

Unfinished Proletarianization: Self, Anger, and Class Action among the Second Generation of Peasant-Workers in Present-Day China

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Abstract

As a result of its open-door policies and 30 years of reform, China has become the “world’s factory” and given rise to a new working class of rural migrant workers. This process has underlain a path of (semi-)proletarianization of Chinese peasant-workers: now the second generation is experiencing *dagong*, working for a boss, in industrialized towns and cities. What is the process of proletarianization of peasant-workers in China today? In what way does the path of proletarianization shape the new Chinese working class? Drawing on workers’ narratives and our ethnographic studies in Shenzhen and Dongguan between 2005 and 2008, this study focuses on the subjective experiences of the second generation of *dagongmei/zai*, female migrant workers/male migrant workers, who have developed new forms of power and resistance unknown to the previous generation of workers. Did the pain and trauma experienced by the first generation of *dagong* subjects gradually evolve into the anger and resentment that has conditioned the labor strikes and class

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actions of the second generation? In short, what continuity and change can we observe in the life struggles of this new working class? Is the second generation of *dagong* subjects compelled to take action as a result of long-endured pain and anger? Self, anger, and collective action among the new working class propel the narrative described in this article.

Keywords

Chinese peasant-workers, proletarianization, working-class formation, anger, class action

There's nowhere I could find myself happy. No matter where I go, I'm not calm and balanced.

—Xin, a 32-year-old *dagongzai*, working in a factory that supplies toys for Disney, 2007

Thirty years of Deng's reform has turned China into the "world's factory." A nation that was once viewed as a developing country now poses a challenge to the global economy. Little attention has been paid, however, to the formation of a new working class: more than 200 million peasant-workers, *nongmingong* or *mingong*, who have streamed from the countryside to the cities, which have been continuously incorporating them into global capitalism over the past two to three decades. This migration has underlain a path of (semi-)proletarianization of Chinese peasant-workers: now the second generation is experiencing *dagong*, working for a boss, in industrialized towns and cities. What is the process of proletarianization of the peasant-workers in China today? In what way does the path of proletarianization shape the new Chinese working class?¹ In this article, we explore the subjective experiences of the second generation of *dagongmei/zai*, female migrant workers/male migrant workers, who have developed forms of power and resistance unknown to the previous generation. Did the pain and trauma experienced by the first generation of *dagong* subjects gradually evolve into the anger and resentment that has led to the recent labor strikes and class actions of the second generation? In short, what are the elements of continuity and change that characterize the life struggles of the second generation of the new working class in comparison with the first generation? To answer these questions, we explore how anger and the politics of resentment contribute to labor actions and collective resistance, a subject that has not been sufficiently studied in the existing literature.

Peasant-workers (*nongmingong*) are not a new phenomenon in China. They were well-represented in prewar China, and in the socialist period as well, when they were frequently employed as temporary labor in state or collective enterprises (Perry, 1993; Walder, 1984). When we refer to the first generation of *dagongmei/zai*, we mean those people who were born in the late 1960s and the 1970s and who were the first to move from the countryside to work in the newly industrialized zones of south China in the 1980s and 1990s. These pioneers were the female workers who came to work in toy and electronics factories in the Shekou Industrial Zone of Shenzhen, the site of China's first Special Economic Zone (Lee, 1998; Pun, 2005). The second generation of peasant-workers refers to people who were born or raised in the reform period, especially those who were born in the late 1970s and 1980s, and who entered the labor market in the late 1990s and 2000s. This category includes the children who were born to the first generation and who grew up in either urban areas or rural communities. There was no essential break between the first and second generation of migrant workers, only the accumulation of work experience leading to a change in the workers' perception of capital and the state, and a shared understanding of themselves as *mingong*, a specific class position, even though the term "class" is seldom used by the workers.

Although both the class structure and the process of an incomplete proletarianization of the new generation of *dagongmei/zai* are similar to those of the previous generation, there are new life expectations and dispositions, new nuanced meanings of work, and heightened collective labor actions among those subjects who had grown up in the reform period. Hence the second generation of migrant workers has been defined by its "structure of feeling" and its ways of life. Characteristic of the second generation's ways of life is a greater disposition toward individualism, an increased proclivity for urban consumer culture (Davis, 2000; Pun, 2003; Yan, 2008), less constrained economic circumstances and greater pursuit of personal development and freedom (Jacka, 2006), a higher rate of job turnover and less loyalty to their work (Smith et al., 2004), and a greater level of spontaneous collective actions at the workplace (Lee, 2007; Chan and Pun, 2009). The second generation, born and raised in the reform period, is relatively better educated and better off materially but spiritually disoriented while having a cosmopolitan outlook. The rapid economic growth in the reform era has shaped a social structure in which the second generation has faced a rural-urban chasm, greater income inequality, and further social exclusion despite a constant improvement in their working and living conditions (Park, Wang, and Cai, 2006). A huge gulf has emerged between their life expectation of becoming urban worker-citizens

and their actual daily work experiences, which are characteristic of the dormitory labor regime and which involve serious exclusion from city life. This chasm has precipitated anger, frustration, and resentment conducive to the emergence of the workers' consciousness and their shared class position.

This article draws on our ethnographic and survey studies in the industrial communities of Shenzhen and Dongguan conducted between 2005 and 2008. It also focuses on the narrative of a *dagongzai*, Xin; in this regard, we conducted a follow-up study on his year-long labor-rights action and paid a visit to his home village in Henan in May 2008.² We highlight Xin, a male worker aged 32 years, because we took him as an example of the second generation of peasant-workers who were now transforming their silence into anger, their pain into action, and their consent into refusal. Whereas many of the first-generation factory workers were females who, rather than participating extensively in collective action, appropriated their own laboring body as a weapon through everyday workplace resistance in the 1980s and 1990s, Xin and other members of the second generation have made up their mind, since the early 2000s, to take collective action.³ Recent collective actions have occurred in the Pearl River Delta, and have been often initiated by male skilled workers, although these actions received massive support from female production workers who poured into the streets and headed picket lines during strikes (Chan and Pun, 2009). These stories reveal that the collective struggle of the new working class is yet to come. Is the second generation of *dagong* subjects compelled to take action as a result of long-endured pain and anger? Self, anger, and collective action of the new working class propel the narrative described in this article.

