ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation:	RURAL MIGRANT WORKERS' AGENCY IN CAPITALIST PRODUCTION IN CHINA
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China's recent economic success largely depends on making hundreds of millions of rural migrants work in the "world's factory". This dissertation investigates why rural migrants work in factories under unappealing conditions from their subjective perspectives. While the literature emphasizes state repression and factory management control, this dissertation proposes that rural migrant workers approach factory work through complicated agency, with agency being defined as the ideas, thoughts, considerations, perceptions, and plans that rural migrant workers bring to factory work. Based on ten months of ethnography in two small manufacturing factories in China that hired approximately 160 rural migrant workers, this dissertation discusses how the rural migrant workers participated in factory production with thoughts and values that had developed from various sources in their general social lives.

RURAL MIGRANT WORKERS' AGENCY IN CAPITALIST PRODUCTION IN CHINA

by

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Introduction: The Phenomenon and the Research Questions

Since China implemented the economic reforms in the 1970s, the world has witnessed China's miraculous change from a poor isolated socialist country to a rapidly rising power playing an active role in global economy. China's GDP grew at an average rate of 9.6% from 1989 to 2016, almost five times the growth rate of the Euro areas and the United States during the same period (World Bank Data). China has superseded Germany as the biggest exporter of manufactured goods and overtaken Japan as the second largest economy in the world (Barboza 2010a; Tabassum and Ahmed 2014). It is also the second largest importer of goods globally and the biggest holder of foreign reserves in the US Treasury (Lin 2011). The world seems simultaneously captivated yet puzzled by China's rapid economic development. Terms like "the rise of China" "the China Model" and "the Beijing Consensus" have been circulating worldwide, as people try to understand how China has achieved such development within such a short period of time (So and Chu 2016). Seen from the outside, China certainly gives the impression of a prosperous nation that is growing wealthier and stronger.

Within China, however, things are less glorious. In the shadow of China's rapidly achieved economic success, more than 200 million Chinese rural migrant workers live at the bottom of society and suffer from various forms of discrimination and inequalities. Rural migrant workers come from the countryside to work in the

urban areas but have to maintain their official rural identities according to state policies. They work at demanding and low-paying physical jobs shunned by urban residents in the cities and are excluded from urban welfare resources such as education, health care, and housing subsidies (Chan 1994: 271). And rural migrant workers cannot sever connections with their rural origins freely, because the state does not allow them to sell their collectively distributed rural land at will (He 2010). Rural migrant workers thus tend to spend their primary years as laborers in the cities, as they grow up receiving care and education in the countryside and return again to the countryside upon retirement due to lack of resources and the hostile urban environment (Hu et al. 2011). Even after two or three generations of migration, many rural migrant workers remain outsiders in the cities where they live and work (Pun and Lu 2010).

As distant as the two images may appear from each other, the deplorable situations of rural migrant workers and China's recent economic success are the two sides of the same story. Since China's reform in the 1970s, rural migrant workers have been the backbone of China's economic activities and served as the chief labor force in all the thriving industries in the country. Rural migrant workers account for nearly 80% of the total labor force in construction, mining and quarrying industries, 68% in manufacturing industries, and over 50% in service sectors (Leung and Pun 2009). China's economic success would not have happened in the same way if not for its rural migrant workers. More specifically, China's economic ascent was achieved mainly through low-cost manufacturing, which has made China the factory of the world (Hung 2009; Barboza 2010b). Not only has the cheap labor of rural migrant

workers provided both foreign and domestic manufacturing capital with high profitability, their status as second-class citizens in the cities has also facilitated labor control as well as the reproduction of cheap migrant labor (Harney 2008).

This dissertation focuses on rural migrants who work in factories in China, asking one broad question: why do rural migrant workers participate in factory production under unappealing working conditions in China? The question is not only important for understanding China's recent economic success, given the essential role of rural migrant factory workers, it is also important for understanding rural migrants in China, because half of them still work in manufacturing factories (China Statistical Yearbook 2016). Asking the question is not suggesting that rural migrant workers have always accepted bad factory working conditions in China without resistance, which would be against all the evidence of their labor activism (e.g., Bradsher 2010; Chan 2012; Chan and Pun 2009; Chan et al. 2013; Lee 2007). This is just saying that enough rural migrant workers have participated in factory production for extensive periods of time to make China's recent economic development possible. This dissertation seeks to understand why and how this has happened.

In addressing this core question of why rural migrant remain in such poor working conditions, many scholars have emphasized the power of the Chinese state, which shapes the living situations of rural migrants in such a way that they have no other choices but to take on and endure unappealing physical jobs in the cities (e.g. Devin 1999; Loyalka 2012; Pai 2012; Fan 2008; Solinger 1999). Other scholars highlight the power of employers, who are aided by the state to control rural migrant factory workers and exploit their labor for profits (e.g., Chen 2001, Zhang 2014, Pun

et al. 2012, Pun 2007). In comparison, the scholarly literature pays less attention to how rural migrant workers interpret their own experiences of factory work and what subjective reasons they may have for participating in factory production.

When certain studies do try to explore the thoughts and opinions of rural migrant workers regarding their factory experiences, they typically focus on rural migrant factory workers' resistant attitudes and actions against employers and management (e.g. Chan 2012; Chan and Pun 2009; Chan et al. 2013; Elfstrom and Kuruvilla 2014; Liu and Shi 201). They highlight rural migrant workers' ability to understand and defend their rights, but provide less insight on their participation in peaceful production process. Not as many studies have explored cases where rural migrant workers cooperate or at least do not openly resist the factories (a few examples include Lee 1998; Siu 2017; Hu 2018). These studies often follow the approach developed by Burawoy (1979, 1983) that emphasizes management regime of labor control and examine certain aspects of rural migrant workers' subjectivities within the framework. As I will explain in more detail in Chapter 2, these emphases with the literature, despite their apparent different focuses, derive their analysis of rural migrant factory workers from Marxist assumptions of capital-labor relations. This has led to a partial conceptualization of rural migrant factory workers' agency in factory production, namely, the ideas, thoughts, considerations, perceptions, and plans that they bring to factory work. And an incomplete understanding of rural migrant factory workers' agency may create difficulty for assessing how power relations actually work between capital and labor in Chinese factories.

In response to these trends within the scholarly literature, this dissertation asks the following research questions. What is rural migrant workers' agency like in factory production in China? What are rural migrant workers' subjective perspectives on why they participate in factory production? How might analyzing rural migrant factory workers' agency in a more complete manner contribute to understanding power relations involved in capitalist production in China?

In the rest of the chapter, I first situate rural migrant workers in broad historical and social contexts, explaining the group's origin and formation, its general conditions, the changes it has been through in relation to China's socialist history, and its current position in the global economy. Then I discuss how the literature has explored rural migrant workers' agency in factory production, especially highlighting how the conceptualization and analysis of worker agency tends to be limited by the emphasis on the power of capital and the state. In the third section, I describe the study of this dissertation, including the goal of capturing a more complete view of rural migrant factory workers' agency and the methodology I have employed. Lastly, I present an overview of the chapters of the dissertation.

Background: China and Rural Migrant Workers

While economists tend to view the transformation of rural labor into urban workers as something common to any society going through industrialization and thus can be discussed out of historical context (e.g. Lewis 1954; Goldstein et al. 1991), their analysis cannot explain the peculiarities of China's rural migrant workers, including both their enormous number and their long-term ambiguous status as migrants. These peculiarities can only be understood in the specific context of China, both in terms of

its socialist regime and its position in the world economy. And as changes happen within national as well as international contexts, the situations of Chinese rural migrant workers also tend to shift.

1. Historical origin of rural surplus labor

When the socialist China was founded in 1949, the nation had just survived a century of turmoil of anti-colonial and anti-imperialist wars, revolutions, and civil wars. China was immediately faced with the urgent mission of industrializing the country, both for the purpose of national defense and for economic development. And it had to achieve the goal with little industrial resources to draw upon; 80% of the Chinese population was still peasantry at the point (Lin et al. 1996) and the hostile international environment against communism in the cold-war era did not allow for an international trade of resources (Fairbank and Feuerwerker 1986; Meisner 1999). With limited aid from the Soviet Union, the Chinese Communist Party (CPP) that controlled the state implemented a centrally-planned economy that coordinated and managed economic activities of the entire population for the purpose of the rapid development of heavy industries (Wen 2000; Lee and Zhang 2013; Ma 1989: 30-34).

Among the series of policies and institutional arrangements designed to serve the development plan, the regulation of the rural areas and the imposed rural-urban distinctions played an extremely important role (Chan 1994). Since the early 1950s and before the economic reforms in the late 1970s, the population in socialist China was characterized by clear rural-urban separation. On the one hand, the state confined the rural residents to their rural lands as farmers and reorganized them into small units of production teams that were responsible for the nation's agricultural production.

The state then collected the agricultural produce from the farmers with very low prices and redistributed it within the nation to support people's basic needs and to provide raw materials for industrial development, all based on strict central rationing (Wen 2000). On the other hand, the urban areas became the center for industrial production. The industrial workers in state-owned factories were extolled as heroes under the official socialist rhetoric, which claimed that these urban proletarians were the true leaders of the country. The urban workers enjoyed various benefits and subsidies from the state, including permanent employment, social welfare, housing, and children's education. The system of rural-urban distinctions was arranged in such a way that resources constantly flowed from the rural areas and agriculture to enrich the urban areas and the industrial production (Gao 1999: 185; Zhou 1996: Chapter 2; Chan and Zhang 1999).

To prohibit spontaneous migration within the country, especially the case where farmers desired to migrate to the cities, the state imposed a strict system of population regulation in the 1950s, i.e., the Household Registration System (also called the Hukou System). Under this system, every Chinese citizen was classified by the place of registration and the type of registration. A person was tied to a particular place of regular residence, which defined his/her rights in the specified locality such as rights to state-rationed food. Where one lived in the country mattered. For example, a person having Beijing *hukou* might enjoy more benefits than a person holding *hukou* of the province of Guizhou, given the privilege of the capital city over an underdeveloped region in the remote Southwest in China. And every citizen was classified as being either agricultural or non-agricultural, with farmers in the

countryside holding agricultural *hukou* and having no access to urban resources. Even though a farmer in Beijing was likely to be better off than a farmer in Guizhou, it made sense to describe the population simply as "rural" and "urban" in discussing rural-urban distinctions and rural migration (Chan and Zhang 1999).

With the *hukou* policy, despite poverty and the lack of sufficient land for the large and growing rural population, rural residents were permanently bound to the countryside. Having rural *hukou* excluded them from all the state-rationed benefits enjoyed by urban residents, while their agricultural production supported the entire population in China and the industrial development in the cities. Through such severe exploitation of the rural population and other measures, China reached a relatively satisfying level of industrialization in only 30 years (Naughton 2007). But the cost was also serious. Even though Chairman Mao made great efforts to counterbalance the great advantages the cities had gained over the countryside (Meisner 1999), decades of unbalanced development nevertheless resulted in significant rural-urban disparities in all the important aspects of people's wellbeing such as income, education, and health, with long-lasting influences (Sheng and Sun 1994; Knight and Song 1999). When China initiated its economic reforms in the late 1970s, it was the poor farmers in the countryside, who had endured decades of oppressed and disadvantaged existence, that became the first generation of rural migrant factory workers (Roberts 2000).

2. Turning rural labor into migrant workers

In the late 1970s, the Chinese state launched its historic reforms that gradually implemented a market economy within China as well as opened the country to the

world. These actions gradually integrated China into the global economy as a de facto capitalist power (Vogel 2011). Contrary to some scholars' view that China's capitalist development is essentially the same as what happened to early Western countries, only with some insignificant differences like a shorter time span (e.g. Gaetano and Jacka 2004; Meng and Manning 2010), the capitalism developed in China was not capitalism in general, but peripheral capitalism that was situated within an imbalanced global system (Amin 1974). Central capitalism generally came to shape in the Western countries in a more or less spontaneously manner, while peripheral capitalism was either imposed upon or pressured to emerge by the threatening Western capitalist powers. The biggest feature of peripheral capitalism is its being subordinated to the domination of the central capitalism, due to the fact that the central capitalist powers not only hold the initiative in the extension of capitalism but often do so to solve the problem of the center. What results from this imbalance of power is the alien and asymmetrical developmental path of the periphery (Amin, 1974: 162), which manifests itself through three main distortions in the peripheral economy responsible for "the development of underdevelopment": the distortion towards export activity; the distortion toward tertiary activities, light activities and techniques; the distortion towards the choice of certain industry branches (Amin, 1974: 169).

The development of capitalism in China since the 1970s clearly bears the characteristics of peripheral capitalism. Faced with a failing planned economy, the Chinese Communist Party sought new sources of economic development and settled on the East Asian development model. Following the examples of South Korea,

Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore, this model emphasized attracting capital investment from foreign labor-intensive manufacturing industries by offering them a cheap labor force and other attractive business conditions (Hung 2009; Chang 2007; Pietro 2001). The Chinese state took full advantage of the immense reserve of rural labor in the countryside by lifting the strict ban on rural-to-urban migration and allowing the farmers to work in the cities. These farmers poured into the coastal cities with new foreign factories, in search of better income and opportunities. Most of the rural migrants went from the western and central inlands to the eastern coastal regions in China. Sichuan, Henan, Anhui, Hunan and Jiangxi provinces became the most important areas that sent rural migrants to the cities, and Beijing, Shanghai, Guangdong, Zhejiang and Fujian became the most prominent receiving areas (Cai and Wang 2003; Wong et al. 2006). Given the large reserve of sufficiently educated cheap rural migrant labor power and China's stable political environment sustained by an authoritarian party regime, the country soon became a hotbed of foreign investment and gained fame as the "world's factory" (Fan 2008). In the process, poor farmers turned into rural migrant workers toiling in the urban factories, and China's economy started to grow with leaps and bounds. And with China's economic development, other industries also thrived over the decades, and rural migrant workers now do not just work in factories invested by foreign capital but are also the chief labor force in domestic factories as well as other industries like construction and service (Leung and Pun 2009).

However, despite rural migrant workers' important contribution to China's economic development, or rather because of it, the Chinese state has been slow to

alter the historical institutional arrangements that discriminate against people with rural backgrounds and prevent rural migrants from being integrated into the urban areas (Fan 2008; Li 2002). Rural migrant workers are still officially distinguished from urban residents by their rural *hukou*, which denies them access to urban welfare resources such as health care, housing subsidies, and children's education (Wong et al. 2007). This official discrimination leads to lower wage levels and other unappealing working conditions for rural migrant workers (Chen 2001; Pun 2007; Pun and Chan 2012). And the state is neither supportive of migrant workers' legal labor rights nor tolerant of wildcat collective actions like labor strikes (Lee 2007). Forcing rural migrant workers to maintain their connections to their rural communities also acts as a safety valve for employers and the state in times of economic recession. For example, while workers from the countryside in Latin America tend to become unemployed and form ghettos in the cities during difficult times, laid-off rural migrant workers in China return to the countryside instead of staying in the cities and causing political conflicts (He 2010). Moreover, because children of rural migrant workers are only allowed to receive uninterrupted education in their parents' original rural communities, the low quality of rural education and separation from parents prepares migrant children for academic failure and helps produce new generations of cheap rural migrant factory labor (Brown and Park 2002; Hannum 2003; Goodburn 2009). Described by some scholars as "incomplete proletarianization" (Pun and Lu 2010), this ambiguous rural-urban status separates rural migrant workers' production and reproduction activities, which allows

employers in the cities to exploit rural migrant workers' labor without shouldering responsibilities for their well-being.

3. General conditions of rural migrant workers

The general conditions of rural migrant workers in China are characterized by discrimination, domination and marginalization in various aspects of their lives. This is one important reason why the group has drawn so much attention from both academia and media all over the world (Wong et al. 2007). For employment and work, rural migrant workers usually take up physically-demanding and low-paying jobs in the cities that urban residents distain, including construction workers, service workers and factory workers in low-value added manufacturing industries like garment and textile, toy, and electronic products (Knight et al. 1999; Roberts 2000; Wong et al. 2007). The earnings of rural migrant workers have been increasing steadily over the years from, for example, 1417 yuan per month (about $200) in 2009 to 3572 yuan (about $500) per month on average in 2016 (National Bureau of Statistics of China). But the annual income of rural migrant workers is still significantly lower than that of urban workers, by about 30% according to some estimations (Demurger 2009; Lee 2012). General working conditions have also been improving for rural migrant workers over the decades, considering that some employers in the late 1990s and early 2000s actually resorted to physical violence to control rural migrant workers on top of paying them meager wages for working more than ten hours a day (Chen 2001). But employers today rarely fully respect rural migrant workers' rights as employees according the labor law implemented in China in 1995. For example, in 2016, only 35.1% of rural migrant workers have signed

labor contracts with urban employers; 84% of them worked more than 44 hours per week; and more than 2 million rural migrant workers were owed wage payments of up to 11,433 yuan (a little less than $2,000) per person on average (National Bureau of Statistics of China 2016a).

Outside of work, due to their rural identities and the institutional discrimination imposed by the *hukou* system, rural migrant workers also meet serious barriers in pursuing their basic needs. For example, in terms of family life, rural migrant workers often have to endure long-term separation from their children. As education resources are allocated based on locality and *hukou* in China, children born to rural migrant parents inherit the rural *hukou* status and have right only to schooling in their rural hometowns. In some cities, children of rural migrant parents could also obtain limited access to urban education, if a parent's workplace is willing to sponsor his/her social insurances in the city, which rarely happens (Goodburn 2009), and if the parents are willing to pay an extra sum of several thousand yuan (about $1000) to a particular school. But even if rural migrant children are admitted to an urban school under these circumstances, they do not enjoy the same rights to education as children born in the cities. When a rural migrant child moves from elementary school to junior high school, for example, he/she has to go back to the rural hometown to participate in the graduate exams administered by the state. And the same thing happens when the child graduates from junior high school and high school, causing constant interruption of the child's education process and social relations with peers (Liang and Chen 2007; Chen et al. 2009). Due to such institutional barriers, together with their lack of financial resources and time, most rural migrant parents have to leave

their school-age children in the countryside. According to one estimate, almost 59 million children of rural migrant parents under the age of 18 years are left behind in the countryside to live with only one parent, grandparents, or relatives (Chang et al. 2011). Such long-term parent-child separation not only causes psychological traumas to both rural migrant parents and their children (He et al. 2012), but has led to tragedies. In 2015, four left-behind children in a poor village in Guizhou province, three sisters and a brother between the ages of 5 and 13, tried to kill themselves by drinking pesticide. Also in Guizhou, in November 2012, five boys died in a trash bin after started a fire with charcoal inside to warm themselves and died from carbon monoxide poisoning (Wong 2015).

In addition to the institutional discrimination, rural migrant workers also face daily discrimination from urban people within interpersonal interaction. Even though rural migrant workers have made great contributions to economic development in the cities, the urban public usually perceives them in a negative light, seeing them as uneducated, ignorant, dirty, uncivilized, lazy, stupid, a threat to social stability, usurpers of urban resources, and suspicious criminals (Davin 1999). Rural migrant workers often encounter verbal words of discrimination as well as deliberate avoidance from urban residents. And rural migrant workers commonly express feelings of being disrespected and looked down upon by urban people (Lin et al. 2011). The hostility felt by rural migrant workers reinforces the physical and social segregation between migrant workers and urban residents. Rural migrants working in factories in the suburbs have little time and money to participate in city lives. Those living and working in the cities either form migrant enclaves where they only have to

interact with other rural migrant workers (Xiang 2004) or they mainly spend their leisure time on watching TV, surfing the internet or resting. Only 24% of rural migrant workers claimed to have local friends in 2016 (National Bureau of Statistics of China 2016a). There was nothing ambiguous about the segregation of rural migrant workers and their status as outsiders in the cities when, in late November, 2017, the state started an aggressive campaign to drive rural migrant workers out of Beijing. After a cramped and substandard apartment caught fire and killed 19 people in Beijing, the government cited safety worries as the reason to purge hundreds of thousands of rural migrant workers and evict them from their homes in Beijing (Hernandez 2017, Buckley et al. 2017, Buckley 2017, Ramzy 2017).

4. Changes regarding rural migrant workers

While the general situations of rural migrant workers remain deplorable, since the first generation of rural migrant workers arrived in the cities, changes have happened to the group and their living conditions. The state recognizes the importance of improving rural migrant workers' lives, at least for the purpose of social stability. Shifts in the global economy also have impacted China's economic opportunity structures, which in turn have influenced the fate of rural migrant workers. And part of the changes has also come from the demographic dynamics of the group itself, which interact with policies and economic structures to shape the relationship between China and rural migrant workers.

The state has been adjusting its policies regarding rural migrant workers over the decades, not just out of concern for the well-being of the group but also to manage the group in such way that it does not contradict other goals of the state like

maintaining social stability and achieving economic growth. In the process, the state also has to carefully balance the interests of multiple entities. For example, with the market reforms of the 1980s and 1990s, the original *hukou* system that managed a static population divided between the cities and the countryside was no longer compatible with the new economic development process that thrived on population and labor mobility. The state thus started to gradually loosen the regulation on the integration of rural migrants into the urban areas, allowing qualified rural migrants to obtain urban *hukou* in designated towns and small cities (Chan and Zhang 1999; Chan 2010a). But welcoming rural migrant workers into the few wealthy and privileged metropolitan cities like Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou and Shenzhen remained off limits (Buckley 2014). In fact, recent events show the exact opposite trend, as Beijing evicted and drove out rural migrant workers on a massive scale (Hernandez et al. 2017, Buckley et al. 2017, Buckley 2017, Ramzy 2017). The big cities have also been expelling rural migrant children from urban schools as well as shutting down "uncertified" schools built by NGOs to accommodate rural migrant children (Hernandez et al. 2017).

For approximately three decades since the economic reform in the late 1970s, China followed the development model of low-cost manufacturing for exportation. The cheap labor of rural migrant workers and their lack of urban rights constituted a crucial element that made the development model work. Yet despite rapid economic growth of the country, from the early 1980s to the early 2000s, hardly any increase in the real wages of rural migrant workers in the coastal areas occurred (Chan 2010a). China's development path could not be permanently sustainable, both because the

global economic environment kept changing and because the cheap rural migrant labor was not as inexhaustible as it had seemed. The global financial crisis in 2008 and 2009 significantly reduced the demand of the world market. Numerous factories producing for exportation went bankrupt and more than 20 million rural migrant workers lost their jobs (National Bureau of Statistics of China 2009; Chan 2010b; Bradsher 2009a). The state took on the important mission of lessening China's dependence on foreign markets, increasing its domestic demand, and moving up the value chain in production. For decades, over 200 million rural migrant workers contributed productive labor without having the means to consume. Increasing China's domestic demand means raising rural migrant workers' wages, which would take away China's current competitive advantage and lead to inevitable economic restructuring (Bradsher 2011; Bajaj 2010).

Difficult as the mission may be, restructuring the economy seems necessary for China's continuing economic growth. And the pressure does not just come from outside but also from within. When the global economy started to pick up again and the manufacturing industries went back to business, urban employers in the coastal areas unexpectedly encountered rural migrant labor shortage (Jacobs 2010a; Wong 2010a). Several factors could have contributed to the situation. First, some rural migrant workers began to favor factories and jobs that had been gradually developing in towns and small cities that are closer to their rural homes in formerly poor inland regions. Even though wages were lower there and life in the countryside was less exciting, rural migrant workers were attracted to lower living costs and a more familiar and friendly social environment (Jacobs 2010a). Second, the younger

generation of rural migrant workers, growing up in better economic conditions and experiencing more exposure to city life styles than their parents, was no longer willing to take up monotonous and physically-demanding factory jobs. This is reinforced by the expansion of China's higher education system since the early 2010s, which has produced many rural young people with better education than their parents and career goals that cannot be fulfilled by factory jobs (Jacobs 2010b). Third, the demographic dividend created by China's one-child policy has been withering away, as China's population is aging fast and shows early signs of labor shortage in general (Jacobs 2010a; Knight et al. 2011). Moreover, the labor shortage also gives rural migrant workers who still work in factories a larger leverage in resisting unappealing working conditions and negotiating better wages, which tend to reduce the competitiveness of Chinese manufacturing industries (Bradsher 2011; Bajaj 2010; Wong 2010b; Barboza 2010c).

In all, China stands out among the countries in the world with some unique features. It has an official socialist regime and is characterized by an authoritarian state controlled by a single political party. It went through a period of planned economy or socialist economy but is now a rigorous participant in global capitalism. The social group of rural migrant workers, with all its peculiarities, came into shape and evolved in these specific historical, political, and socioeconomic contexts of China. The rigid rural-urban distinctions imposed by the state during the planned economy from the early 1950s to the late 1970s kept hundreds of millions of rural residents under-employed and stranded in poverty. And they were only allowed to migrate to the

cities when the state decided to join the global economy and seek national economic development through providing cheap labor for global capital. Poor rural residents became cheap rural migrant labor, toiling in urban factories and other industries and still suffering discriminations under state policies that refuse to recognize them as having equal citizenship as urban residents. Almost four decades has passed since rural migrant workers boosted the profits of capitalists and therefore China's economic ascent with their suppressed wages and rights to social welfare. Various signs seem to be calling for a change to the economic model, especially as China's working-age population is shrinking and as younger and better educated rural migrant workers seem less likely to tolerate unfulfilling factory jobs, let alone low wages and bad working conditions. But no one can yet predict accurately how China's economy might be restructured in the near future and how rural migrant workers would fit into the new landscape.

Studying rural migrant factory workers at this uncertain historical point of time is particularly interesting, especially in terms of analyzing the power relations between labor and capital in Chinese factories. On the one hand, the old structure is still in place, with more than half of rural migrant workers laboring in manufacturing factories in China and enjoying no full labor or social protection. On the other hand, changing socioeconomic context and demographic trends may give rural migrant workers more power to bargain in factories. At this historical moment, why do rural migrant workers participate in factory production in China? Addressing this question might also help anticipate changes regarding China and rural migrant factory workers.

Literature on rural migrant factory workers in China: Powerful Capital and State and Limited Conceptualization of Worker Agency

As I have mentioned in the beginning of the chapter, the literature on rural migrant factory workers emphasizes the power of capital and its interaction with the powerful state when analyzing and explaining rural migrant workers' participation in factory production in China (e.g. Chen 2001; Zhang 2014; Pun et al. 2012; Pun 2007). Given the fact that the authoritarian Chinese state has played an essential role in shaping the origin, formation and living situations of rural migrant workers and that China's economic success so far has depended on capital's exploitation of cheap rural migrant labor, as the description of the last section shows, it is reasonable to highlight the power of capital with the facilitation of the power of the state to integrate rural migrant workers in China into capitalist production. But as less attention is paid to rural migrant workers' subjective perceptions and reasons of participating in factory work, the analysis also poses certain problems. Focusing on the power of the capital and the state presents capitalists and the state leaders as active agents who impose exploitation and domination on rural migrant workers for the purposes of profits and economic development. In this narrative, rural migrant workers are reduced to silent recipients of power who appear to follow state policies and participate in factory production passively. This imbalanced view depicts a rather simplistic picture of how power relations work, constructing a dichotomous relation between a powerful side that thinks and acts with plans and purposes and a powerless side that follows blindly or submits involuntarily. More importantly, even when scholars try to explore rural migrant workers' agency in factory production, the conceptualization and analysis of

worker agency still tends to be overshadowed and limited by the same emphasis on the power of capital and the state as well as the related dichotomous understanding of power relations.

Given their interest in capital-labor relations in general and the specific forms that global capitalism is taking in different societies and cultures including China, labor scholars working in Marxist theoretical traditions are at the center of analyzing rural migrant factory workers' agency in capitalist production. Using qualitative methods, labor scholars pay specific attention to what rural migrant workers say about their factory experiences and the actions they take related to factory work. Studies of these labor scholars can be put into two broad categories. Some studies focus on labor activism, in which rural migrant workers describe their difficult working conditions and tell stories about how they made up their minds to fight for their rights either collectively or individually (e.g. Chan and Selden 2014; Chan 2012; Pun and Chan 2012). Other studies focus on relatively peaceful labor processes, where scholars examine how rural migrant workers' subjective interests, such as their understanding of gender relations and responsibilities, shape management strategies and capital-labor power relations on the shopfloor (e.g. Lee 1998). These works show that rural migrant workers play a more active role in the process of China's capitalist production. In these studies, rural migrant factory workers do not just comply with whatever they are dictated to do passively but bring in their worldviews, feelings, thoughts, calculations, and life plans to the production process. The power imbalance between the state and capital on the one side and rural migrant factory workers on the

other side is no longer presented as a one-way domination but turns into interactions as well as struggles between them.

However, in this literature, the representation of rural migrant workers' agency seems to be limited by the emphasis on the power of capital and of the state. Often guided by Marxist theories, the authors interpret the relations between capitalists and rural migrant factory workers in China according to general rules of capital-labor conflict and capitalist exploitation of labor. They highlight the dominance of capital and its power of pursuing profits to the detriment of laborers. And in the case of rural migrant factory workers, the authors also regard the state as an important facilitator of capitalist exploitation (e.g., Chen 2001; Pun and Chan 2012). The conceptualization and analysis of rural migrant workers is then derived from such theories. On the one hand, studies on labor activism conceive rural migrant factory workers' agency solely as their reactions and resistance to capitalist exploitation and state domination, emphasizing rural migrant factory workers' resistant consciousness and behavior. As these works almost exclusively focus on conflicts between capital and labor while paying much less attention to other aspects of rural migrant workers' agency, they create the impression that rural migrant workers always feel antagonistic to their employers and factory management. Abu-Lughod describes this emphasis on finding resistors and explaining resistance as "the romance of resistance", which actually "foreclosed certain questions about the workings of power" (1990: 42). While the capitalist exploitation of labor leads to objective opposition between the interests of capital and the interests of labor from a structural perspective, workers themselves may not share this view subjectively or

always deal with it through clear resistance. Focusing solely on capital-labor or management-labor conflicts thus has likely oversimplified the social relations as well as rural migrant workers' agency involved in capitalist production. Moreover, in response to the question of why rural migrant factory workers participate in factory production, the labor activism perspective would have to resort back to the power of the state and of capital in imposing the capitalist production order on rural migrant factory workers, because worker agency only emerges in resistance, not in cooperation.

On the other hand, studies on labor processes incorporate more dimensions of worker agency than just resistance in order to better explain why some rural migrant workers keep laboring under exploitation without constant conflicts with employers and management. Instead of seeing rural migrant factory workers as only reacting against the power of the state and capital, studies in this camp represent rural migrant factory workers as also being able to form perceptions and take actions based on other ideas. For example, married women migrant workers may voluntarily choose factories that pay lower wages yet allow more flexible hours so as to better fulfill their family responsibilities (Lee 1998: Chapter 4). Analysis like this has incorporated factors other than the power of the state and the power of capital to explain migrant factory workers' integration into capitalist production. At the same time, however, studies on labor processes are still informed by Marxist theories, and they still conceptualize capitalist production as a process of labor control and exploitation and rural migrant workers as exploited laborers. The representation of rural migrant workers' agency is thus constrained in these studies as well, because only limited

aspects of rural migrant workers' agency that sustain a coherent narrative of labor control are likely to be included. Within this framework, aspects of worker agency that do not directly bear on labor process and management regime tend not to be included.

Selected aspects of rural migrant factory workers' agency that are underemphasized in the literature that is informed by Marxist frameworks become especially visible in works on rural migrant workers that adopt other theoretical frameworks and research objectives. For example, some studies find that rural migrant workers conceive adulthood based on the traditional Chinese cultural emphasis on family obligations and social relations and thus value such activities as learning to care for parents, settling into a long-term career and becoming capable of caring for children (Zhong and Arnett 2014; Fang 2011). How might rural migrant workers' efforts of trying to achieve adulthood play a role in shaping their factory experiences? Other studies examine how rural migrant workers experience modernization and their dilemmas in trying to "find their place" (Jacka 2005), examining how rural migrant workers are changing their communications and social relations with new mobile technologies (Lin and Tong 2008). How do rural migrant workers' experience family and gender relations differently in "finding their place" as part of the impact of migration (Lin 2013; Choi and Peng 2016)?

Although it is impossible to examine every aspect of worker agency in one single study, a glimpse into rural migrant workers' multiple concerns and perspectives raises serious questions about studies that present a limited version of rural migrant workers' agency in articulating capitalist production processes. Are

important elements of agency left out that actually shape rural migrant workers' integration into capitalist production in the specific context of Chinese society? Is the understanding of the process of capitalist exploitation also incomplete due to the limited discussion of rural migrant workers' agency? Moreover, because existing studies tend to derive their analysis of rural migrant factory workers' agency from Marxist theories of capital-relation relations, would a more inclusive understanding of rural migrant workers' agency lead to advancement or even a challenge of the theoretical framework of capital-labor relations?

As I will discuss more in chapter 2, describing rural migrant factory workers' agency in capitalist production in China as either resistance in the narrow sense or in reference to labor control and exploitation more broadly actually reflects the way that worker agency in capitalist production tends to be conceived and analyzed in general in Marxist labor studies. The analysis that emphasizes the power of the state and capital in shaping Chinese rural migrant factory workers' situations is also an extension of Marxist theories of capitalist production and capital-labor relations. Viewed from the perspective of capital flowing around the globe looking for lower costs and cheaper labor force, rural migrant workers constitute but another case of new social groups being integrated into capitalist production and becoming exploited laborers in capital-labor relations. While scholars have good reasons to explore and interpret worker agency within theoretical frameworks of capital exploitation and domination, deriving the analysis of worker agency from these frameworks not only limits the representation of worker agency to certain aspects but also constrains the possibility that empirical evidence on worker agency could lead to theoretical

revision or advancement. As rural migrant workers form part of the labor force of global capitalism, reevaluating rural migrant workers' agency in Chinese factories may shed light on worker agency in capitalist production in general.

This Study: Ethnography and A Broader Understanding of Rural Migrant Factory Workers' Agency

This dissertation describes an ethnographic research project that seeks to capture more completely rural migrant workers' agency in the process of capitalist production in China. It aims to address three overarching research questions. First, what is rural migrant workers' agency like in factory production in China? Learning from the current literature on rural migrant workers' agency, the study does not only focus on the aspects of worker agency that derive their importance from Marxist theories of capitalist production and capital-labor relations but takes effort to document rural migrant workers' agency in a more inclusive manner. It emphasizes what rural migrant workers themselves regard as important in terms of their perceptions of and strategies that they use to navigate their factory experiences.

Second, what are rural migrant workers' subjective perspectives on why they participate in factory production? This project seeks to explore the implications of a broader conceptualization and analysis of worker agency for understanding rural migrant workers' involvement in capitalist production in China. It sees rural migrant workers as individuals with abilities of thinking, planning, and taking actions regarding their factory participation, rather than perceiving them as being forced or coaxed by the state and capital to work in factories.

Third, how might analyzing rural migrant factory workers' agency in a more complete manner contribute to understanding power relations involved in capitalist production in China? Ideally, a more inclusive understanding of worker agency would lead to a more nuanced representation of how power works in the process of factory production. While the literature on rural migrant factory workers, informed by Marxist analysis of capital-labor contradictions, tends to conceptualize factory power relations as dichotomies between the powerful and the powerless or between dominators and resistors, this project explores if power relations play out in more complicated ways in Chinese factories.

I used ethnographic methods to collect data on rural migrant factory workers' agency. This study assumes a particular articulation between theoretical engagement and empirical inquiry. On the one hand, the study is informed by Marxist theories of capitalist production and seeks to speak to the theoretical frameworks with potential findings related to worker agency. On the other hand, however, it tries to avoid being confined by Marxist theories and excluding observations of worker agency that do not seem to bear directly on existing Marxist theoretical frameworks. Therefore, I needed a methodology that would both recognize my theoretical concerns as valid and also allow me to relax related theoretical assumptions in my empirical inquiry. This specific articulation between theory and data collection means that neither of the two major ethnographic approaches within social science research – grounded theory (GT) nor the extended case method (ECM) – is sufficient by itself. Using the approach of GT means inducing theories purely from empirical observations, which did not fit the preexisting theoretical frameworks and concerns of the project. Using

the approach ECM, on the contrary, means deducting data collection from specific theories, which defied my intention to avoid confining the empirical investigation within Marxist labor theories. In the beginning of the study, I had thus practiced a methodology that might be described as a combination of GT and ECM. I will explain in greater details in Chapter 3 how I combined the advantages of both approaches to suit the research purposes.

I carried out the ethnographic research in two small manufacturing factories on the East coast of China from January to October 2015. The first factory, SolarExcellence[1], specialized in manufacturing chemical equipment for the solar power industry. It was a branch factory of its parent company in a Southern city. SolarExcellence was domestically invested and its products were traded on the domestic market with its own independent brand, with a small amount exported to other Asian countries. SolarExcellence had about 170 employees, among which about 80 were rural migrant workers on the shopfloor, all being men mostly from 20s to 40s. The second factory, PrettyDress, processed garments for some Japanese brands with domestic capital investment. The factory employed around 90 rural migrant workers in total. My participants were mainly the 80 women sewing workers. All of them were married aged from mid 30s to mid 50s.

I guided my research in the field with five open-ended questions that were not directly derived from the frameworks of capitalist exploitation but allowed me to

[1] I use vague geographic information of and created pseudonyms for both factories to protect the anonymity of the factories as well as the research participants.

approach the research question of how rural migrant workers considered and navigated their factory work and lives in general. They are: (1) how do rural migrant workers describe their work and life situations? (2) What choices do they perceive that they have regarding their work and life? (3) How do they explain their views of the kind of choices they envision for themselves? (4) What kind of future do they desire? And (5) what kind of actions do they plan to take in order to achieve their goals? I did not interview participants but spent extensive time in both factories as a participant observer. The migrant workers often initiated conversations, and I listened to them talk about what was important to them. I also observed their spontaneous interactions with each other. This approach allowed me to learn rural migrant workers' experience from *their* perspectives instead of seeing them through *my* theoretical emphasis. And it allowed various aspects of rural migrant workers' agency to become visible, a large part of which would not fit easily into the theoretical frameworks inspired by a Marxist analysis of capital-labor relations. Via this approach, I refrained from imposing my understanding of capitalist production and capital-labor relations as proposed by Marxian theories on the migrant workers.

Three months in the field, I read about an ethnographic approach that seemingly satisfied my research purposes and almost described the methodology I had been practicing intuitively. Developed by Iddo Tavery and Stefan Timmermans (2014) based on pragmatic philosophy and published not long before my research, the methodology of abductive analysis suggests that researchers enter the field with neither no preconceived theory, as in the case of GT, nor with only a single theory, as proposed by ECM. Instead, abductive analysis encourages researchers to become

familiarized with multiple theories before starting ethnographic research, to be open to any observations and surprises in the field, and to go back and forth between various theories and field data in search for the best fit. Both of my strategies of entering the field with theoretical knowledge and my commitment to open-mindedness in the field coincided with certain key components of abductive analysis. Yet as I initiated the ethnography study without knowledge of the existence of abductive analysis, I was unable to follow its tenets to their full advantage, especially in terms of the theoretical preparation before field research. I will explain in greater details the logic and purpose behind the methodological design of abductive analysis in chapter 3, and I will also discuss the implications of my following the ethnographic approach yet only partially in the last chapter.

Outline of the Dissertation

To recapitulate, this dissertation seeks to understand rural migrant workers' participation in factory production from their subjective perspectives. The literature focuses more on the power of the Chinese state and of employers in controlling rural migrant factory workers while underemphasizing migrant workers' agency in the process of capitalist production. And in studies that do attend to rural migrant factory workers' agency, the focus tends to be on either their resistance or the aspects of their agency that are directly involved in labor process or management regime. This dissertation describes an ethnographic study that aims at capturing more completely rural migrant workers' agency in factory production and investigating how a broader conceptualization of rural migrant workers' agency might lead to a different understanding of the power relations between capital and labor.

In Chapter 2, I discuss two literatures that shed light on the three broad questions that inform this study, as well as the five open-ended questions that structured my research design. First, I describe how the dissertation project draws upon the labor studies literature inspired by Marxist frameworks. On the one hand, this literature provides theoretical and empirical insights on worker agency in capitalist production. On the other hand, this literature also shows certain limitations that are a result of deriving worker agency from Marxist theoretical assumptions. Second, I discuss some sociological and anthropological works that provide an alternative perspective on conceptualizing and analyzing human agency in relation to considerations of social structures. These works are especially pertinent to this study, because they caution against deriving agency from theoretical analysis of structure and emphasize a more nuanced view of the interactions between agency and structure.

In chapter 3, I explain the methodological design of the study, including the reasons for conducting ethnographic research and for choosing a middle ground between the two major approaches of ethnography – grounded theory and extended case method. I also introduce the two factories and the demographic profiles of the rural migrant workers I observed. I then explain my process of data collection in the field as well as data analysis afterwards.

In chapter 4, I provide a general overview of selected aspects of rural migrant workers' agency as I have observed during my ethnographic research. Organizing the chapter with loose descriptive themes that came from my field notes, I aim to convey the rural migrant workers' diverse and complicated agency in a holistic way. By

describing the rural migrant workers' various perceptions, plans, actions, values, and emphases regarding their factory experiences, I suggest that one can organize the data in different ways and apply many possible analytical perspectives depending on one's focuses.

