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The Spatial Politics of Labor in China:  
Life, Labor, and a New Generation  
of Migrant Workers

**Introduction**

**T**he rise of China as the “workshop of the world” has attracted scholarly interest in the spatiality of global capitalism. The continuous geographical shift of the capital accumulation process from the West to Japan, Korea, Taiwan, and then to China and now the rapidly industrializing nations of South Asia have not only brought about economic miracles in the region but they have also rendered it vulnerable to crisis. As China has further integrated into the neoliberal world economy, structural economic imbalance and class inequality have become more pronounced. In our intervention here, we aim to draw out the deep contradictions among labor, capital, and the Chinese state in the context of global production.

Our focus is the making of the Chinese working class in a dormitory labor regime—the highly concentrated nature of the spatiality of work and residence that workers turn into a battlefield to fight for their rights. Our case study of Foxconn shows that the provision of employer-owned dormitories for workers is integral to capital accumulation in urban China. But worker resistance is also taking place in the dormitories and in workers’ communities. At their dwelling places, worker activists try to share organizing skills and disseminate protest strategies, as long as they can remain together. On the factory floor, they bring specific issues to management. In public spaces, they present collective demands to the local government.

Without the organization of independent trade unions in collective bargaining, workers are living out their own social struggles, of which class struggles are a part. In comparison to older cohorts, this new generation of rural migrant workers, whose average age is twenty-three, is better educated, more aware of workplace rights, and more likely to demand employment protection and decent work (All-China Federation of Trade Unions 2010). Beginning around 2003, a labor shortage emerged in cosmopolitan coastal cities as well as small interior towns.<sup>1</sup> This situation has brought hope to workers because they have been able to leverage the shortage—at least to a limited degree—to demand higher wages. The higher their aspirations for a better future, the more workers become aware of their harsh reality. Against social and economic injustice, they use the workplace and dormitory spaces to engage in life-and-death struggles.

### **The Spatial Politics of Labor**

As Rosa Luxemburg discusses, “Capitalism needs non-capitalist social organizations as the setting for its development” (2003: 346); it proceeds by creating favorable conditions, or removing barriers of all sorts, to its expansion. Most of the socialist economies, since the so-called end of history in the early 1990s, have been compelled into global capitalism as they could no longer sustain their conventional form of existence. China, long centered on non-capitalist social relations, has since the 1990s grown to become the world’s largest industrial producer and a crucial geopolitical site for capital accumulation (Hung 2009; Andreas 2008, 2011). This state-guided economic globalization and structural reform continues to require the acceleration of a specific proletarianization—successive generations of rural migrant workers (*nongmingong*) have become the mainstay of the country’s export-processing sector, but they cannot become “free” laborers in the market.

In China’s rapid incorporation into the capitalist world economy, national government leaders have reversed earlier policies that banned rural-to-urban migration and instead have encouraged peasants to become wage laborers staffing the burgeoning factories in coastal areas that feed the export boom. But rural workers and their families, though invited to work in the city, are denied urban citizenship rights. Local officials receive no funding or incentives “from above” to provide “transient” rural laborers with the same housing, education, medical care, pensions, and other social provisions given to registered urban residents. This deprivation is justified on the grounds that the migrants formally remain rural residents under

the government's *hukou* (household registration) system. Even the younger cohorts of workers and family members who were born and have lived and worked in the city for decades are denied the basic benefits enjoyed by their counterparts in urban households (Selden and Wu 2011; Whyte 2010).

The rural households from which migrant workers come and to which they are entitled to return do retain land-use rights to small plots of land in their native villages. For many rural residents this land staves off starvation in times of adversity, but it cannot provide a livelihood, least of all for the increasing numbers of rural migrants who grew up in the cities and do not have farming skills (ACFTU 2011).<sup>2</sup> Migrants generally return to their villages only to marry and have children. This pattern persists because the children of parents whose household registration remains rural cannot receive public education in the cities, especially in the higher grades.

Such proletarianization is thus characterized by a spatial separation between production in urban areas and social reproduction in the countryside. This reserve army of Chinese internal migrant workers, more than 200 million nationwide, helps lower not only production costs, but also social reproduction costs in host cities by denying rural migrant workers various kinds of social services and public education. A permanent underclass is created in urban industrialized spaces.