The Unfinished Proletarianization

You Need to Stand Up

You say your life is destined to a state of wandering
 You did and you picked up this passage
 Never gonna regret
 Even though you have to suffer from tremendous difficulty
 Care about you, your friends
 You can't say that you have no way of returning
 Everybody has his time of hardship and haplessness
 Undergoing all these sufferings
 No matter how
 You need to stand up, you need to stand up

—A poem in a workers' magazine, 2003 (our translation)

Quasi-Identity: Nongmingong

E. P. Thompson, in his classic work *The Making of the English Working Class*, put it clearly: class formation is “an active process,” which owes as much to agency as to conditioning, and which embodies a notion of historical relationship (1963: 9).⁴ The world history of labor shows that the formation and maturity of the working class usually takes root in the second and third generations of rural workers who come to work in industrial cities. The suffering, hardships, and grievances of working lives often peak not in the first generation of workers but in the subsequent ones. This is the process of proletarianization, which turns agricultural laborers into industrial workers by depriving the former of their means of production and subsistence; in fact, this theme runs through the history of world capitalism. As a result, workers’ fate depends on the process of capital accumulation and the extent of the commodification of labor use. These workers neither own nor control the tools they use, the raw materials they process, or the products they produce.

When China transformed itself into the world’s factory and became a contemporary industrialized society, it reenacted a common phenomenon in the world history of capitalism. What is special about China is its peculiar process of proletarianization: In order to incorporate the Chinese socialist system into the global economy, the Chinese authorities called on rural workers to work in the city but *not* to stay in the city. For China’s new working class, industrialization and urbanization are still two highly disconnected processes, as many peasant-workers have been deprived of the opportunity to live where they work.⁵ The local urban governments have had no incentive to meet the needs of collective consumption for the laborers in terms of housing, education, medical care, and other social goods and services. Rural migrant workers have been barred *de jure*, but not *de facto*, from living in urban centers by the hukou system and by class barriers that have ensured that migrant workers with meager wages are unable to settle down in urban communities (Solinger, 1999). In sum, the process of the proletarianization of Chinese peasant-workers has been shaped by a spatial separation of production in urban areas and reproduction in the countryside. This separation of spheres, however, has been ceding place to the rise of a dormitory labor regime, which offers a new combination of work and “home,” which resembles early capitalist work-and-residence arrangements, and yet which continues to segregate the worker from the city (Pun and Smith, 2007).

The 200 million laborers who have been drawn from rural China to industrialized towns and cities and who, for three decades, have toiled in foreign- or privately-owned factories are still deprived of the legal and social right to reside in the city or to set up their own working class community. This

segregation stems not only from market factors but also from enshrined legal and administrative measures (especially the hukou system) that preserve and prolong the historical rural–urban chasm. Migrant workers are uprooted, but this experience has never stopped them from ceaselessly trying to stay in the city, either as temporary sojourners or de facto urban residents jumping from workplace to workplace and city to city. Second-generation migrant workers have realized that they will always be considered second-class citizens by urban governments, even though some of them were born in urban centers: urban government recognizes no obligation to provide these workers with housing, medical care, education, or other social services.

The resultant pattern is an *unfinished process of proletarianization*, which leads to a deepening sense of *becoming incomplete*, that is, of becoming *nongmingong* (a “quasi-” or “half-” worker in the industrial world). The individual, suffering from a sense of inadequacy, is subjected to a process of wandering. Of about one thousand workers whom we studied in the industrial districts of Shenzhen and Dongguan during 2005 and 2006, most ranged in age from 16 to 32 years, and most had changed their jobs at least once a year. Half of them had already worked in the city for more than five years, and fewer than 10 percent thought they had a good chance of staying in the city. The gates of the urban and industrial world remained closed to the second generation of migrant workers. The *nongmingong* has had nowhere to go and nowhere to stay, as expressed in the above-cited workers’ poem: “You say your life is destined to a state of wandering” and you chose this route to becoming nobody because you are neither a *nongmin* (peasant) nor a *gongren* (worker). You are always a *nongmingong*, somebody caught in between a rural citizen and a worker—a social identity that is always quasi. Acquiring this quasi identity, the individual, however, feels responsible for himself or herself and is compelled to try to overcome the difficulties of becoming: “Never gonna regret/Even though you have to suffer from tremendous difficulty.” This is the motto of the new generation of dagong workers, who are trying to overcome their experience of incompleteness.⁶

A Worker’s Narrative

A deepening process of semiproletarianization created the circumstances in which we met Xin, a peasant-worker who had been working in a Shenzhen-based Disney-supplier factory in 2007. We entered Xin’s life during his prolonged pursuit of workers’ interests and rights by means of a series of collective actions. By the time we met Xin, he and four of his coworkers had already left the factory. In February 2007, when Xin left, he was a skilled

worker and foreman of a department specializing in crafting molds. He had been working in the city since 1998, a year after his unsuccessful attempt to enter a university. In the course of ten years, Xin rose from an ordinary worker to a skilled craftsman to a foreman responsible for a team of skilled workers, plying his trade at three companies. We were aware of his pride in himself for working so diligently and intelligently and for thereby proving himself a fit worker-subject, worthy to have a position of responsibility in a modern factory producing world-famous Disney toys.

Xin quit his job at the Disney-supplier factory after working there for one year so that he could take part in a collective action against the company. He recalled that when he exited the factory for the last time he found himself with no way ahead and no way back. He was lost in the city where he had been working for ten years and where he had met with only a little success in his career: “Never gonna regret/ . . . Undergoing all these sufferings/No matter how/You need to stand up, you need to stand up.”

