

Class and Precarity – an Unhappy Coupling in China’s Working Class Formation

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Abstract

In refuting Guy Standing’s precariat as a class, we highlight that employment situation, worker identity and legal rights are mistakenly taken as theoretical components of class formation. Returning to theories of class we use Dahrendorf’s reading of Marx where three components of classes, the objective, the subjective, and political struggle, are used to define the current formation of the working class in China. Class is not defined by status, identity or legal rights, but location in the sphere of production embedded within conflictual capital-labour relations. By engaging with the heated debates on the rise of a new working class in China, we argue that the blending of employment situation and rights in the West with the idea of precarity of migrant workers in China

is misleading. Deconstructing the relationship between class and precarity, what we see as an unhappy coupling, is central to the paper.

Key Words: precarity, precariat, China, working class, industrial conflict

Introduction

Guy Standing's controversial concept of a precariat class has recently been applied to China (Standing, 2017). Standing replaces the widely used *informal labour* by the term precariat when extending his studies to China (*ibid*: 165). He notes:

“The etymological root of precarious is to ‘beg by prayer’. In other words, it refers to a person’s status and a lack of rights within the state. Someone in the precariat is above all else a *supplicant*, dependent on others doing them favors, in response to requests” (2017:166).

In this regard, he differentiates the concepts of informal labour and Marx’s proletariat from precariat, and does not use the two concepts to understand working class formation in China. In this article, we reject Guy Standing’s dangerous precariat as a class concept, and suggest that employment situation, worker identity and legal rights are mistakenly taken as theoretical components of class formation (Breman, 2013; Munck, 2013). Returning to Marxist classic theories of class, we note that a complex of employment situation, lack of rights within the state and the fragmentation of

workers in the labour market and/or the sphere of production will only affect class solidarity and may prolong the class formation process, but not remove the underlying need for expressions of class consciousness and identity. Using Dahrendorf's (1959) reading of Marx, there are three components of classes, the objective, the subjective, and political struggle. We suggest that the main pressure point of class formation resides not in formal/semi-formal or legal/para-legal status distinctions of workers vis-à-vis the state, but in their relative ability to mobilise collectively (e.g. via strikes and protests) in relation to their grievous experiences as workers in capitalist labour processes as a social activity.

By engaging with the increasingly acrimonious debates on the rise of a new working class in China, we argue that incorporating migrant workers or student interns or workers from ex-state-owned enterprises as a precariat is confusing (Standing, 2017).

Deconstructing the relationship between class and precarity, which we see as an unhappy coupling, we offer more clarity on the language on class and status in China. To this end we show that the emergent migrant working class in China is hardly to be understood as *supplicants*, waiting for somebody else to do them favors or holding misleading perceptions that the state will provide them with protection. Rather, they are a new working class empowered at the grid of increasingly severe strikes and collective actions, especially since the financial crisis of 2007.

In the next section we briefly critique the work of Standing. This is followed by an examination of working class formation in China using Marx's theory of class and taking class as a dynamic and organic concept, reflective of the interaction between the development of objective shifts in class relations and the subjective (identity and action) orientations of workers in the workplace. From this we explore "class in action", as demonstrated by attempts of organizing through class-based associations, and conflicts and class actions amongst migrant workers and how labour NGOs support workers in industrial communities. We conclude by arguing for a more interactive approach to class and workers protests in China, and for greater clarity in terminology around class, precarity and employment situation.

A precarious story of Standing's precariat

In the 1960s and 1970s the active debates around a "new working class" applied to emerging qualified groups like technical workers, considered a vanguard for all workers for French theorists Mallet (1975) and Gorz (1967). The same groups were later considered a controlling 'new middle class', for structural Marxists, like Poulantzas (1978). More recently debates have featured new intermediate groupings in the class structure, such as the 'creative class' (Florida, 2002) and 'knowledge workers' (Wuthnow, and Shrum, 1983). In recessionary conditions, the 'underclass' (Auletta, 1982), more recent 'austariat' (Mešić, and Woolfson, 2015), and the increasingly

influential ‘precariat’ (Standing, 2011) have appeared. The idea of the precariat has gone global, entering Chinese discourse through Lee (2016) and others (Swider, 2017; Standing, 2017), and contributing to growing debates about the character of new working class in China which is our focus in this paper.

Most theories of new classes build classifications out of market or occupational situation, and the trading of new knowledge or ideas in the labour market (Goldthorpe et al 1969; Wright 1997). In other words, it is Weberian ideas of occupational classes using non-competing *exclusive* skills that form the basis of class differentiation. However, with regard to the ‘precariat’ it is the *absence* of market security and the particular ways of contracting labour power, through short-term, casual or insecure exchanges, that is assumed to over-determine the precariat’s class identity against other classes.

