

# **A New Practice of Labor Organizing: Community-based Organization of Migrant Women Workers in South China**

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## Abstract

With China's access to World Trade Organization in November 2001, global competitions and local just-in-time productions became even more intense. Millions of migrant workers, in particular the young girls, are recruited by the transnational corporations in urban cities to race against the time of increasingly short turnover between the placement of orders and shipment. By 2001, it was estimated that a predominant 82.7% of the over 7 million population in Shenzhen alone of the Guangdong province were peasant migrants from countryside, of which about 80% were female. How do migrant women workers collectively understand their working lives as *dagongmei*? Can 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 article attempts to address the above issues. We will, first, provide an analysis of the making of the new female worker-subject, Chinese *dagongmei* within the contexts of state-led economic reform and China turning itself into a "world factory" in the new

millennium. Based on eight-year practices, we provide a critical view whether the frontline projects of the Chinese Working Women Network (CWWN) can provide membership-based and community-based labor organizing in China.

## **Introduction**

With China increasingly incorporated into the global economy over the past two decades, it has become a “world workshop” providing a huge pool of cheap labour for global production. Since the mid 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. There are 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, despotic labor regimes in China are still prevalent. 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. Instead, new global production regimes and capital-labor relations produce employment systems which are highly precarious, generating huge hidden costs that Chinese women workers carry.

The *Chinese Working Women Network* started its projects in Shenzhen. Since 1996 it has witnessed the rapid incorporation of migrant labourers in this Special Economic Zone. In 1979, the Central government and the Guangdong Government decided to upgrade a small town, Bao’an county, to the status of a city named Shenzhen. In May 1980 the Special Economic Zone was set up. Before this, Shenzhen was only a small city with 310,000 residents and less than 30,000 workers. At the end of the year 2000, the total population had increased to 4.33 million and its labor force 3.09 million. Around 30% of the

population are categorized as permanent residents who have come from major cities and become state officials, entrepreneurs, technicians and skilled workers. About 70% are classed as temporary residents, which means they do not have the official household registration entitling them to recognized citizenship in Shenzhen. In 2000, the total number of temporary residents was 3.08 million, which is almost the entire labor force in Shenzhen, the majority being migrant laborers from rural areas.

The economic “take-off” of Shenzhen and the advancement of its position in the global economy is particularly dependent on the extraction of female labor from the rural areas. The process of “globalizing” Shenzhen depends on female labor, which is the cheapest and most compliant labor, in the development of export-processing industries. In our studies in garment and electronics plants in Shenzhen, we found that over 90% of the total labor force in the light manufacturing industries was young, female and under 25 years of age. All women workers were classified as rural peasant-workers, *mingong*. No matter how long they had worked in Shenzhen, they could never be classified as formal workers. Lacking of the right to stay in city, most of these women workers were accommodated in the workers’ dormitories, provided by their employers.

### **Migrant Workers and the Dormitory Labour Regime**

The dormitory labour regime in China contributes to a specifically exploitative employment system in the post-socialist period. This regime links with labour migration and reproduction cycles in the rural communities, serve global production, and generate hidden costs which are borne by female migrant workers. Local governments compete for foreign investment, openly neglecting the legal regulations and social provisions. The costs of labour reproduction such as education and general welfare, are entirely undertaken by the rural communities which subsidize wages, accommodation and consumption. Wages of migrant workers are almost equal to that of ten years ago, if not declining. The lack of residential status in the city precludes the formation of a working class force, which could work for the labour rights of migrant workers in the industrial cities.

The shrinking of the government role in labour provisions has resulted in a lack of social provisions and labour protections to rural migrant workers. Long working hours, low wages and poor living conditions are often the norm, and compare badly to the conditions of the urban working population. Deprived of their rights to stay in the city, there is almost no long-term planning on education, training, housing, medical care and social welfare to accommodate the new working class. As half peasants, half workers, the identity of migrant laborers is ambiguous in association with their basic citizen rights. The lack of proper citizenship status further weakens their bargaining power in the urban and industrial world. The workers are forced to leave the city once they lose their job in the urban factory, no matter how long they have been working there.