Unlike the first generation of peasant-workers, who were lost and passively accepted their fate, the second generation has refused to remain quiet.⁷ From the moment he stepped out of the factory’s dormitory compound, Xin found himself experiencing not only a sense of loss but also overwhelming anger. He decided “to do something big”: he was not at all “calm and balanced,” even though he was ambivalent about his loss and anger.

The plight of *nongmingong* is so well-established that even the workers we met in Shenzhen and Dongguan who had been employed in the cities for more than ten years still found it impossible to reside there. The longer they work in a big city, the more aware they are of their exclusion. Rural migrant workers could sometimes stay in the city after a few years of working in a factory if they could become small storeowners, hawkers, or garbage collectors. However, they still are displaced and transient residents, with no hope of becoming proper citizens as the right of residence in the city is still denied. This is a defining feature of the proletarianization shared among the first and second generations of migrant workers.

The Reform: Freedom and “Homing”

Xin, who was born in 1977, grew up in the years of the reform. He was among the 200 million rural migrant workers who went to the city and became part of the second generation of migrant workers. Rather than arguing that the reform was the catalyst of the proletarianization, we argue that the reform created a pro-market ideology that has sustained this unfinished proletarianization process, and that the rural–urban divide has withstood the great influx of rural to

urban migration and has served as a material base for the new working class. Inequality in urban–rural income distribution is increasing. According to the National Bureau of Statistics, in 2003 per capita income averaged RMB 2,622 for people living in rural areas and RMB 8,472 for those living in cities, for an urban–rural gap of 3.23 to 1. In 2007, the ratio increased to 3.32 to 1. The urban–rural gap has become one of the largest in the world. As the reform continues, the widening gap between rural and urban lives is reflected not only in living standards but also in the mode of life itself (see also Yan, 2008). The social chasm thus widens further. For the second generation of the new working class, the urge to move out of the village and to transform the self is even stronger than it was for the first generation.

The emptying of rural communities is no longer just a matter of concern but a matter of fact in many parts of China (Yan, 2005; Li, 2004). The feeling of inadequacy or of a perpetual inability to catch up with the dagong wave symbolizes the sense that many young people in villages have of being existentially incomplete. Xin looked back at his life and recalled the three times that he failed the university entrance exams. After failing for the third time (in 1998), he gave up completely, even though his father opposed his decision: “I know people who tried seven or eight times without success, and then collapsed. I needed to put a stop to it before it was too late. Maybe I’d make my way elsewhere.” He was also ashamed of depending on his young sister for financial support. She had gone to work in Shenzhen immediately after finishing junior secondary school in 1994.⁸

Xin observed, “My younger sister, who graduated from junior secondary school, moved to the city, where she’s worked for a number of years, but I was still staying in the village repeating my exams.” Going to dagong not only held out the possibility of earning money to support his family but also fostered a sense of individual independence and freedom. Not being able to work like his younger sister pained Xin. Seeking freedom by moving to dagong is the common desire of rural workers, a desire that has deepened through the generations. Katznelson and Zolberg (1986) have argued that disposition and habitus are the most significant ingredients in the formation of a working class. We maintain that both the first moment for the new Chinese working class to identify itself and the main disposition that characterizes the Chinese working class rest on the shared desire to move out to dagong. In China, the process of proletarianization is largely self-driven, arising from people’s strong sense of acquiring freedom by means of dagong and within the context of a huge rural–urban chasm, which itself has emerged in the reform period’s rapid industrialization and globalization.⁹

For the first generation of migrant workers, moving to dagong was not only a major trend (when a person successfully moved out to dagong, the whole village would follow) but also a means of realizing one's economic goals (Pun, 2005; Jacka, 2006). These goals included building a new house, financing a sibling's education, marrying, and setting up a small business. Although in the 1980s and 1990s, these workers were often depicted by the media as metaphorically blind migrants (*mangliu*) traveling without a clear direction, they had specific goals (Zhang, 2001). Today, the new generation of migrant workers is less motivated by economic goals and more determined to achieve personal development, freedom, and a different way of life. The yearning for dagong is stronger than ever. In Xin's village in Henan, home to about 200 families, almost all the inhabitants of working age have departed. More than ten entire families have moved out of the village.¹⁰ The study of Xin's village echoes the findings of various studies on rural communities in Central China (Fang, 2003; Yan, 2005). Fang's study in Hubei shows that 204 of a village's 353 residents were between the working age of 15 and 59 years and that 148 members of this subcategory moved out to dagong throughout the year (Fang, 2003). As a result of the reform, the urban world seems to have opened up to such people, even though they soon realize that this openness is severely limited.

In 1998, Xin finally set out to work in a small factory in Shenzhen. The working conditions were as appalling as those in other factories in the same industrial village. During his probation period, he was paid only seven yuan a day. Once he passed his probation, his wages rose to eight yuan a day. At the small factory, which produced converters for TV antennas, he worked from 7 a.m. to 12 p.m. and from 12:30 p.m. to 11:00 p.m. Even more dehumanizing was the treatment workers received from the factory supervisor. On one occasion, the supervisor asked Xin to remove a lead-bonder from the floor. The lead-bonder had just finished melting and was still very hot. Xin, then a new worker, was unaware of the danger and picked it up without gloves. All his fingers were badly burned. He remembers, "The supervisor stood by my side. He was laughing, watching a flesh-and-blood person clearly in pain but not offering to treat the wounds. Once he was through laughing, he ordered me to do other work." After only seven days of employment, Xin was dismissed.

The reform gave this generation the freedom to move, which led to the freedom to work for foreign- or privately-owned enterprises and the freedom to leave one's hometown. The reform unleashed a desire among many members of this generation to transform themselves, but in attempting to make this desire a reality, many of these people had to sell their labor to factory

owners, the new owners of today's China. This is no secret. The dialectic of the reform lies in the very process of freeing rural subjects so that they can transform themselves into laboring bodies, a process that, at the same time, places severe constraints on the laboring bodies in industrial cities. Xin was free to move and to work. But once he acted freely, he found that he had lost the freedom to move forward or retreat. He was now a stranger and a permanent transient in the city. He soon lost his sense of "home" and felt like a man with no place to go.

