Sewing Garments, Sowing Lives: Two Generations of Migrant Workers' Back and Forth to the Chinese Coast

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Sewing Garments, Sowing Lives:

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Tzou, Alice

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Sewing Garments, Sowing Lives: Two Generations of Migrant Workers' Back and Forth to the Chinese Coast

By Alice Tzou

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Sociology in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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Abstract

*Sewing Garments, Sowing Lives: Two Generations of Migrant Workers’ Back and Forth to the Chinese Coast* by Alice Tzou

**Advisor:** Paul Attewell

Migrant workers in China have been at the center of popular news media and scholarly attention for three decades, since they started to migrate to work in factories on the coast in the post-1978 Economic Reform era. As western and central China has developed and work opportunities have arisen in these migrant-sending regions, internal migrants have started to return home. Push and pull factors of internal migration have been reversed. Poverty and lack of job opportunities used to be the push factors; they are now replaced by new push factors—long hours of work and long-distance travel to and from the coast. Family reunions as well as work and entrepreneurial opportunities at home are the new pull factors. Since the Reform, there have been two generations of migrant workers: the older generation, who were teenagers at the time of Reform (born in the late 1960s and the 1970s) and who were the first wave to migrate out, and the younger generation, who are now in their 30s (born in and after the late 1970s and the 1980s) and who entered the workforce in the late 1990s and the 2000s. At the same time, factories are relocating to western and central China. In addition to giving an inside look at what work is like in a garment factory, this dissertation documents and compares both generations’ return home. The older generation is returning home to retire or semi-retire, having made a livelihood out of their earlier migration. The younger generation is returning home on a less permanent basis, still job-hopping between the coast and home. Many of the younger generation return home to become small-scale entrepreneurs but job-hop back to coastal factories when entrepreneurship falters. I also interpret my findings in light of the larger cultural context in China to understand multi-generational life strategies and social mobility.

**Keywords:** Migrant workers. Generations. Multi-generation. Social mobility. China.
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Chapter 1 Introduction

I grew up with a factory. My father, a small entrepreneur, had borrowed funds from his family to buy the export-oriented leather garment factory where he was working as a financial manager, just a few years out of graduate school. He ran the factory for the next 30 years making leather jackets for Japan, the United States, and Europe. In the 1990s, wages in Taiwan had increased but selling prices had not. Like many other Taiwanese businessmen, he looked into moving the factory to Guangdong, China and did so in 1992.

Growing up with the factory in the Special Export Economic Zone in Kaohsiung, southern Taiwan, I learned a few things. First, the labels on a garment are never as important for an intelligent consumer as its materials and workmanship. From a factory’s point of view, as long as selling prices are satisfactory, it almost never mattered who the client or brand was. Second, stable orders from any client meant stable income for all, which meant a stable lifestyle for all. This seemed obvious, but it translated to something tangible for me to see and be part of.

Every day, workers filed into the Zone on their mopeds (I still remember how vast the moped parking area was), got onto their sewing machines, and heard the chiming sounds of sewing machines mixed with the turning of ceiling fans and the hum of the air conditioning. For lunch, some brought their own food to be steamed in metal lunch boxes, and some went to the restaurants, separated themselves by location and numbers. As a child, I ate lunches with many white- and blue-collar workers in the Number 2 Restaurant.

It did not matter to the workers what brand the factory was producing that month—that was for the office staff to worry about. Most brands were Western, so their labels had Western characters on them. Most workers knew no English. They managed to recognize the beginning letters of the label—the office staff could sort it out—and knew to sew it onto the collar area of each garment. To me, a child at the time, it seemed that workers
were quietly proud of what they were doing or at least happily engaged with the leather jackets. It was not until I entered a sociology PhD program and read Marx intensively did I learn about the alienation of labor, that labor was supposedly alienated and unconcerned about whatever products they were making because their labor power was exploitably sold to employers.

Day in and day out, they came to work and went home, and they quietly brought up children. On several occasions, they invited my father to officiate at their adult children’s weddings because it was he—as the owner of the factory—that gave the family a livelihood. And this was a gesture of honor to thank him.

With the small wealth that my family accumulated making leather jackets, my mother and I set out to the United States where she thought I could receive a better education than the one in Taiwan. I was 15. In a sense, even the boss’ family were migrants moving for a better future. By the time I was done with my American education in 2004, ready for a bright future in the United States if I wanted it, I realized I was homesick. Home had moved from Taiwan to Guangzhou, China because of the factory. So I decided to return home by joining the family business. I packed my things into ten boxes and shipped them by sea to China, and I took a one-way flight from the academic capital of the United States, Boston, to the manufacturing hub of the world, Guangzhou, China, the capital of Guangdong Province. With the highest amount of foreign direct investment in recent years, accounting for nearly half of Chinese inward foreign direct investment in the period 1985 to 1994, Guangdong had the fourth highest per capita income of 30 provinces (Rosen, 1999). The main engines of growth have been Hong Kong and Taiwanese companies investing in small and medium, labor-intensive, export manufacturing plants (Chiu and Frenkel, 1999). My father’s was one such small plant. Keeping with my custom, since my childhood, of eating with workers in the factory, I was beginning to be fascinated by their stories. Stories that would change my own life.
With their various Mandarin accents, workers from all over China described their long hours of train travel to the Guangzhou factory. Their stories of generally poor childhoods and teenage years were intertwined with the present, often concluding with what they were bringing home on their next visit.

Unaware then of the liquidity of capital, at work in the factory I was fighting hard to keep prices and dignity high when our fashion-industry clients demanded insultingly low prices. A major client had designed an Excel spreadsheet for contractor factories to fill out; it contained columns of material costs, labor costs, and administrative costs, leaving profit calculable by anyone with basic arithmetic skills. In other words, they demanded a transparent cost structure from their suppliers. My fights over prices for our goods proved to be futile, as fashion-industry clients had many options from which to procure their goods: alternative domestic Chinese locations as well as India and Pakistan. On the production side, we were beginning to lose workers. My father would come home—actually, another building on the compound of the factory—and report that so-and-so was quitting to go home.

Over the course of the next ten years, I witnessed the factory’s worker count drop from about 100 to less than 10. We found contractors in Hunan to supplement this labor shortage. I recall making trips to one contractor, explaining how a particular jacket ought to be made and negotiated the price. That factory was located in an old elementary school in XiangTan, Hunan, and staffed by local women who still farmed. Because farming was not a 9 to 5 type of job, they managed to both farm and hold on to the light industrial job of sewing. The factory’s production schedule had to make way for farming needs like seeding in the spring and harvesting in the summer and fall. The owner of the contractor establishment received orders from all kinds of places, from export factories like ours and from a domestic upstream contractor like the one who had contracts to sew postmen’s uniforms in China, which was what it was making on my trip. The setup was simple, revealing the transient nature of this line of work—the owner could close shop tomorrow
if there is no work coming in because workers were not on a long-term labor contract and were making piece-rate wages.

While our relationship with this contractor was strictly between buyer and seller, it was a clear example of how we could move to central China to expand production capacity. In fact, if our orders had been more stable and steady, my father was ready to invest in building his own secondary factory in Hunan. And we were not alone. There was a widespread trend of expanding production into the western and central parts of China due to the labor shortages on the coast.

As early as 2004, well before the 2008 financial crisis, many Chinese coastal factory owners had to hold their breaths after each Chinese New Year, waiting for their migrant workers to report back to work. Many workers returned home for good and others dabbled for a few months at home before returning to the coast.

The push factor of destitution that impelled migrant workers during 1980s and the pull factor until the early 2000s of the then-good wages were starting to give way to a new pull factor: the wish to remain closer to home. As the inland provinces of China developed, with large-scale infrastructure projects and accompanying industrial setups, people began to desert their long-distance work destination for a closer work location—some in the very township of their own home where their parents and children live and others in towns located near their homes. Incoming industries included hydro-electric stations, coal mines, construction, and heavy equipment and high-tech manufacturing were springing up in the traditionally migrant-worker sending provinces of central and western China. Industrial projects brought with them light manufacturing and service industries like hospitality and retail. Depending on the geographical location, migrant worker-sending regions also developed tourism, which made traveling long distances to the coast for work unnecessary.
As a result of labor shortages on the coast, manufacturers of labor-intensive goods like garments, toys, shoes, and simple electronics were relocating to or opening secondary factories in southeast Asia or inland China. Symbolically representing global capitalism, Foxconn, the Taiwanese manufacturer for electronics brands like Apple, Dell, and HP, built three factories in ZhengZhou, Henan in central China in 2012, employing a total of 140,000. Hong Kong’s *South China Morning Post* reported in 2004 that Hong Kong’s Hang Seng Bank said: “Many factory managers in provinces such as Guangdong, Fujian, and Zhejiang are now reporting they have difficulty recruiting enough workers, challenging the conventional wisdom of a seemingly inexhaustible Chinese workforce.” It predicted that “over the longer term, only the higher value-added industries will stay in the coastal manufacturing areas while low-end, labor-intensive industries will move to inland provinces.” The newspaper further reported in 2014 that publicly-traded Kingmaker Footwear Holdings,¹ a manufacturer of footwear for Western brands like New Balance, Skechers, and Clark planned to shift production to Vietnam and remote Chinese provinces.

Kingmaker was also studying the feasibility of setting up production in more remote parts of China. Its president stated: “It should ideally be four hours by highway from Hong Kong or at most eight hours. The furthest we will put our factory is in Sichuan Province, but we prefer to set up a factory in Hunan, since a lot of our workers in Guangdong are from that province.”²

With a labor shortage in coastal areas, the bargaining power between employers and employees was beginning to change. Factories that used to impose stringent screening

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¹ A Taiwanese company established in 1981 that became a publicly traded company in Hong Kong in 1988 when it set up an office there, as it looked for entry into the Chinese labor market. It set up its China factory in Zhuhai, Guangdong in the same year.

² Toh Han Shih, Sept 25, 2004. “Coastal labour shortage driving manufacturers inland; Firms shift factories from Pearl River Delta to remote provinces and increase production in Vietnam.” Business Post, P.3. *South China Morning Post.*
rules for their workers in the 1980s and 1990s were now chasing their workers when they returned home.

My father living on the coast in Guangzhou retired, and the factory manager continued the factory’s dwindling business under a different name. In 2013, on the invitation of two workers who lived close to each other in the same township in Hunan, I went home with them and started to document workers’ journeys back home—not just temporary visits but for many their relocation.

That trip grew into this dissertation. In 2015 and 2016, I made several other trips to visit townships and villages in Hunan, Sichuan, and Guizhou Provinces, where I spoke to ex-workers from my father’s factory, current return workers in my father’s friend’s sweater factory, and home workers (in a putting out system) who never left their villages. I also spoke to people who had stopped working since their return home. Many of the past and present workers were proud and happy to invite me into the houses they had built with money saved from working in the factories. Houses that literally reflected sunlight off the tiles. The houses that were built with hard-earned money were sources of pride amidst neighbors’ mud houses. One worker invited me to go home with her in celebration of her father’s 70th birthday. The father lived in a mud house with bare light bulbs illuminating the space. But first, this did not mean he was poor. He had several sons—all owning motorcycles—and this daughter worked on the coast, bringing back money to help with his household expenses. Plus, one of the sons was already building a new house nearby. When it was done, the father would move into a new building, most likely just as shiny as the other new village houses. Second, the daughter had built a large, tiled, three-story house erected in midst of farmland, a ten minute drive from her father’s house. In this house, I stayed in a large bedroom with a “king-sized” bed (1.8 meters wide, the largest kind in China) and was told to tell my father about the big house. I took a photo of her and her birthday-star father in front of the house—she was grinning widely.
In a rural, farming community, often a cement or tiled house marks the presence of someone who has gone out *dagong* and who has “made it,” able to build a new house. Building such a house, with modern interior facilities, is often a life-long dream and goal of migrant workers.

Traditional Chinese culture heavily values a family’s house—a place that one can call his or her own. Perhaps like all migrants or international immigrants, the first thing that traditional Chinese culture compels a migrant to do is to find suitable lodging. Unlike many other migrants (and international immigrants), however, the Chinese are almost always among the first to buy rather than to rent. Internationally, for example, the price of real estate in Vancouver has been greatly inflated, thanks to an overwhelming number of buyers from China, both Chinese immigrants to Canada and Chinese-national investors. The situation is so serious that Canada put in place in August 2016 a 15 percent tax on foreign nationals and non-permanent resident purchases.

Back in the village of these migrant workers, many of these new tile houses stand empty, however, because the owners are too busy in their coastal work destinations to really live in them. Before the time arrives for them to return on a semi-permanent basis, the house is locked up or occupied by their elderly parents or core family members. Of course, to a sociologist, they also symbolize material success brought about with their hard-earned money from the factory. Such a new-tile house usually costs about RMB 200,000, which, with a wage of anywhere starting from RMB 3,000 and up per month, requires about ten years of work, give or take other factors like saving and remittance rate of wages. It is, after all, the most visible sign of improving one’s family finances, a motivation so many migrants cite for their migration.
The 1990s Nike sweatshop scandals alarmed the world about labor conditions at the brands’ contractor factories. In Western Europe and the United States where many of the world’s well-known apparel brands are headquartered, teams were put together to generate contractor compliance handbooks so that the brands could face consumers as socially responsible manufacturers. Their efforts translated into pressure on contractor factories like my father’s concerning wages, overtime hours, overtime premiums, and safe working conditions.

Company worker rights audit teams would visit our factory, walk onto the shop floor, select workers to interview in private, and generate a report and correction action plan for us to follow-up on and make improvements for the next audit scheduled three months.
hence. Reasonable concerns for proper wages, whether overtime hours were paid according to law, and whether those sitting for a long time sewing had back support, or those standing up for a long time cutting fabrics had rubber foot support added to manufacturing costs.

These audit teams created tremendous pressure on manufacturers because they often did not pay overtime wages as the government mandated premiums, 1.5 times the base wage on weekday nights and two times on weekend days. Brand manufacturing (as opposed to an importer) does not necessarily mean better selling prices; in fact, often the opposite is true. While their audit teams pressured factories to improve working conditions and increase manufacturing costs, their merchandising offices were happy to be slashing prices. Could a pocket on a jacket be taken off (to save cost)? Could we take off another zipper? Could we change to a cheaper fabric? And most often heard, *Could you give us a better discount* (because we are comparing prices with another factory)?

To well-meaning friends who suggested that my father sell his factory as an exit strategy amidst this insurmountable pressure, we were embarrassed to reply that the factory contains little sales value because our clients had no loyalty. The brand companies that demanded this and that were never secure. We could not count on repeat clients from year one to year two. This may have been due to our special fabric category, which was more of a luxury than a necessity. Therefore, every product planning season, the sales force stressed out looking for orders. Without the promise of goods to make, workers dropped out, too.

In my own career transition from being part of the futile factory sales force to becoming a sociologist, I set out to find out what workers’ lives were like back home in their township or village, beyond their monotonous daily routines in the factories on the coast. Who were their family members? Whom did they have to support with their wages? How did they care for their children? How were their children doing with absent parents and
often illiterate grandparents? How did they first come out to dagong\(^3\)? What did they gain with this experience? Why did they return? What did they do after returning home? And how did their dagong experience help or hurt them on their return? In the end, because they had to make a choice either to work on the coast or at home inland, were they better off, returning home or continuing to work on the coast?

At no point in my interactions and conversations with workers and ex-workers from our own or someone else’s factories did I pretend to be someone I was not. I am privileged and belong by family relation to the owner’s class. To put it bluntly, I was the boss’ daughter when interviewing our own workers; I was the boss’ friend’s daughter when interviewing workers at my father’s buddy’s factory. If this class standing makes me stick out like a sore thumb among workers, my gender, and my familiarity with workers’ and garment-industry lingo put workers at ease at the very least. Often, when I revealed that I was not planning to take over my family’s business and that I was in a career switch by being a (doctoral) student, they understood immediately that I had my own battles with charting out a livelihood ahead of me. I also received what often felt like pity when I spoke about being in my thirties and single to women workers from farming backgrounds who had and were used to early marriages and early child births. Someone said that in their village, they knew of a woman who was already a grandma at my age. In a subtle but genuine way, I often let them feel that they were the privileged and fortunate ones, having established a traditional family early as opposed to later in life.

I already knew that media attention to the negative aspects of dagong lives was biased and even exaggerated, and I admit that subconsciously I was trying to paint the opposite picture.

\(^3\) The term in Chinese, dagong (打工), comes originally from Cantonese in Hong Kong where labor relations are determined by the market. Simply put, dagong means working for a boss, and connotes an implication of selling one’s labor power as a commodity in exchange for a wage or salary (Lee, 1998).
It turned out, that the opposite pictures did not require much purposeful “painting” on my part. Workers and ex-workers were glad to share their stories; more of them took me home—whether it was a working farm or an apartment in a township in their province of origin. Their stories were often multi-faceted and could not be reduced to a black-or-white judgment. Yes, going out to work on the coast was hard, the long-distance train travel was hard, the eating in the canteen was hard, the separation from their family—in particular, growing children—was hard, the long hours of physical work were hard, but sometimes the boss was good and warm. The relationship with co-workers was intimate, the camaraderie good, and the counting of cash on paydays rewarding.

When sociologists and many left-leaning, Marxist-oriented journalists critique the unjust treatment of these workers by the government in their city work destinations that prevent them from receiving social benefits due to the *hukou* registration system, they are inherently also critiquing the fact that workers’ social reproduction is completely done in their homes back in inland provinces. This horizontally cross-sectional view, while correct, does not consider that as the inland region develops, the offspring of the *dagong* workers no longer need to come out to the coast for a livelihood. With an education that their parents have worked so hard to finance, many of them are growing up to be white-collar workers in or near their homes of origin. Many of them are now united with their ex-*dagong* worker parents at home, with the latter helping with grandchildren.

Deng XiaoPing, when he engineered the Economic Reform, said purposely that he will let “a portion of people get wealthy first.” The idea is that the rest of the country should follow in the steps of the Special Economic Zones and become wealthy, later. We are now at this *later* point in time. If the portion of pilot people Deng meant to make wealthy first was the group of entrepreneurs who caught on with a presence in the Special Economic Zones, then those who were to become wealthy later were the groups that these pilot entrepreneurs employed and those in interior provinces (with the government’s stimulus package that came decades later). If we look at those whom the pilot
entrepreneurs directly benefited, it is a pyramid of people: some white-collar management and staff, many suppliers and contractors, and lastly but surely, the migrant workers. Due to many factors including individual motivations, some migrant workers have risen to the middle and top of the factories, while others have stagnated in a low position. But migrant workers are no different than other workers; the more education and skills they possess the better their employment chances.

Chapter 1 begins with studies of migrant workers in China in their historical context, and explores key ideas about the migrant worker phenomenon. Chapter 2 explains with ethnographic examples the departure of migrant workers from their inland homes to the coast, starting in the mid-1980s. Chapter 3 takes a closer look at what it is like in a small factory—the process of generating products, the pressure from clients, and the relationship between management and workers. Chapter 4 looks at the forces that contribute to the return of first-generation of migrant workers and the returns themselves, while chapter 5 examines second-generation migrant workers’ return to their homes. Why did they return? What did they do after the return? How might the first-generation’s motivations to return differ from the second generation of migrant workers? Instead of dagong, or working for someone else (on the coast), some of the return migrant workers have become small-scale entrepreneurs, while others dabble in entrepreneurship and dagong, with the latter as a surer way of making money. Finally, chapter 6 concludes the dissertation.
1.1 Relevant Literature Review: Putting Migrant Workers in Context

Migrant workers in China have been the focus of scholars and the popular media. The Financial Times (Mitchell, 2009) called the annual human traffic in domestic China around Chinese New Year “the world’s greatest annual human migration,” likening the traffic created by migrant workers’ trips to home provinces to that of an animal population’s migration in response to changes in climate or food supply. Geographer Kam Wing Chan estimated that 200-250 million rural residents have moved to cities and towns in China in search of a better life (2012), earning in industrial factories more in a month than what they could earn in a year on the farm.\(^4\) This is, to put it in perspective, roughly four to five times the volume of the Great Migration of Europeans to North America from 1800 to WWI, which was estimated at about 50 million people (Tilly, 1976).

It is no wonder that the Financial Times made this above observation in 2009. Following the economic crisis in the fall of 2008, many coastal factories—most of them export-oriented—were forced to shut down, and workers laid off. In the return traffic witnessed in Chinese New Year 2009, many were at least temporarily destined to stay home. In fact, labor shortages were felt by factory management as early as 2004. They were due to pull factors such as wage competition with the north and east of China, and more attractive, closer-to-home location of interior China as it started to industrialize.

Yet having a labor shortage, or having any labor relation at all in China is a recent phenomenon in the country’s capitalist history. Taylor, Chang, and Li (2003) noted that there was no such thing as labor-capital relations, and industrial relations were essentially determined by the paternalistic Party-state. In the three decades prior to Deng’s Economic

Reform that ushered in capitalism, China was still a Leninist Party-state led by the Chinese Communist Party. Under this regime, the Chinese working class was proclaimed the “master of the country,” and the interests of the Party-state, the workers, and their work units (danwei) had aligned interests. There was to be little tension and little competition of interests between a labor class and a management class.

Partially as a result of the drastic changes since the Economic Reform, many aspects of migrant workers’ lives—their working conditions, their marriage patterns, their bi-local existence, their children’s education, their aspirations and fears and more recently, their return—have been the subject of study by Chinese and international scholars across disciplines.

Leading the field is Pun Ngai. In her award-winning ethnography *Made in China*, Pun documented her year spent (1995-1996) as a student worker at a Hong Kong-owned electronics factory in coastal Shenzhen City, one of the first four special economic zones that were ushered in by Deng Xiaoping’s economic reforms starting in 1978.

Pun’s observations on suboptimal work conditions, the transitory nature of work, and workers’ silent resistance were characteristic of labor conditions and management-labor relations during the era when employment choices were few, when capital—represented by management—was king (and local government almost this king’s subordinates), when desire to improve material well-being was so overwhelming that laborers were willing to go to great lengths to endure what happens at the workplace. Focused on young, unmarried female migrant workers, Pun celebrated these working girls for their sense of agency and bravery to protest against patriarchal family culture by migrating to coastal factories. She documents the young women’s chronic bodily pains as signs of resistance to oppressive working conditions and suggests that a silent social revolution was
sweeping through China and that these young, female migrant workers were its agents. Different from the Western proletariat’s path to class consciousness, migrant workers in China did not engage in public protests or form an important political force, yet they were a new class based on their collective experience as a cog in the production machine, subject to global capitalism represented by the Hong Kong-owned factory, state socialist power reflected in the government’s recruitment of them, and patriarchal culture mirrored by the family demands that they return home, get married, and to never go out again (Pun, 2005).

Pun’s ethnographic work is vivid and thorough, yet it reflects, timewise, life in the factory in a horizontally cross-sectional scope. The accounts about workers’ pasts and futures were all coming from workers’ first-person narratives; no family members of workers were interviewed and workers’ homes were out of the picture. Consideration of workers’ life circumstances were concentrated on the immediate surroundings of their work in the factory and did not include their families and homes from which they traveled long distances. I had the privilege to speak with workers’ families and to spend time in their homes of origin, thus, placing workers in a more holistic picture than if I was merely interviewing them in their places of work. I hope this perspective helps readers understand these people’s lives as a whole, the good and the bad, the black and the white, and equally importantly, the grey areas.

Pun’s line of work represents a stream of research that emphasizes the powerlessness of migrant workers. In a later paper, “Gendering the Dormitory Labor System: Production, Reproduction, and Migrant Labor in South China,” Pun (2007) found in 2003 – 2004 in another electronics factory in Shenzhen that with its dormitory for its 70 percent female workforce the workday was lengthened and the division between work and personal life (and space) blurred. “Housing provision is not for families, so factory owners are not
interested in the reproduction of the next generation of laborers. Instead, they focus on maximizing the utilization of temporary, migrant, and contract labor by controlling the daily reproduction of their labor power.” Pun also looks at dormitories as sites of control and resistance and shows how the dormitory labor system simultaneously provides workers with opportunities to resist management practices and achieve victories in improving working conditions because workers’ easy access to fellow workers fostered possibility of enlisting solidarity and accelerating consensus.

But in smaller factories, dormitories and owner(s)’ lodging are often within the same factory compound. And in factories with less class conflict, dormitories can also be sites of camaraderie and bonding between owners and workers. Additionally, Pun’s research, alongside Ching-Kwan Lee’s, has looked at workers’ lives in large-scale factories in the Pearl River Delta and have reported on their misery. While I do not—and cannot—wish to completely deny the difficult labor conditions many workers faced, I set out to examine workers’ lives in small factories and their lives at home when they return from the coast. Did they benefit at all from this work experience? If so, how?

In any event, time has passed, and labor shortages, experienced as early as 2004, peaked after the 2008 global financial crisis, suggesting that the table has slowly been turned and bargaining power between capital and labor, as Zhan indicates below, has in fact reversed.

Researchers have pointed to the major role the hukou system has played in limiting migrant workers’ life chances (Chan and Zhang, 1999; Solinger, 1999; Lu, 2003; Alexander and Chan, 2004; Loong-Yu and Nan, 2007). It was first set up in the 1950s to control government welfare, resource distribution, migration, and criminal surveillance. Citizen registration was divided into either agricultural or non-agricultural (urban), each
with different sets of benefits in healthcare, education, housing allowances, and pension insurance. Migrant workers, most of whom were born in farming villages, receive an agricultural hukou at birth, which denied them benefits in urban areas they might migrate to for work. Gradual reforms have been instituted to increase internal equality.

Point-system schemes have been in place in some cities allowing for official migration, not unlike skilled international immigrations to Canada or Australia. Partially due to these reforms, the hukou’s impact on migrant worker lives has arguably declined. Leading this view is Shaohua Zhan (2011), whose ethnographic research shows that market resources and social exclusion are two much stronger influences than the hukou in determining migrant workers’ life chances. Many migrant workers interviewed by Zhan reported experiencing identity-based social exclusion and separation of social networks; they are also aware of their lack of two important market resources: human and economic capital. When asked about the hukou, many did not perceive it as a hindrance to their social mobility. While hukou had played an important role in deterring migrant workers’ permanent, or long-term settlement in urban regions, their effect on migrants’ movement is declining as a result of hukou reforms.

In Ching-Kwan Lee’s Against the Law, she described two different types of labor unrest in contemporary China, unrest from laid-off ex-state enterprise workers and from laid-off ex-private enterprise migrant workers. While the comparison is meaningful, the plight of southern migrant workers is more desperate than that of their northern counterparts. The former have—far away from home and prohibited by the hukou system from receiving local government benefits—little support or recourse and are faster to resort to marching and relying on labor bureaus. Yet despite Lee’s evidence and observation of migrant workers’ legal recourse, migrant workers reject cumbersome and costly legal processes and often acquiesce to unjust treatment in the name of cutting losses. More often than not, after they are laid off—without proper severance package that many small factories are
unable to afford—they quickly resume looking for new work in pursuit of new wages to satisfy imminent livelihood needs of themselves and family members back home.

The work of Zhan and Huang (2013) shows that legal recourse is absent at best. Local governments are often complicit with foreign capital to begin with anyway. They observe that incomplete proletarianization, different from what traditional labor scholars would have foreseen, actually increases labor’s bargaining power in China. Ties and entitlements to farmlands at home offer them the ability to exit the coastal labor market altogether, thus, giving them bargaining power with (current or would-be) coastal employers.\(^5\) \textit{Dagong} is no longer that attractive as alternatives became available.

Using evidence from fieldwork in a 600,000-resident county in Inner Mongolia, a migrant-worker sending region in the 1990s, Zhan and Huang (2013) show that migration has been reversed in the 2000s due to changes in state policies that have promoted rural economic development (and the accompanied increase in employment choices at home). Staffers interviewed at the County Bureau of Employment in the mid-2000s felt that “before, we used to beg them [employers from large and coastal cities in North China] to hire our laborers, but now they beg us to send them our workers.”

In light of this, one important aspect of my research is to investigate return laborers’ life chances outside of the \textit{hukou} system and social exclusion, situations in which migration

\(^5\) Erik O. Wright (2000) differentiates two types of workers’ power: associational power and structural power. Associational power comes from the formation of collective organizations of workers, such as trade unions, political parties, or any other form of institutional representation of workers. Structural power results from workers’ location within the economic system. Wright (2003) further divides structural power into marketplace bargaining power and workplace bargaining power (see also Silver, 2003). Zhan argues that incomplete proletarianization in the China context—meaning migrant workers’ ties to their rural farmlands at home and the resultant nonwage sources of income—gives them the ability to exit the coastal labor market; this credible threat then empowers them to negotiate for higher coastal wages and better benefits and working conditions.
is not involved. Specifically, how do workers make a living now at home? Is their return home final, or temporary? Are they making the same level of income doing what they do now compared to their jobs in the coastal factories? How have their dreams changed or remained the same about life? Have they gone home in time to improve their parent-child relationships? What aspirations do they have for their children?

Starting in 2001, when Chinese scholar Chunguang Wang (2001) coined the terms “new generation migrants” and “second generation migrants,” two groups of scholars have been conducting research on the differences between older and younger generation migrant workers on the coast. To avoid confusion with “first and second generations” of immigrants from international immigration, I will use “older” and “younger” generations throughout this dissertation.

In the most recent work with her research teams, Pun published Migrant Labor in China, a book devoid of the ethnographic detail of her earlier Made in China. She updates her work, adds an analysis of the construction industry, which employs male workers, and portrays the difference between the older and younger generations of migrant workers (Pun, 2016). Pun stresses that while the difference between the older and younger generation of workers should not be exaggerated, the younger generation is on the whole more individualistic, better educated, and more oriented towards urban culture and consumption. Pun concludes that the younger generation is also more prone to harboring resentment and anger towards life circumstances as migrant workers. While this seems logical, my research found a slightly different result among the younger generation. I believe it is their youth, not their resentment or dissatisfaction, that fuels the younger generation’s drive to seek social mobility. Now in their 40s and 50s, the older generation are generally happy settling into semi-retirement at home. In many ways, the younger generation’s return to their home township or village is less final, because they have not
completely ruled out leaving home for *dagong* on the coast again, especially those who still want or need a better wage.

One group of scholars—like Pun—finds that the younger generation of migrants have higher educational attainment, higher occupational status, and higher employment expectations, an increased proclivity for urban consumer culture (Davis, 2000; Pun, 2003; Yan 2008), less constrained economic circumstances, greater pursuit of personal development and freedom (Jacka, 2006), and a higher job turnover rate and less loyalty to their work (Smith et al., 2004), compared to the older generation of migrants. These scholars find the younger generation of migrants to be less resilient than the older generation in their employment, having few emotional ties with their rural places of origin, and strongly identifying with the destination cities, and they have strong desires to stay in destination cities (Liu, 2010; Liu & Cheng, 2008; Liu et al, 2012; Luo & Wang, 2003; Wang, 2001, 2010).