Without state protections, female migrant workers have no choice but to resort to the support of kin and familial networks. These networks facilitate migration flows, job searching, circulate work information as well as help the workers to cope with factory life and hardship in the city. Most of the invisible costs taken up by these familial networks benefit the industrial capital in terms of labor recruitment, labor training as well as disciplining the labor force. Reliant on these labor networks to train their workers, upgrade skill and speed up the process of accommodation to the factory life, the factory management continues to generate an informal labor market which maximizes profit but leads to the precarious employment system in China.

In order to illustrate how the precarious employment system arises in China in general, and Shenzhen in particular, we mainly look at the aspects of labor use, working conditions, migration and reproduction cycles. We will highlight that the patriarchal culture in rural China that affects the migration process and the general reproduction of labor in the communities, also shape the labor conditions in special economic zones and new industrialized towns

We rely on five garment factories where CWWN has assisted in long-term organizing in the workers' dormitories since 2000. We conducted organizing activities as

well as research with over 1500 women workers. The research covers workers who are single and married, fresh and experienced, urban and rural (mostly rural migrants), and focuses on garment factories.

### **Women, family and reproduction**

It is often stressed that the low status of Chinese women is rooted in the Chinese family system, which is matrilineal, patrilocal and patriarchal in nature. Women in rural China were traditionally deprived of the means of production and the right to land, and their personal autonomy was totally submerged under male authority, whether that of their father or their husband. They were temporary members or future deserters of their natal families and stranger-intruders in their new husbands' families" (Johnson, 1983). Women, then, were born into a system which structurally placed them in a vulnerable position where they were essentially powerless. They were doomed to be "useless things" because they could not contribute to the natal family's survival and provide care for their parents in old age. Their labor would be given to another family and they were therefore considered as "water spilled on the ground," as one Chinese saying goes. No family would invest time and money in educating daughters who one day would become the daughter-in-law of someone else. Thus, a sense of inferiority and degradation was nurtured in girls from childhood.

Forty-years' experience of socialism in China did not fulfill its promise of "women's liberation", which was one of the significant revolutionary goals. The priorities of economic and political development overshadowed the goals of social change, even at the cost of sacrificing the promise of women's emancipation.

In reformed China, most of the women knew quite well before they left their village that they were going to be imprisoned in a sweatshop for twelve hours each day, earning about five or six hundred *renminbi* (USD 60.3-72.3) each month. The youngest woman in the workplaces was sixteen, and the oldest was forty-six; they all knew the factory boss would not be lenient and treat them as equal human beings. They knew there

was a huge gap between industrial life and rural life. They knew they were going to sell their bodies to the capitalist boss before they were married out. Thus the individual life cycle, the women's transitional life period between puberty and marriage has meshed with social time, the transitional period of the socialist economy fusing with global capitalism.

### **Uprooting Labor rights**

Population control is a specific strategy of the Chinese socialist state in appropriating labor into global capitalism. Population control in China is effected by a system called *hukou*, household registration, which was formally set up in 1958 when the Central State promulgated the Regulations of Household Registration. The *hukou* system in China determined not just where a person could live but along with that the person's entire life chances -- his or her social rank, wage, welfare, food rations, and housing (Solinger, 1991). In the pre-Reform era, there was only one strict system of *hukou*: the registered urban permanent residence and rural permanent residence. Peasants, with their fate sealed by the rural *hukou*, were banned from leaving the land for over three decades. Loopholes did exist, but in terms of numbers, illegal migration was never able to challenge the bifurcated social order between the rural peasantry and the urban working class.

Shenzhen is the first city to change its *hukou* system dramatically in the early 80s. It introduced provisional measures of control on the moving population. Besides the former permanent household registration, temporary household registration has been issued to hired temporary laborers. In Shenzhen the *hukou* system is well connected with labor control. The mode of regulation is that when rural migrants are hired by enterprises and approved by the Labor Bureau as temporary laborers, after the payment of Increased City Capacity Fee, the enterprises should apply to the Public Security Bureau for a certificate of temporary residence registration, and to the local police station for registering a temporary *hukou*. And, finally, they should apply to the District Public Security Bureau for a Temporary Residence Certificate so that their workers can become legal temporary workers in Shenzhen. The temporary residence is only for one year and needs to be renewed annually and fees paid.

