming from various provinces and serve as the agency that transmits the applicants directly to factories in coastal cities. These labour-management offices arrange long-distant coaches for sending the rural women directly to the factory sites in return for earning management fees on a per head basis from the company.

At an individual and familial level, rural people must contend with low prices for agricultural products in the post-WTO accession era, limited educational opportunities, and limited village-employment opportunities – indeed, these last two challenges are particularly grievous for women. For the young rural women, they have no choice but to become *dagong* starting from their late teens. Some rural women also aspire to escape arranged marriages, familial conflicts, and patriarchal oppression. Still others want to widen their horizons, and experience modern life and cosmopolitan consumption in cities (Lee 1998; Pun 2005a). In a word, personal decisions in out-migration are heavily mediated and strongly affected by socio-cultural factors, not only by economic concerns.

These rural migrants, however, are identified as temporary residents who work in a city and who lack a formal urban *hukou*. The old *hukou* system, which is still for the most part in place, now helps to create exploitative mechanisms of labour appropriation in the cities. The maintenance of the distinction between permanent and temporary residents by the *hukou* system facilitates the state's shirking from its obligation to provide housing, job security, and welfare to rural

migrant workers. While it needs the labour of the rural population, China's overall economy does not need to manage the city-based survival of that population once demand for rural-to-urban migrants' labour power shifts in either location or emphasis. This newly forming working class is permitted to form no permanent roots and legal identities in the city. Still worse, the *hukou* system, with its labour controls, constructs the ambiguous identity of rural migrant labourer and simultaneously deepens and obscures the economic exploitation of this huge population. Hence, this subtle and multi-faceted marginalization of a vast swath of the rural labour supply has created a contested, if not deformed, citizenship that has disadvantaged Chinese migrant workers attempting to transform themselves into urban workers. The Chinese term *mingong* ("peasant-workers" or temporary workers) blurs the lines of identity between peasant and worker.

Being extraordinarily dislocated in the cities, migrant labour is distinguished by its transient nature. A worker, especially a female worker, will usually spend three to five years working as a wage labourer in an industrial city before getting married. Upon marriage, most of the women have to return home because of their difficulty in searching for a marriage partner in the city. Rural communities have long exercised – and have long been expected to exercise – the extended planning of life activities such as marriage, procreation, and family. The reproduction of labour among the next generation is hence left to the rural villages, which bear the cost for industrial development in urban areas.

### **The formation of Chinese dormitory labour regime**

The emergence of a dormitory labour regime in China is not new, as dormitory use for labour has a long history in both a Western and Eastern context of industrialisation (Hershatter 1986; Smith 2003; Pun and Smith, 2007). What is interesting here is not the recurrence of an old form of labour use in the context of global capitalism, but the reconfiguration of hybrid forms of work-residence for the daily reproduction of labour and the embodiment of labour control and resistance in contemporary China. As millions of migrant workers pour into industrial towns and cities, the provision of dormitories for the accommodation of these workers becomes a necessity for enterprises that produce for the global market. 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, 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 notes that when dorms began to be introduced in order to lower labour costs through the feminization of the labour force and the use of migrant workers in foreign-owned companies (1986, 165-66), workers were not willing to stay in company-provided dormitories if they had the choice of living with their relatives or co-villagers in nearby residential areas. As she points out:

Had they been able to, the Tianjin millowners would have made the factory a closed environment, serviced by company institutions and secured by company guards. But workers voted with their feet, resisting the attempt to turn housing into a "tool of discipline" (Hershatter 1986, 165).

Dormitories therefore became the preserve of single, migrant women workers, those without family or local connections, and workers were prevented from leaving and were locked in at night (Hershatter 1986). Another similar study by Emily Honig of female cotton workers in Shanghai in the 1930s also notes that the contractors hired thugs to guard the dormitories and accompany women workers, even on their holidays and days off, and that women had to share beds, endure sexual abuse from contractors, as well as overcrowding and poor sanitation (1986, 106).

