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The Chinese Migrant Workers: Perspectives on Class Formation and Precarisation

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates how the compatibility of class and precarisation can be conceptualised in the case of Chinese migrant workers. While the debate often centres around their collective actions, this article will take a broader look by compiling social, political and economic developments that promoted the emergence of the Chinese migrant workers. Taking Thompson's class concept as a theoretical point of departure, class is defined as a sociohistorical process. Katznelson's critical enquiry adds to the theoretical framework, as he offers a comparatively open approach by proposing an analysis on different conceptual layers. It is further argued that precarisation accompanies the class formation process, affecting the layers of structure and ways of life while evoking responses on the layers of dispositions and collective action. Following these theoretical investigations, the class formation process of migrant workers is retraced, examining the layers of structure and ways of life, the role of precarisation, and the dispositions and collective action of migrant workers as well as differences between new and old generations of migrant workers. Finally, a framework combining the concepts of class formation and precarisation provides a new understanding of China's contradictory transformation processes.

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The Chinese Migrant Workers: Perspectives on Class Formation and Precarisation

By

Max Paul Greve-Gao[1]

1. Introduction: The Spectre of Class

In the more than 40 years since the Reform and Opening (*gaige kaifang* 改革开放), China's far-reaching transformations changed the country's social landscape. While the rhetoric of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) still centres around socialist values and language, there has been a noticeable turn in academia towards explaining the new social landscape from the perspective of social strata (*shehui jieceng* 社会阶层), rather than class (*jieji* 阶级) (Anagnost 2008:501–504). Except for the concept of a new Chinese middle class, often argued of being as much a political project of the CCP as a (for now) elusive reality, the analysis of strata is thus favoured (Guo 2009; 2012; Lin Chun 2015). While such an approach may allow the researcher to catch a glimpse of a highly diversifying Chinese society, the division of strata based on income levels, consumer preferences or occupational statuses cannot illustrate the whole process of capitalist transformation. [2]

A prominent example of China's far-reaching capitalist transformation and an expression of its ensuing contradictory economic and societal logic is the situation of its migrant workers.[3] Numbering 290 million, or one-third of China's labour force (National Bureau of Statistics 2020), they are subject to an ever-increasing amount of scholarship. Besides research into issues of health, living, and education, there is also a strand of labour research dedicated to the work situation of Chinese migrant workers. Often working in the lowest rungs of the urban labour markets, their integration into capitalist modes of production does not happen without a hitch, signified by their day-to-day individual resistance and occasional collective contention.

[1] The author would like to thank Daniel Fuchs for his encouragement and guidance, as well as his editor and the two anonymous reviewers for their helpful critique.

[2] The question of whether or in which degree the PRC is a capitalist nation is certainly a contentious issue. Debates swing between either praising neoliberalism's advance or glorifying China as one of the last hold-outs of socialism. More often than not, China is marked as an exception by unquestionably adopting the CCP's official definition of socialism with Chinese characteristics (*Zhongguo tese shehuizhuyi* 中国特色社会主义). In contrast, this article adopts the viewpoint that 'it may be more appropriate to define Chinese capitalism in terms of long-lasting contradictions' (Peck & Zhang 2013:369) between a socialist legacy and capitalist reforms.

[3] In this article, the word migrant worker pertains to the rural-to-urban migrant workers within China (*nongmingong* 农民工).

Thus, over the years, a debate regarding the question of class emerged around this resistance. Lee's (2007) ground-breaking study looked at two forms of protest, including that of laid-off workers of state-owned enterprises (SOE) and that of migrant workers. Focusing on their articulatory practices during protests, she argues for different identities expressed by these two subjects. While migrant workers only possess the identities of citizens and masses, laid-off state-sector workers also possess class-based identities (Lee 2007:202). Chan (2012) criticises Lee's use of this concept because it reduces class to an identity that manifests itself in linguistic discourses and does not include the processes of capitalist integration. The qualitative and quantitative changes in migrant workers' protest do point to rising class consciousness in his view. In a more recent article, Lee (2016) argues against such an empowerment hypothesis. Rejecting voluntarist and subjective approaches, she rather wants to highlight how Chinese workers, embedded in their specific institutional and politico-economic context, are confronted by global tendencies of precarisation. In a critical response, Smith and Pun (2018) counter that her precarisation hypothesis only points out the fragmentation of the migrant worker class, and by using the notion of China's uniqueness posits it outside global capitalism.

Besides highlighting arguments for and against the definition of migrant workers as a class, these lively discussions introduced the concept of precarisation into the debate, which is itself a contentious issue, not least since Standing's (2011) proclamation of a new dangerous class called the precariat. While many scholars criticise and distance themselves from the much-contested notion of a global precariat (see e.g. Breman, 2013; Munck, 2013), precarisation in itself is nevertheless capable of being integrated into the concept of class.

Accordingly, the utility of the class concept combined with that of precarisation could stem from the possible explanatory power it has in illuminating another facet of China's contradictory and open-ended transformation process. And, as noted by Peck and Zhang (2013:366), the friction of importing an analytical approach or concept to China can very well be productive.[4] Thus, this paper poses the question: *How can the compatibility of class and precarisation be conceptualised?* This framework is then applied to the case of the Chinese migrant workers.

Primarily being a theoretical investigation, the following parts are based on the synthesis of a broad range of secondary sources. In what constitutes the main part of this article, the concepts of class

[4] While Peck and Zhang (2013) mention this with regard to the varieties of capitalism framework, this reasoning is not bound to only apply to their specific case.

and precarisation are elaborated. Alongside Katznelson's (1986) multi-layered class concept, which is in part inspired by Thompson's (1963) seminal work that investigated the history of the English working class, the concept of precarisation is discussed. It is shown that fitting precarisation to these authors' class concepts necessarily entails the theoretical broadening of precarisation. Subsequently, this theoretical framework is applied to the case of migrant workers in the PRC. Four layers on which class and precarisation are examined are discussed before reconsidering the analytical utility of class and precarisation in the conclusion which also provides an outlook on future issues.

