

# Dormitory Labor Regime: Another Space for Labor Control and Resistance

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**Abstract:** The appearance of so-called “dormitory labor regime” in China is a result of globalization or delocalization in the field of production. It represents not only a new mode of production management, but also the platform for a new mode of labor vs. capital relationship. The control and anti-control fight intensifies in the space of dormitory where both labor and capital try to gain the upper hand. In the dormitory labor regime, it is quite probable that concentration of inhabitation and labor is breeding a collective and concerted effort among the working class to fight against factory management.

## I. WHAT IS DORMITORY LABOR SYSTEM

As thousands of rural labors stream into industrial communities, labor dormitories provided by factories become an important organizing feature of China’s globalization production system. In China, whatever a factory’s industrial structure or capital type are and wherever it is located, labor settlers, male and female, married and unmarried, all live in dormitories at or near their respective factories. Each dormitory building can accommodate hundreds of workers; and rooms are shared, typically by 8—12 people, as well as toilets and bathrooms in every room, every department, or on every floor. Except their beds, labors do not have any private space in their dormitories, where living space is collectively used. So we conceptualize the phenomenon that

factories use dormitories to place immigration labors and to take on their daily reproduction as dormitory labor system.

As a distinctive mode of production, dormitory labor system can be viewed as the unique product of the hybrid of Global Capitalism and National Socialism, and a particular form of production space marshaling as the delocalization of global production grows. Because of China's formal and informal system structure, it is difficult for rural labors, the new working class, to establish their own community, so the burden of daily labor reproduction is forced on the factories. This burden shift results in the emergence of China's unique dormitory labor system. Moreover, it leads the formation of a particular exploitative employment system in the new international specialization. Although many scholars had already surveyed factory dormitories, they emphasized the bad living conditions, such as overcrowding, lack of privacy and safety, etc; instead of systematically analyzing factory dormitories' importance to the new international specialization (especially to dormitory labor regime and to the new space for labor anti-control resistance).

## **II. CASE STUDY IN SHENZHEN FENGYONG ELECTRONIC FACTORY**

### **A. The workers' living conditions**

In order to expand enterprise scale and introduce new production equipments to receive more orders from global buyers, Fengyong invested Yuan 10 million to build a new worker lodging sub-district. With a floor space of 12000 square meters, the new sub-district consists of five buildings, four for workers, and one for managerial personnel. The sub-district is walled with a large iron gate which is often closed, and a side entrance nearby, which is open 24 hours but overseen by security guards by turns. Getting through the side entrance and the security janitors' room, we can find two

vacant lots for various entertainments and physical activities, such as playing basketball or badminton. And around the lot sets tables and chairs for workers' chatting. At night, the only one store in the sub-district is often surrounded by many workers coming to watch TV rather than purchasing something. Near the store are two large canteens, able to accommodate over one thousand workers each. Every worker in the dormitories spends 50 Yuan per month on rent and 3 Yuan per meal. Besides, there is a clinic and a reading-room on the ground floor of the managers' building.

However the dormitories are in different ranks and standards, which reflects the disparity among the employees. The differences in accommodation among Hong Kong managers, mainland managers, technicians and ordinary workers are remarkable. Managers' apartments, with a layout of "three rooms, one living room", are all equipped with separate kitchen, bathroom, washroom, and well-appointed electronic facilities, such as television, refrigerator, air-conditioner, and facilities of the kitchen and the bathroom. The General Manager and managers from Hong Kong enjoy independent suite, while manager assistants, supervisors, technicians and office clerks from mainland share a suite with three to six others. However, buildings for labors, by comparison, look more like a hospital, where all rooms are in the same size, having one shared washroom per dormitory and only one hot water supplying room per floor, and have eight to twelve workers in every room with poor hygienic and living conditions. With no kitchen, bathroom or any shared space for placing clothes and other personal belongings, workers have to lay their own articles piled on their beds. Fans are fit in dormitories, but they are always broken and no one is going to repair them. As what we have mentioned, the Global Capitalism during micro production and the disparity appears in labor dormitories are much the same, at least in the foreign enterprises and joint ventures we have researched.

Since the number of workers is large, dormitory management becomes a significant

issue in Fengyong. Over fifty dormitory rules indicated details of punishments were drafted, in terms of sleeping, eating, bathing, entering and leaving, etc. Table 1 shows some main dormitory rules in Fengyong.

Fengyong hoped to develop a big civilized and hard working team through those rigid

表格 1

regulations. Therefore, two managers were appointed to inspect dormitories and canteens, but they often jumped on the workers for slight things and were complained by the workers for their poor attitude.

Dormitory Governing Rules of Fengyong  
(excerpt)

1. Maintain the cleanliness and hygiene; penalty Yuan 10 if found in a mess.
2. Never spit anywhere; penalty Yuan 10.
3. Maintain silence in the dormitory; making noise at night is forbidden.
4. Quarrels and fights are forbidden or else will get fired.
5. Cherish dormitory facilities; vandals will be fined and fired.
6. Stealing collective or individual belongings are forbidden or get fired.
7. No accommodation of visitors. Penalty Yuan 100.
8. Going in or out after midnight is forbidden unless having night shift or emergency.
9. Keep residential permit in the sub-district; penalty Yuan 20 if lose it.
10. No cooking; penalty Yuan 20.
11. No exchanging beds privately; penalty Yuan 50.

The word “Protect” was commonly used when the factory exerted regime or punishment over workers; further, the factory was acting as parents to inspect the workers even in personal time. In this way, managers completely controlled the workers’ life, which would not happen where working and living were absolutely separated.