In a recent note “The Precariat in China: A Comment on Conceptual Confusion” (2017), Standing criticizes the concept of informal labor as an ambiguous theoretical construction, and advocates replacing it with the term he coined, the *precariat*, as the most appropriate conceptual tool for understanding the situation of Chinese workers. However, while it could be argued that informal labour is imprecise, Standing’s recourse to market situation and employment flexibility to define the precariat in the class structure and relationship to the state, produces an ill-defined conglomeration of

part-timers, casual or temporary workers, seasonal workers, self-employed, agency workers, student internees, volunteers, and many others with casual connections to an employer. What defines class identity of the precariat is undertaking work in an irregular or informal manner – namely their employment situation. It does not matter that casualness might be an embedded norm in a sector, such as agriculture and food processing, and workers are repeatedly recruited and accustomed to this pattern of working. If *casually employed* such workers are in the precariat. Due to this indiscriminate construction, Standing's precariat has been called a 'bogus concept' (Breman, 2013). Hyman and Gumbrell-McCormick (2017: 545) note: "Not only does labour market insecurity not create a homogeneous 'precariat', it does not result in a simple polarisation between insiders and outsiders, and affects in different ways social groups with contrasting capacities for collective mobilisation." Standing creates the precariat not out of capital-labour conflicts, where power asymmetries are well known, but presumed labour-labour conflicts - internal divisions within the working class, with those in regular/standard employment judged a privileged 'salarariat'; and those excluded from standard employment contracts, a disadvantaged precariat. Standing (2017: 167) confuses 'relations of production' with market situation and status, and ignores a wealth of sociology of class in this area (see Vogt, 2017 for a recent review). He notes that, using arguments from his book, that the precariat:

“Have distinctive *relations of production*. This means that lack all seven forms of labor-based security built up during the twentieth century as defined by laws, regulations, and so-called collective agreements, namely labor market security, employment security, job security, work security, skill reproduction security, income security, and representation security”.

These are not relations of production - there is no structural class relationship here, but an ideal type secure working class set against ideal type precariat with a sevenfold set of insecurities.

Defining the precariat as lacking the security of employment of the ‘salariat’ makes for a problematic designation. Munck (2013: 771-2) notes that: “the precariat is defined more or less by what it is not—a mythical, stable working class with full social and political rights—and by its vague feelings of anomie and distance from the orthodox labour movement”. In what ways are the politics of employment insecurity the source of danger? Wright (2016: 135) and Braga (2016) insist that the precariat should *not* be distinguished from the working class, or even it’s more stable and well-off layers. In the 1960s the embourgeoisement thesis, suggested workers were being absorbed into the middle class because of increased employment and economic security, but empirically there was no such shift in class location or identification (Goldthorpe et al, 1969) and economic security is not guaranteed in capitalism. Marx noted the general

‘precariousness’ of waged labour in nineteenth century capitalism, especially the constant threat of mechanization of work and pressure on wages, but saw this as a spur to action whereupon “workers begin to form combinations (Trades’ Unions) against the bourgeois” (Marx and Engels, 1848). Shared interests of being waged workers (*however* labour power is specifically contracted) “is a claim about material interests: two people within a given class have greater overlap in their material interests than do two people in different classes” (Wright 2016: 128). Standing “places too much emphasis on division, as opposed to solidarity, whether that solidarity is actual or aspirational” Paret (2016:117). This comes from the fact that he is critical of the idea of labour, and the stress of divisions reinforces the weakness of workers – something central to the use of precarity in the work of CK Lee, who applies it to study China’s working class as we discuss below.

For Standing, class is not defined through mode of production, control and ownership, but an ideal type secure and insecure ‘employment situation’ – thus implying that workers change their class position by changing to different employment contracts. This, however, makes no sense when the particular configuration of contracts is often a human resource management strategy for recruitment purposes. For example, many workers are initially employed through agencies and then, after a period of observation by employers, transferred to regular or continuous employment positions.

This ‘temp-to-perm’ practice is a selection device used by large employers across the globe. In China, as noted in the work of Jürgens and Krzywdzinski (2016: 118) there is a transition to such regular employment contracts in most Chinese car plants. This is confirmed by Chen and Chan (2018: 9) who examined directly and indirectly employed workers in their sample from five auto joint ventures, and found both groups were concentrated on fixed terms contracts, with easy movement from agency to direct employment, but little opportunity for continuous contracts – which less than 10% of their total sample were on. Movement from indirect to direct contracts was a management not class strategy. Worker’s perceptions in Chen and Chan’s research was that job security was available when business was good, but “when the economic situation is not good and orders are low, they will kick us out” regardless of contract type (*ibid*: 9). In other words, precarity or casualness is the shared experience of these Chinese workers on direct and indirect contracts, even in good capital-intensive industry jobs like autos. In this work “...the attitudes of agency and regular workers towards the company are very similar,” (*ibid*: 21) and “...agency workers do not feel particularly discriminated against when compared to the regular workers” (*ibid*: 22). To isolate agency workers as a separate ‘precariat’ class make no sense, and highlights the incoherent nature of the category.