In chapter 5 and 6, I examine two themes that demonstrate how engaging rural migrant workers' agency from their own perspective can shed new light on their participation in the capitalist production process. In chapter 5, I focus on the rural migrant workers' subjective understanding of factory management and explain the puzzle of why they both complained about it and expressed empathy toward it at the same time. Following the rural migrant workers' own discourses, I first discuss how they situated specific factories in the broader context of market competition, which made them empathize with the need of the factories to cut cost and to survive. Second, I explain that the rural migrant workers did not necessarily perceive the factory relations as characterized by specific capital-labor or management-labor dichotomy and opposition. Instead, they viewed the factory relations as general hierarchies that they experienced in various aspects of their lives and held similar expectations for the factory hierarchies. They thus emphasized being responsible and understanding, for the purpose of maintaining functioning hierarchical relations, and only complained about factory management when it failed to support these principles of upholding harmony within the factories.

In chapter 6, I engage the topic of family that the rural migrant workers spontaneously emphasized during my study. Instead of forming their ideas and plans solely in response to their factory experiences, the rural migrant workers actually put

family concerns and values at the center of their considerations and oriented their plans and actions regarding factory work around their family needs. Moreover, I examine how both the male and female rural migrant workers expressed deep emotions and concerns about their families, even though certain patterns of gender differences also existed in terms of how family shaped the rural migrant workers' attitudes and behavior at work. Both chapter 5 and 6 demonstrate that the rural migrant workers were not merely laborers within capital-labor relations but, as social beings, their worldviews and agency reflected their situations within larger social and cultural contexts. The agency they expressed within their factory work was shaped not only by specific capitalist production process and factory relations, as emphasized by Marxian labor studies, but also by larger social and cultural contexts.

In chapter 7, I first summarize the research journey of the dissertation. Then I discuss some theoretical implications of the project, especially in terms of theorizing power relations. Lastly, I reflect on some limitations of the dissertation in the context of discussing the methodology.

Chapter 2: Studying Worker Agency in Capitalist Production: Insights and Inspirations from Two Sources

Two Literatures Informing the Research

This dissertation explores rural migrant factory workers' agency and seeks to understand why they participate in factory production in China from their subjective perspectives. In this chapter, I discuss two literatures that have played essential roles in informing and shaping the research[2].

First, I initially adopted a Marxist theoretical perspective and took inspiration mostly from the scholarly tradition of labor studies. This was the case because I shared the Marxist perspectives of labor studies that emphasize capitalist exploitation of labor and class inequality. China's history and trajectory of economic development since the late 1970s, the deplorable situation of rural migrant workers in the context of China's economic prosperity, and the unjust state policies against the group all make it difficult not to view capitalist development in China as a system characterized by labor exploitation and domination. At the same time, however, I also recognized the limitations of worker agency analysis in the labor studies literature. I

[2] These are not all the literatures relevant to the project, and I will touch upon some other literatures in the last chapter that also shed light on the research but were less central to the conception of the project in the earlier stage.

thus guided my empirical research mainly with a critical engagement of Marxist theories of capital-labor relations and labor studies.

In this chapter, I first situate the current study in the intellectual tradition of labor studies that examines worker agency in factory production. I summarize the major types of conceptualization and analysis of worker agency available in the literature of labor studies, reviewing their contributions as well as limitations. The summaries are not meant to be exhaustive but rather identify some main ideas that are especially germane for the study on Chinese rural migrant factory workers' agency. More specifically, I discuss how the labor studies literature tends to derive the conceptualization of worker agency from Marxist theories of capital-labor relations and thus limit the scope and understanding of worker agency. Similar patterns of worker agency analysis also exist in labor studies that focus on rural migrant workers in China. As I have mentioned in Chapter 1, existing studies related to Chinese rural migrant factory workers' agency tend to revolve around the theme of labor resistance on the one hand and the theme of worker subjectivity in labor process on the other hand. These patterns of analysis actually reflect the two major themes in labor studies in general when it comes to exploring worker agency in capitalist production.

The second group of theories and works that guided my research came from sociologists and anthropologists who analyze human agency, especially in terms of the relations between structure and agency. At the beginning of my inquiry, I shared the perspectives of Marxist labor scholars that rural migrant workers were exploited and dominated by capital as well as the state. This reflected a structural perspective that claimed to recognize the "real" and "objective" material conditions of rural

migrant workers, despite whatever subjective perceptions rural migrant workers might have regarding their own lives. Conceptualizing worker agency within this framework was especially susceptible to the tendency of deriving agency from the structural perspective, leading one to imagine rural migrant workers as either resistors to domination or people who were blinded by false consciousness to help reproducing the structure that dominated them. Both tendencies were visible in the ways worker agency has been analyzed in labor studies in general and in research on rural migrant factory workers in particular. I thus found it helpful to guide my research with the sociological and anthropological scholarship that emphasized the importance of treating agency and structure as equally important and provided insights on conceptualization and analysis of agency in general. I introduce this literature in the second part of the chapter.

Marxist Labor Studies and Worker Agency

A long scholarly tradition within labor studies examines industrial workers' agency in capitalist production on a global scale. Since the early 20th Century, worker agency in capitalist production has been an important subject in studies on labor within capitalist societies. Employing different concepts and terms, such as working-class consciousness, worker consciousness, worker subjectivity, and worker agency, labor scholars have explored and analyzed industrial workers' subjective perceptions, attitudes, and behavior regarding capitalist production in various social and historical contexts. Because the field of labor studies takes its inspiration mostly from Marxist theories of capitalist production and capital-labor relations, labor scholars share certain perspectives and assumptions shaped by Marxist theories.

1. Marx's theories and the impact on labor studies

Marx's complicated theories expressed in copious writings are difficult to summarize. Here I provide a simplified account of his ideas that are especially relevant to industrial workers, based on some of his original works (Marx 1844, 1852, 1990, 1991, 1992; Marx and Engels 1848). Taking inspiration from economists of his time, Marx recognized the basic economic structure of capitalist society as being characterized by two major classes. On the one side were capitalists who possessed factories and machines and employed workers to work in the factories. They sold the products made by the workers on the market for prices that were higher than the production costs and made profits that supported both their own living and further investment in factories. On the other side were workers who had no other means for living except for their own labor power. They worked in factories for capitalists in exchange for wages to fulfill their needs of subsistence.

A key to understand the relationship between capitalists and workers was the origin of profit. According to Marx, profits came from the gap between the value capitalists paid to hire workers and the value workers produced for capitalists. In order for a worker to work for a capitalist, the worker had to keep living and renewing his labor power, which determined the minimum amount of wages he needed from the capitalist. At the same time, the worker was put to work and produce values that exceeded the wages the capitalist paid to him. Therefore, the exchange between workers and capitalists was not equal at all. Instead, in order to survive, workers had to produce more than what they were paid, i.e., surplus value, which became capitalists' profits and added to capitalists' power over workers. To make

more profits and keep accumulating capital, it was in capitalists' interest to reduce workers' wages as well as increase the surplus value they produced, through either extending their working hours or making them work more efficiently. On the contrary, it was workers' interest to demand higher wages and fewer working hours. According to Marx, therefore, the relationship between capitalists and workers was essentially antagonistic and in struggle.

Industrial workers were prominent within Marx's theories also because Marx saw them as the social group that bore the historical task of finally bringing capitalism to its end and initiating a new social system without class struggles. Marx predicted that the conditions of capitalism would lead to ever severer wage exploitation, deepening capital-labor polarization, concentration of capital and collective working mode with large machines, and hardship of economic crises, all of which would work together to eventually make workers, or the proletariat, conscious about the nature of capital-labor relations and drove it to throw the system down. According to these theories, a working class would grow in both its size and its class consciousness till its organized power culminated in the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism.

Therefore, Marx gave theoretical significance to the new social group of wage earners in capitalist society, thus providing subsequent labor scholars a theoretical rationale for studying industrial workers. Marx's ideas have also led to certain assumptions that labor scholars tend to base their research on, one of the most important being that workers are supposed to be conscious of their interests as being against those of capitalists and that they are supposed to resist capitalist exploitation.

Given the important role the revolutionary proletariat played in Marx's theories of capitalist society and the future of humanity, whether workers rebel against capitalists and/or capitalism constitutes both an empirical inquiry and a normative concern for labor scholars.

With the influence of Marx's theories, one major approach to worker agency in labor studies has implicitly conceived of worker agency as labor resistance. Understanding of worker agency is gained as a byproduct through labor scholars' effort of examining different patterns of labor movement and explaining why some workers show more resistance than others (e.g. Perlman 1949; Thompson 1963; Goldthorpe et al. 1968a; Gallie 1983; Voss 1993). This focus on labor resistance and activism has always been a core theme within labor studies[3]. Another major approach to worker agency developed in the late 1970s, namely, examining modern workers' cooperation with capitalists with an eye toward understanding how workers' subjectivity during labor process contributes to their consent to produce surplus value for capitalists (Burawoy 1979). Although different in its focus than the labor resistance approach, the labor consent approach shares the same ideas derived from Marx's theories that characterizes capital-labor relations as relations of domination, exploitation, and potential struggles.

[3] It was no coincidence that the section focusing on labor studies in American Sociological Association is named "Labor and Labor Movement", suggesting the central role of labor movement in labor studies.

In this rest of the section, I review the two major approaches to worker agency in labor studies, especially discussing how the assumptions derived from Marxist theories may have constrained their conceptualization and analysis of worker agency.

2. Worker agency as resistance

Since Marx first gave theoretical significance to industrials workers and their revolutionary potential, labor resistance and activism has always been a central theme of labor studies. From large-scale labor movements in North America and Europe in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century to workers' cooperative unions in the postwar era in the West and to new labor activism in the developing countries since the 1970s, different historical situations of global capitalist development have led labor scholars to shift their specific questions and emphases about working class but not to change their fundamental concern about capital-labor conflict and workers' challenge of the capitalist order.

In this context, labor scholars' understanding of worker agency focuses on workers' consciousness of the antagonistic interests between capital and labor as well as their collective or individual actions of labor resistance against capitalist exploitation. The implicit assumption is that worker agency only matters when it is associated with labor resistance and activism. But in order to examine different patterns of labor resistance and explain why some workers show more resistance than others, labor scholars also have to touch upon other aspects of worker agency as potential explanatory factors. For example, labor scholars notice that workers tend to prioritize immediate material interests within the capitalist system over idealist struggles against the system and that workers tend not to participate in labor

movement when they have other opportunities of upward mobility in larger society (Perlman 1949; Goldthorpe et al. 1968a). In other words, even though labor scholars in this approach emphasize worker agency as labor resistance, they also reveal and accumulate knowledge of other aspects of worker agency along the way. However, because the labor scholars regard workers' thoughts and actions other than labor resistance as either obstacle to or facilitators of labor resistance, what they have learned about the various elements of worker agency is usually not integrated into a coherent understanding of worker agency or incorporated into a different analysis of the power relations between capital and labor. We do not learn how various aspects of worker agency form an integral part of the process of capitalist production, as the focus is merely on explaining why or why not there is labor resistance.

For example, according to Perlman's study of labor movements in Russia, Germany, England, and America (1949), workers by themselves seldom had preference for communism or socialism but practiced solidarity only for the pragmatic purpose of securing economic opportunity for their group, based on a consciousness of scarcity of opportunity that tended to characterize any manual groups in history. Workers' unions sometimes even had to confront anti-capitalist intellectuals to enforce job control, instead of overthrowing capitalism, as their goals of labor movements. Perlman also identified the American working class as lacking class consciousness compared to workers in the other countries, partly because workers in America were used to abundant land and other social mobility opportunities.

In their classic serial studies of British workers, Goldthorpe and his colleagues took up similar themes about workers' pragmatic concerns over resistant consciousness (1968a, 1968b, 1969). In order to investigate whether workers were becoming embourgeoised – a new concern for labor scholars at a historical time when workers moved away from large-scale labor movements, they surveyed and interviewed hundreds of British factory workers who had achieved relatively high incomes and living standards. According to Goldthorpe and his colleagues, factory workers did not experience less alienation at work but were loyal to their factories because they took an instrumental attitude towards work and were thus willing to stay as long as the payment was relatively satisfying.

In the studies of both Perlman and Goldthorpe and his colleagues, situated in two different historical points of time and across the Atlantic, workers were found to care about having short-term material rewards and social mobility prospects rather than devoting themselves to resistance or revolutionary goals. But in both studies, this aspect of worker agency was described but not analyzed. It was simply a factor that prevented workers from developing revolutionary or activist attitude, and it was not discussed as something with implications for understanding workers' participation in capitalist production or how power worked between capital and labor. In fact, for certain labor scholars, the materialist consideration of workers seemed almost inconvenient for their concern of labor resistance. They disapproved of workers for having some sort of false consciousness about their interests instead of seeing this as a legitimate part of worker agency. For instance, in studying young female factory workers in the burgeoning economic development in South Korea, Kim (1997)

examined the conflicts and ambivalences of young women as they participated in the industrial work force and simultaneously grappled with defining their roles as wives and mothers in traditional Korean cultures. On the one hand, Kim showed how some women workers were able to be united and fight for their interests collectively through strikes and other activities of workers' unions. On the other hand, however, Kim also analyzed how some women workers tried to achieve a better future through marriage, and she perceived the women's hopes for marriage as a way out to be an *illusion* that prevented them from realizing their *real* interests as industrial workers (Kim 1997: 113).

Labor scholars have identified other elements of worker agency in the process of investigating labor resistance and activism, some of which may be applied to workers in different historical and social contexts while others are more specific to workers of certain cultures and times. Examples include (1) that workers tend to develop a psychological fear of radicalism and be more conservative in countries where the state shows more support for the power of employers over workers (Voss 1993; Gallie 1983); (2) that it takes more than just common working experiences but connections like religious beliefs, ethnicities, living communities, party ideologies to unite workers for labor activism (Thompson 1963; Chan and Pun 2009; Gallie 1983; Perlman 1949); and (3) that workers' subjective experiences of capitalist production process are shaped by their living experiences prior to the new capitalist order, especially in recently industrialized countries (e.g. Ong 1987). These studies suggest that workers' objective positions in capital-labor relations do not automatically or necessarily lead to the development of revolutionary or antagonistic class

consciousness. Instead, it is a complex process involving various aspects of worker agency in diverse historical, social, cultural, and psychological processes. But within the labor resistance approach that is most concerned about whether and how workers rise up against capitalism, such findings on the complexity of workers' thoughts, feelings, considerations, plans, and actions tend to just serve to explain the occurrence of labor resistance or the lack of it. And they do not lead to a more sophisticated conceptualization of worker agency itself, let alone a different understanding of capital-labor relations based on a more complicated view of worker agency.

Therefore, despite evidence suggesting otherwise, the idea derived from Marx's theories that workers will or ought to resist capitalist exploitation remains central within labor studies. Indeed, labor resistance and activism constitutes such an essential theme in labor studies that the field seemed to have become less relevant when labor movements went into crisis in the postwar era in North America and Western Europe with declining activities of labor militancy (Screpanti 1987; Shalev 1992; Sewell 1993; Silver 2003). But the new wave of industrialization in the developing countries since the 1970s ignited new hopes in labor scholars, who proposed that "new working classes have been created and strengthened in the favored new sites of investment" (Silver 2003: 5). With the idea that "where capital goes, conflict follows" (Silver and Zhang 2009), labor scholars continued to focus on labor resistance and activism in the context of capitalist development in the developing countries (e.g., Kim 1997; Chan and Pun 2009; Leung and Pun 2009; Cohen 1980; Phakathi 2012; Ong 1987; Pun 2005).

In the case of China and rural migrant factory workers, this enthusiasm about labor resistance seems to have led some labor scholars to emphasize studying events of collective labor actions and factories with labor conflicts. Special attention has been paid to high-profile cases of worker strikes in large international companies such as Foxconn (Pun and Chan 2012) and Honda (Chan 2014), with some scholars prematurely claiming that a new working class was rising in China. Yet in fact, the kind of large companies with thousands of rural migrant workers where labor strikes would make international news constitute only a minority of manufacturing factories in China, while small factories with fewer than 300 employees make up 83.1% of all manufacturing enterprises in China (National Bureau of Statistics of China 2016b). Because such small factories without visible labor resistance receive much less attention, a large part of the mechanisms of capitalist production involving rural migrant workers in China remains ununderstood. And when labor scholars studied smaller and less well-known factories in China, they also tended to select cases of labor conflicts (e.g., Chan and Selden 2014; Chan 2012; Chan and Pun, 2009). They presented an image of discontented rural migrant factory workers who were unhappy about their working conditions and fought against capitalist exploitation. These studies often described incidents of labor activism with quotes of rural migrant workers' negative expressions about factory management and working conditions. And the authors interpreted such comments as workers' antagonistic consciousness against capitalist exploitation. For example, in Chan and Selden's paper (2014), some workers described feeling like a cog on the assembly line, and some other workers complained about the low wages in a factory. The authors took these remarks as

evidence of the frustration of the younger generation of rural migrant workers and linked such frustration to cases of labor disputes and collective actions nation-wide as proof of a rising working class in China.

This labor resistance approach to rural migrant workers in China presents a limited picture of worker agency. First, focusing on labor conflicts in case selection tends to preclude situations where capitalist production proceeds relatively peacefully, which actually seem to be the dominant cases (Lee 2016). What is rural migrant workers' agency like when they experience daily labor process without active labor resistance? Second, focusing on rural migrant workers' negative opinions about factory production precludes positive or non-antagonistic comments rural migrant workers may have made, which leads to an incomplete picture about rural migrant workers' perceptions of their factory working experiences. Moreover, how to interpret the negative comments expressed by the rural migrant workers in the studies might also not be as straightforward as it seemed. Do complaints necessarily equal antagonistic feelings? Is it always correct to quote a few of rural migrant workers' negative comments as evidence for their stance of opposing factory management?

In all, influenced by Marx's theories on capital-labor contradiction and proletarian revolution, labor resistance and activism constitutes a main theme in labor studies. In this approach, labor scholars center on investigating patterns of labor movements and explaining why or why not labor resistance happens. The conceptualization and analysis of worker agency in this approach also tends to emphasize workers' consciousness as well as actions related to labor resistance and activism, which forms a rather narrow view of worker agency. Indeed, labor studies

in the approach often reveal other aspects of workers' thoughts, considerations, ideas, and plans regarding their factor work. But as the purpose is to explain labor resistance or the lack of it, evidence on various aspects of worker agency tends not to lead to new understanding of worker agency itself. Nor does such evidence on worker agency challenge the perception of capital-labor relations as intrinsically antagonistic and workers as oriented toward resistance – a Marxist theoretical view from which the labor resistance approach takes its inspiration in the first place. In other words, the analysis tends to be derived from the theory and then feeds right back to the theory. This may partly explain why many studies on rural migrant factory workers today still focus on studying labor resistance, which seems to have not only led to case selection with subjective preference for resistance but resulted in constraint observation and narrow interpretation of data on worker agency. While it is important to pay attention to the kind of resistant attitude and behavior of rural migrant factory workers documented by the labor scholars, it seems limiting to presume that it means workers' total opposition to capital or represents the entire picture of rural migrant worker' agency in factory work. And keeping the observation more open instead of focusing only on the theme of resistance may lead to a more complete understanding of worker agency as well as the power relations between capital and labor.

3. Worker agency as consent

Another important approach to analyzing worker agency in labor studies focuses on explaining why workers consent to cooperate with the production process and factory management. Burawoy initiated the approach with his now classic work (1979) and actually created a new tradition in labor studies that centers on labor process analysis.

Unlike labor scholars before him, who emphasized labor resistance and worked under the theoretical assumption that workers were supposed to rebel under "normal" conditions, Burawoy took workers' cooperation with capitalist production as the focus of his study. And instead of treating worker consent as an abnormality that could only be explained by external factors like workers' psychology of prioritizing short-term money gain (Perlman 1949; Goldthorpe et al. 1968a) or the influence of party ideology and cross-cultural differences (Gallie 1983), Burawoy suggested looking to factors that were internal to factory production process and classical Marxist theories of capital-labor relations for explanations of workers' consent to producing surplus value for capitalists (1979).

Based on his ethnographic study in an American factory (1979), Burawoy argued that it was through workers' practice in the concrete labor process that workers' consciousness was created. As the workers experienced the labor process as a game of "making out" that they actively participated in and which even gave them a sense of autonomy, they did not perceive the piecework system as management measures to extract surplus labor and to instill competitive shopfloor culture. At the same time, the possibility of mobility within the factory and institutionalized internal management of grievance and bargaining also helped establish competition among the workers and cooperation between the workers and the management. Burawoy suggested returning to the point of production to investigate how ideology worked through workers' consciousness and agency. In his subsequent work, by incorporating his original ethnographic study into a comparative work on workers' consciousness in four nations (1983), Burawoy went beyond his initial theoretical focus on labor

process and came up with the concept of political apparatus of production. In this new theoretical framework, state regulation shaped factory regimes, which in turn shaped workers' politics in factory. The factory setting was still an important site in generating workers' practice and consciousness, but factories were situated in specific forms of state intervention.

Burawoy's approach thus encourages close examination of worker agency and detailed observation of what workers say and do during daily production in the factories through ethnographic methods. And without the theoretical emphasis on labor resistance, this approach can pay attention to a wider range of workers' subjective ideas and actions than the labor resistance approach. At the same time, however, this approach also has its limitations in terms of the conceptualization and analysis of worker agency.

To start with, by confining the analysis to labor process only, this approach conceptualizes workers as mere laborers whose agency regarding factory production is solely informed by the labor process of factory production itself. Yet workers have other social identities besides being workers, and they also live in broader social and cultural contexts beyond specific factory settings. It is difficult to imagine that the ideas and perceptions that workers encounter outside of the labor process would have no influence on their agency in understanding and dealing with their factory work experience. For example, Halaby (1985) characterizes worker-employer relations as both economic relations and authority relations, because workers not only labor for pay but are also subordinated by employers during work (also see Simon 1951). The second component suggests that workers' attitudes toward employers is shaped by

workers' perceived legitimacy of employer's control. Halaby then shows empirically that American workers evaluate workplace relations with the specific normative codes of legality, which entail "an orientation of governance to formal rules and laws that affirm reason functions to minimize the subordination of the ruled to the arbitrary personal will of the ruler" (1985: 638; see also Kalberg 1980; Selznick 1969). Halaby's theoretical model puts great emphasis on worker agency shaped by broader social contexts. Workers actively process their experience of workplace justice by applying "a set of normative codes specifying morally correct modes of domination" (1985: 653), and at the same time, these codes "may express in varying degrees the higher-order cultural codes and beliefs that govern the structure of dominance relations in the broader society" (1985: 635). Similarly, other labor scholars also suggest that workers bring in ideas shaped by larger social and cultural contexts to their perception and evaluation of the labor experience (see, for example, Roscigno and Hodson 2004; Hodson 1999; Vallas 2003).

Lee's study involving rural migrant workers in China (1995, 1998) spoke directly to Burwaoy's work and constituted a significant improvement on the original labor process approach. By analyzing and comparing how the different roles of women workers as single young girls and as middle-aged mothers led to divergent management practices in two branch factories of the same company in Shenzhen and Hong Kong, China, Lee highlighted the importance of gender relations in shaping the labor process as well as workers' consciousness. For example, according to Lee, the managers of the Shenzhen branch factory imposed strict control on the young women rural migrant workers, because they perceived the single young women to be not only

immature and lack of discipline but participating in paid work only for a few years before they got married. And the young women subscribed to such control, partly because they did have the plan of getting married in the near future and preferred factory work over service work exactly because it represented the image of desirable wives – endurance for hardship and disciplined labor (Lee 1995: 385). Lee thus challenges the "class-first resolution" of the original labor process approach and seeks to "advance our understanding of the labor process beyond Burawoy" through bringing in gender (Lee 1998: 18).

Lee's work reinforces the point that workers are not merely labors and that their other social identities, such as gender, also shape their agency at work. Indeed, it is often through analyzing the interaction between gender and class in the case of women factory workers that labor studies went beyond the narrow factory relations to incorporate broader cultural and social contexts, especially gendered family relationships (for example, Pollert 1981; Westwood 1984; Lamphere 1985; Nash and Fernandez-Kelly 1983; Safa 1983; Ward 1990; Lee 1998; Ong 1991; Lynch 1999; Marchard and Runyan 2005: 16; Salzinger 2003; Hewamanne 2003).

Yet despite its great contribution, Lee's study also reveals another limitation of the labor process approach. Even though the labor process approach focuses on labor consent rather than labor resistance, it shares at least one common feature with the literature on labor resistance that they both derive their analysis from Marxist theories of capitalist production and class relations. The assumption of the labor resistance approach is that workers should resist to capitalist exploitation, and the analysis of worker agency is constrained because it centers on explaining why

workers may not resist in some cases. For the labor process approach, the focus is shifted to labor consent, and the assumption flips to that of capital succeeding in exploiting labor and soliciting workers to produce surplus value. The analysis of worker agency is constrained in this case as well, because it tends to only include aspects of worker agency that fits both the general Marxist theoretical framework and the need of explaining labor consent (Gartman 1983). Although divergent in their focuses, both approaches are informed by Marxist theories of labor and capitalist production relations. This theoretical derivativeness determines that the analysis of labor process stills needs to operate within the theoretical parameters set by Marxist theoretical frameworks, resulting in its limited ability and imagination of incorporating aspects of worker agency that does not seem relevant in the original theoretical frameworks. Therefore, Lee's adding only one factor of gender to the labor process analysis already signifies a significant deviation from the original labor process model and requires serious theoretical justification (Lee 1998: Chapter 2). At the same time, it's necessary to ask, if gender turns out to be a relevant factor to worker agency in capitalist production that is not included in Marxist theories, what are the other aspects of worker agency that are also important but ignored so far due to the limitation of theoretical derivativeness?

To summarize, in this part, I have situated the project of examining Chinese rural migrant factory workers' agency in the scholarly tradition of labor studies, because labor studies have provided the major models for analyzing worker agency in capitalist production. I have reviewed two prominent approaches in labor studies –

the approach of labor resistance and the approach of labor consent – and discussed how each conceptualizes and analyzes worker agency. Both approaches derive their understanding of worker agency from Marxist theoretical assumptions, but in different ways and with different implications for the discussion of worker agency.

The labor resistance approach focuses on worker agency in understanding and/or acting against capitalist exploitation of labor. It sometimes leads scholars to selectively pay attention to incidents of labor resistance as well as evidence of workers' antagonistic attitude toward factories. And even when scholars include aspects of worker agency other than labor activism in certain studies, it is usually for the purpose of explaining various patterns of labor activism rather than forming a more comprehensive view of worker agency itself. Findings on worker agency are also not integrated into any new understanding of how power works in capital-labor relations. Compared to the labor resistance approach, the labor consent approach conceives worker agency in a relatively broader way and analyzes how workers' various subjectivities contribute to their cooperation with the production of surplus-value. But scholars focusing on labor consent within the labor process tend to perceive workers as merely laborers in capital-labor class relations, and they present difficulty of going beyond factory settings and class relations to situate worker agency in broader social and cultural contexts. Therefore, despite their different focuses, both approaches conceptualize and analyze worker agency with the same limitation of being constrained by assumptions derived from Marxist theoretical frameworks.

The literature on rural migrant workers' agency in factory production, also taking its inspiration from Marxist theories, follows similar patterns of how worker agency tends to be conceptualized and analyzed in the labor studies literature in general. In order to expand our understanding of rural migrant workers' agency in the capitalist production process, it seems reasonable not to confine the idea of worker agency within the Marxist frameworks of capital-labor dichotomy. And it seems necessary to pay attention to a broader range of rural migrant workers' agency that is not limited to their negative reactions to factory authorities or the direct labor process but take into consideration their various attitudes and behavior embedded in larger social contexts.

Sociological and Anthropological Discussions of Agency

The preceding review of worker agency analysis in labor studies discusses the limitations of deriving the conceptualization and empirical analysis of worker agency from Marxist theoretical assumptions and perspectives. While this dissertation on rural migrant factory workers in China shares Marxist labor scholars' concern about capitalist exploitation of labor, it seeks to gain a more complete view of worker agency and potentially a better understanding of how power relations work between employers and rural migrant factory workers in China. For these purposes, I needed to look beyond the Marxist perspectives of capital-labor relations for additional theoretical guidance on the conceptualization and exploration of worker agency.

As I have mentioned earlier, Marxist theories of capitalist exploitation of labor provide a structural analysis of the *objective* relations between capital and labor. Yet because workers may not subscribe to the same view of capital-labor relations from

their *subjective* perspectives, it may be problematic to derive worker agency regarding capitalist production from this structural understanding of Marxism. Asking how to conceptualize worker agency within the context of capitalist exploitation is thus also asking how we should articulate the relations between social structure and human agency. Certain works in sociology and anthropology that focus on discussing agency and structure more generally provide some important insights for thinking about worker agency.

1. Some general ideas on agency

Agency has always been a fundamental idea in sociological thinking since the foundation of the discipline. For example, consider the following famous paragraph from Marx:

> Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly found, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living (Marx 1852: 595).

Marx was essentially discussing the dialectical and mutually-shaping relationship between human agency and social structure. But the actual term "agency" and the discussion of the concept in relation to social structure grew in theoretical significance since the 1970s, primarily within social theorists' works on the topic (e.g. Giddens 1979, 1984; Bourdieu 1977, 1990, 2000; Sahlins 1981, de Certeau 1984, Sewell 1992). Theoretically, these scholars reacted against earlier forms of social theory, including British-American structural-functionalism, certain kinds of

deterministic/mechanical Marxism, and French structuralism, that were elaborated without an intentional subject and tended to see human action as being produced by logic or historical laws that human subjects could neither control nor understand (Ornter 1996: 7; Duranti 2008: 452). Historically, the interest in the concept of agency was connected to the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s (Ortner 1984) as well as the social upheavals in central and eastern Europe in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Sztompka 1991). These events encouraged scholars to investigate how practices can either reproduce or transform the very structures that shape them.

Bourdieu, Ortner and similar scholars are all careful to guard the concept of agency against the common misunderstanding that talking about human agency means endorsing individuals with free will or voluntarism in the philosophical sense. Instead, they make it clear that agency is always socially embedded and emphasize the pervasive influence of culture on human intentions, beliefs, and actions on agency (Ahearn 2001: 114; Lalu 2000). For example, Giddens's theory of structuration (1979, 1984) conceptualizes people's actions as being shaped, in both constraining and enabling ways, by the very social structures that those actions then serve to reinforce or reconfigure. Bourdieu uses the concept of habitus (1977) to describe a generative process that produces practices and representations that are conditioned by the "structuring structures" from which they emerge. For these theorists, agency is never understood as free will independent of social constraints but is always considered together with social structures of inequality and domination. It is not the intention of the theorists to oppose agency to structure; their ambition is rather to

reconcile agency and structure or to over the dualism between structure and agency (Ortner 2006: 130).

Scholars also caution that discussing how people's practices could bring about social changes does not mean equating agency with resistance (Ahearn 2001: 115-116; Ortner 2006: 137), which is especially pertinent to the current project given the prominence of labor resistance in the literature on worker agency. While their critique focuses on subaltern studies and feminist theories, their argument against agency as resistance also applies to the case of labor studies. For example, Abu-Lughod (1990) describes the concern of "finding resistors and explaining resistance" as "the romance of resistance", which actually prevents scholars from examining how power really works. Taking suggestions from Foucault that "where there is power, there is resistance" and that we do not see resistance as a reactive force somehow independent of or outside of the system of power (Foucault 1978: 95-96), Abu-Lughod argues through her ethnographic works that we should not consider resistance as signs of human freedom but should follow all sorts of resistance to learn the different forms of power that people are involved in. Moreover, studying the various forms of resistance will allow us to get at the ways in which intersecting and often conflicting structures of power work together (Abu-Lughod 1990: 42).

Abu-Lughod's idea is especially important for conceiving worker agency in capitalist production. Theorizing worker agency derivatively as workers' resistant spirit against capitalist exploitation risks ignoring the fact that workers' resistance does not happen in a cultural or social vacuum. In other words, capitalist relations are not the only kind of power relations that workers live and work in. Workers are also

embedded in other cultural and social relations characterized by different types of power relations, which would not just influence their ways of resisting capitalist domination but may even shape their very perceptions of the capitalist system itself. In order to learn how workers are caught up in the intersecting power relations, the best approach is thus to understand workers' various kinds of resistance from their perspectives instead of imposing the concern of capitalist exploitation and labor resistance on them.

Despite these common ideas about agency, scholars do not necessarily agree upon one particular definition of agency or one set of principles surrounding the concept. For example, from the perspective of some anthropologists, the conceptualization of agency and of its relation to structure in the sociological theories seems to be leaning too heavily toward the reproduction of structure. For example, according to some anthropologists, Bourdieu's concept of habitus seems to indicate a recursive loop where individuals are predisposed to think and act in a manner that reproduces the existing system of social inequalities. For Bourdieu, there are practices and actors, but there is no significant intentionality: actors strategize, but their strategies are drawn from an internationalized habitus that is itself a virtual mirror of external limits and possibilities (Ortner 1996: 11). Similarly, Giddens is also perceived to focus more on how people's actions are influenced by social structures as well as tend to recreate the same social structures. While both intend to take people's ability of thinking and acting seriously, they emphasize more on how social structures shape people's agency to reproduce the structures and encounter difficulty

of explaining how social reproduction becomes social transformation (Sewell 1992; Ahearn 2001; Ortner 1996, 2006).

2. Inspirations from Sherry B. Ortner's Theory

This dissertation project tries to avoid conceptualizing worker agency as being solely shaped by the structure of capitalist production as a system of inequality, whether it means focusing on how worker agency contributes to the reproduction of capitalist relations or how worker agency may challenge the system through labor resistance in the narrow sense. Therefore, I find the anthropologists' approach to agency most in line with the needs of the project. And among the writings on agency in the anthropology camp, I especially take inspiration from Sherry B. Ortner's works. While her intellectual endeavor builds on earlier sociological and anthropological theories of agency and structure developed by Giddens, Bourdieu, Sahlins, and others, Ortner critiques these theories as not engaging people's practices on the ground enough in a concrete way by bringing in her expertise in feminist, minority, postcolonial, and subaltern scholarship (Ortner 1996, 2006). But she also emphasizes the importance of theorizing and understanding daily practices and micro-politics without losing the sight of "larger forces, formations, and transformations of social life" (Ortner 2006: 130).

As I use "worker agency" as an inclusive term that refers to workers' perceptions, thoughts, understanding, plans, and actions regarding their factory experiences, what I call "agency" is rather a combination of three different concepts related to Ortner's theorization of agency and practices. First, Ortner differentiates between subjectivity and agency. "By subjectivity I mean the ensemble of modes of

perception, affect, thought, desire, and fear that animate acting subjects" (2006: 107). And "I see subjectivity as the basis of agency, a necessary part of understanding how people (try to) act on the world even as they are acted upon. Agency is not some natural or originary will; it takes shape as specific desires and intentions within a matrix of subjectivity – of (culturally constituted) feelings, thoughts, and meanings" (2006: 110). Second, Ortner distinguishes routine practices from intentionalized action and regards intentionality as an essential component of agency (2006: 129). While Ornter writes less about subjectivity and routine practices and focus much more on agency, her theorization and analysis of agency as in her own definition still provides great insights for conceptualizing worker agency in my broader definition.

In discussing agency and practices, Ortner develops the key concept and perspective of "serious games". People can be said to be participating in serious games, as long as they are pursuing some sorts of goals or projects that are culturally constituted. It could simple individual goals like princesses trying to marry princes in fairytales, and it could also be full-blown projects that involve the intense play of multiply positioned subject pursuing cultural goals within a matrix of local inequalities and power differentials (Ortner 2006: 144). In situations of domination, "the exercise of power over subordinates is normally in the service of the pursuit of some project... But subordinates inevitably have projects of their own" (Ortner 2006: 151). "Agency in the sense of the pursuit of cultural projects…is not about being heroic or unique individuals or about entirely routine everyday practices with little reflection. Rather it is about relatively ordinary life socially organized in terms of culturally constituted projects that infuse life with meaning and purpose (Ortner 2006:

145). “The agency of projects is not necessarily about domination and resistance, although there may be some of that going on. It is about people having desires that grow out of their own structures of life, including very centrally their own structures of inequality; it is in short about people playing, or trying to play, their own serious games even as more powerful parties seek to devalue and even enjoy destroy them” (Ortner 2006: 147). For Ornter, agency is less a property that people have and more a disposition toward the enactment of projects that issue from culturally shaped desires (2006: 152).

Therefore, Ortner uses the idea of serious games to conceptualize agency and to overcome the dualism between micro-level daily practices and macro-level social and cultural structures, which I find very helpful in the conceptualization of worker agency. First, as Ortner has pointed out, resistance may play a part in people’s agency but is unlikely to be the entire content. It seems reasonable to take rural migrant worker as full-blown social beings who pursue various kinds of goals and projects based on their culturally shaped desires. This would help me avoid imposing Marxist theoretical framework on them to perceive them as merely laborers situated in capital-labor relations and reacting to capitalist domination. Instead, I would maintain an open mind in order to find out what kind of desires rural migrant workers have, which goals and projects they pursue, and what these might tell us about the cultural and social contexts they live in. Moreover, this conceptualization of worker agency is also in line with Abu-Lughod’s suggestion that we discover intersecting power relations through understanding people’s resistance from the ground (1990). Even if rural migrant workers’ resistance may be part of my observation, the understanding and

analysis of resistance should stay close to rural migrant workers' own practices and interpretations instead of being derived from the structural view of capital-labor conflict.

To summarize, this chapter examines two different perspectives on structure and agency that shape this dissertation on rural migrant workers' agency in the context of China's capitalist production. Marxist labor studies, in terms of both its value and its limitations, is an important literature for the current project, not only because I am concerned about the capitalist exploitation of rural migrants' labor in the context of China's recent economic success but also because Marxist labor scholars have been leading the investigation of rural migrant workers' agency in factory production. A review of the labor studies literature on rural migrant factory workers suggests that the conceptualization of migrant workers' agency seems limited. And I have suggested that the limitations apply to the general labor studies literature as well, which result from deriving worker agency analysis from Marxist theoretical frameworks. In studies that focus more on labor movement and activism, worker agency is implicitly conceptualized as only labor resistance against capitalist exploitation. And in works that are more concerned about labor cooperation in the labor process, worker agency is rather confined to the aspects that directly bear on class relations and management regime. Based on a critical engagement of this literature, the current project seeks to avoid deriving rural migrant workers' agency from Marxist theories of capital-labor conflict and to capture a more complete picture of migrant workers' agency.

I suggest that discussing alternatives to the theoretical derivativeness of worker agency analysis may be regarded as a special case of dealing with the tension between structure and agency, or, between what scholars take to be objective material relations of domination and exploitation on the one hand and people's subjective perspectives and navigations of daily life on the other hand. Therefore, I have turned for insights to the literature on human agency and its relations to social structures in both sociology and anthropology. Based on this literature, especially theories of agency offered by Ortner and similar anthropologists, I have found it helpful to conceptualize rural migrant factory workers' agency as their pursuit of cultural projects, of which labor resistance may or may not be a part. And I have also found it helpful to treat even resistance as something to be observed from rural migrant workers' own perspectives instead of as a derived phenomenon based on Marxist theories.

In the next chapter, I discuss the methodology that I have employed in this project. The chosen methods are designed to (1) maintain the value of Marxist theories and avoiding deriving the observation of worker agency from Marxist theories; and (2) facilitate documenting a broader range of worker agency. Overall, the methodology aims to treat rural migrant factory workers as people embedded in social contexts larger than factories and pursuing culturally shaped projects.

Chapter 3: Methodology: Ethnography at Two Factories in China

Focusing on rural migrants who work in factories in China, this dissertation explores one broad question: why do rural migrant workers participate in factory production under unappealing working conditions in China? To answer this question, it is important to examine rural migrant workers' agency. Because, as chapter 2 points out, the literature on agency is broad, here I define agency to mean the ideas, thoughts, considerations, perceptions, and plans that rural migrant workers bring to factory work.

Even though the project is theoretically informed by Marxist perspectives on capital-labor relations, the review of the labor studies literature in Chapter 2 has pointed out the limitations of deriving worker agency analysis from the theoretical frameworks. The methodology in this study aims to address these limitations by exploring how rural migrant workers perceive and navigate their factory work subjectively. Specifically, I conducted ten months of ethnographic research in total in two factories in China, described by the pseudonyms of SolarExcellence and PrettyDress. Via these ethnographic methods, I aimed to collect data on rural migrant workers' agency without being too narrowly constrained by theory.

In this chapter, I first explain why I chose qualitative methods generally and ethnography particularly for the project. Next, I introduce how my research questions and engagement with theory led me to draw upon the strengths and weakness of both grounded theory and extended case methods – the two major traditions of

ethnography – and to adopt an ethnographic approach that combined the two methods in order to study rural migrant workers' agency. I then introduce the two specific manufacturing factories that served as the specific sites for this ethnography. Next, I move on to elaborate on my actual research process in the factories, comparing and contrasting the two different factory settings and my accordingly adjusted research activities in the two factories. Finally, I introduce the process of data analysis and explain how I generated the themes that organize my research findings in subsequent chapters.