The second group of scholars challenges the first and finds evidence that the difference between the two generations of migrant workers has been exaggerated, and that the dichotomous approach in comparing the two generations of migrants is inadequate and too simplistic (Yang, 2010; Zhu 2010; Zhang, 2011). My research sample of 40 supports this second group of scholars, as does a study by Zhu and Lin (2014). They first interviewed 3011 respondents, including roughly 2000 females and 1000 males.

Demographically, 97 percent of the older generation of respondents are married, compared to only 38 percent in the younger generation. In terms of educational attainment, the older generation has 31 percent primary school graduates and 36 percent junior secondary school graduates, while the younger generation has 55 percent junior
secondary school graduates. The following chart shows occupational structures of the first and current employment of the two generations of migrants.

Table 1 Occupational Structures of Older and Younger generation Migrant Workers in China

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>First Employment</th>
<th>Current Employment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Older generation</td>
<td>Younger generation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>Older generation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>Younger generation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sales, service workers and clerical workers</td>
<td>11.2</td>
<td>22.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>16.6</td>
<td>10.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>16.4</td>
<td>23.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Production and transport workers</td>
<td>58.4</td>
<td>55.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>57.3</td>
<td>49.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>49.9</td>
<td>49.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual business owners, petty traders and casual workers</td>
<td>22.7</td>
<td>8.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>16.3</td>
<td>29.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>21.6</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Admin and technical workers</td>
<td>7.7</td>
<td>12.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>9.8</td>
<td>10.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>12.1</td>
<td>13.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\[\chi^2\] 143.387**

** 156.58***

Note: ****p<0.001
Zhu and Lin (2014) maintain that even though a slightly greater percentage of younger generation is employed as sales, service, and clerical workers than the older generation, it does not constitute significant upward mobility, because there are many menial sales, service, and clerical jobs for migrants that require no more education or sophistication than production and transport jobs and that command just as low an image and wage.

Both generations had production and transport workers as the dominant job category. Not reflected in this chart but revealed in the survey is that employment for both generations was unstable: only 55.4 percent of older generation and 56 percent of younger generation signed contracts with their employers, with insignificant difference between the two generations. Of those who did sign contracts, they were mostly short-term, with those shorter than 3 years accounting for a great majority of the older generation, as well as the younger generation.

In terms of identification with the places of origin and destination and settlement intention in the cities, 61 percent of the older generation identified themselves as rural residents, while only 55 percent of the younger generation did so. However, this difference was small and the statistical significance was not high; second, this difference might be accounted for by the alternative survey choice of feeling difficulty to identify themselves—22 percent by the younger generation—compared to the 17 percent of the older generation. In other words, it is possible that both generations feel a similar degree of identification with places of origin, but because of survey designs that gives the option of choosing “feeling difficulty to identify,” on the surface more of the older generation has an affinity with their places of origin.
Another survey result is telling: The average amount of money sent back by the younger generation migrants was RMB 5950, which was RMB 140 more than that sent by the older generation. Even though this is only a 2.5 percent difference, and the data source does not give information on whether inflation is accounted for and whether this was constant RMB, this evidence further suggests that emotional ties felt by the younger generation migrants to their hometowns are not necessarily weaker compared to the older generation.

In short, Zhu and Lin’s large sample-sized survey revealed that there are more similarities between the old and younger generation of migrant workers than there are differences.

In Lu Zhang’s 2015 book, *Inside China’s Automobile Factories: The Politics of Labor and Worker Resistance*, she deftly observes a labor force dualism, the divide between formal and temporary workers as a central component of labor relations in the Chinese auto industry. She argues that widespread grassroots protests among autoworkers in China have largely succeeded—they have won wage increases, improved conditions on the shop floor, and pressured the government into enacting new labor laws and policy changes (Zhang, 2015).

First, while this is happening in the automobile industry, the story in the garment manufacturing industry is altogether different. One might first assume that automobile workers have less bargaining power than garment manufacturing workers because there are a small number of automobile makers (employers). But upon closer examination, garment manufacturing workers have a grimmer plight. This is because the entry barrier to garment manufacturing is much lower—one can much more easily train to become a worker in garment manufacturing than in the automobile industry, making job positions in garment manufacturing highly replaceable. Also, the entry barrier to establishing a
Garment factory is low, with many small or unofficial workplaces where employment practices fall outside official rules.

Second, not all enterprises can meet all the requirements of the new labor laws and policy changes that the country enacts as it upgrades its industries to become more high-tech, less labor-intensive. Workers who were laid off from these outdated enterprises did not necessarily benefit from the new labor laws. We will learn in chapter 3 the plight of small garment manufacturers.

Garment manufacturing workers are less like automobile workers in Lu Zhang’s book because auto manufacturing is a capital-intensive industry where workers have structural power against their employers. Except for the gender factor, garment workers are more like informal construction workers described in Sarah Swider’s Building China (2015). Construction workers are predominantly male, and the garment manufacturing sector predominantly female. Like construction workers, few garment workers have signed labor contracts, especially if they are working either as seasonal workers or workers of disposable positions.

Swider observes that the informal working class consist of migrant workers, who protest against the state rather than their employers, and issues are framed as universal and symbolic of larger social struggles, increasing the potential for cross-class support. She argues that although these migrant workers have not been incorporated into the new legal framework, they have emerged as a central component of China's economic success and an important source of labor resistance.
My sample size and the factory sites of my research are too small to include many who have participated in labor resistance (only one of 40 did). Militant workers are in the minority, but labor is only acquiescent until it is not.

What I have found from my study of two small garment factories is that labor and capital are not as frequently in conflict as standard Marxism would make it seem. Often in small factories, labor and capital are aligned to face the same enemy of globalization, a social force that is more fundamental in why both labor and capital classes suffer.

For example, I found that wage arrears in the garment manufacturing industry have been tolerated and normalized by workers and are never protested. Labor has internalized such illegal practices, which the government has turned a blind eye toward since the 1980s as it was complicit with global capitalism, to consider it normal. Of course, it is still the factory’s responsibility to pay workers on-time even if the end client has not; workers can at least be somewhat understanding (though still angry) when owed wages because of the sense of camaraderie with factory owner against globalization.

Roger D. Waldinger wrote in in his 1986 book, Through the Eye of the Needle: Immigrants and Enterprise in New York’s Garment Trades, that while firms owned by members of a racial majority often interpret ethnic minority workers’ behaviors in racially stereotyped ways, firms owned by members of a racial minority that hire their co-ethnics practice personal loyalties, ethnic allegiance, and a generally reciprocal employment relationship. In the context of a garment factory in China where both capital and the working class are ethnically Chinese, there is not a co-ethnicity to speak about, but there can be a general sense of camaraderie and a similarly reciprocal relationship between the two classes that are psychologically aligned to face globalization forces.
1.2 Research Questions

The objective of this dissertation is to study migrant workers’ lives, whether they include a departure from or return to their homes of origins. Why did they leave home in the 1980s and 1990s, and why have they returned? This question will be asked to both older and younger generation of migrant workers to see how their motivations might differ. For both groups, I wanted to see whose lives are affected by these moves in both directions. Whose lives have been bettered and in what ways? Where are the hard choices made consciously, and what social forces contribute to the hard choices?

At work, do both generations of migrant workers have a labor contract with their employers? If not, why not? Do they receive proper overtime pay? If not, why not? Do they receive from employer and contribute personally to proper social security schemes? If not, why not? How do migrant workers manage health care and old-age retirement?

With the younger generation of migrant workers who have returned home, how much of a pay cut must they swallow? By choosing to return home, there must be non-monetary reasons, so what are they? What drives some to become small-scale entrepreneurs? What lessons have they learned from the coast—be they business models or general life experience in a more developed capitalistic region of the country?

1.3 Research Methods

This dissertation draws on a variety of data sources—in addition to participant observation, informal focus groups, open-ended interviews, and social media conversations, I worked in my father’s factory for seven years full-time. This gave me insight into the underpinning of the factory’s management, challenges, its relations with labor—even if from the employer’s perspective. Because of my close contact everyday
with workers, I naturally also absorbed their points of view on things. All of this, as well as written documents and secondary resources like newspapers and help-wanted ads.

From 2004 to 2011 before I entered the PhD program in sociology at the CUNY Graduate Center, I worked full-time in my father’s leather garment factory. In fact, in the first two years of my time as a doctoral student between 2011 and 2013, I was living in New York and acting as the factory’s sales representative by visiting clients in New York. I supported myself this way. In 2013, the factory changed ownership, and two workers happened to invite me home. The change of ownership conveniently helped with the passing of my IRB regulations in regards to conflict of interest. But of course, all the knowledge about small factories and their workers, I had acquired during my seven-year prior tenure.

Because of my unique vantage point, access to the factory, which can frustrate other researchers, has never been a problem. I also quickly gained the consent of my father’s friend to interview workers in his factories in Guangzhou, Guangdong and Weiyuan, Sichuan in 2013 and 2015, respectively. Speaking with my father’s friend on social occasions about his business conditions also provided context for his business operations.
This dissertation is a product of much travel and countless mileage. In my first trip with workers to their homes in 2013, I took a six-hour evening train from Guangzhou to HengYang, Hunan. We arrived around 4 am, and stopped at a rest station for a connecting small van to their village. We were only able to get two seats for the three of us; so in the six-hour journey, we bonded over taking turns on the seats (but the two of them were too deferential to ever let me stand) and exchanged stories about their past journeys and their homes that I would never had discovered if I only stayed in the factory working with them under normal circumstances.

As my father’s friend agreed to let me camp out at his secondary factory in Sichuan, I traveled there and stayed for two months in 2015, then again in 2016. As I got to know some of the workers better, I became more involved in their lives. One first generation worker, after receiving my recruitment ad, said her daughter saw the piece of paper and asked to see me. They then asked if I could tutor the daughter in English in the summer between the 10th and 11th grades. I gladly took the job and met with her once a week. Through interacting with her, I learned about her expectations of life, her parents’ expectations of her, and her relationship with her migrant worker parents. Another worker was simply kind enough to take me home, an hour away from the factory in the township. We toured around a vineyard in her hometown, chatting away in depth in an unpressured way. That evening, we slept in the same bed. In 2016, I made another trip to Sichuan to visit the interviewees—by now we were keeping in touch over social media and had become friends.

This is an exploratory study of migrant workers’ return home. I conducted interviews with 40 people, and all of their stories were eventually included.

Chapter 2 The Departure of Older Generation Migrant Workers

The number of migrant workers have risen since the start of Deng’s Economic Reform. In 1983, migrant workers accounted for only 2 million in the population, and this number increased 15 fold to 30 million in six years. Then in 2002, according to the National Statistics Bureau, migrant workers reached 105 million, and in 2008 225 million. The most recent census count shows that in 2014, there were 274 million, a 1.9 percent increase from the count in 2013 (JunJie Wang 王俊杰, 2015).

2.1 Definition of Migrant Workers (nongmin gong)
The term *nonmin 农民* and *gong 工* refers to migrant workers’ bi-local existence, with *nongmin* referring to their official agricultural *hukou* status of being farmers, and *gong* referring to their activity as industrial wage workers. In English, the term “migrant workers” is often short for “agricultural migrant workers.” Ironically, many of the younger generation of agricultural migrant workers who left their farming villages for city jobs have already lost knowledge of farming independently from scratch and by themselves. They might be able to provide peripheral help like harvesting to their farmer parents, or be extra sensitive to recognize the lunar calendar because it revolves around various farming seasons, but they were no longer capable and knowledgeable of farming independently from start to finish. The term, “migrant workers” seems to convey—thanks to media that has often taken perspectives out of context—a negative image of a dirty, aimless, floating, and even riot-prone population. They are in fact the opposite of those descriptions.

Here, I first provide a history of the *hukou* system that had until recently made settling in urban work destinations nearly impossible.

From 1949, when the People’s Republic of China declared its sovereignty, to 1958, citizens were free to move within the country. The earliest form of the *hukou* system started in 1951, when the government merely sought information on people’s whereabouts by requiring registration at a local bureau three days after any move. Local registration was unconditionally granted after three months of moving to a new location.

*Hu* means a unit, or a family; *kou* means persons. Together as a term, *hukou* refers generically to the sums of units of families and people. In this early era in the People’s Republic, *hukou* functioned mainly to manage public safety and the population census. As the People’s Republic in its infancy realized its backward economic development, it

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sought to develop heavy industries as a national priority to accelerate the process. This way, it could “grow up fast,” so to speak, be self-sufficient (as opposed to being reliant on foreign imports), and be equipped with industrial facilities and a modern national defense system, especially during a time when the world was hostile to socialism and the forming of a new socialist country. Heavy industries were 85 percent of all industrial investment at this point. With no other plans for building a socialist country, the nation’s leaders mimicked the development of the former Soviet Union. Jobs in heavy industries then attracted a large number of peasants. During this free-moving period from 1952 to 1957 (the government’s first five-year plan), 20 million agricultural workers moved to towns and cities.

However, this massive number of peasants crowding into towns and cities created overcrowding and food shortages, prompting the government to establish a series of hukou control policies, culminating in the 1958 separation of agricultural and non-agricultural registration and the prohibition of the free movement from an agricultural to a non-agricultural hukou in towns and cities, except in cases of acceptance into jobs or higher education institutes in urban regions. By forcing peasants with an agricultural hukou to stay on their farms, the government made sure that peasants had to engage in farming, as opposed to becoming industrial workers and crowding out urban resources. Moreover, peasants were taxed and exploited by having to submit a disproportionately large quantity of their crops to the government (which would then distribute the food to the industrial and urban populations), creating food shortages in the villages as well. As a result, peasants were forced to uproot themselves and flow into the cities again, now violating the hukou regulations.

This foreshadowed the massive movement of agricultural migrant workers in the 1980s after the Economic Reform.
The rationale for the *hukou* system was to prohibit this flow of peasants into the already-crowded cities. The policy prioritized the protection of urban resources and stability over the equality of all citizens. On the ground, it created a two-class society that featured much inequality in areas of transportation infrastructure; water, electricity, and gas infrastructure; housing; education; healthcare; and other social benefits. Urban *hukou* holders received much better treatment than their agricultural counterparts in the above aspects of life, in terms of greater quantity and higher quality.

Particularly for state sector employees, vital services and welfare entitlements were routinely provided to urban residents, including free or subsidized health care, retirement benefits, and subsidized food and housing (Cheng and Selden, 1994). As if the disparity in the abovementioned provisions were not enough, imagine urban *hukou* holders receiving more than agricultural *hukou* holders in compensation for deaths, when the deaths had occurred, for example, in the same car accident.

All of this started to change in 1984 on a small scale, and in larger steps in the 1990s, then most recently in the 2000s. Those with an agricultural *hukou* but who are engaged in entrepreneurship, labor, or providing services could change their *hukou* status to an intermediate “Self-Funded Food *hukou*” if moving to small townships, meaning they would grow and generate their own food (as opposed to qualifying for the urban *hukou*’s government-provided food ration). This meant that education, skills, and capital were tickets to upward mobility, i.e., peasants were no longer “stuck” in villages but could live in small townships. This intermediate Self-Funded Food *hukou* was not yet a full-fledged non-agricultural *hukou*, it only allowed for those in the villages to work in small townships (note the policy change started with small townships). This pilot policy—and the small step towards loosening the overall *hukou* system—served as an exploration and experiment for the same policy to take effect in large cities and on a larger scale later. See section 2.3.2.
It is no coincidence that the timing of this policy change was aligned with the massive wave of older-generation agricultural migrant workers who traveled long distances to work in coastal factories—the demand to loosen the *hukou* was tremendous. Suddenly, alongside China’s Economic Reform, people needed money to live. Everything that used to be provided for by the Communist government now required cash. Social reproduction had a price tag. People needed money to buy food and other everyday items, to educate their offspring, and to pay medical bills when they or their aging parents were sick. This is not to mention the more advanced needs of culture and entertainment. And therefore, they began moving to the coast to make money.

### 2.2 Stereotypes of Migrant Workers

Disheveled and dirty? No. Most factories and their dormitories on the compound are surrounded by small shops and small supermarkets that sell a wide range of personal hygiene products; it could also be counted on that at least two small hair salons would dot the block nearby: most workers have normal standards for personal appearance, not to mention that basic grooming and uniforms—depending on the size and management of the factory—were often workplace requirements.

Aimless and floating? No. Chain migration happens with an aim. Migrants from the hinterlands know who they are seeking and where they are staying. They strive to stay together with a trusted friend, cousin, sibling, or relative who has come before them, who has helped recruit them to work at the same or nearby factory. And while it is true that some workers job-hop until they find something satisfactory, this search cannot be described as aimless or floating. Given every worker’s preferences, constraints, and desires, everyone—like people working for a wage or salary—is searching to maximize their utilities on the job. It can mean different things for different people. Some want to
earn as much as possible and thus seek out high-wage jobs. Others want to work less overtime with more free time. Still others have health concerns that encourage them to seek a healthier work-life balance. Many workers I interviewed in my study reported having a good relationship with their bosses. “The boss is really nice to me,” they would say, and this often compensated for what workers considered low pay, or a sub-optimal conditions in their factory lives.

Riot-prone? No. If anything, migrant workers are one of the most docile groups of people in contemporary Chinese society. Armed with around nine years of compulsory education and coming from simple farming families, most wish to have nothing to do with riots. They are neither wave-makers nor militant. Even when they are owed wages for nonpayment or arrears, they wish to resolve the problem in a non-confrontational, non-violent way. The purpose of coming out to dagong is not to make trouble but to secure a better life for themselves and their families back home. Anything that distracts from that purpose, like involvement in a riot or a strike that risks further conflicts with management is something they think twice about.

2. 3 The Departure of Older Generation Migrant Workers

In this chapter, I explore why older generation of migrant workers leave their homes. Naturally, the older generation will have had a longer, different work trajectory than the younger generation or wave of migrant workers. In the next chapter, I explore the return of these older-generations migrant workers, and in chapter 4, the return of the younger-generation migrant workers. In some cases, the older generation’s decisions to return home will be more final simply because they are older and have reached retirement age. Going out again to dagong destinations would be fighting a greater inertia and with competition from younger generations, tougher.
Eighty percent of migrant workers in the eastern (coastal) region remain within their own provinces, only 16 percent go outside of their provinces of origin for work. Migrant workers in western and central China, however, are much more likely to travel outside of their provinces of origin for work. Fifty-seven percent of those from western China and 67.2 percent of those from central China migrate to provinces outside of their provinces of origin (JunJie Wang 王俊杰, 2015).

After China’s Economic Reform in 1978, Special Economic Zones were linked to specific inland region labor bureaus in recruiting able-bodied agricultural migrant workers to move to coastal factories for work, with room and board provided. For example, the then labor bureau of my ethnography location, Weiyuan Sichuan, was linked to enterprises in Guangdong Province. Ruth Milkman wrote that as manufacturing in the U.S. withered, the traditionally female-employing service sector expanded; surging demand for female labor drew more and more married women and mothers into the workforce. (Milkman, 2016) China had another situation at the time of its Economic Reform. Both men and women were recruited to go to coastal factories, but many industries preferred women over men because women were perceived to have finer hands, to be more careful and detailed oriented in industries in which such qualities are warranted, such as the electronics assembly lines and garment sewing productions.

Informant P.X. was one of the few pioneer women from her home in Sichuan who, in 1988, migrated out to Guangdong through labor bureau recruiting. She left just before her 16th birthday with her cousin because they were afraid of individual enterprise recruitment ad scams. Informant M. went with an organized group of 200 unmarried female workers in 1989, just before she turned 17.

Thirty years after the initial stifling hukou system, policies in large migrant worker-destination metropolises have started to loosen up. Shanghai in 1994, Shenzhen in
1996, and Guangzhou in 1998 took the intermediate step to grant *hukou* status to outsiders who had an investment, a residential property of a certain size, or a legal job in the city, provided that they had obeyed the one-child policy and paid taxes.\(^7\)

While it seemed like migrant workers would now finally switch into urban *hukou* with this policy change, the majority do not bother to apply. First, because of their long hours and accommodation at factories, most lack child care ability and facilities. In the example of Guangzhou, the urban *hukou* was only given to those aged 16 to 60, making migrant workers’ parents ineligible to move, even if they themselves were eligible. Not only are age limits a problem, housing for parents and children is impossible when migrant workers live in the dorms. Living in the dorms and having little expense themselves, alongside having social reproduction shifted to the villages, enables them to send remittances back home to support the lives of their aging parents and children. Second, conceivably, migrant workers also have a strong affinity and loyalty to the land that they come from and the community they belong to back in the villages. It has always been clear to most migrants that there is an end date to their work experience somewhere in the distant future, when they will have made enough money, when they will have helped family members through a particular crisis, or through a period in which money is especially needed, such as a sibling going to school, after which they will be able to go *home*.

Indeed, some scholars have noted that returning may not be rational, that cognitive and psychological factors tend to be underestimated in studying settlement intentions (Ding, 2005; Hu and Hu, 2009). In China’s context, affection for home and geographic attachment may be parts of the values and traditions of many rural urban migrants;

\(^7\) The implementation of this policy is such that the process to verify education can be so extremely difficult that many applicants resort to giving up after a few attempts. Schools back in inland provinces refuse or do not have the ability to re-print diploma copies, and many applications are stalled and cannot be pushed beyond this step.
migration behavior may be hardly anticipated by neoclassical economic factors like utility maximization (Huang, 1999; Zhang, 2002).

My finding confirms this view. Overwhelmingly, in my sample migrant workers from both generations noted that hukou was never a concern in their decisions to depart or return, except for a few who were exceptionally motivated to stay and earn the urban hukou. In their departure into the coastal host cities, as long as they obtained the Temporary Resident Permit, applied for through their job, their stay was fine, and they were free to move about locally. When I inquired whether the lack of an urban hukou posed a problem, an informant laughed and challenged me: “Not everyone wants to immigrate like you.”

Indeed, moving from the hinterlands to the coast and obtaining an urban hukou is like international migration. It is often a self-selected group of exceptionally motivated people who wish to (im)migrate vs. those who wish to return home one day. A small minority of my sample strove to get an urban hukou: L.A., Y.Y. and L.C.

L.A. came to Guangdong from Sichuan at the age of 16, just after she graduated from middle school. It was at a time when foreign-owned factories were just starting to come in and set up shop and more people like herself wished to get a job than there were jobs. Through her relationship with an aunt who had married and settled in Guangzhou she landed a job in a sweater factory fixing the main label onto the collar area, a very rudimentary task. It was typical of the 1990s, that getting even an unskilled job in a factory, that entering a factory at all, required a relationship, someone who knew someone at the factory. A self-motivated person, she continued to go to night school. At first she studied accounting, but one day in 1993, the teacher announced that without a local hukou, she could not acquire an accounting certificate so she switched to garment making.
As soon as I knew accounting could not qualify me for the local *hukou*, I thought, my first goal was to *get* the local *hukou*. So I took actions to get it. Through relationships, my aunt was able to buy one legally. It cost her just a few thousand at the time.

The 1990s ushered in such policy changes that allowed for buying a *hukou* by agricultural-*hukou* holders. The city was ready to open up and receive those with means, in the name of expansion.

After she received the Guangzhou *hukou*, she moved her mom into the city to live with her. Five years later, together with the income her mother was making cooking for a factory, she bought an apartment that she invited me into. When I commented that she was a very self-motivated person, she revealed her trajectory at work.

After I switched to garment making, I started to incorporate everything I learned at the night school with everything I was learning on the job. So I started to seek out new positions within the garment factory, like sewing and being responsible for other more difficult parts of the garment manufacturing, no longer just a label-sticking girl. Slowly, one step at a time, I learned pattern making and eventually became a pattern maker.

Today, in addition to working in a small sweater company as a pattern maker, she bought another space in town and invested RMB 10,000+ in a set of pattern-making computerized machines to do freelance jobs. It is a way of making extra income, as well as insurance against the company’s failure or ever being made redundant. Without a local *hukou*, establishing her own business would be more complicated and difficult. Now, L.A. enjoys her back-up business set-up, and her daughter enjoys going to a local public
school. Mimicking her mother’s path of success yet striving to advance beyond it, L.A.’s high school-aged daughter studies painting and will rely on her artistic skills to get into college. Had L.A. not had a local hukou, her daughter would not have been able to go to a local public school, and her subsequent artistic skills would not have been developed.

Y.Y. is a Hunan native who has been living and working in a Dutch-owned business in Shenzhen for years, and therefore goes by her English name among her colleagues. She said:

I thought I would eventually go back home. But having a Shenzhen hukou is beneficial for having my 3-year-old go to public school. Also, although there is a long line for it, having a Shenzhen hukou gives me the opportunity to rent or buy government-assisted housing, which is below the horrendous market rate in the Shenzhen real estate market.

We next turn to L.C.’s rich and multi-layered story of turning her hukou from rural Sichuan out to Shenzhen.

2.3.1 Multigenerational Mobility and Life Strategies

In rural China in the 1980s, resources were tight, as the country was coming out of 2 years of being poor under the Communist regime. Families consciously and unconsciously made their everyday and longer-term decisions as a unit. They strategized their divisions of labor and rewards: who is to work and earn money, when and how? Who is to be supported by this money, why and for how long? Who stays home to take care of whose kids? All arrangements of this sort served to improve the family’s upward
mobility as a unit, and they had an internal logic that originated from a deep cultural background.

Quach and Anderson (2008) state that the family constitutes a crucial support network, particularly through intergenerational relationships, even as the Chinese households are undergoing substantial changes. What I have observed in the field is that the family constitutes a support network especially when Chinese households are undergoing substantial changes.

Individual decisions are embedded in collective family decision-making structures. Girls may decide, and have decisions made for them, to give up school and start earning a wage to support boys in the family. Older siblings may decide, and have decisions made for them, to help with the expenses of younger siblings. Teen and late teen girls may decide, and have decisions made for them, to be married off so there is one less mouth to feed in the family.

This is how families function in a collective culture: family members intertwining their lives for collective life improvement. They therefore also take pride and feel shame that much more strongly from family members’ behaviors and performance in life. Migrant workers’ success or failures is not to be determined simplistically on personal successes or failures but taken to include family members. The Chen family illustrates this point.

L.C., 40, a triumphant converted Shenzhen (urban) hukou woman got to where she is today from a difficult beginning. Her mother’s sister had married someone in coastal Fujian, so the mother, B.W., had the idea two or three months after her own father died of leaving their home in Qu County, Sichuan to dagong. At the age of 7 or 8, L.C. was left at home to be cared for by her father and grandparents. During this time, B.W., the mother, worked hard at all kinds of physical and odd jobs to send money home. She had worked on construction sites moving rocks and bricks, stocking ships with goods, and passing sand in a line of workers. “Whatever a man could do, I did, too.” Even at this
physically demanding job, she would skip lunches to save money to send home. B.W. was making RMB 3 a day.

Figure 3 Map showing location relationship between Fuzhou, Fujian and Qu County, Sichuan. Source: Society of Anglo-Chinese Understanding http://www.sacu.org/provmap.html, accessed January 10, 2017

So when B.W. finally got a contact that would help her start working indoors in a factory, she was thankful. She thought life in the factory was quite good. “You are fed in the canteen, and you are not exposed to the elements.”
As a practice to control labor, B.W.’s boss was keeping workers’ IDs so that they would not escape or job hop. But every few months, B.W. would take a three-day-four-night train ride with two or three transfers to go home and visit. This lasted for eight or so years until L.C. turned 16 or 17. She said to her parents, “Mama, I will go out to dagong with you. I will help make money for [her two] younger sisters to study. If I continue school, there will not be enough money left for younger sisters.”

Thus, L.C. stopped school after junior high. She first went to Fujian to make money with her mother, where she learned, at the age of 16 or 17, how to drive a large truck. Then she went to Guangzhou to look for a job with her cousin.

Today, the three sisters’ bond is as great as ever. They are all mothers themselves—L.C. in Shenzhen, the middle sister F.C. in Da County in Sichuan, who never left, and J.C., the youngest sister who returned to Sichuan (ShiMian) after a few years of working in Shenzhen—and are always thankful for what their eldest sister did for them. L.C. picked up her missing high school education with a “GED” diploma, which led to a vocational degree, and eventually a bachelor’s degree, all while working full-time at Philips, the lighting multinational company’s China headquarter in Shenzhen.

The youngest sister has an associate degree in accounting. But to the middle sister F.C., this was not good enough, and she felt somewhat responsible. She said:

Mama was out dagong in Fujian. Older sister is out dagong in Guangzhou. I remember it was just me and Dad looking after J.C., the youngest girl. I was always burdened with the task of putting dirty clothes into our bamboo basket on my back and going to the river to wash them. I remember that J.C. would always just play around me and she would never help. But anyway, it was OK because I was older. I just wished that she could have done better on her physical education test. If so, she could
have gotten into a teacher’s college, and then she might have been better off today as a teacher, as opposed to having to find a job in accounting in the private sector, which is always unstable.

Multigenerational life strategies mean something as tender and deep as siblings’ feeling responsible, proud, or ashamed of one another’s life outcomes, as they do something as simple as the division of chores. In China, the reliance on machines is minimal because people are used to doing things by hand, especially in rural regions or by people with a rural history. So today, B.W. is not bothered that she does not have a washing machine in a household of four adults (she and her husband, plus their daughter L.C. and her husband) and two young children.

They live in a walk-up apartment in Shenzhen for L.C.’s job at Philips Lighting. One day I visited L.C. during the lunch hour so she could help me decipher an informant’s recorded spoken words in Sichuanese. When I saw her walking into the doors of the restaurant, I immediately commented on her sharp appearance. She was wearing a blue top that showed the tops of her bare shoulder, and a pair of high heels, making her look like the powerful career woman that she indeed is. She thanked me for my compliment, and we proceeded to lunch and to the recording. The short lunch hour proved insufficient for her to listen to the entirety of my recording and to make sense and explain it to me properly. So we agreed that I would visit her home that evening. Her father, B.W.’s husband, the family’s designated cook, treated me to a five-course dinner in their small, crowded apartment. And during dinner, I saw B.W. coming out of the shower from the one bathroom they had, with the very same blue top I had complemented L.C. on earlier in the day, now ready to be dried on the balcony. It was roughly 7 or 8 pm, the grandfather of the household was cooking for the guest, me, and the grandmother of the household was taking a shower plus already washing by hand the daughter’s clothes from that same workday. The operation of this family is an example of multigenerational life strategies.
Xu et al. (2007) sums this up concisely,

Chinese culture, being collective in nature, is well-known for its emphasis on family relationships and support. Families are described as close-knit units, manifested in three-generational households. Research shows that despite the changes, family remains the main pillar of the social support network. Families are still greatly valued by the young and the old. Intergenerational relationships are not to be undervalued or underestimated. Child care and elder care remain families’ responsibilities both in urban and rural China (Xu et al. 2007).