Class formation, structure and action

Class within a labour process tradition (Smith, 1987) supports a dynamic approach, where structures are explored through processes of enactment inside workplaces where worker-management relations are active and fluid (Smith and Liu, 2016). Class relations are centred on exploitative social relations of production and class agency is unevenly constrained and/or facilitated by the societal structures within which action is mutually constituted. This has global reach, the entry of China into the global economy meant Chinese workers were linked to workers in other countries through their common class positions (Pun, 2016).

Let's return to the most basic questions of what constitutes a class. What are the objective and subjective factors in defining a class, and if subjective factors usually refer to class consciousness and class action, what is the relationship between structure, consciousness and action? Marx did not provide straightforward answers to these relationships which are always contentious among different Marxist and non-Marxist social scientists (Eidlin, 2014). Based on textual analysis of Marx's work on class, Dahrendorf (1959) noted that for Marx, the constitution of class was never a dichotomous division between structure (objective factor) and agency (subjective factor), but could be understood as composing of three basic components in organic unity. Firstly, often understood as "objective" factors, the working class shares a

common relationship to the means of production, and at the same time, is oppositional to other classes involved in the ownership and control of the process of capital accumulation and profit maximisation. It is in production that social antagonism is realized which magnifies the division in society between owners and non-owners of the means of production. In capitalist society, these are capitalists (bourgeoisie) and workers (proletariat). Even though finer divisions can be further made as new categories of waged labour are generated, but these subgroups are drawn into established social change and conflicts of the industrial society (Dahrendorf, 1959: 7).

However, economic conditions are not in themselves sufficient for the formation of classes, which brings in the second component, often taken as “subjective” factors, where class means members will necessarily have shared perceptions of their common interest. This is usually termed class consciousness; but as a concept class consciousness is not simply an awareness of one's own class interest, but also embodies deeply shared views of how a class should be organized in order to advance common interests against other classes. In the preface to *The Making of the English Working Class*, E.P. Thompson said, “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 other words class is a processual and relational category. Class

formation is also an active process, which owes as much to agency as to habituation within common economic positions, and which embodies a notion of historical relationship (Thompson, 1966: 9). Fantasia (1995) also highlights the idea of what he calls ‘cultures of solidarity’ to overcome the binary separation between structure and agency, and suggests the need to examine cultural practices, collective action and social organization of class in concrete terms, in his case, the American workers’ movement.

Considering the world history of labour, the formation and maturity of the working class usually takes root across generations. The suffering, hardships, and grievances of working lives often reached their peak not in the first generation of workers but in the subsequent ones. This is the process of proletarianization, which turns agricultural labourers into industrial workers, either voluntarily or involuntarily, that runs through the history of world capitalism. Katzenelson and Zolberg (1986) in their comparative studies of working-class formation in nineteenth-century Germany, France and the United States help discern various kinds of reaction to proletarianization and pinpoint a multiplicity of ways of making sense, organizing, and acting in society when the working class emerged. They advocate a model of class with “four connected layers of history and theory: those of structure, ways of life, dispositions, and collective action” (*ibid* p. 14). Importantly, for the working class, class consciousness gives rise to political or civic organizations such as labour organizations, trade unions, and political

parties in order to promote their class interests (Dahrendorf 1959: 16). In this way, class consciousness contributes to the awareness of class differences and conflicts, and potentially, a tendency to institutionalizing or organising, both in an economic and political sense.

The third element of class is class struggle, of which we are guided to ask: what are the forces that could activate the formation of class, turning class agents into class-aware actors? Dahrendorf argues that the organisation of classes follows the progress of conflicts within the sphere of production itself. As capitalism matures, social antagonisms deepen, and the struggle over wages turns into a struggle over political power (Dahrendorf, 1959: 16). This political struggle is not only regarding control over means of production and ownership of property in the unforeseeable future, but the immediate issue of the power of the working class to organise and to be organised in order to formulate coalitions in struggle. Fighting for economic interests, such as increases in wages and improvements of working conditions, grows into fighting for state legislation and the right to trade unionism, and thus becomes a political movement (Dahrendorf, 1959: 16). In short, classes are political groups united by a common interest, although there is not a simple convey belt process connecting movement from the economic to the political sphere.