Qualitative Methods and Ethnography

Qualitative methods constitute especially useful tools for studying people's subjective worlds. Qualitative methods place rural migrant workers' own remarks, explanations, and articulations in the center of analysis, a necessary strategy for understanding their thoughts and considerations from their point of view. Given these strengths of qualitative methods, two reasons shaped my decision to conduct an ethnographic study within factories. First, in order to capture rural migrant workers' agency more fully and to grasp what is important to their subjective worlds rather than what is emphasized in theory (see chapter 2), I considered it important to approach rural migrant workers' thoughts and ideas in the context of their daily working situations rather than asking targeted theory-informed questions through formal interviews and similar qualitative methods. Second, for rural migrant workers to feel comfortable informally sharing their views with me in the context of their daily work settings, I needed to establish their trust. Therefore, instead of going to the

workers intermittently for interviews, I decided to conduct a long-term study where I spent 10 months as a participant observer in the factories themselves.

As the foundation of ethnographic research design, through deepening the researcher's understanding of the people and culture he/she is trying to study, participant observation enhances both the data obtained during fieldwork as well as the quality of its interpretation (Dewalt and Dewalt 2002). And "by participant observation, I mean a technique…of getting data…by subjecting yourself, your own body and your own personality, and your own social situation, to the set of contingencies that play upon a set of individuals, so that you can physically and ecologically penetrate their circle of response to their social situation, work situation, or ethnic situation, or whatever. So that you are close to them while they are responding to what life does to them…. This is not...to just listen to what they talk about, but to pick up on their minor grunts and groans as they respond to their situation… (Goffman 1989)." Given how much I emphasized understanding the rural migrant workers' lives and ideas from their perspectives, participant observation in Goffman's sense was necessary. I needed to approach the rural migrant workers in their daily natural living and working situations in order to deeply understand their daily life process and their perspectives.

In Between Grounded Theory and Extended Case Method

In choosing a specific approach to ethnography, the consideration of the particular articulation between theoretical engagement and empirical inquiry in this study is the key. On the one hand, the study is informed by Marxist theories of capitalist production and seeks to shed light on capital-labor power relations with potential

findings on worker agency. On the other hand, however, it tries to avoid being confined by Marxist theoretical frameworks and excluding observations of worker agency that do not seem to bear directly on the theoretical frameworks. This delicate balance between theory and data collection means that neither grounded theory (GT) nor the extended case method (ECM), the two major ethnographic approaches within social science research, is sufficient by itself.

A major dividing line between the two ethnographic methods lies in whether or not researchers approach fieldwork with preconceived research focuses and theoretical ideas. "Grounded theory methods consist of systematic, yet flexible guidelines for collecting and analyzing qualitative data to construct theories 'grounded' in the data themselves (Charmaz 2006: 2)." Following GT, researchers start fieldwork without any assumptions, categories or theories but draw patterns and conclusions solely based on fieldwork data. In contrast, ECM "deploys participant observation to locate everyday life in its extralocal and historical context" (Burawoy 1998: 1), which requires researchers to be familiar beforehand with the structural and historical contexts in which fieldwork is situated. And through ECM, researchers are promised to be able to "extract the general from the unique, to move from the 'micro' to the 'macro,' and to connect the present to the past in anticipation of the future, all by building on preexisting theory (Burawoy 1998: 5)".

For this study, with the preexisting theoretical frameworks and concerns about capitalist production and capital-labor relations, I chose not to adopt the approach of grounded theory to induce theories purely from field observations. Yet as I had no intention to rely on the Marxist frameworks to guide my empirical investigation but

tried to avoid the constraint actively, neither could I totally follow extended case method to derive data collection from the theories. And the strengths and weaknesses of GT and ECM made it more appropriate to combine the two approaches. First, ECM emphasizes the role of theory, which suits this project, but does not really discuss technical details of *how* to carry out fieldwork or *how* to analyze ethnographic data. "In spite of its name, this approach is relatively quiet on the nitty-gritty of qualitative research and instead delineates analytical steps to move from observations to broader structural social forces in order to extend one's favorite theory (Tavory and Timmermans 2014: 9)." In contrast, GT is meticulous about what kind of data should be collected in the field and what kind of techniques should be employed in order to generate theories that do not impose meanings on the data and fit well with the them. Such techniques include simultaneous data collecting and data-analyzing, line-by-line coding, focused coding, generating theoretical theme, etc. (Emerson 1995; Charmaz 2006). These techniques would be useful in guiding me through the ethnographic process and field note analysis, even though my final purpose was not to construct theories in this manner.

Second, even though I entered the field with the guidance of certain research agendas and theoretical ideas, I had no intention to make the study a closed and rigid test of one single theory – Marxist theories of capitalist exploitation in this case. Instead, I wanted to stay open to surprises and cared more about their own perceptions expressed in their own words. GT is helpful in this sense, as it makes great effort to emphasize openness in the field and has devised all sorts of techniques in asking questions and analyzing data so that the research will not distort the local

people's meanings (Emerson 1995: chapter 5). At the same time, however, by basing its theoretical construction on fieldwork data only, GT naturally produces knowledge close to social processes in daily life. ECM, however, aims to build on "theories that tie observations in the field to larger, usually unobservable patterns of control and macrostructures of domination (Tavory and Timmermans 2014: 18)." In other words, ECM grapples with narratives of abstract social structures while GT focuses on concrete micro social interactions. As the study seeks to speak to Marxist theories that deal with social structures and macroscopic social mechanisms related to capitalist production and exploitation, ECM seems appropriate in terms theoretical engagement.

In the beginning of the study, I designed and practiced a methodology that might be described as a combination of GT and ECM. I recognized my theoretical concerns as being valid on the one hand, whereas I took conscious efforts to loosen up the theoretical assumptions in my empirical inquiry in the field on the other hand. I guided my field study with five broad open-ended questions: (1) how do the rural migrant workers describe their work and life situations? (2) What choices do they perceive that they have regarding their work and life? (3) How do they explain their views of the kind of choices they envision for themselves? (4) What kind of future do they desire? And (5) what kind of actions do they plan to take in order to achieve their goals? These research questions address rural migrant workers' agency in factory production and the possible implications for understanding capital-labor power relations, yet they are not directly derived from the frameworks of capitalist exploitation advanced within labor studies. Instead, building on Ortner's theory on

agency, they seek to understand how the rural migrant workers considered and navigated their factory work and lives in general.

As a participant observer, I was interested in understanding the conditions in the factories where rural migrant workers worked, and hearing their ideas about whatever they discussed with me and, if they invited me in, with each other. When rural migrant workers initiated conversations, I listened patiently while they talked about what was important to them. I also observed their spontaneous interactions with each other. This approach allowed me to learn rural migrant workers' experience from *their* perspective instead of seeing them through *my* theoretical emphasis. Over time, it allowed various aspects of rural migrant workers' agency to become visible.

Three months in the field, I came across an additional ethnographic approach that seemingly satisfied my research purposes and fit well with the methodology I had been practicing intuitively. Developed by Iddo Tavery and Stefan Timmermans (2014) and published not long before my research, the methodology of abductive analysis suggests that researchers enter the field neither without preconceived theory, as in the case of GT, nor with only one single theory, as proposed by ECM. Instead, abductive analysis encourages researchers to become familiarized with multiple theories before starting ethnographic research, to be open to any observations and surprises in the field, and to go back and forth between various theories and field data in search for the best fit. Both my entering the field with theoretical knowledge and my commitment to open-mindedness in the field coincided with certain key components of abductive analysis. Yet as I initiated the ethnographic study without knowledge of the existence of abductive analysis, I was unable to follow its tenets to

their full advantage, especially in terms of the theoretical preparation before field research. I will discuss the implications of my both following this ethnographic approach and only doing so partially in the last chapter.

To summarize, the methodology I have chosen for this project constituted a combination of ECM and GT. On the one hand, following GT, I stay close and open to the field and interact with rural migrant workers in a rather spontaneous manner. I document any evidence that presented itself to me honestly, even if it might go contrary to my expectations or strike me as surprises. On the other hand, according to ECM, I see my ethnography as a case of exploring worker agency in capitalist production and planned to use the research findings to shed light on some general mechanisms of how power relations work between capital and labor.

Two Factories as the Research Sites

I selected two manufacturing factories in East China that employed a significant number of rural migrant workers as my sites of ethnography. The first factory, SolarExcellence, specialized in manufacturing chemical equipment for the solar power industry. It was a branch factory of its parent company in another city in Southern China. SolarExcellence was domestically invested, and its products were mostly traded on the domestic market with its own independent brand with a small amount exported to other Asian countries. SolarExcellence had around 170 employees, among which about 80 were male rural migrant workers in the workshops. About 80% of the workshop workers were male under 35, and they were my research participants at SolarExcellence.

The second factory, PrettyDress, processed garments for some Japanese brands with domestic capital investment. The Japanese brands provided the factory with the kind of designs they wanted and left the rest to PrettyDress, including purchasing raw materials, the actual clothes-making, and packaging. The factory employed around 90 rural migrant workers in total. Around 80 workers were females working on the sewing machines, except for several female and male workers responsible for measuring, cutting and packaging. My main research participants at PrettyDress were the female sewing workers, who were all middle-aged and married women.

Several considerations had shaped my selection of the two specific manufacturing factories as my ethnographic sites. First, I used the method of convenient sampling and relied on the help of friends and relatives to gain access to the factories. It would have been ideal if I could have obtained a list of all the registered manufacturing factories that employed rural migrant workers and then selected the research sites according to certain probability rules. But in the context of an authoritarian state, following the official path meant subjecting the research to official supervision and might jeopardize the rural migrant workers who spoke out unpleasant truths about the regime or the employers. Second, among the several factories that I had access to through the introduction of friends and relatives, I chose to study SolarExcellence and PrettyDress, instead of focusing on just one of them or studying other factories.

In making the decision, I took into consideration both my access to the factories and the characteristics of the sample. On the one hand, SolarExcellence and

PrettyDress offered me greater freedom as a researcher than the other factories because of my personal connections. My cousin was one of the three owners of SolarExcellence and its parent company. He was based in the parent company in another city, while another owner ran the SolarExcellence branch. Because of this personal connection, the factory owner of SolarExcellence gave me full liberty in the factory. As long as I did not impede the production process, I could stay in any workshop and talk to any worker with no restriction. I was also not required to share my observations with the management, making it easier to protect the interests of the workers. At the same time, my connection to the factory owners remained confidential and was not known to the workers. As for PrettyDress, one of my best friends had a cousin, named Jimmy, working there as the accountant of the factory. At a small firm like PrettyDress, the accountant became very familiar with the factory owners and was thus able to help me get permission from the latter. Without such connection, it would have been difficult to conduct research in the factory with a certain level of freedom. On the other hand, I tried to achieve sample diversity with my limited time and financial resources. I will soon introduce in more details the many differences between SolarExcellence and PrettyDress that made the observations and comparisons interesting. Moreover, because small factories like SolarExcellence and PrettyDress employing fewer than 300 employees accounted for more than 80% of Chinese manufacturing factories (National Bureau of Statistics of China 2016b), doing research in such understudied small factories seemed especially meaningful.

My cultural and linguistic backgrounds also facilitated my fieldwork in the two factories. I grew up in the province of Guizhou in Southwest China and then moved with my family to Shanghai at the age of 17, because my father is a local Shanghainese who was sent away during the Cultural Revolution in the 1960s. On the one hand, Southwest China is much less developed than the coastal regions and is thus one of the major origin points of rural migrant workers. My being fluent in the dialect of Southwest China gave me an advantage when I approached and talked to the migrant workers from that area. This was especially the case at PrettyDress, where about half of the workers came from Sichuan and Guizhou in Southwest China. On the other hand, as the two factories were located in the same region as Shanghai in East China, my familiarity with the Shanghai area as well as its dialect helped my navigation around the cities as well as the factories.

Next, I introduce the detailed backgrounds of the two factories, including the industries they were part of, the production processes and the physical spatial arrangements at each factory, the working conditions, and the demographic profiles of the rural migrant workers at the two factories provides a context for this study. This sets the stage for me to introduce my research activities in the factories in the next section, as my research activities and the kind of data I was able to collect were shaped by the different settings of the two factories.

1. SolarExcellence the solar power Factory

SolarExcellence was established in 2008 as a branch of its parent company in another city, which was founded in 2001. The whole enterprise specialized in designing and manufacturing chemical equipment used to process and refine silicon wafers installed

on solar panels. The company was thus situated in the middle of the commodity chain of the solar power industry. Over the years, the company had achieved great success, and its brand was very competitive on the domestic market. At the time of my study, its business was even successfully entering the South Asian market, competing well with some famous European brands.

The company had its golden year around 2010 and 2011, when the Chinese state actively supported the national development of the solar power industry. In fact, during the period of global economic crisis around 2008, China had already stepped up its effort to become a dominant player in green energy, including wind, solar, and geothermal power. Of the US $31.6 billion from the stimulus program allocated to green industries, 51 percent went to solar firms (Goswami 2010, So and Chu 2015). And at that point of time, Chinese governments at the national, provincial, and even local level were all competing with one another to offer solar companies ever more generous subsidies, including free land, and cash for research and development. State-owned banks were flooding the solar industry with loans at considerably lower interest rate than were available in Europe or the United States (Bradsher 2009b, So and Chu 2015).

However, as manufacturers swamped into the solar power industry to take advantage of the government policies, the competition soon led to overproduction in the industry in China. Moreover, as China still had limited market for solar power infrastructures, most of Chinese solar power products were exported to European countries. The European solar power brands found it difficult to compete with the Chinese ones, due to the latter's cheap prices. And the European solar power

providers boycotted Chinese competitors through a successful anti-dumping law suit against China. Around 2012 and 2013, therefore, the domestic overproduction and the European boycott together led to the collapse of China's solar power industry. SolarExcellence also suffered in the process and went through a period of profit reduction and downsizing. But as the company of SolarExcellence actively searched for new emerging markets, such as the South Asia, it bounced back and was doing fairly well during the time of my study.

The product of the SolarExcellence was mostly made of a special kind of plastic that could resist chemical corrosions. The workers first needed to use different types of machines to cut the purchased plastic boards into proper shapes, and then they needed to use welding guns to glue the pieces together in order to make the frames of the equipment as well as to form certain equipment parts like water tanks. After the equipment frames were established and the needed parts ready, the workers then assembled the parts into the equipment, also adding many other machine parts the factory had purchased from outside providers, like motors, air pumps, pipelines, and electric wires. Based on this production process, the rural migrant workers at SolarExcellence were divided into two production departments and five working teams, and they were distributed into four different workshops. The two workshops in one building were occupied by the two teams of workers in the processing department, who respectively cut and welded plastic boards. And the other two workshops in the other building belonged to the three teams of assembling department: the electricians, plumber and assemblers, whose job was putting the equipment together. Every team had a team leader, and each department had a

department director. And there was a chief manager taking charge of both the departments of production.

The organization of the production process and its spatial arrangement in the SolarExcellence determined that the workers were widely distributed in four workshops, with no more than 25 workers in each workshop most of the time. Furthermore, the workers were quite mobile during their work. Those in the processing department walked around in the workshops between the raw materials and the cutting and welding machines. As for the workers in the assembly department, small groups of two or three in the same team moved from equipment to equipment to work on their part. The SolarExcellence workers were granted a certain level of freedom and autonomy at work. As long as they keep up with their productivity, they could walk around freely, use the restrooms and drink water whenever they wanted, and chat with each other. They were even allowed to take a ten-minute break for smoking every two working hours.

As part of a successful enterprise, SolarExcellence managed its production and employees in a formal manner. All the rules were spelled out in the labor contract, even though the real conditions sometimes deviated from the formal standards. For example, the official working hours on the contract were 8:00 – 12:00 am and 1:00 – 5:00 pm on the weekdays. But during most of my study at SolarExcellence, the workers had to do overtime during busy seasons, working till 9:00 pm or 10:00 pm on the weekdays and working for at least eight hours on the weekends. On the labor contract, the workers' wages at SolarExcellence had three main components: (1) the minimum base wage and the minimum hourly rate

stipulated by law; (2) the legally required overtime compensation, which was 1.5 times the regular rate on weekdays, twice on weekends and three times on national holidays; (3) the piece rate incentive designed by the factory. The piece rate incentive worked out as follows: the managers estimated each production task and decided upon the number of hours needed to complete the task with average productivity; each piece rate hour was worth a certain amount of wage, and if the workers could finish the production task with less hours than estimated, they were still paid the full amount. For example, if it would take on average 200 hours to lay out the pipelines of a piece of equipment and each hour was worth 10 yuan, a plumber who used 150 hours to finish the job would be paid 2,000 yuan of piece rate reward.

While most of the SolarExcellence workers found the wage level more or less reasonable – 4000 to 7000 yuan (about $600 to $1000) based on performance, qualifications and seniority – they complained that it had dropped somewhat since the wage reform that had happened a year before my fieldwork. In the past, the workers were paid overtime compensation according to the law, with a small piece rate incentive of 2 yuan per hour. With the wage reform, the overtime compensation was cancelled, which was illegal, while the piece rate incentive was raised to 5 yuan per hour. Based on my interview with the HR manager, the original intention of the wage reform had been to encourage productivity during regular working hours and reduce unnecessary overtime. But things did not work out as planned. The workers complained about the piece rate wages being deducted for no reasons, which prevented them from being fully motivated to work efficiently during daytime, and overtime still being forced upon them sometimes. Therefore, most workers expressed

their desire of going back to the original wage plan, especially during the busy season when overtime was intense and required.

As for other aspects of the workers' working conditions, the workshops were spacious and tidy with clean restrooms, smoking rooms and water dispensers. SolarExcellence provided all the employees with three subsidized meals per day at the factory cafeteria. Most workers commented that the food was pretty good, and I agreed with them. But the dinner was usually simpler, mostly with leftovers from that day's lunch, so some workers also went outside of the factory for dinner sometimes. Above the factory cafeteria was the factory dormitory. The second and third floors were reserved for the managers and their families, while the third till the sixth floors were for the employees, including both the workshop workers and the office employees. However, the factory dormitory did not allow common workers to live there with their partners or children. It was a privilege reserved for the managers. Therefore, the workers with families usually lived in rented places close to the factory. Another sign of the relative good working conditions of SolarExcellence was that many workers actually drove to work every day. Car ownership was not uncommon for the workers of SolarExcellence.

Given the promising future and relatively good working conditions of SolarExcellence, it did not seem difficult for the factory to hire educated workers. More than 60% of the SolarExcellence workers had at least high school education, with some having technical college diplomats and a few even graduating from four-year colleges. The migrant workers at SolarExcellence mainly came from Jiangsu, Hunan, and Hubei, with a few from a variety of places including Henan, Shangdong,

and Heilongjiang. The factory tended to attract local workers from the rural areas. And as the factory owner and his wife respectively came from Hubei Province and Hunan Province, they had introduced a few relatives from their hometowns, who in turn had brought in more people from the same regions. 80% of the male migrant workers were between 20 and 40, and about 70% of male migrant workers were married with children.

2. PrettyDress the garment factory

Unlike SolarExcellence, a factory that was intensive in capital and technology and belonged to the new and rising solar power industry, PrettyDress was part of the labor-intensive clothing industry that had been falling over the past decade or so in China. The clothing industry used to see an average yearly growth of 13.3% during the first three decades of China's economic reform from 1980 to 2008. But it started to decline as China tried to move away from low value-added activities and as the state began to encourage industries with technological innovation (Zhang et al. 2014). When the Chinese state was investing in industries like solar power, it was pulling away its support for industries like clothing manufacturing.

PrettyDress was opened about 20 years ago by two men. One of the factory owners was in charge of the business outside of the factory, such as purchasing raw materials and negotiating orders, and was rarely involved in the production process within the factory. The other factory owner, on the contrary, was in direct charge of the management of the factory and the employees. During my study at PrettyDress, both factory owners expressed no longer feeling motivated to develop the clothing business and were considering shutting down PrettyDress and transferring to other

business. According to them, the government was more and more strict about labor laws in dealing with traditional manufacturing industries, such requiring factory employers to pay social insurances for rural migrant employees and inflicting heavy fines in cases of disobey. Chen Guangbiao[4], the factory owner in charge of inside management, complained to me that the government was deliberately squeezing factories like his out of business, because such strict labor laws reduced his already small profit margins to almost nothing. At the same time, small garment factories like PrettyDress also faced severe competition both from capital-intensive automatized clothing factories in countries like Japan and from factories that had moved to poorer countries like Vietnam and Cambodia with lower labor costs. Therefore, the factory owners of PrettyDress were looking for other ways to diversify his investment and to make money. For example, they rented out part of the unused factory land next to PrettyDress to a metal factory. As a matter of fact, PrettyDress was shut down in 2016 a few months after my study there had ended.

The clothes-making process at PrettyDress was divided into several major steps: cutting the cloth into proper shapes, sewing the pieces of cloth together to make clothes, checking the clothes preliminarily for mistakes, ironing the clothes, checking the quality again more carefully, and finally packaging the clothes. My research participants at PrettyDress were the 80 female workers sharing the main workshop, who included the sewing workers and the preliminary quality-checking workers.

[4] For anonymity, I use pseudonyms for the research participants throughout the dissertation.

They were divided more or less evenly into four different working teams, with each team performing the same jobs.

In every team, the sewing machines lined up in two rows, one facing the front side of the workshop and the other facing the back of the workshop. The two rows of machines thus formed kind of a circle. Because of this layout of the machines, half of the sewing workers faced the other half of the workers in a team when they worked together. Each worker in a team was responsible for sewing one part of a batch of clothes, and a worker passed the clothes to the next worker once she finished her step. Therefore, the clothes-making process in each team was similar to an assembly line, only that the products were not moved step by step through an automatic belt but by the workers themselves. Each sewing team was also assigned a quality-checking worker, who sat at a big desk in the front of the workshop and who was responsible for checking preliminarily every piece of clothes made by the team of sewing workers. They took care of small flaws, such as cutting off loose thread ends and cleaning stains with chemical spray. And they asked the sewing workers to mend major flaws that required the usage of sewing machines. Once the clothes passed their check, the quality-checking workers delivered the clothes to the workers responsible for ironing and packaging. Each team had one team leader, with all the rest of its members being common workers. But the differences between team leaders and common workers did not seem significant, as the team leaders also needed to participate in sewing work. Unlike the relatively developed management hierarchy at SolarExcellence, one factory owner of PrettyDress was the only person supervising the entire workshop and having real management power.

The production process and the corresponding machine arrangement at PrettyDress also led to a different spatial layout from that of SolarExcellence. While the workers at SolarExcellence were distributed rather thinly across four workshops, the PrettyDress workers all sat in close distance with each other in the same workshop. And PrettyDress workers were also much less mobile during their work than their SolarExcellence counterparts, as they needed to sit in front their sewing machines or quality-check desks most of the time. Such different physical arrangement would have significant impact on my different interaction patterns with the workers at SolarExcellence and PrettyDress respectively.

There was no written labor contract at PrettyDress, and the rules were tacitly understood and followed by the workers. The workers were required to work from Monday to Saturday. Working hours started at 7:30 in the morning and ended at 9:00 at night, with two half-hour meal break in between, one for lunch and one for dinner. Such were the regular working hours, and there was no concept of "overtime" at PrettyDress. Sometimes when production tasks were intense, the workers even had to work on Sundays. But such occasions were rather rare, because it tended to arouse strong resentment and great disappointment from the workers, given that they only had one resting day each week. According to the workers at PrettyDress, all factories in the garment industry required such long working hours, though state-owned large factories would offer overtime compensation.

The workers' wages at PrettyDress were around 3000 yuan per month (approximately $450). And the factory owner kept the details of wage calculation as a secret. The workers at PrettyDress only vaguely knew that their wages were decided

by their outputs each month and the unit price of the various steps they worked on that month. But no one knew how much each step paid and how their monthly wages were exactly calculated. And the rumor was that the factory owner paid more to the workers he liked, usually those who were both pretty and skillful. I knew at least one such sewing worker who earned more than 5000 yuan each month. The workers at PrettyDress were not satisfied with the averagely low wages or the unclear composition of the wages. But they generally accepted the wage situations, because, according to them, wages were always low in the garment industry and they were used to it and they thought that their wages would still be more or less the same even if they figured out the compositions of the wages.

The working environment at PrettyDress was not as good as that at SolarExcellence but accommodated basic human needs. The workshop was equipped with bathrooms and water dispensers, though they were not in very good conditions. The workers were allowed to do various things freely during work, as long as they kept up their productivity. The workers at PrettyDress could walk around briefly during work, eat and drink when they needed to, chat with each other, listen to music or radio, and even watch videos on their phones or tabloids when they were not very busy. Occasionally I also saw one or two workers leaving the factory to deal with personal business and being absent for work for an hour or so. Meals at PrettyDress had poor nutrition as well as taste. The amount was small, and the dishes were mostly vegetarian, with only a little meat for lunch. The workers all complained to me about the quality of the meals, and they all told me that they had to eat again when they went home after work, because the meals at PrettyDress just did not keep them full.

In winter, the dishes were even cold. And PrettyDress did not offer dormitories and the workers had to rent their own living spaces in the area[5].

As for the demographic profiles of the female workers, they were mostly from Anhui Province and Sichuan Province, with a few from Guizhou Province and the local suburb. According to the workers, there had been a team of workers from Anhui and a team from Sichuan at PrettyDress back in the day, and they kept referring their friends and relatives from the same regions. 90% of the female workers were married women aged from mid-30s to mid-50s, and they had an average working experience in the clothing industry for a decade. It was becoming nearly impossible for garment factories to hire younger workers. According to both the factory owner and the PrettyDress workers, few of the new generation of female rural migrant workers was learning the sewing skills, because working in garment factories was too exhausting and paid too little. They instead preferred working in the service industries. Moreover, the younger generation of rural migrants are also better educated, and garment factory jobs that even accept illiterates were no longer attractive to them.

Research Activities at SolarExcellence and PrettyDress

The last section has laid out the factory settings of SolarExcellence and PrettyDress in a detailed manner, which sets the stage for me to explain my research activities in the concrete contexts of the two factories. In this section, I first explain the research

[5] The rent was more than 1500 yuan for an apartment in the city, while it was less than 500 yuan in the suburb area. But the conditions of the apartment in the city were also much better.

activities that I did similarly in both factories. Then I introduce the things I did differently in the two factories according to the different conditions of SolarExcellence and PrettyDress[6].

At both factories, my main research activities happened during the rural migrant workers' daytime work. I went to the workshops from Monday to Friday around the same time with the workers in the morning and left around 5:00 pm. I limited my research to the workers' regular working hours, because most of time they *were* working and they tended to be exhausted after work. I also normally did not continue my fieldwork into the overtime hours, because I needed time to process my fieldnotes every day. The workers did not feel comfortable with me using any digital recording devices, so I collected copious and detailed fieldnotes by writing in a notebook very fast and using shorthand. I thus had to organize and type the notes into the computer at the end of each day, before my memory got blurred or I failed to recognize my own handwriting. But occasionally, I went to the workshops during overtime hours for a change, in order to see the workers under different circumstances.

[6] My research activities at SolarExcellence and PrettyDress were regulated and approved by the IRB of the University of Maryland (project#: 576973). The informed consent was waived for participant observation. Unlike formal interviews, it was not practically to get signed informed consent forms from every person I casually talked to at the factories. My research did not involve deceptions that put the migrant workers at risk. The only information I withheld with caution was about my educational backgrounds, as I will explain in the text.

I followed the basic principles of my methodology at both SolarExcellence and PrettyDress. The workers initiated the conversations most of the time both with each other and with me. I followed the topics they brought up by posing "how" and "why" questions to ask for more details of the information they gave me. Sometimes I also asked simple question, such as how they liked working in the factory and what their migration and working history was like. It was actually not easy being open-minded and comfortable with topics brought up by the rural migrant workers that seemed irrelevant to Marxist perspectives of capitalist production. I went through a learning process rather than being good at it right from the beginning of the ethnography. And it was the workers who taught me to listen better and to remain patient with conversations that did not seem to have directions at the moment.

I still remember how, when I just started my fieldwork, some migrant workers got annoyed as I ignored their interests and insisted on talking about subjects that *I* found important. For instance, Jin Long from SolarExcellence, a 37-year-old plastic welder whose biggest passion was traveling, refused to answer my questions when I tried to collect information on his migration and working experience. He complained, *"Who would keep track of such boring stuff all the time, in which year I did what job? I don't remember that! I only remember which cities I have been to and what kind of fun I have had there!"*

And I also learned that it was always better to ask questions that I assumed to be "obvious" or "unnecessary". For example, one day around 3:00pm, Xu Lirui, a 26-year-old plumber at SolarExcellence, said to me, *"I will stop working hard now and do something casually till it's time to get off work."* Hearing this, I immediately

thought: he must be tired of the repetitive physical work and is resisting it in his own small way. Not assuming my correctness, however, I asked Xu if that was the case. Xu shook his head, *"no, not that. It's because I have my own system. I make plans about an appropriate workload for myself. Once I finish that, even if I have time and can do more, I will not."* It turned out that Xu intentionally did not work to his full capacity but calculated the best cost-benefit combination for his efforts, because he believed that not all his hours of working were fully recorded and rewarded due to the flawed management system at the factory. Xu was indeed resisting in his own ways, not against the repetitive physical work, as I had imagined, but against the wage system.

Another example concerned a 25-year-old CNC operator at SolarExcellence, Wang Shuangwu, who once told me that his father had a friend running a garment factory in Suzhou. His father asked Wang to go to work there, but he was rather reluctant. I imagined it to be because of Wang's gender idea that a male should not work as a sewing worker. But once I asked Wang about this, Wang replied, *"no. I'm just afraid that I would hurt my hands, because I had no idea how to use a sewing machine."* Later I found out that another male worker named Lee Bo used to work in a garment factory and that PrettyDress once had male sewing workers as well. It turned out that I was the one with unsupported gender assumptions.

In all, at both SolarExcellence and PrettyDress, I collected data through spending time with the rural migrant workers during their regular daytime working hours. And I followed the methodology specifically designed to remain open to evidence and to avoid being constraint by preconceived theoretical assumptions. At

the same time, my actual interactions with the rural migrant workers and my data collection process at SolarExcellence and PrettyDress had some differences, because of the different physical setup and demographic composition of the two factories as well as the different kinds of access I had to the factories. Next, I summarize my research process at SolarExcellence and PrettyDress, including how I explained who I was, my activities when I was with the rural migrant workers, the role I played in each factory, and the way I interacted with the migrant workers.

1. Research process at SolarExcellence

To maintain confidential my connections with the factory owenrs, I was not introduced to the migrant workers or ushered into the workshops by anyone from the factory. The SolarExcellence workers had not known my existence before I first set foot into one of the workshops on my own. I just went into a workshop by myself on a morning in March 2015 and began to figure out a way to build rapport with the workers on the spot.

As discussed earlier, the workers at SolarExcellence were dispersed in four different workshops, with each spacious workshop having no more than 25 workers at any given moment. Moreover, the workers worked as individuals or in groups of two to three people and moved among machines and equipment. This physical arrangement made it possible for me to work my way into the field through approaching individual workers one after another, giving me the opportunity to explain myself to individual workers and get familiar with each of them on a more personal level. I approached one or two individual workers or one or two small groups of workers each day, till I got to know all the migrant workers at

SolarExcellence. In the earlier stage, before I started collecting information from the workers, I kept testing and adjusting the way I introduced myself to the workers I came into contact with till I gradually worked out a narrative about myself and my research that I judged to be honest, understandable, and acceptable to the workers. The main points of the narrative were as follows:

I am a college student in Shanghai. I am here to study for my thesis. I am interested in China's manufacturing industries as they are developing very fast now and becoming Chinese economy's mainstay. I am also interested in the situations of the employees at the production lines[7]*, as you are the most important people in the industries. I happen to have a relative who knows someone who knows this factory, so I was introduced here to take a look at the actual production processes. It's important for me to spend some time here, because I didn't get to learn these things from books. I will just observe around and chat a little with you when you have time. I am not an employee here and I don't receive salaries from the boss. And I will be here for several months.*

Most migrant workers at SolarExcellence seemed to accept me quickly. A few workers appeared a little suspicious in the beginning, worrying that I was there to spy on them for the factory management. But as they saw nothing bad happen to the workers who talked to me, they gradually began to see me as harmless. As I became more familiar with the SolarExcellence workers and started collecting data from them, I also revealed that I was actually a PhD student in the U.S. The migrant

[7] I avoided using the word "workers" (*"gongren"* in Chinese) as it suggests low class status in the Chinese context.

workers were very curious about my experience in a foreign country, especially as it was a country they perceived to be more powerful and superior than China. They asked me many questions about my life in the U.S., which I answered honestly. It enlivened our conversations sometimes and also contributed to the construction of a more equal relationship between the workers and me. It conveyed the idea that I was not just a researcher who took information from them; instead, I also shared my personal stories, and we were there for mutual understanding.

Each day, therefore, I followed a small number of workers around the workshops. I closely observed their working process and helped them whenever I could, such as holding machine parts for them, fetching tools for them, and sometimes even learning to weld or assemble things with them. Then we chatted with each other casually at the same time. Because I spent a rather long time with an individual worker or a group of two to three workers in a relatively private context, we tended to end up having lengthy and deep conversations. The workers seemed more comfortable sharing their stories and opinions in such a private setting, as they sometimes stopped talking when other people happened to pass by.

2. Research Process at PrettyDress

When I first visited PrettyDress briefly as a possible site for research in 2014, I noticed that all the sewing workers were concentrated in one small workshop. I imagined that, if I went in there on my own, all the workers at PrettyDress would see me at the same time and wonder who I was. And I would have no time to warm up in the environment or to work out my identity gradually. Therefore, at PrettyDress, I needed to be introduced to the workers in some sort of a collective manner. Before I

started my research there, Jimmy had spread the information to the workers casually during their daily interactions that they were expecting a college girl to do some fieldwork for her thesis at the workshop. Jimmy also told the workers that I was originally from Guizhou province, which turned out to be an important icebreaker for my study at PrettyDress.

The moment I stepped into the workshop on the first day of my study at PrettyDress, I was pulled aside by a female worker. Zhang Cai, a 48-year-old quality checker, also came from Guizhou, and she bombarded me with how happy she was to see another person from her hometown and offered to help me settle down if I had not done that already. Then Zhang invited me to the desk where she carried out her quality-checking work and started to chat with me. Through this incident, I seemed to have immediately blended into the workshop instead of standing there without knowing anyone and maybe being stared at by all the workers. But the awkwardness of always being seen by all the workers in the same workshop never disappeared throughout my entire stay at PrettyDress, with various impact on my research process.

To get to know the PrettyDress workers, I also approached them individually. As the female workers had to sit statically most of the time, I usually spent the whole morning and/or the whole afternoon sitting next to one sewing worker or one quality-checking worker. I observed her work and helped her if I could, such as cutting the loose threads and folding the clothes. And we chatted casually at the same time. Because of the close distance between the workers, those sitting around sometimes also participated in the conversations voluntarily. The way I introduced myself to the PrettyDress workers was similar to what I had told the SolarExcellence workers,

except that I kept the initial story of a college student working on my thesis without ever revealing my American PhD backgrounds. Given the much lower educational level of the PrettyDress workers, I judged that it was better not to present too large an educational gap between me and the female workers.

Unlike at SolarExcellence, where I could talk to individual workers with some privacy, the tight spatial layout of the PrettyDress workshop meant that every behavior of me or any worker – however small – drew attention from other workers. Therefore, my research process at PrettyDress felt more limited. The female workers also seemed more discreet when talking me and might have avoided certain comments that could jeopardize their relations with other people at PrettyDress. For example, while the team leaders at SolarExcellence candidly shared with me their difficult position as low-level management people, I did not hear any such comments from the team leaders at PrettyDress voluntarily. When I asked them what it was like to be team leaders, they seemed to avoid responding or respond very vaguely. One team leader at PrettyDress, 45-year-old Zeng Changhong, replied in a curt manner, "*I'm no different from the other people here.*" It could be that the team leaders were reluctant to admit their power positions, worrying that it might make them look assuming in the eyes of the common workers. But they could also be telling how they really felt, given the fact that the team leaders at PrettyDress also needed to work together with the sewing workers and the quality-checkers.

At the same time, however, this lack of privacy and the constant attention from others did not stop the workers at PrettyDress from revealing their negative opinions about various aspects of the factory and its people. The workers still

complained about the working conditions at PrettyDress and the factory owner's stinginess, when they saw that the factory owner was nowhere near them at that moment. And the workers still expressed to me their dislikes towards other workers with lowered voice. I have actually collected abundant evidence on the mutual unfriendliness expressed by the PrettyDress workers. Interestingly, even though it seemed easier for the male workers at SolarExcellence to tell me negative things about each other during our private conversations, I seldom heard such comments from them. It seemed to have to do with gender, which I am explaining next.

3. Different gender dynamics at SolarExcellence and PrettyDress

Even though gender, especially gender differences, is not a focus of the dissertation, it is important to address the topic given the salient contrast of gender distributions of the two factories. As a field researcher, I felt very differently doing research at SolarExcellence and at PrettyDress. One of the factors that influenced the general contour of my research activities was the different gender compositions of the two factories.

I initiated my ethnography with SolarExcellence. Even though the gender dynamics between the male rural migrant workers and me certainly shaped our interactions, I did not reflect on the gender aspect of my fieldwork until I was able to compare it to my experience at PrettyDress. My first stage of research at SolarExcellence went rather smoothly. The male migrant workers seemed to welcome my existence among them and talked to me friendly most of the time. When I transferred to PrettyDress, I tried to continue whatever approaches I had taken at SolarExcellence in interacting with the workers because they seemed successful. But

I soon learned that it would not work. The importance of gender at PrettyDress forced me to both adjust my behaviors in my interactions with the female workers at PrettyDress and to reflect upon my interactions with the male workers at SolarExcellence.

At SolarExcellence, one way of getting closer to the male workers was to show my eagerness in learning their skills at work. I was clumsy at using welding guns and handling other tasks first, but the male workers not only did not mind but actually found my ignorance quite amusing. They patiently corrected my mistakes each time, and encouraged me and cheered me for the slighted progress I made in learning the tricks. I took such interactions almost for granted until I went to PrettyDress. When I tried to learn to use the sewing machine, thinking that it would bring me closer to the sewing workers, the workers all had a good laugh and said *"why would you learn this? Making clothes is so bitter."* One team leader offered to teach me a little, but I failed to sew even a straight line after several trials. Worse still, I managed to break two needles within an hour due to my improper handling of the sewing machine. The team leader who seemed friendly at first was no longer enthusiastic in answering my repeated asking for help, and she started to show impatience on her face and in her tone. Since then, at PrettyDress, I did not try to learn to sew again and limited my activities to helping the female workers in small ways, such as sorting out the clothes, counting the clothes, and cutting the loose thread ends. Looking back, I wonder if my enthusiasm of asking for guidance from the male workers and their offering me help pulled us together because the interaction patterns fit the traditional femininity-masculinity relations.

At PrettyDress, I also needed to control my behavior in a different way than when I was at SolarExcellence. Recall that when I first stepped into the workshop of PrettyDress, I was received warmly by Zhang Cai, a 48-year-old quality-checking worker from Guizhou. I was very grateful for her and for the smooth entrance into PrettyDress, and I moved forward with this positive and optimistic attitude and started to approach other female workers in the workshop. The female workers all seemed smiley and nice, making me feel good about how things were going with my fieldwork at PrettyDress. I had no idea an unexpected blow was on its way.

On the first day of my second week at PrettyDress, I approached Cheng Xiuying, a 36-year-old sewing worker in team #3, for the first time. After I sat down next to her, Cheng made the following comment,

> *"they said that you were a very thoughtless girl, but I thought you were fine! And you just came out of college, how thoughtful should we expect you to be? I actually think you're good. I saw you helping the team leader of team #2 drag the bags of clothes the other day. A really thoughtless girl would just sit there and watch. I looked at you and I thought about my own little daughter. Would people also judge her like that when she grows up and starts working?"*

Cheng's words rendered me shocked and speechless. Her validation did not make me feel any better. All I could hear was that the female workers judged me as being thoughtless behind my back, and I had no clue what I had done to make them say that. Worse still, I had thought that they liked me and had not suspected anything going wrong. As I continued to talk with Cheng, I realized that it was probably

because of one incident that had not even crossed my mind as problematic when it happened. One day on my way from my rented place to the factory, I bought several apples that I planned to eat one that day and save the rest for the next few days. And as I walked into the workshop that morning, Zhang Cai and I said hello to each other. Then I put my stuff away as usual, including the apples, and started my research as usual. According to Cheng, however, my behavior of not asking Zhang whether she wanted to have an apple was interpreted by her and/or other workers she chatted with as being stingy, thoughtless, and impolite. And Cheng vaguely mentioned that she heard the workers gossip about this when they were in the restroom.

