

# **China as a World Factory: New Practices and Struggles of Migrant Women Workers**

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## **Introduction**

The rise of China as a “world factory” signifies a new century of surplus labor drawn from rural China to fuel up the global economy. Since the early 1990s we have witnessed a surge in the relocation of transnational corporations (TNCs) in China from all over the world, especially from Hong Kong, Taiwan, Japan, USA and Western Europe. More than 100 million peasant-workers have been working either in transnational corporations (TNCs), directly owned or joint-ventured by big brand-name American and European companies, or in their Chinese production contractors and subcontractors. With China’s entrance into the WTO, capital from manufacturing industries, high-tech sectors and financial business further poured into China, creating a hegemonic discourse in the West that Chinese workers have increasingly stolen jobs from Western labor markets. There are however increasing concerns emerging amongst NGOs as well as academic circles about globalization and labor conditions in post-socialist China. In spite of the increase in transnational codes of conduct practices at the company level and legal mobilization of labor at the societal level, precarious labor regimes in China are still prevalent (Chan 2001; Lee 1998 Pun 2005a, SACOM 2005). Globalization and “race to bottom” production strategies adopted by Transnational Corporations (TNCs) work against the improvement of labor relations in China through new legal or institutional practices and employment relations, and the changed nature of ownership (Pun 2005b). Instead, new global production regimes and capital-labor relations produce employment systems which are still highly precarious, generating huge hidden costs that Chinese women workers carry while creating a huge social force ready to resist and challenge the existing social order. How would migrant women workers understand themselves collectively in term of class and gender identity? Could they be organized as a new

worker-subject newly emerged in post-socialist China? At the crossroads of China's incorporation into global capitalism, what are the new forms of labor organizing and women empowerment.

This chapter hopes to open up these timely questions drawn from a ten-year struggle of a local NGO, *The Chinese Working Women Network* (CWWN) which started its projects in Shenzhen since 1996. Situated firstly in the Special Economic Zone of Shenzhen, CWWN struggles to survive together with migrant women workers who desperately look for civil society space in urban China for labor protections. Set up in 1996, CWWN stands as a non-profit making NGO with the mission of promoting betterment for the lives of Chinese migrant women workers. It endeavors to fight for labor and gender rights, promote grass roots empowerment, and social justice in China. Because of the great difficulties of organizing migrant workers at the workplace level, CWWN sinks its root in the migrant labor communities and attempts various organizing projects to organize workers outside the traditional trade union model. Limitations, shortcomings and lack of genuine political space for women participation far extend the achievement of the empowerment projects. To survive, as a local NGO in China, tops the agenda of CWWN which affects its real labor organizing power.

### **China's accession into WTO**

The acceleration of the global manufacturing process after China's entrance into the WTO has contributed to a dual process that underlies the making of a new Chinese working class. First, the global process shatters the China's old socialist pattern of industrial ownership and China's old workforce composition, the latter of which has constantly been under restructuring since the mid 1990s. In 1981, the state-owned enterprises (SOEs) produced three-quarters (74.76 percent) of national gross industrial output while the collective-owned enterprises, which had functioned as subsidiaries of state firms, generated another 24.62 percent of national gross industrial output (Lee 2005:4). The SOEs' decline in industrial significance was drastic when economic reform deepened in the 1990s. By 1996, 11,544 units of SOEs had declared bankruptcy (Lee 2003:74). The national importance of the state-owned and state-controlled firms, in terms of total industrial output, dwindled to only 18.05 percent and 10.53 percent respectively in 2001. With regard to the number of

industrial employees in SOEs, the 1990 *China Statistical Yearbook* states that, in the same year, there were 43.64 million staff and workers, constituting 68.42 percent of the national total of industrial employment. The neo-liberal ideology borne by the WTO's deepening involvement in market competition and corporate consolidation has contributed to massive lay-offs of state and collective workers in the new millennium. The once provisioning and paternalistic socialist employment systems have acceded to the market forces of demand and supply. As privatization, mergers, and bankruptcies changed the face of Chinese work units, or *danwei*, the number of industrial workers in SOEs remained, until 2002, a mere 15.46 million persons, making up only 41.46 percent of the total workforce in China.<sup>1</sup>