2. Theory: Conceptualising Class and Precarisation as a Process

First of all, the question of the applicability of Western concepts to a non-Western case should be discussed. Here, it is best to keep in mind the first two principles Sinha (1997) mentions in discussing the indigenization of social sciences in non-Western contexts. On the one hand, one needs to 'problematize and question the epistemological and methodological status of all social science categories' (Sinha 1997:176). On the other hand, it would be fruitful to 'embed social theorizing in the socio-cultural and political particularities of a region, without necessarily rejecting all Western input and contribution' (Sinha 1997:177).

Additionally, the characteristics of China's transformation process will help delineate further theoretical considerations. First, the contradictions inherent in this process call for a class concept taking into account the antagonisms and struggles generated by this very process. Second, the openness and historical recentness of this process draws attention to approaches which examine the formation rather than the definitiveness of classes. Thus, this article follows Pun and other researchers' (Chan & Pun 2009; Pun & Lu 2010; Smith & Pun 2018) proposition of using Thompson's and Katznelson's class formation framework in the following elaboration.

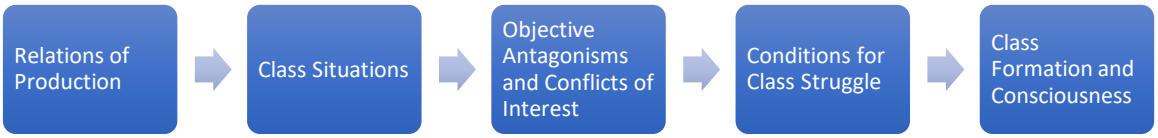
2.1. Point of Departure: Class as a Structured Process

The influence of E.P. Thompson's seminal work *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963) on labour and social history, in general, is profound. While popularising history from the bottom up may be the book's main achievement, Thompson's critique of prevailing structuralisms and subsequent centring of experience in his class concept reworked our understanding of class. Yet his subjective and contingent concept of experience spawned allegations that he obscures objective determinants of class and categorizes every experience and action of subaltern classes as class-based ones. This viewpoint can be traced back to Thompson's belief that class consciousness is a

historical process in which the corresponding class is formed in the process of struggle (Wood 1982:46–47). He wants to highlight the danger of the all too simple equation that modes of production constitute classes, which disregards how first conditions the formation of the latter. Neglected by his critics[5] is the fact that Thompson only postulates that relations of production divide individuals into class situations (i.e. social relations) and, thus, '[c]lass formation and the discovery of class consciousness grow out of the process of struggle, as people 'experience' and 'handle' their class situations. It is in this sense that class struggle precedes class' (Wood 1982:49).

Consequently, conceptualizing class as a social relation and process emphasises the significance of objective relations vis-à-vis means of production as they generate antagonisms. Furthermore, these antagonisms manifest themselves in conflicts and structure social experience in class-like forms, even when they are not articulated in class consciousness and clear class formations. Lastly, the people on which the objective transformations of the productive and working relations are imposed are not blank slates, but historical beings, which are also to be understood across the continuities of the historical process of transformation. Thompson's historical beings are at the same time object and subject, recipient and agent of historical processes (Thompson 1982:58–59). Thus, the concept of class as a structured process can be presented schematically:

Graphic 1: Thompson's class as a structured process (own design)



While in some cases introducing some remarkable innovations to a calcified notion of class, Thompson's concept is nevertheless firmly entrenched in his history of the early English working class. A remedy might be found in Katznelson's approach, which deals critically with Thompson's class concept and its influence on new social history. He consequently elaborates a more complex, but also more open framework allowing the analysis of class formations on a wider spectrum.

2.2. Adding Layers: The Variability of Class Formations

Katznelson's critique initially is pointed against (post-)Marxist approaches in general, which all too often use the class-in-itself/class-for-itself distinction without much reflection. There, structure, worldview, and organization of class are conflated, or latter arises determinedly from former

[5] For an explication, constructive critique and amendment of Thompson's class concept see Sewell, Jr. (1990)

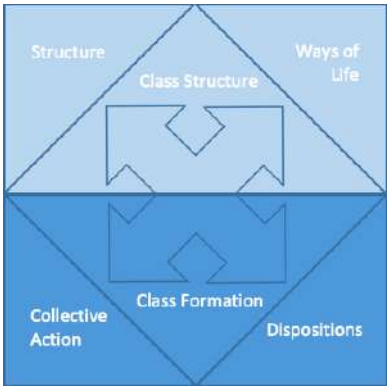
(Katznelson 1986:7). In his view, Thompson intervenes here with his concept of class-as-junction between exogenous determinateness and endogenous agency and thus creates a new point of departure for social history. However, because of the prominent place of Thompson's work, a plethora of unreflective findings are subsumed under his class concept.

Katznelson (1986: 10-13) spots three deficits in this case: ironically, a weak version of the class-in-itself/for-itself model, the labelling of a lack of class consciousness as a deviation from the norm with the consequent creation of a theoretical alibi, and lastly, the polarisation of history and theory. These criticisms must be kept in mind, as Katznelson tries to differentiate his approach from them in the following explication: 'I suggest that class in capitalist societies be thought of as a concept with four connected layers of history and theory: those of structure, ways of life, dispositions, and collective action' (Katznelson 1986:14). On the first layer, the structure of capitalist development and its consequences, proletarianisation and exploitation, are analysed. As an analytical construct, it is experience-distant. Besides the similarities of capitalism, differences in the national economics and structures, for example demographics, cultural traditions or organisation of the state, are highlighted. Similarly, capitalist developments across different contexts are examined on the layer of ways of life, but here, the realisation of social formations is crucial. This layer is experience-near because class relations are lived and experienced in the spheres of production and reproduction. As this layer also includes economic elements, it appears natural to conflate it with the first, but one must keep in mind that capitalism can for example cultivate different types of workplace relations. The differentiation of these specific expressions is the task of this layer. On the next layer, groups with shared ways of thinking are analysed. Regarding dispositions, Katznelson states that '[s]uch cognitive constructs map the terrain of lived experience and define the boundaries between the probable and improbable' (Katznelson 1986:17). These dispositions are not congruent to class structures and ways of life but are rather an answer to the circumstances of the workers. Furthermore, since dispositions are interactive and transcend individuals, they can be understood as cultural configurations under which people act. Finally, dispositions can act as motivators for the layer of collective action. On this layer, groups attain organisation to, for example, consciously change their position in society.