Whereas historians of the European and American experiences can look back over

many decades or centuries and examine the precise formation of particular working classes, the China story is emergent and in that sense incomplete. It needs locating within both an historical and political-economy context – connecting Chinese workers to the experiences of other working classes, to current global trends in work and employment (such as precariousness) and to the unique features of the particular China case, such as the *hukou* or internal passport system. The above discussion of class attempts to bring out its layered quality, and to reclaim the materiality of class regarding the primacy of production relations to the process of class formation. Class is always a relational concept, and class formation takes place in a temporal, social and country context.

Class and precarity in China

Chinese labour studies within a political economy or labour process perspective are attempting to bring class back into analysis (Liu and Smith, 2016). However, in China, this is particularly difficult because of the negation of socialist experience, the U-turn to neo-liberal capitalism and the suppression of class discourse by the state. This negation of class discourse, followed up by changes of socialist production relations, the pouring in of foreign capital, the rebirth of private capital, and last but not the least, the birth of a new Chinese working class, all attest to the material foundations for the renewal of class analysis.

Labour researchers disagree about the character of radicalism in the second generation of migrant workers, and the extent to which either a new class consciousness or a trade union consciousness is being consolidated (Chan and Sui, 2012, favour the latter, Pun, 2016 the former). These debates are about the historical process or length of time a “class” takes to be constituted. These writers have not employed a new dangerous class, the precariat, to set the terms of their debate. Others, despite problems around the precarity thesis, have adopted it to debate the character of the Chinese working class (Lee, 2016; Lee and Kofman, 2012; Swider, 2017). Lee (2016) has highlighted the difficulty of “making” the Chinese working class, locating it within a “state-civil society” framework and departing from a global capital-labor perspective for understanding the on-going process of class formation. By using the terms precarization and underclass, Lee (2016) implies a negative effect on working class formation in China, highlighting division and hence questioning the possibility of forming class solidarities among workers themselves. Lee (2016) attributes the divisions of the working class to the factors of migration, rural to urban divide, labour agency and state control. Principally, she suggests “two institutional factors perpetuating precarization” (Lee, 2016: 324) in China: the state’s opportunistic and political use of legal changes around employment and labour law, and land reforms separating peasants from the land. Lee describes the process of proletarianisation in the

countryside: “The rise of large-scale agribusiness contract farming means the de facto confiscation of land use rights as a form of social security. From now on, farmers’ livelihood is totally dependent on waged employment or corporate profits.” (*ibid.* 324). Nevertheless, by employing the language of underclass and precariousness to describe the increasingly landless migrant peasant workforce she underplays migrant workers capacity for economic struggles: “...China’s landless migrant workers find themselves in an emerging underclass position that is even more precarious than the conventional landholding migrant workers” (*ibid.* 324). Lee is not only pessimistic when it comes to attributing greater levels of resistance to the second generation of migrant workers, but she projects general pessimism about any change in the Chinese workforce which she says represents “authoritarian precarization” (a merging of labour market and state practices that she employs to define class). Lee says that to base class analysis on recent labour disputes in China is subjectivism. Disputes are transitory; institutions of the state incorporate and disable them. Hence action is not the starting place for class analysis. Rather, this should start with local and central state institutions and increasingly insecure employment relationships: “In this day and age of global precarization, it has become ever more important that labor scholars, of China or elsewhere, resist the temptation of subjectivism and voluntarism, and recall Gramsci’s famous motto: pessimism of the intellect and optimism of the will” (*ibid.* 330). In other words, precarity

is used as an objective signifier of enfeebled class consciousness.

Lee's work has consistently downplayed workers' power and potential labour resistance in reformed China. She argued that there was "collective inaction of Chinese workers" (1998: 3) in the 1990s when the state workers were laid off and the newly migrant working class was gradually formed and incipient labour actions were observed. Entering into the 2000s, when increasing labour strikes were recorded, Lee argued that only "cellular and piecemeal labour actions" (2007: 235) were possible because under an authoritarian state and coercive production regime, the working class is incapable of developing class awareness and hence no class actions would be possible. Despite contra empirical studies, provided by Leung and Pun (2009), Zhang (2014), Pringle (2017), Chan and Hui, (2016) and many others, Lee (2016) has fiercely criticised those who studied Chinese workers' power and resistance for providing no evidence and hence these Chinese labour scholars were all trapped in "false optimism" and "subjectivism and voluntarism" in their studies. Lee's argument is in fact arbitrary and subjective as the above- mentioned studies are based on solid empirical research on Chinese workers' protests and strikes in recent years. A key reason for her argument is that she employed the precarity thesis which emphasises fragmentation and division of the working class constrained by the labour market situation and employment situation of workers.