What is striking about today's China is that through a combination of state controls (the *hukou* system), extensive provision of factory dorms and shortages of independent accommodation, the contemporary dormitory labour regime is more hegemonic, pervasive and total than anything existing in earlier periods of Chinese history or experienced by other workers in the region<sup>3</sup>. The new *dagong* sub-

<sup>3</sup> In the silk and cotton industries of early industrialization in Japan: "Dormitories kept women from going elsewhere to work or running home, but they also enabled managers to extract longer hours from workers who no longer had to be allotted time to commute home and prepare meals there. Under strict discipline dormitory inmates could be controlled so thoroughly that nearly all the energies were spent in on thread production". (Tsurumi 1990, 67)

jects are not from the local or urban areas where the workplaces are based, but come as inter-provincial migrants for a temporary sojourn in a factory accommodated through dormitories. Their mobility is shaped by two conditions: peasant-workers' "freedom" to sell their labour to global and private capital that is allowed in post-socialist China, and state laws on population and mobility control (*hukou*) that try to contain workers' freedom of mobility in order to meet the demands of transnational capital as well as Chinese urban development. Because of this double social conditioning and what is basically a paradoxical process, the freedom of the rural migrants to work in the industrial urban areas is checked by a social constraint preventing their permanent settlement and growth in the cities as a new working-class force. The dormitory labour system is hence the hybrid outgrowth of global capitalism combined with the legacies of state socialism<sup>4</sup>.

One characteristic of China's foreign-invested manufacturing plants is the housing of migrant workers in dormitories attached to or close to a factory's enclosed compound. Upon finishing their labour contracts after an average of one to two years, workers must return to their place of birth or find another temporary employment contract (Lee 1998; Solinger 1999; Pun 2005a), to be again confined to the dormitory labour regime<sup>5</sup>. Factory dormitories thus capture migrant workers for the short-term through accommodation, which does not function as a form of long-term protective relationship between the individual firm and the individual worker, as was the rationale for accommodation in other paternalistic types of factories (such as in Japan where this relationship can be life-long).

Management within the foreign-invested or privately owned companies would appear to have exceptional controls over the workforce under the system. With no access to a home space independent of the enterprise, working days are extended to suit production needs. This

<sup>4</sup> In socialist China, state-owned enterprises in urban areas also provided accommodation to workers and their families. These workers' families were properly housed in an apartment unit by the state and hence the urban working class was considered the most privileged class in China. The political economy of accommodation in socialist China was entirely different from that of the contemporary period.

<sup>5</sup> Most of the migrant workers in the export-oriented industrial zones are provided with one-year contracts that must be renewed on an annual basis.

permits a flexible utilisation of labour time, and means that employers can respond to production demands more readily than in situations where workers' time is regulated by the state or workers. If as Marx noted, the "length of the working day fluctuated within boundaries that are physical and social" (quoted in Harvey 2001, 108), then employers within this dormitory labour form would appear to have massive control over "the social". Compared to the "normal" separation between work and home that usual factory arrangements entail, the dormitory labour regime exerts greater breadth of control into the working and non-working day of the workers<sup>6</sup>.

Dormitories in China's foreign-invested manufacturing plants are communal multi-story buildings that house several hundred workers. Rooms are shared, with typically between eight and twenty workers per room. Washing facilities and toilet facilities are communal and are located between rooms, floors, or whole units, so that living space is intensely collective, with no area, except that area within the closed curtains of a worker's bunk, available for limited privacy. But these material conditions do not explain the role of the dormitory as a form of accommodation, as a living-at-work arrangement. Central to the dormitory form is the grouping of typically single, young, female workers. Women and men are highly segregated in order to control sexual behaviour, even though the living conditions of both genders are quite similar. Separated from family, from home, and from rural life, these women workers are concentrated in a workspace and submit to a process of homogenization and individuation, since they are taken in as "individual workers" by the management, untying them from communal bonds and making them responsible for their own behaviours. And insofar as their connection to the firm is short-term and contractual, the alienation of labour derives from significantly more than either labour's separation from ownership of the product or labour's lack of production skills. Workers in dorms live in a system that alienates them from their past and that replaces a customary rural setting with factories dominated by unfamiliar others, languages, foods, production methods, and products.