Alongside the state-initiated transition to the market economy was a sharp rise in jobs in private, foreign-owned, and joint-venture enterprises that now dot the coastal cities of China. The formation of a new working class of internal rural migrant laborers, or the *dagong* class (Pun 2005a), in contrast to the Maoist working-class, has been taking shape in contemporary China. Since the late 1970s, the de-collectivization project has generated a massive labor surplus from rural areas. At the same time, the central government has facilitated an unprecedented surge in internal rural-to-urban migration by loosening up partially the restrictions of *hukou*, or the household registration system. Most transnational corporations (TNCs) (of Hong Kong, Taiwan, South Korea, Japan, the United States, and European countries) and their subcontractors recruit millions of peasant-migrants in export-led Special Economic Zones (SEZs). Until the early 1990s, it was consensually agreed that the number of floaters<sup>2</sup> was about 70 million nationwide. The Fifth National Population Census of China, in 2000, estimated that there were over 120 million internal migrant workers in cities, while other estimates range from 100 to 200 million persons (Lavelly 2001:3). This variation is explained by the varied definitions of *migrant worker* adopted by the government and non-state organizations, which take into account the temporal and spatial dimensions of internal rural-to-urban migration (see also Solinger 1999; Liang and Ma 2004; Gaetano and Jacka 2004).

Women constitute a significant proportion of the rural migrant population in contemporary China. The development of SEZs across China, similar to the development of corresponding establishments in most other developing economies, was based on a massive harnessing of young workers, in particular of unmarried women (see Lee 1998; Pun 1999; Gaetano and Jacka 2004). By 2000, female migrant

workers accounted for about 47.5 percent of China's internal migrant workers (Liang and Ma 2004). In Shenzhen, they recently made up about 65.6 percent of all migrants (Liu 2003).

These rural migrants have been identified as temporary residents who work in a city and who lack a formal urban *hukou*, an urban registry status that confers upon urban residents the entitlement to stay in the city and to enjoy welfare and protection there (Solinger 1999). The old but still existing *hukou* system helps to create exploitative mechanisms of labor appropriation in Shenzhen as well as in other Chinese cities. The maintenance of the distinction between permanent and temporary residents by the *hukou* system facilitates the state's shirking of its obligation to provide housing, job security, and welfare to rural migrant workers. China's overall economy, while it needs the labor of the rural population, does not need the city-based survival of that population once demand for rural-to-urban migrants' labor power shifts in either location or emphasis. This newly forming working class is permitted to form no roots in the city. Still worse, the *hukou* system, mixed with labor controls, is the specific modality of power that constructs the ambiguous identity of rural migrant labor and that simultaneously deepens and obscures the economy's exploitation of this huge population. Do the state and the society regard the temporary laborers as workers or as peasants? The difficulty that one faces in responding to this question not only exemplifies the ambiguity that surrounds the status of rural migrant labor but also facilitates industry's appropriation of rural migrant labor and precludes the Chinese state's full recognition of rural migrant labor as labor. Hence, this subtle and multi-faceted marginalization of a vast swath of the labor supply has created a contested, if not a deformed, citizenship that has disadvantaged Chinese migrant workers attempting to transform themselves into urban workers. The term *mingong* ("peasant-workers" or temporary workers) blurs the lines of identity between peasant and worker (Pun 2005a).

The contention here is always that this process of proletarianization got underway when the Chinese socialist state, while it allowed rural migration to meet the needs of global capital and national development, constrained and contained the formation of this new working class. Furthermore, urban governments do not provide housing, education, and other environmental infrastructure to the temporary residents. Migrant workers themselves are not rightful citizens; moreover, the workers' family members are barred from living in the particular industrialized city unless they too can find a job there and acquire the status of temporary worker. Thus, local governments and

foreign enterprises that profit from these migrant workers can, at the same time, avoid any welfare-related burdens that would otherwise strengthen the workers. In short, the cost of labor reproduction is borne by the rural society.

To better grasp the extraordinary dislocation at hand here, let us consider this specific feature: Migrant labor is distinguished by its transient nature. Normally a worker, especially a female worker, will spend three to five years working as a wage laborer in an industrial city before getting married. Rural communities have long exercised—and have long been expected to exercise—the extended planning of life activities such as marriage, procreation, and family. As in other developing countries, the process of proletarianization in contemporary China relies heavily on the changing subsistence mode of agricultural production.