This incident shook my understanding of myself and my belief in my social skills. At that moment, it gave me the exaggerated feeling of being a failure both as a researcher and as a person. Yet as I spent more time at PrettyDress, I gradually learned that what I experienced personally actually reflected certain norms of how the female workers were supposed to behave among each other. Mine was a first-hand experience of the pervasive disciplines that the female workers gave each other in the factory, through constant gaze and gossiping. Every small behavior and incident was under the surveillance of everyone and could lead to harsh judgment behind people's back.

What confused me even more was the observation that the female workers behaved like each other's friends on the surface, no matter how much they talked ill of each other behind the back. For instance, I once witnessed a dramatic verbal fight between the management factory owner on the one side and two sewing workers in team #2 on the other side – Guo Liping, a 54-year-old sewing worker, and her 24-

year-old daughter Jiang Xiaorong. I did not know what the fight was about exactly, because I was sitting a bit far from scene in team #1, next to Zhang Cai and Chen Xiufen, a 35-year-old sewing worker. Therefore, I only heard Zhang's and Cheng's opinions and gossips regarding the fight at the same time as the fight was going on.

Zhang said, *"who do they think they are, fighting with the owner?!"* Cheng agreed and turned to tell me that the mother and the daughter were really difficult to get along with. *"They fight with the owner. How can they be easy to get along with?"* And there were more similar gossips and judgments exchanged between Cheng and Zhang, some of which stroke me as being rather mean, such as, *"either go or stay (quiet)! Always fighting and fighting… (gives us) such a headache!"* Later in the process of my fieldwork, I learned from quite a few PrettyDress workers that Guo and Jiang seemed to have a temper and tended to fight with almost everybody at the factory. And many workers expressed to me their dislike for the mother and the daughter. At the same time, however, everyone smiled at Guo and Jiang and talked to them like friends at work every day. One would not be able to tell the underlying tensions just by looking at the female workers interact with each other on the surface.

Another example was about Guo Lifeng in team #1, a 34-year-old sewing worker who had always given me the impression of a nice, mild, and quiet person. I had not expected her to display the same kind of behavior. One day, the factory owner got upset with a worker in team #4, and he turned off all the machines in that team as a demonstration of his anger. According to Guo Lifeng, it was because the worker had shifted back and forth between two sewing teams without the owner's permission. At the same time, Guo Lifeng told me that it was Cheng Xiufen, her

coworker in the same team and the same person who harshly judged Guo Liping and her daughter in an earlier example, who made the owner even angrier than he needed to be. Guo Lifeng said in a despising tone, *"Cheng Xiufe kept saying to the factory owner, 'she didn't really respect you' 'she didn't really respect you'. Otherwise, the owner would not have become so angry. Cheng Xiufen likes making mischief between people. She meddles with other people's business all the time."* But later, I still saw Guo Lifeng and Chen Xiufen talk to each other in a very friendly way. This kind of "double-faced" behavior among the PrettyDress workers never stopped puzzling me.

Interestingly, the PrettyDress workers themselves were aware of this kind of dynamics going on among the workers at the factory. Zhao Haiyan, a 25-year-old sewing worker, once said to me,

> *"people here are really funny. They tell you all sorts of bad things about another person… If someone keeps telling me that a person is bad, I will really feel that that person is bad…"*

Zhao also shared with me one of her experiences of the disciplining pressure she felt from her coworkers at the factory. Zhao used to love wearing heels. As a tall girl with a body in shape, Zhao enjoyed dressing up a little and feeling pretty. Yet, according to Zhao, her coworkers in the team all laughed at her and nagged her about her heels, saying that it was so unnecessary given her height. Zhao finally got tired of their mocks and laughs day after day, and she gave up her heels eventually. But Zhao still felt wronged and unfair when she told me about the experience months after.

I witnessed still another incident happening to Zhao Haiyan, which suggested the difficulty of working among the female coworkers. Due to the absence of a

coworker one day, Zhao was assigned by the group leader to work on the absent worker's load. But it involved a procedure that Zhao had never done before, so she had to learn through doing, which she accepted as useful for her future work. I was sitting beside Zhao, and I saw her make great efforts to do it right. But no matter how hard she tried, she just could not get it straight. So she called out the factory owner for guidance when he passed by. The factory owner stopped to teach her and Zhao did better afterwards. While I thought Zhao's behavior was nothing but normal and understandable, at least one of her coworkers, 36-year-old Xu Wenjuan, did not seem to agree. Moments later, when another worker in the team was complaining about her difficult work, Xu said sarcastically, *"haven't you learnt your lesson? Look at those who knew how to ask for the owner's help. How easy things became!"*

Not used to the female workers' intense social interactions and their discipline at PrettyDress, I found it really difficult to navigate or even just survive in such a social setting. I did not know how to behave, who to trust, who were genuinely nice and whose kindness was just politeness. And I no longer felt at ease in the workshop, feeling that I had to watch my own behaviors all the time in order not to be judged negatively by the workers again. But I would still make "mistakes" from time to time.

Associated with the close mutual surveillance among the PrettyDress workers was their lack of privacy in the workshop. It seemed to be the norm to share everything with everyone. For example, whenever someone received a package from online shopping, other workers would make sure that the person opened the package right away in the workshop to show everyone the what the item was or to try it on it was clothes. And the person needed to answer all sorts of questions, including where

she bought the thing, how much it cost, so on and so forth. And the person was supposed to answer every question with details and a good attitude. Then the female workers would discuss and make various judgments about the item's style, color, price, etc.

But even a seemingly friendly and innocuous discussion like this was not necessarily as innocent as it appeared. There was one time when Zhang Cai received a red down coat from online shopping, and she looked very happy and proud as she opened it and tried it on in front of her coworkers. And her coworkers also seemed all excited and had a lively conversation on how much it was, whether it was a good deal, and how beautiful it looked on Zhang. At the moment, I was sitting next to Chen Yanmei, a 35-year-old sewing worker in the same team. Chen whispered to me, *"look at her! Zhang Cai does not make much money, but she bought one coat after another as if she were rich. And I don't really like the color of this one."* With this comment, Chen rolled her eyes. But the very next instant, Chen Yanmei turned to Zhang with a big smile on her face and shouted *"that is a really beautiful coat!"* leaving me stunned by such blatant double-dealing.

The complicated social relations among the female workers at PrettyDress actually made me miss my days at SolarExcellence, where things seemed much simpler. The experiences at PrettyDress also made gender stand out, forcing me to *see* gender in my interactions with the male workers at SolarExcellence as well as among themselves. For one thing, as a young girl, I was treated kindly by the male workers probably because of certain norms of interactions between the opposite sexes. For another thing, if the male workers did not like each other, they simply did not bother

to talk to each other instead of spreading negative comments behind each other's back. Both their friendliness and unfriendliness seemed more straightforward among the male workers, and it still puzzled me to this day why the female workers needed to maintain that superficial friendliness. The different gender patterns that I observed in the two factories made me perceive the female workers at PrettyDress as a tighter group with dynamic group interactions while seeing the male workers at SolarExcellence more as separate individuals.

In the next chapter, I examine why PrettyDress workers shared more similar backgrounds with each other and discuss how maintaining frequent interactions – whether they were negative or positive – with each other might help them deal with the boredom of work. But the major empirical findings I present in Chapter 5 and 6 do not focus on such gender differences. Instead, in the limited scope of this dissertation, I mainly address themes that could be applied to both SolarExcellence and PrettyDress, and I pay more attention to the rural migrant workers' subjective perceptions and ideas as individuals.

Data Analysis Process During and After the Ethnography

As I have mentioned in the last section, I kept fieldnotes with a pen and a notebook during my research at SolarExcellence and PrettyDress. And I typed my fieldnotes into the computer after each day's fieldwork. By the end of my research, I compiled a large amount of raw qualitative data of approximately one million Chinese characters. Here I discuss how I analyzed the fieldnotes, identified themes, and generated insights from the fieldwork that shed light on the five guiding research questions that I introduced at the beginning of this chapter.

It is important to point out that ethnographic research is hardly a linear process, and data collection and data analysis are usually not clearly separated. In the process of interacting with the rural migrant factory workers, I was bound to reflect on what I had observed and to attempt to make sense of my experience in the field. Such reflections influenced, implicitly or explicitly, what I paid attention to and tried to pursue in the field in the next step. Whether the leads proved to be worth pursuing, however, depended on how well the story fit with the reality I had access to.

For example, spending a month at SolarExcellence left me with the impression that the migrant workers seemed to be suffering because of what I called "non-standardized production" of the factory. Part of SolarExcellence's products of solar power equipment were not completely standardized but had to be tailored according to specific demands of particular customers. Yet the engineers at SolarExcellence did not seem to always do a good job handling the details of the non-standardized products, and the workers often received flawed design blueprints. Some of the mistakes were difficult for the workers to notice during the production process, so they had to redo their work when they found that the final product did not function properly. Sometimes the workers could catch the flaws before the damage was done, and they changed the design based on their experience to prevent further problems. I heard repeated complaints from the workers directed towards the "incompetent" and "overpaid" engineers. Observing all these, I could not help thinking about theories on capitalist exploitation of labor. The company seemed to hold a competitive edge in the market by offering customized products. Yet instead of investing more money on hiring more competent engineers or training them to be more adapted to non-

standardized design, the factory seemed to be transferring the burden and the cost to the workers. The migrant workers at SolarExcellence had to put in extra labor to solve designing problems for the factory, yet their intellectual labor seemed neither recognized nor rewarded.

I was excited about the observation and sought to find out whether my "theory" fit the reality. I first approached some engineers, tactfully asking their thoughts about the non-standardized design and production process. An engineer actually told me that "theoretically, it is our job to make sure the design works, but…" He did not finish the sentence, perhaps realizing that the engineers were not completely blameless in the situation. What I learned from the engineers seemed to support my "theory", and I decided to talk to both my cousin as well as the general manager who was in charge of coordinating the different parts of the factory, including both the engineering and the production departments. I scheduled a meeting with the general manager, Chen Yao, and told him that I wanted to understand how the factory ran as a whole. To my great surprise, Chen started to talk about the management difficulty related to non-standardized production spontaneously without me asking it. And Chen's observation of the lack of competency and responsibility of the engineers and the chaos resulted in the workshops was very similar to what I had thought about, and he was actively seeking solutions to the problems. Chen actually said, *"workers' jobs should be easy and straightforward. They shouldn't worry about the design."* And Chen was actively seeking solutions to the problem rather than trying to perpetuate the pattern as I had imagined.

Then, talking to my cousin about non-standardized production made my little "theory" feel even less tenable. Contrary to my imagination, he told me that non-standardization was hardly a desired long-term business goal. It was merely a temporary strategy for the company to attract customers in the competitive market. Once the company had established its position and reputation among customers, the next step was to standardize its products. According to my cousin, non-standardized production was undesirable for several reasons: it made the company susceptible to customers' opinions and whims that were not necessarily always professional; standardized and repetitive production process was cheaper and more efficient than flexible design; non-standardization impeded business expansion. As a matter of fact, SolarExcellence had been standardizing its products for some time and was still in the middle of the process.

Therefore, what I had observed about non-standardization and the migrant workers' extra intellectual labor seemed not to be a "capitalist conspiracy" of labor exploitation as I had imagined. Instead, the factory management also considered it abnormal and was working actively to change the situation. In fact, when I went back to SolarExcellence near the end of my fieldwork, the production part of the factory had just been reorganized and regrouped into two departments, with one focusing on standardized products and the other dealing with non-standardized products as well as working to advance standardization. Stricter discipline was applied to the engineers, and the factory had also started to reward its workers for proposing ideas of improving product designs.

This example demonstrates the circular process of data collection and data analysis that can happen even during careful fieldwork. Pursuing the theme that did not work out also made me realize that my perspective was still shaped by Marxist theories that focused on the contradictory relations between capital and labor. This experience made me more aware and critical of my theoretical assumptions, and it pushed me further to stay close to rural migrant workers' perspectives and what they considered to be important rather than paying attention only to potential themes guided by theories on capitalist exploitation of labor. This actually took much pressure away from constantly comparing my observations against the theoretical perspectives and trying to "find meaning" in the evidence. I felt more comfortable being open to topics the rural migrant workers brought up as well as exploring and documenting data that did not seem to show clear patterns or even quite fit together. The themes on rural migrant workers' agency that I discuss in chapters 5 and 6 came from analyzing the fieldnotes after the ethnography was accomplished, when I had become much more familiar with the topics the rural migrant workers cared about and their perspectives.

1. Generating preliminary themes on rural migrant workers' agency

After I left the field, I repeatedly read through my fieldnotes in order to generate preliminary themes from the data. I did not employ any software of qualitative data analysis, because my purpose was not to generate themes through frequencies of key words in the fieldnotes. Instead, I relied on my subjective judgment to identify patterns that spoke to my research questions and theoretical concerns. The research purpose of the dissertation is to learn about rural migrant workers' agency in factory

production. The following five open-ended questions were designed to tap varying aspect of that agency: (1) how do the rural migrant workers describe their work and life situations? (2) What choices do they perceive that they have regarding their work and life? (3) How do they explain their views of the kind of choices they envision for themselves? (4) What kind of future do they desire? And (5) what kind of actions do they plan to take in order to achieve their goals? In reading through the fieldnotes, I thus focused on themes that shed light on these broad questions and as well as themes that were raised by a significant number of rural migrant workers, even if they appeared to have no bearing on any of these open-ended questions.

I started with generating some themes for SolarExcellence first before moving on to do the same for PrettyDress, following the same order of my field research. But this meant that, in analyzing PrettyDress, I was more likely to both see patterns that were similar to those of SolarExcellence and notice things that were different at PrettyDress. In other words, I tended to see PrettyDress through the lens shaped by my understanding of SolarExcellence. To counterbalance the influence, after finishing generating themes for both factories, I suspended the analysis for two weeks. When I picked up with the data analysis again, I repeated the process of rereading fieldnotes and generating preliminary themes, starting with PrettyDress this time. Despite my effort, it was difficult to completely eliminate the potential bias caused by the initial round of data analysis and as well as the sequence of when I studied each factory. I could imagine that if I had started the research and analysis with PrettyDress, I would have identified some different themes and also seen

SolarExcellence from a somewhat different perspective. The preliminary themes I have generated are presented below in Table 1[8].

[8] I discuss most of these themes below and in subsequent chapters. Here I want to explain briefly the one theme that only applied to SolarExcellence. At SolarExcellence, the workers seemed to refer more to China and the Chinese state as a unique context in several different ways. First, at least two workers specifically talked about Mao's China in a nostalgic manner, even though they were in their late 20s and never had direct experience of that history. They felt overwhelmed by China's materialism today and thought it was better in the past when people were poor, equal, less competitive, and more willing to sacrifice for other people's well-being. Second, the workers at SolarExcellence tended to associate Chinese people's economic activities with certain national characteristics that they perceived in a negative light. For example, one worker described Chinese people as greedy and opportunistic, which he used to explain why every new industry in China, including the solar power industry, was quickly swamped by people who wanted to make money, leading to ever increasing competition and decreasing profit. Another worker saw Chinese enterprises as inferior to Western enterprises, because Chinese people were dishonest and knew only undercutting each other rather than cooperating. Third, the SolarExcellence workers seemed to refer more to the Chinese state, which might be partly explained by the fact that two of the most important national meetings of the Chinese state were taking place during my research at SolarExcellence in March 2015[8]. The migrant workers at SolarExcellence expressed great appreciation of state policies issued by the central government – to my great surprise, yet they condemned

Table 2 Comparison of Preliminary Themes for SolarExcellence and PrettyDress

SolarExcellence	PrettyDress
Understanding market competition	Understanding market competition
Concern about factory interests	Concern about factory interests
Opinions about the employer, managers, and team leaders	Opinions about the factory employer
Opinions about China and the state	
	Group dynamics: chat, gossip, conflicts
Work-family articulations	Work-family articulations
Explaining their social positions: education, family, networks, personality, choice, moral considerations, religion	Explaining their social positions: education, efforts, family, personality, marriage
Future plans	Future plans

the local governments for being corrupted and hijacking benefits that were supposed to be allocated from the state to the people. For unknown reasons, I did not hear PrettyDress workers comment on Chinese people and the Chinese state in this way.

2. Organizing the final themes on rural migrant workers' agency

Once I had generated the preliminary themes, I kept working with these themes to see if I could further combine them into a smaller manageable number. I realized that the migrant workers' understanding of market competition, their concern about factory interests, and their opinions about various factory authority figures could all be put under one theme that discussed their perceptions of factory management and relations, which became Chapter 5 of this dissertation. I also considered the rural migrant workers' almost universal concern about their families as a theme worth elaborating on, because it was intimately related to their attitudes toward work. Furthermore, the work-family articulations of male industrial workers tend to draw much less attention than in the case of female factory workers, and I sought to restore the balance a little in Chapter 6 of the dissertation. In addition to the two major themes forming the two main empirical chapters, I also found it necessary to leave a space in the dissertation to discuss rural migrant workers' agency in all its diversity and complexity. Chapter 4 was designed to play this role, where I both touch upon the other preliminary themes not included in Chapter 5 and 6 and discuss some evidence difficult to fit into the preliminary themes.

Chapter 4: A Holistic View of Rural Migrant Factory Workers' Agency

This dissertation project asks: what is rural migrant workers' agency like when they work Chinese factories? To address the question, I conducted an ethnographic study among approximately 160 rural migrant workers at two manufacturing factories in East China. And I followed a carefully-designed methodology to collect data on worker agency. The methodology guided me to keep an inclusive attitude toward any ideas, thoughts, considerations, perceptions, and plans presented by the rural migrant workers. And it reminded me not to confine the observation only to certain aspects of worker agency derived their importance from Marxist theories of capital-labor relations or to exclude a piece of evidence on worker agency judged as irrelevant or less important based on the theories.

Searching for worker agency at SolarExcellence and PrettyDress with the methodological principles in my mind, I was drawn to a world where the rural migrant workers constantly surprised me with their rich ideas and diverse thoughts regarding their factory work and lives. During our interactions, they emphasized different aspects of their lives and thoughts and presented various personalities, values, life philosophies, world views, interpretations of their experiences, life goals, plans, and ways of dealing other people. The rural migrant workers did not show homogeneous or easily recognizable patterns of agency just because they belonged to the same social group theoretically labeled as factory workers or, more specifically,

rural migrant factory workers in China. They stroke me as complicated human beings who did not merely react to their experiences as factory laborers but drew on their broad social and cultural lives to develop sophisticated ways of perceiving, interpreting, and navigating their factory work.

In this chapter, I describe how I got into contact with the rural migrant workers in the two factories, giving a feel of my interactions with the workers. And I tell the stories of a selective number of rural migrant workers at each factory and discuss the ideas and thoughts that they shared with me, especially paying attention to how their subjective perceptions and personal plans led to different attitudes and behavior at work. I purposively write the chapter in a narrative style with loose themes to organize the materials and describe the rural migrant workers' agency.

This chapter serves two purposes. First, I want to present the various aspects of worker agency I have observed at SolarExcellence and PrettyDress, which is difficult to encompass with a few clear analytical themes. Second, I want to show that, with the rich and nuanced data collected on the rural migrant workers' agency, the analysis could go many directions and that many different themes can come out of it based on different focuses. With this preparation, I will narrow down my focus in the next two chapters and interpret part of the data I have collected through two themes to show how a broader and more inclusive view of worker agency can shed light on our understanding of the process of factory production. At the same time, it is important to keep in mind that the themes I will introduce are but two possible examples of data analysis. Even though it is impossible to engage all the aspects of agency presented by the rural migrant workers in my study in an analytical way, it is

important to at least present a bird's-eye view of the scope of agency I have observed, which is the purpose of this chapter.

Stories of Worker Agency at SolarExcellence

On March 3, 2015, about 8:30 in the morning, I swiped the door card I had obtained beforehand and entered one of the workshops at SolarExcellent on my own. I immediately noticed how tidy and spacious the workshop was. And the workers were already at work surrounding several pieces of big white equipment. For a few minutes, I stood by the door and felt extremely nervous, not knowing anyone and not sure how to get started. A man in white uniform in his thirties – clearly a manager of some sort, as most of the workers were in blue uniforms – noticed me and asked, *"hey, what are you doing here?"* I replied immediately, still feeling my heart pounding, *"oh I am just here to observe and learn, and it's already approved by people 'above'."* The man quickly accepted and responded *"okay, okay. You can take a look"*, while turning back to talk to other workers and leaving me alone again.

I slowly moved against the wall and took in impressions of the workshop. The workers were mostly busy working in groups of two or three on different equipment. Though some of them were throwing curious looks at me, I did not feel comfortable approaching them and interrupting their work. I finally identified a chance, when I noticed a tall and stout man in his thirties working quietly on his own to weld pipes on a small welding machine in the corner of the workshop. I approached him and briefly introduced myself as a student from Shanghai who was in the factory to learn things. He smiled and introduced himself as Li Zhansi, and I was surprised by how naturally he just started to talk with me. His kindness and

friendliness immediately made the space less strange to me and dissipated my fear of rejection as a first-time ethnographer. Li told me that he came from the countryside of Liangyungang, Jiangsu, and I asked him about the socio-economic situations of rural migrant workers. But Li did not seem interested in such topics and kept directing our conversations to China's e-commerce, the state's new developmental plans in some cities, and other business opportunities. And Li shared with me,

> *"I don't plan to work in factories for too long, because I don't enjoy working for other people...There are many opportunities in China right now. I didn't pay attention before. But now I learn a lot through following news on TV and on the Internet...You see, I didn't have much schooling, so I'm not good at textbook knowledge. But I had come out*[9] *(to work) at a very young age and I have accumulated a lot of real-world experience...In today's society, textbook knowledge isn't everything. Social networks are very important. As long as you know people, you can go to places. For example, today I got to know you, someone from Shanghai. Maybe one day you could...you know..."*

At that moment, it suddenly occurred to me that maybe Li was friendly to me partly because he found social networks to be important in general and my Shanghainese connections to be potentially useful particularly for his future development. In our brief exchange, Li expressed his preference for working for himself, his plan to leave the factory, and his ideas of how he might achieve this goal based on his evaluation of his disadvantages and advantages as well as his

[9] "Coming out" (*chu lai*) is a slang commonly used by rural migrant workers in China to indicate "leaving the countryside and coming to the city".

observation of success in current society. Li might have also started to orient his actions toward the goal through behavior like treating other the people he encountered in his life as potential networks and resources. Not only did my conversation with the first rural migrant worker at SolarExcellence allow me to catch a glimpse of worker agency, it also reminded me that the rural migrant workers were not passive research participants waiting to be observed or questioned by me but could have their own reasons and considerations in talking or not talking to me.

My exchange with Li helped me gain a foothold in the workshop, and I found myself more confident and at ease in approaching other workers in the same workshop and then gradually the workers in other workshops at SolarExcellence. The physical structure of the factory and the way the production process was organized at SolarExcellence, as I have introduced in Chapter 3, determined that I would approach the workers in a more individual manner. As I gradually had the opportunities to interact with most of the rural migrant workers in all the workshops in the factory, I kept being impressed, sometimes even overwhelmed, by the scope and diversity of the agency that the rural migrant workers presented. Even though the rural migrant workers had similar jobs in the same factory and shared certain backgrounds and situations as rural migrant workers, such as poor family backgrounds in the countryside, lack of four-year college degrees for most, and few opportunities to get out of blue-collar jobs, they developed different ideas out these situations. They interpreted their experiences in a variety of ways and navigated their factory lives with perceptions and understanding that hardly fit into any clear patterns. As it is impossible to tell each individual rural migrant worker's story and share every idea

they expressed, I selectively discuss the experience and thoughts of several SolarExcellence workers in this section. The themes are merely for the purpose of making the materials more readable and are not meant to be the focus of analysis.

1. Personal ambitions

The second worker at SolarExcellence I talked to was Guo Chao, a 24-year-old electrician who stroke me as an ambitious and capable young man. His family was from the rural areas of local Changzhou, not far from where SolarExcellence was located. After graduating from a technical secondary school, Guo had first worked as a machine operator in a factory where his uncle was also employed before coming to SolarExcellence. Guo explained to me why he left his last job,

> *"I feel that that job was for old people. You just sit there and move the lever for about 3,000 yuan a month. You don't learn anything. But there are young graduates of my age who preferred that kind of job, because it's easy and stable. They are usually introduced by their relatives and they actually appreciate it. I look down upon young people like that…You see, the best job for an electrician is to be the maintenance technician for a factory, because you would be irreplaceable. But it's hard to get such a job, because one factory only needs one such technician and the position is usually occupied by someone who is senior and experienced. I actually want to leave Changzhou and try my luck in bigger cities, but my mom didn't allow me to do so. It's frustrating. Sometimes I feel sad because my own mother doesn't trust me. She doesn't believe in her son. I came to work at this factory only because she saw the hiring ad outside of the factory and applied for me. She wanted me to have*

a stable job near home, and I did not want to disappoint her. But I keep telling her that I will not have a future at this factory either. I will not be able to climb up the ladder here, because I heard that this place promoted people not based on abilities but on nepotism…Anyway, I will work here to save 10,000 yuan (about $1,300), then I will leave."

Guo differentiated himself from other young workers who were content with easy and low-paying jobs and expressed his ambition of trying to become an irreplaceable maintenance electrician or achieving something else in some bigger cities. For Guo, working at SolarExcellence was what he could not have refused as a filial son. And he took it as a transitional stage to save money for his future plans, because Guo did not believe that there was fair chance for him to climb up the hierarchy at this factory. Also notice how the various factors worked together to both demonstrate and shape Guo's agency, including ambitious personality, family influence, peers, perception of factory management, and understanding of one's occupation.

Guo Chao usually worked in pair with Hu Lei, a 26-year-old electrician originally from Hubei Province. Compared to his teammate Guo Chao, Hu Lei did not express such strong desire for individual achievement or "climbing up". Instead, Hu expressed desire for better wages for workers. When he learned that I was at the factory to study workers, Hu immediately commented, *"ah, workers…have very simple thoughts. It's all about wages. Money."* When speaking of his reasons of leaving his last job in another factory, Hu continued with a similar logic but also indicated certain nuances in his understanding of workers' wage situations.

"I left because of the unsatisfying wages. Well it's not all that…The company was not doing well and didn't have enough money to pay the workers… You know, last year for about three or four months, workers at SolarExcellence were also paid a monthly wage of only 2,000 yuan (about $300), because there was no work for us to do. You know, the solar industry is also not doing well the recent two years. There is the anti-dumping campaign…and there is also severe competition. There are so many people investing in the solar industry now, because they feel they can make money. The competition is severe. But… there won't be innovation without competition. Like Nokia, it didn't innovate and it failed."

Hu did not seem to have the kind of career ambition that Guo had. In fact, on another occasion, Hu told me,

"I used to be motivated to work hard. But after I saved enough money for the down payment of a new apartment for my girlfriend and me at our hometown, I seemed to have lost purpose and motivation."

Hu focused more on the monetary side of the factory work and believed it to be the most important concern of workers – although it was certainly not true for Guo Chao. At the same time, however, Hu did not simply demand better wages for workers within the framework of a particular factory. Hu situated factories in the larger context of an industry and competition and perceived the reduction of wages to be inevitable sometimes.

As Hu Lei perceived competition to be necessary and the reduction of wages inevitable due to competition, he seemed to regard the state as the only solution to the

wage problems. When I was around, Hu liked saying to me, *"it would be great if your research could help raise our wages."* In fact, during my stay at SolarExcellence in March 2015, two of the most important national meetings of the Chinese state, National People's Congress (NPC) and National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), happened to be held in Beijing. One of the most important agendas of the meetings was to devise policies that would improve Chinese citizens' well-being on a national level, especially that of the rural migrant workers'. Hu paid great attention to the news of the meetings, and he said to me in a hopeful tone,

> *"yesterday the president of GREE[10] proposed that the minimum income level for personal income tax should be lifted to 5,000 yuan. It is currently 3,500 yuan. It might work, because the proposal came from such a powerful and influential person!"*

Compared to Guo Chao, Hu Lei emphasized different considerations when he communicated with me. Hu seemed to care more about wages than career plans and, based on his perceiving factories in the context of competition, saw the state and powerful individuals as important sources for improvement of workers' conditions.

Their respective personalities and pursuits seemed to have led Guo and Hu to navigate their factory experience differently, especially in terms of dealing with the authority figures. Consistent with his ambition of "climbing up", Guo presented

[10] GREE is the name of a Chinese company that is the world's largest residential air-conditioner manufacturer.

stronger skills in interacting with and appealing to the foremen on the shopfloor, while Hu tended to be more reserved. An illuminating example came from my observation when I was once invited to a dinner party organized by the workers to celebrate a traditional Chinese festival at a restaurant. The dinner quickly turned into a game that focused on toasting, drinking, and urging each other to drink[11]. Guo Chao was visibly active in both drinking toasts to all the foremen and volunteering to take the drinks offered to the foreman of his own team, an electrician named Chen Shuguang. I was impressed by Guo's skills of pleasing all the authority figures at the table. The foreman of another team actually commented on Guo by saying to Chen Shuguang, *"you have a really good employee on your team!"* At the same time, Hu Lei was sitting at the table and quietly eating most of the time. I even saw Guo Chao trying to create opportunities for Hu Lei by tactfully including him into the game, *"Hu Lei! Come! Come! Let's drink to Brother Chen!"* But Hu Lei rejected the invitation with a mild shake of head and a smile, and he continued sitting at the table quietly for the rest of the dinner party.

Even though they were both rural migrant workers in their early 20s, Guo Chao and Hu Lei appeared to me two very different individuals with agency in developing ideas of their situations and pursuing their goals. Various factors seemed to have shaped their thoughts and actions, including personal ambition and values, family relations, and perceptions of factory situations and conditions, which led them

[11] This is part of China's drinking culture at the dinner table. Everyone has to make at least one toast. And refusing to accept the drink proposed by another person is often taken as a sign of disrespect and is offensive.

to develop different interpretations of their factory experience and be oriented toward different actions and goals at the factory. I found it rather difficult to categorize their agency and fit it into a certain theoretical framework. If that was the case for merely two rural migrant workers at SolarExcellence, the difficulty multiplied as I tried to include all the workers I had come into contact in the factory in a coherent story of their agency. Each of them had distinct stories, personalities, life plans, passions, concerns, social relations, perceptions of the world, and life philosophies, and all these played a role in shaping their attitudes and behaviors regarding their factory experience.

2. Individual choices

Chu Dongsheng was 28-year-old and just joined SolarExcellence as an apprentice assembler when I first went to SolarExcellence. He had always been friendly and willing to talk to me, but we only sat down and had a long conversation after he accidently cut his finger with a paper knife at work and were allowed to take breaks from work whenever he needed to. As we sat face to face in a quiet corner of the workshop behind a piece equipment, Chu told me his stories and revealed to me his anxiety and ambivalent feelings about work and life. Chu came from Hunan Province and recently got married to a local woman in Changzhou. Chu felt very lucky to have found someone he really loved but soon realized that marriage life also brought new challenges. It started with him having to quit his former job as a construction worker that paid really well, because it was too hazardous an occupation for a married person. Then he entered a factory for the first time in his life, hoping to establish a

stable career. Having no relevant skills, however, Chu found that he could only earn minimum wages here.

> *"We just bought an apartment. And nothing barely left of my salaries last month after we paid the mortgage. I worry that life is only going to be harder with a child in the future."*

Pondering on his current situation, Chu thought that he had made the wrong career choice in the beginning.

> *"I have a cousin who basically had exactly the same backgrounds as I did growing up. But he started his first job in a factory and has stayed there since then. He is now already in charge of the purchasing activities of the factory and has saved a million yuan. I should have also entered a factory right from the beginning as well…Entering a factory at this age, I feel that I'm not even used to all the rules. I was just fined 50 yuan for forgetting to wear my uniform the other day. My wife asked me to be more careful and not to make such simple mistakes again. And I agree with her. I felt that I was a raw stone, and she is there to refine me. We fit together so well."*

Thinking about the future, Chu found himself caught in a dilemma. On the one hand, he wanted to quit SolarExcellence that did not really impart strong marketable skills and to instead work as an intern somewhere to learn new skills. On the other hand, however, he and his wife desperately needed him to maintain the job and keep paying for the mortgage. And then, Chu added a comment of self-reflection in the moral sense that I had not expected.

"You know, even though I want a job that teaches me valuable skills, I would give up on that and stay here if this factory pays me enough. I have this evil thought. People today are just that practical. We can't help with it. Nowadays, without money you can't buy things or even have your meals. You know, the old people are right when they say that people today no longer have the spirit of dedication, unlike in Mao's times…"

In Chu's case again, various elements played a role in shaping his thoughts, including marriage, family needs, personal experience and observation, and even the kind of moral education he was brought up with. Chu Dongsheng's marriage led to a change of job, brought him new financial challenge, and made him reflect on his career path so far. Drawing on a personal observation of the experience of his cousin who shared similar backgrounds, Chu came to see individual choices as a key factor in deciding one's career development and regretted not having entered a factory when he was younger. When he thought about the future, Chu again put the weight on individual choices of either staying at SolarExcellence for cash flow or finding a new place that paid less but offered more prospect for developing marketable skills. At the same time, Chu actually imposed a moral judgment on himself when he imagined the scenario of staying at the factory just for money, while he at the same time recognized the urgent need for money for him as well as people in broader society in general.

Chu Dongsheng was definitely not the only rural migrant worker at SolarExcellence who focused on individual choices but also touched upon broader social context when communicating his considerations and concerns. Zhang Tiyang, a 37-year-old plumber from Shandong Province, was probably one of the unhappiest

workers I met at SolarExcellence. He was divorced and often expressed guilt about having to leave his ten-year-old son in the countryside to his own father, whose elderly health condition he also had to worry about all the time. When we were getting close to the national holiday in October, Zhang told me that he did not like holidays, because *"I'm not used to having holidays…Those young people can go out and have fun. Those white-collars can go travelling. I don't really have that mood or the economic means."* And Zhang continued to tell me about how he felt about his life right now.

> *"People like me who came out to work, many felt very helpless when it came to family stuff…Coming out to work caused a lot of misery, such as divorce. I know many divorced couples. And because both my brother and I are out here, there is no one taking care of my father at home…People shouldn't have to come out to work, but there's no money, there's no money in the countryside…Yet people who came out to work rarely achieve anything, very rarely. We only know working and saving money. We don't know investing money…Working for other people is really meaningless. (In order to achieve something), either you should be born to rich parents or you are very competent yourself – well, it's also okay if you are not competent, as long as your family is willing support you. Even if you have good ideas, if your family has no money and there's no one at home willing to support you, you will also always be poor…You know, when a person is in his 20s, he is courageous and full of ideas. If there are people to back him up then, he will persist to the end*

and not give up. Once reaching 30s, 40s, it's no longer so easy with settled life…"

Zhang Tiyang complained about the situation of migration and miserable lives of rural migrant workers. Yet he also saw rural migrant workers as being partially responsible for achieving nothing, as they did not know how to invest money or had no family members to support their courageous ideas when they were younger.

Yang Dehua, a 54-year-old assembler, was rather emotional when he told me about some of his former rural migrant worker friends who had become millionaires by opening their own factories.

"The popular saying is true that 'only those who love fighting can win'. People create conditions for their success, not the other way around. They once asked me to join them, but I was afraid of taking risks. I'm not brave enough. When we meet now, they are still very warm and nice to me just like old times. But I feel rather embarrassed in front of them."

And when I commented that it must not be common for workers to become factory owners. Yang Dehua disagreed, *"I know quite a few!"*

The examples of Chu Dongsheng, Zhang Tiyang, and Yang Dehua illustrated how some rural migrant workers tended to cite individual choices to explain their situations and seemed to have reached the understanding through their experiences and observation. At the same time, Zhang also touched upon the social context of migration, while Chu situated his individual choices in the moral lessons he had learned in the Chinese cultural context. In fact, Chu was not the only rural migrant worker at SolarExcellence who engaged the topic of moral and ethics. Zhang

Wenqiang, a 26-year-old CNC operator from Henan Province, once asked me, *"have you ever asked me why I left the countryside to work in the cities?"* I was surprised by Zhang's question, because I thought it was something self-evident and needed not to be asked. *"Didn't you do it to make a living?"* I tentatively replied. Zhang shook his head, *"no, I could have also made a living in the countryside."* Seeing my puzzled face, Zhang continued to explain, *"it's because we like comparing with others. When you see people in your village making more money in the cities, you want to do the same thing and also make more money."* Both Chu and Zhang thus brought a moral perspective to understanding their situations and described their pursuit of better incomes in a negative way, which I had not expected.

3. Moral considerations

At the same time, moral concerns did seem important to some rural migrant workers, in terms of their various moral principles in dealing with interpersonal relationships as well as in living their own lives. Jin Long was a 34-year-old welder from Hubei Province who liked traveling, singing, and making jokes. Sometimes I could hear him singing at work from some distance in the workshop. And he was the one I described in Chapter 3 who got impatient when I tried to learn his working histories instead of talking about his travel experience[12].

But Jin did share with me that he came to SolarExcellence after his small clothes shop failed in Guangzhou Province and that he planned to go back to that business in the future. Jin especially emphasized, *"No matter what I do, business or*

[12] See page 87.

work, I never deceive people and I always treat others fairly." When Jin Long first heard that I was here to study workers' lives and thoughts, Jin pondered a little and commented, *"of course everybody has thoughts, but you shouldn't overdo it…for example, the employer is already nice to you, you (shouldn't) ask him to be even nicer."*

At first, I thought that Jin might be someone who empathized somewhat with the factory authorities. But getting to know Jin better also made me wonder to what extent I should believe these early comments of his. After all, Jin's another important moral principle seemed to be not to trust other people easily, which might have included me when we just met. Jin Long expressed his principle of being cautious in dealing with other people through different stories and from various angles. For example, when Jin and I were discussing the policy of overtime without wage compensation at SolarExcellence, I asked, *"why don't you guys fight for wage compensation?"* Jin replied,

> *"Fight with whom, the factory? That's useless! You often hear people murmuring and whispering in the workshops, saying that the wages are low and this and that. Yet the moment the wages for a month are distributed, the workshops immediately turn into silence. You know why? Because those people (who complained earlier) were just sowing discord among the workers! When three or five people gather, someone may say, 'alas, the wages are so low. I want to quit!' Those who are cool-headed won't be influenced. But what about those who are quick-tempered? They may really quit… Whoever says something like that is trying to use people who are easily*

influenced and to make them to start a scene. It is so…insidious. You would fall into the trap if you don't pay attention. So, you know, sometimes, you can't believe everything other people say."

On other occasions, Jin also shared stories in his hometown or in his past work experiences where certain people tried to deceive or take advantage of others. Jin seemed to disapprove such behaviors a lot but also emphasized that one should adapt to the situation and learn to protect oneself.

Another rural migrant worker who tended to focus on moral lessons in our communications was Xin Guanghe, a 35-year-old welder and also a team leader at SolarExcellence. But Xin approached the topic from a religious perspective that was very different from Jin's emphasis. Xin identified himself as a Buddhist and tended to process his personal and working experiences through religious terms. Talking about his own backgrounds, Xin said,

"I came out to work because there's no other way. With good family backgrounds, who would come out to work?... I started to work when I was fifteen because my family was poor. You know, it is already predestinated how much money a person will have during his/her life. There are still extremely poor villages now, where people are poor because they don't have enough rain. And there are also people who were born with a golden spoon in their mouths and have more money than they can ever spend. It's all predestinated, including one's family backgrounds, parents, locations of birth… There's no way to choose them."

In Xin's opinion, people nowadays were living in a rather exhausting and unhealthy way, which was due to *"bad karma"*. And Xin developed his own life philosophy to deal with the difficulty and pressure.

> *"Human life is painful. For human beings, living is suffering. Since you are born, you live for money… People nowadays live really exhausting lives. The competition is too severe! After all, it's because of bad karma… You know, people in the rural areas today love comparing with each other. Well, not just the rural people, everyone in modern society likes comparing! 'That person has a car, then I will also buy a car even if I have to borrow the money.' So tiring… Life is so painful to live, and it would be easier if you are not attached to anything, such as money, fame, etc. We bring nothing at birth, and we take away nothing when we die. Nothing really belongs to you. You just borrow various things temporarily when you live in the world for several decades… For me, safeness comes first, health second, and all other things come third. Some people died so young, in their 20s or 30s. How should their parents face it? Life is really unpredictable, and death does not select people based on age. So, people should try to be happy, be optimistic and not overvalue external things besides one's body. That would be better for your body and mind…People should also live kindly, starting from being filial to one's parents and then being kind to one's teachers and friends… Be tolerant. Hatred brings trouble and makes it hard for you to eat well or sleep well… Since I learned these things, I have changed entirely. I used to gamble, smoke, and drink. And I used to have a very hot temper. Now I don't really care.*

What's there to be angry about? If I don't like you, I just avoid seeing you. What's the big deal? Anger is really bad for health…"

Xin actually asked me when I went to bed at night and told me to sleep earlier and to take better care of my health, especially considering that I was female. Xin also applied his life philosophy to his job as a group leader, and he emphasized overlooking rather than getting angry with the workers' small mistakes or some other behaviors against the rules as well as treating the workers as brothers and with kindness and respect.

