

Aphasia and Voices of a Class

-----A theoretical angle of parallax on Chinese young female labourers

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Abstract: Young female laborers have become a workforce that forecasts a new form of social resistance and a new round of “silent social revolution” at the grassroots level of society. In the radically transforming, post-social China, where a new body of workforce is taking shape, class construction and class deconstruction are going hand in hand. The formation of the new working class has brought about a new type of social violence, thus posing a serious political problem that transcends the old resistance theories of individual or collective actions, non-political or political conflicts, local or global struggles.

On Nov.19th , 1993, a big fire swallowed a toy factory funded by capital from Hong Kong, which is a subcontractor responsible for products processing for a famous toy enterprise in Europe. In this tragedy, more than 80 employees lost their lives, 50 got burned seriously and 20 were slightly injured. This tragedy shocked the world and caused a big stir in China. It seemed as if it was the first time that China had suffered from heavy losses on transnational capital since the implement of reform and opening up policy. All of a sudden, it seemed as if the mass media realized the grievous price these rural labors had indeed paid for the rapid development of Chinese economy. It is this fire that left an indelible scar to Chinese society in which people sincerely believed in the dream of modernized capital and market. In the process of pursuing modernization, there are not only uproars of expectations and desires, but also it is

glutted with evils going with the development. Under this course, the bottom working class' sacrifices are considered to be a necessity for economy development. For an accidental chance, I met Xiaoming, one of the lucky survivors in that fire, who suffered the forever parting with the girls from the same village in the tragedy. It is the fire, which engulfed the factory but could never destroy these young female labourers' dream that impels me to seek a minor Genre of social resistance unremittingly.

Till today, the life of Xiaoming still flashes and sparks in my mind. I have never thought that I could meet Xiaoming, a young girl aged 21 from a village in Hubei province with a little working experience. When I first saw her, she was lying in hospital, entire body having been burnt except her pretty face on which there were bright and pure eyes. While looking very feeble, she told me her story calmly.

“Children like fighting, skipping and singing. However, I like dancing, so I dreamed that one day I would be a dancing actress...”

It is difficult to get to our village, for it is in the mountainous area and there is no train and bus passing through. It will take you about one hour to get to my place.

People in my hometown are very poor, but unsophisticated... There is almost no trust between people in cities. To be honest, I don't like urban citizens.

I have helped my parents with the farm work and housework for several years. And nowadays, youngsters don't like farming, neither do I. Everyone says that working out of home is very funny, and can earn a lot of money.

In 1990, some townsmen and I left home for Shenzhen, and we found a job opportunity in a clothing factory, which was my first experience of hunting for a job. Before being admitted to the factory, the administrators interviewed us in the form of oral examination and writing. At that time, I was really worried about it. In the factory, everyone vied for job opportunities, and I felt lonely when competing with others

I told myself I should behave like an adult and that I had to look after myself, no matter whether my townsmen worked here or not. According to the arrangement of the factory, I lived in staff dormitory, where I had no acquaintances. It was at that

moment that I really savored the bitterness of parting with family, which meant that you could only rely on yourself.

In fact, I was very excited when I just came to Shenzhen. Big city, tall buildings, supermarkets and so many people...it seemed like a film in which I was a role. Everything was new and attracting and I felt myself too earthy and innocent...

But I was not happy and satisfied with my first job. The boss was a Taiwanese, who was always behind in paying our salary. The salary should have been paid at the first day of every month. But it was always delayed for one month, sometimes even two months...The good thing was that the salary was not lower than that of other factories, which meant that I could earn 300yuan RMB per month.

I left that factory in May 1991. My cousin introduced me into this toy factory. It was a big factory...the work was very toilful. We worked from dawn till mid-night, 12 hours per day. Every day, I was exhausted...But I felt happy and fulfilled here, for many of relatives and friends worked here too and we often chatted and helped each other.

From then on, I had not thought about job-hopping...Every three months, I would mail 600yuan RMB to my father and saved several hundred for myself. I had thought that I could work here at least several years

But afterward, the factory was on fire, and the big fire...

To uncover the ineluctable social violence happening to these female laborers, I have been embarking on the boundless road of looking for main Chinese working body, with the environment of China, a Socialist country, gradually entering the global capitalization system. At the same time I have tried to seek the possibility of alternative social resistance in China—it is becoming to be a “global factory” which supplies abundant cheap labor force and natural resource for global production. Flames, pains and memories came into Xiaoming’s life again and again, which clearly highlights the wound of this age and recounts the every migrant worker’ social resistance in the period of social transforming.

It has been ten years since the fire broke out. I find that as China is integrating itself into Globalization, a new working class which is struggling to find jobs in big cities is being formed. When I try to understand the totally strange and cruel living experience, of them what confuses me most is that their living standards in China is hard-set, while at the same time their voice is not only submerged by the thunder roar of modernization construction, but also undergoes dislikeness and abhors from general public which includes not only newly emerging middle class in cities, but also on some occasions migrant workers themselves. On the one hand, the main body of the class cannot speak for the topic of themselves, on the other hand, the whole society suffers from widespread aphasia on class. It is this bewilderment that drives me to make a thorough exploration on the Context of Chinese classes. However, what is ridiculous is that the word “class” has been emptied except for a trunk, just like a ghost waiting for reincarnation.