2.3.2 Urban Hukou

We will use Shenzhen as example to discuss the recent hukou changes since 2005. The total population of Shenzhen has grown from 2.61 million to 11.55 million in 20 years between 1992 and 2012, and with about four million coming and leaving each year, indicating how great mobility is in Shenzhen (ZhenJing Li 李振京、LinShan Zhang 张林山 et al., 2014).

Statistics indicates that at the end of 2012, the total population of Shenzhen was 11.55 million; within it, 27.3 percent (2.88 million) had a Shenzhen hukou, and the rest 72.7 percent (7.67 million) lacked one. The ratio is 1:3. In fact, the non-hukou population has hovered around 70 percent for the past 20 years. They live mostly in traditional manufacturing districts like Bao An and Long Gang. As expected, even though those with higher education (associate and bachelor degrees) have increased among the non-hukou holders, the majority remain poorly educated (ZhenJing Li 李振京、LinShan Zhang 张林山 et al., 2014).
In Shenzhen’s 2011 city-wide five-year policy plan, there was a goal to reduce the *hukou*: non-*hukou* ratio from 1:4 in 2010 to 1:2.3 in 2015 by increasing Shenzhen *hukou* holders by 280,000 people annually, doubling the growth in the last five-year planning period (ZhenJing Li 李振京、LinShan Zhang 张林山 et al., 2014).

How does Shenzhen achieve this goal? Compared to Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou, as we will see in the below chart, Shenzhen’s *hukou* application threshold starts rather low, requiring just evidence of one year of social security payments. Using a point system not unlike that used in international immigration to Canada or Australia, Shenzhen has simplified the *hukou* application process for those with a special occupational skill and those with at least a bachelor’s degree in a mid-level position. More important, like Canada and Australia, individuals are allowed to apply for their own migration, as opposed to relying on their employers’ to apply (like in U.S. immigration), further lowering the standard so that more are eligible.

The following table shows the points-based *hukou* system for agricultural-*hukou* holders to qualify in mega cities of Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Shenzhen.

**Table 2 Criteria of Qualifying for Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Shenzhen**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Urban Hukou</th>
<th>Beijing</th>
<th>Shanghai</th>
<th>Guangzhou</th>
<th>Shenzhen</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social Security</td>
<td>Evidence of continued payment for 7 and more years</td>
<td>Evidence of payment for 7 years</td>
<td>Evidence of payment for 4 years</td>
<td>Evidence of payment of 1 year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Place of</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Must have a</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Residence</td>
<td>requirement</td>
<td>requirement</td>
<td>legal residence</td>
<td>requirement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>Not older than legal retirement age.</td>
<td>5 points for 56-60 years of age. 2 points more for each year less.</td>
<td>Not older than 45 years of age</td>
<td>18-45 years of age</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minimum Education</td>
<td>No requirement</td>
<td>No requirement</td>
<td>Junior high school</td>
<td>No requirement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resident’s Permit⁸</td>
<td>Holder of Beijing Resident’s Permit</td>
<td>Holder of Shanghai Resident’s Permit for 7 years</td>
<td>Holder of Guangdong province Resident’s permit for 3 years</td>
<td>Holder of Shenzhen Resident’s Permit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maximum Points</td>
<td>Published each year</td>
<td>Backlogged cases to be processed next year</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Chinese Business Industry Research Academy 中商产业研究院

⁸ Resident permits are a more temporary type of permit that allows legal residence in the city but does not entitle holders to the same benefits as the permanent hukou.
A careful analysis of the chart shows these mega cities are welcoming productive workers (those who have paid for social security through their employers) in their prime productive years of age.

According to the Five-Year Plans (policy directives) in these mega cities in 2015, Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Shenzhen set population goals respectively to be 23 million, 25 million, 15.5 million, and 14.8 million. And respectively, Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Shenzhen have a shortfall of 1.3 million; 847,300; 2 million and 3.42 million people. As a result, the population policy has now turned 180 degrees to invite non-urban, agricultural-hukou holders who are of productive utility to the mega cities. Like movements to mega cities, rural agricultural-hukou holders can also move and register for town hukous with similar requirements. Instead of moving to mega cities, many choose to and more easily manage moving to nearby towns for the better schools that attract better teachers.

Gradually, China has been seeking equal public services for all citizens without discrimination. Again, in the example of Shenzhen, a resident permit has been in place since 2008 in lieu of the temporary resident permit, which had a connotation of discrimination against the holders to be just “temporary” sojourners. City-wide, more equal public services have been put in place, more community clinics and the coverage for all residents in these clinics, providing nine categories of free-of-charge basic medical services to all residents. In terms of housing, the policy endeavors to increase the amount of guaranteed low-rate housing available for rent and purchase.

Getting an urban hukou is in many ways similar to international migration, which attracts those with above average motivation. First, those that wish to apply tend to have an above average drive to “make it” in the more modern urban life. Indeed, since education and job
are two crucial factors in obtaining an urban hukou as we saw in Table 2, this domestic migration necessarily attracts those with a greater motivation in life. L.C. is but one example of this group.

Since L.C. went to Fujian to dagong with her mother, she did not attend high school. After Fujian, she went with a cousin to Guangzhou to look for a job. At first, she was an assembly worker in a factory. Then she submitted an essay to the factory management to be hung on the walls. In it, she lied about high school, she wrote, “I was very frustrated after failing the college entrance exam…” when in fact she had not gone to high school, let alone eligible for the college exam. But this apparently got the attention of management, which was facing a rapidly growing Chinese economy and urgently in need of human resources to help with expanding business in the factory. So they promoted her into the office. Now she became a shipping clerk.

L.C. moved her hukou two times before finally registering it in Shenzhen. A native of Qu County in rural Sichuan, L.C. first moved her hukou by default by marrying someone in Guangxi. Then, when she had a job on the border of Shenzhen and the manufacturing city Dongguan, she bought an apartment with savings and moved her hukou to Dongguan in 2011. “I didn’t have my college-equivalent diploma yet, but the city considered this an eligibility as long as you paid an RMB 10,000 ‘land construction fee.’ This was a wrong move on my part, had I known that later I was eligible for the Shenzhen hukou, the hukou of a real big city. In hindsight I wasted this $10,000.” In 2013 she gave birth to a set of twins. According to the Dongguan Health and Family Planning Bureau, after the first pregnancy, women were required to have an intrauterine device inserted and after the second pregnancy, tubes tied (tubal ligation).

But the Dongguan Health and Family Planning Bureau considered her pregnancy with twins as having two children and therefore forced her to tie her tubes. This policy and the argument with the Bureau made her indignant. “In 2015 (at age 39), I finally turned in my
college thesis and received my diploma, so now, for Shenzhen’s points-based *hukou* entries out of 100 points, I could receive 85 points for education.” Besides education, there were two more items required: a residential permit, which one automatically gets if one has been paying social security at a job, and social security itself. L.C.’s motivation for the Shenzhen *hukou* in 2015 was to be eligible for government-assisted purchase of housing, to avoid the Dongguan Health and Family Planning Bureau’s policy on birth control, and to eventually send her twins to Shenzhen schools when they reach school age.

This is her understanding of Shenzhen’s *hukou* policy. “Shenzhen is an international big city and it needs human capital. With a stable population of 11 million and a floating population of 3.4 million, it is still not considered a mega city, so it wants to retain people on the edge of staying vs. leaving for their inland homes of origin.” She continues about her social circle. “There are a lot of people from second- and third-tier cities who have bought land or apartments in Shenzhen that have since risen in price. Once they capitalize that, they can leave and live like kings at home, given the lower living standards inland. So why not? For these people, the calculation is simple. I think as a result of losing this group of people, Shenzhen’s population policy loosened up.”

Indeed, an urban *hukou* means giving up the benefits of an agricultural *hukou*, which includes giving up profits from renting out a plot of land. These benefits may, in financial terms, be larger than the benefits of having an urban *hukou*, especially because with more public services in cities and the greater ease in obtaining an urban *hukou*, an urban *hukou* is relatively common nowadays.

L.C. continues her story: “The whole export-oriented factory was 1,000 people including workers. Only the owner and the one secretary knew English. Even the vice president did not know English. This inspired me and inspired my interest in English.” L.C. faked a high school diploma (a common behavior in the 1990s in which a large “infrastructure”
of small businesses printed school and other certificates) and enrolled in the continuing education school to study English at Guangdong Foreign Language University. “My level was not at all up to par to attend the classes. I only knew things like ‘What’s your name?’ I had to go to the school and begged them to change my course to be a lower level English class, because I did not go to high school I said to the school, “Please, please help me. I have savings of RMB 10,000, my parents are working as nannies in the factory, and this is the only hope for my future.”

The school agreed, to her relief. But besides her own level of classes, she also listened in on business English classes by lurking in the classroom. Despite faking the high school diploma, a few of her officemates in the factory saw her trajectory and copied it. “I think business was much easier back then, so there was not a lot of emphasis on diplomas, and I could get my way. When I now look back on old emails sent by old colleagues, I’m appalled by the poor English. But the country needed people to work, however badly trained they were!” She explained that a lot of her then officemates, for example, those in the purchasing department, also just had a middle school education and faked their high school diplomas.

After 1 1/2 years at Guangdong Foreign Language University, I went for an interview for a European lighting company, stuttering. But I passed! My immediate managers were an expat couple. They had just gotten married and the husband was called to relocate to China. He negotiated with the company to have his wife follow him with a job offer, in training, in the same company. The trouble was, she had no experience in shipping. So she taught us English, and I taught her shipping. Every email I would send out, she would read and correct it first. I learned very fast during this period.
When L.C. finished her studies in the Continuing Education School at Guangdong Foreign Language University, she had an associate’s degree, with which she was then looking for a job at Philips. At this point, she was armed with the previous lighting company’s work experience and now English. More important, now that she had the associate’s degree, she did not have to justify herself and explain all of her past mobility climbing step by step. Her CV looked just as normal and chronological as is expected of young women her age.

L.C.’s story illustrates the existence of agency in an otherwise overwhelmingly rigid hukou system. Her sense of tenacity, exhibited since age 16 or 17 when she decided consciously to go out and dagong with her mother on the coast, accompanies her throughout her adulthood, trials after trials, and hurdles after hurdles. She jumped through these hurdles and overcame the trials. Coupled with the loosening up of Shenzhen’s population hukou policies, she finally qualified for a Shenzhen hukou at the prime age of 39. Now, her children can legitimately enjoy the better schools that a Shenzhen-hukou parent is entitled to, as opposed to having to go to the type of schools for migrant workers, with worse resources for the students and more expensive—the type of schools that L.C.’s youngest sister J.C.’s daughter had to go to, before their return to Sichuan. We will discuss their story in chapter 4.

2.4 Eating Bitterness⁹: Swallowing Hardships to Depart

Of those who returned, P.X., now 43, remembers why she came out to dagong. A somewhat typical narrative, P.X. left in 1988 because she wanted to help her family reduce its financial burdens. “Plus, I was already proving that my studies were not good

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⁹ Eating bitterness literally means swallowing hardships in Chinese.
anyway, so I wanted to give up and start earning money.” She recalls her train travels between her Guangdong work destination and Sichuan home.

I was this small 16-year-old girl carrying a disproportionately huge backpack on my back and my two hands were also full of stuff I bought in Guangdong to bring home. Better material, everyday things that were hard to get in Sichuan because it was less modern, less industrialized, and lacked these commodities. I quickly learned the hard way that there wasn’t any space for all my stuff on the train! I had absolutely no space and no strength for all I wanted to carry…in the end, someone from the same province helped me carry a lot of them. When I looked up, it seemed like everyone from the crowd was so big and tall. I felt so inferior and overwhelmed at the train stations. And when I tried to run, my legs were so weak.

Before Chinese New Year, you might as well forget about having a seat on the train. You are lucky to have a spot to stand and rest your feet. And you had to constantly say “excuse me” to attempt to pass people on the train Traffic was so much during this time that the train authority was putting out cargo trains without windows to transport people.

Men were lucky they could pee in used water bottles. The toilets on the train could also be filled with people. That was how crowded it was. If a woman had to use the toilet, you would just have the people who were squeezed in there look the other way while you did your business.

Q.H.H. came a little later than the pioneer cohort, and she came having already gotten married and given birth to two children.

I came here in October 1993. At the time, I had borne two children, I had no money, and had to pay the fines under One-Child Policy (to have a second child). Then a neighbor helped bring me to Guangzhou.
I came to Guangzhou, stayed for a few days, then went to get tested at MTY Factory. It was a very reputable factory, very hard to get in. It had sewing tests for us. I already knew how to sew back home, using a mechanical sewing machine, but not an electronic one. They used electronic ones in the factory, so I did not pass the test the first time. I went to a training center to get training on operating electronic machines. The second time I tested, I had a low pass into the factory.

My life was very painful at that time. I knew I needed to go out to make money. If only my husband worked, we could not have had any savings after all expenses are accounted for. If we both worked, our situation would be better. My children were small. For elementary school, I put my children in the home of my older sister. But by middle school, they lived by themselves, the two of them together, and my father-in-law would come to our house to check-in on them. By high school, they went to a boarding high school and went home by themselves on weekends. At this time, they wrote me a letter saying that they felt cold and empty when they returned to a home of no parents. It made me cry reading that letter, I could barely finish it.10

Today, Q.H.H. is the only sewing machine operator left in MTY factory because some have moved on to nearby factories with better and more stable orders, while others have gone home to retire and look after their grandchildren. A veteran at her factory, she has grown sympathetic to her stressed out owner, who is close to giving up on the business. Q.H.H. said, “tell the boss to give up. If business is so difficult, forget it. We will all be alright. We can go home and look after our grandchildren. My son is working now, he can take care of me, and once he gets married and has a child, I can occupy my time looking after the grandchild. We will be alright.”

10 He Hua-Qi teared as she stated this to me.
2.5 Refusing Arranged Marriages

M.J. went out to *dagong* at the age of 16 partly to help support her older brother in high school and partly to try carving out a different life trajectory than the one that would have been, i.e., getting married off in a year or two.

I have four siblings. My older brother was in high school, my two younger brothers were respectively at middle school and elementary school. I was part-time helping my parents out on the farm after failing to enter middle school. My older brother who was boarding at his high school kept needing to come back for cash to continue; our family had to start selling objects for his expenses. I was 16, I thought, if I left to start working, the family did not have to cover my expenses and I could still help the family. Plus, if I did not go, I probably would have been married off at 17, 18, that would have been my destiny. So in 1988, I came out to a Hong Kong-owned factory in Guangzhou. The labor bureau came to recruit, so I went. I got my initial training in the factory. I was making a wage of RMB 2.5/day, which was too low and the factory did not have a large flow of goods for us to work on. For two or three years, I was jobbing around among a few factories.

At first, people back home thought, gosh, what could young girls do when they get to Guangzhou? Nothing dirty?! It was very heart-breaking, old men in Guangdong would cat-talk to us and say offensive things to us outsider\(^{11}\) young girls. Well, but in fact, men and women alike, many have turned bad—for example, a male acquaintance went to Guangzhou, started to use drugs, and died at the age of 23. I was the first to go out from our hometown. There were a few

\(^{11}\) Here she means those from outside Guangdong Province.
M.J. was shocked in her initial days at her first factory. Even if she came from a farming household in the village, she was a normal teenager who had most of her needs met at home, certainly her basic need to eat. But suddenly in the factory, this basic need became an expenditure for the factory, a social reproduction cost that management wished to keep as low as possible.

I soon learned that life at home was much better, much more comfortable. However poor we were, we could at least satisfy our stomachs. In the factory canteens, there wasn’t more to eat if you wanted it. I had to save and save and save. I could get the simplest dishes with my meal tickets (everyone had to purchase meal tickets from the factory): RMB 0.2 for a bowl of rice, and RMB 0.1 for one vegetable dish. But even this cheaper vegetable dish I would skip every now and then. I would just add soy sauce, salt, and spring onions to make my rice edible. There were RMB 0.3 dishes, which were better, and of course, RMB 0.5 deluxe dishes with meat. I wouldn’t get them; rather, I would save up from my meal tickets to trade cash with colleagues who wanted to eat more. I was very homesick. My dorm was on the fifth floor, and my diet was so poor that I wouldn’t have the strength to climb all the way there. My feces was also always very soft, too soft and small, it showed how insufficiently I was eating. After 3-4 months, I stopped selling my meal tickets and decided to treat myself better by eating better because by now I was making money and could do so.

My brother did not get into a college the first time around and wished to get our father’s approval to repeat a year and try again. He wrote a letter to me and wanted me to convince our father to let him do that. Me because I had clout in the family since I was making money and contributing to the family expenses.
But I wrote him back and said, “You can consider coming out to dagong, too, like me. I only have an elementary school diploma and I am making RMB 1200 a month. Studying is no use. You can start making money already.

I still remember to this day what he wrote back in response. He said, “Sister, you are right. But that is because you are short-sighted and have no culture (education). If you had more education, you would not have said this.”

Indeed, to many poor farming families, providing for children past China’s compulsory nine years of education, into high school and behind would be considered an act of delayed gratification, delaying the immediate possibility of earning a wage in a coastal factory.

Today, M.J.’s older brother, college-educated, lives an upper middle-class lifestyle in Beijing. M.J. speaks in a somewhat bittersweet way about her brother and his lifestyle as he portrays it in his posts in social media, showing his family’s vacation trips all over the place. She knows in a deeply proud sense that her brother’s present success would not have been possible without her sacrifices, yet was she stupid to have sacrificed? What has she herself gained?

M. is a cheerful lady who keeps her figure slim and her manner upbeat and pleasant at all times. She left for Guangdong before her 17th birthday in 1989, when the local labor bureau organized 200 unmarried female teenagers to go together. Of the 200 that went, only 45 persisted and stayed; the others drifted away or went home because they “couldn’t eat bitterness.”

These examples recall the mid-1990s workers portrayed in Pun’s Made in China, who were “active agents in living their own lives.” “Workers in the Meteor workplace often were proud of their earning capacities, their work skills, and their dagong identities.
Attempts at transgressing, such as escape to work in the city or refusal to go back home for marriage, worked to challenge the patriarchal power of the family and submissive images of Chinese women.” In my study, both M.J. and M. were brave and active agents in charting out their individual paths by refusing to stay home passively and wait for the marital fates arranged by their families. Even though M.J. is divorced now, she spoke of her undaunted heart leaving home at 16 partly because “otherwise I would have been married off a year or two later at 17 or 18.” Dagong, earning a wage and therefore a rite of passage, was a much better alternative than being in a voiceless marriage.

A few days after I distributed my recruitment flyer in the Top Weiyuan factory (my ethnography site, which I will describe in detail in Chapter 4), which explained the purpose of my trip and presence, I was surprised to receive a phone call from M. She took the initiative to call me one evening at 8 pm, inviting me to a dam park nearby to chat. We walked around for nearly two hours, and in the end, we climbed up from the valley dam area back into town along a small pathway only a local would know.

Afterwards, I went to her house twice for meals (one of which included her husband dashing in to have a meal before rushing out for his night shift job), and we went out again to another park to walk around, this time with her 18-year old daughter.

The third factory I was at was a state enterprise that produced silk. I was then 23 years old, and my mom was very anxious about my marriage prospects. She arranged many matchmaking sessions for me, and I rejected them all. But there at this factory, I met my husband out of free love\textsuperscript{12}. Some co-workers were joking about us and wanted to set us up. So they told me one day that this guy wanted to ask me out for a movie date. I waited and waited, he never came. I was very pissed off. A few days later in the canteen, he called my name when I was on my way to get lunch. I was very surprised that he had not eaten yet

\textsuperscript{12} Free, romantic love; non-arranged.
because the kitchen folks were his buddies, so he normally eats in advance of everybody. He said, “Look, we were originally going to be together anyway. Now it’s an opportunity again.”

I didn’t say yea or nay right there and then because I did not know how to manage the situation, but I was touched that he sacrificed his early lunches to catch me and speak with me.

M.J. and M. and a countless number of young Chinese girls exhibit tremendous courage and desire for choice and freedom by refusing to follow family arrangements. Traditionally, families, relatives, and matchmakers back in the village would introduce suitable marriage partners to young girls from a nearby neighborhood. The expectations would be that they would get to know each other over a short period of time, then get married. The girls would move into the husband’s homes to live with her parents-in-law, take up the farm work of the husband’s family, then it would be time to have children—and so the entirety of a girl’s life: to be a wife, a mother, and a farmer.

M.J. and M., by having made the decision to go out to Guandong to dagong, defy this tradition. Consciously, they chose to work in a factory and put their marriage prospects on the back burner. The transition of life from the village to the city involved trading a communal, collectivist system to one of individual risk-taking and rewards.

M.J. is quietly proud of having seen “the world” in Guangdong for nearly twenty years. “If I had never gone out, I would only be able to meet my children’s more basic needs. I could not have offered the worldviews and perspectives on things that I do. And this is the result of having seen the outside world.” She feels quietly superior to an elementary school classmate when she compares herself. The classmate, due to being exposed to the elements from farming, looks physically older and has never been to the nearest big city.
of ChengDu, just two hours away. “Whatever the husband decides counts; she has no
voice. This is not the kind of life I could live.”

Today, a divorced woman, M.J. still looks at her life with a sense of empowerment that
might have been impossible without her *dagong* credentials.

> It would be much worse if I were divorced and living in the village. If I were
> divorced and having to bring up children on my own…and going back to my
> parents were not an option because the divorce was a shame on the family, how
> bitter would that be? It is possible then that you would get re-married too
casually again too soon just to have security in life. And if it’s not a suitable
partner, you would separate again.

What M.J. is conveying is the tangible ability to earn a livelihood that a woman must
have, as well as the intangible sense of empowerment and making one’s decisions, which
she believes is crucial and is quietly proud of having.

Perhaps like any financially independent divorced woman anywhere around the world,
M.J.’s *dagong* experience, or earning her own livelihood, solidifies her world. She told
me, “Maybe when my second child becomes an adult or has her own home, I will
consider looking for a partner again. Just someone to have company with because at that
point, finances wouldn’t be a threat any more, and you wouldn’t be calculating each other
like when you were a younger couple.”

2.6 Building Houses that Stand Empty until Further Notice
Freelance electrician G.C.C. is 48 years old. Like many migrant workers, he decided to stay in Guangzhou and it does not deter him that he cannot get a local city *hukou*. He left his last fixed-wage job as an in-house electrician in 2013 and started to be an independent electrician, serving as many as 22 factories that needed his services in the area.

I was in the last factory from June 1, 2001 to April 30, 2013. Before that, I was in a factory in Dongguan for three years. It was a large 6,000 people factory that had a team of 22 electricians responsible for 28 shop floors. My father had died, and according to our customs, you have to be beside him for seven days. I asked for a personal leave for a week – with travels to and from Guangzhou, I needed about ten days. Well, I was back 3 days late, and my work was gone. Nobody had told me that…except when it was too late. The security guards told me that when you were late for 1 day, your monthly bonus is gone. When you are late for 2 days, your annual bonus is gone. When you are late for 3 days, your work is gone entirely. I found out the hard way.

I have an electrician’s license for high-power (high-voltage) electricity from my home village. But I first came to this factory not as an electrician – I thought I’d try it for one to two months.

Despite the lack of a local Guangzhou *hukou*, G.C.C. decided to have his wife and two children come live with him, leaving the new house that he had built back home in Hunan empty with weeds growing around it.

In 2012 September, my wife and two children came to live with me in Guangzhou. It’s warmer to have the whole family live together. If I did not come out to work, my children could not have come out here, either, and I could not have helped them expand their horizons.
Of course, our expenses are also greater as a result. Before I could save and send home about 80 percent of my earnings. Now my wife runs a small mom-and-pop grocery store in the neighborhood. Before they moved here, my monthly water and electricity bill was about RMB 60/month, we now spend RMB 1500/month renting a living and shop space.

For my daughter, we couldn’t get her into a public school, which charges RMB 8,000/year and needs to be paid all once. We then searched for more schools and found a private school that charges RMB 2,600/semester which includes all expenses including school bus. Her grades are better than when she was at home in our village. I believe this is because the school—even the ones that are considered worse, that are reserved for children of migrant workers like us—is better quality here in Guangzhou than in our home village in Hunan.

2.7 Factory Life: Some Perceive That It Is Not All Bad

Most older-generation migrant workers went out to dagong as unmarried workers. They started as young as 15 or so, with seven to nine years of education, and found their work either through the labor bureau’s linkage with coastal factories or together with fellow provincials. Pun Ngai in her award-winning book Made in China gave a vivid portrayal of what their lives were like in a Hong Kong-owned Guangdong electronics factory, manufacturing for the export-oriented market. Pun’s work was done in the mid-1990s, in the glorious days of the factories, when these migrant workers had just arrived. The factories were glorious because they were just starting to be built, so there were more workers wanting to get in than there were job spots.

13 Compulsory education in China is 9 years.
In a way, factories were also glorious for workers—one could be proud of working in a modern factory. They had proper regulations and policies, which indicated not everyone could get in to work. It was a badge of honor to be able to. My work was done between 2013 and 2016, when the same wave of migrant workers had aged from their teenage years to middle age, becoming mothers and grandmothers on the way. Their financial burden had eased as they experienced a lifetime of working, a house had been built and the interiors had been renovated on the money they had worked so hard to earn, and their children were now adults able to make money.

The 36 year-old sewing machine operator L.S.L. from Hengyang, Hunan, already had more than 20 years of work experience under her belt.

When I was 14 years old in the second grade of junior high school, I knew I was not going to make it to a good high school, and because the economic situation of my family was not very good, I wanted to help out. So I left home and followed a 16-year-old cousin out to Guangdong. My first job, I helped make rice noodles; then I entered a shoe factory and a toy factory as a quality control and craft worker. I learned that there was no overtime after work, I could play and stroll the streets on my free time, watch movies and go skating, etc.

Factory life for these unmarried workers is not the all-consuming sweatshop that Pun describes from her ethnography site at the large electronics factory. Many factors contribute to the different treatment migrant workers receive and the different fates they encounter. Small- and medium-sized factories, especially those run by small families, can be less stifling, and some employees even report working and living a homelike experience.

L.Z.L., now a worker in Zhejiang’s Haining region and a mother today of a junior at Hainan University, spoke of the good old days at her last factory in Guangzhou. She was
an excellent seamstress and was working in the sample room of a Taiwanese-owned leather garment manufacturer. The boss, his brother, the brother’s wife, and his 90-year-old mother were living on-site in the factory, opposite from the workers’ dormitory. The factory and the dormitory, rebuilt in 2005 under pressure from an American brand company’s workers’ rights audit, were modern in comparison to others in the Guangdong region. The dorm offered husband-and-wife rooms for couples instead of the typical sex segregated dormitories or floor divisions that were the standard practice. The bedrooms had attached private bathrooms with hot water, a rare deviation from the standard cold-water communal shower bathrooms. Otherwise, there were communal faucets to collect hot water.

This factory’s business dwindled in the new millennium, and L.Z.L. left in the first decade. Having worked a number of years there, she kept in touch with fellow workers over social media. In 2016, when I interviewed her on-line, she had moved on to making more each month in Haining, Zhejiang, a region famous for its leather-garment manufacturing. Six years after she left, though, she still reminisced over the good old days at the Guangdong factory. “Is the boss still running it? I want to return and work there.” When I asked her why, she said, “Because there was a homey feeling that’s absent here. We used to watch TV and play poker together after work if there was no overtime. Here, we go back to our dorms—singletons to dorms and others to their outside rentals, and there is no communication after work.”

**2.8 Empathy for the Nation**

It seems natural for workers and citizens to rely and fall back on the law when they feel like their rights may be infringed. Yet what if you are workers and citizens of a nation that has yet to develop laws that govern and protect you because law-making cannot
catch up with the speed of socioeconomic happenings on the ground? Such is the case with China following Deng’s announcement of the 1978 Economic Reform. Labor law, by definition, is a product of capitalism. Only with capitalist relations between the capitalist (owners of factories and businesses) and labor (in this case migrant workers) would there be a need for labor law to govern this relation.

China experienced two periods of labor relations. First, before the Economic Reform, was the planned economy period of relations between state-owned enterprises and state employees. In this period, there were no labor laws per se. The legal framework relied on guiding documents issued by the national government with details mandated by the local government and exact specifics executed by the enterprises. During this time, the nation, the local government, and the enterprise were bound together. National policies were enterprise policies, and nobody dared to transgress regulations. Therefore, no need existed for labor laws to adjust labor relations and conditions.

The second period is the period after the Economic Reform. With the introduction of the market economy, labor-capital conflict arrived. The 1980s witnessed some beginning attempts to regulate certain aspects of the labor-capital relationships. For example, 1987 ushered in the Labor Department’s mandate on the prohibition of hiring child labor and the following year a mandate to protect female laborers.

But these were merely single, exploratory mandates, and although they resembled bits of labor laws, the People’s Congress passed a nation-wide set of labor laws only later. The first such draft was attempted in 1979, and the second attempted in 1983. Neither were effected at the national level, but the third attempt finally had a nation-wide hearing in 1994, a transition period following the Economic Reform. Finally, a comprehensive set of labor laws was put in effect on January 1, 1995.

When I asked P.X. about the legality of her initial work experience when she first traveled to Guangdong in 1988, before she turned 16—the very year that underage child
labor law was passed—she said “The enforcement of the laws was not strict at the time. It was not until a few years later that there was something called illegal underage working.”

Meanwhile, Q.Y.G., now 45, talks empathetically about the nation’s progression toward perfecting labor laws. “The country itself has had to walk through the river by touching the rocks,” an expression that means taking things one step at a time on a trial and error basis without having a set blueprint from the onset. She continues, “It’s only been recently that the country has a standard on how bosses should treat workers. Now there are also labor laws to protect us.”

It is remarkable that migrant workers like P.X. and Q.Y.G. and the older generation they represent can be so empathetic about the country itself for lacking the laws or lacking the enforcement of laws to protect their rights. Instead of being bitter about what the lack of labor laws has meant—unregulated, sometimes outrageous hours that can last until midnight and during weekends—they sympathize with and forgive the nation for its backward origins.