The strategy of local governments is to change the use of rural labor regularly. Local officials openly declared that if there was work, rural labor could come and be given a temporary residence. However, if there was no work, they would have to leave so the local government would not have to bear the burdens of urbanisation.

The existing *hukou* system thus helps to create exploitative mechanisms of labor appropriation in Shenzhen as well as other cities in China. 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. The labor of the rural population is needed, but once their labor power ceases to be necessary they can no longer survive in the city. This newly forming working class is not permitted to form roots in the city. Still worse, the *hukou* system, mixed with labor control, simultaneously deepens and obscures the exploitation of migrant labourers. This has created a contested, if not deformed, citizenship, which 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 (Solinger, 1999).

Furthermore, housing, education and other environmental infrastructure is not provided by the Shenzhen Government to the temporary residents. Migrant workers themselves are not rightful citizens and, moreover, their family members are not allowed to live in Shenzhen unless they too can find a job and acquire the status of temporary worker. Marriage and childbirth cannot be registered in Shenzhen. Officially these workers are still regarded as peasants and are supposed to have backup from their families in the rural areas. Thus local government and foreign enterprises can reduce their burdens while at the same time making use of the rural labor for their own profit. The cost of labor reproduction is borne by the rural society. Migrant labor is distinguished by its transient nature. Normally a worker, usually female, will spend three to five years working as a wage laborer in an industrial city before getting married. The long-term planning of life activities such as marriage, procreation and family were all expected in rural communities. Given that there is

a great labor surplus in rural China, it is almost unnecessary for the urban government to consider the long term reproduction of labor.

Most workers lived inside factory dormitory buildings with about fifty workers in one flat or house built of wood and iron sheet provided by their employers. However the foreign-invested companies also benefited from the status of the workers. Since the temporary laborers were not officially recognized as worker, *gongren*, the factory did not recognize them as such either. One company director said that the workers they previously employed in Hong Kong were still under the protection of the labor law in Hong Kong, and they could not dismiss the workers arbitrarily without compensation. In Shenzhen they could dismiss workers at any time they want.

### **China as a world factory and the dormitory labour regime**

The notorious working conditions in the special economic zones and industrial towns in China can be attributed to a particular labour use system, called the *dormitory labor regime*. This regime exerts greater breadth of control into the working and non-working day of the worker. With accommodation tied to employment, the employer has control over the non-working life of the worker. With extended working, the employer can inhibit the job search time for workers. And with the *dormitory labor regime* resting on recruitment of young workers, workers can be easily controlled (Smith and Pun, 2003).

Dormitories are predominantly owned by local authorities and rented to factory owners. Increasingly however, foreign-invested firms are building their own dorms to suit their own particular needs and typically, these facilities are within compounds flanking the factory. In these settings, the spatial integration between working and non-working life is tighter, and companies, rather than the state, play a more commanding role in controlling workers' lives. To illustrate this part, we use one detailed case study to

discern the interlocking relationship between global subcontracting, specific labor use and working conditions in China.

*China Wonder Garments* is relatively small subcontracting garment factory set up in Shenzhen in 1989, the first Special Economic Zone in China across the border from Hong Kong. China Wonder moved to Shenzhen simply because of lower production costs, cheaper land and labour, and the local state provided a better investment contract package, including lower taxes, less management fees, and lower rents for a larger factory compound than in Hong Kong.

China Wonder had a workforce of 600, and is a typical Hong Kong-owned enterprise under control by a Hong Kong director who has the sole authority over the operation and management of the factory, thus having a quasi-paternalistic style of management. China Wonder lies in the middle of the global subcontracting chain, in which it produces garments for Hong Kong buyers who hold the production orders from American and European corporations. The total production is for export, and no exploration of the domestic market in China has been attempted. China Wonder has an office base in Hong Kong, which co-ordinates marketing, production orders, and materials provision, shipping and other activities for facilitating the whole production process in China.