Xin continued his account of his first factory job:

On the seventh day, a few co-workers who had come from my hometown couldn't tolerate it any more. They were ready to quit. One of them asked me to go too. But I said no. I wanted to continue to work till I received my wages. We kept talking for about ten minutes at the entrance of the shop floor. Our boss noticed us and turned to a supervisor. When I returned to the shop floor, the supervisor didn't ask me anything. He just said, "You don't need to come tomorrow." I then told my co-villager who had arranged the job for me that I'd just been fired and that I should have been given 49 yuan for my seven days of work. My co-villager said, "You'd dare to ask for money? You should be happy that you haven't been fined!"

Xin had worked for seven days but had earned nothing. He took his personal belongings and left the factory:

In those days, I didn't have a temporary residential permit. I was wandering on the streets, afraid to walk on the main roads or to enter small alleys, where I feared I'd be robbed. At night, I had nowhere to go except cinemas . . . After 11 p.m., the cinema played late shows at 3 yuan a ticket. The 100-person cinema house was then transformed into a place to sleep for as many as 40 to 50 people. I couldn't even straighten my legs. Between 6 and 7 a.m., we were asked to go. I slept in the cinema for more than 20 nights until I found another job.

Xin's story echoes the stories of most migrant workers regarding their first move from rural areas to the city for *dagong*. Ming, a female worker in an electronics factory in Shenzhen, said, "The first thing I learned from my first job is that you don't have your own rights. The boss has the right to ask you to leave but you don't have rights" (Interview in Shenzhen, Oct. 2006).

The reform embodies a contradiction: As new labor was needed for the use of capital, Chinese peasants were asked to transform themselves into laboring bodies, willing to spend their days in the workplace. This context represented a departure from time-honored customs—a departure from these people’s entire previous mode of life and their collective history. Yet, as disposable labor, when they were not needed, they were asked to go back to the villages that they had been induced to forsake and to which they had failed to remain loyal. This scenario was characteristic particularly of the younger generation. If transience was a dominant characteristic of the first generation of migrant workers, rupture characterizes the second generation, who now spend much more of their lives in urban areas. Transience suggests transitions, and so encourages hopes and dreams of transformation. Rupture, however, creates closure: there is no hope of either transforming oneself into an urban worker or of returning to the rural community to take up life as a peasant.

No Return: New Forms of Enclosure

Rewriting Grasshopper

Dance, dance, dance, someone says what I dance is a dance of survival
 Dance, dance, dance, what we dance is pain and anger
 That supplant our humanity and dignity
 Together with skinny shoulders
 We creep upon the alien land haplessly

—Poem by a young worker published in a workers’ booklet,
Voices of Workers, 2006 (our translation)

In the spring of 2000, after working two years in the city, Xin made up his mind to go back to his hometown. Xin told us,

Even though I worked hard every day, I wasn’t treated like a human being in the workplace. I didn’t see a future for myself in the city. How could I have any good prospects? I had no money or anything to rely on. I’d rather go back home.

Having no place in the city, Xin could not envision a desirable future that would justify prolonging his work life in urban areas. In contrast to many workers of his generation who still maintained themselves in the city, Xin

was determined to return to the place where he had been born and raised. He hoped to earn a living in the countryside even though he was neither strongly committed to a specific path of rural development nor in the habit of regarding himself as a rural subject.

The struggle between heading out to dagong or staying in a village hoping for some break was the preoccupation of two generations of the working class. The study of Bai and Song (2002) on twelve villages from four counties in two provinces (Anhui and Sichuan) shows that returned migrant labor accounted for 15.7 percent of the total rural labor force. Most of the migrant workers who chose to return to their hometown in the hopes of bettering their lives made the return trip not because of individual or familial factors but because of poor job prospects and poor life prospects in the city. Only 2.5 percent of the returned migrants did business in their hometown (11–15). A recent study by the Development Research Center of the State Council concerning the condition of businesses established by returned migrants states that among 301 villages in 28 provinces, returned migrants accounted for 23 percent of all migrant laborers, and of the returning migrants, 16.06 percent had participated in the establishment of rural enterprises or in agricultural business (see Han and Cui, 2007).

It has often been presumed that rural areas would be the final resort for migrant workers who had lost their job in the city. Sustained by the existing land-use system, the village would bear the social costs of the reproduction of its laborers. This argument was supported by the frequently repeated fact that, once workers left their factories, they would temporarily return to their hometowns for a few weeks. The strong desire to return, particularly for the Chinese New Year, was demonstrated in 2008 when, despite incessant snowstorms causing hundreds of deaths and thousands of injuries, a great wave of laborers came home. In many workers' diaries and journals, the phrases "missing home" and "dreaming of going home" recur. Such nostalgia could be understood as the "weapon of the weak" in the face of the cruelty of industrial life. "Home" becomes their imaginary anchor to life.

However, second-generation peasant-workers were soon to discover that their lived experience was a radical overturning of this assumption—an assumption that had sustained the previous generation. In contrast to the formation of the English working class in the late eighteenth century and the nineteenth century, the new Chinese working class had not undergone the brutal process of a land-enclosure movement, nor was it forced by the state to give up its right to land. Instead, the land rights of the agrarian population, based on the male line of succession, enjoyed legal protection, even though there have been heated debates about the privatization of rural land and

about the obvious subsequent erosion of peasants' land rights in the last decade (Qin, 2006). Chinese peasants are still able to keep for themselves a small piece of land sufficient to sustain a life of basic subsistence. The final cancellation of the agriculture tax in 2006 further eased the burden on peasants. Unlike the English working class, the Chinese working class faced no coercion effectively forcing on them a process of proletarianization. However, the fact that there are no compulsory measures forcing peasants to leave their land has not made a significant difference. The second-generation peasant-workers' sense of "enclosure" has been acute, owing to the worsening situation in the life of peasants and the loss of the means of soil-dependent subsistence. Xin remembered his return to his hometown:

When I got back home [in March 2000], it was seeding time for the coming year. I was thrilled because I had a great plan in mind. I sub-contracted a piece of waste-land to set up an agricultural business. I couldn't sleep at night because I was obsessed with the idea that if I could expand the scale of cash-crop planting, I could also make money. I could show my parents and the villagers that returning home was a good move.