With achievements on these four layers, does a group then constitute a class? This approach is not intended as an answer to this question. Rather, it can be used to investigate the formation of a class regarding the variability of the interdependent processes. Regarding different use cases, Katznelsons (1986:22) additionally notes that the content of these layers historically and

geographically varies, that the layers do not only have to be examined from a stringent class perspective and that the connections between layers are contingent. It is moreover helpful, as Dangschat (1998:56) notes, to see the layers of structure and ways of life as those on which the class structure is produced, while on the layers of dispositions and collective action the class formation is reproduced. This argument is reproduced in the following graphic:

Graphic 2: Katznelson's multi-layered class formation framework (own design)



When comparing this graphic to the one associated with Thompson's class concept, the seemingly non-linear nature of Katznelson's approach is revealed. Thompson's work contains the belief that through the process of industrialisation followed by an inevitable proletarianisation of a large group of workers, these workers will politically challenge the status quo. Thus, his work 'bore the mark of the modernization theorists he aimed to critique' (Batzell et al. 2015:756). A similar critique can be levelled against Katznelson's concept, as he is still influenced by the same meta-narrative. Regarding clusters of class theories around the emergence of the English working class, Somers writes that '[e]ach theory takes as given the *same causes* – proletarianization and the impact of capitalist society. This leaves for empirical research only the historical variations of these unquestioned causes' (Somers 1997:79). Katznelson's class concept, too, is guided by this a priori causal argument.

Following this critique, this article wants to introduce the concept of precarisation, not to completely question the causes and effects of capitalist transformation, but to broaden and complicate this point of view. This involves an explanation and integration of precarisation into the concept of class formation.

2.3. Precarisation: Effects and Responses

Precarious means, for one, to be "vulnerable to the will or decision of others" and, for another, it describes things, both material as well as immaterial, that are unstable, insecure or hazardous (OED Online 2020). The latter meaning was borrowed when, in the sociology of labour, the concept of precarious work gained prominence to highlight the recurrence of low-paying, socially insecure and temporary work in Western society (Dörre 2017:259). A notable elaboration was done by Castel (2000), who observed the erosion of "traditional" employment and divided the society into zones of (in)security. Regarding labour markets and work processes, precarious work was more narrowly defined as a mechanism of control, while Bourdieu (1998) saw precarity in a broader sense as an instrument of power used by the existing political order.

Precarious work is often understood as a deviation from a real or imagined standard of employment, in terms of material, working and legal standards of integration. This orientation towards a supposed standard is shared with the concept of informal work (Mayer-Ahuja 2017), which would explain its often-interchangeable use in literature. For example, Kuruvilla, Lee and Gallagher (2011:4) speak of an 'accelerated transition into precarious informal employment' in the context of China. While informal work should not be subsumed under precarious work, as former could also consist of relatively stable employment which is simply out of the view from government tax authorities, gradual informalisation, for example through a multi-layered subcontracting system, may well be counted as an important factor of precarisation.

Not only the roots but also the consequences of precarisation and how it is defined are different in non-Western countries (Lee 2019). Colonialism, imperialism, authoritarianism, and uneven development in general influence the local occurrences of precarity in specific ways (Lee & Kofman 2012). In addition, conditions of precarity may be institutionalized by state regulations and laws, and lead to a country-specific or even locality-specific development of precarious work (Pang 2019). Thus, even if the global entanglements of capitalism draw attention to precarisation as a global phenomenon (Sproll & Wehr 2014:8), the local outcomes must be analysed in detail.

Lastly, it needs to be considered how precarisation fits into the process of class formation. As staunchly argued by Palmer (2014), the claims of a new precariat class are hardly tenable. Taking a historical perspective, he argues that precarisation always follows the class formation process (Palmer 2014:49). Yet he closely links precarisation to dispossession from which proletarianisation arises. This view may prove to be more restrictive than helpful, especially when one looks at the

diversity of class formation processes. This article proposes that precarisation must be investigated on each of the four layers of class formation. While the layers of structure and ways of life mainly analyse the effects of precarisation, the layers of dispositions and collective action are concerned mostly with responses to it. Thus, precarisation is a constant companion of class formation but is also challenged by its recipients, effectively being changed in the process (Sproll & Wehr 2014:5).

What follows now is an application of this framework to the case of the Chinese migrant worker. In the first block, structure and ways of life are analysed, then the effects of precarisation are discussed. After that, dispositions and collective action are examined with special attention granted to the responses to precarisation.

3. Retracing the Migrant Workers from a Class Formation Perspective

3.1. Structure

On the layer of structure, this article aims to retrace three developments which especially influence the emergence and class formation of migrant workers: (1) the structural release of Chinese farmers, (2) the particularities of the developmental system, and (3) the intensifying of the rural-urban divide and the *hukou* (户口) system. These developments in the objective structures in favour of capitalist developments in today's China are located in the Reform and Opening period which is considered a break with the socialism of the Mao era, and began after the reformers gained power in the face of crisis phenomena, such as the slowing down of industrial growth, political leadership battles after the death of Mao, and the growth of social resistance (ten Brink 2013:103).