<sup>6</sup> In Socialist China, the enterprise institution or *danwei* also provided workers with life-long accommodation. For the workers' welfare, *danwei* did not prolong the working hours of the workers.

In sum, the dormitory labour regime operates according to the following strategies of control and domination:

1. An absolute lengthening of the workday and a compression of “work-life”: Ten years compresses into five years, owing to excessive workweeks and to the production-based use of chiefly young women workers.
2. A suppression of wage-increase demands: an elevated circulation of labour (due to temporary labour contracts) makes it more difficult for workers to demand wage increases.
3. Easy access to labour power during the workday: a just-in-time labour system for just-in-time production profits through the quick-delivery of orders and rapid distribution systems.
4. Daily labour reproduction: control of the reproduction of labour power within the factory (accommodation, food, travel, social and leisure pursuits within a production unit).
5. Direct control over the labour process: a system of labour discipline imposes penalties on workers.
6. State and non-market interventions: state policies that restrict labour mobility affect the overall labour process and underline the lack of genuine implementation of labour legal regulations over the dormitory labour regime.

### **A case study of the dormitory labour regime**

This section presents a detailed case study of one of the factories we studied, China Elton Electronics, a joint-venture company owned by a Hong Kong corporation and located in Shenzhen SEZ. Fieldwork in this factory was conducted in the period from 2003 to 2004 and was based on interviews with the factory managers and more than thirty workers<sup>7</sup>.

Established in 1991, the company was mainly under the control of a Hong Kong director and a few dozen Hong Kong managers, supplemented by another hundred Chinese Mainland supervisory staff

<sup>7</sup> This case study is part of a larger field study carried out by the author in the Pearl River Delta from 2003 to 2005 for the project on “Living with Global Capitalism: Labour Control and Resistance through the Dormitory Labour System in China”.

members who were in charge of daily management and production operations. With production orders mainly coming from Japanese and Korean brand buyers such as Sony and Samsung, China Elton produces high-tech electronic devices such as mobile phones, MP3 players, speakers and other consumer electronic goods. Amidst the global subcontracting chain, China Elton had a position at the high end of the chain: it had three subcontractors, one in the Shanghai region, and another two outside the Shenzhen SEZ in the Pearl River Delta, which provided product parts such as LD screens or other electronic components to China Elton. The company also subcontracted final processing and packaging jobs to other small local producers located in small towns in Guangdong and Jiangxi, and then sent them back for final quality inspection before export. China Elton was able to achieve lower costs of production through subcontracting upstream the production and the packaging operations, since land and labour were cheaper and more easily available for the local subcontractors in inland China.

According to its upper management and since its inception in Shenzhen, China Elton had the ambition to build the most advanced and modern enterprise in Shenzhen, outshining the thousands of other plants in the same sector. In order to attract its huge investment of RMB 30 million (USD 3.7 million) in the early 1990s, the local government granted China Elton privileges on land resources, facilities and telecommunications, flexible practices on import/export of raw materials and products, tax exemption and the like. China Elton expanded quickly to a workforce of 4,500 in the mid 1990s, which was about the size of its workforce at the time of this fieldwork in 2003. The company was able to survive amidst severe global competition by introducing modern management models and international labour standards. The managers were proud of building what they perceived to be a new “factory empire” in Mainland China, something physically grand and magnificent. Located in the most expensive part of the Shenzhen SEZ, initially it consisted of two three-storey buildings, housing the production facilities, machines, raw materials and final products, with an attached administrative block for general management, meetings, and research and design purposes.