### **The Dormitory Labor Regime**

Because official and unofficial structures prohibit this newly-formed working class from building its own community in urban areas, the burden of the daily reproduction of labor is left to the factory. This shift in responsibility creates what we refer to as China's "dormitory labor regime," which contributes to a specifically exploitative employment system in the new international division of labor. As millions of migrant workers pour into industrial towns and cities, the provision of dormitories for the accommodation of these workers remains a *systemic* feature of globally producing enterprises. Irrespective of industry, location, or nature of capital, Chinese migrant workers—whether they are male or female, single or married—are accommodated in dormitories within or close to factory compounds in China. We theorize this phenomenon as the "dormitory labor regime" to capture the recurrence of dormitory factories as the hybrid outgrowth of both global capitalism and the legacies of state socialism (Pun and Smith 2005). In light of China's incorporation into global capitalism, my colleague and I aim to examine the dormitory labor system, not only as a form of labor management, but also as a platform for labor solidarity, for labor resistance, and for the emergence of new employment relations. While this use of dormitory labor is specific to the context of contemporary China, its impact on global production especially in terms of labor control and labor resistance is far-reaching and tremendous.

In China, what is noteworthy in the opening up of the country to global production, starting with the Shenzhen Special Economic Zone in 1981, is the emergence of the provision of dormitories on a systemic basis. The employers' provision to workers of dormitory-themed accommodation has extended to the majority of production workers and is the norm. The existence of China's dormitories is therefore more *systemic* than *contingent*. Moreover, dormitory accommodation in China fits neither the paternalistic mold identified in the West nor the "managerial familism" in Japan, nor yet again the firm as a "total institution" of the pre-reform Chinese state enterprise. This is because contemporary China's dormitories house mainly single workers for short-term employment, and hence little accommodation functions for the long-term: the dormitory precludes a protracted relationship between the individual firm and the individual worker. Moreover, the Chinese dormitory labor system applies to companies irrespective of product characteristics, seasonality, location specificities, or employer preferences.

Most important, it is not the case in China that the enterprises provide employees with accommodation use it to buy labor loyalty or to retain scarce skills. Rather, the dormitory labor regime in China ensures principally the short-term capture of single migrant workers, which maximizes the use of labor services during the working day. The ensured "capture" represents a new mode of production—one that accounts for both a specific overabundance of rural labor and the economic integration of China into the global assembly line.

The apparent recurrence of this old form is, in fact, the hybrid outcome of global capitalism and state socialism, reinvigorated through foreign-invested firms and local states in a globalizing economic context. Virtually all foreign-invested companies use dormitories, whether rented from local authorities or provided privately within the enterprise. All these companies aim to capture youthful migrant labor, particularly female workers for short sojourns to the factory. This capture, in turn, creates an infrastructure for sustaining China's precarious employment systems.

### **Exploitation of Labor**

As I mentioned, the dormitory labor regime stems from the incorporation of global manufacturing production into China's socialist system, all of which is steeped

in the new international division of labor. One characteristic of China's foreign-invested manufacturing plants is the housing of workers in dormitories attached to or close to a factory's enclosed compound. Such dormitories are communal multi-story buildings that house several hundred workers. Rooms are shared, with typically between eight and twenty workers per room. Washing facilities and toilet facilities are communal and are located between rooms, floors, or whole units, such that living space is intensely collective, with no area, except that area within the closed curtains of a worker's bunk, available for limited privacy. But these material conditions do not explain the role of the dormitory as a form of accommodation—as a living-at-work arrangement. Central to the dormitory form is a *political economy* that governs the grouping of typically single, young, female workers. Separated from family, from home, and from routine, these workers concentrate in a workspace and submit to a process of homogenization. And insofar as their connection to the firm is short-term and contractual, the alienation of labor derives from significantly more than either labor's deficient ownership of product or labor's deficient control of production skills. Workers in dorms live in a system that alienates them from their past and that replaces a customary setting with factories dominated by unfamiliar others, languages, foods, production methods, and products.

Under the dormitory labor regime, management within the foreign-invested firms appears to have exceptional controls over the workforce. In short, the *dormitory labor regime* operates according to the seven following strategies:

1. An absolute lengthening of the workday: a return to an absolute, not relative, surplus-value production.
2. A suppression of wage-increase demands: an elevated circulation of labor makes it more difficult for workers to engage in collective bargaining power, in general, and to demand wage increases, in particular.
3. Easy access to labor power during the workday: a just-in-time labor system for just-in-time production profits quick-delivery order and distribution systems.
4. Daily labor reproduction: control of the reproduction of labor power operates in the factory (accommodation, food, travel, social and leisure pursuits within a production unit).
5. Compression of a “worklife”: Ten years compresses into five years owing to excessive workweeks and to the production-based use of chiefly young workers.
6. Direct control over the labor process: limited formal consensual controls

characterize workers' bargaining power, while a system of labor discipline imposes penalties—such as fines for effort bargaining—on workers.