As workers with management responsibilities, such as Xin, considered how to approach their relationships with the common workers, the common workers also developed their own ideas in terms of the appropriate ways of dealing with the factory management. From the perspective of Zhou Hai, a 27-year-old electrician from Anhui Province, the managers of SolarExcellence might not be good but were also no worse than the managers he had seen in other firms.

"Lingdaos[13] all like shifting responsibilities to each other. Every firm is like that. This firm is actually one of the better ones. In some firms, when you go to the lingdaos for some issues, they always tell you to go to other departments. It's normal. They get paid, but they don't do anything."

However, Zhou disagreed with my comment that *"it is the people working at the bottom who suffer"*. Zhou did not necessarily blame such managers for making things harder for workers but seemed to take the different roles as they were and focus

[13] Lingdao is a Chinese word that refers to any authority figure. There will be more explanation in the next chapter.

instead on what it required to be on one side or the other. *"It's not suffering. You get paid based on what you do. If you don't have the abilities, you don't get to be a lingdao like them."* Talking about the policy of overtime without wage compensation, Zhou Hai found it rather stupid because the factory then put itself in a vulnerable position. *"If people really want to sue, they can win. You can reduce the performance reward, and no one will say anything, because there's no law for that. But overtime without compensation is illegal."* Yet when I asked Zhou why he did not try to sue with other workers, Zhou indicated that he had learned from his past experience not to cause unnecessary harm to people, including managers.

> *"I would just leave, instead of doing something like that that both harms other people and doesn't really benefit myself. I used to do that once in another firm… There was this manager who was a relative of the factory owner. He did crappy work yet got high performance pay. Even though it wasn't as high as mine, I just found it intolerable. I was rather friendly with the vice president of the firm, so I reported the issue to him. Then I told him that I would quit… The vice president asked me not to leave. But I insisted, asking him 'can you bear to work under a person like that?' And I left. Then the manager was transferred to work at the warehouse… It caused quite a scene. How's that meaningful? Though people didn't say anything on the surface, they must have seen me as someone (crazy)… Back then, I did have a hot temper, and I actually felt good about what I had done. Now I think about it, it's none of my business! Why not just leave instead of doing something that harms other people and doesn't benefit me?"*

Jin Long, Xin Guanghe, and Zhou Hai approached the factory work, especially interpersonal relationships at the factory – both among the workers and in terms of management-worker relations – with their own moral ideas that were very different from each other. And they had developed the ideas based on broader social experience, past working experience as well as religious beliefs.

The selective stories from the several rural migrant workers at SolarExcellence suggested the richness and diversity of the thoughts and considerations that the rural migrant workers brought to their factory work, in terms of how they perceived their situations, how they explained their lack of success, what they planned to achieve in the future, and what they considered the best way of dealing factory relations. Their approach to the factory experience seemed to have been influenced by a variety of factors that went beyond the specific factory setting, such as their personalities, family, understanding of market competition, observation of peers, past experience, and religious ideas. And these thoughts were often embedded in the larger social and cultural contexts, including the migration condition, family values, and moral standards.

Stories of Worker Agency at PrettyDress

As I have mentioned in Chapter 3, It was a different process entering the one and only workshop of PrettyDress for the first time. It was unlike SolarExcellence, where workers were divided among several workshops and usually worked in groups of two or three that were separated by big equipment instead of all clustering together. At PrettyDress, all the sewing workers sat and worked in one open room, where anything

going on in the space would be visible to everyone. I felt intimidated before going in, wondering whether my appearance would disrupt the entire workshop in ways that I could not predict and how I could break into the homogenous body of workers and get the opportunity of talking to individual workers under the eyes of all the rest of the workers.

The moment I stepped into the workshop, however, I was unexpectedly grabbed by someone, who started shooting me with words even before I had time to look at her carefully. *"I heard that you were from Guizhou! Is that right? Are you my fellow-townsman?"* It turned out that the woman, 48-year-old Zhang Cai, was the quality-checker of the second sewing team, whose desk was right next to the front door facing the sewing workers in her team. She had learned from Jimmy, my contact as well as the accountant of PrettyDress, that I came from Guizhou, which was also her hometown. Settling down at her big desk, I started to introduce myself to Zhang Cai and got to know her a little. She seemed very excited to meet someone from her hometown and immediately asked me to type my phone number into her cellphone. Zhang even asked, *"have you found a place to stay yet? If not, you can come to where I live, though it's a little too small…"* I thus made my first step into the PrettyDress workshop with the unexpected help of Zhang Cai, who impressed me with her warmth and enthusiasm – although that impression would prove to be incomplete or even a little inaccurate as I better understood the PrettyDress workers and their interactions with each other. In the following process of my research, I usually sat next to one or two sewing workers each day, observing them at work, chatting with them and also listening to them chatting among each other. As the workshop was an

open space, sometimes the conversation often involved several workers in the proximity.

Similar to the male workers at SolarExcellence, the female sewing workers at PrettyDress also stroke me as presenting rich and complicated agency in understanding and navigating their experiences as rural migrant factory workers. Even though they had to work 13 hours per day and six days a week for an average monthly wage of 3,000 to 4,000 yuan (less than $700), my daily observations at the workshop and interactions with them did not leave me with the impression that they were downtrodden or particularly negative. While the women workers all expressed to me how exhausting and undesirable being a sewing worker was, they nevertheless showed great psychological resilience based on various interpretations of their experiences as individuals and created a working environment that was full of live conversations, laughter as well as dramas as a group.

The PrettyDress workers showed some different patterns in the ideas and thoughts they expressed as compared to the SolarExcellence workers. First, there appeared to be greater homogeneity in what the women workers communicated with me, in terms of how they viewed their situations and what they were most concerned about. This was likely because the women workers at PrettyDress had more similarity with each other in their demographic profiles as well as working history. Unlike the SolarExcellence workers, whose ages mostly ranged from early 20s to early 50s and who included both single and married workers, the sewing workers were mostly in their late 30s to early 50s and married. Also, the SolarExcellence workers had more diverse educational backgrounds, with a few having as little as elementary school

education, a few having as much as college education, and many other in between. In contrast, all the PrettyDress workers had elementary school education or less. Moreover, the SolarExcellence workers had different working histories before they joined this factory. In contrast, the sewing workers often narrated the story that they started learning how to sew as a teenage girl and had stayed in the garment industry ever since. They often cited hairdressing and sewing as the only two possible occupational choices for teenage girls in the countryside back then. And as hairdressing business in China usually insinuated covert sex service, the women workers often found that they had no other choice but becoming a sewing worker after they left school. And they rarely changed industry afterwards due to limited education and skills. Given these shared demographic characteristics and working experience, the rural migrant workers at PrettyDress seemed to express ideas that were more similar to each other than in the case of SolarExcellence workers. Second, I documented more details related to group dynamics and interpersonal relationships among the rural migrant workers at PrettyDress, because the physical space of a shared workshop induced more group interactions and probably also because of certain gender dynamics.

1. Education and job opportunities

The second day at PrettyDress, I told Zhang Cai that I would like to learn how to use the sewing machine if possible. Zhang Cai found my request hard to believe. *"Making clothes is so exhausting! Why would you want to learn that?!"* For Zhang Cai and the other women workers at PrettyDress, they had to work at a garment factory only because they had little education and thus no access to better jobs. And

in their eyes, such a job should absolutely be avoided as long as one had better education and other options. The second worker I talked to, 36-year-old Chen Yanmei from Anhui Province, actually did not understand initially why I came to PrettyDress at all.

> *"Are you studying how to run a firm?... No?... Then, are you going to be a manager in the future?... No?... Well then I don't understand what business you have here at a garment factory as a college student."*

After I told Chen that I was at PrettyDress to conduct a social inquiry for my thesis and that I was likely to become a teacher in the future, Chen replied,

> *"you guys are really onto something. When you become a teacher in the future, you will be sheltered from wind and rain. Our work is hard! The long working hours… It's good that you guys have more education. One should after all try to be a white-collar, with (short) fixed working hours."*

Later I would gradually found out that Chen's sentiment was shared by all the women workers at PrettyDress, who were unanimous in using their low education level to explain their position and in describing being a white-collar as their ideal job.

Hearing my conversation with Chen Yanmei, 29-year-old Shen Tingting, who sat next to Chen, pitched in and joked at Chen, *"it's too late for you! Why didn't you study harder before?"* Chen chuckled and responded, "*Right, it's too late for us. That's why we let our children have more education! There's no place for us to get more education now! Heh-heh."* Then Chen and Shen went on to joke with each other about how they were almost illiterate now and no longer even knew many Chinese characters. Our conversation was also an example of a phenomenon that I would

observe over and over again at PrettyDress: when the women workers lamented their lack of education and their wish for having a white-collar job, they usually blamed themselves for failing to study hard when they were young – either because they did not know better or because they lacked the intelligence or the right characteristics.

When I first approached Wang Huaiyi, who came from Anhui and was in her mid-30s, she said to me smiling,

> *"life is nice for you guys who go to school. You don't need to look for jobs. You just need to scribbling and doodling. People who don't go to school need to do physical work."*

Hearing this, the woman sitting next to Wang, 28-year-old Zhao Xiaojuan from Anhui Province, responded, *"there's no other way! It's our own fault that we let our minds wander off studying! It's our own fault that we didn't study hard!"*

Another sewing worker from Guizhou, Chen Jia, was 25 when I met her at PrettyDress. She was pretty, petite, thin, and relatively quiet. When she spoke, Chen Jia often talked to her coworkers sitting around her as well as to me about her unhappy marriage, including her lazy husband and her unkind parents-in-law, as well as her worry for her two young children left behind in the countryside. Chen used to say to me,

> *"After all, it's better to go school! Compared to you, I find myself pathetic. We're of the same age, but (our lives are so different) ... If I could turn the clock back, I would have continued to go to school… You college students have a lot of opportunities, and you are not married… It's good to have college education. My cousin does, and he has a comfortable white-collar job*

sitting in the office. Being teacher is also good: it gives you a lot of time to rest… Or you can get into a big company when you graduate. It makes a difference after all to have education. Big companies are clean and working there isn't hard."

Forty-eight-year-old Liu Xiaohui from Sichuan Province echoed Chen Jia's opinion about my future.

"No matter what you do, your life will be much more comfortable and easier than ours. Once you finish school, you will be liberated. You will go to work, and you guys will be sitting in an office, instead of doing hard physical labor. Like us, we do hard physical labor. Heh-heh."

Speaking of herself, however, Liu did not seem to imagine a different past or outcome.

"Making clothes is hard. But studying is even harder for me! I still remember how painful it was for me to go to school. I studied and studied, but I just couldn't get it! I was actually happy to quit and to start making clothes. It was easier for me."

Unlike Chen Jia, Zhao Haiyan, a 23-year-old girl from Anhui Province, was very lively and talkative, always laughing and joking with people. She was also the girl who gave up high heels due to the ridicule of her coworkers[14]. When I first approached her, Zhao was telling her coworkers about a funny phone call conversation she had with her 2-year-old daughter in the countryside and was laughing with them. When Zhao learned that she was actually two years younger than

[14] See page 99 in Chapter 3.

me, she smiled and said, *"alas! I'm rather embarrassed to talk to you! You're still going to school, and I'm already making money to buy my baby formula. People are really different from each other!"* As we got to know each other, Zhao saw me come to the factory every day and take notes all the time, and she commented,

> *"you are working really hard for your study. I envy you… If I were as serious as you when I went to school, I would not have been working here. But I doubt that I could have gotten used to your lifestyle. It's so gentle and quiet."*

To Zhao, getting a college degree not only meant reading a lot of books but also entailed a certain type of personality that she did not find herself fit for.

> *"It must be very hard for you to come this far. I bet you have books that pile up like a mountain… I actually don't understand people like you who are so soft and gentle and do not talk a lot. I feel painful if I don't talk…Sometimes I dreamed of going back to the ancient times through time travel. I must have been a chivalrous girl during ancient times."*

Interestingly, Zhao wanted her daughter to be a quiet child and to be able to study well.

> *"I deliberately named her Jingyi*[15]*, hoping that she could be a quiet and agreeable child…But she is so naughty! Now, whenever I have time, I search online to learn how to better educate children. It really gives me a headache. I even worry about it in my dreams… But then I think, I didn't even educate myself well, what do I have to educate her? Maybe I should just let her be and let her play herself."*

[15] "Jing" means quiet or quietness, and "yi" means being agreeable.

The women workers tended to find themselves responsible for their lack of education, even when I felt that they had clear reasons to blame external factors, such as gender discrimination. The story of Li Cui, a 28-year-old woman originally from Anhui Province and were married to a local rural Shanghai husband, especially left me with a strong impression. When we first met, Li, just like other women workers at PrettyDress, expressed her envy towards my education background and my future job opportunities.

> *"Sometimes I envy people like you. You get to have a decent job and enjoy campus life…My little brother is also a college graduate, and he works in Beijing right now…This society is all about education. People like you can sit in an office after you graduate. That's the gap (between us). (We) have no education and we are of little culture."*

Speaking of why she did not get much education, Li said,

> *"there were lots of reasons. Our family was poor and kind of valued males over females. I have a little brother under me, so of course his needs were taken care of first. It's not that my parents didn't want me to go to school. It's just that my family was really poor. So, I had to quit school and come out to work to support my family."*

One day in September, I was observing Li Cui at work and chatting with her from time to time. Then I saw Li Cui staring at her cellphone below the working desk and smiling. As Li put down her phone and returned to sewing, I asked her what she was smiling at. It turned out that Li had been texting with her little brother.

> *"My brother is going home for the upcoming National Holiday. He asked for a leave for a week… Sometimes I feel that I'm not as a good person as my brother. Whenever he has time, he always thinks about going back to see our parents. But I always think about where I want to travel and have fun."*

Recalling our conversation about her family valuing males over females, I suggested another way of looking at this, *"but your parents also gave your little brother more. So, it makes sense that he feels closer to your parents."* Li disagreed, *"but it's also because our family was poor and didn't allow much. Otherwise they wouldn't have made that choice." "But still they chose your brother and considered more about your brother."* Hearing this, Li responded,

> *"yes, but those were already the bygones. And we can't go back to the past. We have lived our lives like this so far, for more than a decade… Sometimes I also chat about this with my brother. He said that we should have borrowed a few thousand yuan back then (for me to go to school), which we would have been able to repay now. Yet back then we did not think of that. I just quitted school and came out to work. Just like that. If I had insisted in continuing to go to school, I should have had a better life now."*

Li Cui thus did not blame her parents but more or less blamed herself for not knowing better and for not pursuing education. And she showed understanding towards her parents and valued their family connections despite the fact that she had to work while they supported her brother for school.

Overall, it stood out that almost every rural migrant worker at PrettyDress highlighted the lack of education as the major reason for their being stuck in the garment industry

as sewing workers instead of being white-collars, who they imagined to enjoy all the working conditions that were the opposite of those at the garment factory, i.e., shorter and stable working hours with weekends, better wages, and less physically exhausting labor. Moreover, the women workers tended to blame themselves for not having studied harder when they were younger and thus for having no access to better jobs. While the women workers dreamed of having white-collar jobs with no exhausting physical labor and with short fixed working hours, they had to live the reality of working in a garment factory. Seeing themselves as never fit for school and blaming themselves for not having studied harder might have helped them accept the reality without always feeling angry or unfair, whether this was how they had always looked at it or something they chose to believe ad hoc for the sake of reconciliation with their current life situations.

2. Staying positive

At the same time, the women workers did not always perceive and live their lives as sewing workers as something negative. Instead, they had developed diverse ways of understanding and navigating their current life situations. Li Cui once asked me whether I felt happy about my life and moved on to give her own view,

> *"the issue of happiness depends on your understanding and perception. In general, I think that I'm quite happy. I think I live a pretty good life. My little brother is doing an internship in Beijing. Well, they call it internship, but it's really just fetching materials for people and booking hotels for his supervisors… If you put it in a fancy way, it's an internship. But if you put in a harsh way, it's just a menial job… Everybody has different understanding.*

For our job, the only bad thing is that we have little free time. Even if we want to travel and to have fun somewhere, we don't have the time even if we have money. (We work) six days a week…And when we finally get to rest on Sunday, we would want to have some more sleep…"

"But I heard that it's easy to ask for leaves here. No?" I asked Li Cui.

"Yes, it's okay to ask for leaves, but you need to consider the interests of the factory. As said by the boss, only when the big family exists can the small family exist[16]*. And if you always ask for leaves, you will be disliked eventually…It will be the same when you start working. If you always ask for leaves, your supervisor will certainly (judge you negatively)."*

For Li Cui, being a sewing worker seemed to share some characteristics with doing other jobs, even though it certainly had its own unattractive aspects. At the same time, Li Cui seemed to show understanding towards the way their working conditions were set up instead of just complaining about it. On another occasion, Li Cui also touched upon the issue of wages when she told me that some of her coworkers found their wages for the last month lower than they had expected. As I was away at SolarExcellence during the time of wage distribution, Li Cui told me that the factory owner tried to explain the lower wages to the workers through the several days the workers took off during a national holiday and through their reduced productivity that

[16] "Only when the big family exists can the small family exists" is a traditional Chines saying that teaches people to prioritize collective interests, such as the state, the company, the clan etc. over individual interests, such as one's family and oneself.

month. I asked whether Li bought the explanations given by the factory owner. In Li's opinion,

> *"Well, each one of us is actually pretty clear about how much work oneself has done. Most people believed what he said. It's just that our work is also tough, so everybody wants higher wages…After all, one is never satisfied about money…Sometimes the boss is actually right: don't just look in front you. You need to look beyond. Short-term interests are after all temporary, and you need to look at long-term interests…Long-term interests mean that, compared to other small factories in our area, the wages of our factory are actually increasing."*

There were others at PrettyDress who shared Li Cui's empathetic views of the factory owner as well as the way he managed the factory and the workers. There was one time, I noticed that the team leader of team #3, Cheng Xiuli, was writing on some charts on the big table in front of her team. I approached Cheng Xiuli in order to find out what she was working on. But she turned away without even looking at me, which made me felt a little awkward. 36-year-old Cheng Xiuying from Anhui Province, who also worked in team #3 and was Cheng Xiuli's big sister, saw the incident and explained to me what was going on.

> *"My sister is calculating the wages of our team. The factory owner doesn't allow anyone to know about how much each of us was paid. The team leaders handle it all. If you feel that you were paid less than what you deserved, you can go to talk to the owner. But the team leaders' calculation can't be revealed to anyone, not even to me as her sister."*

And Cheng Xiuying continued to explain why the workers were not supposed to communicate with each other about their wages.

> "*In a factory, the salary can be very high for some people and very low for some other people. If people with lower salaries get to know that, they will feel unpleased. Right? We all worked for a month, why were you paid more? Say, for example, you and I are chatting, and your salary is much lower than mine, you will feel unhappy and quit. That's what the owner is afraid of. But some people's salaries are higher, because they worked harder! For a piece of clothes, some parts are more difficult to make and thus are paid higher, while some parts are easier and are thus paid lower…"*

Even though not being allowed to communicate their wages tended to isolate workers from each other and prevent workers from recognizing their common interests, Cheng Xiuying showed understanding towards such a regulation. Drawing on her understanding of the human nature of comparing with each other and seeking fair treatment, Cheng Xiuying saw the measure as necessary to keep the workers at work and the factory in order.

Relatedly, some women workers at PrettyDress also showed respect towards the factory owner, as they perceived him as a smart and diligent man who had earned his fortune and established the factory from nothing. Together with the owner's efforts in the workshop, the workers actually admired him as having the right of being a factory owner. Several workers expressed the view that the factory was smarter than them, which was why he was the owner and they were just workers. Once Zhao Haiyan chatted with me about her little sister, who went to a mediocre designer

school and was now unhappy about her being stuck in the low-end designing world. A senior worker sitting next to us, Weng Jiexiao, overheard Zhao's words and vehemently opposed her sister's attitude. Using the factory owner as an example, Weng said, *"everybody starts from ground zero and works their way up!"*

But some workers did not share this positive view of the factory owner. Instead, they perceived the factory owner as someone who pursued his own monetary interests through repressing workers' wages and providing them with as little benefits as possible, even though it did not necessarily mean to the workers that he was a bad person per se. For example, Guo Liping, a 50-year-old woman from Sichuan and whose daughter also worked at PrettyDress, commented,

> *"Factory owners are all like that, neither good nor bad. They are just like that… They all care about their own interests. They are basically telling you, 'that little money is all I can give you, either do or go.'*

With a sarcastic smile, Guo continued, "*Can they expect to make money without having a black heart? All crows are dark… Can they make money without having a dark heart?"* When I asked Guo, *"so you just bear with it?"* she replied, *"isn't working for others just like this? I just bear with it and let it go. I thought, just a few more years (then I will leave) …One's arm can't be stronger than one's thigh."* Bearing with the bitter life at the factory, Guo instead looked forward to the life she would live once she quitted the factory the next year. Guo had been saving money for her youngest son, and they planned to open a car maintenance shop in their hometown. In Guo's words,

"you know, I will go back, helping my son with the shop, cooking for them, and washing their clothes. That's pretty nice. The only thing I'm worried now is my youngest son's marriage though. He was seeing a girl earlier, but it didn't work out. It's okay. I never liked that girl very much anyway. He needed a more sophisticated woman to help him with the business."

As hard as they work and lives were, the women workers looked at the bright side of things and showed great psychological resilience in facing their difficulty. One morning in July, all the women workers were discussing and murmuring about some woman who committed suicide by jumping into the river nearby the day before. I heard comments like *"why did she do that?" "what was so unbearable that she had to do that?" "it shouldn't be necessary"* emerging here and there in the workshop. I was sitting next to Zhao Xiaojuan, a 28-year-old woman from Anhui Province, who was also commenting on this event through speaking out loud. *"Gee! Life is very fragile. Why mistreat yourself like that? Whatever is on you mind, vent it somewhere. Don't kill yourself!"* Someone in the group responded, *"she has big pressure."* Zhao Xiaojuan spoke back to the group, *"what big pressure? Sometimes I also say that I have big pressure. But when I think about it again, I don't really have much pressure. I feel that my life is pretty good!"* Li Cui responded to Zhao's comment, *"That's so true. There wasn't much pressure. Think about those poor kids. As long as I'm safe and sound, it's happy enough."* Then Zhao Xiaojuan turned to me and continued,

"In this era, health is the most important thing. Then you make a little bit money each year. You get by. That's enough!... Now I just think about how much money I make each year and see if I can buy something at the end of a

year. Sometimes I do feel a lot of pressure. But then I calm down and tell myself not to give myself so much pressure. Just let nature takes its course. To be honest, sometimes I see other people buying new cellphones and this and that, I also want that. But I don't have that much money… Then I'm like, sigh, let's just take it slowly. I will buy one thing this year, and then another thing next year."

Cheng Xiuli felt that her life was actually easier and more comfortable than mine. Seeing me work so hard at the factory and hearing that I was going to pursuing a graduate degree after this, Cheng Xiuli went ahead and gave me a quite long "lecture".

"Don't get too much education. Once you get a Master's degree, your husband also has to have a Master's degree. With too much education, who would you marry? For girls, the most important thing is still getting married. See, my husband's younger sister used to be a lawyer, very smart and educated. Yet what's the point of that? She is a full-time housewife now…Yes you can work hard, but after two years of working, your child will come. Then you have to quit your job and to take care of the child. What's the point? So, I would say, don't be too excellent, otherwise it would be too much pressure for your future boyfriend… Also, when you look for jobs, you don't have social experience or work experience…it's going to be hard, unless you have powerful connections…I know some women want to be independent and pursue success on their own, but they are still going to regret it the day they become successful. They will regret that they didn't spend time enjoying good

romantic relationships. Girls shouldn't work too hard!... You know, nowadays, successful men all like innocent girls. Find a good husband; take care of your children; that's a good enough life!... Boys should work hard. Girls shouldn't work too hard. I once met a rich boss, who said, 'I love that my daughter knows nothing, and a delicious dish is enough to satisfy her. I have never met someone so innocent, etc. and etc.' Look at all the rich men out there, they all like innocent girls, not sophisticated girls…We are going to retire soon. I'm so happy! You keep fighting slowly!"

After this long lecture, Cheng Xiuli went on to peel a banana and also gave me one, saying, *"Eat. Become plump and find a good boyfriend. That's your goal now. See, we don't need to use our brains at all. When I look at women like you, working so hard and trying to climb higher and higher, I feel tired for you. Women shouldn't be so tired. You should find a good husband and get married."*

In all, even though working at the garment factory was difficult and exhausting, the women workers still managed to have a positive attitude about their work and life. They either turned to other aspects of their lives – such as happy family life – for console or they redefined the meaning of happiness as having such precious things as health. Sometimes they even identified with the traditional gender value and found happiness in living a simple life where they did not have to compete for success.

3. Group interactions

While all the women workers at PrettyDress found the job of sewing clothes exhausting and undesirable, at least one of them claimed to have chosen to keep

working at PrettyDress voluntarily. 36-year-old Cheng Xiuying from Anhui Province, whose little sister was Cheng Xiuli, presented an interesting case because of her family situations. Similar to her coworkers, Cheng came from a poor rural family, did not have much education and came out to work in the city at a young age. What made her situation different, however, was that her husband had been doing well in the construction business in the recent years and could provide for her and their three children more than sufficiently now. Cheng often wore new and pretty clothes, used the latest version of iPhone and iPad, and received packages of relatively pricy items from online shopping all the time. According to Cheng, even her husband asked her not to come to work. Yet Cheng talked about the various reasons that she wanted to stay.

> *"You know, I was just telling my husband yesterday that it was so hot here that I was getting rashes on my neck. He asked me not to complain to him because he wasn't the one making me work here… But if I stay home, I would just be watching TV all day by myself. I feel better working here. I could talk to people and time passed quickly. Plus, my family used to be very poor, so I feel uncomfortable doing nothing and not making any money…*

On another occasion, Cheng also explained another aspect of her motivation for working at PrettyDress.

> *"My sister and I also thought about not returning after last Spring Festival at our hometown. But the factory owner called us and pled us to come back. Our team is really (productive and cooperative) … Our team is the most productive of the entire factory, because we are united. Everyone has only one*

pair of hands, but (our hands work faster). The owner really likes us… It's not that we are super competent. It's just that we have solidarity. Whenever there are production tasks, we work at break-neck speed. Last time, their teams (referring to #1 and #2) and our team were making the same clothes. We used only four days…They started early from the weekend before, while we started from Monday and finished on Friday. Didn't the owner say that they used four or five days more than we did? And they were also exhausted after that batch of clothes were done."

By explaining her individual reasons for wanting to stay at the factory, Cheng Xiuying actually touched upon a major observation about worker agency I had made at PrettyDress. One thing I kept noticing about the workshop was how lively it always was, with the workers chatting, bantering, laughing, and sometimes also quarreling with each other in the same space. Such interpersonal interactions, which Cheng mentioned as one of the reasons she liked about working at PrettyDress, were especially frequent within the teams but sometimes also happened across teams. For example, when Chen Jia told her coworkers about her unhappy marriage, all the workers sitting around her joined the conversation and pitched in to give her advice and suggestions.

Chen Jia: *My parents-in-law called me yesterday to ask me for money to buy a new refrigerator.*

Team Leader: *Just ignore them!*

Chen Jia: *My father-in-law told me that he's taking care of my son, and my son is also using his money. He even asked me, "aren't*

your money also your son's money?"

Huang Jianlin: *I would say you should only send them half of your wages, tops.*

Deng Li: *I agree with Huang Jianlin…*

Huang Jianlin: *They thought you were their bank, or money printer?*

Team Leader: *You can send them half, no more.*

Chen Jia: *It's his own son who is a loser…*

Team Leader: *Is your husband working yet? He can't always stay idle…*

Chen Jia: *I will only send them 1,500 yuan this month. I don't care about the rest!*

Huang Jianlin: *How much did they ask you for?*

Chen Jia: *More than 2,000 yuan…to buy a refrigerator. They will need to add some themselves, I guess.*

Huang Jianlin: *Buy nothing!*

Chen Jia: *I used to think that their economic status was fine. They only have one son. Never thought that they would depend on me…He even told me that I couldn't count on them, and he will not give me a penny.*

Huang Jianlin: *Doesn't your husband understand the situation of his own family? How can he not work? How many people do you need to feed on your own?*

Chen Jia: *This time when I go back, I want to take my elder child out with me.*

Huang Jianlin: *Don't do that! It's not so convenient as you think. You spend more than 10 hours at work here each day. Who will be there to take care of your son at night? You definitely shouldn't bring this up with your parents-in-law.*

Chen Jia: *But I feel that my children are like orphans. What do they need their parents for?... My husband is really irresponsible. Look at our situation. He's still so irresponsible. He's like a child. But I'm not his mother! I really don't want to see him again!*

Yang Supin: *Well, if they only have one son, all they have now will finally belong to you one day!*

Chen Jia: *Oh, I don't think I can count on that. Plus, they have a daughter…Sigh. Every year I go back, I actually have to give them red packets*[17].

Huang Jianlin: *You have too soft a heart! Why would you give them red packets? Tell them that they actually need to give you red packets! They are your elders.*

Chen Jia: *Ha! Easy for you to say. I need to give them at least 500 yuan each time!... And when I bought them clothes instead, they showed antipathy and said it's out of fashion. And they wouldn't stop judging…*

[17] It is a tradition in China that the elderly give the young generation in the extended family money on the Chinese Spring Festival. And the money is wrapped in red packets to symbolize good luck and best wishes.

Yang Supin: *Hey you young girls! You need to learn better how to respect the elderly and to love the young*[18]*. You will get old too one day…Now you have two children with them, of course you should give your parents-in-law some money. And it's only right and just that you buy them some clothes for the Spring Festival.*

Huang Jianlin: *Yeah, sure, it's right to send them money. But they are always asking for money, money, money. Who has that much money?!*

Chen Jia: *I never saw my mother-in-law treating her mother-in-law so nicely?*

Yang Supin: *That's because we were all poor in the past.*

Chen Jia: *I never even saw her washing clothes for her mother-in-law.*

Yang Supin: *Shouldn't her mother-in-law have passed away?*

Chen Jia: *No, she's still there!... Filial piety should be passed down from generation to generation. I never saw her being filial to her mother-in-law.*

Yang Supin: Well, you can be the one starting the tradition…

Lively conversations like this among the women workers abounded in my field note. The women workers chatted with each other about a wide range of

[18] Even though Yang Supin was trying to teach the younger women the importance of respecting the elderly, given that she herself was in her 50s, Yang cited the Chinese saying that always combined respecting the elderly and loving the young together, both being part of the important traditional virtue in China.

subjects, such as their family affairs, tales from their hometowns, house chores, beauty, styles, shopping, social news, and TV shows. Basically anything could become their topics for chat. They usually kept moving their hands at the sewing machines when they talked, and such interactions made the repetitive work and the long working days less monotonic. It is also important to note that interpersonal interactions were more salient at PrettyDress than at SolarExcellence not only because chatting was more popular among the female gender. It also had to do with the nature of the job and the related spatial arrangement. Sun Shimin, a 27-year-old welder at SolarExcellence, once compared his past experiences of working at a small garment factory and his current job at SolarExcellence.

> *"It's rather quiet here, right? When I worked at the garment factory, there was only a small workshop where all of us worked together. We chatted with each other all the time, and time passed more quickly like that. Here it's more difficult to do that, because we are rather far away from each other. We only come together to chat during breaks."*

As all the sewing workers sat at their sewing machines that were put next to each other in the same workshop, it was easier for them to carry on conversations among themselves while keeping working at the same time. Through their agency of sharing their stories, expressing their opinions, and giving each other ideas, the women workers created a working environment that, despite all the hardship, provided them with some social support and things to laugh about and engage.

However, it took me some time to learn the other side of the seemingly benign interactions among the female rural migrant workers at PrettyDress. As I have

touched upon in Chapter 3, I gradually found out that their warm conversations and their smiles at each other might not necessarily indicate real friendship or true concerns about each other's well-being. In Cheng Xiuying's earlier comment on the different productivity of the several teams, she indicated her pride of belonging to a team that she regarded as being more competent and cooperative than the other teams, which might be part of the reason why she preferred working at PrettyDress. In fact, Cheng Xiuying expressed a similar opinion on another occasion. One day in early August, the women in team #3 were asking the employer about the calculation of wages of July. The employer explained it to them in a very confusing way – I knew I could not make sense of it – and the workers all looked confused. Cheng Xiuying announced to the group, *"I don't really care about the details. The only thing I know is that our team has the highest output, so our team should have the highest wages of the whole factory. That's the only thing I care about.*"

As I spent more time observing and listening to the sewing workers, I realized that the different teams were actually not in friendly relationships with each other. Yet their competition and mutual hostility was concealed under warm exchanges and smiles on the surface and was not immediately perceptible. For example, one day, I was sitting next to a sewing worker in team #2 when a quarrel broke out between several workers and the team leader in team #4. As there was some distance between the two teams, I could not hear clearly what was going on. So, I asked the team leader Zeng Changhong *"what's up*", as I saw her stand nearby with her head turning towards team #4 the whole time. Hearing my question, Zeng turned back her head, rolled her eyes, and replied to me in a tone that indicated distain, *"I don't know. I*

don't care. Who cares about what ***they*** *are doing."* Then Zeng turned to speak with the workers in her team who sat close to her, *"those women in that team are bad. They are very bad. I know what kind of people they are."* I did not find it appropriate to probe into this topic, but that Zeng held some negative opinions about the workers in team #4 was evident.

The team #3 led by Cheng Xiuli was obviously favored by the factory owner. While the other three teams could not compete with team #3 in productivity, they maintained their distance from team #3 in other ways. In contrast, team #4 was the least liked by the owner, and people in team #4 were aware of that. There was one time when team #3 and #4 were making the same kind of clothes and it was rather complicated work. Team #3 started earlier, and Chen Xiuli the team leader had experience of making this kind of clothes. When team #4 started working on it, it was really difficult and they were quite frustrated. But when I asked them why not ask the people in team #3 for advice, I got a few negative answers. Qin Li, a 45-year-old sewing worker from Anhui, said, *"we know how to do it. Our team also has people who know how to do this. We can just ask her (referring to Liu Xiaohui, who really did not know how to do the work either)."* Then I went to ask Liu Xiaohui, *"they had experience of doing this, can't you just ask them?"* Liu Xiaohui also refused, saying,

> *"the method is the same like this. It's just that we are doing it for the first time, so it's slower. They have done it before, so they will surely be faster. We are doing it the same way, otherwise the boss would have said something already."*

Moreover, it was not just in between the teams that competition and unfriendliness showed. As I have described in Chapter 3, the women workers also talked ill of each other as individuals behind the back.

In all, this section, I have selected three different themes to tell the story of worker agency at PrettyDress. While the themes are different from the ones I choose for SolarExcellence, it does not mean that the two sets of themes only apply to one of the factories exclusively. In fact, the PrettyDress workers also showed variation of personal ambition; they also talked about how past choices impacted their current situations, especially in terms of education; and they also applied various moral principles to navigating their factory relations. As for the SolarExcellence workers, they also talked about education, and they also had their ways of remaining positive faced with unsatisfying working conditions. But the purpose of the chapter is to give an overview of work agency at the two factories that is as rich as possible. Therefore, I have strategically chosen six different themes and focused on the three themes that stood out most for each factory.

Similar to the case of SolarExcellence workers, the PrettyDress workers also showed richness and diversity of the thoughts and considerations in understanding their factory work. The women workers mainly perceived their doing exhausting sewing work as a consequence of their not studying hard when they were young; They had various strategies for keeping a positive about their lives and futures, despite the highly undesirable working conditions at PrettyDress; and given the nature of the physical space, they created a live working environment through group

interactions that were more intense than at SolarExcellence. All these aspects of worker agency played a role in shaping PrettyDress workers' attitudes and behavior at work. Also, similar to the case of SolarExcellence workers, the PrettyDress workers' agency was also shaped by factors that went beyond the specific factory setting.

Summary and Implications

In this chapter, I have selectively shared a dozen of rural migrant workers' stories within six loose themes to present a holistic view of the worker agency I had contact with at SolarExcellence and PrettyDress. Because I did not constrain my interactions with the rural migrant workers within preconceived theoretical frameworks or judge any topics they brought up as relevant or irrelevant, I was exposed to and collected a wide range of evidence regarding the ideas, thoughts, considerations, perceptions, and plans that the rural migrant workers brought to the factories. The main purpose of the chapter is to provide a space to introduce the agency the migrant workers presented at work in its richness and complexity and to draw a few general lessons before narrowing down to elaborate on one or two specific aspects of their agency.

The first noticeable feature of worker agency as presented here was its great variety and diversity. The rural migrant workers touched upon a myriad of topics, sometimes with different points of view, including but not limited to personal ambitions, understanding of market competition, perceptions of education and occupation, explanations of their current social positions, the importance of moral considerations, concerns for marriage and family, opinions about factory authorities, ideas of happiness, and future plans. This leads to the second observation that the rural migrant workers' agency in factory production could hardly be contained within

an analytical framework that only focuses on elements directly related to the factories and the production process. There was no clear boundary between the migrant workers as industrial laborers working in specific factories and the migrant workers who were involved in other parts of their social lives. During their factory work, the rural migrant workers continued bringing in agency that had developed and kept developing from various sources of experience and observations.

Most importantly, all the various aspects and elements of worker agency played a role in shaping the rural migrant workers' attitudes and behavior regarding their factory work. For example, their different personal ambitions might lead them to keep making money as a worker in a factory, try to climb up the management ladder, or leave a factory. Their understanding of market competition and their empathy toward factory authority figures might mean more tolerance of unsatisfying working conditions. Blaming themselves for not landing better life opportunities because of their personalities, bad personal choices, or having failed to work hard at school might make them less likely to perceive their situations as collectively shared and unjust. These were but a few possible scenarios. The challenge, however, lies in the difficulty of fitting the variety of worker agency into one analytical framework or one coherent narrative. On the one hand, multiple aspects of worker agency may call for different analyses of multiple mechanisms through which worker agency shapes factory production. On the other hand, a new theoretical approach may be required to reassess the role worker agency plays in capitalist production process, which may have to go beyond the existing theoretical frameworks of labor studies to incorporate

the reality of diverse and complicated worker agency and its involvement in shaping factory work.

In the next two chapters, I follow the first path to separately analyze two aspects of rural migrant workers' agency that emerged in the research and discuss how they each influenced the migrant workers' participation in factory production. Chapter 5 discusses how the rural migrant workers perceived factory management and navigated their relationships with the factory authorities. Chapter 6 turns to rural migrant workers' emphasis on family at work. And in the last chapter, I ponder on some possible theoretical directions to go in the next step.

Chapter 5: Rural Migrant Workers' Perceptions of Factory Management

One Puzzle and Two Explanations

In this chapter, I closely analyze one aspect of the rural migrant workers' agency: their subjective thoughts regarding the various aspects of the factory management and the management personnel at SolarExcellence and PrettyDress. This theme is worth elaborating on, not only because it is closely related to the traditional topics of labor studies but also because it constituted a key concern for the rural migrant workers themselves. In the process of my fieldwork, the rural migrant workers at both factories touched upon these topics repeatedly and spontaneously. By discussing perceptions of management, I am thus following the rural migrant workers' subjective concerns. The SolarExcellence workers actually used the term "management" to express their ideas about the working conditions and the various management rules, while the PrettyDress workers discussed similar subjects without necessarily employing the word "management".

Two factors might have contributed to the different usage of the term "management" at the two factories. First, the employers of SolarExcellence and its headquarter company were making conscious efforts to establish a modern company that not only was productively competitive but also had the public image of a well-managed enterprise. For this purpose, the employers had hired general managers specialized in discussing management, who in turn trained their middle-level

managers with the same idea. “Management” was part of the management personnel’s daily language at SolarExcellence, including when they were communicating with the workers. It was thus not surprising that the rural migrant workers at SolarExcellence ended up adopting the term. In contrast, the employer-manager of PrettyDress just sought survival of the small workshop with no ambition of expanding it to a big firm. He thus never talked about management either to me or to the women workers. PrettyDress workers only spoke of “management” occasionally when they talked about their past experience of working at large factories with development management structures. Second, the SolarExcellence workers were faced with a stratified management system, where no single one authority figure made all the decisions. Sometimes, the migrant workers even saw the interests of the different managers to be at conflict with each other. It was thus not always clear to the SolarExcellence workers who was at fault for various management-related problems of the factory, and they tended to use the generic term “management” to discuss their factory experience in general. As PrettyDress was managed by the employer himself alone, the rural migrant workers at PrettyDress could clearly attribute every factory policy to the intentions and actions of the employer. The women workers thus tended to express their opinions about the factory management through directly commenting on the employer instead of using the impersonal term “management”.