Both production and dormitory premises were rented from the local district government, which charged the company an additional management fee. Both production facilities and working environment were relatively poor, but there was no strong incentive to upgrade the company outlook. The management knew that there was an international pressure to improve the working and living conditions by different codes of conduct. The Director had subscribed to the Disney code of conduct (Disney provided a set of company codes on labor standards to regulate its subcontractors or suppliers in China since the mid 1990s), which was displayed on the wall in Chinese. He said these codes were useful if they gave support on improvements – but as most only gave verbal advice and no resources, they were not considered particularly helpful. Moreover, while a

benchmark for the owner, they were also said to be ‘window dressing’, and any changes introduced were superficial and temporary. It was stressed that profit margins were so tight, that there was no room for additional costs that codes or new dormitories would bring.

Nearly all the workforce in China Wonder were rural migrant workers from the provinces of Guangdong, Hunan, Hubei, Jiangxi, Anhui and Sichuan. The only locals of Shenzhen were the accountant and the housekeeper of the company. The problems in housing these migrant workers were difficult and expensive, according to the housekeeper, though only very basic housing facilities were provided. The dormitory building of three stories was just adjacent to the production building, which required only two minutes walk to the shop floor, thus easily facilitating a just-in-time labour system for just-in-time production. Each dormitory room housed 12-16 workers and was very crowded, lacking ventilation, adequate lighting, and absolutely no private or individual space. No kitchen, toilet or bathroom was provided in each room, and thus the workers in each floor had to share common toilets and bathrooms at the end of the corridor. The management admitted the living conditions were very poor, but blamed the local government for not providing enough space for adequate dormitory facilities. The dormitory building was built to accommodate 500 workers only, but in China Wonder, it always had more than 600 workers.

The dorms provided by China Wonder were ‘free’ and no deposit for accommodation was required. A hierarchy for the spatial arrangement in lodging was evident, this re-enforcing a hierarchy of labour. Managerial, technical and supervisory staff members were sharing 2 per room, but the rooms were also very basic. Neo-paternalism in this workplace reflected not only the managerial style which was almost a copy from the family-based enterprises in Hong Kong, but also the way the company heavily relied on family networks to recruit workers. As an example, a supervisor in charge of 60 workers in the finishing unit had 12 relatives in the factory, and he had been with the company for 6 years. With 600 workers in the factory, it only took about 50 families or less to be responsible for recruiting all of the workers. For the management side, we saw a few families controlling access to work. For the workers this means access

to the factory was totally network-dependent, and strangers could not get a look in. This formed an 'extended internal labour market' operating to pass job information to those linked to insiders, usually kin or same place individuals. In other words, if a family member or same village member got work in a clothing factory, this determined the fate of others who followed the flow into this clothing factory, or followed the significant individual around as they moved.

This might form a dormitory labour "honeycomb" pattern started from one or two core family members and spiralling to create a network linked to more than ten to fifteen workers in the same company. In China Wonder, the finishing unit supervisor took six years to weave his family network connecting individuals to different work positions. Acting as a paternalistic patron, he needed not only to take care of his relatives and co-villagers' daily lives and accommodation, but also was responsible for their work behavior on the shop floor. All the family members recruited needed to be responsible, and this might act to police the performance of the worker; if they let the family down, they let the team down and payment, which was strongly performance based, would suffer. This resulted mutual obligations as well as mutual control and group discipline in the workplace. Thus, labour mobility was balanced by these self-regulated job-hopping networks, which served as a stabilizer for keeping a constant labor force for the *dormitory labour regime*.

### **Freedom of Movement**

China Wonder stressed tighter control and more restrictive measures to regulate workers, who came from more than five provinces. The company kept the workers' identity card as well as enforcing a system of deposits. In addition to the token Disney's Code<sup>1</sup>, China Wonder had its own code, the real one, which was far more detailed and disciplinary. After entering the company every worker received a handbook that contained more than 50 provisions.