Xin began by mobilizing his relatives and neighbors: "I could do it because I made a tremendous effort to convince people and I had a good network in the village." Xin was pleased. Others provided tractors and farm labor. He was able to acquire around twenty *mu* of arable land to start his plan. After conducting a local market survey, Xin decided to grow watermelons, a fruit he thought would be easy to manage and have market potential. However, circumstances were against him, as they usually are in rural lives. Owing to heavy rains, the watermelons ripened too soon to be sold. Xin's father, from the outset, had objected to the subcontracting project. Behind Xin's back, his father had urged the others to withdraw their support. After just a few months, almost all Xin's savings of several thousand yuan had been spent. He had no choice: he had to leave home to work again.

Kind, diligent, and perhaps a bit stubborn (like many other farmers of his age), Xin's father, now 56 years old, was a typical *nongmin*, who had worked his whole life on the land to support his family.¹¹ He knew the land and the village better than anyone else. In his view, there is no hope of escaping poverty by staying on the land and by depending on farming. His strong opposition to his son's plans for an agricultural business expressed the same attitude as his determination to push his son out of the village by making him repeat the university examinations. According to Xin's father, the village is not the

place for a young and capable person. It offers no opportunity to avoid the fate of being a poor person (*qiong renjia*), that is, to avoid suffering from a life of hardship (*kuming*) (see also Guo, 2008). The *qiong* and *ku* of peasant life convinced Xin's father that Xin, with a high school education, should make every effort to leave the village for good. Staying would not help the family gain face; it would ensure *bu zheng guang* (i.e., it would seal the family's "inability to gain face and honor"). The attitude of Xin's father is not exceptional in rural China today, as many honest and diligent peasants whom we met shared the same judgment regarding rural poverty and nondevelopment. The prevalence of this judgment reflected both the outcome of urban hegemony and the tilt of modernity toward urbanization and industrialization under the context of global capitalism and a socialist market economy (Yan, 2008).

The opposition of Xin's father to Xin's plan mimicked an act of enclosure to a certain degree: there was no way the father would let his son stay in the countryside. Xin's strong "will to return" encountered his father's strong "will of refusal," revealing the life struggles between the father and the son. The victory of his father's refusal undermined Xin's strong desire to return, resulting in a similar sense of enclosure, both spiritually and physically.

Xin was definitely not alone in this "enclosure" experience. Of those peasant-workers who *decided* to return home to do business in their hometown village, less than half eventually *returned* to the village (see Han and Cui, 2007). And regarding that minority category of returnees, most of them whom we met in Shenzhen and Dongguan ended up losing money. Hua, a female worker who returned home to marry a suitor and to engage in agricultural business in a village in western Guangdong, said, "I lost five thousand in three months' time trying to raise ducks in my hometown. I don't have experience in feeding ducks. Many ducks died, and I lost money. This is why you see me again" (Interview in Shenzhen, Dec. 2006). When female workers reached marriageable age, usually between 22 and 26 years, they would return home, get married, and move into the home of their husband's family, and some of them would end up running a small business in town. Hua, however, came back to Shenzhen in pursuit of *dagong* only after a half-year break in the village. Recent government policy to promote not only the return of migrants to their hometown villages but also economic development there could not offset the negative factors affecting people like Hua and Xin: lack of both experience and skill in doing agricultural business, lack of both material and financial capital necessary for setting up a successful enterprise, and a highly fluctuating market all contributed to the failure of business ventures like the duck husbandry and the watermelon farm. Our visit to Xin's village

in Henan revealed the extent of this situation. Only a few households were involved in agricultural business, and one such household was that of Xin's uncle. He had subcontracted a fish pond and a lotus-roots plantation pond, and raised a few pigs and sheep. Although the family was working very hard to maintain their business, Xin's uncle and aunt both said that they could hardly earn 10,000 yuan a year. Were Xin to have stayed on and kept running his business, he might have had great difficulty in surpassing even the modest achievement of his uncle.

Xin felt that he had no choice but to leave his hometown again. This time, he was traumatized. Internalizing his pain, he journeyed to Shenzhen again. On the train to Shenzhen, he overheard someone say that good money could be made by doing sculptures. He was hired at a handicraft factory where he earned 800 yuan a month. After a probation period, his wages increased steadily. In his third year at the factory (2002), he earned up to 1,700 yuan per month. With overtime, he sometimes earned 3,000 yuan a month.

Xin was lucky enough to rise to the position of master craftsman and earn a high salary. However, because of the trauma he had suffered, Xin was never able to truly enjoy his work life. If the pursuit of material rewards is the shared ambition overriding the internal differences among the working class, the pursuit had lost its meaning for Xin. The concept of work was blighted for him, creating a rupture in his life: "Wherever I work, I don't feel happy. My soul is never at peace. I always feel that I should do some big thing."

The second generation of migrant workers has faced a pronounced dilemma, as one of the women workers we met in Dongguan noted, "I missed my home while I was out to dagong. When I returned home, I thought of going out again" (Interview in Dongguan, Apr. 2006). Only a small percentage of migrant workers are willing to return to their hometown in order to make a living, and yet like Xin, they find no way to transform their return into something sustainable. Many members of the second generation have realized that their existing rural community means "no development" and hence "no return." "Farming has no value" has become common-sense truism among peasant-workers. They know that a modest owner-built house, together with marriage expenses, basic education fees, the cost of medical care, and daily household costs, would eat up all the dagong earnings of the family. The social reproduction of labor in terms of housing, clothing, education, and medical care—indeed, in terms of most forms of labor except for food-related labor—depends largely if not exclusively on the incomes that peasant-workers earn in pursuit of dagong. In sum, both the lack of opportunities for individual development for returned migrants and the structural barriers preventing members of rural communities from successfully

addressing the social cost of reproduction contribute to a sense of “land enclosure,” resulting in what we have understood to be a process of “self-driven” proletarianization.