Of the China Elton workforce, around 70 per cent were women, coming from villages or towns all over the country, including Guangdong, Guangxi, Hunan, Huibei, Sichuan, Jiangxi, Anhui and Guizhou. In

2003, most were aged between 20 and 26 years, with the youngest being 17, and the oldest 42. At the time, the average length of time these workers were employed with China Elton was two to three years. The production workers were paid on a piece rate basis (RMB 3.3 or approximately USD 0.4 per hour for normal work, and RMB 4.2 or approximately USD 0.5 for overtime) and paid on a monthly basis, with an average monthly wage of RMB 900-1000 (USD 110-124) inclusive of overtime hours. The working day usually involved twelve hours per day, six days per week. Except for public holidays, it was particularly difficult for the women to apply for rest time, even if they were sick or not feeling well. The supervisors, technical, managerial and office staff were paid on monthly rates, with a higher average at RMB 1500-2000 (USD 185-247). While the workforce was deeply divided along the lines of gender, ethnicity, family backgrounds and educational levels, it was simultaneously united as a class when it was deliberately arranged as producers for the extraction of labour through the dormitory labour regime.

To upgrade its company scale and production facilities to attract more high valued production orders from international buyers, China Elton invested a further 10 million RMB to build a new dormitory premise in 1995, as worker living conditions became part of the international labour monitoring system (Pun 2005b). Empire-like, the dormitory compound stood like a housing estate in 2003, with four buildings for workers' accommodation and one building for housing managers. These five buildings were enclosed by a long wall and gated by a giant iron-door. There was a small side door, open 24-hours per day and watched over by security guards. Walking through the side door and the security tower, there were two open areas for workers' recreational activities such as playing badminton and basketball. There were a few tables and several dozen chairs at another corner where workers could chat and eat. A shop adjacent to two huge dining halls was crowded with workers in the evening time, who were not buying daily necessities but watching TV programmes. The dining halls could each seat one thousand workers. Workers had to pay RMB 50 each month for accommodation and RMB 3 for each meal. There was also a clinic and a reading room located on the ground floor of the managers' building.

A hierarchy of accommodation existed, which reflected the segmentation of the labour force by status and gender. There were huge differences in the provisions among the Hong Kong managers,

Mainland Chinese managerial staff, technical and clerical staff who were predominately male, and the remaining production workers, mostly women. The managers' building was designed into three-bedroom flats, with a dining room, kitchen, toilet and bathroom. These flats were well furnished with a TV set, refrigerators, air-conditioners, as well as cooking and bathing facilities. The director and each of the Hong Kong managers were provided with an independent flat, while the Mainland assistant managers, foremen and technicians and general staff had to share a flat between three to six persons. All the managerial staff was male. For the ordinary women workers' buildings, the structure was a hospital-like structure composed of similar sized rooms, with a shared toilet in each room, and a common room for hot water provision on each floor. Each dormitory room housed eight to twelve production workers. Living and sanitary conditions were generally poor. The workers were not provided with their own storage space for their clothes and personal belongings, which they had to hang over their beds. Fans were installed, but many of them were out of order and never repaired. The women workers learned quickly that they would be treated differently in their daily life at the dormitory. Spatial differences and hierarchies were built into the workplace and crystallised through the labour process and dormitory provisions, and hence nurtured workers' consciousness of class and gender differences in the Chinese workplace. Many women complained to me in their dorm room that they were not being treated equally and that they shared a common fate as *dagongmei*, with less power and resources to fight against their unfavourable working conditions.

Given the sheer size of the China Elton workforce, the management relied on meticulous controls over the dormitory life of the women workers. There were more than twenty regulations, each with associated punishments, relating to dormitory behaviours including sleeping, eating, bathing and leaving the dormitory compound. The details of the major regulations were as follows :

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## **The Dormitory Regulations**