Often, especially in peak production season, workers work seven days a week until 10 pm, midnight, or 1 am, and occasionally when there was a miscalculation of workload or when there was really too much to be finishing up for the next day’s truck load-up, the boss would call the whole factory to pull an all-nighter, providing a late night snack at 3 am or so to replenish physical energy. This is not peculiar to China, Margaret M. Chin wrote about Chinese and Korean garment factories in New York City, which has to “stay open all night to complete its orders. This, however, rarely happens. It is more likely that the shop will be open seven days a week so that orders can be completed.” (Chin, 2005)

Because the base wage is relatively low to begin with, many workers desire overtime to increase their earnings. Going back to their dorms early after dinner in the canteen leads to an idle evening, does not maximize their earning potential, and negates their original
reason for working on the coast. Overtime work until 10 pm seems to be the optimal end time, allowing just enough time to collect hot water for showers, and washing and hanging laundry. While workers might whine and complain here and there about over time, they are most satisfied on paydays, counting the cash out of wage envelopes, many a time with the total take-home wage possible only with the overtime hours they worked and got paid for.

The fact that the country is developing rapidly can be felt everywhere. During summers in college, in the late 1990s, when I visited my family’s factory in a somewhat distant part of town, there used to be a herder who would walk his two cows around the factory. I recall looking out from one set of windows, at one moment, as they walked towards our building and then going to the opposite set of windows to follow them in the next moment. The land around the factory was a vast sea of greenery for as far as you looked; there were weeds, pasture, and small private farm units with water for irrigation balanced on bamboo sticks on farmers’ shoulders. Very quickly, plot by plot, land was being developed. First, for example, just across the street from the factory one summer, a portion of the land was converted to narrow store fronts of auto repair and car wash establishments. The next summer when I returned, they would be gone, replaced by newly-constructed houses. A few years of time and they gave way to real estate developments. Now it is as busy as any part of town, hosting residential complexes and businesses that cater to the residents.

A smart worker could see that land prices went up rapidly from year to year, at least in the coastal region. In fact, part of the make-up and incentive of migrant workers’ travels and work to the coast was the ability to buy their own houses in their villages back home, and to be able to decorate the interiors with modern amenities. With each month, cash from the wage envelopes goes towards that goal.
Migrant workers I interviewed report being able to save as much as 80 percent of their wages, both because much of their lodging and food needs are taken care of within the factory and because they are just that thrifty. With development proceeding speedily they witnessed a flow of goods passing through their hands in need of making and assembling, migrant workers were hopeful and optimistic.

When Q.H.H. invited me to her home in 2013, she and her construction worker husband had already built their new tile house, but they had not enough money yet to furnish it.

![Figure 4 Migrant worker Q.H.H.’s newly built tile house, ShuangFeng County, LouDi City, Hunan Province](image)

Then at the end of 2015, she invited me to go again. “This time you can stay with me,” she said cheerfully and proudly, as she had by now finished the interior. Last time in 2013, I had stayed with another worker from my father’s factory, who had her big new tile house for herself, her husband, and her 20-year-old son, while her 70-year-old
father’s mud house was a ten-minute car ride away. This mud house, I learned four years later, was torn down and a new tile house was built on the same plot of land.

Figure 5 Migrant worker, Z.’s father’s mud house in 2013. By 2017, this house was torn down and a new tile house is being built on the same plot of land

Chapter Conclusion:

The departure of the older generation of migrant workers has caught the attention of international media and domestic and international scholars. Migrant workers’ migration out to the coast has been studied in geography, sociology, political science, and even by child development psychologists. Against and amidst various stereotypes, the older generation of migrant workers strived to earn a wage to support their families back home and maintain their bi-local existence by visiting once or twice a year and regularly calling
home while working on the coast—all well documented in the literature, in documentary films, and in vivid memories by the older generation of migrant workers. The long hours meant pay checks sent home to help build new tile houses, to finance children’s education, and to command clout in family decisions.

The *hukou* system, which is infamous for preventing agricultural *hukou* holders from settling down into the cities, loosened up in the 1990s, and settlement in the cities became possible. Except for a few exceptionally motivated individuals who strived for an urban *hukou*, my ethnography shows that the *hukou* was never a consideration for the migrant workers departing to or returning from cities in which they worked. They were merely in the cities to make money and always planned to return home where they belonged psychologically.

Switching an agricultural to urban *hukou* was difficult for some but not impossible. With education and urban work experience changing *hukou* is possible, especially for the extra motivated. My ethnography explores how such people obtained urban *hukous*, the prices they paid, and the benefits they enjoyed.

**Chapter 3 Inside a Small Factory**

Lu Zhang’s work is about the auto industry, whose labor relations differ from garment manufacturing. The auto industry is capital intensive and employees have what Beverly Silver calls structural power to stop work at any time. Idling capital-intensive machinery creates potentially great losses. In contrast, the labor-intensive nature of the garment industry means weak associational bargaining power. Garment manufacturers have low barriers to entry; their fixed capital costs little to acquire, and training is minimal—
unskilled labor can be quickly trained on the job. Job attrition is high, and there are always people waiting to replace existing workers.

Pun’s *Made in China*, a shop floor ethnography of a labor-intensive electronics factory, and Chin-Kwan Lee’s, *Gender and the South China Miracle*, also in labor-intensive electronics factories, in Shenzhen and Hong Kong, described work that takes place in large-scale factories, where the distance, both physical and emotional, between owners and employee is great. In their work, organizational hierarchies involving department heads, foremen, and line supervisors suggest that factory owners hardly know any front-line workers personally. In fact, in Lee’s *Gender and the South China Miracle*, factory size is seldom considered important to management style: Matron workers in Hong Kong are described as being immersed in “familial hegemony,” while unmarried young women in Shenzhen find themselves in an internal system of power based on regional politics and kin connections, or “localistic despotism.”

Lee concludes it is the gender politics of the two labor markets that determine the culture of each factory, but it is also plausible that factory size affects culture. The factory in Hong Kong is small, producing almost only samples, whereas the factory in Shenzhen is vast and engages in bulk production for the same export clients. Since interpersonal relationships in a small place are different from a big one, it is easy to conceive that management is different as a result.

Pun’s and Lee’s Shenzhen factories are not small- or medium-sized factories like the ones I worked in for seven years and where my ethnography was focused. Industrial (as opposed to wholesale, retail, or construction) small- and medium-sized enterprises are those with 3,000 or fewer workers with revenues below RMB 300 million or assets below RMB 400 million. Specifically, medium-sized enterprises are those with 600 to 3,000 workers or more, with a revenue of RMB 30 million and assets above RMB 40 million.
The rest are small-sized enterprises.\textsuperscript{14} As of the end of 2012, there were more than 12 million small- and medium-sized enterprises in China. They comprised more than 99 percent of all enterprises within the country. They produce 60 percent of the GNP, provide 80 percent of employment in urban settings, and turn in more than 50 percent of the country’s total tax revenue.\textsuperscript{15} In other words, the small factories I describe are similar to what many workers experience on a daily basis.

Edna Bonacich and Richard P. Appelbaum (2000) in \textit{Behind the Label} investigated the cut-throat nature of garment contractors in Los Angeles. Similar circumstances hold among garment contractors in China. Here, with my personal account, I wish to add what it is like inside a small factory—such as the one I worked in (my father’s) for 7 years as well as the ones I have done interviews in and camped out at (respectively Top’s main factory in Guangzhou, and its secondary factory in Sichuan).

Concentrating on the business function of garment contractors and ignoring for a moment the ethnic entrepreneurial nature of many Los Angeles contractors, Bonacich and Appelbaum explain that contractors are businesses that respond to industry demands and serve as middlemen between manufacturers and workers, helping to control labor on behalf of manufacturers.\textsuperscript{16} Following this logic, they report that garment contractors


\textsuperscript{15} Source: \url{http://www.docin.com/p-1059529797.html}, accessed February 9, 2017

\textsuperscript{16} That contractors control labor on behalf of manufacturers is, in my opinion, a value-laden statement that depends on how the situation is viewed. One could argue that contractors are simply those entrepreneurs with a small pool of funds who look to enter into an entrepreneurial pursuit that requires little barrier to entry, and a workforce not difficult to train. I do not endorse either value in this dissertation but merely report their existence.
employ workers only when labor is needed, since contractor agreements with manufacturers are not long-term. Manufacturers can expand and contract production with seasonal shifts in demand or popularity of styles. Due to the instability of the work, most contractors—unless extremely close to one economically strong manufacturer—try to work for more than one manufacturer. They wrote,

Ultimately, the externalization of risk by the manufacturers is passed onto the workers by the contractors. If the flow of work slows down, they lay off some of their workers. If work picks up, they hire more people. Workers in contracting shops have no job security, and often suffer from continual, forced mobility from one job to the next. The contracting system means that the real employers of the garment workers, the manufacturers, do not have to bear responsibility for the workers’ employment or unemployment. The risks of instability of work associated with apparel are thus borne by the workers and the contractors, not by the manufacturers.

As I described in the introduction, I do not and cannot pretend to be who I am not. In the seven years of factory work, I was the boss’ daughter, supposedly in opposition to the workers. My official title, however, was business development manager, which meant I shuffled between communicating with prospective and existing clients about different sizes, scales, needs, and protocols, our sample room, our bulk production shop floor, and the shipping companies to get samples or bulk production shipments out. This gave me a deep exposure to clients’ psychology but more important for this dissertation to workers’ lives and their psychology.

In my experience in this small factory, there were more external conflicts between the factory and clients than between owners and workers within the factory. Granted, I was not responsible for managing the workers, but I worked and lived in the factory during the first few years of my life there, and I experienced management helping resolve
conflicts among workers themselves, as opposed to conflicts between management and workers. For example, workers themselves had scheduling conflicts about which security guards would stay behind for the Chinese New Year holiday.

Another example of conflict from our factory would be determining which department made a mistake that showed up on a piece of apparel, which workers were to be blamed. This type of organizational fault-finding occurs frequently but is not an example of class conflict. It is a normal process that goes on whether an organization consists of a highly educated, white-collar work force or a minimally educated group involved in labor-intensive factory work.

### 3.1 The Process of Generating a Product

In this section, I will describe the process of generating a product, how globalization and a race to the bottom put enormous pressure on factories to survive.

The process of generating a piece or a collection of apparel is as the follows:

- **Step 1**
  - Multinational corporation or importers create diagrams or photos of garments
  - Factory/Workers' input: minimal

- **Step 2**
  - Diagrams or photos passed to factory
  - Factory/Workers' input: discussion with sample room workers

- **Step 3**
  - Factory provides price quotations to clients. Samples may be ordered.
  - Factory/Workers' input: calculation of labor costs on apparel's detailed work. For example, how much time does it take a worker to complete the studs insertion on a shoulder part of a women's jacket; or how much more time would sewing extra split pieces together as opposed to having one big piece.
As Robert J. Ross writes in *Slaves to Fashion* (2004), unrestrained globalization means a race to the bottom—low-wage countries’ exports drive down domestic as well as global working conditions as businesses seek to purchase the lowest priced goods.

Retail chains have the most power in the apparel supply chain. A buyer at Nieman Marcus whom Ross interviewed noted that retailers can calculate how many minutes it takes to sew a garment and based on the minimum wage, can figure out how much they need to pay per garment to cover labor costs. But for large orders, the retailer can cut back the price he is willing to pay, forcing contractors to pay less than the legal minimum.

Prices start from the retailer and move down. It does not start from the real costs of making a garment; retailers can always find someone who can do it for less.

Further, power is concentrated in a few hands: the top five U.S. retail organizations control 48 percent of the U.S. apparel market (Ross, 2004). So retailers have amassed enormous buying power, dictating price and putting cost pressures on contractors, while denying direct employment responsibility for workers. In this business climate, workers
are arguably in the same boat as factory owners are when negotiating with clients, i.e., in a passive position.

As seen in Step 1, multinational or importer clients base their design decisions on forecasts from their markets and invest in the making products. At most in this stage, a factory gives clients price quotations on a few difference styles so that they can decide whether to proceed to Step 3 to order samples. Intense negotiations start at Step 3 and 4, when clients want the goods, but want them as cheaply as possible. “Could we reduce this pocket?” “How much more do YKK zippers cost?” “If we use regular zippers, how much can we save?” “Can we change to a cheaper fabric?” And most frequently and most important, “Can we [the client] get a further discount?”

Because these questions are answered by staffers at the factory who are in frequent communication with workers, workers learn about the difficulties and brutality of the buyer’s market in the needle trade. For example, a trims warehouse manager would be sensitive to notice whether YKK or regular zippers are used for a particular shipment. He or she may then discuss with co-workers the quality of goods. Workers quickly learn to judge and evaluate the shipment of goods they manufacture and understand that factory owners do not necessarily make a profit. Factories producing large batch jobs almost always earn a lower, or even a negative profit, whereas those producing smaller quantities are more likely to generate a profit. They usually require more delicate manufacturing processes to produce finer details.

At the same time as samples are made in Step 3, labor costs and time are calculated in the price quotation sent to clients. The sample-room workers’ contribution is critical because the complexity of a product affects time and cost and is an important part of the price, which may make or break the entire order. However, the owner risks spending money and time on sample prototypes production, which requires studying and lots of trial and error. It takes longer than a line worker would take later during bulk production. Even
though it takes time to make the samples, client bulk production quotes have to be based on estimated labor time and costs at a standardized, faster assembly-line pace. The bulk production price has to be competitive to earn the order but reasonable enough to pay workers, especially on more-difficult-to-make apparel. This is the capitalist’s risk. But it is worth noting that communication and a sense of camaraderie—that management and workers are working together to bid on the order—are critical to the success of the factory. Instead of fighting each other, the reality in a small factory is that the business owners and workers are united—at least in spirit—to fight their global clients outwards and externally.

At Step 5 after an order is confirmed, production starts at the factory. If management has arrangements with subcontractors, they can be semi-finished goods or fully finished products done at one or several subcontractors. Instead of the seemingly numb workers who were merely given instructions that Pun (2005) describes in an electronics factory, the needle-trade assembly line workers have to assert and apply themselves in learning about the different characteristics of each shipment of garments. What I mean to assert is that workers have the power to change minute details of a garment because the client’s technical specification may not always be correct (designers might not be as knowledgeable as factory workers about production details). Workers must also address the problems that may arise from the reality of the shop floor in a timely fashion. A thread required by the client might be too thin for the fabric used in a garment, and this type of feedback is only possible if workers are well-intentioned and escalate the problem to management quickly enough to meet tight production schedules, which are the norm in an industry governed by fast-changing fashion markets.

At Step 6, clients often demand factories bear financial risks, too. To save banking costs, few clients accept the older practice of opening a letter of credit with their bank, which allows manufacturers to receive payments once their goods are on board vessels heading to the clients’ destinations. Instead, clients make a first deposit, and can procrastinate on
making the final payment, putting enormous pressure on manufacturers who are waiting to receive payments for goods already made and packaged, payments that will reimburse workers and pay for raw materials.

Garment manufacturers face stiff competition within China and from other Asian countries in which labor costs are lower. Since the Economic Reform, the legal environment has been loose, allowing for a huge opportunity for entrepreneurs to set up shop, especially in labor-intensive industries that have less stringent requirements on capital—so people with a small pool of funds can easily open up shop—and thus lower barriers to entry. This means that export buyers have many options, often making several domestic stops in their China trip, usually shopping for the lowest prices and the best terms. It is not difficult to find manufacturers who would be quick to admit that they sometimes take a loss on an order just to keep the factory going, to keep production lines occupied and workers from leaving.

At any step along the process, workers have inside information about how their employers run the business. For example, it is customary to have a factory driver (sometimes more than one) who delivers and picks up raw materials, transports semi-finished products, etc. because long-distance vehicles ownership used to be low in the 1980s and 1990s. The driver chauffeuring around the boss would know intimately where the boss was going and for what purpose. One day he was going to the bank to negotiate more loans, another day to a subcontractor to negotiate more favorable payment terms (sometimes in anticipation of a client’s late payment), yet another day to visit a worker in the hospital. Of course, information spreads quickly in a small community and soon enough, the driver’s buddy knows the boss’ whereabouts, and co-workers, too, would soon learn.

3.2 Price Pressure and Small Profit Margin on Small Factories
Mr. L1 is a shoe manufacturer, whose client list includes snowboarding brand Burton, sportswear brand L.L. Bean, and other US and European snowboarding, cowboy boots, and casual shoes. He shared many of the difficulties running his multi-sited factory:

My profit margin is five to six percent. Today, clients are too shrewd and vicious. Many don’t let you make money; they come with a CBD (cost break-down) sheet, scrutinizing your material costs, wages, management costs, etc., and tell you straight out loud that your wages and management costs are too high. They also negotiate directly with the main material suppliers and nominate them to us so that we must buy from the nominated suppliers. Clients also compress production lead time from 90 to 120 days in the past to 60 to 75 days. 75 days for new styles, and 60 days for existing styles. This is a lot of time pressure for us. As if this is not enough, they still want to slash prices by one to two percent after dictating whom we buy our main materials from. My policy is – if it is within the five to six percent of my profit, I let them get what they want. There are two reasons for this. One is that I understand clients also face competition—some get bought up or merged into another company, others have shrinking market shares. Second, I want them to at least stay buying in China.

Despite the frustrating business climate, Mr. L1 speaks calmly about how he copes:

Moving to places like Vietnam or other South Asian countries is too risky. First you have to invest with cash, then you have to worry about recruiting probably untrained workers from scratch, what about your middle management? Who is going to come with you from China—and who could really stay? Then of course, you worry whether the factory is going
to make money. Going to inland China is also not ideal, but that’s what we have done so far. In the longer run, we will have to become like Nike or Adidas—we will have to build our own brand name in China.

Mr. L1 has opened a main factory in JiangXi Province, and two shoe-surface factories in more rural locations in JiangXi. When I asked if labor was stable there, assuming that the workers were local and could have a better work-life balance, Mr. L1 shook his head.

Figure 7 Map showing location relationship between Guangzhou, Guangdong and PingXiang, JiangXi. Source: Society of Anglo-Chinese Understanding http://www.sacu.org/provmap.html, accessed January 10, 2017
“Labor is not stable. Why not? All kinds of factories opened up next to us. We went from a stand-alone factory, to being part of an industrial park. Within ten years, there has been now 300 factories within the industrial park. I have a factory across the street from mine that puts up a huge sign advertising their ten percent higher wage, trying to attract my workers.”

“So what do you do?” I asked.

I can’t prevent others from doing what they wish. So I could only change from within. Everything matters – we have to treat our workers better, maintain a better work schedule that leaves enough time for them to rest. We have to care about workers; when they make mistakes, try not to harp on them, but instead, talk softer with them. When they want to get leaves of absences, be less strict about it. Of course, we also hope to maintain our orders so that the workers will stay with us and not leave for a nearby factory. Also, I have to increase the efficiency of my workers so that I do not need to ask for a higher price from my client to compensate for their mistakes.

Mr. L1 chuckled as he compared himself to Foxconn:

Unlike Foxconn, our product does not allow us to automate that much. We have already tried to automate some processes and I have already put in close to 40 machines in the JiangXi locations. But there is only so much we can do in automation. Foxconn’s profit is probably also only five percent; what we have in common is a labor-intensive, low-profit business that must make money on volume. I also tried to simplify manufacturing steps, this ensures against my unstable labor because it reduces the labor necessary to make my products.
3.3 Wages and Wage Arrears

Perhaps workers in my three needle-trade factories saw the difficulty and risk-taking business owners took. Perhaps they actually sympathized with their bosses much of the time. When sociologists and journalists who have read Marx intensively see businesses paying wages late they readily and righteously classify that as exploitation. But wage arrears, in the mind of the workers, have been normalized as standard practice. One could argue that they could only acquiesce to this condition. But another way of looking at this is that workers feel a psychological orientation that is aligned with their employers—they feel they are in the same boat as their bosses. Until there is militant labor resistance, which my ethnography does not find but has been the subject of many scholars, there seems to exist in workers’ mind normalization and acquiesce to wage arrears and identification with the factory owner. Of course, I must acknowledge here again my own biased position as the boss’ daughter or the boss’ friend’s daughter when interviewing workers about wage arrears.

The reason I dare to steer away from Marx’s doctrine here is because I see that workers see the precarious plight of a small-sized factory. And this empathy can translate into workers’ acquiescence to wage arrears. My job involved business development, negotiating with new prospective clients and existing clients over prices. It was often the case that clients would not budge 50 cents on a garment that was, say USD 80 per piece (factory’s selling price). Why the haggling over less than one percent? It may be that the price reduction is meant to meet investor demands or in the case of private companies to line the owner’s pocket. In any event, in almost all negotiations on price, it felt as though the client always had the upper hand. With such price pressure, factories find it difficult to survive, and giving workers a generous wage payment is often a far-fetched goal.
My father’s factory used to delay payment by two months. Top’s main factory in Guangzhou delayed wage payments by a month. Yet all (18) workers I have interviewed across these two factories considered this normal. This is both because internally they have normalized this behavior in their mind, and externally, other employers might behave just the same.

L.L. at Top’s main Guangzhou factory said, “the boss has owed us wages before, for a few months. But in recent months, no. It’s just a one month delay.”

When I pressed further and asked him whether he found this reasonable, he said, “It is reasonable. Companies have their own rules. It’s been like this throughout.”

Another worker, 24-year-old L., when asked if workers are paid on time at Top’s main Guangzhou factory said, “Yes. At the end of December, we get our November wage. It is on time. I have never been owned my wages.”

Australian business management professor Stephen Frenkel notes that average wages in foreign-owned firms and joint ventures tend to be around 125-145 percent higher than in their state-owned counterparts, many of which have been laying off workers, leading to increased unemployment (Lee 1999, UNDP, 1999). Foreign-owned firms and joint ventures paid a higher wage to workers because in the 1990s they were more profitable and demanded a higher skill set of their workers than their state-owned counterparts.

Today, in the absence of state-owned enterprises, the comparison is between foreign-owned and domestically-owned enterprises. Informant T.Z. reports that in Weiyuan, Sichuan, Top pays twice the piece rate as domestically-owned factories, but that the quality demanded by Top is also higher.

I can earn up to RMB 80-100 per day at Top, but there aren’t enough goods to be made. So I have to go to domestically-owned factories to get freelance jobs. With lower piece rates, I can earn up to only RMB 50 per day. I don’t want to become a full-time employee there, though, because in
addition to the lower piece rate, the hours are even longer. It would be from 7 am to 7 pm, compared to Top’s 8 am to 5 pm.

Confirmed by workers in Top’s Sichuan factory and Top’s management, wages in Top’s Sichuan factory vs. Guangzhou main factory differ in two ways. Those in Sichuan earn on average a monthly salary of RMB 2000-3000, and the same job would earn RMB 5000-6000 in its Guangzhou factory, due to different living standards. Informant M. from chapter 2 reported taking a 70 percent pay cut to come back home, revealing her commitment to family issues and desire to be home. Later in this chapter, I will explain why migrant workers value money so strongly because of the lack of insurance provisions.

Although both garment manufacturing and construction workers lack labor contracts, they differ greatly in wage treatment and wage arrears (Swider, 2015). First, garment manufacturing workers are at least able to receive their wages monthly, as opposed to at the end of a year’s work, or at the end of the project, as occurs in the construction industry. Second, because they are not owed a year’s worth of wages, garment manufacturing workers can “vote with their feet” and walk out any day, when they are dissatisfied with their current factory. And many do; in fact, attrition is a problem that can be so epidemic that some factories even have a standardized “quitting sheet” printed out, ready for exiting workers to fill out.

3.4 Frequent Entries and Exits from Factory

If (relatively) low wages and long hours are the evil of workers’ lives in the factory, then perhaps the flexibility that many small- and medium-sized factory owners allow their workers is the compensation. Since many workers’ social reproduction takes place in
their homes of origin, many often take an extended leave of absence to, well, reproduce in the literal sense and come back to the coastal factories after they have given birth to their children.

L. at Top’s main Guangzhou factory commented:

I came to this factory from inner Guangdong, in 1994. I have come to this factory three times and exited twice due to child delivery and child rearing. I left the factory to get married in 1998-1999. Then in 2000 I delivered my child, so I was out for seven months. Afterwards I came back again, and my mom was taking care of my child. Then I left again to take care of my child; after I felt ok that my child can be left, I re-migrated back to Top to work.

When owners and workers are considering maternity leaves, what labor law mandates seems almost irrelevant. The conversation is almost never about what the law mandates, but what supply and demand, as well as what an on-going, mutually beneficial and well-meaning relationship between the owner and the particular worker would yield. The high substitutability of low skilled workers can put workers completely out of a job if they want to leave the factory for an extended period of time, but a few things become the saving grace for them, and more often than not, they are able to re-enter the factory they exited. First, everybody has social reproduction needs to go home due to family-related matters. So these problems are not individualized but rather common across workers. Second, despite their coming and going and despite their low skills in the grand scheme of China’s industrial scene, they are still experienced workers, or they have occupied a specific position in the factory. Retaining workers is still worthwhile for owners because no re-training is required. Employers have learned to compromise with and adapt to the social reproduction needs of workers and accept the frequent coming and going of workers.
Just like how appreciating owners’ hardships makes workers psychologically aligned with them, the flexibility of having their jobs back—some as long as after two to three years—is also what makes workers willing to continue “eating bitterness” to work with and for an owner.

3.5 Faux Kinship with Owners

In a small factory, it is common for owners and workers to live together on the factory compound, drawing them close to each other not just physically but emotionally as well. Together, they work the overtime hours necessary to get a particular shipment out—sometimes until 10 pm, 1 am, or occasionally, an all-nighter packing, until a truck arrives the next morning for shipping. On days where such overtime is required, the factory canteen provides snacks, for example at 9 pm, or a 5th meal at midnight. Eating in the canteen, for example, like in my childhood experience, means bonding, especially done at 1 am. It is often not the case that the owner is sitting and chilling out or busy oppressing the workers, but, rather, the owner is helping with the tasks of that night. Management could be re-distributed to hand-sew the 500 buttons that need to be sewn that night as a last production step before the truck shows up the next morning. Or they are dispatched to place each garment into poly bags, with a hand tag and barcode that have been carefully printed without any typos in a language that is not their own.

It is not hard then to imagine that there can be a faux kinship between owners and workers. L.L. at Top’s main Guangzhou factory (where the owners live on-site in the

17 As mentioned above, due to the low wage rate, workers desire to have overtime. In the 80s and 90s in the absence of a stringent set of Labor Laws, there was little overtime pay. Workers were paid the same rate in their overtime hours. But this began to change after the Labor Laws were put in place after 1995. Weekday overtime rate was 1.5 times the regular wage, and weekend overtime rate was 2 times the regular wage.
factory) said, “When my sister’s child needed a liver transplant, I borrowed money from classmates, friends, family, co-workers, and the boss. The child needed six chemotherapy sessions, and they amounted to a total of RMB 200,000.”

I do not know what to make of the following episode, but I understand that whenever my father talks about this, he means it well, even if a little patronizing. The factory’s cleaning lady had high blood pressure just like himself. They had seen each other’s medicine and confirmed that it was the same—the same brand of medicine, and the same dosage. So, given that my father’s doctor was willing to give him an extra amount, he considered it a kind act to give his extra medication to the factory’s cleaning lady. Certainly exchanging personal medication is not to be encouraged, and is not my point, but this is an example of the intimate ties, or the lack of emotional and physical distance that goes on between an owner and a worker.

What I wish to illustrate with these examples is that Marx’s alienation of workers is not absolute. There are many factors that influence workers’ sense of alienation. Factory size is one. In fact, in Ching-Kwan Lee’s comparison of electronics factories in Hong Kong and Shenzhen, she failed to cite factory size as an important factor that contributes to the difference she observed across the two factories. My description above of the intimate distance between owners and workers is similar to what Lee observed in the Hong Kong factory, namely familial hegemony.

I, on the other hand, maintain that it is a factory’s size and ownership type (publicly traded vs. private) that affect how much owners are involved in an enterprise and affect the culture and management strategies of factories. I should also mention that both my father’s factory and Top, and countless others, are small family businesses with the owner a middle-aged parent and middle management the adult children. Often, they live on-site in the factory, in a building separate from the workers’ dorms. This set-up adds to the likelihood an entire factory will run like a family—to the extent possible, simply because
when top or middle management makes decisions, they are likely to consider implications not just for themselves but for the well-being of the people above and below them, just as adult children do when they make decisions big and small on a daily basis that affect their parents and children.


In small-sized factories, labor contracts do not usually exist between employers and employees for two reasons. From the employers’ point of view, the lack of a labor contract means little need to follow government-mandated labor protection measures such as providing social insurance. From the employee’s point of view, they are not pursuing such contracts because without them they enjoy more freedom to job hop. Labor activists may argue that job hopping stems from suboptimal working conditions in the first place. This is true; however, in my ethnography, most workers have had to acquiesce to wages that they wish were higher, canteen food that they wish was better, and dorms they wish were more comfortable. In other words, they have normalized suboptimal working conditions, and if they hop around, they only just wish to try their chances at a different factory that might just be slightly better in wage payment and other non-monetary provisions.

Interestingly, the shoe manufacturer Mr. L1 shared that JiangXi’s provincial government requires that 50 percent of all workers have social insurance. This number is at 80 percent in Guangzhou, but with negotiations, 30 percent passes, too. “And contrary to what you might think about inland governments, they are quite strict about everything else. They criticized our environmentalism by picking on the fact that the trees we planted were too small. So we had to pull out all the small trees we planted and re-plant larger trees.”
The first problem that follows from the lack of a labor contract is that the employer-employee relationship is unofficial. Chinese scholar JunJie Wang reports that in 2014, only 38 percent of migrant workers had signed a labor contract with their employers, same as in 2013 (JunJie Wang 王俊杰, 2015). Without a labor contract, enterprises are not obligated to contribute to workers’ social security insurance. This is especially common in small-sized enterprises where regulations and rules are skirted to save on costs. Unfortunately, however, due to migrant workers’ low level of education and skills, they are concentrated in small- and medium-sized enterprises, without access to more standardized factories. Wang (2015) reports that 17.6 percent of migrant workers participate in medical insurance, 16.7 percent participate in retirement insurance, 26.2 percent participate in occupational hazard insurance, 10.5 percent participate in unemployment insurance, and 7.8 percent participate in child birth insurance. Then, Chinese scholar GongCheng Zheng indicates that 26.8 percent of migrant workers have expressed that the most pressing social insurance for them is medical insurance, 20.4 percent expressed the most pressing insurance is retirement insurance, 18 percent expressed the most pressing insurance is occupational hazard insurance, and 16.8 percent expressed the most pressing insurance is unemployment insurance (GongCheng Zheng 郑功成, 2011).