7. State and non-market interventions: external and internal state actions that restrict labor mobility affect the overall labor process.

These specific characteristics of China's dormitory system, and the wider exploitative labor regime of which they are examples, have undermined any pro-labor policies proposed by the central government. In recent years, the central government has instituted new regulations that govern, for example, the minimum wage and working hours. The stated goal underlying these regulations is a unified legal framework for the protection of all workers from inhumane treatment. On May 28, 1993, the Standing Committee of the Shenzhen People's Congress passed *The Regulations on Labor Conditions in the Shenzhen Special Economic Zone* so as to institutionalize the labor recruitment system and to govern labor relations at both the enterprise-level and the city-level.<sup>3</sup> The notable feature of these regulations is the provision for important labor protections, including those concerning minimum wage, work hours, and social insurance for internal migrant workers citywide. However, precisely in the course of these government-initiated labor reforms, at least two broad concerns surfaced: first, labor policies and labor regulations are unevenly implemented at local levels and hence protection for workers is seldom enforced; second, state and collective workers have been hard-hit by economic restructuring, and the phenomenon further exposes the lip-service that government pays to labor. Concurrently, as flows of private and foreign capital increase to coastal cities and to SEZs, pronounced competitiveness has taken hold among TNC factory suppliers and local enterprises, each trying to lower the costs of their just-in-time production while trying to raise the quality of their products. This trend has become especially pronounced since China's accession into the WTO.

In view of the working and living conditions that characterize the rural migrant workers in South China, the Guangdong Federation of Trade Unions (GDFTU) issued an investigative report in 1994, stating that all the 127 surveyed foreign-invested enterprises had violated the national labor laws by imposing excessive working hours on their workers (Sun 2000:179). The report's findings should not come as a surprise, insofar as Taiwanese-invested enterprises (to draw from only one example) wield a militaristic style of management (Chan 2001:46-56).



Corporal punishment, physical assaults, body searches, and other unlawful labor abuses are commonplace. Factories under South Korean ownership are also notorious for their adoption of harsh labor discipline and management practices: managers beat female workers on the shop floor, force them to publicly kneel down, and the like (Chan 2001:56-63).

When I compared the current working conditions with the working conditions in the 1990s, I found little improvement. For instance, the past ten years have witnessed persistently low wage levels. Another report released by the GDFTU in January 2005 shows that, in Guangdong, the average monthly wage of 11.6 million peasant workers was only 55 percent the average monthly wage of state and collective staff and workers. In other words, a majority (or 63.2 percent) of the peasant workers earned between 501 and 1,000 yuan a month. Most alarming was the finding that, despite unprecedented economic growth, the overall twelve-year increase of Guangdong's wage level for migrant workers amounted to a mere 68 yuan.<sup>4</sup>

Nevertheless, the minimum wage in Shenzhen used to be the highest among those of all China's cities. The wage level of the Shenzhen SEZ between 1997 and 1998 was 420 yuan, compared to Shanghai city's 315 yuan and to Beijing city's 290 yuan.<sup>5</sup> In table 2, we see the Shenzhen government's annual adjustment of the minimum-wage standards, which covers the period from 2000 to 2006 and which takes into account inflation and the cost of living.

**Table 2: Legal Minimum Wage of Shenzhen City, 2000 – 2006**

Year	Shenzhen SEZ (yuan)	Outside the Shenzhen SEZ (yuan)
2000 – 2001	547	419
2001 – 2002	574	440
2002 – 2003	595	460
2003 – 2004	600	465
2004 – 2005	610	480
2005 – 2006 *	690	580

Note\*: The effective date of the legal minimum wage level was July 1, 2005. In previous years, the adjustment was set on May 1, International Labor Day.

Source: Shenzhen's labor and social security bureau

However, production workers in Shenzhen industrial towns often receive basic monthly pay that totals about 400 yuan, far lower than the legal standard. Including overtime payment, the earnings of production workers ranged approximately between 600 and 1,000 yuan a month. Deductions for costs such as dormitory rent, water and electricity, and social insurance could amount to nearly 100 yuan a month. And if no food canteen were available, and if a dormitory prohibited cooking, workers had to incur the much higher cost of eating out. Given the combination of pitiful income levels with onerous living expenses, most of the women workers we interviewed complained about their below-subsistence income, which sometimes results from illegally low wage rates. In recent years, this problem of underpay has triggered collective actions by production workers in South China.