In the 1980s and the 1990s when China was incorporated into the global economy and turned itself into the “world’s workshop”, there were more precarious jobs than in the new millennium. More recent government labour legislation has moved to offer more protection, but this has been followed by greater labour resistance and collective action (Chan and Hui, 2016). Although lack of enforcement of new labour laws is widespread, alongside use of fixed-term contracts, in terms of labour disputes and collective actions, we witness a lot more in the new or second generation which is supported by numerous empirical studies (Leung and Pun, 2009; Pun and Lu, 2010a; Pun and Lu, 2010b). Contrary to Lee’s (2016) argument that agency workers weaken regular workers’ capacity for resistance, Pringle (2017: 5) notes that in the 2010 Honda parts dispute, agency workers were a critical part of the collective strike action. Thus, the same employment situation produced very different class actions in Honda’s strike, and therefore it is difficult to say, as Lee does, that precarization is the fate of the second generation and this determines a single field of entrapped or disempowered action. A question for us is why a group of workers, small or large, fighting for their economic interests at the point of production is *not* considered engagement in class action?

Apart from the precarity thesis, Lee’s analysis assumes China is “unique”, with institutions like the *hukou* system impeding class formation. The *hukou* or household registration system was used in Maoist China as a basic unit for planning economic

activities such as food and other daily necessities and employment provision, and continues to have a positioning effect of dividing the rural population from the urban population (Cheng and Selden, 1994). Your *hukou* was set by your birth location, and geographical movement was very limited, and citizenship rights were tied to where you were registered not where you worked. The *hukou* regime effectively tied one's right to permanent residence to place of birth, and hence migrant workers are prevented from establishing their own working class community.

The perceived “uniqueness” of China in most Chinese labour studies (Blecher, 2010; Kuruvilla, Lee and Gallagher, 2011; Lee and Kofman, 2012) is wrongly presumed to locate China outside the circuits of global capitalism, and enable these studies to argue a *de-making of class* in China despite the fact that China is producing products for the world market as well as creating the largest working class in world history. Likewise, the concept of ‘unfinished proletarianisation’, put forward by Pun and Lu (2010a) is often mistakenly used to argue for a weak Chinese working class lacking in identity, consciousness and action. However, according to Pun’s recent study (2016), unfinished proletarianisation would not affect the making of class forces as it analyses a tougher economic situation affecting workers entering the production sphere, resulting in severe class conflicts and generating more class action. The hegemonic state discourse employed to deny that “peasant-workers” are proper workers, and create a legal identity

problem for these migrant workers, does not alter the fact that peasant-workers are structurally positioned as “waged workers”—a starting point used to discuss the formation of a working class as noted above.

The complication of class formation in China

When China transformed itself into the world’s factory and became a contemporary industrialised society, it re-enacted a common phenomenon in the world history of capitalism. For example, the making of the English working class in the nineteenth century, the experiences of the “Four Tigers” of East Asian countries in the twentieth century, or the transformative experiences of countries in South Asian and Latin American today. All these countries underwent a rapid rural-to-urban transformation, which relied on a working class that migrates from rural areas to settle in urban communities. Everywhere we can find examples of rural migrant workers streaming from the countryside to work and build industrial cities. These rural workers were able to stay in the city where they established family homes and larger communities. What is special about China is its peculiar process of proletarianisation: in order to incorporate the Chinese socialist system into the global economy, rural workers are called upon to work in the city but not to stay in the city. For China’s new working class, industrialisation and urbanisation are still two highly *disconnected* processes as the peasant-workers are deprived of their rights to live where they work

due to the *hukou* system. These disconnected processes obviously complicate the formation of a Chinese working class which is constrained by state control, hegemonic discourse as well as the direction of capital.

The 270 million migrant labourers in China today who, for three decades, have laboured in foreign or privately-owned factories, are still deprived of the legal and social rights to reside in the city or to set up their own working-class communities. Despite these constraints migrant workers have not stopped trying to stay in the city, either as temporary sojourners or *de facto* urban residents, jumping from workplace to workplace, and city to city. The new generation of migrant workers has realized that they will always be considered second-class citizens by urban governments, which recognizes no obligation to provide them with housing, medical care, education, or other social services.

However, legal status does not affect the process of forming a class identity. The materiality of class being defined by production relations and the opposition between capital and labour instead of the personal identity or employment contracts of workers. What we call them, for example, migrant peasant-workers, does not change their production relations, that is, the materiality of class. It does, however, when applied by the state, affect the process of class awareness and consciousness. In theory, providing migrant workers a legally complicated worker identity would affect the cognitive

recognition of themselves as a class. Yet, in practice, the deepening process of capital-labour conflicts facilitates their oppositional awareness of their class situation resulting in more action not less.