While the *hukou* system provides a cushion in the form of equal land-use rights for rural residents, including those who are living and working in the cities, thereby contributing to social stability, the system involves tacit collusion between the Chinese state and capital. In this political economy, employers need not pay a living wage because they provide workers with the minimal necessities of life within the enclosed world of factory complexes. Maintaining the dormitories, in which a dozen young people may share a single room jammed with bunk beds only a few feet apart, costs the employer far less than the wages necessary for workers to find their own housing. The same goes for the notoriously low-quality food provided in employee cafeterias. Employers reduce their costs even more by deducting food and housing fees from workers' wages. Cheap housing and cheap food minimally secure their rural migrant workers so that they can eat, sleep, and then wake up quickly to work the next day. Further, employers take advantage of the *hukou* system by assuming that workers can fall back onto their rural land at economic downturn. Thus the distinctively noncapitalist *hukou* system serves the interests of capital even better than the company towns or urban tenements in which Western proletarian workers were housed in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (see also Burawoy 1976).

By temporarily housing the laborers as they circulate from one workplace to another, the dormitory labor regime also supports the proletarianization process in that it extinguishes family life. While workers are moving frequently from temporary dwelling to temporary dwelling, they are continuously separated from their families. Elder family members and school-age children tend to live in the birth village while working-age relatives are usually scattered among different employers and different dormitories. The sociopolitical institution of the dormitory labor regime therefore keeps a massive internal migrant labor force without the support of family networks and communal life.

The Chinese government, in addition to denying basic social welfare benefits that would allow rural migrant workers to be less dependent on their employers, circumscribes workers' self-organization in a manner that perpetuates low wages despite periodic upward adjustments of local minimum wage requirements. Critically, freedom of association, the right to strike, and collective bargaining are all severely restricted by the government. If workers could bargain effectively, they could pressure employers to raise income levels so that workers could afford nondormitory housing, which would quickly support the development of housing options outside the dormitories. In urban industrial zones, rural migrant workers' inability to bargain collectively drives income levels down, despite the labor shortage that ought to work in their favor. China's export sector, organized around the capitalist principle of profit before people, has turned most of its profits into enterprise savings, dividends, and reinvestment, rather than sharing it with workers. Capital accumulates, enterprises and multinational corporations get rich, and migrant workers from the countryside suffer.

Irrespective of industrial types and localities, we have found that high-rise dormitories are central to the organization of production and the daily reproduction of the workers at the lowest possible costs and highest efficiency in the service of foreign-invested, privately or publicly owned companies. The dormitory compounds are often built inside factory complexes or adjacent to workplaces, forming freestanding, all-encompassing industrial cities. This spatial proximity helps meet just-in-time production deadlines by imposing overtime work and lengthening the workday. The employer switches employees on and off as if they were water coming out of a tap. The boundary between "home" and work is blurred. Workers need less time to get to work, but they also have fewer leisure opportunities in manufacturing environments. On windy days, workers' clothes hanging in the dormitory corridors fly like colorful multinational flags. These are the flags of

the new working class in an era characterized by the advent of global capital in tandem with the Chinese state.

### **Foxconn: The “Electronics Workshop of the World”**

In 2010, within a period of five months, thirteen young rural migrant workers attempted suicide at the Shenzhen facilities of Foxconn, Apple’s major supplier and in 2010 the employer of 1 million Chinese workers.<sup>3</sup> Eleven of the thirteen workers died, and one of the survivors came through with crippling injuries. These workers ranged in age from seventeen to twenty-five. Most of them leaped from dormitory buildings, while one cut his wrists after failing to jump. In the wake of this series of events, Foxconn wire-grilled and safety-netted its eighteen-story dorms at Shenzhen and other factory cities. Although this may have made suicide by leaping from a rooftop more difficult, it left untouched the causes of the suicides and created a truly depressing window view for workers now reminded daily of the reality of Foxconn’s rule. The revelation of human suffering and extreme nature of the suicides brought about a “moment of reckoning”—not only in the industry but in the spaces of global civil society.