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The working hours were also very long; overtime work on Sundays and every night was expected. The workers in China Wonder worked from 8am to 10 pm. If there were rush orders, the workers could be requested to work up till midnight. Twelve working hours per day was normal for the workers; a rest day would *only* be provided if there was a break of production orders or in the low season. This meant that the workers worked between 72 hours and 77 hours each week, far more than the working hours allowed by Chinese law (40 hours each week, and 36 hours overtime work per month). It openly violated the Chinese Law and Disney's Code. At the beginning of 2002, the factory kept on operating on January 1<sup>st</sup>, the National Day, which was a statutory holiday. In addition, workers had to work on Sunday 24<sup>th</sup> February after the Chinese New Year holiday, which was in violation of the code providing one day off in seven.

According to Chinese law, overtime on normal workdays has to be paid at 150 per cent of normal wages, 200 per cent when occurring during rest days and 300 per cent during statutory holidays. Most of the workers would not know the Chinese Labor Law since there was no educational or promotion programs. Most workers, in particular those in the cutting, sewing, packing and quality control sections were paid on a piece rate basis. Other workers and apprentices were paid on hourly basis, while management staff was on a monthly payroll. For those workers paid on a piece rate basis, the overtime premium was paid according to the law as far as normal workdays were concerned. Wages for overtime during rest days however did not conform to the law. Work on Saturday was thus not considered overtime, which was accounted only on Sundays and work after 8pm; overtime work was paid for 1.5 times only. The workers interviewed, for their part, did not have a clear understanding of when overtime premium was paid, and were under the impression that overtime was only paid in the evenings, and not on Saturdays or Sundays since both the company and the workers would take evening work as overtime work. Overtime work was not voluntary as stipulated by Chinese law and the Disney Code. In contradiction of the law, the worker's handbook stated that: "when the workers cannot do overtime, they have to apply to the supervisors for a written exemption from overtime". While the workers acknowledged that they welcomed the possibility to work overtime, they considered that they could hardly refuse overtime, especially during the high season. They thought that they could only get an exemption

unless they had a good reason.

With longer working hours, the wages in China Wonder were relatively high. However, the hourly wage was only marginally higher, and workers only received more due to the excessive hours they had to work. The paternalistic *dormitory labour regime* provided absolute lengthening of working hours and double extraction of labour power through absolute control of labour time and living space.

In short, most foreign-funded enterprises of Hong Kong, Taiwan, South Korea, Japan, America and Europe recruit village women who hold unmarried-status certificates for export-led production. They are assumed and expected to be more hard-working, deferent, submissive, obedient and docile than their male counterparts. On assembly line, the women workers are reinforced a traditional gender role and subordinate female identities, and hence an inferior socio-economic status. In addition, they are believed to get marry soon and not worthy of minimal investment in technical and professional trainings or supporting human resources. Overwhelmed with patriarchal assumptions, and the exercise of modern disciplinary technology, production process is rendered low-end, repetitive, meaningless and monotonous. To the deskilled women workers, the assembly line seems never-stop and they have to live a precarious working life.

Migrant women workers' youth and labor power are appropriated for profit accumulation and capital maximization. Their reward so called "wage" is in fact a meager and pitiful amount, often far below the statutory level. Paying below the minimum wage set for an eight-hour workday is however illegal. The legal minimum wage standard is reviewed and adjusted annually. The benchmark standards are established locally, based on a formula provided by the central government and pegged to the cost of living in an area. For example, the minimum monthly wage set in the year of 2004 to 2005 for Shenzhen is 610 *yuan* (approximately US\$77). Analysts and economists have attested that although the Chinese economy has been fast developing, in real terms, the minimum wages have remained the same level throughout the 1990s.