Organising the unorganised: class conflicts and class actions

Moving into the new millennium, a new generation of migrant workers has gradually become aware of their class position and participated in a widening series of collective actions, as reported by various recent studies (Chan 2012; Friedman 2014; Zhang 2014; Chan and Hui 2016; Pringle 2017). Migrant workers are now experiencing a deeper sense of anger and dissatisfaction than that of the first generation, accompanied by the realization that they are increasingly cut adrift from economic activity in their home town (Pun, 2016). The structure of production and domination embedded in the dormitory labour regime of the “factory of the world” embodies a new labouring subject of resistance (Pun and Smith, 2006; Smith and Pun, 2007).

Recent years have further seen increasing numbers of collective actions among migrant workers pursuing delayed wages, demanding compensation for injury or death, or pressurizing enterprises to increase wages and living allowances. “According to the CLB [China Labour Bulletin] (2016), the number of labour strikes and protests in 2015 in China reached 2774, more double the number for 2014 (Chan and Hui, 2016: 9-10). Elfstrom (2017) explores the different data bases on the incidents of strikes in China.

Below are two different sources that confirm the same trend; namely increases in strikes in recent years. This supports other empirical claims of more disputes being associated with the new generation of migrant workers.

Table 1 & 2 here

Labour shortages enhances bargaining power of Chinese workers and “has great implications for the balance of power between capital and labour in the post-crisis period” (Chan and Hui, 2016: 5). Worker actions include legal litigation, such as suing subcontractors or companies (Chen and Xu 2012), as well as collective actions such as sit-ins, strikes, and even suicidal behaviour (Pun, et al., 2014). Workers took action to confront capital at the point of production in the workplace as well as challenging power at societal levels in the courtroom, on the street, or in front of government buildings. We can illustrate the character of these actions through the case of Foxconn workers, the best known representative company-case of the second generation of migrant workers struggles.

Foxconn workers are most often associated with the suicide wave that happened in the factory compounds in 2010. By comparison, their resistance and collective action has hardly been reported or studied. Our research on Foxconn workers in the past seven

years, has however, recorded stoppages, sit-ins, demonstrations and even riots in different Foxconn facilities (Pun, 2016). Foxconn, the world's largest electronics company, employs more than one million workers in China. During the first half of 2012, Foxconn launched a huge recruitment campaign to gear up production at the Taiyuan plant. A brief strike did not win workers a wage rise. Grievances over wages and benefits, speed-ups, and humiliating treatment of workers remained unaddressed. At 11 p.m. on September 23, 2012 a few security officers severely beat two workers for failing to show their staff IDs. A "bloody fight" between several security officers and workers at the factory's industrial dormitory followed. Workers from the same ethnicity were called upon to join the fighting, and the screams of the victims, alerted many others in the darkness. A riot eventually broke out. Tens of thousands of workers smashed security offices, production facilities, shuttle buses, motorbikes, cars, shops, and canteens in the dormitory and factory complexes. Many others broke windows, demolished company fences, and pillaged factory supermarkets and convenience stores. Workers also overturned police cars and set them ablaze.

Running through from midnight until the following day, workers rioted at the 80,000-worker Foxconn Taiyuan factory, causing the shutdown of entire production lines and disrupting the manufacturing of iPhone metal parts. This industrial action is worth noting not only because of the scale of protest, but also that the workers' leaders were able to voice their condemnation of the whole production system, demonstrating their agency and power through collective actions. Zhonghong, aged 21, with two years'

work experience at Foxconn and his co-workers made overt demands to the company and its union. His open letter to Foxconn CEO Terry Gou beautifully ends with three “remembers”:

Please remember, from now on, to treat your subordinates as humans, and require them to treat their subordinates, and their subordinates, and their subordinates, as humans.

Please remember, from now on, to change your attitude that Taiwanese are superior, those of you who are riding a rocket of fast promotions and earning wages as high as heaven compared to those on earth.

Please remember, from now on, to reassign the responsibilities of the company union so that genuine trade unions can play their due role.

Many in this new cohort of migrant workers – second and even third generation youth who grew up living and working in the cities – are experiencing grievances and anger: “always yelled at,” “self-respect trampled mercilessly,” holding low-waged jobs, and at best, with slight chances to advancement via education or training (PUN, 2016). Zhonghong and his co-workers are now standing up to defend their dignity and rights through direct class action. This is particularly telling at a time when China has begun its transit from a nation with a large labour surplus and a relatively youthful population, to one with tight labour markets and aging population, a situation that is driving wages higher and prompting corporations to transfer operations to lower wage areas in China’s interior.