(1) The Structural Release of Chinese Farmers

The transformation of rural China was the basic prerequisite to the emergence of the migrant workers. Before the reforms, agricultural work was generally administrated in collectives. The introduction and enforcement of the household responsibility system transferred the land use rights, as well as profits and risks onto the household. Even though rudimentary welfare still existed under this system of "full responsibility" (Zweig 1997:57), the main burden and livelihood security shifted from the collective to the household and its farmland. The rural household effectively became, except for the state grain quota (abolished in 2006), a free-market actor and was able to freely allocate its resources, including its labour-power. This not only led to an enormous growth in production, but also to the release of large swaths of the agricultural labour force. These parts of the labour force were initially absorbed by the then burgeoning township and village enterprises (TVE), but in the late 1990s their expansion stagnated (Chan 2016:129–130).

This stagnation was met by a policy change of the central state regarding rural-to-urban migration, allowing local states to manage their migration restrictions. Yet, cities in the late 1990s also suffered from high unemployment rates stemming from the restructuring of SOEs. Therefore, restrictions by the local government helped to channel the migrant workers in the low-paying and low-prestige jobs which were shunned by the urban population (Li 2010:6).

(2) Particularities of the Development Model

These developments must be seen in tandem with the particularities of China's reform model. Inspired by the East Asian development model[6], and later alerted by the negative effects of the "Big Bang" economic liberalisation in Russia and some of its former bloc states, a gradual and initially on special economic zones (SEZ) confined process of capitalist development took place, called 'gradualism with growth' (Gallagher 2005:9).

One distinctive feature of this process lies in the centrality and early liberalisation of foreign direct investment (FDI) (Kroeber 2016:14). The high volume of FDI is a special case of the East Asian development model, as it normally took place without great foreign participation in the market. According to Gallagher (2005:6), FDI had three functions in the Chinese restructuring process. First, it exerted competitive pressure vis-à-vis SOEs, which consequently introduced capitalist work practices. Second, FDI and the foreign sector served as laboratories of reform through which the reform process could be gradually pushed forward. Third, an ideological reinterpretation took place. Public ownership was reinterpreted as national ownership so that competitiveness could be made imperative.

In this view, FDI might have exerted two influences in the early reform process. For one, foreign capital inflows helped in building capitalist production sites in China, in which first and foremost migrant workers are exposed to the real subjugation of capital. On a larger scale, FDI played an outstanding role in the tight integration of China with the global market in the form of an 'extrovert economy' (So 2010:100) and thereby facilitated the formal subjugation of China and its workers under global capitalist rationale.

[6] The East Asian development model describes those East Asian capitalist economies in which a strong central directs the economy and invests in specific sectors to boost their growth. Japan, South Korea, Singapore and Taiwan are often mentioned in relation to this model (White & Wade 1988).

(3) Urban-Rural Divide and the Hukou System

The selective investment of FDI in state chosen SEZs and their surrounding provinces heightened China's regional disparities. Coastal provinces such as Jiangsu or Guangdong received respectively 7.6 and 12.7 per cent of their regional GDP in FDI during the high tide of foreign investment (1993-2002), while the capital inflow for inland provinces amounted to only 1.4 per cent (Naughton 2018:426). FDI was mainly invested in the export-oriented light industry, which required vast labour resources, found in the poorer inland provinces.

Here, state regulations come into play by facilitating a migration regime through its *hukou* system, thereby utilising these structures of inequality. The *hukou* system which divided the population into urban and rural people by linking an individual's household registration with social welfare, such as food stamps in the urban areas, and agricultural subsistence in rural ones, has been gradually relaxed. While the decentralization of the *hukou* system shifted the primary distinction to one between local and non-local *hukou*, the system still disfavours the migrant workers. In most cases, they do not attain the strict criteria for a local *hukou* status and the social welfare that accompanies it (Chan & Buckingham 2008:595–596).[7]

Thus, the toleration of migrant workers without their effective integration in the cities' welfare system allows for the separation of production and reproduction spheres, and the passing on of costs to the institutions in their hometowns or the workers themselves. As a result, the state and market are each tightly interwoven in respectively supplying and demanding cheap labour for the urban areas. On the structural layer, the dualisation of the Chinese economy continues. Yet what differs from the Mao era is the emergence of a labour force caught between the rural and the urban spheres based on accumulation without expropriation.

3.2. Ways of Life

The changes and continuities on the layer of structure are reinforced by the actual development of capitalist society at and away from work, namely the production and reproduction spheres in which migrant workers reside. On the layer of ways of life, this article thus wants to highlight (1) the peculiar connections between these spheres in the case of migrant factory workers, and (2) the reliance on kinship and hometown ties.

[7] This picture might become more complicated when looking at differences between larger cities and small towns. While the larger cities are still major destinations, smaller cities are also host to large swathes of migrant workers. Garcia (2011), for example, argues in her work that small towns may be more effective in their social inclusion of migrants.

(1) Disconnecting and Reconnecting Migrant Workers' Regimes of (Re)Production

The duality upheld by the *hukou* system is reflected in the peculiar separation and concurrent fusion of production and reproduction, which is exemplified most vividly by the 'dormitory regime' (Pun & Smith 2007:30).

The migrant workers who are producing goods for the international, as well as the domestic market, in China's factories are subjugated to a harsh system of production. The fast-growing demand for flexible production calls for flexible labour-power, which is supplied by the migrant workers. But flexible production is no trend specific to China and migrant workers. What makes the situation of a great margin of migrant workers different from other workers is the connection of flexible production with the accommodation of the workers within the closed factory complex, and the consequent extension of control mechanisms onto the domain of labour-power reproduction. The example of Foxconn[8], the world's largest provider of electronics manufacturing services, illustrates this. First, looking at the domain of production, the long hours and high work intensity must be highlighted. Pay is low, and thus overtime work is required to receive adequate pay – a common theme in Chinese manufacturing. The workers are integrated into production in a standardised manner (Deng, Jin & Pun 2013:58), leading not only to the alienation from their work, but also to fragmentation among themselves, as each of them has only small tasks in the production chain.