For those who sign labor contracts with their employers, many refuse to have personal contributions to these forms of insurance deducted from their monthly pay due to an already low wage and/or a low awareness of the concept of insurance. Often, their employers fail to convince them to do so and must require that they provide a signature to indicate they voluntarily forfeit social insurance coverage. Even though lawyers have warned small enterprises that the signature has no legal power, nonetheless small enterprise owners perceive some protection from the government’s mandates. If ever in court, many employers believe an employee waiver will absolve them of legal responsibility.
This phenomenon comes about for a few reasons. First, labor contract law is loosely enforced with employers rarely checked for mandatory insurance coverage. Second, migrant worker employees have a misconception that their insurance is not transferrable from their place of employment in province A to their homes of origin in province B. Technical procedures make this transfer difficult (but not impossible) for migrant workers, giving them a rationale not to contribute. When migrant workers return home or retire at the end of the mandated 15 years, in the case of old-age pension, for example, they fear that their contributions collected in a coastal province cannot be paid in their home province. Third, migrant workers are either job hopping too much or have a too short-term horizon of things, making them unable and unwilling to consider the probability of sickness and old-age, especially because they are still in their prime productive years and retirement and old-age feel far away.

We can see from the above statistics that low insurance participation rates make migrant workers vulnerable for sickness and occupational injuries, in old age, and, of course, unemployment. Chinese scholar GaoYa Yu surveyed 29,425 migrant workers and found that only 64.32 percent of them think their health is good, with the remainder rating their health as “just ok” or “not very good.” About three quarters of migrant workers responded that they have been ill during their work lives, and that 45 percent of them have been ill more than three times. Almost 80 percent have had to bear the burden of their own medical expenses (GaoYa Yu 余高雅, 2012).

3.7 Misconceptions of Social Insurance Provision

Current labor contract laws mandate five types of insurance jointly paid for by the employer and employee or by the employer alone: old age insurance (20 percent by employer and eight percent by employee), medical insurance (roughly ten percent by the
employer and two percent by the employee, for example in Beijing. It varies by location.), unemployment insurance (roughly 1.5 percent by employer and 0.5 percent by employee in Beijing, varies by location), and occupational injury (by employer alone, either 0.5 percent for service industries, one percent for manufacturing industries, and two percent for mining industries), and child birth insurance (by employer alone, 0.8 percent in Beijing, for example, and 0.7 percent in Chongqing).

In other words, were a factory able to survive and sustain itself in business, this is what is provided through employer’s and employee’s contribution to social insurance. Below is an example of a young, 22-year old person’s insurance scheme based on a RMB 4,000/month wage.

Employer’s contribution:

- Retirement/Old-age insurance: RMB 4000 x 20% = RMB 800
- Medical insurance: RMB 4000 x 10% = RMB 400
- Unemployment insurance: RMB 4000 x 1.5% = RMB 60
- Occupational injury insurance: RMB 4000 x 0.5% = RMB 20
- Child birth insurance: RMB 4000 x 1.5% = RMB 60

Total: RMB 1340/month

Personal contribution:

- Old-age insurance: RMB 4000 x 8% = RMB 320
- Medical insurance: RMB 4000 x 2% + 2 = RMB 82
- Unemployment insurance: RMB 4000 x 0.5% = RMB 20

Total: RMB 422/month

What these contributions translate to, assuming the worker retires at the age of 60, in retirement/old-age insurance, is the following calculation of how much this person can get after retirement until death.
Retirement/Old-age insurance payment = average wage of all employees within that specific city one year before retirement x 38% + personal account’s sum of principal and interest ÷ 139. In this example, assuming the average of all employees within that specific city is also 4000, then the claimable amount is: RMB 4000 x 38% + 119,040/139= RMB 2376.

While this scheme seems fair and fine—with both the employer and the employee contributing to the insurances and the claimable amount after retirement decent enough for a modest living. In reality, the unwillingness to buy and misconceptions that the purchase of insurance is a choice (when it is not) is a common issue experienced in many small- and medium-sized enterprises.

Like governments on the coast in Guangzhou, in the beginning when investments were few and governments in need of capital investment, they sided with employers in establishing businesses. As time went by and the country increasingly developed, the government favored industries—for instance high tech firms—that it believed would prosper, and discouraged what it believed were obsolete industries like labor-intensive or polluting ones. Favorable terms and incentives were denied obsolete industries.

3.8 Buying Government-provided Insurance on One’s Own

Instead of hoping for and not getting social insurance from their work place, many migrant workers (with agricultural hukou) opt for what has been in place since 2003 in select places and popularized in 2010, the New Peasants’ Co-Op Health Insurance and the New Peasants’ Co-Op Pension Insurance, sponsored by the government at their
homes of origin. This is the government’s response to the reality that migrant worker
social reproduction, including medical care, takes place in homes of origin.

Yet there is a problem with this, too. Because participation in this insurance is voluntary,
and because there is still a monthly co-pay (of roughly RMB 150/month per person)
many who want to save as much cash as possible opt out, leaving themselves uncovered
and vulnerable. Research shows that participation rates in the nation’s poorest counties
awaiting government assistance have lower participation rates than non-poor counties.
Poor populations as well as low income populations also have low participation rates
(ZhongWei He 何忠伟, 2015).

For peasants, medical insurance expenses are usually a large sum of money that families
skip if they can. Researchers at Peking University found in 2001 and 2002 that in rural
parts of Anhui, Hunan, Yunan, and Sichuan Provinces (all migrant sending provinces)
81.25 percent of peasants requiring medical treatment were not receiving it. Half of this
was attributed to financial concerns (ZhongWei He 何忠伟, 2015).

All of my interviewees, except P.G.Z. at a newer, modern sweater factory in Weiyuan,
Sichuan, which provided her with company insurance, have bought the Peasants’ Co-Op
Health Insurance and the New Peasants’ Co-Op Pension Insurance because they have no
contract with their employers. Because none has reached retirement age yet, none could
give me information about their experience with the Co-Op Pension Insurance. But
almost all of them have experience with the Co-Op Health Insurance. For a contribution
of RMB 120/year, they receive an allowance of RMB 80/year worth of medication and
outpatient services. For inpatient services, expenses are reimbursable for up to 60 percent.

Anybody who has ever been mildly ill in China understands that health care is expensive,
as is medication from drugstores. A set of simple cold medicine would cost RMB 20 or
so. Therefore, the RMB 80/year seems low, leaving purchasers vulnerable for any
medium or big expenses.
The point here is that despite these New Peasant Co-Op insurance schemes, migrant workers are still vulnerable in the face of major illnesses, whose treatment they must finance largely on their own. This lack of effective insurance is a major factor why migrant workers, and those in precarious life circumstances in China, value money so highly. Savings becomes the insurance they have against anything that should happen.

3.9 Lack of Enough Social Security Makes Money Everything

Many low-income workers—among whom are migrant workers—go about life with no provision of social security. Neither from their work place nor from the government. This creates a tremendous pressure on themselves to be earning cash, not only just to improve their lives but also to insulate themselves and family members against the prospects of illness. It is fair to observe that lack of enough social security (even if exacerbated by a refusal to contribute to government programs) partially drives these migrant workers’ pursuit of money.

In fact, even the urban benefits are a contemporary provision, and it’s fair to say that for generations Chinese people have provided for their own old-age and sickness. For most of Chinese civilization, having children (and relying on them) has functioned as old-age insurance, as it is in many pre-modern civilizations. The saying “feeding a son to prevent old age,” or 養兒防老 describes the general Chinese psychology of relying on the adult offspring in old age and in sickness. Peasant parents, who lack the ability to take care of themselves independently, rely on this psychology. They expect to be taken care of by their adult children. When adult children do not provide, family conflicts arise and family finances suffer.
In my research, I was told not to ask about things relating to social security by the owner of the factory in Sichuan on my first trip there. It was not until I established personal relationships with some workers that I asked them about this matter privately.

3.10 Pressure from Labor Market Side

Labor-rights-related NGOs (often receiving financial assistance from Hong Kong branches of overseas NGOs like Oxfam) alongside magazines for migrant workers increased awareness of workers’ rights starting in late 1990s. 2001 ushered in the strict enforcement of social security laws, which the government had helped investors turn a blind eye to in the 1990s in the heyday of industrialization. Then, in late 1990s, as two major coastal industrial regions—near Shanghai and Guangzhou—competed for investment, labor conditions in both regions also improved.

Mr. D., a Taiwanese owner of a 170-employee boiler machine factory, supplying ironing machinery to garment-making factories, relays his clients’ plight:

Many of my clients who manufacture for the US and European markets are facing a wage increase of RMB 3000/month to RMB 4000+/month after employers’ contribution to social security. Their clients don’t care if your production costs have gone up! They still have to buy cheap. Many of my clients have already gone to inland China from the coast. They went to Hubei and Hunan Provinces to set up factories. But the wages there are still not low enough compared to Vietnam and Cambodia, which offer wages at 1/3 of Chinese wages, at around RMB 680-700/month. So a European buyer’s buying office in Shanghai might ask a factory: “Ok, you are selling me this shift from China for $28, how about from Cambodia?
Will $20 do?” So manufacturers have gone to set up factories in Cambodia to continue receiving the European orders. In a client’s factory in Cambodia, they bus workers in from two hours away, all 6,000 workers into 100 buses – a quick fix before the factory commits to building dormitories. It’s really a scene. So how am I responding to this? I also go to Cambodia to set up an office there, to service my manufacturer clients and to sell to new factories that have set up shop there.

The race to the bottom that Ross so vividly describes in the garment industry in Slave to Fashion also means, of course, a response by garment factories to this race to the bottom. Mr. D.’s quote reveals precisely how some of them are coping by chasing after even cheaper wage labor in South East Asia.

Mr. Y., another Taiwanese ex-factory owner of an eyewear manufacturing plant transitioned from running a factory with high wage expenses to trading and entered the restaurant business. Mr. Y. has been in China for 26 years since moving from Taiwan:

We were a family business in Taiwan, and we were starting to experience a labor shortage in the ‘80s and ‘90s in Taiwan. The social security laws requiring health insurances for workers had increased workers’ wages to an unaffordable level. The first thing everyone that would come in looking for a job would ask was: “is there air conditioning?”

Mr. Y.’s enterprise was ready to move to China in the late 1980s; in fact, he had paid a USD20,000 deposit for a piece of land near Xiamen, Fujian, which speaks the same dialect as spoken in Taiwan. But then there was the Tiananmen Square event, and everyone was scared about political stability and business prospects in China. “So we moved to Malaysia for three years, as a first step out of Taiwan. But workers there were difficult to manage – they were gone shopping or whatever, the day after payday, nobody came to work!”
China was still in Mr. Y.’s plans, and shortly after his investment in Malaysia, he went to check out Guangzhou, which was only a 1 3/4-hour train ride away from Hong Kong, the closest flight connection point from Taiwan. He then ran his factory making glasses for about a decade before wages increased in China, too. “I feel that due to the large inequality in China, the government has turned all the way to side with labor, the lowest bottom stratum of people now. Or they put in action plans to look like they are siding with these people. For example, within the social insurance provision, why do men have to get child birth insurance? How about women in their 50s who are already grandmothers who are clearly not giving births any more? And before the legality of the second-child since 2016, what about the women who have already given birth to their one-child’s—why must we pay for their child-birth insurance?” As a result of these expenses, Mr. Y. exited the factory by transitioning into a trading role. He said, “Running a factory is too much responsibility, it’s too difficult. Unless you run away, it seems difficult to stop a factory operation.” Indeed, many factories lack a healthy cash flow to lay off their staff properly with severance packages. Today, Mr. Y. goes inland to give orders in Jiangxi province and sells to his original clients.

In China, the power dynamics of the capital-labor relationship were starting to change in the early to mid-2000s when migrant laborers started to return to their farms and stopped coming to coastal cities. 2006 represented a change in government policy—for example, the 2006 cancellation of agricultural tax—to promote and subsidize agricultural lives. Fed up by low-pay, long-hour factory jobs, some opted to return to their farmland where, with the new policy, their income is lower—but tolerably so—than that earned in a factory, but where the benefits of other non-financial factors like living with family members outweigh the reduced wages. For some, growing crops is not the whole of their lives back at home. In fact, many have already moved, and moved their hukou from their rural villages to the nearest township. These people then choose to work in industrial or service jobs within the townships. Some have the flexibility to help with their family’s crops in a
peripheral way, and others still work for a business owner or become small-scale entrepreneurs.

The financial crisis in 2008 accelerated this process as workers realized their export-dependent employers now faced precarious business demands and could fire them on a moment’s notice. Seasoned workers like the first generation of migrant workers who have lived in coastal areas since 1980s have now gathered enough funds and valuable work experience, further strengthening their sense of empowerment. An increasingly transparent domestic media eager to expose bad labor practices also tempered factory management.

Chapter Conclusion:

In the supply chain, factories are on the bottom passively receiving orders and demands from multinational brand clients. When they give price quotations, they often fear competition from domestic sources and Asian countries with low material and labor costs.

In the 1980s and 1990s when China was just beginning to develop, there was little foreign capital invested in factories. The labor market at the time was a complete buyer’s market with a few factories training a vast number of unskilled workers. The foreign-owned factories proved to be tax-generating saviors and with the government’s help turned a blind eye to labor protection mandates like social insurance provisions.

A difficult business climate arrived in the 2000s. Coupled with now official nation-wide labor laws passed in 1994, China’s labor was beginning to become expensive, and its labor-intensive industries losing their comparative advantage. Social insurance now needed to be bought for employees without compromise, at least on the coast. The real
plight of a small factory reveals, however, that because labor contracts are usually not signed with employees, business owners could avoid social insurance payments and save on costs.

Besides pressure from the labor market, factory owners also experienced tremendous pressure from the product market side. Multinational brand clients audited factories with cost-increasing demands to improve labor conditions but without guaranteeing orders from year to year. After the 2008 crisis, many factories on the coast could not resist the pressure and closed.

From the early practice of holding back wage payments to control labor attrition, factories were often now paying wages with a delay due to late client payments. Workers displayed three sentiments: normalization of the situation, acquiescence in their plight, and identification with factory owners as they recognize a sense of resignation in the owners.

I dare not steer too far away from Marx’s alienation of labor and the labor-capital conflicts that are present perhaps in any labor vs. capital relationship, but here, what I want to portray is that this labor-capital conflict is not absolute and is not always the case.

**Chapter 4 Return of Older Generation Migrant Workers**

In the absence of more scholarly research about the phenomenon, geographer Kam Wing Chan observed that due to the global financial crisis in August 2008, migrant workers started leaving for home in October 2008, three months before the usual return traffic for Chinese New Year. According to one newspaper account covering eight major migrant-exporting provinces, Chan finds that close to 6 million migrant laborers had already left for home by late November/mid-December (Chan, 2010)
After sifting through varied statistical sources, Chan concluded that the rural migrant population was approximately 140.41 million at the end of 2008. About 50 percent of these workers (70 million) returned to their home villages before Chinese New Year. The 50 percent return rate was higher than the average 40 percent in previous years because many had lost their city jobs due to the financial crisis. Of the returnees, 36 percent were from the manufacturing sector (Chan, 2010).

4.1 Reverse Push and Pull Factors for Migrant Workers

In the next two chapters, I will explore the plight of these returnees; chapter 4 covers the return of the older generation of migrant workers and chapter 5 the return of the younger generation. Workers have been returning to their homes as early as 2004, then again in big waves after the 2008 financial crisis. But what does it look like in everyday life?

Mr. L2, owner of a garment manufacturer in Guangdong Province, laments that the new labor laws were too “advanced” for his enterprise:

As those with capital, we are not necessarily the stronger, compared to the workers. We take on a lot of risks—on raw materials, on payment terms, on consumption of the materials (garment manufacturers have a financial risks when the consumption of materials used quoted to clients differs later with actual consumption). Every little step involves a lot of risks. But our profits are too low. Sometimes we have to take an order at loss just to keep the factory running.

Starting in the 2000s, push and pull factors between the coast and migrant workers’ homes have been reversed. The new push factors have become the suboptimal working conditions that migrant workers face—for one, inflation in the entire country grew at an
unprecedented double-digit rate, while wages have not increased at the same rate. Any small enterprise owner would be quick to point out that workers have become “greedy.” Despite a lack of performance improvement, workers are looking for wage increases, which enterprises have become increasingly unable to pay, due to severe competition that has kept product prices down.

As a result of futile demands for higher wages and the inability of factories to pay, many factories—those that survived anyway—started to look for subcontractors in interior parts of China that could help capacity. *Singtao Daily* reported on December 28, 2008 that in the third quarter, alone, 7,148 companies moved away from or closed in Guangdong, a speed unprecedented since the Economic Reform. In the last quarter of 2008, 50,000 more companies closed shop, and in the entire year of 2008, a total of 62,000 companies shut down in Guangdong Province (Chan, 2010).

For surviving factories, subcontractors allow a firm to enter into a usage-basis transaction just as multinationals avoid fixed manufacturing costs by entering into a buyer-and-supplier relationship with factories in their sourcing network. In other words, factories use subcontractors only when they need to fill an order for their clients; they enter into buying relationships with subcontractors in the same sort of relationship that multinationals have with them. Instead of keeping a fixed cost, a fixed staff that demands a higher wage, factories keep subcontractors at their fingertips ready to produce what is needed. Subcontractor establishments in western and central China, have in turn become pull factors for migrant workers, who are attracted to jobs closer to home, even at a lower wage.

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18 These are the estimates of the Guangdong government. Of course, Guangdong Province is a place with high enterprise failure rates. Many enter into a phantom mode, meaning that they close and open up under another name, to avoid paying workers’ severance packages.
While Mr. L2’s comments may sound like mere complaints, small-sized enterprises, especially those export-oriented and labor-intensive—like garments, toys, electronics—have experienced tremendous pressure, both from product markets and the labor market.

The new pull factor is the existence of jobs and economic opportunities closer to home. As inland provinces develop with large-scale infrastructure projects and accompanying industrial setups people have started to desert their long-distance work destination for a closer work location—some in the very townships where their parents and children live, some in towns near their homes. Infrastructure projects include hydro-powered electricity stations generating energy for the coastal region, coal mining, construction of new office and residential buildings, and equipment manufacturing. Accompanying the development of this infrastructure are service industries like hospitality and retail. Depending on the geographical location, migrant worker sending regions have also developed tourism as a vibrant income generator, making long distance travel to work unnecessary for many.

Starting from coastal cities and now westbound inland, infrastructure projects and urbanization are knocking on the doors of many regions, changing the physical landscape with high-rise buildings and the options migrant workers now have with construction, industrial, and service jobs.

### 4.2 Pressure from the Product Market Side

From the product market side, many factors pressure enterprise owners. First, for example, e-commerce has been a mix of blessing and curse for many. Before internet commerce, middlemen or agents held tight, dear, and secret their sources of goods (called sourcing). But suddenly with internet commerce, end (corporate) buyers can find factories and do their own sourcing; likewise, factories can reach corporate buyers,
circumventing middlemen. But with this, the cost of goods for end buyers has gone down and so have product prices. Price wars follow. Business owners need to manage and control suppliers (factories), a function that used to be taken care of by the middlemen. Corporate buyers put in place things like manufacturer manuals that dictate how, for example, products must be packaged—where the tags need to be hung and barcodes shown, etc. Heavy fines are implemented when a manufacturer fails to act perfectly—and perfection is often difficult under time pressure when, due to uncertain economic conditions, buyers do not send orders until the last minute, squeezing production lead time.

Since the 1990s Nike, Mattel, and Gap sweatshop scandals, business name corporate buyers have been extremely careful about protecting their reputation for fair labor treatment in the factories they use. Since they do not directly own these factories, but only maintain a buyer-supplier relationships, they audit factories (or hire third-party auditors) on labor-related issues such as wages, overtime hours, overtime wages, and safe working conditions. Auditors visit factories every three months to interview workers and check on improvements like, for example, back support for those sitting down to work and foot padding support for those standing up to work.

This is one side of the client—making demands that increase production costs. On the other side, the merchandising department, there are demands to decrease product prices. In other words, the client wants to buy cheaper but with better and more expensive working conditions, a contradiction that again puts factories under enormous pressure if they want to keep business. In addition, there is no guarantee of orders from year to year even if the factories comply with all working condition improvements. This all begs the question whose financial responsibility is it—the brand’s or the factory’s. To evaluate the production of socially responsible goods is beyond the scope of my work; I merely wish

19 Source: [http://www.nytimes.com/2008/01/05/business/worldbusiness/05sweatshop.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/01/05/business/worldbusiness/05sweatshop.html), accessed March 13, 2017
to document the enormous pressure that factories are burdened with when facing their multinational brand clients.

4.3 Chinese factories Move Inland to Western and Central Regions

Leading labor scholar Beverly Silver documented the phenomenon of automobile corporations moving across international borders in search of lower-cost labor in a race to the bottom (Silver, 2003). Similarly, Japanese economist Akamatsu (1962) coined the term “flying geese” to describe the catching-up process of industrialization in late-comer economies, which develop an orientation toward industrial production by shifting from consumer goods to capital goods. Industries shift from making simple to more sophisticated products. Also, as factor prices rise, the labor-intensive industries in a developed country will gradually lose comparative advantage and likely be moved to developing countries with lower factor costs. This is certainly the case with labor-intensive factories in coastal China gradually moving either to interior provinces or South East Asian countries like Vietnam, Cambodia, or Myanmar. Chinese scholars Ruan and Zhang (2014), using 1998 to 2011 data from the textile and apparel industry, confirmed the trend within China of relocating labor-intensive industry to interior provinces. My research gives a qualitative dimension to labor conditions in coastal and inland factories in the textile and apparel industry.

Enterprises seek to lower labor costs by locating production in low labor cost regions. To illustrate the differences in regional labor costs, instead of providing a chart of GDP or GDP per capita rankings of provinces in China, which can be misleading because some provinces have high income inequality due to the presence of mega high-tech centers, I
provide the Human Development Index\textsuperscript{20} of the four coastal regions, China’s average, and select central and western inland provinces in which my fieldwork takes place.

**Table 3 Human Development Index of Migrant Worker-Sending and Receiving Provinces**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Human Development Index</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Beijing City</td>
<td>0.891</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shanghai City</td>
<td>0.908</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guangdong Province (Coast: Pearl River Delta)</td>
<td>0.844</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zhejiang Province (Coast: Yangtze River Delta)</td>
<td>0.841</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jiangsu Province (Coast: Yangtze River Delta)</td>
<td>0.837</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shandong Province (Coast: Circular Bohai Region)</td>
<td>0.828</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fujian Province (Coast: Southeast Coast)</td>
<td>0.807</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mainland China average</td>
<td>0.7923</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hunan Province (Central)</td>
<td>0.781</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sichuan Province (Western)</td>
<td>0.763</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guizhou Province (Western)</td>
<td>0.690</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: China Development Research Foundation, 2008/2010 report

\textsuperscript{20} The Human Development Index is an index developed by the United Nations based on a few measures: life expectancy, adult literacy rate, school enrollment, average number of years of schooling, GDP per capita and purchasing power. It is arguably a better gauge of quality of life than purely GDP or GDP per capita.
My main ethnographic site, Top Knitwear, like many factories on the coast in Guangzhou, was losing workers in the early millennium. Still strong in his 50s and with two adult sons taking over the factory, Mr. W. the owner was in an excellent position to address the labor problem by setting up a secondary factory. After setting up small workshops and dabbling in JiangXi and GuangXi Provinces and losing money because quality control was not up to par, Mr. W. learned to do exit interviews with his departing workers. *Where were they going?*

The W.’s found that many of the departing workers were leaving for home, Weiyuan county in Sichuan, some 1600 KM away from Guangzhou, to get married or have children. (See map in Figure 2.) In addition to workers leaving for this home destination, Mr. W. has a long-time acquaintance Miss C.S.W. (of no relation to him) also from Weiyuan, a woman now 45 who had a long history as a restaurant and club manager. She was an older-generation migrant worker who had come out to Guangzhou from Sichuan in the mid-1980s. Instead of going to the factories, she worked in the restaurant and clubbing business. In later years, she managed de facto prostitutes, a restaurant staff, and eventually became the co-owner of a restaurant. Because of her exposure to the restaurant sector, she got to know many businessmen in town. Mr. W. was one of them. In 2006, they took a trip together to Weiyuan, and Mr. W. decided to rent a space downtown as his secondary factory. He made C.S.W. (of no relations to himself) the legal owner of the factory, although he remained the de facto owner. After rehiring departed workers, shipping some obsolete hand-cranked knitting machines from Guangzhou, and employing a cook and security guard, the Weiyuan factory was officially up and running.

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21 Most of Top’s goods are now made by computerized machines. When Mr. W. was looking to open his second factory in Sichuan, hand-knitting machines were less expensive than computerized machines. But computerized machine prices were beginning to fall significantly. He knew that computerized machines
Top management knows that computerized machines are the wave of the future, but their older hand-cranked knitting machines needed a home. With the knowledge that the older generation of migrant workers desired to go home, Top opened this second factory and shipped their out-of-date machines there. The workers that followed and continued working at Top were overwhelmingly those lacking up-to-date computerized knitting skills that the market valued.

Top’s six or seven sweater factory competitors in Weiyuan, Sichuan, were mostly founded by people who were close to upper management in competing coastal sweater factories in Guangdong and Zhejiang Provinces. They had a small source of funding, customer orders, and knew enough of these return workers to be able to organize a manufacturing set-up. These owners themselves were the cream of the successful return migrant workers. A worker earns about RMB 2000-3000 when working at home in Weiyuan, vs. RMB 5000-6000 on the coast, a figure confirmed by workers themselves and by managers at Top.

were becoming ubiquitous but wished to keep a “reserve army” of capacity in case his computerized machines were over-loaded with orders. The cost of transporting goods between his Guangzhou main factory and the Sichuan factory outweighed the lower costs (mainly due to lower wages in Sichuan) of making the goods there, but for Mr. Wu, having extra capacity was important in case orders in the main Guangzhou factory exceeded capacity. Computerized machines do not require more education to operate than hand-knitting machines because even the imported machines now have programmed their operation systems into Chinese. Instead, the hand-knitting machines required talents and experience in knitting pieces. The hand-knitting machine operators were not retrained to operate computerized machines because they had the Sichuan factory to go to.
4.4 Why Did the Older Generation of Migrant Workers Return?

Return migration is a concept capturing the phenomenon of migrants who suspend their migration by returning to their places of origin (Vanderkamp, 1971; Lee, 1974). The return flow has been associated with both international and domestic return migration (Cerase, 1974; Lindstrom, 1996; Zhao, 2002). The returnees can return both voluntarily or be compelled to return. Both skilled and unskilled laborers are involved in return migration. Some return migrations are short-term, such as seasonal migration (Dustmann, 1997), or circular migration (Ortiz, 1996; Duany, 2002); others may be long-term migrations such as permanent return migration (Vanderkamp, 1971; Ley and Kobayashi, 2005), or repatriation (Ripmeester, 2005).

Both international migration out of China and domestic migration out of interior
provinces of China have received more scholarly attention than return migration. In terms of domestic return migration from the coast, there are two opposing views in Chinese policy circles. One considers returnees to be negative, burdening and exacerbating the problem of surplus labor in rural areas (Huang, 2005; Ma and Jin, 2009). The other considers returnees to contribute positively to the development of their homes of origin as bearers of capital, technology, and entrepreneurship (Li, 2003; Huang, 2005; Xu, 2005; Liu, 2006; Ma and Jin, 2009). But regardless of the findings, these studies have been done mainly using survey data, recording only returnees’ objective data, like age, marital status, education, whether spouse is also a migrant, land ownership, per capita income, and presence of children and parents over 65. Statistical regressions are performed to find the likelihood of returning (Zhao, 2002, Yue et al., 2010). My work seeks to uncover the how of these phenomena and to understand subjective decision-making processes.

In my fieldwork, I found most older generation migrant workers return to their exact towns of origin or to small cities close to their villages of origins to find new work, to continue working for the same employer’s interior factory, or to retire or semi-retire. Many have already moved their hukou from their rural villages into the nearest townships. When they return, it is to the townships that they return, not the more rural villages. Many of them also reported that they no longer have the ability or desire to farm from scratch. With farming, they unanimously agreed, one could never make enough money, one is exposed to the elements, and crucially, not many of them know how any more, since they only provided peripheral help to their parents when they left their homes in their late teen years. In this way, my finding disagrees with the stream of research that finds returnees to be burdening their homes of origin with a surplus of people and agrees with the opposing research stream that views returnees as positive contributors to their hometown, simply because most continue to work in various settings. The informants included in this
chapter have moved from Top’s factory in Guangzhou on the coast to its secondary factory in Weiyuan, Sichuan.

The media have portrayed—and therefore, it is the public’s perception— migrant workers as poor victims who toil days and nights for coveted products but will never be able to afford them, as if they actually want them in the first place. Many, and my fieldwork suggests most, do not. When asked about what would make an ideal life scenario for them, they often cite being able to unite with their family members (aging parents for the older generation and children for the younger generation), residing in their villages in a self-built house, having aging parents’ health needs met, having children attend school and feeling hopeful about their own futures, and more important, having work nearby. There is no intention of moving or making it in the big city.

Why do some migrants return and others not? There are a few theoretical perspectives that attempt to explain the causes of voluntary migration. These perspectives are divided into two groups: the first focusing on economic factors, often through a neoclassical lens (Qiu, 2001; Wang and Yuan, 2003; Ding, 2005; Huang, 2009; Sheng and Hou, 2009; Xiao and Yao, 2009; Zhang, 2009), for example, changes in wage differentials (Dustmann, 2003), employment opportunities (DaVanzo, 1976; Lindstrom, 1996), and cost of living differentials (Durand, Massey, and Zenteno, 2001). The second group takes an approach that focuses on social psychological factors that affect individual processes of return migration. They have noted that behaviors and behavioral intentions in return migration may not be rational and that influences of cognitive and psychological factors tend to be underestimated in studying settlement intentions (Ding, 2005; Hu and Hu, 2009). See 2.3.

My findings confirm the second group of scholars’ work. For example, informant M. took a 70 percent pay cut to return home, accompanying many of her colleagues who
decided to return home due to family concerns, despite a clear knowledge of a pay reduction on moving from Top’s Guangzhou to Sichuan factory.