The language of “rights” used in workers’ strikes and industrial riots should not narrowly be confined to the realm of legal rights. For human dignity and the shared interests of workers living “at the lowest level” in Foxconn, Zhonghong angrily called for talks with CEO Terry Gou “on an equal footing.” The sense of equity was embedded in the workers’ worldview with a strong desire to call for fair treatment. He also

demanded the right for worker organization from senior management and requested a genuine union be set up from the local government in order to protect the workers (Leung, 2015).

Migrant workers have also formed grassroots labour NGOs to fight for their own rights and interests. This is an expression of the political dimension of class action, no matter how incipient. Many labour NGOs were formed by former workers or workers' leaders with direct involvement in strikes or labour disputes, where they became experienced in advocacy or nurturing labour activism and spreading experiences to different cities of China. Notable examples include the Shenzhen Chunfeng Labour Dispute Service Centre found by Zhang Zhiru and the Foshan Nanfeiyang Social Work Service Centre headed by He Xiaobo. Zhang, a worker formerly employed in an electric plant in Shenzhen, was injured at work and fractured his clavicle in 2002. Being unable to obtain compensation for medical expenses from the factory owner, the anger towards injustice and unfairness has sparked his idea of doing something for migrant workers like himself. He first attempted to found a trade union in another plant in an industrial district, but failed due to the intervention by both management and local cadres. As the unionising attempts were fruitless, Zhang turned to the NGO approach and established the Shenzhen Chunfeng Labour Dispute Service Centre in 2004 (Ng and Pun, 2017).

The suppression of labour NGOs in the recent years, coincides with increasing

class conflicts perceived as threatening “social stability” in the eyes of Chinese government. Lacking social capital and institutional channels to voice their grievances, the migrant working class now mobilises mass protests to demonstrate their discontent and resist suppression. China’s political regime has striven to legitimise governance by placing class struggle approaches within the law and related institutions as an arena to mediate conflict through the courts rather than in the streets (Gallagher, 2006; Gallagher and Dong, 2011). New legal provisions passed since 2008, tested by workers in the labour dispute arbitration committees and courts, and particularly worker victories, were said to contribute to raising worker consciousness of labour rights by labour NGOs.

In recent years, the All China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU) has frequently attacked labour NGOs as “foreign oppositional forces” and demanded replacing these “illegal organisations” by reformed workplace unions. China’s labour NGOs have thus become increasingly contradictory. While some have conducted tactical experimentation to develop lower risk mobilisation strategies (Fu, 2016), many labour NGO practitioners have turned to a non-confrontational stance, self-limiting themselves to service provisions and so earning some legitimacy from the party-state. The harsh suppression of labour NGOs leaders obviously would affect the future development of labour organisations in China, but most importantly, recent widespread arrests, which have been widely reported, serve to undermine the argument that labour NGOs are

useless, serving as anti-solidarity machine for the sake of state co-optation and social stability (Lee and Shen, 2011).

Conclusion

Precariousness as a description of labour conditions may be a useful concept, the precariat is not. At different times precariousness is a more or less important attribute of being a worker. The processes of creating non-standard forms of employment is recognisable across the world of work, from unskilled manual workers to more white-collar and professional employment (Hyman and Gumbrell-McCormick, 2017). The idea that security is a basis for class differentiation is unhelpful as is the idea of a new class called the ‘precariat’. More importantly, we need to look at interactions between workers on different contracts in production relations, and not invent employment differences that confuse employment situation and social class.

The precarious situation of Chinese workers is evident in the research we have referenced in this paper. In China, there is political-institutional dualism in the form of the operation of the *hukou* system which effectively limits entry to some jobs in government or state-owned enterprises to only those with appropriate citizenship rights. Migrant workers working away from home are excluded from local social security and their children from public education. These social discriminations provide migrant workers with unique and unprotected employment situation which is further exploited

in the sphere of production by capital, often with the aid of the state. Capital usually divides labour into core and temporary segments, but the labour struggles driven by class conflicts, increasingly unite those in regular and precarious employment situations, especially in times of crisis and collective action. Moreover, universal casualness, rather than contract segmentation between core and insecure workers characterizes Chinese workplaces (Chen and Chan, 2018). Direct and indirectly employed workers both sell their time for wages, putting them squarely at the grid of capital conflicts, however their contracts are defined. We suggest that it is unscientific to predict the behaviour of workers based on employment type and underestimate collective class forces and action. Paradoxically Chinese migrant workers have both had increased insecurity and increased militancy; and precarity is therefore not a reliable predictor of class action. Workers due to structural antagonism to capital and employers are pressed into combined struggles, even though their legal situation may be disadvantageous. They may lack secure employment contracts, legal labour rights with an employer, but they can band together along lines of common class interest in cultures of solidarity. With the rise of a new working class in China, the new generation of peasant-workers are now increasingly proletarianised through their class situation and class action. Concomitantly, their old ownership rights in the countryside have disappeared or are disappearing, making any return to petty-ownership status as farmers impossible. This

double movement, dispossession of land rights and possession of industrial worker consciousness, has seen China change its class relations. The migrant workers are now experiencing a deeper sense of anger and dissatisfaction than that of the first generation, accompanied by the realisation that they are increasingly cut off – there is no return to economic security in their home town but they are rapidly forming into a class force at a national level.