In terms of working hours, the Chinese Labor Law, in effect as of January 1, 1995, stipulates that a five-day workweek should not exceed 40 hours and that overtime work must be limited to a maximum of 36 hours a month. However, almost all the enterprises in South China have failed to observe these regulations, and an average work day often lasts between twelve and thirteen hours, six to seven days a week. When the production deadline approaches, management sometimes reduces lunch and rest breaks to merely thirty minutes. To cope with the increasingly just-in-time production schedule, management often requires workers to work nonstop into the morning. In extreme cases, they are forced to work for 48 hours. Total working hours in a week can thus add up to between 90 and 110 hours (SACOM 2005). Of course, with demands like these, housing in factory dormitories serves an essential role by ensuring the round-the-clock availability of labor power.

Under such work-related pressures, women workers suffer from a variety of occupational illnesses that include menstrual disorders, back pain, headaches, deterioration of eyesight, fatigue, and respiratory problems. The situation is compounded by poor ventilation on the shop floor, which is overwhelmed with toxic chemicals. Weaker female workers sometimes faint at their work station, an occurrence that is especially common during the hot summers. Employers provide no paid sick leave, despite the fact that most employees contribute their share to social insurance—the central insurance fund contributed to by both employers and employees at the city level. Paid maternity leave, also required by law, is likewise a neglected, although basic, benefit.

An examination of collective-bargaining power reveals that almost no trade unions operate in foreign-invested factories or private enterprises, despite the stipulation in Article 10 of the Trade Union Law (2001) that any enterprise with twenty-five employees or more should establish a *jiceng gonghui weijiyuanhui*, or grass-roots trade-union committee under the auspices of the All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU), and despite the stipulation in Article 7 of the Labor Law (1995) that workers shall have the right to join and organize a trade union in accordance with the law. And if an official trade union operates in a workplace, the union's functioning is confined to entertainment and welfare activities such as the organizing of balls and parties during festival days. My in-depth interviews and everyday discussions with production workers revealed, in fact, that none of them had any idea about the organization and function of trade unions. Should there be strong disagreements with regard to wages and overtime work, workers either turn to their immediate shop floor supervisors for settlement of the issue or quit the job. Collective bargaining through trade unions is unheard of among many production workers.

### **Community-based labor organizing**

It is under this global production context in which precarious employment and infringement of labor rights were prominent in China, CWWN, a Hong Kong NGO, came into being and rooted its base to the industrial zones of South China. Started to organizer women factory workers in Shenzhen, the first Special Economic Zone of China, CWWN has no choice but work with local official departments by using community-based organizing model. Set up in 1996, CWWN stands as a non-profit making non-governmental organization (NGO) with the mission of promoting betterment for the lives of Chinese migrant women workers. It endeavors to fight for labor and gender rights, promote grass roots empowerment, and social justice in China. Because of the great difficulties of organizing migrant workers at the workplace level, CWWN sinks its root in the migrant labor communities and attempts various organizing projects to organize workers outside the traditional trade union model.

The CWWN now operates on several fronts, including ongoing projects launched by Women Workers Center, Women Health Express, Occupational Health Education Centre in Shenzhen and three industrial towns in the Delta. With an aim to

provide comprehensive empowerment programs for Chinese women workers, on the one hand, we conduct training workshops on labor and gender rights for enhancing labour conditions in the workplaces. On the other hand, we organize cultural and educational activities to enrich their social lives and encourage self-help solidarity. In addition to these continuous projects, we encourage workplace training, research exchanges and experiences sharing among concerned groups on women workers.

For almost ten years, the pioneering CWWN has sought to empower women migrant workers in Guangdong Province's manufacturing hub, the Pearl River Delta, through diverse grassroots programs dealing with occupational health and safety, labor rights, and gender equality. CWWN has also launched factory dormitory organizing initiatives and founded cooperatives for women workers.

Working quietly but consistently in places where these predominately female migrant workers labor, eat, sleep, shop and recreate, CWWN has reached out and sunk deep roots into this community of working women.

One of our most successful and unique programs has been CWWN's Mobile Van Project, which reaches approximately 3,000 migrant workers each month. In view of the grave need to empower China's migrant women workers, CWWN launched a mobile van project called the "Women Health Express (WHE)," reconstructed from a 17-seat mini bus. It contains a small medical clinic, a small library, and a cultural function center with a television set, VCD, and speakers for educational lectures in open areas. This project is affiliated with the Guangdong Province Prevention and Treatment Center for Occupational Diseases. WHE started operation in the industrial areas of Pearl River Delta in March 8, 2000; the project reached over 80,000 women workers by the end of March 2002, and served 35,000 migrant workers this year.