The emptying out of the rural communities has had its material aspects as well as its spiritual aspects. For the younger generation, whose members have grown up in relatively good living conditions, have a more cosmopolitan outlook than their elders, and have a perhaps unparalleled interest in what color dye to use in their hair and what style of clothing to sport, now it is even harder for these migrants to find a convincing reason to return home for good once they embark on their *dagong* journey. They are usually not able to identify how much land their family has and how much of the family income is generated from farming or agricultural business. There is now a greater desire among the second generation of migrant workers to look for ways of staying in the city. They understand that *dagong*—working for a boss in an alien workplace—cannot last long, and now many more migrant workers dream of turning themselves into self-employed operators of lucrative businesses. Both the unfulfilled expectations and the incessant frustration of moving back and forth between the city and the country have weighed heavily on the second generation, inevitably creating anger and grievances that cannot find a release.

Anger, Collective Action, and the New Working Class

We have to rely on ourselves. We can't trust the government, we can't trust management. We simply want a speck of justice (*yidian gongping*).

—A worker participating in a labor protest in Shenzhen in March 2003

The process of proletarianization in reform-era China has created a new working class that is increasingly conscious of, and prepared to participate in, various forms of collective action (Chan, 2001; Lee, 2007; Thireau and Hua, 2003; Chan and Pun, 2009). The “enclosure” of the second generation of migrant workers has nurtured spontaneous strikes in south China. Although it is difficult to estimate the number of collective actions, official statistics reveal that between 1993 and 2005 the number of incidents rose from 10,000 to 87,000 (a 20 percent increase per annum) and that 75 percent of these protests were mounted by workers and peasants (Leung and Pun, 2009).

According to national statistics, the number of labor disputes in arbitration soared from 135,000 in 2000 to 314,000 in 2005, for an average increase of 18.4 percent per year. In 2003, the number of employees involved in labor arbitration reached 801,042 (*Laodong tongji nianjian*, 2006).

Anxiety, loneliness, and pain have long besieged the lives of the first generation of the new working class. If Yan, a pioneer of the first generation, was not able to articulate her negative feelings collectively and openly, the second generation of migrant workers has now asked for a change. For the second generation, pain and anger are evident in their working lives. If Xin's narrative is worth highlighting, it is only because he suffered from social traumas throughout his school experience, his work life, and his failed attempt to return home. All these experiences brought his anger to a head: "I believe that I should do something big. I should have a bigger ideal in my life." On various occasions, he emphasized that he was unhappy and had not achieved inner balance (*pingheng*).

Xin turned his turmoil outward and acted collectively. In early 2007, when he found that his factory had decided to relocate outside Shenzhen in order to reduce production costs, he mobilized his coworkers who together embarked on a series of collective actions. Xin and four coworkers launched a lawsuit against the local labor bureau for failing both to respond to the workers' demands and to implement administrative measures that would protect labor. The five workers were later known as the "five gentlemen of labor-rights protection" (*weiquan wu junzi*) and became famous labor militants. Of the five workers, only Xin was from Henan, the other four hailing from other localities, including Hunan and Jiangxi. All the workers had belonged to the same production unit (the molding department) and had risen to the status of molding masters. They were all in their 30s, and the oldest, Huang, had worked for the factory for five years and earned up to 4,200 yuan a month. Xin had only worked there for one year; he made around 2,200 yuan a month.

Conflicts with the management at the point of production united workers as militants, while staying together at the dormitory facilitated their organization and mobilization. At night, the five workers often listened to the radio, especially to programs on legal rights and work issues. Xin said that listening to the broadcasts was an "act of enlightenment": They learned that working without a contract was illegal and that overtime work should receive double or triple pay.

On the February 12, 2007, the five workers launched an industrial action, declaring that the factory was an illegal operation. They submitted a written notice of "collective revocation of labor relations" to the factory management,

on the grounds that the management had failed to sign lawful labor contracts and to pay social insurance premiums, had forced them to work overtime, and had not paid overtime premiums on weekdays, weekends, and statutory holidays. At the same time, the protesting workers urged the district labor officials to defend workers' legitimate rights. Specifically, Xin and his colleagues demanded that the officials ensure that the factory would shorten its working hours to the legal limit, sign lawful labor contracts with employees, enroll in social insurance schemes, and pay wages and overtime premiums for January and February 2007. Most strikingly, the five workers demanded back pay for two years of overtime work; the amount was equivalent to RMB 650 thousand. They stated their points clearly:

Employees are required to work at least 28 days a month and 13 hours a day. Overtime premiums were only paid when one worked for more than 9 hours. However, the illegal underpayment of the workers amounts to between 1 and 1.2 yuan per hour. There is no overtime premium at all for pieceworkers.

Take the example of Huang XX: in December 2006, he worked for 227 hours (considered a "normal" workload), plus 114.5 hours of overtime work. In January 2007, he worked for 266 hours, with 87.5 hours of overtime. Or Chen XX: in December 2006, he worked for 269.5 hours, plus 77.5 hours of overtime.

Still, the catalyst of the collective action was the factory relocation. Anger, frustration, and a sense of unfairness were mounting in the workplace. The fear of layoffs and the difficulty of acquiring overtime compensation after the factory's relocation reinforced the protesting workers' determination to take action. As one of the five, Huang, observed,

We are among the few core skilled workers in the factory. I earn around 4,000 yuan every month; that's not nothing. I don't have to worry about what to eat or drink. But we lack a sense of security. We also don't have a decent self-image. Despite the dedication of our youth and sweat to Shenzhen, we've been displaced and are ultimately disposable. When we get old, contract chronic occupational diseases, and go home, what can we do without old-age pensions and health insurance? (Interview in Beijing, Apr. 2008)

Huang made it clear that he was not discontented with his working conditions or salary; what worried him was the future, the prospect of neither security

nor dignity. As a replaceable laborer, he was aware of his vulnerable position. When he became old, he would be let go by the factory, would probably be suffering from a chronic occupational disease, and would—of necessity—return to his hometown. It was this sense of no future and no dignity that precipitated his anger and grievances in his professional life.