1. *Dormitory conditions shall be kept clean and sanitary. A dorm room found dirty merits a fine of RMB 10.*
  2. *Spitting will incur a fine of RMB 10 if done in the dormitory compound.*
  3. *No noise is allowed after midnight. Everybody has to keep quiet once they enter the dormitory rooms. Those caught being noisy after midnight will be penalised.*
  4. *No arguments or fighting are allowed. Those found fighting in the compound would be dismissed at once.*
  5. *Dormitory facilities shall be protected. Anyone found to have maliciously damaged the facilities will be penalised and dismissed.*
  6. *Stealing dormitory property or residents' property will incur dismissal.*
  7. *No visitors are allowed to stay overnight. If overnight visitors are caught, a fine of RMB 100 will be imposed.*
  8. *Unless for night shift work or during an emergency, nobody is allowed to enter or leave the compound after 12am.*
  9. *Residency identity cards have to be carried all the times in the compound. If lost, the person will be charged RMB 20.*
  10. *No cooking and eating are allowed in the rooms. Secretly using cooking machines in the dorm will mean a penalty of RMB 20.*
  11. *Nobody is allowed to independently change his or her bunk. If they do so a penalty of RMB 50 will be incurred.*
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With these strict disciplinary rules, the company expected to benefit from retaining a better quality workforce with more “civilised” attitudes and a good work ethic. Only those who were able to put up with the strict discipline of the dormitory and by implication the workplace discipline were able to retain their jobs. There were two Facilities Managers responsible for managing accommodation and food provisions, who justified the dormitory discipline in the following terms:



We provide regular inspections in workers' dormitories, and we have no choice but to keep discipline as strict as possible, otherwise, how could we control 4,000 workers?

We won't allow workers to wander around in the street at midnight. For male workers, it would be too easy to create trouble, [and they would have] no spirit to work in the daytime. For female workers, it is unsafe to be outside the dormitory compound at midnight. They need protection.

The word, "protection" was often used when it frequently implied control and punishment on women. The "paternalistic" concern over the female workers' private time prolonged the management control in a way not possible where there is a separation between home and work. Dormitory techniques of power were not supplementary but central to the extraction of labour from workers. The entire ethic of the dormitory regime was not just to impose severe discipline and punishment, but also to create a discourse on self-discipline, which was often emphasized in the workplace. Self-management of dormitory rooms was also expected so that the workers could learn how to behave themselves as proper "modern" workers. The modern dormitory regime deployed a series of hard disciplines as well as subtle surveillance and meticulous self-supervision of everyday lives (Foucault 1977). In short, creating a well-trained female workforce through discipline, as would be fitting for the maximization of production, is the political technology of the dormitory labour regime.

### **The dormitory as a lived site for struggle**

Despite its systemic and near-total domination of labourers' lives, the Chinese dormitory labour regime, on the other hand, opens up space for struggle and resistance. Because they cannot rely on state protection as a way to mitigate the abuses in the new industrial order, the mainly female migrant workers have to manipulate their dormitory space for their own uses. Overcrowding and intensive human interaction might cause conflicts among workers, but being together – sharing a "common fate" – also brings their working lives closer. The dormitory constitutes a gendered place, one that, because it generates emotional links and sisterhood among female workers, merits a careful analysis.

In the dormitories, the women workers, already joined to one another along gender lines, further cluster themselves along kinship

and ethnic lines, linked to widespread networks outside the workplace setting. It is true that these kinship and ethnic networks benefit industrial capital by strengthening the recruitment, the training, and the disciplining of the labour force. However, it is also true that these same networks facilitate migration flows, job searches, and the circulation of work information, and they strengthen workers' capacity to cope with factory life and the hardships of the city (Pun 2005a). In a contradictory manner, employers' reliance on these networks as mechanisms that enhance the training of workers, the upgrading of workers' skills, and the acceleration of workers' acceptance of factory life translates into a mechanism that simultaneously gives rise to workers' exploration of collective force. Contrary to the view that workers' cultivation of a collective spirit stems from class-based factors, this same spirit among China's migrant workers, most of whom are female, reveals the powerful influence of kinship, ethnicity, and gender (Honig 1986; Perry 1993; Pun 2005a).