This Van functions as a mobile service center to disseminate information on occupational health and safety, as well as to train workers to assert their basic rights. First launched in 2000, the Van has been promoting CWWN's objectives through education and training, workers' organizing, legal advice, health consultancy, and advocacy. The Van is currently operating within three industrial towns in South China, with regular contact hours and venues.

We seek to speed up the integration of local women workers into CWWN programs—particularly the Mobile Van Project—so that Mainland organizers and active women workers can assume a more integral role in planning and organizing our

projects. Jointly carried out with the Chinese migrant workers in South China, the four major projects of CWWN are:

- The Women Workers Center
- The Women Health Express - the Mobile Van Project
- The Concerned Group for Chinese Injured Workers
- Community Occupational Health Education Centre

The major problems and concerns of the women workers in the Pearl River Delta can be distilled into three areas: (a) labor rights; (b) occupational health and safety; (c) women's rights for independence and self-determination. These become the major areas covered by the work of the CWWN.

For the daily operation of the projects, CWWN have established the following objectives:

1. To increase women migrant workers' awareness of community and occupational health and safety issues, especially regarding the prevention of occupational diseases and women's health.
2. To provide information and training on labor and employment rights, especially on the regulations concerning occupational health and safety and social insurance.
3. To offer basic health services like simple physical examinations and occupational disease referrals.
4. To develop mutual aid and concern groups so as to reinforce migrants' awareness of labor rights, occupational health and safety and women's rights.
5. To enrich the social and cultural lives of women workers.

### **The Women Workers Center**

The Centre for Women Workers was established in 1996 to provide a platform for organizing Chinese migrant women workers in the Special Economic Zone of Shenzhen. Major organizing work includes labor rights education, protections against workplace sexual discrimination, sexual health education as well as training for returned migrants. With accumulating frontline experiences in the past few years, we are determined to form self-organizing networks among migrant women workers in

the dormitories. The Centre has developed rapidly into a comprehensive dormitory organizing and workers' training base for the migrant labor in South China.

The Centre offers women workers with interactive programs that tailor to their learning needs. We also nurture them into volunteers and organizers of nearby dormitories and develop mutual support networks. Our work initiatives include running small group discussions on labor rights, reading, handicraft making, movie sharing, photography, singing, drama, and so on. Through these diverse cultural forms, they are facilitated to express themselves and articulate their collective identity as migrant women workers.

With the suggestion made by women workers in May 2004, CWWN decided to establish the Women Workers Centre in Bao'an district, a huge industrial hub close to the Shenzhen International Airport. The Centre, opened in November 2004, functions as a multi-functional activity room and a training room. In normal times, workers can come here for reading, learning and making friends. This year, more cultural activities like listening to music, singing songs, performing drama, and reading books have been included to display the life of women workers as a group. The Centre is favored by many women workers; since its opening it has accepted 140 members and served for 1,118 person-times. Women workers are very enthusiastic about taking part in the activities held by the new Centre, which is still in its building-up stages.

As women workers have to work long hours and could not participate in the Center, we have to reconsider our organization work in order to reach them at the dormitories. Building up a solid dormitory organizing network becomes one of urgent works with the aims of offering networking, training and activities to women workers in the dormitories, and helping them form mutual aid groups among themselves in their dormitories

Organizational and educational work is developed in the dorm area—primarily among women workers—to promote awareness of labor rights, occupational health and safety, and feminist consciousness. Thus far, we have built up eight dormitory networks. Since dormitory organizing often carried out in late hours around 11:00 pm, in order to get in touch of the women workers who have to work overtime at night. Each time the organizers have to divide into small groups with one or two workers working at the visited factories, and hence the workers are able to bring the organizers into their factory dormitories. Our method of organizing is diversified. In one factory we usually divide workers into different groups: those who have just come to

Shenzhen; those who have worked for half a year; those who love recreational programs; etc. According to their need we have designed different talks and sharing programs. For those who have just come to Shenzhen but work in different factories, we have prepared a set of information about how to get used to the working life in Shenzhen as well as an introduction to the minimum wage in Shenzhen. We also encourage the workers to visit each other and expand their social networks.

For those who already have some social relations in Shenzhen, the organizers would start sharing some experience on how to improve their working conditions. Over the years there are dormitory network groups which organize women workers and initiate them to communicate their requirements regarding salaries and facilities to the management personnel. In one factory, for example, 500 women workers succeeded in asking for an increase in their basic salary and overtime fee, thereby improving working conditions by signing together. They also asked for a one-room-one-telephone plan after the factory agreed to install telephones. Furthermore, we also established libraries in four factories and trained volunteers to assist in management. In order to cope with women workers' working time, we have tried held trainings in their dorms from time to time.