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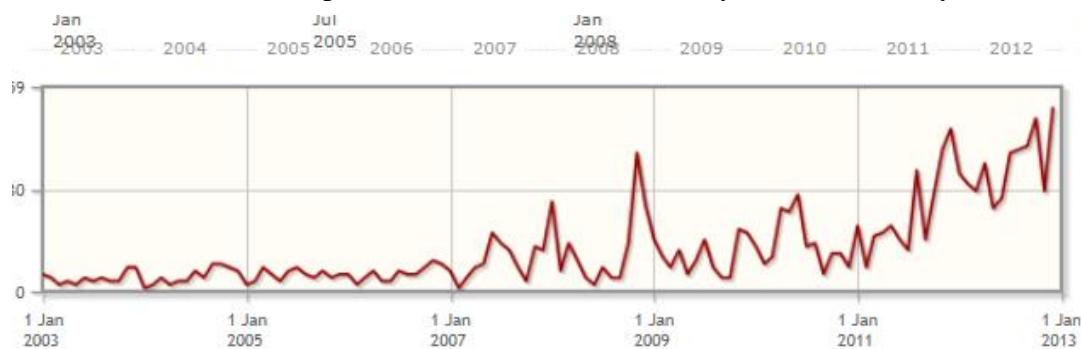
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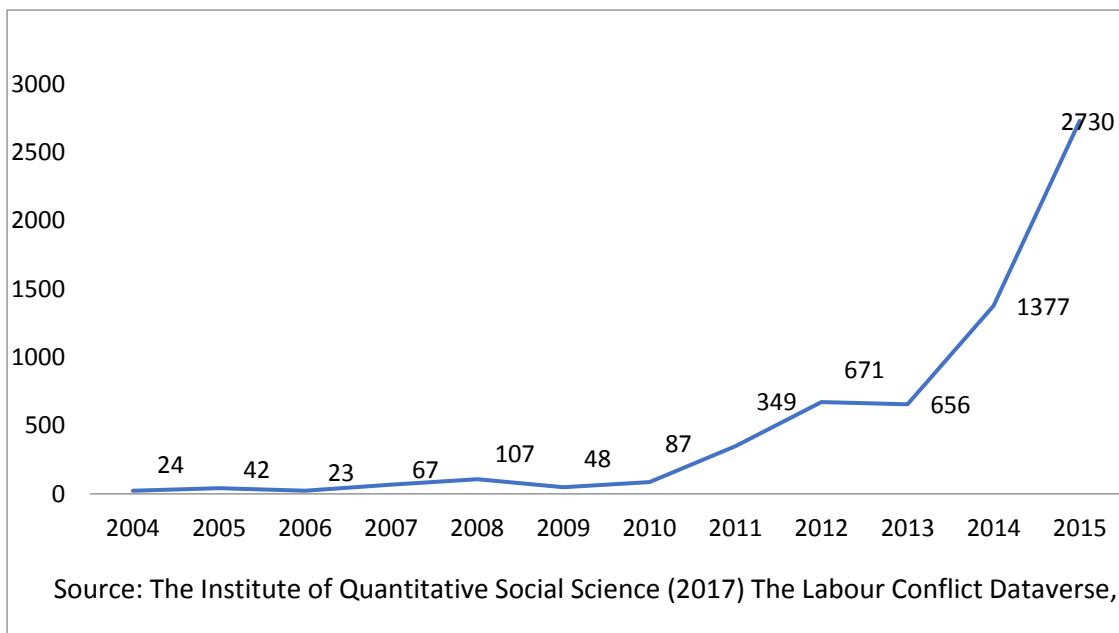
TABLES

Table 1: Labour Disputes in China: January 2003-January 2013



Source: Manfred Elfstrom - <https://chinastrikes.crowdmap.com/>

Table 2 The Number of Strikes in China, 2004-2015



Source: The Institute of Quantitative Social Science (2017) The Labour Conflict Dataverse, China, 2004-2015

https://datasets.socialhistory.org/dataverse/labourconflicts?q=&fq0=keywordValue_ss%3A%22China%2C+Labour+conflicts%22&types=dataverses%3Adatasets&sort=dateSort&order=desc

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