The tightly controlled regime of production is complemented by a dormitory system, in which the workers are even denied their respite from work, as they are constantly monitored and disciplined. Thus, the dormitories can be seen as the extension of their workbenches (Liang, Bao & Lu 2013:88). Controls are almost as strict as they are in the production facilities. Workers from the same hometowns or even province are divided into different rooms or dormitories. Their freedom is systematically limited by the ordering of "voluntary" work, and the (moral) supervision of workers is widened by prohibiting drinking, smoking, gambling, and visits from the opposite sex (Liang, Bao & Lu 2013:88–92, 96–99). On the spatial and social dimension, this regime of (re)production thus contributes to a new type of alienated urbanism (Yang 2014) in Chinese cities.

[8] The Taiwanese electronics giant is part of another facet of China's integration into the global capitalist economy. Especially in the beginning, large parts of foreign investments came from economies operating in close cultural proximity to China. While investments arrived from Taiwan and Hong Kong, the new capitalist class in China funnelled their profits back through them, explaining the considerable weight of these economies for "foreign" investment in China. So, Lin & Poston (2001) provide in their collection more in-depth examinations of further connections.

(2) Hometown Networks

Even outside of the confines of the factory complex, spatial and institutional exclusion highlights migrant workers as an outlying group. They often congregate in the urban periphery or urban villages – rural enclaves surrounded by the sprawling city. There they find grey areas of healthcare and schooling for their children, as high fees often exclude them from both. Besides the formation of a dual labour market, the dualisation of Chinese cities also takes their course. Yet these "modern" ways of exclusion are also crisscrossed by social ties established in migrant workers' hometowns (Pun, Lu & Zhang 2016; Swider 2014).

The continuing dependence on their hometowns is not only stemming from their institutional exclusion at their destinations but is also a product of the enduring reliance on social networks in finding and organising work. Construction workers may be the best-investigated example because it shows how this reliance coincides with an exploitative mode of production (Pun, Lu & Zhang 2016:123).

The construction industry in China is characterised by a multi-layered system of subcontractors, with migrant workers employed as construction workers under the leadership of a petty labour contractor being situated on the lowest tier (Pang 2019:555). The contractors recruit the workers mostly from their hometowns and lead their work on the construction site. At the end of the contract, they pay out the wages, which is usually done just before Chinese New Year, when the workers migrate back to their villages. Besides the subcontractor system, these hometown networks disguise the relationship between capital and labour and divide the construction workers by their hometowns. While the relations of production on the site of work are still discernible, the borders become less clear after returning. In their hometowns, the kinship norms and relations are emphasised more strongly. This often leads the workers to forego open confrontations with their contractors, which are sometimes friends or family, to save the face of both parties (Pun, Lu, & Zhang 2016:118–123). Here, capitalist processes are overlapping with non-capitalist practices and intensify the exploitation of and divisions between the construction workers (Pun, Lu & Zhang 2016, p. 139).

In contrast, Swider (2014:50) compares this type of 'intermediary' employment with 'embedded' employment. Latter is based on the high rate of interaction in urban migrant enclaves, wherein new networks are built. Besides hometown networks, migrant workers may utilise these new networks

to change employment and thereby expand and branch out their networks. This adds to the formation of a more intertwined migrant worker class.

3.3. Endemic Precarisation: The Case of the Labour Law

Capitalism in China, just as in the rest of the world, entails the precarisation of one or more segments of workers. The class-formation process of the migrant workers was and still is accompanied by precarisation by both state and capital. While migrant workers did not experience the departure from the urban standard employment, meaning the transition from the social(ist) contract to the individual labour contract, they are the recipients hit most strongly by precarious employment, which may define a new normal.

This article furthermore argues that the distinctiveness of China's *hukou* system suggests an inherent potential for precarisation, which is brought into action through uneven development and subsequent migration, as social security is mostly *hukou*-based. Besides urban marginalisation and institutional exclusion, the temporary character of their migration is forced by the state and can only be partially covered by non-state mechanisms of integration, such as hometown networks. The *hukou* system separates the productive from the reproductive sphere and thereby instils uncertainty into the working and living conditions of migrant workers at their destinations.

The state is conscious of the immense growth of social inequality and the issues this has for social stability. When looking at reforms and policies enacted by the state, included in them are also measures aiming to socially and legally protect migrant workers in particular. Yet these measures only lead to marginal changes in favour of migrant workers. Simultaneously, new tendencies of precarisation develop in reaction. The deep-seated problems, which prohibit substantial change, can be exemplified with the labour law reforms of 2008-09 (see e.g. Gallagher & Dong 2011).

To remedy the widespread lack of labour contracts and employment rights of migrant workers, the labour law reforms aimed at providing these rights, albeit only in the individual sense. Collective employment relations, which constitute the core issue through which migrant workers could assert their rights, were therefore not addressed (Chang & Brown 2017:39). Now, just as before, collective bargaining only takes place after migrant workers articulated their interests through strikes and protests. Afterwards, the state, in using the only legal union, the All China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU), takes charge of the bargaining without much input from the affected. The more or less organised migrant workers are thus side-lined. 'In a legal sense, the workers are the

responsive aspect of labour, while the union is the authorised aspect' (Chang & Brown 2017:41), with no effective linkage between the two. The migrant workers are thus deliberately alienated from politics of labour.