During our two years of fieldwork<sup>4</sup> at twelve of Foxconn’s megafactory cities across China, we learned about the deepening alliance between business and local governments, from incredibly low-cost land use to water and electricity supplies to labor service. The smallest single Foxconn factory compounds employ some fifty thousand workers, and the larger ones employ an extraordinary four hundred thousand. Within the walled cities of Foxconn, migrant workers at the bottom rung of the thirteen-level organizational hierarchy struggle to improve their lives in the face of a production system that demands they fulfill ever-higher productivity targets at higher levels of speed and quality. A bright red banner hanging at the new Foxconn factory in Chengdu reads, “Heart to heart, Foxconn and I grow together” (“Xin lian xin, Fushikang yu wo gong chengzhang”), suggesting that the workers and the company identify with each other as if they shared a heart. The corporate propaganda team has created a dream of riches through labor and has tried to persuade workers that success and growth are possible only by working at a grueling pace. Yet, many workers reject these kinds of rosy dreams as distant and unrealistic. Angry at their lack of opportunities for career development and respect, workers mock Foxconn’s slogans with a twist of words, turning “humane management” (*renxinghua guanli*) into “human subordination” (*renxunhua guanli*).

Corporate human resources managers also brought in as many as 150,000 student interns—15 percent of the Foxconn labor force—in the summer of 2010 alone, according to company statistics (Foxconn Technology Group 2010). The students, from sixteen to eighteen years in age, are studying full-time in private and public vocational schools. They are sent to do internships at short-staffed Foxconn factories for terms between three months and a year in length. Fixing screws and sticking labels on iPhones and iPads has nothing to do with these students' studies, which include arts, music, applied computer studies, preschool education, and tourist industry management. The "internships," far from being freely chosen, are collectively organized on a mass scale, with Foxconn, local governments, and schools establishing a triangular relationship.

### **Control and Resistance within the Dormitory Labor Regime**

Far from being a form of company welfare, the dormitory labor regime is deployed by management to maximize control of workers. And yet, the other side of this process remains understudied: workers' subversion of the dehumanized environment to their individual or collective interests.

The institution of the dormitory labor regime is centered on bureaucratic control as much as on self-discipline. Sexuality is highly regulated by the gender-segregated dormitories. Male and female workers—most of them unmarried teenagers and young adults—are forbidden to visit one another's rooms. Security officers stand by at the dormitory gate, or even on every floor, around the clock. Governance of desire and obedience to dorm rules, framed in the managerial discourse of morality and cooperation, is crucial to the politics of work. Laborers are trained not only during work hours but also during their supposed leisure hours under this capitalist system.

Currently a standard dormitory room is usually shared by six to twelve workers in double bunk beds. Newly built multistory dormitories tend to have better facilities than the old ones and are equipped with hot-water showers, air conditioning, personal lockers, shared television rooms, and elevators. Despite this, basic conditions remain largely unchanged: workers with different jobs and even different shifts are mixed in the same dormitory. They are awake and asleep at different times and frequently disrupt one another's rest. Private space is limited to one's own bed behind a self-made curtain. Many workers live in the noisy factory dormitories because they are unable to afford even a small apartment in the industrial town. Many married workers live apart from their spouses. Only a few can share a place

outside of the dormitories. In this context, capital envelops the entire living space in a total system of daily management. Food and drink, sleep, and even washing are all scheduled tasks like those on production lines. Workers live with strangers, are not allowed to cook, and cannot receive friends or family overnight.

Random dormitory reassignments break up friendship and localistic networks, increasing isolation and loneliness. And yet the divisions of age, skills, native place origins, and conceptions of fairness and justice may be transcended, especially when the workers face common threats. In the densely populated and intensely stressful environment, grievances arising from poor public hygiene in the dorms, lack of sleep from excessive overwork, humiliation and punishment from breaking rules, exposure to occupational safety and health hazards, and blocked communications between workers and management are common topics. No matter how tight the workplace control and surveillance, workers—as human beings and not machines—find ways to address their economic, social, and affective needs.

The seemingly all-powerful Foxconn production empire, subjected to the ruthless demand for just-in-time production from Apple and many other technology companies in the global supply chain, is prone to disruptions to its workflow. It is true that due to its massive scale, Foxconn can shift orders and workers from one plant to another to reduce risks and losses—just as it did after the deadly aluminum-dust explosion and ensuing shutdown of a polishing workshop in Chengdu in May 2011 (IHS iSuppli News Flash 2011; Students and Scholars against Corporate Misbehavior 2011). However, this “spatial fix” is at best a postponement or reshuffling of crisis, not a solution to the problems at the workplace level and beyond.