The Labor Law also defines that the overtime rate is an added percentage of the regular hourly rate. The hourly rates however are neither made transparent by the

management nor understood by the workers. Overtime rates, therefore, are also nonexistent in most foreign-funded enterprises. The calculation of wage is arbitrary and manipulative. As the enforcement of laws and regulations is ineffective, the labor rights of a large number of migrant workers are not secured.

“In the ‘race to the bottom,’ China is defining the bottom” (Chan 2003:41). There is seemingly an endless supply of young Chinese peasant migrants as cheap labor in cities. The labor standards are poor and very low in most non-state enterprises. Female migrants in particular are highly exploited to keep up with the break-neck work intensity for exports. In terms of occupational health, according to official statistics in 2001, some 42.7% of the 9,585 industrial enterprises in Shenzhen involving 116,000 production workers are situated in toxic and dangerous working environment (Hong Kong Christian Industrial Committee 2001:92). About 70 cases of occupational diseases were reported and 371 patients were under medication, of which unfortunately 23 were dead. The figures are believed underestimated.

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

In responding to the poor working conditions and the serious infringement of labor rights in China, CWWN starts its projects in Shenzhen, 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. Jointly carried out with the Chinese migrant workers in South China, the four major projects of CWWN are:

- **The Centre for Women Workers**
- **The Mobile Centre - the Van Project for Migrant Labor**
- **Women Workers’ Cooperative**

- **Community Occupational Health Education Centre**

### **The Centre for Women Workers**

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 return migrants. With accumulating frontline experiences in the past few years, we were 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 and entertaining 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, Cantonese and English learning, movie sharing, photography, singing, drama appreciation, and so on. Through these diverse cultural forms, they are facilitated to express themselves and articulate their collective identity as migrant women workers.

### **The Mobile Centre - the Van Project for Migrant Labor**

The Mobile Centre, we called it, Health Express started operation on 8 March 2000. It is the first project we work with Guangdong Prevention and Treatment Center for Occupational Diseases. The Mobile Centre is a renovated 17-seat van, equipped with books, magazines, television set, video and broadcasting equipments, and simple health and body check tools. It provides outreach organizing to migrant women workers at three industrial towns of the Pearl River Delta. The mission of the Centre roots firmly in realizing the fact that most of the foreign invested enterprises are full of risks and pitfalls, especially in terms of occupational health and safety. Women workers are suffered from

skin allergies, headaches, eye-sight problems and various kind occupational diseases. Some even have disorders in reproductive function and cancer.

From the mid-2003 onwards, we have reengineered ourselves by actively facilitating the formation and self-organization of a large-scale Concerned Group for Chinese Injured Workers. We provide 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 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 all migrant workers so that they can work in a dignified way. Moreover, we advocate for better occupational health and safety education and protection of social insurances in China.

### **The Women Workers' Cooperative**

The Women Workers' Cooperative (the COOP) aims to assist Chinese migrant women workers to run economic activities in a collective and cooperative form. It promotes workers' democracy, empowerment and economic autonomy. From August 2002 onwards, a group of women workers who were determined to leave the sweatshops have been building up collective purchasing networks in factory dormitories. In December of the same year, the COOP overcame various barriers and opened a shop in an industrial town, operating business on daily necessities, books and magazines for migrant workers.

The COOP commits to self-determination among women workers on a collective basis. It is an alternate model of economic practice. Women workers unite themselves to resist against exploitations and exclusions by capital in competitive labor markets. As a social institution, it adheres firmly to principles of mutual cooperation and social equality. In the organizing and managing processes, it emphasizes participation and democracy. As such, the system of cooperative is entirely different from that of factory.

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

The Occupational Health Education Center, another project jointly organized with Guangdong Prevention and Treatment Center for Occupational Diseases, was set up in September 2002. 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.

In 2003, 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.

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 such as ARTivism<sup>2</sup> 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

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<sup>2</sup> CWWN employs different cultural means like drawing in an ARTivism project (e.g. a young peasant worker was injured in a factory and expressed his agony and helplessness over his cut-away arm by conceiving a "broken fan" image) to encourage both the male and female migrant workers to uphold their labor and feminist rights by forming peer support and self-help networks.

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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