Despite their different usage of the term, the rural migrant workers at both SolarExcellence and PrettyDress expressed their thoughts about factory management, including their working conditions, various management rules, and the factory

authority figures. In this chapter, I analyze this aspect of the rural migrant workers' agency by engaging an observation that appeared rather puzzling at first sight. During my study at SolarExcellence, almost every rural migrant worker I came into contact with expressed some negative opinions about the factory management or the managers of SolarExcellence. Similarly, as I have touched upon in the last chapter, I also heard the women migrant workers at PrettyDress repeatedly complain about the long working hours, the low wages, and the bad food at the factory cafeteria. These complaints and dissatisfaction seemed to indicate that the rural migrant workers felt resistant to the factory management and the factory authorities. At the same time, however, the same rural migrant workers at both SolarExcellence and PrettyDress also expressed empathy for the factories and the management people, suggesting that they might also identify themselves with the interests of the factories and the factory management sometimes. For example, while some SolarExcellence workers severely criticized certain managers' treatment of the workers, they nevertheless empathized with the same managers because they regarded the managers' jobs as being difficult and full of pressure. The PrettyDress workers also expressed understanding of the employer's needs of cutting costs for the survival of the factory, despite their complaints about the unappealing working conditions. Were the rural migrant workers expressing contradictory ideas regarding their own interests as in relation to those of the factory management and the factory authorities?

Based on my analysis, I propose in this chapter that the rural migrant workers' mixed positive and negative comments on the factory management and the management personnel might have actually reflected two sets of consistent ideas

regarding their perceptions of the factories and their understanding of the nature of the factory relations. First, the rural migrant workers tended to situate their factories in the larger context of market competition, which made them empathize with the management practices that they believed to be necessary for the survival of the factories. By the same logic, the rural migrant workers were also empathetic toward the factory employers, because they did not see the employers as being omnipotent. Instead, the migrant workers perceived the employers as being vulnerable, as they had to compete on the market and could suffer loss and failure. At the same time, the rural migrant workers did complain and express dissatisfaction, but only when they felt that the working conditions could be improved without jeopardizing the factory survival or when the working conditions sank below the migrant workers' standard of being reasonable – based on their subjective and contexualized definition of what was reasonable.

Second, the discourse with which the rural migrant workers discussed the management personnel indicated that they did not characterize the factory relations as a capital-labor dichotomy that was specific to the factory setting but perceived themselves to be situated in hierarchical relations that were common to other aspects of their social lives. With such understanding of the nature of factory relations, the rural migrant workers did not challenge the power of the factory authorities; instead, they emphasized that both the factory authorities and the workers should be reasonable and responsible in doing their work so that the hierarchical relations could function to the benefit of everyone involved in the factories. This perception further explained why the rural migrant workers at SolarExcellence and PrettyDress

empathized with the factory employers, who were seen by the workers to shoulder the difficult responsibility of leading the factories to compete in the market. Moreover, at SolarExcellence, this perception also explained why the male migrant workers both showed understanding toward the managers for their difficulty jobs and complained about the managers when they felt that the managers failed to be reasonable and responsible in fulfilling their management responsibilities.

Factories, Market, and Employers

In this section, I focus on the rural migrant workers' attitudes toward the working conditions and the factory employers at SolarExcellence and PrettyDress, which presented a mixture of both positive and negative opinions. I propose that the seemingly ambiguous attitudes did not necessarily mean that the rural migrant workers had contradictory feelings and that they sometimes identified their interests with the factories and the employers while other times rebelled against those. Instead, the positive and negative comments together of the rural migrant workers might reflect their consistent ideas that the factories should be situated in the larger context of market competition and that the factory employers were also subject to the market rules instead of being all powerful.

1. Situating the factories in the market

At both SolarExcellence and PrettyDress, the rural migrant workers expressed empathy toward certain management arrangements that they believed to be inevitable or necessary for the survival of the factories in the market competition, even when such arrangements led to unpleasant working conditions that hurt the workers'

interests. None of the rural migrant workers actually used the exact term "market competition", but they either talked about "competition" directly or described the functioning of their current factories in reference to the specific industries or other factories out there.

Recall Hu Lei, the electrician from SolarExcellence that I have introduced in the last chapter. He directly linked the worsening wage situations at SolarExcellence to the increasing international and national competition of the solar power industry.

> *"…last year for about three or four months, workers at SolarExcellence were …paid a monthly wage of only 2,000 yuan (about $300), because there was no work for us to do. You know, the solar industry is…not doing well the recent two years. There is the anti-dumping campaign…and there is also severe competition. There are so many people investing in the solar industry now, because they feel they can make money. The competition is severe. But… there won't be innovation without competition. Like Nokia, it didn't innovate and it failed.*

Hu Lei thus did not blame SolarExcellence or the employer for failing to pay the workers satisfying wages. He rather expressed a sense of helplessness, as he perceived competition – the major factor that he understood to be responsible for workers' decreasing wages – to be inevitable. As Hu did not see the factory or the employer as having the power to control competition or its impact on workers' wages, Hu hoped that the state or powerful national figures could step in to improve workers' situations, as I have also described in the last chapter[19]. Another rural migrant worker

[19] See page 119.

at SolarExcellence, a 26-year-old CNC operator named Zhang Wenqiang from Shandong Province, held similar views regarding the powerlessness of workers as well as factory employers when faced with market changes. But Zhang did not seem to share Hu's belief that the state had the ability to take care of workers, especially during times of economic crises. In the following quote, Zhang reflected upon his past experience of participating in a labor strike at another factory and expressed an understanding attitude towards factory employers in general.

> *"There was the financial crisis in 2008, and many factories went bankrupt with employers running away. Our factory was one of them. It's small, and small factories were easy to fall. I don't think that our employer wanted to run away on purpose... You know, for people like us, we would be in the same situation again if another financial crisis hits now. If the employer of this factory runs away, there would be no point looking for him, and there would be no point going to the government either. If it was about only one employer running away, maybe the government could solve the problem. But with many employers of many factories running away, the government would be helpless as well."*

Zhang Wenqiang lamented the helplessness of workers when they were faced with failing factories and running-away employers, yet he did not find the factory employers completely to blame. Instead, Zhang showed understanding towards factory employers because they could also be victims of financial crises. Unlike Hu Lei, Zhang did not the state could provide the workers with security, because the

government, in Zhang's eyes, also only had limited capacities in handling large-scale economic crisis.

Also recall Li Cui from PrettyDress, who accepted the unexpected low wages for one month, as she compared her wage situations with those of other small-sized factories in the same area.

> *"…Sometimes the employer is actually right: don't just look at what's right in front you. You need to look beyond. Short-term interests are temporary after all, and you need to look at long-term interests…Long-term interests mean that, compared to other small factories in our area, the wages of our factory are actually increasing."*

Perhaps influenced by the employer of PrettyDress, Li Cui learned to situate the factory in the context of all the small garment factories in the same area. And Li learned not to ask for short-term high wages that might jeopardize the long-term survival and prosperity of the factory. Another sewing worker, 38-year-old Yang Aixia from Anhui Province, also found it unwise to demand too many benefits from PrettyDress, because, according to Yang, it might threaten the survival of the factory. When we discussed the fact that PrettyDress did not pay social insurances for its workers, Yang commented,

> *"It would be nice to have social insurances. But I don't think the small factory can afford it. Do you know the KaiLian factory nearby? It went bankrupt because it provided its workers with all sorts of benefits."*

Yang was referring to a garment factory located a few blocks away from PrettyDress that used to hire thousands of workers but was shut down a month before my arrival

at PrettyDress. I heard several PrettyDress workers as well as Jimmy, the accountant of PrettyDress, talk about the incident. But they all seemed to have different information and opinions regarding why the KaiLian factory failed. According to Jimmy, the factory was voluntarily shut down by the former employer of Kailian because he was getting old and his son was unwilling to take over. Guo Lifeng[20], however, believed that *"the big factory was brought down by the many 'parasites' it had, managers, chief managers, and general managers – people who were paid well but did not do anything."* What mattered here was not whether Yang Aixia's idea was objectively true but how her belief about Kailian had influenced her subjective perception of the PrettyDress. Believing that good benefits for workers were incompatible with the survival of a factory that was even as big as Kailian, Yang seemed to accept it as obvious that PrettyDress could not afford to provide the workers with social insurances.

Yang Dehua, who felt ashamed in front his successful rural migrant friends[21], provided another example illustrating how the workers situated the factories in the market. Yang Dehua saw the employer of SolarExcellence as a generous and fair person. He especially liked reiterating the story of SolarExcellence's annual New Year banquet in 2010, where the employer distributed large bonuses to the workers because the factory had made great profits that year with the booming solar power industry in China. Then, Yang Dehua explained his understanding of why the employer gave the workers much lower wages and bonuses now than before,

[20] She first appeared in the dissertation in Chapter 3 on page 98.

[21] See page 125 in Chapter 4.

"Old Zuo (the employer) is a very generous man. He wants to continue giving us great bonuses now, but he's got his hands tied. During the early years when the solar power industry was growing exponentially, Old Zuo and his business partners invested little but earned a lot, so they could afford to be generous. Now, they have got new investors and a board. Those people have invested several ten million yuan recently without getting much profit back. So, even though Old Zuo wants to pay us more, the board members wouldn't let him."

Yang Dehua situated SolarExcellence in the larger context of the solar power industry, which he understood to have been generating lower profits for the factory with growing competition. Moreover, Yang also imagined that the employer was constraint by his investors as well. Therefore, while higher wages and bonuses were desirable, Yang Dehua did not insist on getting similar bonuses now.

Zhang Cai, the quality-check worker who grabbed me on my first day at PrettyDress, also expressed empathy toward the factory employer. Zhang did not enjoy doing her job, because *"it's too detailed...you need to be very careful and pay attention to any tiny flaws."* In fact, before the clothes made by the PrettyDress workers could be exported to Japan, the clothes had to go through another round of examination at professional quality-check companies. And according to what I heard from the PrettyDress workers, those companies were extremely strict and often sent back clothes that the factory quality-checker workers judged to be fine. Zhang commented,

> *"The workers are not easy! But the employer is also not easy. Every time the clothes get examined by the quality-check companies, it costs him money. And if the clothes do not pass the quality-check and are sent back, next time it costs him money again to examine the same clothes… The electricity, the water (of the factory) … it's all money that the employer is spending. So, as we are here, we need to work"*

Even though Zhang Cai had to spend tedious hours checking the clothes closely, she did not blame the factory or the employer for imposing the strict standards. As Zhang saw the factory employer as also being bound by the rules of the market, she empathized with the employer and found it reasonable to keep working.

As the examples have suggested, the rural migrant workers at SolarExcellence and PrettyDress did not perceive the factories or the employers to have the ultimate power in determining or controlling workers' working conditions. Instead, the rural migrant workers considered the factory situations in reference to the larger context of the market, which consisted of competition among factories in the same industries and especially of similar sizes. As the rural migrant workers believed that the factories and the employers were subject to market rules, they tended to demonstrate an understanding attitude toward the unsatisfying working conditions that they deemed to be necessary or inevitable for the survival of the factories in the market.

The rural migrant workers' ideas about market competition and factory survival could have originated from a variety of sources, including but not limited to employers' influence as in the case of Li Cui, the migrant workers' working

experience and observations in different factories, and their or their friends and relatives' experience of doing business and participating in market competition.

Some of the rural migrant workers had experienced similar working conditions as they moved from one factory to another, which led them to perceive certain practices to be normal in a certain industry or for a certain type of factory. This mechanism was especially evident at PrettyDress. While all the sewing workers complained about the long working hours and the low wages at PrettyDress, their always followed the complaints with such comments as *"but garment factories are all like this" "making clothes is always about sitting there for a long time" and "in all garment factories wages depend on the hours of overtime you do."* In other words, the women migrant workers took the working conditions at PrettyDress to be no worse than the working conditions they had experienced in other garment factories, especially smaller ones like PrettyDress. They thus rarely demanded better treatment or connected their complaints about the working conditions to any wrong doings of the particular employer of PrettyDress. The sewing workers' frustration about the working conditions in the garment industry was directed more to themselves and to their lack of education or ability of securing better jobs, as I have discussed in the last chapter.

Though less unanimous, similar comments also emerged at SolarExcellence. For example, the SolarExcellence workers were not happy with the recent wage reform[22], as I have described in Chapter 3. Yet not all SolarExcellence workers

[22] See page 78.

perceived the procedure as completely unacceptable. Commenting on this, Li Doudou, a 27-year-old assembler, said,

> *"Every enterprise is like this. Any company that has piece rates is like this. Rationally I understand that this is how an enterprise can survive. But emotionally I still feel unhappy about it."*

Based on his past working experience in other factories, Li Doudou regarded the deduction of piece rate wages as a common practice and associated it with factory survival. Because of this perception, Li Doudou tended to accept this management procedure, at least on the logical level, even though he felt upset emotionally.

Sometimes, through their working experience, the rural migrant workers also observed how market situations could impact the fate of factories as well as that of workers, such as in the case of Zhang Wenqiang, who witnessed that a financial crisis could destroy factories and employers. Another worker from PrettyDress, 36-year-old Zheng Jiemiao, also demonstrated how her past working experience had taught her some rules of how market worked. Zheng used to work at several small garment factories in Zhejiang Province and had only came to PrettyDress a month before my fieldwork there. Zheng shared with me some of the reasons she had left Zhejiang to come to work at PrettyDress.

> *"I did not want to work there anymore, because the wages were unstable and tended to become lower and lower over time. There, we didn't work for exportation like PrettyDress does. In Zhejiang, we made clothes for the local markets. When the clothes sold well, the business was good and we did fine. But when the clothes we had made couldn't sell (on the local markets), the*

business was bad and the employer lost money. When the employer lost money, he had to suppress our wages. Here, at PrettyDress, because they work for exportation, they always have orders."

Based on her experience, Zheng saw her wage conditions as being directly related to market situations and business opportunities. When the products sold well on the market, the employer made money and the workers were paid well. Yet when the products did not sell, the employer lost money and the workers' wages also suffered. Zheng also compared producing for the local markets and producing for exportation, coming to the conclusion that the foreign market offered a more stable market for factory production and thus more reliable and predictable wages.

Similarly, Tu Min, a 34-year-old machine operator at SolarExcellence, expressed his understanding of market competition in describing his past working experience in the shoe industry as well as explaining why he preferred working for the solar industry.

"I used to make shoes. The competition was even severer for the shoe industry. They don't really care about the quality of shoes. The lower the price, the better one can compete. And there is really not much technology involved in making shoes. They just need to take a brief look at a pair of shoes, then they know how to make cheap imitations…Making the equipment here at least requires some technology. Even if they show you the equipment, you can't make it without the blueprint. For industries that don't require technology, the advantage of price makes a big part of the game."

Tu Min then touched upon the fact that SolarExcellence had also been receiving fewer orders in the past year. Echoing Hu Lei's view, Tu connected this to increasing competition in the specific context of China by drawing on business stories he heard from his relative.

> *"It's always like this in China. Once a product offers high profits, many people will join the competition. At first, the profit may be 100%. It then turns into 50%, 30%...till it gets smaller and smaller… That's what happened with the cellphone industry. Before, (making) a cellphone made the profit of hundreds of yuan, but now…I have a relative who works on developing cellphone software, you know those small games you make on the cellphone. He said that an employer of a cellphone factory told him that (making) a cellphone used to make 100 yuan (about $15) but only 10 yuan now. According to my relative, the employer felt helpless."*

Tu Min's past experience of working in the shoe industry familiarized him with the difficulty of business caused by easy and severe competition, which made him appreciate the solar power industry given the higher threshold of technology for entering the business. At the same time, however, Tu Min also learned from his relative in the cellphone industry that competition was unstoppable and the falling profit was inevitable, even in industries heavy with technology.

Some of the rural migrant workers also had had first-hand experience doing business themselves, where they learned about rules of competition. For example, Wen Jing, a 34-year-old sewing worker at PrettyDress, used to run a small car maintenance shop with her brother in their hometown in Anhui Province. But their

business had failed a year ago, which was why they both had to come to the city to be migrant workers. When I asked Wen if she felt bad about their business, Wen seemed rather calm about it.

> *"Not really. We couldn't do anything about it. We had been doing fine. Then someone else opened a new car maintenance shop on the same street. It's larger, and more people went there instead. We don't have the money to invest more. We could do nothing about it. The other shop indeed did a better job than us."*

Overall, when the rural migrant workers considered the working conditions of the particular factories, they brought in their past experience of working both in and outside of factories. Some of the rural migrant workers compared their working experience in different factories and tended to tolerate certain unappealing working conditions at the particular factories as long as things were not worse than what they had experienced in other similar factories. Combined with the perception that factories needed to compete with each other in the market, the rural migrant workers seemed to find it unreasonable or unrealistic to ask for working conditions that surpassed what they understood to be common standards. Some rural migrant workers also learned to situate the factories in the larger context of market and competition, either because they had directly observed or experienced how market conditions influenced business profitability and even existence of different factories or because they had direct experience of participating in business competition themselves.

2. Mixed attitudes toward employers and factories

As the rural migrant workers at SolarExcellence and PrettyDress situated the factories in the larger context of the market with competition for survival, they perceived the factory employers to be constraint by market rules rather than being omnipotent in controlling workers' working conditions. Not only did the rural migrant workers show an understanding attitude toward certain unappealing management measures, they also did not always develop negative attitudes towards the employers because of the unsatisfying working conditions. The examples of Yang Dehua and Zhang Cai that I have discussed earlier demonstrated that the rural migrant workers could even express feelings of empathy toward the employers despite their complaints about the working conditions.

At the same time, however, the rural migrant workers did criticize the employers as well as the working conditions sometimes. But a closer look indicated that their negative comments reflected the same idea of situating the factories in the context of market competition. The rural migrant workers only expressed complaints and dissatisfactions about the factories and the employers when they believed that providing better working conditions for workers did not conflict with the need of the factories to survive in the market. As I got to know him better after a few month, Jin Long, the 34-year-old welder from SolarExcellence who tended to mistrust people, seemed more upfront with me about his thoughts. During our chat, Jin expressed the idea that the employer should treat the workers with better working conditions in order to motivate them to work more efficiently. According to Jin Long, this would

lead to a relationship of partnership between the factory and the workers that were beneficial to both sides.

> *"The employer has money and expects to establish an enterprise. It has to allow its employees to prosper. Why do some employers give stock shares of their companies to the employees, as I read in the news? It's asking the employees to work hard. I would definitely work hard with the shares, because the money I make out of my hard work belongs to me. But nowadays, factories are usually not like that. There's nothing for the employees. The working conditions are not good, and the workers are not motivated. Well then, if you tell me to finish some work within an hour, I can keep working on it for two hours, even three hours… The employer needs to build a harmonious relationship with the employees. Then, whenever you want something, I will get it done immediately for you. With a bad relationship, of course it won't work. If the management is bad, even good workers will do bad."*

Jin thus criticized the working conditions, more specifically the lack of economic rewards for the workers, at SolarExcellence as well as at some other factories. But Jin was not necessarily challenging the power of the employer per se. Instead, his ideal seemed to be a reciprocating relationship between the employer and the workers, where the employer got to keep his power and profits while the workers worked for him willingly with better benefits. Li Bo, a 35-year-old machine processer at SolarExcellence, expressed a similar opinion when talking about the overtime.

> *"Sometimes, when the production tasks are really heavy, the management people press you to do overtime every single day. It's actually not good. It*

makes people even more…resistant. I remember one year, when I was still at the Shenzhen headquarter, it was also very busy, and no one wanted to do overtime. But the factory would not be able to pull through without people doing overtime. Guess what solution the employers there came up with? For those three busy months, the workers were paid 10% more of their wages each month. Of course, people were willing to do overtime with that…"

Such demand or suggestion of better working conditions was more common among the rural migrant workers at SolarExcellence. They seemed to believe that improving certain aspects of their working conditions would not jeopardize the interests of the factory given its relative success, and they expressed the idea that better working conditions could actually benefit the development of the factory. In comparison, the PrettyDress workers rarely asked for better working conditions, probably because they tended to see little room for improvement given the small scale of the factory and the common low standards of working conditions at small garment factories.

The women workers at PrettyDress normally tolerated the undesirable working conditions at the factory without criticizing the employer. But once in a while, they also complained about the employer and even refused to cooperate with the production process. This was the case when the women workers believed that their working conditions went below the line of being reasonable or acceptable. When I was at PrettyDress, there was one time when the women workers got particularly upset about the employer. It was a Friday in hot July, and the women workers had been working nonstop for almost two weeks to accomplish a pressing order. In the afternoon, the team leader for team#2, 45-year-old Zeng Changhong from Sichuan

Province, stormed out of the office of the employer and rushed back to her team with a sulky face. Zheng said angrily to the workers of her team,

> *"I can't believe this! He said that we needed to work this Sunday as well! Two weeks without break, it's too much! He just keeps accepting orders after orders, without considering whether there are enough people to work on them! Does he think that making clothes takes no time at all? Does he think that we work as fast as the lightening? I'm so angry!"*

The sewing workers in Zeng's team as well as the sewing workers in other teams who had heard Zeng's words all agreed with Zeng and joined to express their discontent. The next day, when I sat next to Jiang Xiaorong in team#2, she revealed to me,

> *"Sunday is the only day we look forward to each week. You've no idea what it's like when we hear that we need to work on Sunday. It's like…you march on and on with your teeth clenched and you tell yourself 'just one more day' as you see Sunday coming. Then suddenly, the employer tells you that you need to keep working on Sunday. Just imagine the frustration we felt! You know, yesterday, when we were gathering at the backyard of the factory after dinner, we were all cursing the employer! We were all cursing him!"*

The sewing workers' discontent about working on Sunday did not lead to open conflicts between the workers and the employers, while another incident that had happened at PrettyDress a year before turned out a little differently. When the sewing workers complained to me about the meagre food that was provided by the factory cafeteria, several of them told me the story that the entire workshop had once stopped working one day last year because the workers found the lunch to taste too bad and

have no meat or nutrition. According to them, the PrettyDress workers all sat at their seats and refused to start working again, until the employer bought and distributed boxed instant noodles for them to eat first.

Therefore, the rural migrant workers at both SolarExcellence and PrettyDress expressed empathy toward the factory management and the employers based on their understanding of market competition and factory survival. Following the same understanding, the SolarExcellence and the PrettyDress workers also expressed negative comments when they believed that the employers could have afforded to provide the workers with better working conditions without impeding the performance of the factories. By situating the rural migrant workers' mixed opinions about the factories and the employers in the context of their broader experience of market competition, I thus suggest that the rural migrant workers were not necessarily having self-contradictory understanding of their interests but might be expressing the consistent perception of market competition.

In addition to such similarities regarding their understanding of market and their attitudes toward their respective family employer at SolarExcellence and PrettyDress, the rural migrant workers at the two factories also presented different patterns in their opinions about the employers due to the different management structures at the two factories.

At PrettyDress, the factory employer interacted frequently with the workers on a daily basis as the only management figure in the workshop. This created ample opportunities for the PrettyDress workers to see the employer as a multi-dimensional individual with unique personality. On the one hand, the PrettyDress workers saw

clearly that the employer tried to squeeze every penny out of the workers, even though they understood it to be inevitable sometimes. The women migrant workers thus recognized the employer as a ruthless businessman who was sometimes a little too harsh in treating the workers and was rather stingy in saving costs. On the other hand, however, the PrettyDress workers also appreciated the humane side that the employer showed them in their daily interactions and regarded the employer as someone with a human heart that they could to some extent relate to. For example, the sewing workers expressed gratitude that, when it rained heavily, the employer went back and forth several times to drive some workers to the factory and then back home because they lived relatively far from the factory. Their opinions about the employer thus tended to present another layer of mixture of positivity and negativity, as demonstrated by the comment of Guo Lifeng that *"he has a harsh mouth when he talks to the workers, but he has a good heart."*

The PrettyDress workers were fully aware that the kindness of the employer was motivated by his own interests, but it did not prevent them from appreciating the employer making things a little easier for the workers. Chen Yanmei, a 34-year-old sewing worker commented,

> *"Last weekend there was heavy rain. The employer came to pick us up at home. Well, he's afraid that we wouldn't come to work."*

Similarly, recall how Cheng Xiuying, the sewing worker with a successful husband, expressed her pride of the fact the employer liked her team and pled her and her sister to come back to PrettyDress[23]. Yet when I commented that *"the employer really*

[23] See page 151 in Chapter 4.

cherishes you and hates to part with you guys!" Cheng Xiuying corrected me in a rather serious tone.

> *"It's not like that. If there were no workers like us, how could he have been the owner? By making clothes himself?"*

Cheng Xiuying knew clearly that the employer treated her and her sister nicely only because he needed their labor as well as Cheng Xiuli's leadership of the most productive team. But Cheng Xiuying still appreciated and was even proud of being the employer's favorite, which seemed to make her feel superior to the sewing workers in other teams.

Furthermore, based on their daily observation, the PrettyDress workers praised the employer as a hard-working person. He came to the factory earlier than even the workers and was always the last to leave. He was always working on something in the workshop, either working around and supervising the workers, or teaching the workers how to sew the difficult part of the clothes, or doing random and miscellaneous work like fixing the broken door of the workshop or even cleaning the restrooms. According to the PrettyDress workers, the employer *"can't stand doing nothing. When he's idle, he always finds something to do."* They spoke highly of the diligence of the employer, especially as a man, commenting that *"his wife must be very happy. With him taking care of everything so diligently, she doesn't need to worry about anything at home!"* By the same logic, the PrettyDress workers admired the employer as someone who had earned his fortune and established the factory from nothing with his intelligence and hard work.

Therefore, based on their observations of and interactions with the employer, the rural migrant workers in PrettyDress formed another set of mixed positive and negative attitudes toward him, seeing him simultaneously as a ruthless businessman, a caring boss, a diligent man, and a successful self-maker. In contrast, the SolarExcellence workers' judgment of the employer tended to present another layer of positivity shaped by the distance between the workers and the employer. With the developed management system at SolarExcellence, the SolarExcellence workers rarely saw the employer but interacted mostly with the managers and the team leaders. They tended to perceive the employer in a positive light as a strategic leader who worked on a higher platform, whose responsibility was not to micromanage the daily function of the factory. And the SolarExcellence workers were more likely to blame the managers for some of the management procedures they regarded as unreasonable.

Gao Huiquan, a 40-year-old welder, once told me that he found the employer of SolarExcellence to be a good person. Yet when I asked him why he thought so, Gao seemed to have difficulty articulating himself and mumbled *"well he just doesn't look like a bad person…"* Then Gao moved on to comment on the unpleasant management situations in the factory, enthusiastically criticizing the middle-level managers who he perceived to be the bad guys.

> *"It's like this in every company: it's people like the chief managers and the department directors who manage the workers. The employer doesn't manage everything, he's too busy."*

As Gao Huiquan proceeded to talk about how the middle-level managers pushed the workers to do overtime and deducted the workers' wages without good reasons, I tried to further understand his thoughts by asking Gao Huiquan, *"are you saying that the managers are doing these things without the employer's approval?"* Gao Huiquan pondered a bit and replied,

> *"of course he knows! To say that he doesn't know at all would be an overstatement. But it's like…the managers would propose to him what they wanted to do, and the employer doesn't really have time to attend to all their plans. So, he would look through their proposals and he would be like…yeah, okay, sure. Even though the employer knows about these things, he doesn't really know all the details. So, the managers would use that small amount of power they have to mistreat you."*

Similarly, when Sun Shimin, a 26-year-old welder, discussed the relationship between the workers and the employer, he spontaneously moved to comment on the middle-level managers instead.

> *"Between the employer and me, it's a relationship of employment: you employ me and I work for you. As long as you don't pay me less than what I deserve, I will keep working for you. But now…I feel that the employer is actually different from the management people. The employer thinks big, while the management people are like the slave-owners holding a whip and slashing you to make you toil. But hey, I work for the employer, not for you! The managers are also just employees and work for the owner!"*

Therefore, as the SolarExcellence workers had few direct interactions with the employer, their opinions about the employer tended to be positive and include certain imaginations about him being the thought leader, a generous and nice person, and someone directing the entire company rather than managing everyday activities on the shopfloor. And the SolarExcellence workers' comments on the managers led nicely into the next theme I want to introduce. The SolarExcellence workers tended to express negative comments on the managers as compared to the employer, yet they nevertheless also expressed positive or empathetic opinions about the managers in other occasions. While the rural migrant workers' mixed opinions about the factory employers could partly be understood through their understanding of the market as the context of factory operation, their seemingly ambiguous attitudes toward the managers might be explained by their perception of the factory relations as general hierarchy rather than as specific capital-labor dichotomy.

Factory Authorities, Lingdaos, and Hierarchies

In this section, I discuss the other explanation of the rural migrant workers' mixed positive and negative attitudes toward the factory employers and, in the case of SolarExcellence, toward the managers as well. Staying close to the workers' discourse, I suggest that the rural migrant workers might perceive factory relations as being similar to other hierarchical relations they experienced in their general social lives rather than seeing factory relations as a capital-labor or management-labor dichotomy that was specific to the context of factory production. With this perception of factory relations, the rural migrant workers seemed to understand their interests to lie in sustaining and securing factory hierarchical relations that would function well

for everyone involved in the hierarchical relations, including both the workers and the factory authorities, instead of challenging or overthrowing the factory authorities from the opposite camp. Within this framework, both the critical and empathetic attitudes the workers expressed towards the factory management and the management people indicated what they understood to be appropriate or inappropriate measures in terms of maintaining functioning hierarchical relations.

1. Factory authority figures as *lingdaos*

At SolarExcellence, even though the factory authority figures at different levels of the management system all had official titles that were known to the workers, such as general manager, department director, chief manager, and team leader, the rural migrant workers rarely used the specific titles to refer to the factory authority figures. Instead, they frequently used the word *lingdao*. The Chinese word *lingdao,* when used to describe a person, is normally translated as "leader" in English. But there are important differences between the two words. The word *lingdao* describes someone who occupies a position of power in an organization and who has the authority to make decisions and to supervise people on lower power positions in the organization. The word *lingdao* by itself does not specify the kind of organization, the level of the power position, or the exact amount of authority attached to the position. People can use *lingdao* to describe someone as powerful as the president of a state, or they can just be talking about a team leader in a factory. To be recognized as a *lingdao,* one just needs to possess some sort of a recognized title entailing certain responsibilities and privileges in a certain organization. Therefore, *lingdao* in daily usage in China emphasizes one's objective position on power hierarchies. A "leader" in English, by

contrast, describes someone who not only has authority but also has the ability of influencing and leading people. The term *Lingdao* also has implications for social orders in the context of Chinese culture, as people are supposed to show more respect to a *lingdao,* especially if it concerns a *lingdao* with more power than oneself.

The rural migrant workers at SolarExcellence frequently used the word *lingdao* in discussing their factory experiences and sharing their thoughts about different managers. Sometimes the workers did not specify which factory authority figure(s) they were talking about, as they just used the word *lingdao(s)*[24] to refer to one or more people with power at SolarExcellence. For example, Du Haidong, a 26-year-old electrician, once explained to me that he was making an electronic panel in a new manner. And he said,

> *"before, the lingdao(s) asked us to make the electronic panel in that way. Now it's changed to this way. These were all arranged by the lingdao(s). Whatever the lingdao(s) assign us to do, we do it."*

Similarly, Zhang Weichao, a 24-year-old plumber, once shared with me, *"when I just came here, I knew nothing. I just did whatever the lingdao(s) told me to do."* In both cases, it was difficult to tell which authority figures Du and Zhang were referring to in the factory. At other times, the general term *lingdao* and the specific titles of the factory authority figures were used interchangeably in the workers' conversations. For instance, one morning, after the Chief Manager at SolarExcellence gave a morning lecture to the all the workers, I asked Hu Lei, a 25-year-old electrician, what

[24] The pronunciation is the same for the singular and plural forms of the word *"lingdao".*

he felt about the lecture. Hu Lei replied, *"he was exaggerating about how much money the factory is losing. But lingdaos all talk like that. They just like exaggerating things."* Another time, I was observing several welders at work under the guidance of their group leader, Liang Youwu. I was amazed at Liang's skill and said to a welder next to me, 30-year-old Zhou Long, *"your group leader is really skilled at welding things!"* Longzhou agreed by saying, *"of course, he's the lingdao!"*

The SolarExcellence workers thus preferred using the word *lingdao* to talk about the factory authority figures rather than using their official management titles. This choice of word suggested the possibility that the rural migrant workers perceived the factory management people not as being specific to the factory but as similar to *lingdaos* in various socials settings. In other words, the migrant workers might perceive the factory managers and the employer as general authority figures in society instead of as representatives of the power of capital/management that were specific to the capitalist employment relations. Such a lack of differentiation between factory authorities and other authorities became more obvious when the SolarExcellence workers explicitly made reference to *lingdaos* in other social settings when they discussed the factory *lingdaos*, making analogies, examples, and comparisons among various types of *lingdaos* as if they were all of comparable or the same nature. For example, consider my conversation below with Xin Guanghe, the 35-year-old team leader I introduced in the last chapter as a Buddhist.

YG: Is the job of being a group leader easy?

Xin: The pressure is big. Doing management work, you need the people below you to respect you and to support you. You need a few people whose

backgrounds you know very well and who really support you. It is the same for group leaders, chief managers (of the factory), or even the state president. Even the president of the state has his own faction!

Xin stated it clearly that, for him, being a factory group leader was no different from being any other type of *lingdao* either at a factory or in general society, at least in one certain aspect. Xin's remarks transited seamlessly and naturally from the factory setting to state politics, as he used the example of the state president to illustrate the importance for a team leader to have a group of familiar and trustworthy followers.

A brief exchange between Sun Huachun, a 32-year-old electrician, and me also demonstrated a similar phenomenon. Sun once complaint to me about the forced overtime at SolarExcellence that had been continuing for a few weeks. He expressed his exhaustion and lamented the fact that he had to "*follow the lingdaos' orders*". I asked Sun, *"so when your lingdaos tell you to do overtime, you just obey and do overtime?"* Sun replied jokingly, *"yeah, of course. One must not resist the imperial edict!"* Here Sun was referring to the imperial system that had characterized Chinese society for more than two thousand years till the revolution in early 1900s. And during the imperial era, anything uttered by the emperor was an imperial edict carrying absolute authority and had to be followed by everyone in the kingdom without hesitation. By analogizing factory *lingdaos*' orders to ancient Chinese emperors' edict, Sun seemed to suggest that his relationship to the factory authority figures was comparable to Chinese people's relationship to an emperor in the past, and the power of the factory management was thus not recognized as power specific to the system of capitalist production.

While both Xin and Sun drew on the state politics to talk about authority figures in the factory, Jiang Junke, a 26-year-old assembler, referred to another social setting he had personal experience of. Being a veteran who had recently left the army to join SolarExcellence, Jiang was impressed by both the similarities and the differences between *lingdaos* in the army and *lingdaos* at the factory.

> *"…Lingdaos in the military care about people at the bottom. They would ask you whether you eat well and sleep well. Because the superiors care about the inferiors, there is great solidarity in the military... In the military, the evaluation of lingdaos depends on not just how much they can please the superiors but also how well they can manage the inferiors… Would factory lingdaos care about workers like that? No. They just want productivity in the factory… Like A Bian (nickname for the Chief Manager), he didn't even know how to talk to us. In his speeches, he always makes it so clear that he cares more about the interests of the employer more than our well-being. I understand that, as a lingdao, of course he needs to consider cutting costs (for the factory). But the way he speaks to us just makes us very uncomfortable."*

Jiang approached the hierarchical power relations in an unfamiliar factory setting through drawing on his experience of the hierarchical power structure in the army. Even though Jiang seemed to have discovered some distinctive features of factory relations, such as the central concern for profits at the cost of humanity, Jiang's remarks nevertheless suggested his focus on the common hierarchical nature of both the factory system and the army. He explicitly compared and contrasted the *lingdaos* in the two different power hierarchies, indicating his idea that the authority

figures in the two systems could be compared on certain common grounds. Moreover, Jiang took it for granted that *lingdaos* in general served the interests of an organization as well as people higher on a power hierarchy. But he perceived the *lingdaos* in the army to be more effective than *lingdaos* at the factory, because the former knew how to establish solidary in an organization by treating people without power more humanely. Jiang's narrative not only exemplified the SolarExcellence workers' comparing *lingdaos* in the factory to *lingdaos* in other social settings, it also touched upon the ways in which the workers tended to understand and judge *lingdaos* and power hierarchies. As I will explain in the next section, the norms and values the rural migrant workers attached to *lingdaos* and power hierarchies in general played an essential role in shaping their perception of and engagement with the specific authority figures and power relations in the factory.

The fact that the rural migrant workers did not distinguish among different types of power hierarchies in society manifested itself unmistakably through a conversation that I happened to overhear one day at SolarExcellence, when I was walking in front of a small group of workers on the alley outside of the workshop to return to the factory dormitory after work.

Worker A: We electricians are not really in the charge of Liang Youlin.

Worker B: But Liang Youlin is the Director of the whole department (to which the electricians belong).

Worker A: Well…

Worker C: The Chief Manager is also in the direct charge of Xi Jinping!

Worker B: Then in whose charge would Xi Jinping be?

Worker C: His wife, ha-ha.

Worker D: His wife is again in whose charge?

Worker C: Well…no one. She has the highest power.

Worker A: The Assembly of People has the right of recall.

Worker D: Ha! Yes, but it only has the right on paper!

(They then laughed loudly together.)

I found the conversation funny but hardly significant at the moment, which was why I did not even turn around to identify the workers who were talking. As I continued with my ethnography and reread the fieldnotes, however, I gradually came to recognize the significance of this small conservation. The electricians were discussing a Department Director named Liang Youlin that they did not particularly like. Because they had to subsume to Liang's power as part of his department, the electricians tried to show that Liang was not omnipotent because he was under the power of the state president, Xi Jinping. Then the electricians continued to joke that even Xi was not always powerful, because he had to follow his wife. And in the end the joke came back to the state institution that was supposed to have power over all Chinese citizens by law, including Xi's wife. As the four electricians joked with each other about the manager, they thus seamlessly shifted back and forth among the power relations in the factory, in the state, and even in the private conjugal life. This exchange of jokes, which did not seem to make much sense at first sight, actually demonstrated that the workers perceived the power of the factory management not as social relations specific to the context of capitalist employment but as something common to various social settings.

Compared to the rural migrant workers at SolarExcellence, the PrettyDress workers did not discuss their experience of working at the factory with so much reference to *lingdao* or analogies regarding other hierarchies. Yet it does not necessarily suggest that the rural migrant workers at PrettyDress did not share the SolarExcellence workers' interpretation of factory relations as being similar to social hierarchies in other contexts. As introduced earlier, PrettyDress had a simple and relatively flat management structure, with one employer overseeing the entire workshop. Even though there was a designated team leader for each sewing team, the team leaders were not clearly differentiated from the common sewing workers. The team leaders also helped with the sewing work all the time, and there were no formal rules clarifying their authority or power. Therefore, it was not surprising that the PrettyDress workers discussed hierarchies less than the migrant workers at SolarExcellence. And with the employer as the only certain authority figure in the workshop, the rural migrant workers at PrettyDress tended to refer to him simply as "the boss" instead of *lingdao* or *lingdaos* in general.

But the women workers at PrettyDress did use the term *lingdao* to refer to their team leaders sometimes, such as when Chen Yanmei, a 34-year-old sewing worker, asked me, *"don't you think that my lingdao is quite tall and slim?"* And similar to their engagement with the term "management", the PrettyDress workers talked even more of *lingdao(s)* when they recalled their past experience of working in other factories that were larger and with more developed management systems. For example, Guo Lifeng explained to me why she left a large clothing factory to come to work at the small PrettyDress.

"Big factories have far more rules. At the factory that I used to work for, you needed approvals of various lingdaos in order to ask for a leave. You even had to write a note just for going to the bathroom! So inconvenient."

For another example, Chen Jia, a 26-year-old sewing worker, described her experience of working in big electronics factories,

"I once worked in two electronics factories during two months in the Sichuan Province. I feel that people in Sichuan become very arrogant and bossy once they become small lingdaos. I didn't like it. So, I left."

In her remarks, Chen Jia not only referred to management people as *lingdaos* but also indicated her ideas of appropriate or inappropriate attitudes and behavior of *lingdaos*, especially small *lingdaos* in this case. Moreover, even though the women workers at PrettyDress did not directly use the term *lingdao* as often as the SolarExcellence workers, the way PrettyDress workers talked about the employer and the standards against which they evaluated him, as I had discussed in the first section, suggested similar patterns in their interpreting factory relations as a general hierarchy.

In all, the SolarExcellence and PrettyDress workers used the term *lingdao* to talk about the authority figures in factories and described factory *lingdaos* as of similar nature to *lingdaos* in other hierarchical systems. This suggested that the rural migrant workers might perceive the power relations in factories as comparable to other types of power relations in general society rather than as something specific to the context of capitalist production. Therefore, instead of seeing themselves as being situated in specific capital-labor relations, the workers might regard their

relationships to the factory managers and owners as hierarchical relations that they also experienced in other settings in Chinese society in general.