### **Mobile Van Project- The Women Health Express -**

With the launch of the Mobile Van project- the Women Health Express, CWWN has been attempted to further apply the community-based organizing model in the industrial towns of Pearl River Delta. Three industrial areas, Baocheng, Xixiang and Fujong were identified as suitable places for carrying out the Mobile Van project. The Women Health Express parks at specific spots every Tuesday, Thursday and Sunday from 5:00 to 10:30pm.

During each visit, the van uses exhibition boards, distribute handbills, and set up via broadcasting group discussions to talk about issues of interest to women workers. Usually a single topic will be chosen for each session. We have designed handbills on 14 topics and 60 exhibition boards. New leaflets and exhibition boards on the topics such as workplace injury, occupational disease, how to handle labor disputes cases, and sexual health will be produced.

There is a book corner (mini-library) on the Van, with more than 300 copies of books and magazines available for borrowing. This serves as a good resource to

enrich women workers' cultural life.

Advice and counseling on labor law issues are offered to women workers in different contexts to assist them in analyzing and resolving problems they are facing. Law students from area law schools, supervised by faculty, travel great distances to help in this program. We also link up the women workers in need of assistance to the women workers who have overcome similar problems so that the latter can help the others.

Building up a pool of active and enthusiastic women workers as volunteers for the Mobile Van is also one of the major purposes. Apart from providing them with a platform for serving other women workers and promoting the Van project, this activity also enables women workers from different factories and areas to know and support each other. The most active volunteers will be trained as local organizers.

In order to promote women workers' awareness, knowledge and ability, group discussions are also arranged. The topics include public speaking and communication skills, procedures for conducting simple physical examinations for women, sharing of volunteer experiences, etc. This primarily targets volunteers, along with active members who have been continuing to borrow books from the Van's library for a long period. The group activity usually lasts for 30 to 60 minutes each time during the service time slots. Women workers seldom take initiative to deal with the problems they encounter, as most were taught to be passive and obedient. The group discussions will help them to build up confidence and learn how to present their own ideas, as well as to gain new knowledge on relevant topics.

Social gatherings for volunteers from different services spots are often held on the public holidays. Cultural performances, games, competitions and group discussions are for the sake of networking the volunteers from different districts and to enrich their social and cultural lives.

### **The Concerned Group for Chinese Injured Workers**

Based on the Van project, we have trained a team of local organizers in China to help promote the self-organizing of injured workers and advocate the call for public awareness on occupational injuries and diseases in China. Localization is an important agenda for the implementation of this project. We are prepared to learn from the



organizing experiences of Hong Kong, Taiwan and other countries. In the process of localization, we have also networked with many local agents to help support the work of the Mobile Van. All these localized networks and staff make up the important groundwork for the future development of occupation health and safety rights in China. After providing projects in China for migrant women workers for nearly ten years, our hope is to ensure the empowerment of all migrant workers so that they can work in a healthy, safe, and dignified environment.

Intensive training on legal knowledge and labor organizing have been provided to a group of 12 injured workers in the year of 2003-2004, and we finally had a Concerned Group for Injured Workers by the workers themselves in November 2004. This Group provides regular visits to hospitals in the three industrial towns where injured workers lying on beds, with broken arms or deformed bodies. Most of the workers were not being informed or educated about the potential hazards in their working environment, nor were aware of legal right protections as well as the entitled compensations. In this regard, with the setting up of this Concerned Group, we hope to ensure the empowerment of migrant workers of their basic labor rights, as well as advocate for better occupational health and safety education and protections in China.

### **The Community Occupational Health Education Centre**

The Occupational Health Education Center (OHEC), a project jointly organized with Bao'an Health Department was set up in September 2004. This Centre strongly believes that education and promotion is the best way for the prevention of occupational diseases and industrial accidents. Our frontline staff operates hot-line consultation services, produce education kits, provide information on occupational health risk assessment, organize participatory training workshop for workers at plant level. The goal is to build a training and advocacy center for occupational safety and health in China.

Since there is limited manpower in OHEC, the office time has to be set from afternoon to evening, Sunday to Thursday. Services and activities involve the OSH library, activity room (with a television), consultation, developing support group for fellow workers based on factory, visiting patients, training volunteers, holding Cantonese and English classes (with volunteer tutors), and lending out exercise and

recreational equipments. The library is open everyday from afternoon to evening and watched by a volunteer.