Even though the older generation of migrant workers had to orient themselves to market oriented aspects of life—being pressured at work to produce more with less—it is a false assumption that they wish to abandon their life inland altogether and desire an urban life with all its modern amenities. Some modern amenities would be nice to have back at home—and many but not all do already. Popular media too often makes the general cry that migrant workers cannot afford the products they produce—be they the newest smart phones, pieces of luxury clothing, or gadgets—or more important, property in the city they helped construct as evidence that they are underpaid and mistreated. While this may be valid, or at least logical, at a glance, possession of modern amenities is not always the benchmark that migrant workers measure their satisfaction and social mobility in life.

When discussing why she returned to Sichuan after a 20-year job history in Guangdong, M.J., who in chapter 2 we learned supported her brother’s education, said:

> The key was my relationship with my son. In order to take care of him (he was in high school then), I returned. Actually, monitoring his studies is not the primary concerns as nowadays college is much easier to get in than before. A lot of us (return migrant workers) think this way. It’s the relationship and everyday behavior and interaction that matter the most. We weren’t home to teach home good manners and daily habits—he doesn’t know how to tidy and organize his space. When eating fruits for example, he doesn’t think of his parents, etc. My son also has an incorrect concept: he thought that studying was for us, not for himself. Maybe that was also attributable to us being away. When we were away,

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22 Sharing food is a common cultural practice expected of people in Chinese culture. Here, by not sharing fruits, JianMei is conveying the sense of self-centeredness of her son because of her absence to teach him basic mannerism and cultural expectations.
we could only call and the phone conversation could only be about test scores. When he scored badly, he would say, it’s because we had failed our promises.

In M.J.’s case, we see that being back in Sichuan fulfills her needs to be near her family. At work, she continues to be respected as a supervisor as she was in the Guangzhou factory; and she gets to live and spend time with her family. (By the time I interviewed her, her son had already gotten into college and moved away. But she has a 12-year-old daughter with whom she spends time.)

Despite what is true about the hukou system, most of my informants have overwhelmingly stated that hukou was not an overt issue or a consideration in departure or return decisions. In their departure, all they needed in the coastal host city was a temporary resident permit, with which they could legally live in dorms or rent near the factories. Factories with good guanxi [relationship] with the authorities even had so much clout that their workers did not have to have their temporary resident permit on them all the time. As long as they report the name of the factory as their employer, the police let them go. In their return decision, hukou also played a peripheral role. Workers were simply returning to their families, which is naturally where their hukou is or is near.

4.4.1 Parenting and Education of Children

M., who we learned in chapter 2 rejected her parents’ attempts at arranging a marriage for her at home in Sichuan, continued her story after her marriage to her free love

Today, my husband works at another factory that sometimes has night shifts, operating on hot stoves for energy generation. When he has night shifts, he supplements his earning by driving motorcycle taxies during the day.

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23 See Footnote 12.
In 2000, when my child reached two, I went out again to DongGuan, Guangdong. But I eventually opted to come back to Weiyuan when my child was 5 because I knew that in life, you can’t have it all. Life outside is hard on the body, and hard on the heart. Especially if you are out alone—as a couple it would be much easier and better, but not alone. You must prioritize and choose. I had no childcare. My husband’s mother came from the village to Weiyuan county for childcare, but she wished to go back to be together with my father-in-law. So I prioritized my child over the opportunity to continue working in Guangdong. For me, family was more important. I took a 70 percent pay cut to come back home.

At home in Weiyuan, at first I took a job at a supermarket. But that was no good because you had to work through lunch hours, which made it impossible to go home and cook for my school-aged child. [Lunch breaks from primary to high schools in China can be as long as 2 1/2 hours; students have the option of going home for lunch and a nap.] So I changed into this factory job operating the mechanical knitting machine. Mr. W. is lax about lunch hours—he allows workers with families to leave a bit early to go home. So this is a nice arrangement.

For 19 years now, she has owned an apartment downtown, just across from the main bus station, where the factory is. She has been back for 11 or 12 years. She explains her whole building is a hot commodity on the real estate market because it’s only one block away from the city’s best high school, and many from surrounding villages want to come and rent places for the school.

It was July 2015 when I made my first trip to Weiyuan. M.’s 18-year-old daughter R.Y. had just finished the university entrance exam and decided that she did too poorly to enter in the same year. She decided she would repeat a year and try again. A soft and sweet
spoken girl, R.Y. was an intelligent, sensitive, and curious girl as she perhaps should be at the age of 18. As a hard working migrant worker, Miao has instilled in her daughter’s mind the importance of having a diploma. “It cannot be…life without a diploma.” To M., a diploma means working in air-conditioning, the difference between sweating and cooling down, literally and figuratively. In fact, I had a discussion with her about air conditioning. Because there are, in fact, many shop floors that have started to offer air conditioning, I asked if she was averse to the fact that theirs did not. Her response surprised me; she said, “Air conditioning consumes a lot of electricity, a lot of money, especially for a big space like a shop floor. Mr. Wu is a very nice boss; you cannot dagong for a boss and not think about the interests of your factory!”

So striving on her way to becoming an air-conditioning consuming white-collar staffer somewhere, R.Y. complained to me and sought my advice on her studying strategies. Of course, having a mother who has never gone to high school, even if she is loving and supportive, does not help with improving study skills and ultimately improving test scores, crucial in China as it is the only indicator of performance in the one-shot university entrance exam system. In a year’s time when I visited M. again in 2016, R.Y. got into a teacher’s college three to four hours away from home. R.Y. came home, and we met over a home-cooked lunch.

What I describe here is a common problem, and a problem that can be several-fold more serious than M. and R.Y.’s example demonstrates. China’s current compulsory education is 9 years. This means migrant workers have mostly 9 or less years of education. If they are out in their dagong destinations on the coast, they are not near their school-aged children. Even less educated and oftentimes illiterate grandparents are bringing up these children. And if migrant workers are living with their children at home, they may not have the education level to help their children with school work.
Up to the end of middle school, which is up to the end of the compulsory education, money is not a primary factor in students’ dropping out. Elementary school costs about RMB 200-300 per semester, and middle school about RMB 300-400. There is an additional RMB 100 per semester for room and board for children who live too far away. They board at school and return home Friday afternoon and go back to the dorms Sunday afternoon. If the school is within 2 hours walking distance, a student usually walks to and from home on a weekly basis, because otherwise, they incur a transportation cost for the family. Up to the end of middle school students drop out because they lack parental supervision, parental love, and proper role models that show how education changes one’s fate. The short-term gratification of not doing homework, of playing outside are all too great to overcome—for those without parental supervision. Many students in rural settings speak to their parents in *dagong* destinations only once a week. Parental love and caring may not be easy to convey on the phone. Asking: “Have you eaten yet?”; “How is grandpa’s health?”; and “How are your test scores recently?” is not the same as having your parents around.

Migrant worker priorities vary. Where the family is financially? How old are their children? What kind of childcare is available? How good or bad do the children behave? What is the health of the parents? These are all factors that influence whether a migrant worker choose to stay in coastal work locations or to return home. Some families decide to have the husband or wife stay on the coast, while the other spouse takes care of the children at home.

H.X., a Guizhou native whose spouse is from Sichuan, reported going home alone due to the lack of childcare, leaving her husband on the coast. She paid a large “ransom” trying to get her son into a better school in a more urban county than her husband’s farming village.
When the child was 1-year-old, I left for Guangdong to dagong again until he graduated from elementary school. I returned because nobody was at home to care for him.

H.X.’s son had finished elementary school while living with his farming grandparents in the village. The grandparents, typical of their generation in China, were semi-literate—the grandfather was more literate than his wife. When I was invited to visit them at home, the grandfather spoke more to me than the grandmother, due to more verbal confidence, although he was speaking in his Sichuan dialect and not Mandarin. H.X. did not want to entrust her son in their hands when he got to the middle school stage, with a greater stake in the future. We also passed by the middle school where the boy would have gone if he had not been moved by his mother to Weiyuan County. It stood in the middle of the one road that connects Weiyuan County to one of its surrounding villages. Surrounded by corn fields, it was a lone, simple, and old building inside the school yard that one quickly associated with a lack of modern amenities and better teachers.

I was preparing to take him to Weiyuan County for middle school. Schools in the town are better. To get to a better class in the school, I spent RMB 9,000 as “construction fee”\(^{24}\) to the school through the acquaintance of a relative. Much of this money was scammed from us (just RMB 1,000 was refunded to us), and when I wanted to reveal this to the public, the relative came to beg us not to. So we did not. My son was very bitter on my behalf and said “our village couldn’t produce a good education and good human resources? It must be the city schools?”

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\(^{24}\) “Construction fees” are fees charged agricultural hukou holding parents by schools in urban settings to compensate for the usage of school facilities, thus the name “construction.”
P.X., now a white-collar employee in accounting at Top, remembers the days when she was plagued by guilt for not being with her son.

In 2003, my Dad’s health deteriorated, and my son was two, he was just learning to talk. I would be working during the day, and at night I would have dreams where he said, “Mom, if you come back to be with me, I will talk. If not, I will not talk.” Finally, when he was five, my husband and I decided to come back.

P.X. showed me a smart phone photo of three half omelets with ham, cucumber, and egg. This was a nice home-cooked breakfast for the now high-school 10th grade son. Following photos of the omelets were photos of sushi, which she also enjoys making every now and then. It is not an overstatement to describe P.X.’s life as centered around her son’s needs. Today she accompanies him to the hospital for IV injections for a cold, tomorrow she pays for after-school cramming lessons (remedial classes).

P.X.’s son is 15 years old today, but P.X., absent as a dagong migrant worker, holds on to the belief and guilt that she was not a good parent before he was 5.

My son’s general health, his immune system is not superb. Maybe because I did not bring him up. He has recently passed his rebellion phase. A few years back if we went out with him, he could get annoyed very easily. Wouldn’t want this, wouldn’t want that. I think this is because I was not with him when he was little.

P.X. talks as if she were a developmental psychologist. She believes that personality is formed between the ages of two and three. And because she came home only when her boy was five, she believes she missed out on the golden opportunity to mold his personality. I could not help but wonder if she might be over-compensating as a parent now and whether her teenage boy would have been awkward and rebellious simply because he was a teenager.
My view is that, general conditions at home are much better now. Who would want to leave their home and family to go out to dagong? Indeed, my [dagong] wages and my husband’s together were quite significant. But everything was for the family. When family members needed us, we went back. Otherwise we would regret it. She then cites a popular quote by Confucius: “Even though trees wish to be silent, the wind goes on; and even though children wish to be familial, parents are no longer alive. What for then?”

4.5 What Did the Older Generation of Migrant Workers Gain in Their Dagong Experience?

Pun (2005) in her early book Made in China, observes a young generation of women workers being recruited into assembly lines as if their bodies were machines that could take the cruel work schedule and as if there were no human judgment, no “brains” required in the repetitive tasks involved in the production line.

It is possible that Pun’s and my observations are different due to differences in industries; after all, the electronic industry seems to tolerate few errors, and its heavy use of machines means humans only help to keep the machines operating.

Nevertheless, I question her analysis by providing evidence from another industry—the garment manufacturing industry—that requires and appreciates those migrant workers who have accumulated years of experience and who have become specialized in what they do. Sometimes their skills and judgment make a difference between a shipment of

25 It is true that garment manufacturing industry has a low entry point for unskilled workers. But after years of working in it, workers become specialized and skilled; like in any other industry then, re-training would be costly. Workers’ experience becomes precious and often plays a crucial role in resolving production process problems or in saving time, for examples.
goods being accepted or rejected by the customer. This makes a difference of whether money for a particular shipment is received, discounted, or worse yet, not received at all.

M.J., as noted in chapter 2, left to dagong initially for her brother’s high school expenses. She has the clout in the family to plead with her father to let the brother repeat a year for the university exam. Now a supervisor in Top’s daughter factory inland in Sichuan, she recounts her job trajectory, being promoted by her first and second boss to learn a higher set of skills in knitwear manufacturing.

“In two years, I was promoted to a line supervisor because Mr. H.(first boss) said to me: ‘You are young now, your eye sight is good. What happens when you are in your 40s and 50s? This is a skill to learn, to gain, and to have. You would be employable when you are 50. If I can’t hire you any more, you can be hired elsewhere.’ My original response was: my wage would be RMB 1200 during the training period, and the same afterwards. But workers with piece rate can make up to RMB 1500~1600 a month. So why should I bother?

Mr. H. countered: “You have to trust my ability to read people. I have confidence in you.”

M.J. listened and remained a supervisor. Today, knitwear workers flock to her when they get stuck on their machines or have questions. Having stayed on and therefore, made herself a career path in knitwear manufacturing, her skills, experience, and judgment are crucial to the factory. Being a supervisor at the daughter factory in Sichuan also means that without her, problems may not get solved and production may be stalled. She is an invaluable asset to the factory—she knows it, and her boss knows it, too.

It is common that ordinary migrant workers who have the average status of a line worker become supervisors, technicians, consultants, or group leaders when they come to the inland factory. In fact, this is a (formal or informal) transfer of skills and knowledge. It
happened between Top’s headquarter in Guangzhou and the daughter factory in Sichuan and in many other factories in other industries.

The knitwear manufacturing industry, compared to the electronics industry, may require more human judgment at various junctions in the production process. Pun’s Made in China did not concern itself with the career trajectory of assembly workers. Her cross-sectional account describes all assembly workers as stuck in dead-end, monotonous jobs that not only have no future but also have no “present” – they stifle the existence of workers.

When Tufts University child development scholars Lang Ma and Francine Jacobs interviewed 12 young women working in four production chain factories in Guangdong Province in China, their informants frequently spoke as if they had no reasonable alternatives but to come out to dagong. These scholars, however, found that informants found ways within their reach to shape their own life trajectories by, for example, proactively researching candidate factories before making their selections. They asserted a sense of agency by “voting with their feet” – they simply left subpar factories (Ma and Jacobs, 2010). In addition, they sought out opportunities to enter training programs: computer language skills courses. In sum, their informants had planned out goals, and despite modest origins, they were ambitious, seeking to give their children good living and educational environments, to be promoted, to establish their own businesses, and to pursue more education (Ma and Jacobs, 2010).

Despite my informants being older and married and no longer seeking training programs, my fieldwork echoes the above finding of a sense of agency. Even though M.J.’s trajectory is not extraordinarily great, and certainly her wage does not proportionally reflect her importance in the company—garment manufacturing generally pays low wages. I argue that she has had agency and choices along the way. She is well positioned to jump ship any time to another knitwear company, if she so desires. Being able to make
those conscious choices and assert agency have given her the poise that she has today and
the experience and supervisory position that she commands now, even if it is not reflected
in her current wage.

Mr. W. (current boss) sent her to the machine manufacturer for 15 days of training on
how to fix the machine early in her job history.

I’m a direct person. I feel that being a worker (as opposed to being a supervisor)
is simpler and purer. If there is work, there is money. But if there is no work,
there is no money. If I’m in management (as a line supervisor) to fix machines, I
get paid even if there is no work. This is more stable. But the responsibility is
greater – if there are mistakes, it’s my responsibility. Fine, then I want more
responsibility because piece-rate wage is not stable, and management wage is
stable as an hourly rates. But with the management job, I have to be on my toes
about being more knowledgeable than workers because they, too, know the
machines. I have to constantly improve myself to be convincing.

Granted, part of Pun’s observation in Made in China, is that unmarried young women
were able to use dagong as a means against their patriarchal families’ pressure to marry.
Her account is largely about these young women’s struggles during the prime of their
productive lives. I encounter a later stage and experience their wisdom as they recount
life strategies. It is as if the dagong days were like a university experience that enlightens
them and teaches them about themselves, the world (highly competitive on the coast), and
how they ought to interact with it.

4.5.1 Earning Ability and Marital Relations after Dagong
As *dagong* workers within the leather garment factory, women can earn more than or as much as men. This means, wives can earn more than or as much as their husbands. For a variety of reasons, however, wives and husbands are often separated in different factories or job locations so that sharing a dinner together or sharing the same bed at night is impossible. This phenomenon has several implications. First, *dagong* gives married men and women an opportunity, an excuse, to exit marriage by leaving for a work destination in the name of making money for the family. It is not rare to see a spouse who no longer enjoys communication with the marriage partner but nevertheless commits financially to the household to care for the young and the aging parents or parents-in-laws. *Dagong* becomes a legitimate escape for many.

Second, one factory may not offer suitable positions for a husband and wife to be both working there. And even if there are suitable positions, the owner may prefer that husband and wife do not work together, for whatever reasons. Furthermore, even if a husband and wife are working together for the same employer, they may in fact be staying in sex segregated dormitories, if the factory does not provide for couples. The physical distance between a husband and a wife can be a few blocks away at different factories within the same industrial park, or it can be a few provinces away. Migrant workers have learned to swallow this kind of bitterness: the necessity to endure a long-distance relationship with their spouses and other family members because the husband and the wife’s jobs may likely be in different locations. There are only so many manufacturing jobs in China, like electronics assembly lines, which are perceived as “gender-neutral.” Many manufacturing jobs, by the physical nature of the work, take only

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26 Certainly, there is gender segregation in jobs as will be stated below; and certainly the predominantly female jobs pay poorly overall. But my research and work experience show that within the leather garment manufacturing industry, women can make more or as much as men, especially those whose wages are based on piece rates, as they could be faster in sewing than their male counterparts. This is different from Margaret M. Chin’s finding of men’s higher earnings than women’s in garment factories in New York City, largely because in the New York City factories, the higher-earning men are sewing denim, which is a rougher, faster job than the more delicate and time-consuming silk that women are sewing.
men; many others, like in the needle trades, take mostly women. Then there are other blatantly gender-specific industries outside of manufacturing: construction sites take men over women, and beauty or hair salon jobs take women over men exclusively.

As part of multigenerational family life strategies, one could argue that couples engage in dual-location life strategies, too. If a husband and wife are stably or gainfully employed at their respective jobs and in separate locations because finances are prioritized over staying together, there is no strong incentive for one partner to relocate. A dual-location life strategy is often the norm. This is because migrant workers often cannot take the risk of losing one partner’s income. The location of one partner’s job may be so specific or isolated that there simply isn’t the option of relocating for the other partner, unless one chooses to stay home and not work. But staying home and not working defeats the purpose of migrating to work in the first place. So, we are left with countless long-distance marriages. Sometimes one partner is designated the caretaker of the family and stays at or close to the family by working in the nearest township or having a small store front in the village, while the other partner ventures out long-distance. Other times, both partners work in far-away places. The bond that binds them together, however, oftentimes is not each other but loyalty to the family since traditional Chinese families are child-centered rather than couple-centered (Xu, Xie, Liu, Xia, and Liu, 2007).

If a woman becomes good or fast at her job, it is common that her earning power surpasses that of her husband’s. Combined with the long-distance factor, many marriages start to fray as women become financially superior and command greater clout in the family.

Q.Y.G., 45, appreciates her migrant work experience for the help it gives her in understanding how the world works, for help in becoming assertive, articulate, but nevertheless compassionate. Her husband was the last thing she would talk about in her
multiple conversations with me, seeming to indicate the low priority of marriage in her life.

I went out in 1985. I had a classmate who went before me. She wrote me a letter from Guangdong. When the letter arrived, I thought, ‘Who do I have in Guangdong that would write to me?’ I realized that she had gone out to dagong only after I opened her letter. Her uncle was in the military in Foshan, Guangdong, and she went to a nearby place to find work.

Q.Y.G. invited me to spend a night at her home, just 45 minutes on the bus from the township of Top factory. When at work, she still lives in a Top Sichuan-provided apartment, a crowded space with two bunk beds to a bedroom, and a living room area occupied by three bunk beds. Only water boiling, as opposed to real cooking, is done at the apartment. Meals are provided every day at the factory, even on off days, to retain workers.

Q.Y.G. and I took a bus one morning at 7 am to come to Q.Y.G.’s real home. Entering the two-bedroom apartment, there was a huge plasma TV, a spacious kitchen connected to a spacious dining area, and a modern couch with protective bedsheets on it to prevent her two year old grandson from soiling it. The most impressive of all, however, is a framed embroidery called “Golden Foliage All Over” hung above the plasma TV. It was roughly 1 1/2 x 1/2 meters and took her seven months of after-work embroidering to complete. She said she made another one for her younger brother’s wedding. Even though her job at the factory is not as eye-sight harming as the knitting or the piecing people’s, it was impressive to see a massive endeavoring like this…to separate out the different shades of yellow threads and the detailed embroidery hand work required a massive amount of concentration.
Framing and hanging this large piece on top of the TV in her living room was her way of expressing herself in pursuit of an esthetically better lifestyle. Underneath the umbrella term “migrant workers” are vast differences in how each and every one expresses life. Q.Y.G. is someone who has the patience and an esthetic appreciation to engage in a pastime hobby such as embroidery, which, with its beautiful patterns and glorious names, shows her enthusiasm for life and life’s promises. Q.Y.G.’s life is not defined by or confined to her worker status. She has much more to look forward to. She maximizes the resources she has on hand in exchange for maximal family outcomes and circumstances.

In 1993/1994, I had proposed buying a new house in my husband’s town near where you saw our current house. When I was back for Chinese New Year, I saw developments going up. But I didn’t have time to look into it and had to return to Guangdong right after the new year’s holiday to work. So I wrote my father-in-law a letter, asking him to inquire into it. It was going to be a new house for RMB 20,000, which I was 50 percent short of with my savings from
working in Guangdong. But I thought, being RMB 10,000 in debt from friends was manageable as long as I was still working.

My father-in-law was too old-fashioned. Even though he himself always had a salaried job and did not rely entirely on the farm for his family’s livelihood, he had a farmer’s way of thinking. He thought I was crazy—that if we were to live on the town away from the farm, we would be away from the land and therefore starving.

With his objection, I couldn’t buy the house. Moreover, my father-in-law asked my mother-in-law (whom he read my letter to because she did not recognize many characters) not to go around town advertising the fact that I had written with such a proposal. He worried about my image, that if the villagers heard I had such an idea, they would think what kind of dirty [sex-related] money I was getting in Guangdong!

In 2000, there came an opportunity to buy our current two-bedroom apartment. The price was now RMB 46,000. This was a pre-mortgage era. You had to have the full amount in cash. At that point, since I hadn’t been making real money for five years because I had returned home to be with my school-aged son, my savings were down to RMB 20,000. So I was short of RMB 26,000. I was very angry at my indecisive, negative, and un-cooperative husband; I only just wanted his verbal support and nothing else. I would have been the one going around trying to solve the problems anyway. But he could not even give me verbal support. In the end, my father-in-law lent me in RMB 7000, and I borrowed RMB 10,000 from each of my sisters and my brother. Renovation costs, I still remember, was RMB 3988, and this fund I had borrowed from friends. In the end, I paid it all back, of course. And I couldn’t have done it without working in
Guan dong: the money, the knowledge, and the confidence that buying properties was the right thing to do [for use as well as for investment].

Q.Y.G. is not alone. All but one of the return migrant worker interviewees in Weiyuan have bought houses to live in. Although owing the bank a mortgage is something undesirable for many of them, they managed to get mortgages to pay for the houses they have bought. Some purposely chose the lesser number of years (but higher payments each month) to be debt-free earlier.

However ambitious and aggressive that she may seem, Q.Y.G. is first and foremost a family woman. But a family woman in the vertical direction in doting on her 24-year-old son and her grandson, and not so much in a horizontal direction with her husband with whom her relationship is more of a formality now than an actual bond and union. Traditional Chinese culture has never emphasized the husband-and-wife relationship until modern times. Family relationships in vertical lineage between parents and children are reinforced, emphasized, and carried out more than other types of relationships, like between a couple or among siblings (Xu et al., 2007).

Now that she is a grandmother, the focus of Q.Y.G.’s life is her grandson. In China, grandparents are de facto care takers, culturally assumed so before the grandchildren’s births. Often, Q.Y.G. broadcasts her excursions with the little boy over social media: a visit to the waterfalls here, a walk around the grape fields there. Because of the fluctuating production cycle in the factory, she does not always have work. On her days off, she has the option of either going home 45 minutes away or staying in the company-provided apartment and hanging out in the town. With free time on her hands, she has plenty of opportunities to take care of her grandson, especially because her son works in a town 1 1/2 hours away from their home and only gets to go home four days a month, and her daughter-in-law works a full-time job. Q.Y.G. often wears a lime green
T-shirt with a large pineapple print on the front. She explained that her grandson had just gotten to know how to say the word “feng li” [pineapple], so she bought this T-shirt when she saw it, to help stimulate the little boy’s learning.

Q.Y.G. spoke with a superior attitude about her husband; such superiority, perhaps, would not be as accentuated if she did not migrate to the coast to work and had stayed on an equal footing with her husband.

My husband had never “eaten bitterness” in his life. He grew up with his father being a salaried staffer (even if low) vs. my having a farmer father. I think his parents spoiled all three of them, the male children. It is always me making decisions big and small; he never had an opinion. All big expenses come from me, too: besides the property buying episode described above, the dining table [large furniture item] comes from me. Son’s middle school expenses, 1000+, for example, came from me, too. For much of the duration of our marriage, he stayed home and did not have an incentive for a better life. It’s really so frustrating, I tell you. Really, if my parents-in-law were not so kind and nice, I would have left this marriage a long time ago. My mother-in-law had always supported my ideas, and my father-in-law, eventually approved of me after several incidents that proved I was right or had a better judgment.

Q.Y.G. has an extremely compassionate soul, one that cares for and goes many extra miles to help her peers, not just her family. The husband of a colleague of Q.Y.G. had been sick with leukemia for nine years. He was getting treatment in the big city ChengDu and resting at home with medication. Q.Y.G. said one of his medications was not available in Weiyuan, only in Zigong where her family lives. So she was on a mission to help the colleague’s husband get this medication. In the beginning, the doctor refused, and Q.Y.G. thought to herself, how could this doctor be so cold? Then she went to the

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27 Two hours away from Weiyuan, Sichuan.
pharmacy department of the hospital and met a young man working there. This young man said to her, “We are the out-patients’ pharmacy, you should check with the in-patient pharmacy.”

Just this small helpful sentence was very very moving to me. Later on, every time I went, he recognized me and we would say hello. Last year, the patient passed away. I was very emotional for a long time and I wanted to say to him, “The person we have been helping is gone.” But I didn’t, I swallowed it.

To help the colleague and her husband, sometimes I went home to Zigong on extra trips when I did not plan to...because anything else I could not have helped. This was the only thing I could do, so I did.

After her husband passed away, I, or I should say we—us co-workers, have been on the lookout for someone suitable to matchmake her with. If we come across someone suitable, we would first check out his background and then judge whether it would be a good thing to introduce him to her. Anything that we could do within our ability, we would. Losing a husband is devastating and we just want to be there for her.

As I was writing this chapter, I received a forwarded message from her, with two further voice messages. The husband of an ex-colleague that she has known since 1998 in the same factory had a car accident in 2014. Since then, he had been incurring an exorbitant sum of medical expenses (RMB 800,000), and the forwarded message was one organized by the family to try collecting donations from the general public.

“This is a true story. I worked with her before.” Q.Y.G.’s voice said vehemently.

I haven’t seen this colleague for 10+ years. This time, this incident is talked about by a group of other colleagues/ex-colleagues on social media. Her husband has been in and out of the operation room five times, and here are some
photos of the family before and after the accident. The last photo is the one I most dare not look at, where the husband is pushed in a wheelchair by his aging mother with white hair.

I read and re-read the forwarded message, looked at my own finances, and decided I would contribute a meager RMB 1000. I wrote to Q.Y.G.: “My ability is limited as I am still a student myself, living a life where I would go to the cheapest grocery store on my second-hand bike. I would, however, like to contribute RMB 1000, but it has to wait until my next trip to China to wire the money.”

She sent back a sophisticated, thoughtful message: “Do not mind this message. You are still a student. Other ex-colleagues requested that I forward this message out. I hesitated for a few days before forwarding it to you and two other ex-classmates. I do not want this message to bother my friends. Let us pray for the protagonist and wish him a speedy recovery.” The man passed away in 2016, just a day before my second visit to Weiyuan.

Even though Q.Y.G. herself—or anybody else, for that matter—had not expressed this, it was clear to me that the bonding among co-workers was as important a factor for encouraging workers to stay as any other. Especially for the older generation of workers, their inertia to change workplaces was great, and so was the psycho-social factor of belonging.

4.6 Multigenerational Lifestyle

The older generation of migrant workers often expect, and are expected by their adult children, to retire or semi-retire from their coastal stints and take care of their grandchildren. Most do when they return to their homes of origin. They are different from the younger generation of migrant workers, whom we will discuss later. As previously
discussed, Chinese cultural values expect intergenerational contributions to the family. Quach and Anderson (2008) state the family constitutes a crucial support network, particularly through intergenerational relationships. Having grandparents take care of children is not unique to rural China nor to farming communities. Urban folks do so, too. In the cities, the grandparents’ generation lives under the same roof as the core family, and in both one- and two-income families, is expected to contribute to household chores. They are found buying groceries in the morning, picking up children at kindergarten and primary schools in the afternoon, and in many cases, making dinner for their sons and daughters and their sons- and daughters-in-law who work 9 to 5 jobs. Standard apartment interiors in high-rise buildings are designed to suit this cultural practice with three- or four-bedrooms: a bedroom for each generation. Real estate developers advertise their property by marking and labeling rooms such as “grandparent’s bedroom,” alongside parent’s and children’s bedrooms.

When I walked into Top’s Sichuan factory, I was first greeted by a small black board on the wall near the entrance. It instructed: No children in the factory during summer months.

Yet, because Miss C.S.W., the legal representative/owner of the factory was hands-off or absent herself, and because Mr. W.’s management team is all the way in Guangzhou, what is in place is actually a lax policy on having children on the shop floor.

Children and grandchildren (like Q.Y.G.’s) are brought to work when school is not in session. For a factory of 20 plus workers, four to five children sometimes showed up. One day, a 12-year-old girl, M.J.’s daughter, spread out on a big ironing table to read her colorful story books. Two children were running alongside the aisle between the mechanical knitting machines and the locking machines. The weather was hot, so the children had their shoes off. As I approached the locking machines to sit down with someone to chat, I noticed that there were long needles on the floor. My Western-trained
child-safety alarm clock went off, and I got up quickly to start picking them up. Workers agreed with me that it was a potential danger, but when I sat down again with my small collection of needles, I saw why they were not as nervous as I was. The needles were dull and long and were resting mostly in the narrow grooves “in” not “on” the floor. So in theory, it was not likely that children would get poked even if they did step on them.

Ever since Nike’s 1995 child labor scandal, large brand companies, mostly in North America and Western Europe, started to audit factories on measures of workers’ rights, wages, hours, etc. Workplace safety is certainly on the list of things these auditors check. Is there a specific place designed to store (potentially dangerous) tools of production? Is this place safeguarded? Long documents and checklists are passed out from the brand companies to their contractor factories and pressure is applied on the latter to comply with regulations and rules the brand companies make up.