The five workers felt that they had little choice but to take action. In their mid-thirties, they had all reached the limit of their career advancement, and what awaited them was inevitable decline and probable replacement by younger workers. They all knew that the skills they had learned could be learned by others. Caught in the limbo of no return and no progress, they were ready to take radical action. The target of their action shifted from the factory management to the local government. Eagerly acquiring information on the Internet, Xin and his coworkers soon figured out that the local bureau should be responsible for monitoring work conditions and handling labor disputes. The activist workers also calculated that a case of arbitration against a local state agent such as a labor bureau would lower their legal expenses. They finally sued the labor bureau for “administrative inertia”: not handling their labor dispute case properly. However, the court declined to accept their case.

During the course of litigation, 600 production workers of this Disney-supplier factory, most of whom were women, also organized a strike. In May 2007, the factory signed short-term contracts with its employees and announced that the factory would relocate the facility to Dongguan by the end of the year. By September, the women workers had united to stage collective work stoppages, protests, and revocations of their contracts. They demanded unpaid overtime premiums, financial compensation, and the social insurance they were owed (*Southern Metropolis Daily*, September 12, 2007). “No boss has a conscience” was the frequent refrain of the workers when they walked out the dormitory building with their luggage. The sense of the disposability of labor was strong, not only among the women workers who resigned but also among those who chose to stay. The women workers were further aggravated when the management argued that, according to the labor law, the company was required to give workers only 24 hours’ notice of contract termination, and thus no compensation was needed. The one-month compensation offered should be considered a benefit, not a right. Workers should be pleased to leave, even though they had worked for the company for up to six years.

In July, the five workers took their case to court for the second time. They submitted a more detailed account of the mishandling of their complaints by the labor bureau. More important, they insisted on financial compensation and the right to safeguard their interests:

We do not have hopes for winning over the government departments or for successfully claiming compensation. But we do wish to create a new possibility—to point to a new path of safeguarding our rights that would be helpful to workers. (*Nanfang dushi bao*, July 25, 2007)

It would be too easy to say that this collective action was simply interest-oriented. The more we understand about Xin and his coworkers' work lives, the more we realize that anger and resentment informed every stage of their actions. For Xin, neither money nor personal fame was the driving force of his action. He was motivated by the desire "to do something big," "to have attention paid to the hardship of a laborer's life," "to seek justice for the *dagongzai*," and "to punish a cruel employer." Obviously, their employer owed them a reasonable salary, one that met the legal minimum wage standards. Paying what was owed should not have been too difficult for a company as famous and sizable as the one supplying Disney with toys.

Having waited for legal action for a year, three of the five workers—Xin, Huang, and Chen—finally took their case to Beijing in April 2008. It was their last chance to seek help from the central government: "Going to Beijing is the last step. We have taken almost every step we could. Now it's the last step, and we don't want to miss it," Huang said. During their five days in Beijing, they visited the Ministry of Labor and Social Security, the Petition Office of the People's Congress, the Supreme People's Court, the State Council and All-China Federation of Trade Unions. Their reception filled them with despair. Later, Xin and Chen claimed the trip to Beijing was worthwhile because, after being expelled by the Petition Office after hours of queuing, they realized they were on their own: "I finally lost my confidence in the party. I still had some hope before I came," Chen said. The politics of resentment was transformed into a sense of desperation and an acute understanding of the wretchedness and helplessness of working people: "We have to rely on ourselves. We can't trust the government; we can't trust management. We simply want a speck of justice (*vidian gongping*)."

Conclusion

The reform has remade China and turned it into the world's preeminent workshop. It has also remade the Chinese working class. Taking a specific path of proletarianization, the second generation of peasant-workers has gradually become aware of its class position and has participated in a series of collective actions. Having a quasi-social status, *nongmingong*, the second generation of migrant workers is now experiencing a deeper sense of anger

and dissatisfaction than that of the first generation, and is realizing that they are increasingly cut off from so many erstwhile or nominal sources of support—in fact, there is almost no returning to their hometown. A process of “enclosure” has been attached to an unfinished process of proletarianization of Chinese peasant-workers, and the entire edifice rests on a spatial chasm between production in urban areas and reproduction in the countryside.

Inspired by E. P. Thompson’s classic work, *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963), we strive to make sense of the newly formed Chinese working class not as abstract subjects created from a temporal manifestation of social structure only (e.g., the reform), but as historical agents who have participated in making their own social change while China has evolved into the world’s workshop. To the new Chinese working class, China’s *mingong* status in this regard has been a lived experience. The lived experience has yielded anger, trauma, and a deep sense of profound unfairness and has embedded itself in the lives of the second generation of peasant-workers. Therefore, this experience is of tremendous significance in our efforts to understand the future development of class action in China.

Xin’s story powerfully highlights the contours of this generalized experience by presenting an in-depth portrait of the corresponding struggles in the workplace as well as in rural life. Xin’s heartrending experience is both individual and social. Perhaps Xin is unique in that he had a strong-minded father who tried his best to dash his son’s dream of a successful entrepreneurial return to his hometown. However, Xin is like many other migrant workers who have tried and failed to establish a small business in their hometown. The failure forces them to leave the countryside again—an incessant, unfinished process of proletarianization. A vicious circle has been created: the reform and the rural–urban dichotomy foster a desire to escape the countryside; escape leads only to the hardship of factory life; the frustration of factory life induces the desire to return. However, there is no place for returned migrants—going out to *dagong* is considered the only means of survival and getting ahead. This vicious circle contributes to a series of brutally truncated life experiences, resulting, inevitably, in a politics of resentment. The migrant worker now has no hope and no vision that would provide meaning to a life of *dagong*.