Importantly, the dormitory serves as a platform for some workers to share their anxieties about their future and to articulate common concerns—that is, when there is enough rest from excessive overtime work to make time for serious discussions. On a late Saturday evening in December 2011, we met with a twenty-five-year-old Foxconn worker, Zhu Weili, who wore blue jeans with Nike sneakers and the dark blue Foxconn uniform. Despite his sunny, sportive look, he expressed deep concerns:

I'm no longer able to muddle along at my job; every month I make only over a thousand yuan. If I don't marry I could get by for a few years, but if I marry, I will have to raise kids; it's really not enough for that. . . . Our days are truly hectic, and even if you are strong, it's difficult. Most people in my dorm are unmarried, and I feel that married people generally won't come here. The wages are low.<sup>5</sup>

Zhu and his roommates once thought about staging a work stoppage to negotiate wages and benefits with management, but the plan did not develop.

On another day, at a women workers' dormitory, we joined Fan Chunyan and her two roommates for occupational health and safety discussions. They mentioned "vomiting all over the place" in their first few days of night-shift work, as the chemicals applied in the product-parts cleaning process are "allergenic and irritating." They linked chronic, high-dose chemical exposure to reproductive health problems and birth defects. As they were at child-bearing age, they were very fearful about the unknown chemical substances they had to use every day. Getting together in a group, they realized that it was not an individual problem of "weak bodies" or "personal troubles" but a workplace-based, systemic issue.<sup>6</sup>

Sporadic collective actions eventually broke out. On the night of January 6, 2011, at a dormitory in Foxconn's Chengdu plant, "rioting workers" threw glass bottles and fire extinguishers from the upper floors onto the ground. Although the workers did not present management with clear demands, behind this "senseless" behavior, as it was characterized by management, lay deep dissatisfaction with working conditions, in particular low wages and long hours: workers were working thirteen twelve-hour days in a row, including four hours of illegal overtime. On March 2, 2011, hundreds of workers from the same production department went on strike and blocked the main entrance of the southern plant until police came to disperse the crowd. This time the demand to increase wages and improve safety measures was clearly articulated, but it went unanswered.

In July and August 2011, at Foxconn Zhengzhou's "iPhone City" in Henan, aggrieved workers called the company's hotline at 78585 for assistance (in Mandarin the numbers "78585" are phonetically equivalent to "please help me, help me"), but the excessive overtime and wage dispute problems they raised remained unresolved. A work stoppage followed, and the striking workers were all dismissed. Discussions about unfair treatment went on for weeks in the worker dormitories. On March 28, 2012, Apple CEO Tim Cook toured the factory floor, where workers had spent hours cleaning up beforehand. Snapshots of the preannounced audit were staged, with the number of toxins reduced before the visits and workers temporarily reassigned to safer tasks. Workers sent out messages through mobile phones and microblogs to vent their anger toward both Foxconn and Apple: "It's just for show."

When the Chinese government does not enforce labor laws and codes protecting workers, employers like Foxconn feel free to ignore state restrictions on overtime and health and safety in order to meet global manufactur-

ing and logistical imperatives. What about union representation? Chinese law ostensibly gives workers key rights, including the right to elect union representatives, the right to vote union representatives out of office if they do not represent them, and protection against discrimination for union activities. However, although Foxconn entered Shenzhen in 1988, the flagship Longhua plant set up a trade union only at the end of 2006, under the double pressure of media exposure of Apple-branded iPod manufacturing conditions and the mobilization of the Shenzhen Federation of Trade Unions (China Labor News Translations 2007). Workers have shared with us in our interviews that the union does not act according to their needs, but instead organizes activities like box-sealing competitions to meet the company's needs. Foxconn workers, like most Chinese workers, lack the means to appeal for help from the union or draw on other sources of assistance. Interning students are not even represented as union members, as they are legally defined as interns, not employees.

Young workers in their late teens to mid-twenties who have been placed in the factory-cum-dormitory environment experience alienation in the classic Marxist sense. The “flexible” manufacturing of Foxconn dictates that labor, as a commodity, together with other means of production, is organized into a twenty-four-hour nonstop operation dedicated to satisfying global consumers' demand for electronic gadgets. “I am just a speck of dust in the workshop” is the sense of self that arises after countless lectures and reprimands from line leaders. As rural migrants, Foxconn workers enjoy little labor protection in society at large and suffer from heightened work pressure and desperation in the workplace that lead to suicides and to daily and collective resistance.

## Conclusion

In the midst of China's high-speed economic growth, a younger generation of workers faces growing income and opportunity inequality worse than that experienced by their parents or older cohorts. The experience of workers, who are objectified by the process of having to sell their labor to a capitalist who is then in control of their capacity to work, contrasts sharply to the purposive action of a self-empowered person who works to do something that is ultimately more beneficial to himself or herself than to a relentless employer (Marx 1973).<sup>7</sup> The moment the Chinese laborers see there is little possibility of finding decent work and building a home in the city, the very meaning of their jobs, and even their lives, collapses.