Of course, bringing one’s children or grandchildren to the workplace seems so out of the question that they would not appear on the checklist of things not to happen. But it happens every so often when a worker has no alternative childcare. And when there is no pressure—like that applied by Western brand companies to forbid this—management, especially at smaller factories turn a blind eye.

The Chinese mentality and practice of childcare does not generally make room for outside “professionals” like a daycare center. Kindergartens exist and are utilized, but a few factors make them a non-necessity. First, kindergartens exist only in more urban regions. In rural villages, such setups rarely exist. Or kindergartens may be too far away to get to because there is too few of them. Second, attending kindergarten or a daycare center means that instead of family members taking care of their children, the children are cared for by “outsiders.” Many Chinese reject this idea; they overwhelmingly desire to over-protect their youngsters by keeping them within eyesight. Third, either a kindergarten or a daycare attendance means extra family expenditures. And this is one
too many expenses to many frugal Chinese or frugal Chinese migrant workers whose budgets are not so big to begin with.

Again, the existence of children on Top’s shop floor reflects both the cultural proclivity to *not* outsource caring for the young and the unofficial, informal way that the workplace meets workers’ real needs by de facto allowing them to attend to their family obligations.

**4.7 Rites of passage**

What I meant earlier by likening *dagong* with a university experience is not so much the freedom endowed on carefree university students—migrant workers are burdened with a host of worries—but the sense of empowerment and the rites of passage that a university experience grants. *Dagong* on the coast is a kind of rite of passage for migrant workers from knowing nothing of capitalist arrangements of work and organization to becoming a busy participant. Some older generation migrant workers I interviewed in the last chapter repeatedly expressed sympathy for their boss who was struggling to keep the business afloat. Being in a factory long enough teaches you about the things that can go wrong with a shipment of goods and the things that must go right for the boss to receive a proper, full payment. When business is bad, some older generation migrant workers even state that they understand if they must be let go. “We will be alright back home. Our children are adults now. We can go and wait to take care of our grandchildren.”

For those that climb into supervisory roles, the rites of passage continue and make them keepers of capitalism, however small that role is. Harry Braverman, in *Labor and Monopoly Capital—the Degradation of Work in the 20th Century* (1974), points out that middle management, despite being workers, functions to guard capital on behalf of the business owners. In my observations, seasoned and senior migrant workers—especially
those in a small-sized factory in which interaction and bonding with the boss is intense and frequent—develop a loyalty and mentality to work as if they were running the show. By this, I mean that they are usually conscious of their entitlement or at least use of company resources, a car ride with the driver, consumption of production and other material, or they pay attention to whether the lights and air conditioning are off when people leave a room, to name a few examples.

Further, they are molded and socialized on a daily basis to be concerned about costs and prospects of profits when taking an action. Behind their work stations, they chat about whether a garment they are currently making will sell or not—is the pocket on the chest big enough for cell phones? Does the tassel look good with this length or that length? The technical specification says this, but we think that makes a better product because of reasons XYZ.

These are at the same time technical details and tiny business decisions that concern a migrant worker with his or her subdivided tasks because they have learned—through observing the boss’s mood, for example, at various times against the happenings in the business, through going to lunches with the client and listening in on the conversations, through sharing a car ride with the factory’s accounting staff to pay the electricity bill. These should not be their concerns, yet they have been socialized into capitalism day in and day out to learn to care. They care not only because everything is in a small way related to their wage payment and whether they will still have this job next month. But they care also because there can be a general sense of camaraderie with the factory owners and their co-workers. And when they share the company’s concerns, they are appreciated by upper management; even if there may be no room for many of them to rise to middle management or supervisory roles. A business mindset earns them an approval rating with upper management and the owner. And in a small factory setting where upper management or the owner’s words dictate the daily world, they have earned a new status. Now they can be entrusted with greater tasks—with greater autonomy, or eat with upper
management in a room separate from or adjacent to the larger canteen. Indeed, in a small factory, a separate facility indicates status, and smart, hard-working migrant workers, too, have a way to advance in their jobs.

4.8 Empowerment

As I argued earlier, after the dagong experience, many older generation migrant workers return home having a stronger sense of empowerment, a can-do attitude because anything at home could be easier and less threatening than the “bitterness they had to eat” when out on the coast. They are more aware of their human rights because work and life experiences on the coast, where laws are more complete and fully implemented, imbued them with a general sense of being savvy. They have also seen, observed, and interacted with urban folks, and now they know how things are done in a more civilized, sophisticated way. Having seen how capitalism works in its most cut-throat region of the country, they now talk and walk with a confidence about them that cannot be taken away.

Objectively, despite their relatively low level of education, almost all of them speak better Mandarin, the country’s official language, than their counterparts who did not migrate. They have had to communicate and collaborate with superiors and white-collar staffers usually from local coast areas, as well as fellow migrant workers from different parts of central and western China. In theory, there should be economic returns to speaking better Mandarin (Gao and Smyth, 2011), but because all my interviewees have continued working for the same employer, they did not report greater economic returns for speaking better Mandarin.
J.D.W., 44, is a conscientious, hard-working mechanical knitting machine operator. She has a high school aged daughter, and her husband, a migrant worker, is away in the adjacent Guizhou Province.

In 1994 in March, my cousin and I went to Guangzhou Train Station, en route to Shenzhen Bao An district, which required a Border Pass. It was an era that such a Pass was required for anybody to enter the special zone. We stayed overnight in a small hotel in Guangzhou with the kind of a huge, communal bed for a group of people. There was a small fire in that hotel that very evening—we were scared to death for a while before it was quickly put out. The next day, security people laughed at us jokingly and said we hadn’t experienced the world.

Finally we got our border passes and got to this small factory in Shenzhen. The Shenzhen factory canteen food was much better than the one in Jiangsu where I had been previously, but after a while, there were no more wages and the owner vanished.

A group of us workers went on a march in front of the Shenzhen labor bureau holding signs which we had helped write. The labor bureau eventually liquidated the facilities and paid us. I remember I was owed RMB 380 and got paid eventually.

Of course, this is not to say that the dagong experience was carefree and intentionally growth-oriented for the sake of workers. It is not. It is in many cases cruel with long hours, far away from home and repetitive. Yet post-dagong, workers told me they think of dagong positively as something that built character and life experiences.

**Chapter Conclusion:**

This chapter explores the reverse push and pull factors that occurred after the Economic Reform in the 1980s, which explain migrant workers’ return home. Pressures on small-
and medium-sized enterprises that employ a large percentage of migrant workers and work opportunities in newly developing western and central China have led to return migration. Coastal factories sought to move to western and central regions of China, as well as South East Asia, for lower cost labor. On average, workers returning inland receive half of what they used to earn on the coast.

The older generation of migrant workers are willing to take this pay cut to be living with, taking care of their growing children, and providing parental supervision for their education, which they deem important in their upward intergenerational social mobility.

My informants are overwhelmingly female, and many are separated from their spouses—although many did not stay close to their spouses spatially to begin with, as traditional Chinese culture never prevailed on the husband-and-wife relationship, but rather, on the parent-to-child relationship. Although the larger body of literature on factory workers has documented and emphasized their powerlessness, a small group of scholars, including me, has found bits of evidence that coming out to the coast means acquiring a sense of agency and empowerment, as well as a rite of passage.

Because of western and central China’s development, the relocation of coastal factories, or the opening of daughter factories, older generation migrant workers have returned home to continue working. Those who are past their productive years have returned home to retire or semi-retire by becoming caretakers of their grandchildren. Despite retirement, their coastal experience has made them more confident, evidenced by improved Mandarin skills. While they may not have capitalized on these qualities, their newfound self-confidence is a positive outcome of their dagong experience.

Chapter 5 Return of the Younger Generation of Migrant Workers
5.1 Why Did the Younger Generation of Migrant Workers Return?

The younger generation of migrant workers returned home for more varied reasons than the older generation, which due to their age generally stay in the same factory, same industry, or retire. Compared to the destitution that the older generation encountered at home in the wake of the Cultural Revolution when they had few opportunities to make money, the younger generation of migrant workers finally has choices. In their choice set, they could continue to migrate out to the coast to work, return home, or stay closer to home to work. Others chose to become small-scale entrepreneurs.

Yue, Li, Feldman, and Du found in 2010 (Yue et al., 2010) that members of the younger generation have stronger desires to do nonfarm work and that returning to native villages to seek a nonagricultural job has become the most important goal for this generation. Using survey data, they found that the younger the migrants, the more likely they intend to be nonagricultural returnees and settlers. Their quantitative study cites a higher return to increasing education level as a reason the younger generation is returning; they also found that social capital, migration motives, and social and economic conditions in areas of origin affect the younger generation’s intention to return. My qualitative study, however, suggests that it is their family status—whether there is a family back in their homes of origin to feed and to be together with—that is the main determinant of whether the younger generation of workers returns. In my study, there is almost no difference in the sense of family responsibility between older and younger generations of workers.

More economic opportunities exist in western and central China now, making returning home an option.

Chinese anthropologist Zhou Daming reports on job hopping frequency among the 112 workers he surveyed in a stationery factory in the Pearl River Delta.
Table 4 Job Hopping Frequency of Various Generations of Migrant Workers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Job hopping frequency</th>
<th>Migrant workers above 30-year-old</th>
<th>Migrant workers between 21-30 year-old</th>
<th>Migrant workers between 15-20 year-old</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Above 4 times</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-3 times</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 time</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did not respond</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: DaMing Zhou and XiaoYun Sun, Research of Migrant Workers’ Job Hopping—Mobility of Enterprise Migrant Workers Series, Part II 周大鸣与孙箫韵，农民工”转工”研究—企业农民工流动研究之二, 2010

Zhou and Sun’s findings show that workers in their 20s have the highest job hopping frequency, which confirms my ethnographic evidence. Although my sample size is relatively small (40), it allows me to see that younger generation migrant workers are less stable, even in their jobs at home, after their return from the coast. They either job hop at home, or job hop between the coast and home region. We will discuss what this means with the example of P.G.Z., later.

For many younger generation migrant workers, the distance away from loved ones quickly reminds them of their priorities in life. They have not even had a chance to accumulate any work experience or savings on the coast. Their consumption patterns have not made it conducive to saving. Thanks to China’s internal economic development that makes work at home possible, the difference for the younger generation between
staying home to work and going to the coast is no longer the difference between earning nothing and making a livelihood. Also, thanks to internal economic development, the consumption level of western and central China has risen so that entrepreneurship of all kinds is a possibility. All of this is another way of saying, this generation has a choice, even if sometimes a hard one. It is an improvement over the older generation’s lack of choices.

T.Z. was 30-years-old when I met her in Top’s factory hallway. After I explained my purpose, she readily shared her story. Just a few sentences into her story, she quickly teared up sharing how she decided to leave her infant child to pursue work on the coast.

I was a child of migrant workers myself. My parents are still out working, as we speak. They left when I was just an 8-month old baby, my paternal grandparents raised me. But I did not want to repeat this family history, I did not want to be a migrant worker again myself, but I tried leaving when my baby was small, for lack of alternatives to make money. I recall that my father-in-law was holding the baby; they were across a valley and I was walking towards the train station. They walked in parallel with me and my father-in-law was saying to the baby, “Call out to your mother!” It was very unbearable, the pain. I regretted the decision as soon as the train got out of ZiGong, the nearest train station to where we were living. When I arrived in Guangzhou, I wanted to turn back right away but I knew this would not solve any problems. So I stayed and worked. In those initial 56 days, I worked for 40 and made a whopping RMB 5600. Then, there was no more goods to make, even the boss said so. In the beginning when I called home, my baby boy knew to call me “Mama.” As time went by, he stopped calling me. I told my husband, I did not want to work here anymore, I wanted to go home. As soon as I hung up, I went to buy a train ticket. When you go out to work, aren’t you doing so for the sake of the child? But in fact, returning is the real sacrifice you can do for the child.
T.Z. had another problem: just a month before we met, her husband was diagnosed with end-stage uremia and had to go through dialysis every 2-3 days. She fears for his life, and she fears for the medical expenses to come. A middle school teacher, her husband has state-provided medical insurance. But still, now that he is not working and rests at home every day, she fears his medical expenses will be unaffordable on her meager wages. Locking together knit pieces into finished garments. Doing this, she makes around RMB 3000/month, which is unstable due to the instability of factory orders. But T.Z. is too tough to be quickly defeated. Having just a middle school education, she is limited in what she can do to make a living. Through personal connections, she managed to buy a second-hand locking machine that she places on her balcony at home. With the machine, she processes extra work as a freelance, piece-rate worker for other owners than Top’s Sichuan factory, which has not signed a labor contract with her and which does not have enough work to occupy her time.

Here we see that T.Z.’s potential choice set would be between staying at Top’s Guangzhou factory being paid for her full-time work capacity and coming home to Sichuan and soliciting freelance jobs.

At one point, I started a small business. I bought from wholesale cheap women’s clothing and toys, and tried to sell them to workers by having a stand on the street near where they would pass by to and from work. This was a bad decision, and I have some stock clothing left.

She abandoned the business and the idea of doing business on her own altogether. She then started to get freelance jobs doing the same task she does in Top’s Sichuan factory. When I saw her again in 2016, she was splitting her time three ways. Work at Top when there were goods to be made, freelance work at home, and on-site work in a custom-made sweater shop. Since the summer of 2015, she has broken up her day by fitting in her husband’s dialysis sessions at the hospital. If she is at work in the factory, she goes home
right after lunch to take her husband to the hospital on her moped. She stays with him during his session, and comes back to work later than the lunch break allows. Management is nice about it and does not give her trouble. Earning RMB 3000/month and having to pay an RMB 1200/month mortgage, she and her family are living frugally, especially now with an on-going medical expense. But however frugally she lives, she does not miss spending family time on mini vacations and surely does not miss taking her now 8-year-old son to eat an American hamburger and milkshake on his birthday. After all, this is what all the struggles are about, this is the reason she returned: quality family life together, not apart.

Not all younger generation migrant workers’ return are as final as T.Z.’s. Unlike white-collar workplaces in the West, factory owners in China accept the numerous comings and goings of the same worker. So, you could have a worker quit for two months to go home inland due to boredom in the factory, due to a family event, and then decide to come back out to the same factory again. If the factory is still in need of helping hands and if the worker has no real conflicts with his co-workers, then there would be no reason to stop him from entering the factory again.

P.Y.Z., 35, a locking machine operator at Top, worked alongside T.Z. whom we got to know in the above section. A year after my first visit to Weiyuan and to P.Y.Z.’s two-bedroom apartment with her husband and their 12-year-old daughter, she suddenly announced on social media that she was “departing.” “Departing for where?” I asked.

P.Y.Z. and her husband were leaving for Suzhou. They were taking a 12-hour high-speed train ride. She felt bored and posted a photo of her departing train on social media. She was excited for her trip and her new life in a factory peeling plastic membranes. In the first few days after she arrived, her husband got into the factory smoothly without a problem. She, on the other hand, had to resort to forging a health certificate, because of low blood pressure, which for her employer might be a sign of possible fainting on the
job. She said to me, “We will see what happens around Chinese New Year.” Her plans for staying at this job extended for only six months.

5.2 Infrastructure and Telecommunication

Infrastructure and telecommunication have changed dramatically in China in the past 20 years. Train rides, thanks to the development of increasingly extensive high speed railroad networks, have been shortened to as much as 1/5 of the time it used to take. The oldest ex-migrant worker I have in my study, B.W., the mother of the triumphant Shenzhen hukou receiver L.C. from chapter 2, used to take five- to six-day one-way train rides to get from her Fujian work site to her home in Sichuan. “Despite the incredibly long distance and the pain of traveling, I found every opportunity to go home and visit. It was really really hard, every train ride was guaranteed to have large crowds, and you had to transfer so many times, waiting and waiting between trains.” Now living with L.C.’s family in Shenzhen, B.W.’s travel mode has changed to high speed rail and even flights, when she goes all over China to visit her relatives: driving with L.C.’s husband to her younger sister in Fujian, high speed railroad to another younger sister in Tianjin, and a flight back from her youngest daughter’s place with a connection, three hours away from ChengDu.

B. W. also experienced the drastic improvement in telecommunications in the country and how it affected the way she kept in contact with her family. “In the ‘80s, I never went to the outside world and knew nothing of that world. We learned everything step by step. For example, I struggled to learn how to send text messages on the phone. In the mid-1990s there was the telecommunication companies’ 200 fixed landline phone program. I did not have a phone in my home in Sichuan, but a niece had married into a family in the nearest township that had a fixed telephone. So, that was why a lot of times
after dinner, I would say to my employer, ‘I am going out to phone the family.’ Every time there is something happening in the family, I was very anxious, always calling and calling. I was only making a few hundred a month, but over a year, I would have to spend over a thousand in telephone fees! It was only after the 200 fixed landline phone program did we have personal cell phones. It was then that I started to learn how to send text messages.”

Q.Y.G.’s daughter-in-law, a slender and beautiful woman who used to work in the beauty industry in Shenzhen, dabbled around at home for a few years selling food at a storefront and then working in town before returning to Shenzhen for a job in the beauty industry. Q.Y.G. warns her, “You will find out how much you will miss your son. I went through the exact same thing. In our era, we had no social media, no video-conferencing abilities. A letter took half a month to arrive; that’s the only difference. But the pain of missing your child stays the same. It’s your son, it’s your decision.”

5.3 Job Hopping

P.G.Z. is 34, she had previously worked in handbag factories in Guangdong, starting when she was 14, using her older sister’s ID to fake her age. Now a mother of two, her family of four is considering going to Guangdong again after a few years back home in Sichuan.

We want to go out again, together, as a couple, even as a family with the children, if we can manage. First we will renovate our house this year, rent it out so our mortgage is taken care of, then we will be free to go. My husband wants
to try his hands at selling computer electronics\(^{28}\)… His sister owns an electronics factory in Huizhou near Shenzhen. So, it’s been a project for my husband to learn driving, but he’s been too bogged down by his current well-paid job in welding to really study for the driving tests.

Just as I was wondering about her a few months later and helping her to brainstorm a way to achieve this move, she went back to Sichuan again, telling me that the thought of moving to Guangdong had been scrapped.

P.G.Z. has job hopped so much between Guangdong and Sichuan that it takes her a while to recall her past job trajectory. Below I illustrate this past job trajectory with a timeline.

1997 (age 14): Sichuan \(\rightarrow\) Guangdong. Not reached age 15 yet. “Borrowed” older sister’s ID.

2002: Guangdong \(\rightarrow\) Sichuan, came back to Weiyuan, left for ChengDu for a few months, then back to Weiyuan again. Marriage and birth of Child 1.

2003: Sichuan \(\rightarrow\) Guangdong, a few months after Child 1 was born.

2012: Guangdong \(\rightarrow\) Sichuan, after staying put in Guangdong for about nine years, only coming home on major holidays, she returned to Sichuan on a more permanent basis.

2013: Sichuan \(\rightarrow\) Guangdong, but went out again.

\(^{28}\) The computer electronics market in various parts in Guangzhou is occupied by small-scale entrepreneurs from various provinces. In my district, there is a high percentage of small-scale entrepreneurs from Hunan in the market. They are between 30 and 50 years old, and typically rent a space in a computer electronic market that hosts rows of small individual spaces for small businesses. Typically, it is run by a family—either couples or siblings, where a basic division of labor takes place. One person would be responsible for fixing computers, for example, with the other person selling and going out to get sales contract from small- and medium-sized businesses around town. A family successful in running such a business would not think of returning home to their village—there, such a mature market does not exist, and they would be giving up the fruits of their efforts thus far.
2014: Guangdong → Sichuan.

2016: Sichuan → Guangdong for a few months, after buying a new apartment and having an immediate need for cash for the apartment’s interior designs.

After I had gotten to know her, one summer day in 2016, she announced on social media, “I am now in Guangzhou, dagong! I just got here 3 days ago, so tired, everyday working until midnight!” Then she started to explain, “we bought a house back at home. All our money has gone into that. We need money urgently, so I came out to dagong again in Guangzhou, helping the family.”

She found this Guangzhou factory through friends. She left her two children at home with her husband—since, compared to her husband, she finds it easier to get work with her locking machine operation skill set—took a direct bus from Weiyuan County to Dongguan, and started working in a knitwear factory.

At the expense of such a long trip and what seems like a big endeavor to move again, P.G.Z. will be leaving her two small children. She is still job hopping in Guangdong, looking for a factory where she did not have to work so many overtime hours but that paid between RMB 5000 and 6000. A few days passed, and when I next heard from P.G.Z., she was already working at a “better factory” in the same Dongguan region. She said she can’t work the terrible long hours because she has hepatitis B. But to earn RMB 5000-6000, overtime every day until 10 pm is inevitable. I half-jokingly told her that she would be alright, that my grandmother lived to 96 with hepatitis B. Then she said, in these modern days, it’s more likely the case that we can’t live to this old age because we are all eating gutter oil.

Alice: Are you living in the dorms?

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29 Gutter oil is a term used in China and Taiwan to describe illicit cooking oil which has been recycled from waste oil collected from unsanitary, unlawful, and unimaginable sources like restaurant fryers, sewer drains, grease traps, and slaughterhouse waste.
P.G.Z.: Yes, it’s room and board provided.

Alice: Then you must be eating gutter oil.

I snapped in a joking mode.

Alice: Couldn’t you find a place to rent on your own, and that way you could at least cook dinner for yourself?

P.G.Z.: I am in for a quick buck. I only want to work until Chinese New Year. She said. In this seven-month period she intends to work out on the coast in Guangdong before returning home to plan next steps. Meanwhile, her husband is at home learning to drive. When he masters driving, the two of them plan to switch places. He will go out to Guangdong and help his brother-in-law do sales in his electronics factory.

A month later, P.G.Z. bought a slow cooker so she could at least make some soup for herself when she wants.

Anonymous and highly substitutable, these factory jobs make coming and going easy for workers, unlike white-collar jobs which require greater efforts to find and get into and are taken more seriously.

Four months before Chinese New Year, four months before her planned return, she quit and left for home in Sichuan, yet again. She said she could not stand the pain of missing her two children and could finally find another sweater factory at home that utilized her skills on locking sweater pieces.

Job hopping is not something that belongs strictly to migrant workers from interior provinces. Twenty-seven-year old younger-generation sales assistant at Top’s Guangzhou factory spoke of dissatisfaction with her wage. “Sometimes I want to quit, I want to look for other jobs outside. But after doing this for so many years, I don’t know what to do otherwise.”
5.4 Entrepreneurship

Entrepreneurship is what many younger generation migrant workers aspire and resort to when they return home. In fact, the second half of their coastal *dagong* experience after the initial hardship is over prepares them in all aspects for entrepreneurship back home: finances by saving their wages, experiences by observing how their bosses do business, and connections with co-villagers or co-province friends, *laoxiang*.

But entrepreneurship also means risk. Some migrant workers-turned-entrepreneurs are resorting to *dagong* when the going gets tough and when they cannot earn as much as they would have liked as entrepreneurs because a wage is a surer livelihood.

P.G.Z.’s older sister, now 37, who started her working life doing *dagong* in an electronics factory, returned to Weiyuan to start a bakery shop. But after a few years when the bakery was not making as much money as she had expected, she went out with P.G.Z. to Dongguan, Guandong to work in a sweater factory. In fact, from the onset, not having sweater-factory skills like P.G.Z., she could only do quality control work at the end of all knitting processes. But for her, *dagong* was a solution to the problem of having three growing daughters to feed and when entrepreneurship did not work. After the bakery, her husband opened a shop to send and receive courier packages. Yet that proved to be difficult, too, because there are too many couriers in the market and too much competition. This family hedges its earning potential by having at least one parent shift between entrepreneurship and *dagong*, the possibility of making more money (entrepreneurship) vs. a stable income (*dagong*) to live on.
With China opening and developing its western and central regions, the economy back home is picking up speed, leaving residents there desiring similar goods and services that have already been available on the coast.

Scholars that view return workers as a positive force have argued that they promote rural economic development, non-agricultural and agricultural sectors (Xu 2005; Liu 2006; Ma and Jin 2009).

The failed bakery and struggling courier entrepreneurship case and the hair salon place (detailed below) reflect what this group of scholars have observed. My work finds their claim an overstatement because most entrepreneurship by return migrants employs only the entrepreneurs themselves, with no job creation just yet. The trend, however, is correct; returnees are the carriers of capital, sophistication, and sometimes technology to diffuse to their homes of origin.

27-year-old hair salon owner-I and hair salon owner-II are classic cases. Owner-I used to work in his aunt’s hair salon in a district of Guangzhou for more than seven years before returning home, buying home property, and signing a rental lease for his salon.

In the beginning in my aunt’s salon in Guangzhou, we used to just sleep on the salon beds when she did not have that many helpers. Later, she upgraded us to a rental residence where guys were sleeping on the couches in the living room, and girls were sleeping in rooms with doors. Now that I have my own home property back home in Sichuan, I wish to find a partner and start a family in 3 years. Maybe I/we will go out to the coast again when I’m in my 30s or 40s depending on the will of my other half, but for now, I am staying put to develop this salon.

Owner-II in his mid-20s said that to start and develop his salon business at home is just as hard as it was to develop his joint-venture salon business in Guangzhou. He has been
back for nine months, and he set up shop right when he returned. “My connections and friends are all there. To start and develop this business here, I am starting from scratch.”

If it is equally hard in Guangzhou and back home, what brought him home?

Everything is related. My 2 1/2-year-old child, my aging parents. You know, it’s like my parents aged suddenly. All of a sudden they have illnesses. When I was in Guangzhou, I was young and my parents were young. You don’t feel any burdens when you are young. You just think, this is fun. But business at home is more difficult. You have to spend more time convincing the clients to pay for a certain service that was easier to get paid for in the city. Here, people really bargain!

In 2010 Taiwan’s own Business Week magazine reported the trend of migrant workers returning home, citing a whopping 3.6 million returnees between 2008 and February 2009. A particular village of 4700 in Sichuan is reported to have 70+ returnees. Thirty-six-year-old He is such a returnee. After leaving home at the age of 18, Business Week reported, working as a security guard, a cook, and an assembly worker for traffic lights in Guangdong, Beijing, and Yunan, his last job was as a foreman in a shoe factory in Guangdong, making RMB 3000+ a month. After the 2008 financial crisis, the factory’s orders shrank from a few thousand pairs per day to under 300. He was out of a job. Within 20 days, he was on the train going back to ChongQing (the municipality adjacent to Sichuan, where Sichuan dialect is spoken). He took out RMB 10,000 to bid for a fish farm, and during the time he waited for the fish to grow he bid on a 500+ Mu30 (33.35 hectares) plot of land to grow trees. He negotiated with 100+ farms to hire them to plant trees—all the farmers would receive more than RMB 1000 a month in wage, plus the rental fees they get. The farmers’ incomes were elevated to better than a coastal wage. HE spoke of the comparison between his dagong life before and his entrepreneurial life.

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30 Chinese Unit of area. 1 Mu=0.165 Acres.
now: “Before making money was just to live, but now it’s not the same. I am full of motivation and energy. In the future, I dream of opening a martial arts school.”

From the returnees, we see that not all migrant workers value earning ability above everything else in their decision-making. If they did, they would choose to stay on the coast as wages on the coast are still higher than they are in western and central China. Many prioritize being together with family over a higher wage; some treat the return home as a long-anticipated opportunity to try their hands at entrepreneurship, something they have observed from a distance and experienced as a worker with their owner(s) on the coast.

J.C. (the youngest sister of L.C. from chapter 2) and her husband Zh. returned to Sichuan in 2014 and 2012, respectively. Both native Sichuanese, Zh. has always wanted to try his hands at growing vegetables to sell. Before his return, he was a line leader at a packaging department in a Philips-acquired lighting factory. J.C.’s wife commented that continuing in a factory was not a way of life. “It was a dead-end job that led nowhere. No high wages and no room for promotion. He only had a middle school education, and no real skills, so it’s hard for him to find a satisfactory job. Entrepreneurship became a real alternative.”

But returning to Sichuan has not been easy, either. Zh. has family in two places, five hours apart by bus. J.C. followed Zh. to one of his homes, ShiMian, to be near his sister, but Zhang had to relocate to near his other family in GuangHan, where he recruited his nephew to go into the farm business with him.

“What do you miss him?” I asked J.C. when she and I visited the farm together. The couple hadn’t seen each other for three months since her last visit.

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“Nope! I have two daughters to keep me busy!” J.C. replied. Perhaps it was a superficial answer for an outsider, but it is true that even young Chinese couples, like their parents’ generation, are used to separation with spouses and family members.

I visited Zh.’s farm only half a year since he started, and so far, he has been losing money. “1 Mu of land costs RMB 700-800 just for the fertilizers, not counting labor yet. I learned that a neighbor’s radish was down to a few cents per half a kilo, and the only thing they could do was to destroy the crop. Even destroying the crop costs money, then you’ve got to find a way to get rid of the crop itself. It’s really hard—the prices of vegetables fluctuate a lot, we don’t have the experience yet to be making a sure profit, and it depends a lot on the elements.”

The Global Entrepreneurship Monitor, co-founded by Babson College and the London School of Business coined the term, “necessity entrepreneurs.” Many a type of entrepreneurship I witnessed in Weiyuan, Sichuan, belongs to this category. A quick glance at help-wanted ads shows that many jobs discriminate on age and take only those below 45. So what did return migrant workers do when they exceeded that age? Many become small storefront and restaurant owners and are forced by necessity to be on their own.

So what made Zh. choose the farm business? “It’s been a dream, and also, in ten year’s time, food safety is going to be a big issue. People are going to have a great demand for safe food.”

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This gave the couple faith to invest RMB 70,000 to 80,000 into the farm business. J.C. says she is supportive because “if we don’t try creating our own future with this venture, we will soon lose our risk-taking ability as we get older.”

She herself was making RMB 6,000 in Shenzhen at the Philips-acquired lighting factory, where she had met her husband some eleven years ago when she was an assembly line record keeper. Now back in ShiMian, Sichuan, she found a job making RMB 4,000. “On the surface,” she explained, “it seemed like I am making less. But now I don’t have the kind of pressure you get when you live in a mega city. Everything is more expensive: kindergarten was RMB 1,000+/month in Shenzhen, and RMB 1,000/semester in ShiMian. Dance lessons was RMB 2,000/term in Shenzhen, and RMB 500/term in ShiMian.”

This is not to mention that because she did not have a Shenzhen hukou, her two children didn’t, either, so they could attend the type of schools reserved for migrant workers’ children, requiring extra fees. Also, they could not qualify city medical insurance and could only go through the school’s system, making it more expensive.