2. Factory power relations as general hierarchies

If the rural migrant workers perceived factories as just one of the social settings with hierarchies and *lingdaos*, they might not particularly problematize the existence of power inequalities in the factories. And instead of challenging the power and authority of the employers and the managers, the rural migrant workers might desire hierarchical relations that functioned well to satisfy the needs of both the workers and the *lingdaos* on different levels of the factory hierarchies. At both SolarExcellence and PrettyDress, the rural migrant workers saw everyone at the factory as having specific responsibilities and benefits that corresponded to different positions on the hierarchy. And the migrant workers expected the employers and the managers to be responsible and reasonable in doing their jobs and maintaining well-functioned hierarchies, and they also applied the same principle to themselves.

With the developed management system at SolarExcellence, the rural migrant workers' ideas about hierarchy were expressed more explicitly. The SolarExcellence workers made it unmistakably clear that they did not view the factory authority figures as a homogenous entity but as diversified based on the layered positions on the hierarchy. For example, Guo Chao and Hu Lei once complained to me about the complicated management rules that required the workers to keep the workshops clean, such as always wearing shoe covers when they walked in to a workshop to keep the space and the equipment clean, picking up industrial scraps promptly after one's work, and mopping the floor of the workshops every day after work. These

rules were unpopular among the workers, because they made the workers' work inconvenient and added to their burden. Then, Guo said,

> *"It's the middle-level lingdaos who want this. The top-level lingdaos just want to make money, and they don't really care how often we clean the shopfloor. But the middle-level lingdaos, they need us to display such performances in order to impress* ***their*** *lingdaos and to show that they are working at all."*

I pursued the subject and asked Guo and Hu whether they thought the middle-level managers had common interests with the workers or with those positioned higher in the factory system. Guo and Hu looked surprised by the self-evidence of my question. *"With those higher on the level of course!"* They replied in one voice. *"What about the team leaders, then?"* I asked again. Upon this question, Guo and Hu turned a little soft and replied, *"the team leaders are one of us."* Such differentiation among the different management personnel was common when the SolarExcellence workers expressed their thoughts about the managers and the employers.

Based on their understanding of the layered hierarchy, the SolarExcllence workers expressed the idea that everyone involved in the hierarchical relations had certain privileges and difficulty associated with a specific position on the hierarchy; everyone's life thus entailed a tradeoff between responsibilities and benefits, with no one being completely powerful or carefree. Even though the factory relations at PrettyDress appeared to be an employer-labor dichotomy, as I have explained in the last section, the women migrant workers expressed similar attitudes that were better understood with the perceptions of hierarchy. This further helps explain why the SolarExcellence and the PrettyDress workers showed empathy and positive attitudes

towards the factory employers, as they perceived the employers to be *lingdaos* who had great responsibilities of leading the factories through severe market competitions. As I have already written about the migrant workers' attitudes toward the employers in the forgoing text, in this subsection, I focus on the SolarExcellence workers' attitudes towards the managers and the group leaders to illustrate how such a framework of general hierarchy aligned better with their mixed expressions.

While Hu Lei was critical about the management rules he and Guo perceived to be imposed by the middle-level managers, Hu also empathized with the difficult job of the middle-level managers,

> *"being lingdao is also not easy. The state president has the state president's problems. The factory lingdaos have their problems. And we also have our problems."*

Similarly, Zhou Long, a 34-year-old plumber from Henan Province, commented on the managers,

> *"they also work for salaries and they have to fulfill their responsibilities in order to get paid. They are under even greater pressure than the workers."*

Xu Zenghang, a 26-year-old electrician, presented an especially interesting case. When I first talked to him, Xu seemed to dislike the chief manager a lot. Yet after he himself was promoted to become a group leader and got a taste of all the new responsibilities and extra work he had to perform as a management person, he started to empathize with the chief manager, even though he might still not like the chief manger's personality that much. *"He may be bossing around and annoying, but he lives a really tiring life. Now I understand."*

Nevertheless, as the managers were the *lingdaos* who directly imposed unpopular management rules on the workers at SolarExcellence, the workers tended to express more negative opinions about the managers than about the employer. However, similar to the case of the employer, the workers' complaints about the managers did not oppose the managers to the workers. Instead, the workers criticized the managers for failing to be effective or reasonable *lingdaos*, which prevented the hierarchical relationships at SolarExcellence from functioning well.

The SolarExcellenc workers had certain expectations of the managers. For some workers, the managers were supposed to establish good relationships in the factory by knowing how to please both the employer and the workers. Other workers saw such a balance as difficult, if not impossible, to achieve and only expected the managers to treat the workers reasonably without abusing their power too much. At the same time, the rural migrant workers also saw themselves as having the responsibility of being reasonable and supportive workers. Jiang Junke, the assembler who compared the factory with the army in the earlier text, found it normal and unproblematic that *"as a lingdao, of course he needs to consider cutting costs (for the factory)."* At the same time, however, Jiang expressed dissatisfaction about the chief manager, because the chief manager failed to make the workers feel comfortable about the management measures.

> *"We all know that the factory tries to cut costs, but he just made it so clear that he only cared about the owner's interest. What does it mean that we should use our working hours to clean the shopfloors? Why can't the factory spend a few thousand yuan on hiring some cleaning people? He should have*

known how to make it sound better to the workers. Also, *he always talks in a negative way, and it discourages the people 'below'. It actually has to do with his lack of education. He is not very educated, so he's kind of straightforward in talking to us. More educated people would not have spoken like that in his position. A different way different of speaking would make people feel better."*

Jiang did not seem to have problem with the chief manager working for the employer's interests, because Jiang regarded it as the job of a *lingdao*. But Jiang expected the chief manager to care for the workers' feelings, even if it was only using a softer language without changing the substance. Jiang's complaints about the chief manager were thus not directed to the managers' power or interests but indicated his desire for a more effective manager who knew how to maintain a good relationship with the workers.

Liang Youwu, a 28-year-old welder and a group leader, made a similar comment on the chief manager.

"The people 'above' value him a lot. Of course, he's a very trustworthy person to them. He's actually very responsible for the factory. But he only does a good job pleasing the people 'above' and fails to consider the people 'below'. So, the people 'below' disliked him a lot. I mean, yes, they work under his power, so they have to listen to his orders, and they don't argue with him. But they are unhappy inside. Well, but everybody has his own responsibilities and everybody has his own pressure. He won't behave like that if he's not under pressure. Generally speaking, I think he has made great contribution to the factory."

Liang also spoke positively about the chief manager's ability of contributing to the factory and being trusted by the employer. But like Jiang Junke, Liang criticized the chief manager for failing to win the support of the workers.

Yet not every worker hold such high expectations of the managers. For example, Li doudou, a 27-year-old assembler, judged such balance of pleasing both the people above and below as impossible. Li Doudou once shared with Jiang and me a story that took place in SolarExcellence a few years ago. A manager tried to watch out for the workers by refusing some difficult production goals, and he ended up being demoted. Then Li also revealed to us how the current chief manager got promoted. According to Li, the chief manager proved his value to the employer and the general manager by being much more ruthless than his predecessor in trying to push the workers to fulfill the production tasks.

As some workers, like Li Doudou, judged it impossible for the managers to please both their bosses and the workers simultaneously, the workers only wanted that the managers did not abuse power and were reasonable in imposing management measures on the workers. In return, the workers were also willing to be reasonable in fulfilling the managers' requirements. In other words, the workers expected both the managers and the workers to be reasonable and together to maintain a good relationship.

Jin Junwei, a 27-year-old CNC operator from Nantong, Jiangsu, was one of the rare college graduates at SolarExcellence. Jin was smart, lively, and liked having fun. He was not happy about the situation of forced overtime in the factory.

"I thought about quitting. Some day when I feel really unhappy, I will leave. So far, it's still bearable. You see, usually, I'm quite cooperative. If I do not come to do overtime because I'm playing video games every day, then I could understand your lecturing me and asking me to work. But if I really have some personal issues to attend to, such as a former classmate seeking me out in town or something happening at home, then I will be unhappy if you still ask me to do overtime! Just be reasonable! When I really have things to do, you should understand."

For Jin, forced overtime was not the issue essentially. He was not against being asked to do overtime, in the case that he was spending his personal time playing video games. But the forced overtime became unreasonable to him, when Jin could not attend to personal business that he regarded as important. Qian Hongbin, a 34-year-old electrician, expressed a similar opinion. I never heard Qian complain about the forced overtime until his request for taking a leave to go to a wedding was declined.

"I need to go to Hangzhou to attend my niece's wedding! Whether he (the Chief Manager) permits or it, I will go. People can't just stop getting married because there is work to do in the factory, can they? My older brother only has this one daughter. How can I not go to her wedding? It's such an important personal relationship, how can I not go? So, I told him (the Chief Manager) that I absolutely needed to go. But he wouldn't listen. So unreasonable! It's like if you want your job, you have to abandon your family."

For both Qian and Jin, doing overtime was understandable. But there seemed to be certain boundaries beyond which imposing overtime became unreasonable and unacceptable to the workers. In the case of Qian and Jin, for example, they valued their relationships with families and friends, which they expected the managers to respect. As long as doing overtime did not interfere with things the workers deemed important, the workers were generally willing to cooperate.

In fact, the workers expressed the idea that the workers should also be reasonable and responsible, doing their own job well and not demanding too much from the factory. Sun Huachun, for instance, felt that the workers were part to blame, when the chief manager and the department director spent over an hour one morning lecturing the workers about the importance of keeping the workshops clean.

> *"Meetings like this shouldn't be held too often. The issue mainly lies on the basic level with the workers. We have 80 workers, one hour of meeting means 80 wasted hours that should have been spent on production. If everything were done well, such meetings wouldn't have been necessary. Everyone has responsibility. Do our job well. Cooperate with them well. If we do a good job, the lingdaos will be happy."*

Sun thus saw the workers as also having responsibility in supporting the functioning of factory by doing their jobs well and cooperating with the managers. Hu Lei provided another example of the workers' idea of being reasonable. Hu appreciated the freedom enjoyed by the workers in SolarExcellence and had no intention of abusing the freedom. Hu said,

"I feel that this company rather gives us a lot of freedom, as long as you don't go too far. Of course, you need to make sure that your own job is done well. But it's not like some other companies, where they meddle with you even for just taking a sip of water during work."

Overall, while the rural migrant workers at SolarExcellence sometimes expressed understanding towards the managers, they tended to have more negative opinions about them as the people who directly imposed management on the workers. Yet the migrant workers did not challenge the power of the managers per se but expressed their expectations that the managers performed well as *lingdaos* in establishing a functioning hierarchy in the factory. Some rural migrant workers had higher standards and judged the managers negatively when the managers could not please both the bosses and the workers. Other SolarExcellence workers just hoped that the managers could be more reasonable in handling the workers' needs. And as long as the managers were reasonable, the rural migrant workers were willing to work responsibly and make no unreasonable demands.

Among all the factory authority figures, the SolarExcellence workers showed most empathy and positive feelings towards the team leaders, who directly supervised the workers and coordinated their work. The rural migrant workers especially empathized with the difficult job of the team leaders, which the workers regarded as full of pressure yet unrewarding.

SolarExcellence was characterized by a chain-style management structure: the employer and the General Manager gave orders to the Chief Manager and expected him to deliver results; the Chief Manager in turn made demands on the Department

Directors and evaluated the latter's performances accordingly; Department Directors then imposed the management measures on the team leaders and expected them to motivate the workers to meet the requirements. Yet how the team leaders dealt with the workers on the shopfloor-level was none of the concerns of the managers. Moreover, the managers would dismiss the team leaders' explanations for failures as excuses and scold them for being incompetent.

Lacking institutional support for their authority, the team leaders had to treat the workers nicely in order to secure the workers' cooperation. As said by Liang Youwu, one team leader of the welders,

> *"the workers fear the managers. They can just give orders, and everybody has to follow. They have the authority. But we can't do the same as group leaders. If we scold our workers as A Bian (nickname for the Chief Manager) does, the workers would rebel against us. You see, our job was actually more difficult."*

Xin Guanghe shared with more details how he dealt with the workers in his team, following the same Buddhist principles he believed in.

> *"I respect them, and then they respect me. You can't get a swelled head, scolding this person and that person every day just because you have a small title. For certain things, just turn a blind eye and let it pass…Treat the workers like your brothers, and they will feel it."*

Because the team leaders consciously treated the workers with care and respect, sometimes genuinely and sometimes out of practical needs, the workers generally felt positive about their team leaders. As said by Guo Chao and Hu Lei, *"the team leaders are one of us."* Moreover, the rural migrant workers empathized with the team

leaders for their difficult jobs, because the team leaders also got scolded or punished for the workers' mistakes by the more powerful *lingdaos* and enjoyed little authority or prestige. One afternoon, Sun Shimin, a 26-year-old welder told me,

> *"this morning, A Bian happened to catch someone playing with the cellphone. He first scolded that person. Then he scolded Xin Guanghe, so harshly that Xin Guanghe almost had tears in his eyes. Poor thing! It's not his fault, but he got scolded. The team leaders' job wasn't easy."*

Similarly, Zhou Long shared with me the story of how his team leader once had to pay a fine of 800 yuan when an assembler broke a machine part years ago. Zhou commented,

> *"it's rather unfair, right? He did nothing wrong, yet he had to pay. The management system is problematic. Sometimes I actually wonder why anyone would want to be a team leader. It's a lot of unrewarding work."*

Both Sun and Zhou thus expressed sympathy towards the team leaders, which sentiment was shared by other workers. Despite their sympathy for the team leaders' lack of authority, however, the workers sustained the team leaders' authority in form. The SolarExcellence workers only told me such stories and thoughts secretly behind the team leaders. During their interactions with the group leaders, the workers addressed their team leaders as *"lingdaos"* and showed respect to them. And the workers listened to the team leaders silently and deferentially, when pressured team leaders lashed out on the workers occasionally.

Overall, the team leaders functioned as the cushion between unpleasant management measures and the workers. The workers appreciated the team leaders'

nice treatment of them and felt closest to the team leaders among all the management personnel. They empathized with the team leaders' difficult job, especially because they had to motivate as well as take blames for the workers. At the same time, the workers tended to keep such sympathy to themselves and treated the group leaders as dignified *lingdaos* in their daily interactions.

In all, the SolarExcellence workers regarded the factory relations as a layered hierarchy that they were also part of, rather than seeing themselves on the one end and the employers and managers on the other end of an opposing dichotomy between labor and capital. Such a conception of factory relations was also indicated by the way the SolarExcellence workers discussed and navigated their relations with the factory authority figures. The rural migrant workers separated the factory management into three general layers, and they not only had specific expectations for each level of factory authority but also treated themselves with the same standards that they regarded as important for establishing and maintaining a hierarchy that functioned smoothly and benefited everyone involved. Even though I did not discuss PrettyDress in this part, it was not because similar perceptions did not apply to PrettyDress workers but because they had no layered management system to comment on at PrettyDress. At the same time, the PrettyDress workers' attitudes toward the employer that included empathy and understanding on the one hand and complaints and dissatisfaction on the other hand, also aligned well with the principle of being responsible and reasonable.

Summary and Implications for Worker Agency

In this chapter, I have focused on one of the aspects of the rural migrant workers' agency in factory production and analyzed how their perceptions of factory practices and relations might have shaped their attitudes and behavior in navigating factory participation. I have started from the puzzling observation of the rural migrant workers' mixed positive and negative comments on the factories and proposed two explanations related to worker agency. First, the rural migrant workers drew on various experiences and observations inside and outside of factories to form the understanding that specific factories were part of the larger scene of market competition. This perception led the rural migrant workers to see factory employers as being vulnerable and some cost-saving measures as reasonable. The migrant workers thus expressed empathy toward unsatisfying working conditions that were seemingly inevitable for factory survival, but they also complained when they found certain working conditions to be unreasonably unappealing. Second, the rural migrant workers seemed to perceive factory relations as general hierarchies and navigated their relations with factory authorities with principles that also applied to their other aspects of social lives involving hierarchies. The rural migrant workers did not oppose labor to capital or management but expected different factory authority figures and workers to together maintain well-functioned hierarchical relations. The rural migrant workers seemed to believe that each position on the hierarchies corresponded with specific responsibilities and also offered certain benefits. The rural migrant workers thus empathized with the difficult responsibilities that the factory employers and managers had to shoulder, yet the migrant workers also criticized the

latter if they failed to be responsible or reasonable in doing their jobs and thus undermined the functioning of the factory hierarchies. With this analysis of the rural migrant workers' agency in developing the perceptions of capitalist economy and factory relations, their mixed opinions about the factories no longer seemed self-contradictory but indicated their consistent understanding of their experience as factory workers.

The analysis of the chapter further illustrates the importance of staying close to the rural migrant workers' own perspectives instead of approaching their participation in factory production with preconceived theoretical assumptions about capital-labor relations. To start with, the rural migrant workers did not just directly react to factory production and management as laborers within the scope of a specific factory. Their subjective experience of capitalist production was broader and multi-dimensional, and their understanding of the system drew on their various experience of working in and comparing different factories as well as their observations of how market competition worked on multiple occasions. The rural migrant workers' perceptions of their factory work thus went beyond specific factories and individual employers to incorporate more general pictures of capitalist economy and market competition. As they found competition to be omnipresent, inevitable, and in nobody's control, it seemed difficult for the rural migrant workers to imagine significant improvement of their situations as factory workers. In addition to individualistically oriented solutions, such as climbing up the management ladder, trying to find better jobs or searching for other business opportunities, the rural migrant workers did not seem to demand too much from the specific factories, except

for better working conditions perceived by the workers to be compatible with the interests of the factories.

Related to the last point, the rural migrant workers did not seem to see factory authorities and workers to be completely opposed to each other as in a dichotomous and contradictory relationship. Instead, they seemed to perceive factory relations as general hierarchical relations common to their social lives, with each position on the hierarchy entailing corresponding benefits and responsibilities. The rural migrant workers expected everyone involved in factory hierarchies – both the factory authorities and the workers – to fulfill his or her responsibilities, to treat each other reasonably, and to work together so that everyone's benefits were promoted. Again, the rural migrant workers drew on their broader social experience in developing their understanding of factory work. Rather than seeing factory relations in capitalist production as something completely new or with distinctive nature, the rural migrant workers identified some parallels between power relations in factories and power relations they experienced elsewhere. This suggested that the rural migrant workers' experiences of hierarchies in Chinese society in general, such as within the state structure, in the military, or in the rural communities, were likely to shape the way they perceived, judged, and navigated factory relations.

In all, staying close to the rural migrant workers' perspectives, this chapter has provided some insights on their complicated agency of interpreting factory management with important implications for understanding how the rural migrant workers navigated their participation in factory production. Among the various aspects of rural migrant workers' agency touched upon in the last chapter, this chapter

represents but one possible analysis for one part of the observed worker agency. In a similar spirit, the next chapter focuses on another aspect of the rural migrant workers' agency and discusses how their family concerns played a role in shaping their factory work. The two chapters together both provide more detailed analysis of rural migrant workers' agency in capitalist production and serve as examples for developing analyses of other aspects of worker agency that has emerged in the fieldwork.

Chapter 6: Rural Migrant Workers' Work-Family Articulation

Work, Family, and Gender

In the last chapter, I have discussed how the rural migrant workers approached factory management and factory relations with ideas shaped by their broader social experience that operated beyond the setting of factory production as well as specific capital-labor relations. This further illustrates a point I have raised in Chapter 4 that the rural migrant workers were not merely laborers working for capitalist production but were multi-dimensional individuals who brought to the factories agency that developed in broader social lives and contexts. Their world views, value systems, and life philosophies shaped by sources other than being factory workers could all shape how they understood and navigated their participation in factory production.

In this chapter, I turn to another aspect of worker agency that appeared to be situated outside of factory but had significantly shaped the rural migrant workers' perceptions and actions regarding their factory work. During my fieldwork at the two factories, both the male workers at SolarExcellence and the female workers at PrettyDress repeatedly and spontaneously brought up the topic of their families. The more I listened to the rural migrant workers talk about their families, the more I realized that their family relationships and values were deeply involved in their thoughts and actions regarding their factory work. To some extent, the rural migrant workers treated factory work not as an end in itself but only as means to satisfy their family needs. Therefore, how the rural migrant workers thought about their families

and understood their family responsibilities influenced how they perceived and navigated their factory work.

At the same time, it is impossible to talk about family without bringing in gender. Cross-culturally, men and women are expected to play different roles and fulfill different responsibilities in family, and China is no exception. Both the male workers at SolarExcellence and the female workers at PrettyDress spontaneously and enthusiastically engaged the topic of family during my study, but the way they talked about family and the mechanisms through which family shaped their perceptions and actions at work showed certain gender differences. A goal of this chapter, however, is to highlight the importance of *not* overemphasizing the gender differences in the male and the female migrant workers' attitudes toward family. It is by no means a novel discovery that workers bring their ideas and concerns about families into factory work. Yet the literature tends to present a gender imbalance: studies on women factory workers pay great attention to how women's gendered family relationships as daughters, wives, and mothers shape their factory experience (For a review, see Ong 1991; Mills 2003)[25], while men's family responsibilities as sons, husbands, and fathers remain on the margin of studies on male factory workers. For male industrial workers, the discussion of work-family connections rarely goes beyond describing the

[25] This partly has to do with the fact that women workers generally have lower status than men within families and shoulder most housework and child care responsibilities. Feminist labor scholars are thus keen to analyze how capitalism and patriarchy interact to shape the domination of women workers (Mies 1986; Mies et al. 1988).

male workers as breadwinners whose masculinity depends on their ability of providing for their families. Much less is known about male factory workers' perceptions of their responsibilities and connections related to family. In my study, the male migrant workers at SolarExcellence expressed deep concerns about their families as filial sons, responsible husbands, and caring fathers in the specific context of China and rural migration, revealing important details regarding their thoughts and emotions about family that were no less intense than in the case of women migrant workers.

In this chapter, therefore, I discuss the rural migrant workers' agency in approaching their factory work with ideas about family, with an eye toward restoring some gender balance to the subject. I first introduce how marriage and children marked a turning point for the female rural migrant workers, which drove them to settle down and treat their work and financial needs more seriously. Then I explain how and why the rural migrant workers were motivated to save money for their children's college education, which both demonstrated their love for their children and showed their way of investing in their children's futures in the specific context of China. These two themes applied to both the male SolarExcellence workers and the female PrettyDress workers, highlighting certain similarities of work-family articulations for both genders. Then I discuss some different observations regarding work-family articulation at the two factories, which had to do with both gender differences and some other demographic differences between the migrant workers of the two factories.

Marriage and Children as a Turning Point

When the rural migrant workers at SolarExcellence and PrettyDress told me about their personal stories of migration and work, they brought up the recurrent theme that marriage and children marked a crucial turning point in their attitudes toward work as well as life. Before they got married, both the female and the male migrant workers in the two factories had migrated around the entire country, chasing after what they thought to be better job opportunities or simply enjoying the excitement of exploring unknown cities with friends and relatives. Once they got married, however, the rural migrant workers all settled down and worked more stably in one place, trying to live together with the spouse or at least staying in the same city with the spouse. Li Ping, a 34-year-old sewing worker from Sichuan Province provided a typical example.

> *"These years I have been staying in Shanghai. Before, I've been to Jiangsu, Shengyang, Dongbei, and so on. I came to work in the cities at a young age, and I went here this year and went there the next year. I found that it was great fun! When I no longer wanted to stay at a place, I talked with my colleagues and my girlfriends…And if they said that things were better in a different city, we just left for the new city. But since I got married, I've been following my husband and staying here."*

Zhou Jiawan, a 30-year-old welder at SolarExcellence, shared a similar trajectory. My following exchange with Zhou demonstrated a similar change of migration pattern as well as life priority upon marriage.

> *Zhou: I came to SolarExcellence in 2007. I got married also in 2007. Since then I no longer move from one province to another.*

YG: It seems that everyone settles down after getting married. Why?

Zhou: Why? It used to be just you alone, and now it's about two people. (Pause.) You think about different things…

YG: What did you think about before marriage?

Zhou: Before marriage, I thought about having fun! I did whatever that was fun. Now? I think about my family.

As suggested by Zhou's comment, getting married did not just mean physically settling down for the rural migrant workers, it also brought changes to their thoughts and priorities. Chu Dongsheng, the 28-year-old newly-wed at SolarExcellence who really cherished his marriage[26], described the mental shift rather dramatically, *"getting married really made me grow up overnight."*

With the formation of their own families, the rural migrant workers started to shoulder family responsibilities consciously instead of just considering their individual happiness. For the rural migrant workers with humble backgrounds and relatively low socioeconomic status, an important part of their family responsibilities consisted of working hard to make financial contributions to their families. And such pressure for making money became even larger when the rural migrant workers had children. Moreover, as a legacy of China's socialist regime, China has the highest rate of female labor force participation in the world (Maruer-Fazio et al. 2011). It was thus normal for both men and women to work outside of the household. In the case of rural migrant workers, their lack of economic resources makes it even more desirable and sometimes even necessary to have dual-income families. This context is

[26] See page 123 in Chapter 4.

important for understanding that both the married male and the married female rural migrant workers in my study emphasized making money to support their families.

When I chatted with Zhang Weichao, a 23-year-old plumber at SolarExcellence who was actually three years younger than me, he expressed his dissatisfaction with the wages he got from the factory and said, *"we are not like you. You're still a student. We need to think about making a living."* I disagreed by responding that I needed to make a living as well. Zhang seemed a little annoyed by my reaction and replied with a defensive tone, "*no, it's different. Are you married? I'm married with a child, and I have a family to feed!"* It seemed that Zhang Weichao perceived making money for one's family to be more serious than making money for oneself. Similarly, it was common to hear the women workers from PrettyDress relate their efforts of making money at work to their family responsibilities and contrast married life to single life. For example, when I asked Zheng Jiemiao, a 36-year-old sewing worker, what her biggest concern for life was right now, Zheng replied,

> *"Hmm…family stuff. People like us consider our children most. It's for my son that I make money. You see, once one gets married, it's all about the children, about the family. When I think about it, it's better after all when I was a little girl*[27]*. I didn't have to worry about anything. I just thought about what to eat, what to drink, and finding a boyfriend. Aren't you like that* now*? He-he."*

Getting married and having children thus meant a family life that was significantly

[27] In Chinese, "little girl" is a euphemism for a virgin and a girl who has never been married in the traditional Chinese context, where premarital sex was scandalous.

different from a single life for the rural migrant workers. They oriented themselves more towards fulfilling family responsibilities than having fun as an individual, which led them to work in certain factories and to work hard so that they could provide for their families. This financial need made some migrant workers work longer and harder in the factory, less likely to resist long overtime hours, and less likely to quit on a whim as the young single workers often did. As Li Zhansi, a 35-year-old welder, summarized succinctly,

> *"Nowadays employers prefer hiring married people, because they are more thorough in thinking about things. They won't leave without figuring out the next step. Young single people won't consider so much, because they only need to feed themselves."*

The transition from living for oneself to shouldering family responsibilities, however, was not always easy for the rural migrant workers. Sometimes, They inflicted great self-discipline upon themselves in order to get adapted to doing difficult jobs for the sake of family and children. Zhao Haiyan, the 26-year-old sewing worker at PrettyDress who liked wearing heels, once posed a question to me and to herself when she was sewing and chatting with me.

> *"Why do people get married after all? I got married too early. People like you are carefree. My unmarried former classmates are also carefree, flying to Sichuan now and to Guangzhou the next moment. But me? I am making money to buy mild powder for my daughter day and night!"*

And from there, Zhao shared with me her process of transformation.

"I used to be very innocent (when I was single). I didn't think about things in a complicated way. There was nothing for me to worry about at home. And I didn't need to worry about money either. I was really thoughtless, unlike many people who already know what life is about at an early age. But then, the reality chastened me…"

Following Zhao's topic, I asked, *"was there anything that especially chastened you, something that left an especially strong impression on you?"* Zhao responded and continued to describe how she transformed from an innocent girl to a hard-working mother of a 2-year-old daughter.

"I was chastened after I had my kid. I used to be quite carefree. Now, I have to consider a lot of things for her from day to night, such as the money I need for her to learn this and that, her clothes and shoes, her study and education…Even though I'm not physically at her side, I think about these things all the time. Whether she will become excellent or not, I just want to make sure that I have fulfilled my responsibilities… Responsibility means that I will try to provide her with more or less the same things other children have. I didn't make much money during my first year of work, but I spent it all on her… I feel that once I was married and had my child, my views towards the world and life became different."

Zhao then asked me half-jokingly, *"I'm curious. If you had to work like us, would you be able to tolerate it?"* I smiled and replied honestly, *"probably not."* Zhao also smiled and continued.

"I thought so. You wouldn't be able to tolerate it. Even for us, we only became used to this gradually bit by bit, starting from when we were very young. We also cried a lot in the beginning. I had always been at school since I was a child, how could I bear such hard work and bitterness?... In the first place, I really didn't want to work in a garment factory. I only wanted to play. I had just left school and didn't want to do this. I 'fished for three days and laid the net under the sun for two days'. And I always asked for leaves, till it annoyed our team leader in another factory. So, I quitted and changed to another garment factory…then another…That was how I came all the way through. Later, I gradually learned that I needed to make money to raise the child. Then I started to behave."

In addition to illustrating the painful process of turning from a carefree young girl to a hard-working mother, Zhao Haiyan's narrative also touched upon an important point about the specific migration situation in China. As I have introduced in Chapter 1, due to unfriendly state policies and the disadvantaged economic or social status of rural migrants, many rural migrant workers had to leave their children in the countryside. Faced with this difficult situation, some rural migrant workers worked extra hard to make money so they could afford to keep their children with them in the cities. When I first talked to Qian Hongbin, a 34-year-old electrician, he took me as a reporter. Qian cordially introduced to me his teammate Sun Huachun standing by his side, and Qian said emotionally,

"Huachun's daughter is hundreds of miles away. You need to write that down. It's a significant social phenomenon in today's China! As for me...I'm here;

my wife is here; so, I have also brought my daughter here. I just can't bear leaving my daughter alone in the countryside missing her mom and dad."

Keeping a child in the cities was costly for rural migrant workers, especially for child care and education. Qian thus needed to work harder to make more money, not merely because of his provider role but because of his love for his daughter and his desire to keep his family together. Yet not every rural migrant worker was lucky enough to have the economic and social resources to bring their children with them as Qian Hongbin did. For those who had to leave their children behind in the countryside, like Zhao Haiyan, the long-term separation between the rural migrant workers and their children made the migrant workers feel guilty as parents. And they worked even more diligently to better provide for their children materially as a compensation for their absence in their children's growth. Zhang Tiyang, a 37-year-old plumber at SolarExcellence told a rather heartbreaking story.

"I'm divorced and had to leave my son at home with my parents so that I can work here. There was one year where I didn't go home for the Spring Festival due to overtime in the factory. My son called me and said, 'dad I miss you. When will you be back?'... My son is ten years old now and is going to elementary school. He does really well at school and is one of the best students in his class. A few years back, the school rewarded the best students with schoolbags and red coats as a kind gesture to the 'left-behind children'. My son never once wore the coat. I asked him what his favorite colors were. 'Don't you love black and red just as I do?' He said yes. 'Then why won't you wear the red coat?' I asked. My son did not even mention that it was a reward

for the best students, instead he just said, 'the coat is for the students whose parents are absent. It is for the left-behind children. There's no way I will wear it!' How old was he back then, maybe seven or eight? A child was not supposed to have that kind of mentality. His words really made me cry... My father asked me to call my son every week, but sometimes I'm hesitant. I want to call, and then I don't want to call...I'm afraid of listening to what my son has to say. And he wouldn't want to hang up the phone. When I told him that I had to hang up, his mood immediately went down. So, sometimes I can't bear to call home...I don't know what I want my son to grow up to do. I was never by his side. I will just let him consider for himself and study whatever he likes. I don't ask him to be the first or second in his class, just the top ten is enough. But he has been ambitious since a little kid and always talks about wanting to go to college. When I go back home next time, my son will be entering junior high school. Let's see how much money I can accumulate for him by then."

In all, getting married and having children constituted a crucial turning point for the rural migrant workers, both male and female, which made them settle down physically and shift their priority from pursuing individual enjoyment to shouldering family responsibilities. For both the male and female rural migrant workers, they became more serious about working stably and making money. Moreover, sometimes the mental and behavioral transition could even be a painful process of self-discipline. And the fact that the rural migration situation in China forced certain rural migrant workers to leave their children behind in the countryside added another layer of motivation for the rural migrant workers to work harder to support their children.

Working for Children's Futures

What Zhang Tiyang said about supporting his son's education touched upon the main point I want to discuss in this section. When talking about their hard work for the sake of their children, the rural migrant workers all pointed to financially supporting their children's education as a major motivation. Understanding why the rural migrant workers put such great emphasis on education would not only help explain the essential role that family concerns played in shaping their agency at work, it would also help illustrate how the specific social contexts of China shaped the work-family articulations in ways that contribute to integrating the rural migrant workers into the capitalist production process.

During my fieldwork at SolarExcellence and PrettyDress, the difference between my educational background and those of the rural migrant workers tended to invite comments from them. The rural migrant workers, especially those with less than high school education, expressed envy toward the kind of life I was able to live as someone with strong educational credentials, as I have described in Chapter 4. At the same time, however, the rural migrant workers at both factories attributed my educational achievement mainly to my personal traits and efforts instead of social advantages like my family backgrounds. For instance, when the rural migrant workers learned about my college or PhD education backgrounds, they usually reacted with comments like *"you're so smart" "it must have taken a lot of efforts to reach this high"* or *"I wish my children could be as competent as you"*. And when some migrant workers expressed envy about the kind of opportunities I had access to because of my education, other workers who happened to be around often joked at

their colleagues by saying things like *"you could have been the same if you did better at school" or "why didn't your study harder? It's too late to regret!"* In other words, from the rural migrant workers' perspective, educational success like mine was mainly a personal achievement based on intelligence and hard work. Therefore, even though they themselves had missed the chance for better education, the rural migrant workers did not consider my educational achievement to be completely out of reach of their own children despite their disadvantaged situations as rural migrants.

This attitude of the rural migrant workers toward education should be understood in the context of China's unique education system. It consists of nine years of mandatory elementary and junior high school funded by the state, followed by a high school entrance test administrated by each prefecture every year. If a student finishes three years of high school, the student can then choose to participate in a nationally administered college entrance exam that the state organizes once a year. The score on the college entrance exam entirely determines whether a student should be admitted by university as well as the specific universities that the student is qualified for. Moreover, except for several large cities like Beijing and Shanghai, the textbooks and curriculums were consistent throughout the country (Thøgersen 1990; Davey et al. 2007). As a student's advancement in the education system every step of way depends only on impersonal test scores on nationally administrated exams, it is possible for people with humble backgrounds to realize upward social mobility through studying hard and excelling in exams. Even though performance on the national exams is influenced by educational resources that are far from being equally distributed across different regions or social classes in China (Qian and Smyth 2007;

Wu 2010), these barriers are not deemed as impossible to overcome through personal intelligence and persistence.

Given this context of China's education system, the rural migrant workers I met at both SolarExcellence and PrettyDress typically hoped that their children would go to college, which motivated the migrant workers to work hard and save money for this particular purpose. This also had to do with another feature of Chinese culture. Compared to the Western individualistic culture, Chinese society is characterized by stronger family cohesiveness in general, especially in terms of parent-child relationships (Xiao, 1999). While children in the West are expected to be independent of their natal family once they reach adulthood or even earlier, it is the norm for Chinese parents to provide for or at least give partial financial support to their adult children for as long as the children need and as far as the parents can afford it. Gao Huiquan's narrative was typical;

> *"I can't express how much I wish my son to go to college. It all depends on whether he has the ability. I will let him pursue his education as far as he has the ability to go, and I will financially support his education till he himself stops. No parents would ever discourage their children from going to school... In today's society, having no knowledge doesn't work, right? And I feel that even college students don't worth that much nowadays, unless they graduate from privileged universities. There are college graduates everywhere, and earning a degree from a mediocre university doesn't really make a difference. Have you noticed that many young employees at SolarExcellence are also college or technical college graduates? Their lives don't seem to be a big deal*

as well. They are still working with their physical labor. If not a privileged school, then it has to be a higher degree like yours. You're desirable (as an employee) wherever you go."

The strong concern Gao Huiquan expressed concerning his child's higher education was shared by other married male migrant workers at SolarExcellence. They did not want their children to repeat their difficult lives as factory workers and perceived education as the best path to better futures. Chen Shiping, a 54-year-old welder, summarized this point of view:

"Going to school is the most important thing. In my hometown, there are kids who stop going to school early. They now live even worse than their parents."

Similarly, when the sewing workers at PrettyDress talked about their children, they also emphasized their children's education as a priority. For example, in Chapter 4, I described how Zhao Haiyan was worried about educating her daughter and hoped that her daughter would have a quiet and agreeable personality that Zhao regarded as suitable for being a good student. Another sewing worker, Chen Yanmei, also expressed the importance of letting her children, especially her daughter, have more education, based on her observations of the differences between herself and the younger generation of women.

"The post-90s generation gets more education, by going to technical colleges or getting certificates of being kindergarten teachers… It's also good to be a doctor. Doctors only need to go to work two or three days a week, unlike us working five or six days a week. And doctors are respected by people.

Doctors, teachers…those are both good occupations, golden bowls! Their life won't be as hard as ours. Have you noticed that, few people from the post-90s generation are making cloths? It's very tiring, and the payment is low… I want my daughter to also have more education and not to be a garment factory worker again."

For Cheng Xiuying as well, the single most important concern she had for her daughter was education. As I have introduced in Chapter 4, Cheng's husband was doing well financially and could support the entire family more than sufficiently. Whenever Cheng Xiuying talked to me, she always expressed her strong desire for her daughter to have a good future. But her daughter seemed to be rather rebellious and disliked school, which made Cheng worry a lot.

"I told my daughter that, if I could start over, I wouldn't have been so rebellious. I would have studied well and found a better job. And when I was little, my family was really poor, so we also had to start working early. My daughter doesn't have to do that. She has all the right conditions to focus on study. But she doesn't listen. It really gives me a headache."

Cheng Xiuying also offered a more gender-specific reason for wanting her daughter to be educated.

"I don't really expect her to be successful or anything. But how can she find a good and educated husband if she is not educated herself. Yes, she's kind of cute. But I have seen too many marriages, where the wives could not really talk with their husbands due to their educational gap. Do you think a marriage like that can really last?"

During my research at SolarExcellence and PrettyDress, the rural migrant workers also frequently asked me how much my college education cost and estimated the amount of money they needed to save for their children's future college education. As Sun Shimin, a 26-year-old welder, said to me during our conversation,

> *"Based on your calculation, supporting a child through college is likely to cost more than 25,000 yuan per year. I have two children... The pressure is rather great. But my children must go to college. In their times, college education will be the minimum requirement."*

In all, with their perceiving educational achievement as something that was mainly determined by personal efforts rather than family backgrounds, the rural migrant workers worked hard to save money for their children's education. It was their way of investing in their children's futures and helping them achieve social mobility in the specific context of China.

Some Different Work-Family Articulations at SolarExcellence and PrettyDress

In the last two sections, I have focused on mechanisms of work-family articulations that applied to both the male migrant workers at SolarExcellence and the female migrant workers at PrettyDress. In this section, I discuss some different observations at the two factories of the ways in which the rural migrant workers' concerns about family shaped their ideas about factory work. On the one hand, the different genders of the rural migrant workers in the two factories did lead to some different observations of how work-family articulations played out. Both the male and the female rural migrant workers might need to adjust their job choices upon marriage. Yet while the male migrant workers were mainly concerned about making money for

their families, both in the short term and in the long run, the female migrant workers had to put childbirth and care responsibilities first. On the other hand, the rural migrant workers at the two factories were at different stages of their life courses. While all the women workers at PrettyDress were married and mostly over 30, more than a dozen of the male migrant workers at SolarExcellence were under 30 and unmarried. I was thus able to catch a glimpse of how single male workers' parents as well as the young men's own anticipation of future families influenced their orientation at work.

1. Some gender differences in work-family articulation

So far in this chapter, I have examined how both the male and the female rural migrant workers at the two factories, upon getting married and having children, made family and children their priorities and worked hard to financially support their families and invest in their children's future education. In this section, I discuss some gender differences in work-family articulation for the rural migrant workers.