The legislative process of the Labour Law Reforms in itself also showed to what extent the state acknowledged the interest of capital as hegemonic (Friedman & Lee 2010:528). A novelty was the involvement of public opinion in the legislative process. Besides many suggestions by NGOs, academia, and workers, global as well as national capital formed up to resist the, on paper strict, standards (Gallagher & Dong 2011). While they did not succeed in preventing the law, capital succeeded in considerably limiting its reach, which is also partly owed to the state's concessions in wake of the global economic crisis.

Although the formalisation of employment relations must be seen as a big step forward, it does not hide the growth of new tendencies of precarisation. Immediately following the Labour Law Reforms, an increase in temporary work practices was observed (Kuruvilla, Lee & Gallagher 2011:2–3). According to the state union, the total number of temporary workers grew to 60 million by the end of 2010, which is a 20% increase (Zhang 2014:56). This also highlights the need to distinguish between the concepts of (in)formalisation and precarisation, as formalisation might not lead to a less precarious workforce.

3.4. Dispositions

The experiences of migrant workers are complex and are embedded in productive, cultural-social and spatial-temporal contexts. The interpretation of experiences by migrant workers themselves must also be examined. Experiences are furthermore shaped by discourses[9], which in course of their use are continuously reworked and contested. This part highlights (1) discourses of modernity in relation to self-development narratives, as well as (2) prospects for solidarity among migrant workers in collective dispositions.

(1) Modernity and Self-development

The transition to a more or less developed market economy was accompanied by a departure from Maoism. 'New allegories of modernity' (Rofel 1999:29) promised a departure from the retrospectively viewed economic and cultural backwardness of that era, while the alignment to

[9] A discourse for the purpose of this article, and in loose reference to Foucault's (1981) concept of discourse, is basically defined as a structure of knowledge which, to a certain degree, dictates ways of experiencing one's individual surroundings, thus influencing one's thought and action.

global modes of production promised wealth and power. The official discourse distanced itself from the Maoist egalitarianism and collectivism and turned towards the individual as the engine of modernity instead (Rofel 1999:101). Furthermore, a discourse about the quality of the population (*renkou suzhi* 人口素质) allowed to ascribe the growing inequality between urban and rural China to its people, obscuring structures of inequality, as well as creating hierarchies and evaluations leading to the decentring of the worker subject (Florence 2007:124) and degradation of the rural population.

The migrant workers' dispositions are oriented towards these hegemonic discourses, but also challenge them. For example, Jacka (2005) has collected and analysed different narratives from members of the Migrant Women's Club, finding strong narratives of individual self-development. These individual narratives are sometimes interrupted by the articulation of protest in face injustices and indignity experienced by the migrants. One side of the coin is the act of speaking bitterness (*suku* 诉苦), in which they contrast their urban experience of migration and the new social order with their as more favourable perceived rural past.[10] The other side is the utilisation of a burgeoning rights discourse to protest their working and living conditions (Jacka 2005:274–275).

Two conflicting tendencies are combined in their dispositions: the wish for self-fulfilment in the cities, and the resulting disillusion over the impossibility of this task (Florence 2007:131). This process happens under the influence of the state discourses about individual entrepreneurship and modern development. Thus, many migrant workers are describing their experiences as a hardening process, in which only individual will and effort counts (Florence 2007:132). Yet the development discourse is also appropriated and ironically subverted, for example, in poems, and the rights discourse is contrasted with the experienced reality of the Chinese justice system. In both cases, the experiences are situated in the broader reality of migrant workers (Florence 2007:141).

(2) Work and Solidarity

In another way, based on Pun's (2005:132) characterisation of the workplace as microcosm and point of (re)production of the dual society, shared dispositions might indicate collective characteristics discernible within the group of migrant workers. Here, the direct reaction to their

[10] In contrast, Li claims that migrant workers' way of speaking 'differs from speaking bitterness because these speech patterns appear primarily in informal, private settings, while speaking bitterness rituals were state-sponsored public speech acts' (Li 2016:49). Yet Li (2016) also retorts that these speech practices are incorporated more and more into migrant workers' cultural productions such as poems and music.

positioning in the relations of production and their growing awareness of their position vis-à-vis other social groups are of importance.

The case study Foxconn showed that the fragmentation and isolation at and away from work takes an enormous toll on the migrant worker. Most often, they are additionally pressured by their social responsibility for their families (Chan 2002:176–178). Pun and Lu (2010) also diagnose the migrant workers they researched with a diffuse state of anger, which does not only appear to result from their position in the relations of productions but their social position as a whole. In the same vein, resignation or the belief in the temporary nature of their lot is widespread, too. Often, the wish 'to be their own bosses' (*ziji dang laoban* 自己当老板) is articulated (Ling 2015:130). This appears to be the antithesis of solidarising dispositions.

Yet migrant workers may find a sense of solidarity in their dissociation from other groups. Guang (2005), for instance, highlights that migrant workers' use of the word *dagong* (打工) for work (and also through the imposition of society) dissociate their temporary, unregulated and low-paying work with that of urbanites, who do *gongzuo* (工作), "regular" work (2005:497). Zhang's (2014) research into the automobile industry gives further insights. The segmentation into the regular workforce and temporary workers, of which the latter consist of mostly migrant workers, generates a strong sense of injustice among the latter. They are paid less and often take on dangerous and strenuous work. The reasoning of the management that temporary workers perform similar, but qualitatively different work clashes with experiences on the shop floor and strengthens resentments. The low chance to attain the far more stable regular employment consolidates the perception of this group as a self-contained workforce (Zhang 2014:149–152). Thus, in the narrower setting of the relations of production, the migrant workers may understand themselves as a cohesive "we" through their shared experiencing and handling of injustices.

3.5. Collective Action

The contentious issue of the debate outlined in the introduction centres around a potential qualitative change in the strikes and protest of migrant workers and its relation to the migrant workers as a class.[11] This article (1) retraces these strikes and protests, then (2) discusses the state's

[11] For an excellent quantitative overview of social unrest in China, which also highlights the dominance of labour-related protests see Goebel (2019). For a broad overview of the characteristics of migrant worker strikes in manufacturing from the 1990s until 2010 see (Ling 2016:5-25).

reactions and NGO involvement, and lastly (3) highlights the migrant workers' reflection on their own strike actions.