So far, the OHEC all together has developed 31 volunteers, of whom 27 were patients of occupational disease, of whom 14 are still in the hospital. Intensive trainings for volunteers have been held. Main subjects include occupational poisoning and its prevention, labor rights and interests, industry injury rights and interests, current situation of labors in Asian countries, self-recognition and growth. Through such sets of trainings, volunteers cultivate the capacity for spreading knowledge about OSH as well as labor and industry injury rights and interests among their fellow workers. They also cultivate the capacity for doing duty work and assisting in daily management of OHEC.

In 2005, the Centre took a step forward by setting up a specialized unit of labor legal support for migrant workers. Migrant workers are equipped with systematic legal knowledge such as protection of labor rights, compensation for injured workers and social securities as stipulated in the Labor Law. Our staff compiles relevant policy materials and makes them into easy-to-understand training manuals. Audio-visual aids are also employed for educational purposes.

## **Conclusion**

The Chinese Working Women Network (CWWN) is a Hong Kong NGO that has pioneered labor rights advocacy and empowerment for women migrants in Guangdong Province, China since 1996. It was built from scratch by two members of the staff who were experienced labor activists in Hong Kong. We now have three Hong Kong facilitators stationed in Shenzhen and Guangzhou, and ten Mainland organizers who were all previously migrant women workers.

As China has become integrated into the global economy, Guangdong Province has rapidly become a “world workshop,” providing a huge pool of cheap migrant labor for facilitating global production. More than 120 million peasant-workers have been laboring in the production chains spawned by these TNCs—either in factories owned or joint-ventured by big brand-name American and European companies, or in sweatshops run by their Chinese production contractors and subcontractors. As countless workers are being drawn into this new private industry, old institutions and

practices that allowed some measure of industrial democracy in the socialist context have proven ineffectual. New labor laws are not enforced.

In the new post-socialist China, there is little room for grassroots workers' voices or women's empowerment. In spite of new labor laws, government rhetoric about women's rights, and the increase in transnational "codes of conduct," we must report that precarious employment in China still prevails.

However, the young migrant workers who face industrial abuse, injury and death in the Pearl River Delta are beginning to empower themselves and invoke the rights granted them on paper by the until-now largely ornamental labor and gender equality laws of China. This trend may prove to be an epochal step towards a building of civil society and people's voice in Mainland China. CWWN's work is aimed at just this target--empowering the grass roots to create demand for workers' rights, particularly among migrant women workers.

Yet, this new rights conscious that is being fostered by CWWN is developing against a backdrop of abuses and hidden costs created by the hastily developed and over-determined global factory chain. With "race to bottom" transnational production strategies adopted by TNCs, labor relations in China are difficult to improve without proper resources and effective strategies.

All in all, CWWN serves an alternative community labor organizing model, outside of trade union system, to fight for labor rights in the export-processing zones of China. It targets at foreign-invested and private companies which rely extensively on the use of internal migrant workers whose basic civil rights and labor rights are seriously violated. In addition to building labor networks through the center-based organizing and the mobile van project, we also encourage cultural projects to facilitate the migrant workers as a collective to fight for their labor and feminist rights and strengthen workers' solidarity. A Chinese magazine entitled *Voices of Dagongmei* (women workers) is regularly published. A collection of oral stories of migrant women workers is also compiling to engender common and collective working experience and class consciousness.

"What is the weapon of the weak?" Migrant workers as a collective agent, transcending differences in localities, ethnic origins, gender, age, work positions and the like, are still capable of empowerment. There is a wide array of strategies and diverse forms of labor organizing which can be distinguished from the conventional trade union organizing model.

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<sup>1</sup> See China Statistical Yearbook, 2003.

<sup>2</sup> The migrant workers who tend to float from one location to another have moved, either in the short-term or in the long-term, away from their registered place of residence and have done so without a corresponding transfer of *hukou* (the official household registration).

<sup>3</sup> *Shenzhen Jingji Tequ Laowugong Tiaoli* [Regulations on Labor Conditions in the Shenzhen Special Economic Zone] (1993) defines *laowugong* (temporary hired labor) as those who work in Shenzhen without local permanent residential household status (Article 2). Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan citizens, as well as foreign nationals, working in the Shenzhen SEZ are not governed by the regulations (Article 53).

<sup>4</sup> *Yang Cheng Wanbao*, quoted from *Apple Daily* 22 Jan 2005.

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