Sometimes, the family responsibilities of the married rural migrant workers were complicated by the fact that they did not just have to work for money but also needed to choose the right jobs for other considerations for their families. The dilemma of Chu Dongsheng illustrated this point well, as he had to quit the well-paid but dangerous job as a construction worker upon marriage and joined SolarExcellence as a cheap apprentice. Chu's coming to work at SolarExcellenc was thus not solely because of economic reasons but was based on concerns about safety and a longer-term family life. Such a consideration was not uncommon for the male rural migrant workers in my study. For example, when Li Doudou, a 27-year-old assembler, talked

to a newcomer to SolarExcellence named Kang Huagang, Li asked Kang where he used to work and whether he was married. After hearing Kang's answer, Li commented,

> *"You made the right decision to quit your last job at the chemical factory. Those chemicals are very bad for health. It's okay if you're single. But as you're married with children, it's better not to work there anymore."*

Female rural migrant workers at PrettyDress sometimes also needed to change jobs in order to accommodate their family responsibilities, but in a different way from the male rural migrant workers. During my communication with the sewing workers at PrettyDress, they often mentioned that they had the choice of working either for big garment factories like the bankrupt Kailian nearby, or small garment factories like PrettyDress. Many sewing workers at PrettyDress shared the same trajectory of shifting from big factories to small factories upon marriage. According to the sewing workers, big garment factories, sometimes state-owned, tended to abide by the labor laws in terms of setting regular working hours, paying minimum baseline wages, and providing the workers with social insurance. But big factories all had strict disciplines and rules, making the workers feel very uncomfortable with the lack of freedom. In contrast, small factories like PrettyDress were undesirable in terms of the working conditions yet tended to be more flexible in terms of management rules. Upon marriage, the women migrant workers shifted from big factories to small factories in order to better accommodate their family care responsibilities. As described by Shen Tingting, a 28-year-old sewing worker from Anhui Province,

"At the big factory that I used to work for, we were not allowed to use cellphones or talk during work. Every day, there were people there watching you, like the factory director, the section supervisor…all were there. But the environment was very clean and very pleasant to the eyes. After all, it's state-owned. State-owned enterprises all work according to the state's laws. No work on Sunday. And it's paid based on time rate, not piece rate. Saturday counted as overtime with overtime wage compensation…But the rules were too strict! I worked there for three years. It was so difficult to ask for leave. (You got) at most one week by asking for three days' leave, plus two days' absence, plus the weekend. That made exactly a week. I wasn't married then, and I worked there by myself. Now I'm married, I need to ask for leaves often. Here, at least it's easy to ask for leaves. Every year around the National Holiday, I go home for the harvest season. Over there, the factory was very formal. Couldn't ask for too many days for leave."

Similarly, Deng Li from Sichuan Province also used to work in big state-owned garment factories and explained how different it was.

"Big factories were stricter, in every aspect. Here at the small factory, we just need to be here in the morning, while in a big factory we needed to sign in. We also needed to clean the floor of the workshops. Too many rules, oh! The benefits were certainly better. The big factories paid social insurances for you. Here there's nothing, oh!" But there were too many rules there. I like being free and at ease. Not used to (the rules in the big factories). When you don't need to take care of children, you go to big factories. When you need to

take care of children, you go to small factories. Small factories pay a little less, a few hundred yuan less than did the big factories."

Furthermore, in their stories of migration and working experience, the female workers at PrettyDress all pointed out a time or several times when they quit their jobs and went back to their hometowns in order to give birth as well as taking care of their new born baby or babies. As their positions were highly irreplaceable, the women workers usually had to look for new jobs once their children were old enough to be left to other family members in the countryside and they could come to work in the city again.

Therefore, both the male and the female rural migrant workers needed to adjust their jobs upon marriage so that they could better shoulder their family responsibilities. Sometimes these adjustments actually meant giving up jobs that paid better and taking jobs that better fulfill other needs of their families. The male rural migrant workers often gave up jobs that paid well but were physically dangerous or imposed health hazard. In comparison, the female migrant workers, often left big garment factories that offered better working hours, higher wages, and social insurance to work at smaller factories with worse working conditions but more flexible rules, for taking leaves for example. While both the male and the female rural migrant workers had to reconsider their job choices according to their family status, the different dynamics for the two groups highlighted a gender difference in the rural migrant workers' family responsibilities. Unsurprisingly, the male migrant workers focused on financially supporting their families both in the short-term and in the long-term, while the female rural migrant workers were the ones responsible for daily

routines of housework and childcare. Even though my findings revealed the deep emotions and concerns about their families behind the male migrant workers' provider behavior, the basic gender division of labor within household that was widely documented in literature still applied in the case of Chinese rural migrant workers.

This gender difference in family responsibilities also demonstrated itself in the rural migrant workers' daily interactions. Even though the male workers also shared their experience of taking their children to the park to play or helping them with their homework, it was the female migrant workers who chatted with each other about daily childcare activities, including getting groceries, thinking about what to cook for their children, and whether the season was too cold or too hot for their children to sleep. The female migrant workers also spent a large amount of time discussing other interpersonal relationships within their families, such as how to better get along with one's mother-in-law and whether it was reasonable to expect one's husband to cook. Some female rural migrant workers actually directly expressed the idea that marriage might not be a desirable thing for women. When I chatted with Zheng Jiemiao about her 20-year-old daughter, Zheng said,

> *"she doesn't have a boyfriend yet. And I don't really want to push her to get married either. For a woman, once married, it's a bitter life about working, doing housework, and taking care of the children and the elderly. I'd rather that she enjoys a few more years of freedom."*

Overall, while both the male and the female rural migrant workers in my study expressed similarly deep emotions and concerns about their families, there still

existed gender differences when it came to division of labor within household. The male migrant workers focused more on financially supporting their families, while the female rural migrant workers were the ones responsible for daily routines of housework and childcare. This influenced the mechanisms through which family shaped factory work experiences for the male and the female rural migrant workers respectively, which tended to make working more unstable for the women workers as well as make them choose jobs based on their caring responsibilities within family rather than economic reward or working conditions.

2. Young male migrant workers as filial children

As I have mentioned earlier, Chinese society is characterized by stronger family cohesiveness in general, especially in terms of parent-child relationships (Xiao 1999). Corresponding to the selfless parental support I have written about in the last section is parents' authority over their children, as parents expect to influence their children's important life decisions and sometimes even to make decisions for them directly (Deutsch 2004).

In the context of the tight relationship between parents and children in China, young male migrant workers' parents sometimes played an important role in directing them to work in factories as well as in making them diligent workers. Certain parents seemed to urge their sons to keep a working-class job instead of being idle or reaching for unrealistic goals. Recall the story of Guo Chao that I have introduced in Chapter 4, the ambitious young man who had come to SolarExcellence because of his mother. Guo Chao's family lived close to SolarExcellence in suburb Jiangsu, and his mother had applied to the job behind his back. According to Guo Choa, it was

because she wanted her son to have a stable job and stay close home. An ambitious young man, Guo did not see opportunities of promotion in SolarExcellence and wanted to try his luck elsewhere. But Guo respected his mother's wishes and worked in SolarExcellence for more than a year.

Some parents also passed on their work ethic and lessons to their children, teaching them to work hard and endure difficulty. When I confided in Guo Chao that sometimes I wished the time to get off work could come sooner, Guo replied with a smile,

> *"You are feeling exactly what we feel! Every day we come to work, we wonder when we can get off. The key is to remember what my father told me: doing this is for making a living, not for passion or interest."*

Another example came from Chen Shiping, a 54-year-old welder, who said to me with pride, *"Wherever I go, I'm always the most serious person at work. My son is just like me, always thinking about doing his job well."* I also witnessed senior workers in SolarExcellence assume a parental role and teach younger new comers to behave in the factory. During a work break, I came across 53-year-old Yang Dehua, who expressed empathy toward the employer[28], telling a new apprentice in his early 20s,

> *"Do your own job well and don't mind other people's business. It you don't do your things well, you have nothing to say when the boss scolds you. If everybody is irresponsible, everybody gets scolded. If you don't know how to*

[28] See page 170 in Chapter 5.

do it or you don't have enough time, you can talk to your supervisor. But you must do it."

Moreover, parental love and control sometimes joined hands with networks of relatives to put the young male migrants in factories. Yang Longlong, a 25-year-old plumber, was one of the few workers in SolarExcellence with a college degree. He used to be a salesman and had never imagined himself to be a factory worker. But Yang's parents first forced him to quit his salesman job in order to spend an extended period in their village meeting with girls as potential wives. When the holiday was over, his parents urged Yang to follow his cousin, who was a manager in SolarExcellence, to come to work in the factory.

Zhou Lvsheng, a 20-year-old plumber, shared a similar experience with Yang, as he also came to SolarExcellence following his parents' orders and his cousin who worked at the factory as an engineer. While Yang was a few years older and seemed to take the job arrangement relatively calmly, Zhou expressed aversion to the long hours and lack of freedom at SolarExcellence. Yet Zhou contemplated quitting the factory for several months without being able to take the action, because *"I really don't know how to tell my cousin. It's he who took me here."* Zhou not only had to consider his parents' wishes, as in Guo Chao's case, but also was concerned about how his behavior would influence the relationships between his cousin and himself, between his parents and his cousin, and between his parents and his cousin's parents.

Overall, the young single rural migrant men did not always come to work in SolarExcellence based on individual considerations or decisions. Instead, they followed their parents' wishes to work in the factory, at least temporarily. And when

parents entrusted their sons to relatives working in SolarExcellence, the young male migrants found it even more difficult to disobey or to quit. Being filial sons not only helped bring in labor power to the factory but constructed good workers with moral teachings from elders. At the same time, while the women workers at PrettyDress were all married, they also told stories related to working as filial daughters, such as in the case of and Li Cui and Cheng Xiuying[29], who both started working at a young age to financially support their natal families, especially male siblings.

3. Young male migrant workers oriented toward future families

In the first two sections of the chapter, I have discussed how marriage and children changed the rural migrant workers' attitudes toward work as well as life in general. But it was not always only when rural migrant workers got married that the impact of family value on them materialized. At least in the case of the SolarExcellence workers, ideas about family also influenced the single young men's work attitudes and job choices as they anticipated getting married and building families in the near future.

The young male migrant workers regarded family formation as a life milestone that should be accomplished around a certain age, and they adjusted their work pace and paths to accommodate this need. When I told Jiang Tao, a 23-year old CNC operator, that I was interested in learning what people in this factory cared about, Jiang Tao replied with surprise, *"what do we care about? Getting married, of*

[29] See page 140 in Chapter 4 for Li Cui's story and page 228 in this Chapter for Cheng Xiuyi's comments.

course." At first I laughed, because I thought he was joking. Yet Jiang looked at me seriously and repeated, *"I mean it. Look around; there are so many bachelors… My family is impatient. Well, I'm impatient, too."* I later learned that Jiang was leaving SolarExcellence to look for jobs closer to his hometown in Shandong province, partly because it would be more convenient to visit a potential girlfriend his family had found for him. While the desire to marry drew Jiang away from SolarExcellence, it was the opposite case for Xu Lirui, a 26-year-old plumber, who traveled thousands of miles from Northern China to Jiangsu for his girlfriend whom he met online. Xu disliked working in SolarExcellence and longed to go home. He stayed here only because his girlfriend's parents were reluctant to marry their daughter so far and Xu was taking time to convince them. Xu planned to take his girlfriend back to Northern China as soon as he got her family's permission to marry her.

Furthermore, even when they were single, some young men got their motivation for work from the anticipation of marriage and family formation. Hu Lei, a 24-year-old electrician, once confided to me,

> *"When I just came to work in the cities, I had a goal to pursue: I wanted to buy an apartment in my hometown for my girlfriend and myself. Now that I have purchased an apartment, I have kind of lost the desire of getting ahead."*

For some male migrant workers, the connection between the idea of family and that of work went so deep that the conceptualization of the meaning of their work and factory participation was difficult without referring to the idea of family. Zhang Wenqiang, a 26-year-old CNC operator, expressed frustration with his lack of achievement in life.

"What I regretted most now was that I did not stay in the same factory over the past nine years of my work life. I overestimated myself and quitted so many jobs for small dissatisfactions and all sorts of reasons, such as low wages and dishonest managers. If I had stayed in the same factory for nine years, I would have accumulated some money and probably bought an apartment and got married. That's what happened with my classmates from the junior high school. They did better than me in enduring hardship and stayed in the same factories they started with. Now they are all married with children and have their own apartments. Even though I don't desire a life that's so ordinary and mediocre, what I'm having now is worse than that."

For Zhang, whether or not he was able to achieve a family life served as an important criterion against which he evaluated his work life and measured his success or failure at work. His narrative transited back and forth between work and family in such an inseparable way that they seemed essential in informing each other. The story of Chu Dongsheng, a newly-wed who regretted his career choice and envied his cousin who had worked in a factory right from the beginning illustrated a similar point[30].

The influence of marriage and children on work was thus not limited to the married male migrant workers. It also shaped the single young migrant workers' motivations, trajectories, and choices regarding working in factories. They shared the values of getting married and forming families and showed agency at work in trying to achieve these life goals.

[30] See page 121 in Chapter 4.

Summary and Implications for Worker Agency

Following the same spirit of Chapter 5, in this chapter, I have selected to discuss in greater details one aspect of rural migrant workers' agency that emerged in the fieldwork. While Chapter 5 focuses on the rural migrant workers' agency in interpreting factory management and developing perceptions of factory relation, this chapter centers on their considerations of family that they repeatedly expressed at work. The point that runs through Chapter 4 and Chapter 5 applies to this chapter as well: even in the process of factory production, the rural migrant workers were not just laborers involved in industrial work but were still embedded in broader social lives with multiple parts and dimensions. The findings presented in this chapter suggested that all the rural migrant workers "brought family to work" and that their concerns and ideas about family were an integral part of the rural migrant workers' interpretation and navigation of factory work.

The married rural migrant workers, both men and women, seemed to have learned to prioritize their family responsibilities over individual pursuit of enjoyment, sometimes through a prolonged process of painful self-disciplining. The need for family stability and financial contribution made the rural migrant workers more likely to settle down in one place with their spouses upon marriage and, for those without better job opportunities, to endure difficult working conditions in specific factories. Hopes for their children's future upward social mobility seemed to have provided the rural migrant workers with another motivation for bearing with hard factory work, as they sought to accumulate funds for their children's higher education in the specific context of China's education system that was perceived to be egalitarian. And for the

rural migrant workers who had to leave their children behind in the countryside in the difficult migration situation, working hard and making money to satisfy their children' material needs also constituted a way of expressing their guilty feelings as absent parents and compensating their children. At the same time, although these general patterns of work-family articulations that centered on money-making applied to both genders of the rural migrant workers, certain gender differences in family division of labor remained in place in the sense that the women migrant workers still needed to prioritize childbirth, childcare and other family care responsibilities over employed labor.

Furthermore, based on the evidence from the unmarried male migrant workers at SolarExcellence, family also seemed to influence the rural migrant workers' attitudes and behavior regarding factory participation through mechanisms other than actual marriage and childrearing. On the one hand, parents' wishes and power over their children in the cultural context of China seemed to play a role in channeling some young migrant workers to factories, both through what parents considered to be realistic assessment of their children's careers options and through the introduction of extended family networks. At the same time, the ideas of marriage and children were even part of the considerations of currently unmarried rural migrant workers, as they anticipated future marriage and family formation. Such expectations not only influenced the rural migrant workers' decisions of staying or leaving certain factories but seemed to be deeply related to their evaluations of their own success and failures.

Compared to the discussion of the last chapter, where the rural migrant workers' agency of interpreting factory management and factory relations were

directly involved in shaping their participation in factory production process, the rural migrant workers' ideas and concerns about family, as observed in this particular research, might seem to play a less straightforward role in the labor process. On the one hand, family did not influence the rural migrant workers' factory work through simple mechanisms but often interacted with other factors to determine the migrant workers' attitudes and actions regarding factory participation, such as their educational backgrounds, access to better job opportunities, and even their personal ambitions. For example, the financial needs of one's family did not necessarily lead all rural migrant workers to discipline themselves for factory work. In a few cases, the rural migrant workers at SolarExcellence who were better educated and/or confident about their abilities also mentioned leaving factories for other economic opportunities[31]. On the other hand, even under circumstances where the rural migrant workers had not considered other options than working in factories, the link between family concerns and migrant workers' cooperation with factory production could go both directions. For example, I heard a few comments from the SolarExcellence workers who expressed understanding toward certain managers' harsh treatment of the workers, because the department director *"is also under a lot of pressure because he has two children to raise"* or the team leader *"needed to make more money as he is still trying to get married at the age of 32."* On some other occasions, however, the

[31] Li Zhansi, the first migrant worker I talked to at SolarExcellence, who was very interested in new business opportunities in China, provided one such example. See page 113 in Chapter 4.

male migrant workers also expressed frustration about unsatisfying wages that were difficult for them to provide for their families.

It is important to point out that the purpose of this chapter is not to systematically uncover every mechanism through which family was involved in the rural migrant workers' attitudes and behavior regarding factory work. The chapter just proposes that family constituted an integral part of the rural migrant factory workers' agency at work, which was clearly suggested by the observations discussed in this chapter. In fact, as the original research was designed to neither focus on rural migrant workers' perceptions of factory management nor clarify how their family concerns shaped the factory labor process, the evidence collected for both Chapter 5 and Chapter 6 and the related analysis could not be as systematic and thorough as in focused research. Instead, the goal of the study is to explore rural migrant factory workers' agency with an open attitude and to embrace observations on worker agency in its variety and complexity. While Chapter 4 describes in broad strokes the diverse and complicated ideas, perceptions, and plans that the rural migrant workers brought to their factory work, Chapter 5 and Chapter 6 seek to elaborate on two prominent themes of the observed agency of the rural migrant workers as examples and to provide some possible analyses of the connections to factory production. The three empirical chapters combined suggest that, to understand capitalist production in China and rural migrant workers' participation in the process, it seems important to treat rural migrant factory workers not merely as industrial laborers in specific factories but as people who are simultaneously embedded in multiple aspects of social lives; it also seems crucial to not only analyze mechanisms of labor process within

specific factories but incorporate rural migrant workers' experience in the larger social contexts. The description and analysis provided in these empirical chapters are not meant to offer final answers to the discussions but serve to suggest the potential insights that could be gained through further research in this direction. At the same time, as Chapter 5 and Chapter 6 each deal with one aspect of the rural migrant workers' agency and its implications for factory production separately, the challenge remains to envisage an inclusive theoretical framework, if possible, that could incorporate the variety and complexity of worker agency and analyze its role in capitalist production in a coherent manner. The next chapter, also the concluding chapter, discuss some thoughts on this, in addition to reviewing the entire research project and reflecting on its implications as well as limitations.

Chapter 7: Worker Agency, Capitalist Production, and Power Relations

China has achieved miraculous economic success within a few decades, changing from one of the poorest countries in the world to the second largest economy on earth. Part of the success came from turning China into the "world's factory" and more than a million Chinese rural migrants into cheap factory workers. Situated in this context, this dissertation focuses on rural migrants who work in factories in China and ask the broad question of why they participate in factory production under unappealing working conditions. Addressing the question is not only important for understanding China's economic success, given the essential role played by rural migrant factory workers, it can also shed light on rural migrants, a large and special social group in Chinese society whose majority works in factories.

Part of the reason why rural migrants have to endure undesirable factory work, as highlighted in the literature, is rural migrants' limited life opportunities caused by highly discriminatory state policies combined with the power of capitalists. In other words, rural migrants cooperate with factory production partly because they do not have access to better options. This explanation, while valid, puts more emphasis on the powerful side of the power relations and tends to underemphasize rural migrants' own agency, i.e., the subjective thoughts, considerations, perceptions, ideas, and plans that they bring to the process of factory production. Such under-emphasis of the agency of the powerless side pictures a rather simplistic view of how

power relations work in the process of China's capitalist production, as if only the powerful entities of the state and capital were active in making decisions and taking actions while rural migrant workers just submit to the powerful passively or endure it negatively. Moreover, within this framework, even if rural migrant workers' agency is attended to, the conceptualization of rural migrant workers' agency also revolves around the powerful. Rural migrant workers are depicted to be either resisting the power or contributing inadvertently to the power. In fact, as I explain in Chapter 2, this way of understanding relations of factory production in China and rural migrant workers' agency reflects how capital-labor relations and worker agency tends to be analyzed in the broader literature of labor studies informed by Marxist theories. As Marxist labor scholars draw on theories of capitalist exploitation of labor and expect workers to rebel against the exploitation under the right conditions, their conceptualization of worker agency tends to be derived from and confined within this concern of exploitation and resistance.

Seeking to respond to the initial general inquiry about rural migrant workers' participation in factory production and to address the particularly limited understanding of rural migrant factory workers' agency in the process, this dissertation aims to document a broader range of worker agency that is not confined by the primary focus on the power of capital as well as the state. In other words, this project investigates rural migrant workers' agency not merely as *reactions* to the specific powerful entities but as migrant workers' positive abilities of interpreting and navigating their work and lives as human beings embedded in larger society. The project also explores a related theoretical question: how might analyzing rural

migrant factory workers' agency in a more inclusive manner contribute to understanding power relations involved in capitalist production?

In this last chapter, I first summarize my preliminary findings on worker agency. Next, I reflect on the findings by discussing the advantages and limitations of having followed the methodology of abductive analysis in a partial manner. I conclude this chapter by exploring selected theoretical implications of this study, especially in terms of conceptualizing and analyzing power relations.

Preliminary Findings on Rural Migrant Factory Workers

My ethnography with about 160 rural migrant factory workers in two small manufacturing factories in China opened to me a world of sophisticated and diverse worker agency. Because my purpose was not to fit rural migrant workers' agency into specific theoretical analysis or a coherent sociological story, I embraced their diverse thoughts, ideas, and perceptions. Unlike the media images of rural migrant workers who are either pitiable victims of severe factory exploitation and control or upset and angry resistors fighting for their rights, I met rural migrant workers who were actively engaged with their lives and work in a variety of ways and who could not be placed into a few boxes with simple labels. Even though the migrant workers in each factory shared similarly disadvantaged backgrounds as rural migrants and participated in similar factory work, they expressed different understanding of who they were, what factory work meant to them, what was important to them in life, how they should treat their work and lives, and what plans they had for the future. They did not always present homogeneity as migrant factory laborers but remained people with diverse living experiences and perceptions.

And how they subjectively perceived their situations often had impact on their ways of navigating factory work. For example, ambitious migrant workers who believed in their abilities might try to cultivate good interpersonal relations with the management; migrant workers who took bad working conditions in an industry as the norm seemed less likely to perceive a specific factory employer as the villain; as some migrant workers considered personal decisions regarding education and career choice as the key factors determining their current living and working situations, they tended to blame themselves for not knowing better or trying harder rather than challenging the domination of state or of the factory. The evidence suggests that various aspects of rural migrant workers' agency took part in shaping their attitudes and behavior regarding factory production participation.

The wide range and great variety of rural migrant workers' agency I observed during the fieldwork was difficult, if not impossible, to be fully engaged and analyzed within the scope of one dissertation. In this dissertation, therefore, I have selected to zoom in on two themes of the rural migrant workers' agency and provided some possible interpretations of these aspects of their agency as well as the role such agency might have played in shaping their participation in factory work. Because a large part of the evidence on rural migrant workers' agency is not closely analyzed here, the findings documented in here are of a provisionary nature.

One major finding of this study is that the migrant workers expressed empathy toward the factories despite their dissatisfactions with the working conditions and management sometimes. It seemed that the migrant workers, drawing on their personal experiences and observations, perceived the factory employers not as being

all independent and powerful but rather as being vulnerable in market competition. From the migrant workers' perspective, the factory employers could not freely decide the kind of working conditions to provide for the workers but had to consider saving costs in order for the factories to survive in the market. Moreover, the migrant workers seemed to perceive the employers and managers as general authority figures in society and perceived factory relations as general social hierarchies, unlike capital-labor dichotomous contradictions emphasized in Marxist labor studies. Therefore, the rural migrant workers were understanding toward the employers and management, because they did not want to jeopardize the survival of the factories and because they treated the factory authority figures as just people with difficult responsibilities on a hierarchy.

Another major finding of this study is that the migrant workers always kept their families in mind during their factory work and their involvement in factory production could not be understood in isolation from their concerns about family. The theme of work-family articulation also speaks to the literature of labor studies, especially works that bring in a gender perspective to study women factory workers. But part of the goal of my analysis is to emphasize that such work-family articulation applies to male workers as well. Both the male and the female migrant workers cited getting married and having children as the most significant turning point in their lives, which often transformed them from carefree individuals to people who needed to shoulder family responsibilities. More specifically, saving money for their children's future college education constituted one of the major motivations for staying in the factories and working diligently, which could only be understood in the context of

China's education system. And the rural migrant workers' concerns about their children were also further complicated by their separation from their children due to the migration policies, and they sought to compensate for their absence by better providing for their children. Moreover, the importance of establishing and maintaining one's family also manifested itself among the single young male migrant workers in my study, who changed their job trajectories to accommodate their future needs of establishing families as well as measured their value of their work by the success or failure of getting married and having children.

Based on these findings, at least two points could be made about the rural migrant workers' agency in factory production. First, the rural migrant workers were neither passively involved in factory production nor always resistant toward the employers or management. Instead, the rural migrant workers had agency in actively interpreting the meaning of factory relations and in articulating their subjective standards of reasonable and unreasonable treatment. The intimate work-family articulation also suggested that the rural migrant workers actively constructed meanings of factory work through their family concerns and values. Second, the rural migrant workers were not just laborers embedded in factory relations and reacting only to the factory context. Rather, their agency was shaped by their broader experience as general social beings, and they drew on other aspects of their social lives to develop ideas and perceptions regarding factory work. These findings present a more nuanced picture of factory production in Chinese factories with rural migrant workers. Paying more attention to rural migrant workers' agency, including the ideas, perceptions, thoughts, considerations, and plans they brought to their factory work in

a positive and active way, led to the understanding that rural migrant workers were not simply repressed by the powerful forces of the state or capitalists to passively or negatively endure difficult factory work. They presented active agency in interpreting the meanings of their participation in factory labor and navigating their factory work, drawing upon their experiences as human beings in broader social contexts.

Partial Abductive Analysis: Benefits and Limitations

Because my research findings on worker agency stem directly from the methodology that I used, it is important to reflect on the benefits and limits of the methodology that I had adopted. To reiterate, while the dissertation project was informed by Marxist theories of capitalist production and capital-labor relations, I did not derive the conceptualization of worker agency from the theories but made efforts to prevent the empirical observation of worker agency from being constrained by the theories. I adopted a methodology that was situated in between grounded theory on the one hand, which disapproves having any theories before fieldwork, and extended case theory on the other hand, which endorses guiding fieldwork with one single theory. I took as legitimate my theoretical concern of capitalist exploitation and capital-labor power imbalance, but I did not guide my observation and data collection in the factories with these theoretical concerns. Instead, I was open to whatever the rural migrant workers felt interested in talking about, either with me or with each other, and refrained from judging any topics they brought up as irrelevant, however trivial or remote from the theme of capitalist production they might sound on the surface.

This openness in the field was essential for the kind of data on worker agency that I was able to collect. It pushed me to follow closely the rural migrant workers'

own perspectives and discourses, instead of imposing the theoretical views on them. This was why, for example, I was able to notice that the rural migrant workers might perceive factory relations as common social hierarchies rather than capital-labor dichotomous contradictions – as spelled out in Marxist theories of capitalist relations. If I had gone into the factories with the theoretical assumption that the interests of the workers were in direct opposition to those of the employers as well as the management, I might have interpreted the rural migrant workers' attitude and behavior regarding the employers and the managers as either resistance or consent to their power. I would not have been able to reveal the nuances of the power relations that did not necessarily revolve around capital-labor dichotomy but were shaped by another kind of worldview. This methodology also helps open up an entire world of the diverse and complicated agency of Chinese rural migrant workers in particular and of workers in general. It points to aspects of worker agency that are usually not included in the labor studies literature for the sake of maintaining a coherent story that fits into the theoretical frameworks. And it provides the opportunity for a potentially new understanding of the power relations involved in the process of capitalist production, as I have discussed in the last section.

The ethnographic methodology I envisaged at the start of my study coincides with Tavery and Timmermans' 2014 presentation of abductive analysis. Drawing from pragmatism, Tavery and Timmermans (2014) situated abductive analysis between the inductive logic of grounded theory and the deductive approach of extended case theory. Abductive analysis suggests that researchers enter the field with neither a preconceived theory, as in the case of grounded theory, nor with only a

single theory, as proposed by extended case method. Instead, abductive analysis encourages researchers to become familiarized with multiple theories before starting ethnographic research, to be open to any observations and surprises in the field, and to go back and forth between various theories and field data in search for the best fit. Both my entering the field with theoretical knowledge and my commitment to open-mindedness in the field coincided with certain key components of abductive analysis.

When I first started my fieldwork, I was unaware of this particular methodological approach, yet the way that I initially conceptualized my methodology did fall under main principles of abductive analysis. However, I did not follow the tenets of abductive analysis to their full advantage. More specifically, had I incorporated more theories and literature regarding factory production, worker agency, and rural migration before I entered the field, my observations might have been richer. Instead, I conducted my participant observation with only a critical affiliation with Marxism and labor studies, which provided a general direction for the research but did not guide the observation and data collection in a positive sense. The open attitude toward empirical observations facilitated my documenting a large amount and a great variety of evidence on worker agency, and the empirical investigation has also led to theoretical insights regarding Marxist approaches to labor studies. But the lack of a more expansive theoretical focus at the outset meant that, while the dissertation did provide some suggestive findings and theoretical insights, I may have missed opportunities to see things differently when I was in the field. the addition of specific theoretical frameworks at the outset might have provided deep analysis on certain aspects of worker agency.

An exploratory study that reveals various aspects of worker agency underemphasized in labor studies has its own value. But a broader theoretical preparation might have generated more focused observations as well as deeper analysis based on certain theories. Take for example the observation that the rural migrant workers seemed to perceive factory relations as being similar to other hierarchical relations they experienced in their broader social lives, which to some extent contributed to their cooperation of factory management. This finding could have been further pursued through having a conversation with theories and literature on modernization, industrialization, and rural migration in the area of industrial sociology. Industrial sociologists reinterpret Marx and hypothesize that industrialism would spread to the world and shape certain aspects of social structures in different countries into a common mould (Kerr et al. 1960). Rural population turning into industrial workers constitutes an essential element of the industrializing process and attracts great attention from industrial sociologists (Form 1979).

One debate in the field centers on whether pre-industrial cultures lead agricultural population to resist new arrangements of factory production and to what extent similar factory systems promote similar social behavior among workers in different nations (e.g. Moore 1951, Blumer 1960, Moore and Feldman 1960, Alba 1968). Empirical studies so far seem to confirm Moore's proposition (1965) that industrialization tends to produce similar patterns in worker behavior in the first-order, such as regularities in wage systems and promotion rules and workers' responses to them, but leave variations in things related to ideology and cultural practices. Research suggests that labor commitment to industrial production is largely

determined by factory working conditions and shows similarities across nations; better working conditions increase worker attachment and reduce turnover, regardless of workers' rural or urban backgrounds (Chaplin 1967, Lambert 1963, Bhatt 1969, Form 1976), while unattractive working conditions are associated with difficulty of recruiting agricultural workers into factories (Berg 1965, Moore 1967, Gutkind 1968). At the same time, as Moore (1965) has predicted, even with similar working conditions, national variations remain in areas related to ideology and workers' subjective perceptions, such as patterns of labor-management relations (Shiba 1973) and workers' attitudes about the legitimacy of authority systems (Gallie 1977).

My observation that the Chinese rural migrant workers treated factory relations as common social hierarchy seemed especially relevant to discussing the role played by pre-industrial culture in shaping new workers with rural backgrounds and possible national cultural differences in industrialization process. On the one hand, instead of being an obstacle, the rural migrant workers' experience of pre-industrial authority structures in the countryside might have contributed to their integration into the factory system. But the source of their perception of hierarchy might have also been Chinese culture in general or the authoritarian state structure. On the other hand, this attitude about factory hierarchy might remain an inherent part of factory relations in China, or it might change as rural migrant workers were exposed to more factory experience or different types of management. In order to fully engage the discussion, I would have needed to pursue data collection further along this line of inquiry, maybe even including new sites and participants. For example, would deeper conversations reveal different attitudes between older and

younger migrant workers? Would factory workers with urban backgrounds share similar perceptions? Would rural migrant workers in large factories with highly bureaucratic and impersonal management style interpret factory relations differently? In other words, going into the field with theories of industrial sociology would have sensitized me to specific interpretations of certain data and driven me to ask more theoretically-focused questions.

At the same time, for the research to follow abductive analysis rather than falling back to extend case method to derive empirical investigation from one single theory, I would have been equipped with other theories than just those of industrial sociology. The point is to try out various interpretations of the observations from different angles and search for the best fit available. For instance, the rural migrant workers did not just express empathy and understanding toward the factories but also indicated their dissatisfaction on certain occasions. In this dissertation, I interpreted both attitudes as following the same principles of workers supporting factory interests as well as factory relations, and I did not highlight the potentially resistant aspect of the rural migrant workers' agency. But resistance *was* part of the power relations that rural migrant factory workers were involved in, although it was neither the only "projects" that the migrant workers pursued nor necessarily of the derived nature as depicted by theories of capital-labor contradictions. The theories developed by James Scott on everyday forms of resistance (Scott and Kerkvliet 1986, Scott 1985, 1990) could have guided me to pay more attention to potentially resistant attitudes and behavior of the rural migrant workers that helped them survive in an unfriendly environment and preserve their dignity, sometimes in the form of "hidden transcript"

(Scott 1990). Moreover, the analysis of resistance could have also benefited from the theoretical framework developed by the anthropologist Abu-Lughod (1990), who suggested that we do not derive observations of resistance from theories of power relations but instead "follow all sorts of resistance to learn the different forms of power that people are involved in" and "get at the ways in which intersecting and often conflicting structures of power work together" (Abu-Lughod 1990: 42).

These were but two examples of the possible theoretical directions the research could have explored in the field. Equipping myself with such diverse theoretical knowledge would have helped me try out different interpretations in the field, search for best fit, and advance certain theories with more focused data collection and in-depth analysis. At the same time, doing this could also have led me to narrow down the scope of the observations too early and thus risk not collecting data on rural migrant workers' agency with such variety and complexity. Therefore, to some extent, the limitation of lacking specific theoretical guidance might also be regarded as a merit of the project. But the next step of the research should certainly engage more theoretical perspectives and pursue either certain aspects of the evidence on worker agency or develop more overarching theory on agency and power relations.

Reflections on the Theorization of Power Relations

This dissertation has broader implications for the study of power relations. I started the project with a Marxist perspective that understood China's economic changes as essentially a process of capitalist production and capitalist exploitation of rural migrants' labor with the Chinese state's assistance. Similar to labor scholars focusing

on China, I perceived rural migrant factory workers as being involved in imbalanced power relations, with the state and capitalists being on the more powerful end and rural migrants being dominated and exploited in the relations. Unlike the labor scholars, however, I was suspicious about conceptualizing rural migrant workers' agency as either being completely defined by their involvement in the power relations of capitalist production or being fully responsive to their domination or exploitation. In other words, I did not derive the conceptualization of rural migrant workers' agency from the theoretical understanding of the power relations but studied their agency as something positive and in its own right.

My research findings suggest that rural migrant workers bring to factory production diverse and complicated agency that they have developed from a variety of sources in their multi-dimensional social lives, such as experience of common hierarchical relations in general social lives, perceptions of the importance of family, trajectories of migration and work, experience and understanding of the Chinese education system, observations of one's family, relatives and friends, personal ambitions, individual family situations, and even religion. These findings suggest that rural migrant workers' agency during the labor process is indeed neither completely defined by the power relations of capitalist production they are in or merely being responsive to their objective situations of domination and exploitation.

The theoretical challenge now, however, is what to make of the evidence on rural migrant workers' sophisticated agency with all its diverse sources and individual variety and how to reconcile it with the initial understanding of the power relations involved in capitalist production in China. To some extent, the research findings on

rural migrant workers' agency seem to disrupt the original conceptualization of the power relations, which is consisted of relatively straightforward dichotomous relationships between capital and labor in the factory production process. With evidence on the diverse and complicated worker agency, so many other areas of social lives have to be brought into the capitalist production process that it almost feels like that they "spill over" the initial framework of the capital-labor power relations and blur the boundary of the framework. What are the power relations now with all the connections to other parts of rural migrant workers' social lives outside of factory production?

A key to approaching this, I suggest, is to recognize that the original conceptualization of power relations, while reflecting realistic social inequalities and power imbalances, is a theoretical construction in nature. On the one hand, it addresses objective patterns of domination and exploitation in capitalist production that are accessible through theoretical and macroscopic lens but are not necessarily experienced as such on a microscopic level by rural migrant workers in their daily lives. On the other hand, as a theoretical construction, it contains a certain level of abstraction that extracts a few key factors from complicated social reality and social relations, such as capital and labor, and forms a coherent and abstract narrative that centers on relations among these factors, for instance, capitalist exploitation of labor. Such theoretical construction sheds light on patterns of domination and exploitation by making them stand out among other social relations, but it also risks isolating the particular power relations from the texture of social reality that they are essentially part of.

In the case of rural migrant workers in factory production, for example, it is not against the reality to state that they are being exploited by capitalists and dominated by the state. Yet at the same time, there exists another aspect of the reality in terms of what the process of exploitation and domination looks like and how it continues operating in daily practices. The two layers of reality should not be confounded, as one concerns the abstract and macroscopic observation of general social patterns that are only accessible through theoretical perspectives while the other has to do with details of social life as experienced by ordinary social actors. And problems arise when scholars take the theoretical construction of particular power relations as the entire reality and derive their analysis of social life on the ground from the abstract perspective.

From the perspectives of social actors, what was understood by scholars as relations that are ultimately characterized by domination and exploitation may not be always perceived and experienced as such in daily interactions. Moreover, the particular power relations in question may not even stand out for social actors, as other aspects of their social experience do not just constitute backgrounds for the power relations but intersect and interact with the power relations in question on the same platform and with no less subjective importance. For the rural migrant factory workers, for instance, participating in factory production was but one of their social activities and might not be considered special or separate from their other parts of social lives, such as family, community, religious practice, education, general economic life, and experience of other social authorities. As various aspects of social lives are all meshed together for them, it seems reasonable that rural migrant workers'

interpretations and navigations of factory work would be shaped by their experience both inside and outside factories. This insight, while appearing to be intuitive, may prove difficult to achieve if one starts from the theoretical perspective on particular power relations and derive actual social processes involved in the power relations from the theoretical construction rather than approaching the analysis from social actors' experience and perspectives.

In all, the understanding that rural migrant workers are exploited and dominated by capitalists with the aid of the state, which has inspired the project in the first place, remains valid – but only on one level of reality. To access another level of the reality, i.e., how the exploitation and domination operates and continues through daily life experience, one cannot simply impose the initial theoretical understanding of social patterns on rural migrant workers but needs to consider how rural migrant workers themselves interpret their experience of factory production in the context of their larger social lives.

These thoughts on theorizing power relations may also contribute to the ongoing discussion among some sociologists and anthropologists on the relations between social structure and people's agency. In Chapter 2, I have touched upon the works of certain sociologists and anthropologists who struggle with difficulty of integrating agency and structure (e.g., Giddens 1979, 1984; Bourdieu 1977, 1990, 2000; Sahlins 1981, de Certeau 1984, Sewell 1992, Ortner 1996, 2006). These scholars are usually most concerned about structures of social inequalities that involve power imbalances. Different from earlier social theorists like Marx, who seemed to put more emphasis on features and patterns of social structures than on

people's perceptions and navigation of mundane daily life on the personal and interpersonal level, these scholars seek to take into account and reconcile social structures that are only accessible with abstract theoretical perspectives on the one hand and people's subjective understanding and actions that can be observed on the ground on the other hand. As I have explained in Chapter 2, among the group of theorists, Sherry B. Ortner seems to be the one who takes the importance of agency furthest. Her concept of "serious games" describes people, even subordinated people, as being purposeful in pursuing projects deemed worthwhile in certain cultural contexts. "The agency of projects is not necessarily about domination and resistance, although there may be some of that going on. It is about people having desires that grow out of their own structures of life, including very centrally their own structures of inequality; it is in short about people playing, or trying to play, their own serious games even as more powerful parties seek to devalue and even enjoy destroy them" (Ortner 2006: 147). For Ornter, agency is less a property that people have and more a disposition toward the enactment of projects that issue from culturally shaped desires (2006: 152).

In the case of the rural migrant factory workers, they can also be perceived as pursuing multiple cultural projects and participating in serious games of advancing their own lives. Sometimes different rural migrant workers may pursue different projects based on their backgrounds and personal goals. Recall Guo Chao and Hu Lei, two electricians in their early 20s and whose stories I have told in Chapter 4. Guo desired upward social mobility and would try his luck either climbing up factory hierarchical ladders or seeking other opportunities in bigger cities, while Hu Lei

would be content with being a factory worker as long as the wage level was higher. The rural migrant workers also seemed to all care about the goal of achieving and maintaining family life, and they not only shouldered responsibilities for providing for their families but also perceived saving money for children's higher education as a worthwhile project. And these were but two examples emerging from the study. Rural migrant workers' small and big life projects are not necessarily always about capitalist production, though sometimes they certainly overlap with the process of factory production as well as factory relations.

To some extent, capitalist exploitation of labor and capital-labor relations may be thought of less as an overarching social structure, to which rural migrant workers' agency has to either resist or contribute, but more as one of the multiple social structures and sets of social relations that rural migrant workers are involved in. From this perspective, more important questions seem to be: to what extent are rural migrant workers' life projects and the kind of serious games they play to achieve their goals becoming shaped by the recent development of capitalist production and capitalist relations in China? And what are the other social and cultural contexts that construct other projects and goals deemed worth pursuing by rural migrant workers? And these inquiries also apply to other societies. Even the most developed capitalist countries must still include cultural projects other than those related to capitalist production and reproduction, although the degree to which they are influenced by or interact with the capitalist structure needs to be identified empirically.

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