(1) Discussing Migrant Worker Strikes

Strikes can have different reasons. The most prevalent reason has been and still is the non-payment of wages. Especially in the construction industry, wage arrears are rampant (China Labour Bulletin (CLB) 2018:6–7). With the partial relocation of the manufacturing industry from the coastal to the inland provinces, factory closures and lay-offs are becoming more prevalent. Here as well, outstanding compensations play a big part in migrant worker strikes. Besides these defensive strikes, migrant workers gradually articulate more offensive demands, mostly an increase in wages (CLB 2018:15). Political demands, such as calls for democratic union elections, are more often than not side-lined, as 'state and union at all levels maintain a steadfast dedication to the isolation of political from economic struggles' (Friedman 2014:160). All in all, as migrant workers try to assert what is theirs, a transition from rights-based to interests-based protests can be observed (Lin, Kevin 2015:82).

Collective action undertaken by migrant workers is often spontaneous and without leadership. The reluctance to choose worker representatives comes from the fact that enterprises often target these representatives (Ling 2016:13). Hence, collective demands are only ineffectively conveyed. Migrant workers' economic situation and lack of welfare state coverage also do not allow them to prolong the strikes and pressure on enterprises. This has implications for cross-factory strikes. Although strikes can spread like wildfire across factories, as the 2010 Nanhai Honda strike wave displayed (Chan & Hui 2012:662), cross-factory organisation was and is still not given. Yet singular strikes show a higher degree of organisation. For example, before initiating a strike in a Guangzhou shoe factory, 'workers had completed a multi-layered democratic process of organising, electing their representatives, establishing media liaison teams, a solidarity fund administrative team as well as a security team' (CLB 2018:17; for a more detailed account see CLB 2015). Such developments are worth mentioning, but strict regulations on collective organisations beyond the state's purview are constricting any organisations outlasting the immediacy of struggle.

(2) The State's Reaction and NGO Involvement

When looking at the central state's reaction to the migrant workers' collective actions, one can make out a legislative rush, which culminated in the already mentioned labour law reforms. This partly led to the isolation of collective into individual conflicts by legal means but failed at

eliminating conflicts (Friedman & Lee 2010:533). Also, the only legal Chinese union, the ACFTU is seen by migrant workers as just another instrument of state control and without any legitimacy. The often-propagated reforms of this quasi-state authority and the forceful expansion of union bureaus in enterprises did neither change the top-down approach, nor the overall effectiveness of the union, as the Chinese state still operates with socialist methods in a post-socialist world (Friedman 2014:16).

Can NGOs fill these gaps? Unlike the state union, they often take on legal cases involving migrant workers, which appear to be lost causes or are deemed politically sensitive. However, besides attending to their legal needs, their hands are mostly tied when it comes to the organisation of migrant workers. Fu (2018:3) argues here for a 'mobilisation without the masses' under a regime of flexible repression. NGOs only have three options: micro-collective actions of symbolic nature, atomised actions, which articulate complaints and force the state to act, and discursive actions, which try to construct a counter-narrative (Fu 2018:20–21). At all times, NGOs are caught between the dilemma of state incorporation and repression. In the end, migrant workers are largely to rely upon themselves. Then, how are migrant workers experiencing and reflecting upon their collective actions?

(3) Effects of Strikes on Migrant Workers

Through examining worker narratives (Ren 2016), migrant worker's reactions and reflections can be identified, which point to the effects of strikes on the migrant workers' sense of their situation vis-à-vis capital. First, migrant workers become aware that they have potential as a collective and change their minds regarding this (Ren 2016:92–93, 144). Second, the importance of collective discussions and collective pressure during bargaining becomes apparent to them (Ren 2016:74, 195–196). Third, their organisational skills grow throughout the strike, and they realise the importance of networks for their work environment (Ren 2016:92–93, 210). Fourth, their attitude towards labour law stays ambivalent. While some state that they attained a deeper understanding of the laws (Ren 2016:195–196, 210), others believe with a growing disillusion that the law only applies to the rich and powerful (Ren 2016:83, 182). Fifth, migrant workers show a remarkable degree of solidarity. They collectively resign or try to block the arrest of their strike leaders and try to compensate them after they are fired by the management (Ren 2016:123–124, 169–170). And lastly, if individual lines of production organise a strike, this often awakens the interest of other lines and their strike experience is consequently shared (Ren 2016:105).

No clear answer can be given as to how these reflections may have been embedded into a broader notion of class. However, as the migrant workers' reflections about their own strike actions have just shown, in the course of a strike or protest, when capital, often working together with the state's security apparatus, is confronted, a heightened sense of antagonism towards the exploiter and of solidarity among migrant workers is apparent.

3.6. Old Structures and New Perceptions of Precarisation

Living and working in the cities, the migrant workers experience and handle the uncertainties of their temporary migration on a daily basis. They are aware of the deep divisions existing between the rural and urban sphere, and experience antagonisms at work closely mirroring these divisions. Yet the perception of their precarious position is not constant but changes over time. Therefore, this research argues that migrant workers' changing perception of their precarisation leads to a realignment of their dispositions and shifting boundaries of possibilities.

Expectations regarding migration, work, life and their future come into conflict more openly with their uncertain work and life situation, which is best exemplified with regard to the "old" and "new" generation of migrant workers. This distinction is based on differences in education, household structure, farm experience, job preferences and urban integration (Fan & Chen, 2013). Concerning strikes and protest, stronger consciousness about rights and class is sometimes attributed to the new generation, but this is debatable (Franceschini, Siu & Chan 2016; Lee 2016:326). However, with both generations experiencing continuous precarisation in their own ways, the shifts in their normative framework may have implications for the process of class formation.