Workers’ narratives help us understand both the continuity and the change characteristic of the second generation of migrant workers. In contrast to the first generation of *dagongmei*, who might have turned their pain inward, Xin, a member of the second generation, has faced his trauma and turned his anger outward. If transience was a dominant characteristic of the first generation of migrant workers, rupture characterizes the second generation and creates

closure: no progress or retreat. Pain, anger, and suffering have nurtured the working class, and have transformed its rank and file into opponents of capital. Without collective bargaining power, an effective trade union, or elected representatives, the workers in times of distress often turn to the state, which invariably disappoints them: “We have to rely on ourselves. We can’t trust the government; we can’t trust management.”

Through a detailed study of Xin’s life struggles and through our ethnographic studies of the industrial communities of the Pearl River Delta, we hope to shed light on how human emotion and suffering can contribute significantly to our understanding of collective resistance or class action. Driven by their anger and their sense of fairness, workers have fought against all types of discursive and structural constraints, as shown in the recent waves of labor strikes in south China. And as new class subjects, the second generation of the working class now objects to the unfinished process of proletarianization, the race-to-the-bottom global-production strategies, the uprooting experience of the city, and their quasi *mingong* identity. We have studied the sense of self, the anger, and the collective action of the second generation of peasant-workers, and we have noted that these people exist squarely at the center of a grid of controls and domination where workers themselves can negotiate and articulate their own agency. We have observed an array of everyday and collective instances of resistance coming from the new working class. The resistance has taken place at new heights in the struggle, threatening the forces of capital and of the state that have been anxious to subdue this resistance.

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Notes

1. The new Chinese working class discussed in this article is not to be confused with the Chinese working class in the socialist period, which Andrew Walder (1984) termed the *second* working class. In contrast to this *second* working class, which was a product of the state, the new Chinese working class, an outgrowth of the market economy, has been shaped largely by capitalism, in conjunction with pro-capitalist policies, and now accounts for 57.5 percent of China’s industrial workforce. See also Ching Kwan Lee’s recent work (2007) for a detailed comparison of the two patterns of the Chinese working class with regard to labor protests and collective action.
2. Our study in Shenzhen owes much to the help of the Chinese Working Women Network (CWWN), a local labor NGO that has been in operation since 1996. We were introduced to Xin in the summer of 2007 and began a series of interviews with him. The interviews took place in Shenzhen in December 2007, in Beijing during his petition trip with his coworkers in April 2008, and in a village in Henan in May 2008, when Xin returned to his hometown for a short stay. We would like to thank CWWN and Leung Shuk Mei, a labor researcher, for introducing us to Xin. CWWN conducted a survey of 350 workers in the Huang Tian Industrial District of Shenzhen in the summer of 2005. This study of the life plans of migrant workers was initiated by CWWN with aid from the first author of the article. It covers fifteen factories, mostly in the garment, electronics, toy, and printing industries. The second author contributed to a Dongguan-based study that covers nine factories in three industrial towns and that involved 655 workers who were asked to fill out an open-ended questionnaire in April 2006.
3. Characteristic of the second generation of factory workers has been an increasing body of male workers who have occupied either higher rungs on the hierarchy, such as managerial and technical positions, or lower rungs on the hierarchy, such as security guards or temporary workers. A higher percentage of male workers have also entered the production lines of the garment, electronics, toy, and other light industries owing to south China’s shortage of industrial-zone labor, which has emerged since the early 2000s.
4. In this article, we have adopted the conceptions of class and class consciousness described by E. P. Thompson:

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 usually opposed to) theirs. The class experience is largely determined by the productive relations into which men are born—or enter involuntarily. Class-consciousness is the way in which these experiences are handled in cultural terms: embodied in traditions, value-systems, ideas, and institutional forms. (1963: 289)

5. This living experience is strikingly different from that of the urban middle class, which assumes that industrialization goes hand in hand with urbanization. Obviously, there is rapid urbanization in today's China, but this process is driven mainly by capital in the form of urban property. Industrial capital plays only one among the many roles that have turned China into the world's preeminent factory.
6. Richard Sennett and Jonathan Cobb stated that the hidden injury of class is the creation of a feeling of inadequacy embedded in the self through day-to-day life experiences. The self is induced to feel responsible for the inner anxiety arising from a sense of inadequacy or incompleteness even though, in a society with a class structure, individuals are deprived of the freedom to control their lives (1972: 36–37).
7. See a case study of the first generation of migrant workers in Pun, 2005: chap. 6.
8. For the younger generation in rural China today, entering a university is one of the few ways to leave the countryside and settle in the city while reserving for oneself both legal rights and potential economic support. Except for a few elites, the majority of the *nongmingong*, despite their position in the industrial hierarchy, cannot reside in the city on an equal footing with their urban counterparts. Among the 1,000 workers we studied in Shenzhen and Dongguan, about 75 percent had received junior secondary education. The female workers often had a smaller chance than the male workers of getting into higher secondary schooling, not to mention getting into a university.
9. Freedom refers to kinds of capabilities that the peasant-workers in the reform period acquired: a freedom of mobility, a freedom to move in pursuit of city-based work, and a freedom to exchange their labor power in the market. These freedoms were unaccompanied by a freedom according to which the workers might make their own production-related or residence-related decisions.
10. There are a few exceptions—families that kept their middle-aged family members in the village. This exception has occurred usually because the family members in question operated a store renting agricultural tools to the villagers, subcontracted a fish pond or a lotus-root plantation, or suffered from illness and hence remained behind as a village cadre. Not much agricultural land, however, was allowed to lay fallow in the village, as most of the agricultural activities were undertaken by the elderly population. The average extent of agricultural land per person was

about 1 *mu*, and the average household income that derived from farming (mostly wheat) and livestock (mostly pigs) was about 2,000 to 3,000 RMB per year.

11. When we visited his father in the village in May 2008, he was the one who took care of all the farming chores and pig rearing on a property of five *mu*. He supported a family of seven: Xin's grandmother, Xin's mother and Xin's father himself, two of their grandchildren (a girl aged three years and a boy aged one year), and Xin and his wife (both of them working in Shenzhen). Xin's grandmother and mother also contributed substantially to the support of the whole family.

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