In the accelerated accumulation of capital from coastal to central and western China, the dormitory labor regime ensures both cost-efficiency and that workers spend their off-hours solely preparing for another round of production. Paradoxically, as our study of Foxconn shows, workers also reclaim the limited living space and time to which their labor and lives are confined to create and remix culturally diversified repertoires of social struggles, through slogans and public statements expressed in protests. By turning their collective dormitories into communal spaces, they open up new opportunities for labor resistance. Rights awareness is heightened through the sharing of labor law information via word of mouth and mobile technologies. Mutual learning among different segments of workers (young and old migrant workers, fresh and veteran labor activists, and student interns) helps to build solidarity. The outcomes of labor strife aside, our point here is that class analysis, as a weapon of progressive social change, has to be recast in the lived experience of the working class. China's capitalist transformation offers us a non-Western perspective on understanding the contradictions of transnational capital mobility, working people's lives, and the changing role of the state. The children of the post-Mao reform era have grown up. They raise legitimate concerns about the "citizenship rights" discourse articulated by the state. They pierce through the hypocrisy of the global corporate image of "care," behind which companies' actual ordering practices go against everything they promise in their labor and environmental standards programs. Workers invite conscientious consumers of Apple products and concerned academics to produce knowledge that can enhance their ability to win in global labor politics.

### Notes

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- 1 China's labor supply is massive in size. Even once the growth of the working-age population decelerates, partly due to the mandatory one-child policy, it is estimated that the number of persons in non-farm employment will increase by 80 million between 2010 and 2020. Rural labor abundance *coexists* with tightening migrant labor supply in some cities.
- 2 The 1,000-enterprise ACFTU survey (2011) from twenty-five cities reported that 73.9 percent of young migrant workers were employed in manufacturing (only 5.5 percent in the construction industry), and the proportion with experience of agricultural work prior to urban employment dropped to just 11 percent.

- 3 Foxconn publicized visits by psychologists with the dismissive suggestion that the number of suicides at its plants was below the national rate of 23.2 per 100,000 people. But no scientific study would ignore the fact that the Foxconn suicides were by young people employed by a single company. Specifically, Foxconn failed to consider the “norm” of Chinese workers committing suicide in protest against abysmal working conditions.
- 4 We have been members of the multi-university Foxconn Research Group since its establishment in June 2010. Faculty and students from twenty-two universities in China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, the United Kingdom, and the United States joined forces to conduct independent investigations of Taiwanese-invested Foxconn’s labor practices in the wake of the suicides. In the first phase, between June and December 2010, we interviewed and surveyed workers and managers at major Foxconn factory complexes in nine cities mainly in coastal China where the company’s factories were then concentrated: Shenzhen, Shanghai, Kunshan, Hangzhou, Nanjing, Tianjin, Langfang, Taiyuan, and Wuhan. In the second phase, from March to December 2011, we traveled to three new Foxconn complexes in Chengdu, Chongqing, and Zhengzhou in the central and southwestern provinces. In the third phase, from January 2012 to the present, we have worked closely with local nongovernmental organizations that provide training programs to Foxconn workers.
- 5 In December 2011, Foxconn Chengdu paid its entry-level workers 1,300 yuan per month (US\$204). Food costs (the cheapest meal package was 11 yuan per day), rent for a dorm bunk (110 yuan per month), and social security fees (75 yuan per month) were deducted from workers’ wages. In 2011, the average monthly wage of China’s migrant workers was 2,049 yuan (US\$322), including overtime wages.
- 6 Foxconn’s labor problem is by no means an isolated case in China. Without effective legal protection and under the constant pressure of Apple and other buyers, at least 137 Wintek workers were poisoned in 2009 when they cleaned iPhone touchscreens with n-hexane, a chemical that, despite its dangers, was chosen by Wintek because it evaporates much more quickly than any substitute cleaner, thus speeding the production line.
- 7 In Karl Marx’s words, “Labour is their being in so far as they are not-objectified; it is their ideal being; the possibility of values, and, as activity, the positing of value. As against capital, labour is the merely abstract form, the mere possibility of value-positing activity, which exists only as a capacity, as a resource in the bodiliness of the worker” (1973: 297–98).

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