The old generation of migrant workers has closer ties to their rural hometowns and more agricultural experience. Periodic economic stagnation or harvest push them to return, and thereby contribute to the consolidation of these ties. While some NGO reports (Landesa 2012) highlight illegal land transfers and inadequate compensation, and a trend towards leasing of agricultural land to big agricultural enterprises can be observed, it must also be noted that rural land ownership is quite resilient in the Chinese context (Zhang & Donaldson 2008:44).

Furthermore, a growing portion of old generation migrant workers is nearing retirement age and is now confronted with questions concerning insurance and pension payments. The Yue Yuen strike in Guangdong in 2014 showed the rising relevance of this for older migrant workers. Following the non-payment of social insurance contributions, more than 40.000 workers went on

strike, the core of which consisted of mostly older migrant workers worrying about their future security (Schmalz, Sommer & Xu 2016). While agreeing with Lee's (2016:329) argument that the institutional structures subjugating the migrant workers did not change in broad ways, this article argues that the Yue Yuen strike shows a growing awareness in older migrant workers about their precarisation by capital and state. With more and more migrant workers not willing or not able to move back to their farmland, because they either perceive no opportunities or lost their farmland in course of expropriation or long-term leases, this awareness and possible resistance might grow stronger.

Although the new generation of migrant workers may face similar problems in the future, they differ from the older generation regarding consumption patterns and future planning. Furthermore, as they migrate earlier and have less or no agricultural experience, the problem of integration at their destinations grows even more prominent. Their dispositions are changing in the sense that they adopt an urban way of life and attempt to integrate themselves more strongly (Yue et al. 2010:546). However, this also means that they confront their continuing exclusion and marginalisation in the cities more strongly. Thus, Smith and Pun conclude that the 'new generation of migrant workers realized they will always be considered second class citizens by urban governments' (Smith & Pun 2018:607–608).

He and Wang (2016:76) attenuate this argument in their study – not new, but old generation migrants feel more strongly about the social inequalities in the city. At the same time, new generation migrant workers' attitudes and responses towards their precarisation by capital and state are changing. This is respectively indicated by their higher job expectations and consequently more and quicker changes of employment (jumping feeding troughs [*tiaocao* 跳槽] or voting with one's feet [*yi jiao toupiao* 一脚投票]) (He & Wang 2016:86), and their wish to rather relocate to smaller towns due to more lenient *hukou* regulations (He & Wang 2016:83).

While maybe not as eye-catching as their participation in offensive strikes, such as the 2010 strike wave, these choices emphasises the need to examine new and old migrant workers' handling of their precarisation in broader ways.

4. Conclusion: Future Prospects for Chinese Migrant Workers

This article aimed to show that the concept of class formation can be reconceptualised in relation to global trends and their local manifestations, expressed here by precarisation. By examining the

case of Chinese migrant workers, the need to focus on a plethora of interrelations becomes apparent.

First of all, this article argued that there exists a reciprocal relationship between structures – the combination of an export-oriented, uneven regional development project, a massive surplus of labour-power, and the state-sanctioned exploitation and segmentation at and away from work – and ways of life.

Additionally, these developments go hand in hand with changes in discourses. Here, a look at the migrant workers' dispositions reflects the contradictory nature of China's capitalist transformation. On the one hand, they incorporate and utilise discourses about individual success and rights. On the other hand, they use the socialist practice of speaking bitterness to voice their indignation. In public, they likewise respond to their positioning by capital and state in the lowest rungs of the urban labour and living spheres through a variety of struggles. This research argues that while these struggles may not arise directly from a collective identity and are often of individual nature, they are, as reactions to their exploitation and precarisation, nonetheless central in their formation as a distinct class.

Moreover, the migrant workers are distinct in the fact that the migration regime, which is upheld by the *hukou* system as well as discriminatory discourses and labour practices, leaves open any conclusion to their proletarianisation. Thus, class concepts taking for granted the established truth of a heroic proletariat enacting socio-political change will be of little use, especially in cases of authoritarian state such as China. Rather than trying to predict the consciousness and capabilities of a group by positioning it in relation to a supposed, in most cases Western, standard, the analyses of classes would gain more by retracing how this group responds to challenges in the spheres of production and reproduction and potentially defies them. It is worthwhile to investigate precarisation, by far not a new but concomitant phenomenon of class formation, as such a challenge. As always precarisation must be scrutinised in the local context.

What are the prospects for migrant workers? Political, social and economic developments, the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic being only the most recent example, will continue to influence their class formation process. In the past, one could observe, for example, some limited, but earnest trade union reforms by local leaders (Friedman 2014), thus highlighting the fact that the Chinese state itself must be differentiated.

Under the rule of Xi Jinping, many of these experiments have been abandoned and new ones restricted. At the same time, labour NGOs are increasingly restricted in their actions or are incorporated by the state (Fu 2018:153–156). Still, strikes and protests by migrant workers do not stop, although shifts of manufacturing either inland or to economies offering cheaper labour, lead to more defensive strikes (Xu & Schmalz 2017). Additionally, as more migrant workers move into a service economy marked by new tendencies of precarisation such as fluid workplaces, organising protests may become harder. In contrast, new overarching identities such as the workmate (*gongyou* 工友) have been observed (Yu 2018).

One also needs to look at developments in the rural spheres. With the state's push for agricultural modernisation, population pressures in the cities could be exacerbated (Zhan 2019). This possibly leads to a deepening of precarisation, as the rural areas cannot cushion migrant workers in times of economic downturn any longer. It may also be beneficial to look beyond proletarianisation as proposed by Jakobsen (2018) in finding new pathways for resistance and solidarity. In the end, the framework of class formation and precarisation conceptualised in this article may assist in integrating these developments in further studies.

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