China is not the only socialist country that fetches in elements of global capitalism. Similar to East European countries’ reform, facing the various pitfalls caused by rigid structure of planned economy, Chinese government has decided to solve these social crises, this was especially grave in later period of Cultural Revolution. (Such as low development level, insufficient employment, mass unemployment and the overall decline of living standards) by means of introducing the market –oriented economic system. (Dirlik & Meisner, 1989) in the post-reform and opening up period, central government transfers the power of developing economy to local governments, and so the local governments make an effort to develop cities into “world factory” in succession. To give priority to the realization of economic development, local governments enforce strict social control. In the tremendous gap between the dream of building mega cities and the desire of strengthening the administrative control system, there appears Exploitative utilization of labor force and governmental system.

Chinese population control is carried out by household register system, which was officially performed in 1958, when *Regulations of P.R.C. Concerning Household*

Registration was published. Chinese household register system not only determines one's place of residence, but also determines one's whole changes in life----social status, salary, welfare, physical assets allotment system, housing and so on.(Solinger, 1991; Yin Zhijing, Yu Qihong, 1996: Lu Xueyi, 2002). Before reform and opening up, the household register system was single-facet and strict, which was divided residents into urban permanent residents and rural permanent residents. Under this system, farmer's fate was shackled on land. The loophole of the household register system caused some "illegal" migrants. However, judging from the quantity, the urban-rural dual structure and dual structure of farmer and worker can't be changed.

In the early 1980s, Shenzhen government first made great reform on household register system and proclaimed a temporary regulation on transient population control, which was primary for these short-term migrant workers: adding temporary registered residence on the basis of former permanent residents. Connecting household register system with workforce control closely contributes to the emergence of labor exploitation mechanism. Government divided urban population into permanent residents and temporary residents by household register system so that the government will not shoulder the responsibility for migrant workers , such as providing housing, job security , and other welfares.(Solinger, 1999; Mallee, 2000; Zhang, 2001; Tan, 2000). Cities need workforces from rural areas, however once the workforces are no more needed, they can't continue to survive in cities. In fact, the cities don't allow newly emerging working class taking root there. What's worse is that household registers system mixing with workforce control forms a special power pattern and constructs an indistinct identity for migrant workers, at the same time; it deepens and covers up the exploitation on migrant workers. Whether these temporary residents are urban residents or not? Are migrant workers or farmers? The answers to these questions are always ambiguous (Andor, 1988, p40-41). Migrant workers' indistinctive identity contributes to government's enslavement on them, when their identity has not been fully confirmed. As Suo Linge (1999) said, it has caused a state

of deformity or of conflicted cotested citizenship. This state is not helpful for migrant workers' identity changes: from migrant worker to worker. The words " migrant worker" blurs the boundary of farmer and worker, which unconsciously stifles the construction of new working class.

Besides this, city governments don't offer housings, education and other environmental infrastructures to temporary residents. Migrant workers cannot enjoy the basic rights as ordinary citizens in cities, nor can their family members be allowed to live in cities, except that they can find jobs in cities as well. The marriage of these workers cannot be registered in cities. The government still regards these workers as farmers, thinking that they should rely on their own rural family nets. Therefore, local governments and foreign enterprises can not only relieve their burdens, but also make a profit from the employment of rural labors. However, the cost of labor force reproducing is undertaken by rural society. Migrant workers are fleet transients in cities. Generally speaking, workers out of home, especially young female laborers, work at factories in cities for almost 3-5 years before getting married. They usually have a long-term plan for their life and their marriage will be held in countryside as expected. Similar to other developing countries, in China the process of proletariat internationalism is extremely dependent on self-sufficient agricultural model of production. In China, another character of proletariat internationalism is that it is determined by political and administrative capacity, instead of by market capacity, that is to say, integrating social relations and economic structure into the process of market economy through political and administrative capacity. Because there is too much surplus labor force, local governments are not worried about reproduction of it at all.

Make a long story short; to transform this special economic zone to a modern industrial city, Shenzhen government must rely on migrant workers coming from all parts of China. But at the same time, the exposition of nation and capital denies the "class" status of these workers out of home wittingly or unwittingly. Indistinct identity is the special mixture of population control and labor force control. In the

whole process of integrating China and global economy, indistinct identity helps to continue cheap labor's supplying and elasticity. The new liberalism exposition that emphasizes modernity and development not only rationalize this kind of exploitation, but also determines new working class's disadvantageous status, since the room where they can demonstrate their existing is not offered to them. The basic problem this new working class faces is that they can't enjoy the right to make their home in cities. Therefore it equals to depriving the soil where class takes root. Slums are the place where proletariats can gather and develop themselves into a class power. In Guangzhou, Beijing and other big cities, there are some phenomenon that the gathering areas where migrant workers gather is expanding rapidly (Zhang, 2001; Wang Chunguang, 1995; Wang Hansheng, Liu Shiding, Sun Liping, Xiang Zou, 1997; Zhao Kaishu, 1997), however, in majority cities, these gathering area are usually the chief target which the government makes great effort to administer and clear away. Proletariat internationalism in countryside is a unique phenomenon in China. In this process, for every migrant worker, his or her life as an industrial worker is of short duration and no one dare to entertain high hopes that his/her social status could be changed from farmer to worker completely. When migrant workers are sent back to their native places, this working class's "root" that grows up in adversity is destroyed. Therefore we can draw the conclusion that in modern China, it is politics, administrative capacity (irregular) and utterance of the class that decide new working class's construction and deconstruction jointly.

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