Hence, contradictions within the dormitory labour regime exist. Both workers and employers rely on networks that frequently work at cross-purposes. There are forms of intensive intimacy and solidarity that, by building bonds among workers, interfere with management control over workers' lives on the shop floor and in the dormitories. They also participate in localized dormitory networks that generate intensive information exchanges about external job opportunities, and that thereby create and strengthen workers' mobility power (Pun and Smith 2007).

Operating from their dormitories, workers who find themselves in the midst of a crisis or a strike easily transform these "soft" support systems – the kinship networks, the ethnic enclaves, the spirit of sisterhood, and 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, easily 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 to opponents of collective action. On strike, workers efficiently and spontaneously organize themselves, receiving little or no formal organizational help from trade unions or labour organizations. The compression of time that, in the dormitory labour regime, is

necessary for production, in turn, works in favour of collective worker organization by accelerating consensus building and strategy development, therein. One strike we noted in 2003 was against the factory relocation, and for the compensation and payment of overtime work. This involved more than six hundred workers and all the meetings were convened at the open area of the dormitory buildings. The strike occurred for a week's time in March of 2003 and resulted in a partial success. Most of the laid off workers were compensated with overtime payment, though still under what would have been required by the Chinese labour law. However, the labour leaders were all forced to quit their jobs and none of them attempted to stay for further struggles. The dormitory space, while facilitating workers' mobilization and the growth of class-consciousness, also provides too little protection for the leaders to maintain their forms of resistance. It should be noted that spontaneous strikes among migrant workers in China have been mounting since the late 1990s, a topic that is very much under-researched.

## **Conclusion**

In China, the dormitory labour regime is embedded in an increasingly globalized context, reinforcing a new international division of labour that coincides with China's accession into the WTO. Inscribed in dormitories, which are sites of management control and worker transgression, are histories of global capitalism, of political regulation and of labour resistance, all of which require in-depth studies. This specific labour regime, by the very nature of its existence, helps articulate a challenge to the claim that by entering the WTO, China would ensure its working class a better life. It is true that globalization has created more jobs and more opportunities for the rural migrant workers whose lives have been adversely affected by competition in the global market for agricultural products. It is also true that some of the rural women feel that factory work is the only way to generate cash income and contribute to the economic gains of their family. Quite predictably, these workers have entered into the urban manufacturing world, encompassed by the dormitory labour regime. As a consequence, it is also true that a specific exploitative employment system has attached itself to these jobs, which so many Chinese female workers are called upon to perform.

In this article, I argue that employers' use of dormitory labour, which has linked itself to both labour migration and daily labour reproduction, serves global production by generating hidden and therefore largely invisible costs borne by the migrant women workers. The situation has deteriorated further now that local governments within China compete for foreign investment and thus openly neglect the labour regulations and the social provisions implemented by China's local, provincial, and national governments (Pun 2005b). The costs of daily labour reproduction are largely undertaken by the dormitory regime, which subsidizes the living cost of labour in terms of wages, accommodation, and consumption. The labour reproduction of the dormitory regime has sustained cheap labour in China over the past two decades.

Hence, the systemic provision of dormitories for internal migrant labour facilitates the continuous access to fresh labour reserves from the countryside. The dormitory labour regime concentrates labour, nurturing workers' consciousness in the face of acute exploitation by capital, but because of the high circulation of labour power among this transitory semi-proletarianised class, it also inhibits the workers from gaining enough stability within one place or space, which would be needed for forming a continuous working-class community. No doubt the dormitory labour regime, by concentrating and yet circulating labour between capitals, creates a powerful production regime to spatially contain the formation of a new working class, but dialectically it also becomes a bedrock for nurturing acute class consciousness and facilitating class actions in the future.

The battle for this new working class does require a struggle with both capital or employers, and the state. Against the state, the migrant workers should launch an urban citizenship rights struggle in order to be able to settle down in the industrial cities and towns, and create their own working-class community. Against capital, the workers need to look for alternative ways of organizing since traditional trade union struggle is not effective, if not allowed, in a dormitory labour regime in China. Dormitory-based organizing along the line of gender helps generate sisterhood solidarity among workers that will hopefully be one of the alternative forms of resistance.

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