Why didn’t J.C. try to apply for a Shenzhen hukou like her eldest sister? The birth of a second child made her ineligible to pass one criterion, which was compliance with the one-child policy. A fine would have solved the problem, but the fine was RMB 200,000, an amount she did not have nor would be willing to pay. So her choice was clear: return

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33 Author’s conversion from the Chinese unit of Mu. Zh. rents 20 Mu’s of land. 1 Mu = 1/6.07 Acre
home. And like the group of scholars holding a positive view of return migrant workers, even though J.C.’s husband’s small-scale agricultural business employs no one other than his own kin, at least the capital investment is a type of investment that otherwise would be absent in his village of origin.

P.X. admitted to me that she had tried entrepreneurship back at home and failed. “Since we came back in 2003, we have tried many things, none of them was easy. I realized that suddenly we needed to manage our interpersonal relationships, those were so important if you wanted to be an entrepreneur. All kinds of relationships, parallel ones with your peers and vertical ones with the people you are trying to employ. These are things you did not have to worry about if you were just a dagong worker.”

When we first came back, we invested in the trucking business with my cousin. We bought a truck for sand mixtures. But in the end, our money was scammed by my cousin’s friend. That was almost all our savings from our dagong lives, close to RMB 200,000. Then we opened a lamb soup restaurant, a popular type of cuisine here in Weiyuan. The taste of our restaurant food was not bad, but we did not have enough helpers in the restaurant. Our son was small and did not help, so we asked my husband’s father. He helped for half a year. In the end, we closed down and chose to find jobs with salaries instead of being entrepreneurs. It’s easier. In fact, being someone else’s employee is easier than not working. If you don’t work, you are at home worrying about your child – what he wants to eat, what groceries to buy, etc. Now that I am working, I am eating lunch in the factory. For dinner, sometimes my mother would make it [so I don’t have to worry about it.]

X.G.W. is a small-scale entrepreneur who owns an ethnic clothing shop. In her small shop of about 25 square meters in the heart the township of Zhouqin, Guizhou, she has many lines of businesses. The Shui ethnic minority clothing is famous for its hand
embroidery. X.G.W. has five to six women as her “reserve army”—non-working women, some peasants, in the village that she could go to for embroidery pieces. Once these pieces are done, she collects them and sews them together. X.G.W. first draws patterns of the embroidery, hands out the small pieces with patterns on them, collects them, and sews the pieces together into the various products she carries: dresses, baby carriers, shoes, and purses that she wishes to develop.

Figure 11 Wang’s sewing machine and embroidered baby carriers on the wall

Her reserve army of village women resemble what Ping-Chun Hsiung (1996) considers in her book Living Rooms as Factories—Class, Gender, and the Satellite Factory System in Taiwan, invisible production lines in the living rooms in which women take piece-rate jobs to work on at home. Hsiung observes Taiwan’s 1980s economy with its many small and satellite factories revolving around a core large factory that produces a finished good. What she observed about Taiwan then is true in China today on two accounts. First, everyone has a “boss syndrome,” meaning that everyone wants to be a boss (Chang,
1988). This was one of the central themes in the last chapter when I discussed that many return migrant workers aspire to be small-scale entrepreneurs in their home. Second, the heavy density of factories making finished goods gives ample opportunities for small subcontracting factories. These small subcontractors then create jobs for even smaller manufacturing set-ups. This putting out system is not new. It was used in English and American textile industries early in the industrial revolution. Known also as the workshop system, it is a means of subcontracting work to offsite facilities, either in craftsmen’s homes or in workshops with multiple craftsmen.

Hsiung argued in her book that whereas large manufacturing setups accounted for Korea and Singapore’s economic miracles, another one of the Asian Tiger, Taiwan, had its miracles founded on smaller satellite-type factories. They are small in nature, centered around families and the married women that produce piece-rate goods from what Hill Gates termed “part-time proletarians” (Gates, 1979).

In the township of Zhouqin with a surface area of 154 square KM and of a population of 160,000, X.G.W. is probably one of five or fewer tailors. One could see from both the location and the merchandise displayed in X.G.W.’s shop that she is more ambitious in wishing to include a greater number of products than her competitors, one of whom, for example, is situated in the township’s central traditional market and offers just women’s tops and bottoms, where the trims have machine-made embroidery, unlike X.G.W.’s hand-made ones.

A majority of people in their productive years still choose to go to the coast for migrant work, evidenced by the town’s empty look—few pedestrians are on the street at any given moment. There are not many jobs to be had. If there are store fronts, usually the family that owns the store provides enough human resources to run it. On the wall of a storefront, there hangs a plaque indicating that it’s a pick-up spot for long-distance buses.
that travel to coastal Zhejiang, Jiangsu, and Guangdong Provinces where people sell their labor power to factories or services, and repeat the kind of lives described in chapter 2.

Figure 12 Bus ticket booth for ZhouQin Town to coastal dagong destinations

Route A: ZhouQin to Hangzhou, Zhejiang province, & Changzhou, Jiangsu province

Route B: ZhouQin to Wenzhou, & Ningbo, Zhejiang province

Route C: ZhouQin to Dongguan & Shenzhen, Guangdong province

Route D: ZhouQin to Zhenjiang & Lingbei, Guangdong province

Yet the village women that X.G.W. employs receive their first lesson in capitalism from dealing with X.G.W. Things like deadlines, quality, returns, and piece rates are something these women must grapple with if they want to work with X.G.W. They are economic aspects different from what they have encountered in their farming lives. E.P.
Thompson (1967) wrote in his landmark paper “Time, Work, and Industrial Capitalism” that “in mature capitalist society all time must be consumed, marketed, and put to use; it is offensive for the labour force merely to ‘pass the time.’” And this is what is happening to women who for the first time are learning about the import and precision of time, as required in the capitalist way of things. As Thompson wrote, indeed,

In all these ways – by the division of labour, the supervision of labour; fines; bells and clocks; money incentives; preachings and schoolings; the suppression of fairs and sports—new labour habits were formed, and a new time-discipline was imposed.

Figure 13 Ex-migrant worker, small-scale entrepreneur X.G.W.

5.4.1 Piece Work at Home

Through an American couple who traveled to the tourist town Fenghuang in Hunan Province and started a small factory that produces small pouches and bookmarks that feature the hand embroidery of the ethnic minority Miao women, I got to see a third group of workers. Calling them workers is an overstatement, actually. This is a group of peasant women who either never left their rural village or left and came back not to the
nearest township but to the very village of their houses of origin or that of their husbands’.
The embroidery is done in the villages by these peasant women, who engage in this piece
work around their farming schedules.

We used to go into the villages physically to be with the Miao people ten years
ago when I had more energy. I don’t do that so often now, but I have the women
come to me to turn in their finished products and to collect new blank
embroidery pieces. I see them that way and I will pay their bus fares.

The wife from the American couple said. At their office, a staffer readily provided her
insight that in this type of handcraft industry, the wage is never comparable to one
received in an assembly line industrial job. The population here, if choosing to leave for
work, mostly goes to Zhejiang or Fujian.

This explains why on any typical day in the villages—like almost all farming villages
across China—most able-bodied people in their most productive years are out in coastal
regions making a living away from home, leaving behind their elderly parents and young
children. Villages are empty and quiet, and occasionally a group of children comes out to
play in someone’s front yard, many a time supervised (or for that matter, un-supervised)
by grandparents who usually stay indoors.

Gao-ao village is no exception. When I approached the village, greeting me immediately
was a cow. The village was awfully quiet, with no one out on the small roads. Surely by
virtue of being a village, there were no streets for pedestrians to stroll on, only houses
that lay one next to another, connected by small cement roads wide enough only for
motorcycles.

Although Fenghuang is a tourist town, domestic Chinese tourists do not value hand-made
embroidery; they are unwilling to spend money on embroidery. It’s often looked down on
as a lowly handcraft done at an unprofessional level. But in fact, even though it is a
rudimentary skill, good embroidery does require a high level of focus, patience, experience, and discipline.

T.Y. (in the picture below), is 62 years old, the women’s director in her village, as well as the village’s National People’s Progress representative. She received me into her typical farm house on a hill, reachable only by foot beyond a certain point, as the cement roads beyond a certain point become just wide enough for a tri-cycle moped at most, with steps going up or down. In front of her house piled up against the front wall are dried corn stems that families collect for fuel. There is electricity but no indoor plumbing or water. A restroom is in a shed outside of the main house. T.Y. has two years of elementary school education, but there was an unusual sophistication about her. I could see how with her communication skills, she has become a leader in this small village.

She started our conversation by getting right to the point that young people don’t care to stay home and do embroidery. “It pays too little, so the only ones that do it are we middle-aged and old people. When regular employers see my ID card, they don’t want me.”
Figure 14 Piece-rate worker T.Y., also women’s director34 of her village

She was the first to do embroidery for the American couple’s company.

I was selling embroidery on my own in Fenghuang center. The boss saw it, and asked me if I was willing to take their embroidery jobs to do. You can count on the money from embroidery for nothing. Not my grandchild’s kindergarten tuition, nothing. Just some small pocket money. At RMB 6 or 7 we get per bookmark depending on the size of the bird to be embroidered, you can’t even afford a lunch box in Fenghuang center making two a day.

This is true. A lunchbox in Fenghuang costs at least RMB 12, and making the maximum of RMB 14 per day—if one is fast enough to complete two, that is—and that would be 4

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34 Women’s directors are a government-appointed position in villages in China. They are tasked with the responsibility to record pregnancies and births in their villages, as well as to distribute contraceptive devices. Before January 2016 when a second child was allowed in China, they were tasked with reporting on the women who did not comply with this government policy for fines.
bigger birds and some small flowers around them—one cannot afford a simple meal in the center of Fenghuang center.

She complained about such low piece rate and asked me how much each of these bookmarks sells for. I told her that each bookmark costs RMB 40, and she was quick to understand without harboring a sense of resentment.

When I relayed the complaint to the American couple, they said they knew, but the market simply does not allow room for a higher embroidery wage. I imagine this to be the case because at RMB 40 it is just about the proper market rate for a delicate bookmark. Anything higher might be rejected by prospective customers.

Figure 15 Y.T.'s piece rate embroidery bookmarks, designed by the American couple

We make either pieces to go onto small bags, or we make pieces to be made into bookmarks. For the bookmarks, we coordinate our own colors, and the bags have been color-matched by the company. Every time, each of us would take an equal amount of blank pieces to make: usually a batch of bookmarks would have 20 in it, and it depends on each woman’s speed, which depends on their family circumstances, how long it takes to complete something.
The same 20 bookmarks, for example, can be collected in anywhere from two weeks to two months, depending on the woman. T.Y. helps her neighbors collect the blank pieces, especially the older women for whom mobility is a problem.

Of the six people in this village who still do embroidery, I have met five, all in T.Y.’s living room. What they have is a cash-diminished economy, in which agriculture is still the main staple of their livelihood, or I should say, taking care of their own household food consumption is the major activity of these peasant women, as the agriculture they engage in is too small scale to be sold on the market.

Figure 16 Y.T. opening up her living room for village women to gather and make embroidery in an afternoon.

One of the embroiderers was back on leave from her industrial job in a ship-building company on the coast in Zhejiang Province. It takes her 18 hours on a direct bus from Fenghaung to get there. She was home for a few days to visit her 73-year-old mother, who embroiders to pick up some extra cash, so she chips in helping her. Hers is a set of hands that normally works on a polishing machine which polishes parts and accessories for large vessel ships, and now she is picking up a small needle to do embroidery. When
she was looking after her children and staying at home, she, too, took this job for two years. “But it doesn’t pay, you can’t depend on it for your livelihood. So people go out to Fenghuang center to wash cars, to wash dishes, or they travel the distance to Zhejiang to work.”

Embroidery serves to absorb the lowest-skilled group of peasant women in this cash-diminished economy, who would otherwise be doing other manual labor such as car- or dish-washing, but do not or cannot due to individual circumstances. Some have grandchildren to take care of, some may be handicapped. They are normally uneducated and do not have the education or dare to go far to coastal cities for industrial jobs. As I watch them manage the rising and falling thread, I realized that it really is a simple, light pre-industry type of work that requires no more than a pair of scissors as tools. Some women wear their scissors on a string in front of their chest, making themselves mobile “on the job.” Wherever their set of hands are, this work can be done.

“My mom is old.” The Zhejiang migrant worker says. “But if she does not do this, she has zero income. On her own, she embroiders children’s hats and shoes. So, she might as well utilize this skill.”

Most acquiesce to the low pay of embroidery work, but if their alternative is doing nothing, they choose to work because having some income, however small, is better than none. The Zhejiang migrant worker continues,

As to me. In my family there are four girls and one younger brother. So I did not get any education and I am really suffering from that. The tasks we uneducated workers do are harder. Easier jobs are for people who had gone to school. They’d be operating a computerized machine.

The alternatives to staying home to do embroidery is going up into the mountains and harvesting herbs and cigarette leaves. “With cigarette leaves, they want you at 6 am. It takes one hour to walk to the cigarette leaf farm, and you are working from 7 am to 7 pm,
making RMB 60 a day.” T.Y., for example, cannot do this because it starts too early. She has to send her grandchild to the kindergarten bus later in the morning than the start time and receives him back earlier than the end time. On their four Mu (1/3 hectare) land, T.Y. and her husband grow rice, corn, yams, and they feed a cow, which helps with plowing, because it is too heavy to move a machine up to the hills where their farm is.

W. at the age of 54 seems young to be doing embroidery. When asked why she does not work elsewhere, maybe in Fenghuang center, she said her foot is hurt and can never get better. Due to her handicap, there are few alternatives.

C.H. in Kaitang Village in Guizhou Province—another migrant worker-sending province—is 30 years old, and had just returned from coastal QuanZhou, Fujian less than three months ago. “I was a waitress in a restaurant there, but I would not go out to work again, because now I can do embroidery at home.” She said. “The pay is comparable, plus I get the benefit of being at home with my 12-year-old child. Also, embroidery is much easier on the body. I hope to get it as a stable source of income.”

Peasant women want to make money as long as it helps pay family expenses, get a child through school, or get aging parents through illnesses and medical bills. Choosing between having your labor process exposed to a Foucauldian panopticon in a factory or restaurant vs. doing hand embroidery in the comfort of home and at the convenience of your own schedule seems obvious for many, especially if they are meticulous and fast enough that wages would be comparable or even if wages from embroidery would be slightly less.

A 10 cm by 10 cm flower pays RMB 30 piece. Depending on how much she works, she can make anywhere from half a piece a day to three pieces a day, making an income of anywhere from RMB 15 to RMB 90 per day. Because there are bigger patterns than the RMB 30/piece flowers, it is possible to make RMB 900/week, which translates to RMB
2000-3000/month\textsuperscript{35}. This is, indeed, comparable to any blue-collar job even on the coast. But the work can be sporadic and unstable. By outsourcing these jobs to village women living at home in such a putting out process, a company does not have to pay workers a fixed wage. Wage payment is only paid when there are orders. Currently, a company called Sun Drum, which sources from a village co-op\textsuperscript{36} that organizes the women in the putting out system, gives out orders. Sun Drum then sells these embroidery pieces to other companies; one example is the French brand Hermès.

C.H. grows rice, corn, yams, peanuts, and feeds a few pigs at home. But all of this is for her own household’s consumption, none for sale. She utilizes her free time from farm work and animal husbandry to do embroidery. When I asked what expenses she has besides the child’s tuition and her in-law’s medicines for high cholesterol, triglycerides, and blood pressure, she told me that she has to buy salt, oil, clothes, and some meat.

W.Y., a neighboring woman across the village’s only road, too, learned embroidery as a child. “I learned from my mom.” She recalled with a grin. “We used to make big bridal pieces for anybody in the village getting married, but I haven’t done that for a long time now.” Before she returned home, she went to coastal Guangzhou to be a jewelry street vendor. “I prefer being at home than being out. I miss my child. If I am not home, neither I nor the child is happy.”

As a street vendor in Guangzhou, she can make between RMB 2000 and 3000 a month, which is comparable to making more than RMB 2000/month doing embroidery at home. “If I have time, I will do more. If I have less time, I will do less.”

\textsuperscript{35} Jobs will include both big and small patterns, so the possible RMB 900/week does not necessarily translate to RMB 3600/month. It depends on the combination of the sizes of patterns to be made.

\textsuperscript{36} The village co-op was started by the women’s director of the village. On one end, it mobilizes idle peasant women to do embroidery in their off time from farm work; on the other end, the women’s director endeavors to get orders from companies that buy embroidery pieces to make into bags and shoes.
H.C. is in her 30s and has two children, one in 3rd and the other in 5th grade. “Before I came home, I have made everything: in Shenzhen I have worked in a telephone factory and an electronics factory. I came back for my children two or three years ago. Before, my parents-in-law could help me take care of them, but now they can’t anymore.” H.C. is a reticent woman, and I wonder how she would get along with fellow workers in a factory setting, whether she could be happy having to navigate so many interpersonal relationships. I asked her if she felt a sense of being her own boss with this embroidery job. She responded by saying, “Doing embroidery at home is much freer than in the factory—you just wash your hands and you’re on the job already, but you can’t earn money on it.”

When I countered citing the numbers other interviewees have given me, that a total of piece rate payment of RMB 2,000-3,000/month was possible, she said “But I have to farm, too, I’m not just doing this [embroidery, so my payment is not as much.]”

Like everyone around her, H.C.’s crops are not sold on the market; they are for the household’s own consumption. A commonality shared by almost all these village women who have ever received embroidery work to do at home is that there exists what I call an economic imbalance. Being now at home as opposed to being a migrant worker, they all engage in agricultural work growing crops on their own plot of land. This to them is natural and taken-for-granted. However, this poses an inherent economic imbalance. The plot of land is almost never big enough to justify selling the crops, which consist of a combination of rice, corn, cabbage, beans, peanuts, yams, and whatever the climate allows, plus pig husbandry. Not only is the land not large enough, but their locations are almost always too far from any urban locale in which there is a customer base. Neighbors and near-by families grow their own crops, too.

Village women thus spend precious physical labor hours on the farms without getting a reward other than being able to supply their families with produce without exchanging
money; what we have here is a cash-diminished economy. Many interviewees commented that “being at home to do agricultural work makes your stomach full, but it doesn’t give you money.”

If a village woman chooses to return home, it is almost always expected that she expects no more income, certainly no more of the industrial income that she used to receive as a migrant worker. Not only are industrial enterprises in or near her homes non-existent, but the necessity of having to do agricultural work also takes away her time. Although agricultural work does not require an everyday presence; for example, during seeding season, sometimes a few days of rest is needed after the soil is loosened for it to absorb nutrients from the sun. This means that the women have periods of free time in their daily schedules. This is where embroidery work can exist: in between agricultural work.

Embroidery is not rocket science. It is a skill that most can master if they apply themselves and are attentive and dexterous enough. Companies provide training every now and then for the village women. After a 15-day training, most women are good enough to start making quality embroideries for sale.

L.S. is a woman who was learning from scratch. But she does it more out of boredom than the necessity for the money. “I just returned from being together with my husband in Shenzhen.” A young mother of two at the age of 19, L.S. has her hands full. Often, after she puts down one kid, the other one starts a tantrum. As we proceeded in our conversation, she started nursing in front of me. “My time is split between the 10-month old and the 2 1/2 year old. I do the cooking for the household. Everything else, my parents-in-law take care of, like farming, pig husbandry, and laundry. When I have a quiet moment, I will pick up the embroidery. I just picked up a few pieces to make, they
are due in two weeks. I am just 2 or 3 pieces short.”

Figure 17 L.S.’s home with her husband’s family

L.S. has never worked for a wage in her life. After middle school, she married a man in the next village whom family members introduced. “My husband and his cousin run a furniture factory in Shenzhen, and I live between Shenzhen and home. Each place for four or five months.” She plans to reunite with her husband by going out to Shenzhen again when her kids are older and can be left for the parents-in-law. “At that point, I would not be staying home just for the embroidery.”

“What would you do then, as a job?” I asked.

“I don’t know yet. Will have to see what is available and suitable for me.”

For L.S., embroidery work is something she certainly can live without. If it is there to be done, she will pick some up. If not, it is not the end of her world. Like all other women and even more so for her, it is merely a nice opportunity for some extra pocket cash. When I asked her what her biggest expense is, she said, “Going to the relatives. You have to give a few hundreds if there is a newborn and if there is a death.” As we spoke, she played with her smaller baby while the older boy entertains himself.

These village women, unlike city folks, do not have an urgent and constant need for cash. City folks need to pay rents and have all kinds of bills. But the village women are living
in their husband’s house passed down through the generations, for example, and they are growing their own produce and butchering their own pork.

Figure 18 L.S.’s embroidery kit on the balcony

J.N. was the last person I interviewed. Sitting in her front yard with neighbor W.Y. whom I interviewed earlier, J.N. works deftly on her piece. She did not require training. Since childhood she has embroidered, and in fact, she can train others. She has worked in Guangzhou, Shanghai, and Fujian, in shoe and pajama factories. “Doing this [embroidery], I can look after my children and the old. It’s very free. Working in the factory is very tiring.” She continued, “of course it’s better being at home. After a few months in the factory, you miss your children, you miss your husband. I went to dagong for 20+ years, and just got back this year. Actually when I was working in the factory, I would bring the materials to make embroidery in my spare time, for my own use. It’s very expensive to make a big piece now, a lot of work, it’s not possible.”

“Can you ask the boss to increase our piece rate?” She asked me persistently as I ended the conversation with her. Indeed, to many women, this is the only opportunity at making any money, so it is sensible trying to have a higher piece rate. But would they get their wish? Unlikely because as long as they accept jobs at this current rate, the company is unlikely to increase its piece rate.
The co-op takes physical space in an unused elementary school that the women’s director applied to the local education bureau to use. It serves in theory as a training and working ground for village women to gather doing embroidery. In practice, this space is only used when there is training going on. Almost all women take their embroidery work home to do. The women’s director plans to receive a share of the government’s financial assistance, and then to grow the co-op into say 20 people to receive more funding under a different funding category.

Village peasant women in Sichuan, Hunan, and Guizhou are on the absolute bottom of the socioeconomic ladder – much lower than the return migrant workers, who have gone through the great coastal odyssey. These women are either old, handicapped, or caring for children, which makes them unlikely candidates for any type of work but handcraft piece work at home like embroidery.

**Chapter Conclusion:**

The same new push and pull factors for the older generation to return are what make the younger generation of migrant workers return home. However, the return of many in the younger generation is not yet final; many engage in job-hopping between coastal factories and work at home. The decisions can be short-term and short-sighted, fueled at times by, say, a quarrel with a spouse or an instant need for money (say for house renovation). That wages at home in Sichuan are about 50 percent less than they are for the same job on the coast is treated differently by returnees with different needs. Those who have absolutely no child care or just do not wish to go out again are de facto content with what they could get at home, despite occasional complaints of low pay. Those with greater expenses tend to have a greater proclivity to go out again, after being home for a while. Yet others who would not tolerate the lower wages but who desire to go home start...
their own entrepreneurial pursuits at home, confident that entrepreneurship allows for a better material well-being.

There is another group lower on the socioeconomic ladder than migrant workers, they are the women who have never left their farming villages, or who have returned not to their townships but to their farming homes from their coastal work. They live in an extremely cash-diminished economy, managing their livelihoods by growing their own rice and crops for subsistence and relying on the occasional embroidery piece work given out by a local co-op. This kind of piece work in a putting out system is the only cash these women can make, since they cannot sell their produce because all farming neighbors grow their own crops, and the volume is generally too small to justify incurring transportation costs to sell in the nearest city.

In sum, in this chapter, we learned about the unstable nature of the younger generation’s return, the situation of necessity entrepreneurs, and the plight of farming village women whose only cash-earning opportunities come from occasional piece-rate handcraft work.

Chapter 6 Conclusion

Every year, news on TV used to report the vast annual movement of migrant workers returning home on trains and buses for Chinese New Year. This year, however, TVBS in Taiwan reported a reverse traffic of elderly going to the cities to their adult children who have settled down there, to celebrate the New Year.38

Since the Economic Reform, scholars’ attention has been on the hukou system that has created a bi-local existence for migrant workers, whose official status is agricultural farmers but who have crowded into cities for manufacturing, construction, and service

jobs. Time has passed, and the hukou has loosened up, especially most recently in the 2000s. With bachelor’s degrees and work experience, or with specialty skills, those from the provinces can qualify for an urban hukou and begin to live like citizens equal to the city natives. They qualify for government-assisted housing to rent or buy, their children can go to public schools instead of schools reserved for migrant workers’ children with fewer resources and less-qualified teachers.

Earlier scholars like Pun Ngai in Made in China (2005) and Ching-Kwan Lee in Gender and the South China Miracle (1999) have studied labor issues in purposeful ethnographies situated in electronics factories. In other words, their ethnography happened for the purpose of their research work. I differ in that I had first worked at a garment factory for seven years before my research work took place. Therefore, I contend that this gives me an in-depth view, especially inside the factory, of the relationship between globalization and workers’ daily lives. In chapter 3, I examined these global social forces that led to, for example, wage arrears, which workers normalized both because they identified and somewhat empathized with factory owners and because the “grass (treatment) is not greener in other factories.” The sentiment of normalization and empathy with factory owners experienced by workers is similar to Roger D. Waldinger’s description of ethnic garment manufacturing business owners’ relationship with their co-ethnic workers; that is, there is a sense of camaraderie and reciprocity not found in other types of employer-employee relationships (Waldinger, 1986).

Further, Pun Ngai’s Made in China (2005), Ching-Kwan Lee’s Gender and the South China Miracle (1999), and Lu Zhang’s Inside China’s Automobile Factories (2015) documented workers’ lives in large factories. Except for Ching-Kwan Lee’s Hong Kong workshop, these ethnographies reported workers’ lives in large factories. But 99 percent of all enterprises within the country are small- and medium-sized enterprises. What goes on inside these small- and medium-sized enterprises is just as important to understand as
what occurs in large factories, because that is where many workers live and work every day.

As Robert J. Ross pointed out in *Slaves to Fashion* (2004), buying prices of goods from factories are calculated by buyers in a top-down fashion from the department store’s or multinational brand’s selling prices. From these end-product selling prices, buyers then go around factories in Asia or China, looking for factories whose price structure can fit into the calculation. Factories never have a say in the price; if anything, they could only be pressured to move it downwards.

To make matters worse, buying power is concentrated in a few hands: in the U.S., the top five retail organizations control close to 50 percent of the apparel market (Ross, 2004). In other words, every buyer a factory encounters behaves similarly, holding all buying—thus selection—power in hand. Some of these buyers face demanding Wall-Street investors and must buy at the lowest price to make the most profit for their shareholders and investors.

Factories face enormous pressure to lower prices and have experienced numerous closures, especially after the 2008 financial crisis. Those that survived started using subcontractors to expand their production capacity when they needed to, making many workers redundant.

Push and pull factors for workers to come out and work on the coast in the 1980s and 1990s have been reversed. Push factors used to be poverty and lack of job opportunities at home, and pull factors used to be the opportunity to work in factories to make a stable income. Now, as western and central China (migrant-sending areas) develop, it is the suboptimal working conditions in coastal factories that have become the new push factors. Family reunions, work, and entrepreneurial opportunities at home have become the new pull factors.
The 31 migrant workers I interviewed—about 20 of them staying on the coast and about ten of them returning home—are a tenacious and versatile group. Their tenacity is shown in everything they do, whether it’s related to work or life in general. Even in their teenage years, they were a self-selected group of extra motivated people, who, at such a young age, dared to change their life trajectories by migrating more than ten hours by train from home to work. And that has made all the difference: 10 to 20 years later, the old generation of migrant workers is a group that has bought or built houses earlier than their counterparts who never left home. They speak better Mandarin, and there is an air of confidence in them that cannot be stolen away. It was the migration work experience that gave them this sense of empowerment.

Many of the old generation of migrant workers have returned home on a more permanent basis, live in the houses they built earlier in their villages, or bought apartments in townships. In their houses and apartments reside their parents or parents-in-law, sometimes with their spouses missing because they are still out *dagong* in another city. But this is already the best that they could be doing, owning a home bought from the savings they acquired working on the coast. More often than not, there simply are no jobs back home that utilize skills acquired on the coast. So one of the couple remains away, working.

The new generation of migrant workers has returned home on a less permanent basis, to settle down, yes, but also optimizing family mobility by being flexible regarding their locations. Some new generation migrant workers have returned home, completely abandoned what they did on the coast and became necessity entrepreneurs. Others, like their older generation counterparts, have a spouse still working at a distance and one spouse at home. Still others are only home temporarily, dabbling in some kind of work

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39 In total, I interviewed 40 people. Only 31 of them are currently migrant workers or return migrant workers. The rest are ex-migrant workers who have become small-scale entrepreneurs or take piece work at home to make, like the women interviewed in the latter part of Chapter 5.
waiting for a more apropos time—like their children’s graduation from a certain level of school—to leave for the coast again.

Despite possessing desirable factory skills, wages are about half inland from what they are on the coast. Living standards and costs are at the same time lower inland. Unless there is an urgent need for cash, as there often is, for the new generation of migrant workers, returnees in general are content settling back home and maneuvering within their lower wages and standard of living.

This is what is happening to migrant workers in small factories in China. It remains interesting to ask the question of whether construction and service industry workers are experiencing similar types of new push and pull factors to return home. I recommend that future research streams\(^\text{40}\) covers these two industries because often, their jobs are even less secure than manufacturing jobs, and seeing the plight of migrant workers in these two industries would shed lights on what lives are like on the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder.

\(^{40}\) Sarah Swider’s *Building China* draws on research in Beijing, Guangzhou, and Shanghai and focuses on the current lives and social relations of construction workers. As western and central China develops in both commercial and residential real estate sectors, it remains interesting to see whether these migrant workers in China’s three biggest cities are also returning home for the same construction jobs, or switching into less physically exhausting opportunities.
Appendix A

List of Interviews

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interviewee Categories</th>
<th>Number of Interviewees</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Migrant Workers</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>MTY Factory, Guangzhou (2013)</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Migrant Workers,</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Top Factory, Guangzhou (2013)</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Return migrant workers,</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Top Factory, Sichuan (2015, 2016)</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual returnees/small-scale entrepreneurs, Sichuan</td>
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<tr>
<td>Individual returnees/farmer women, Guizhou</td>
<td>5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Urban <em>hukou</em> holders, ex-migrant workers</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others (Return ex-migrant worker), Sichuan</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
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Map Source: Society of Anglo-Chinese Understanding