## **B. The workers’ resistance**

Where there is power of regime, there will be bypass, resistance and protest. Under

strict management and control, most workers are apparently obedient, but it does not mean they really accept the rules. In order to stay in a circle of relatives or the same racial unity, female workers often exchange beds to live with their relatives or countrymen. And the workers' countrymen always come to visit and stealthily stay until they land a job, sometimes, men are even found on women's beds, although which will cause instant dismissal. Besides, forbidding cooking is impossible since workers are hungry after staying late at work; meanwhile some prohibited behaviors in dormitories, like gambling and drinking, are seldom seen in female dormitories but prevalent among the males'. In the workers' daily life, these anti-control acts are numerous; however, these acts do not seriously threaten the normal labor dormitory order.

Nevertheless, a large-scale collective labor resistance, which we knew from the interview with some labors, gave us a vivid example of anti-control fight under dormitory labor regime. We even can say that it is just the labor dormitory system that supplies the necessary space and social foundation for the collective labor resistance.

The workers remained in Fengyong with relatively high wages, but after knowing some items of the Labor Law of the People's Republic of China they became quite dissatisfied with the factory which did not double their wages for working in their days off (and should be three times in official holidays) according to the Labor Law. What was worse, in 2002, Fengyong decided to move its partial production to some industrial district away from Shenzhen so as to reduce labor costs, with a decrease of labor basic wage from Yuan3.3 to Yuan 2.5, and extra work wage from Yuan 4.2 to Yuan3 there. Overall, the wage levels had been reduced by 25% in the new factory.

Moreover, since 2002, Fengyong had started to massively dismiss the workers whose contract was in due time. In March 2002, after the spring festival, 600 workers

returned and found themselves fired with a severance pay equal to a basic month's pay, without any advance inform from the factory. However, as Fengyong managers' comprehension, they should just inform the workers 24 hours before the due time of the contracts, so they did not need to compensate the workmen and the severance pays were to express their kindness instead of discharging their obligation.

After the case in March 2002, all kind of rumors and messages about dismissals spread across the dormitories and workshops. The next redundancy became the main theme discussing in dormitories and made the workers anxious and worried, especially those whose contracts were due in September 2002. They begun to notice various labor laws and regulations of Shenzhen Labor Bureau, seek information about the compensation they might got from the factory, the possibility of demanding overtime pay according to the Labor Law. They often gathered to take discussion with countrymen, relatives and friends, and finally decided to jointly write to the Labor Bureau. The letter was drafted by a group of female workers from Hunan Province, passed on secretly among different dormitories and signed by some workers (even signed by 200 workers within one day), and then sent to the Labor Bureau. A clerk there received the letter and promised that they would conduct an investigation about the situation as soon as possible.

Nevertheless, the labor bureau delayed long in answering the letter. In order to settle down emotional instability and shirk its responsibility for overtime pays, Fengyong announced that there would be no more lay-offs in 2002. Whereas, production equipments moved out continuously and overtime work became less and less, the workers' incomes were influenced seriously. Pessimistic sadness filled all the dormitories, as workers thought that their fate lot of unemployment was unavoidable.

Consequently, Fengyong only planed to remain managerial personnel in workshops,

who hoped to remain some “loyal” workers around them (usually worked long with them), and promised to relocate them in the new factory. Most workers insisted to stay in the factory unless they got compensations. And as overtime work reduced, workers had more time to stay in their dormitories to discuss approaches together. They read and discuss about the labor regulations of Shenzhen municipal government. Some of them even begun to collect and record evidences of Fengyong’s violation of labor regulations (in terms of work time, work conditions, labor contracts and social insurance, etc). In the dormitory space, forming into different groups or networks, workers all realized that the factory’s violating labor laws and regulations was illegal, and became aware of the disparity between the factory’s behaviors and those prescribed by labor laws. In this way, the workers’ consciousness of rights and laws was cultivated rapidly and effectively.

On 6<sup>th</sup> January, 2003, Fengyong finally set to shearing the workers again, involving one thousand workers this time. These new laid-offs refused to accept the severance pays, as well as the termination of their contracts. Besides, they refused to move out of their dormitories at that night, in contrast, they lock all their belongings in the dormitories. Fierce and extensive discussion filled the dormitory buildings. The next morning, about 600 sacked workers collectively walked to the Shenzhen municipal government building and asked a talk with the officials in charge. Relevant departments quickly responded to the workers demands and remonstrated with them, promising to have a meeting with Fengyong in the afternoon. In the third day, delegates of the labor bureau and the factory, as well as six worker representatives according to the workers’ demand, had a face-to-face negotiation for three hours.

The worker representatives were voted in the dormitories. The voting process was informal but smooth according to what we knew from our interviewees. In their daily lives, the workers have formed their own living groups or social networks in terms of

kinship, clan system and friendship, in which leaders were called “eldest sister” or “eldest brother”, who always take care of other members, help others to solve daily problems, receive respect from others and high reputation among them, and finally being worker representatives through election. The election carried out without any formal and democratic procedure, because it seemed unnecessary for a group or leader that had existed in the dormitories.

Through the negotiation, Fengyong and its sacked workers reached an agreement: the factory still terminated the workers’ contracts, but would give compensations based on their serving time (one year serving time equals to a basic month’s pay). In this way, the workers who had been worked in Feongyong for five years can gain Yuan 5000 compensation. As they never expected the renewal of their contracts with Fengyong (unless they agreed on the reduced 25% salary and working in the new factory), the agreement was a great victory for the workers. These one thousand workers suffered unemployment finally fetched more severance pays with their consistent efforts.

### **III. CONCLUSION: DORMITORY LABOR REGIME ----- ANOTHER SPACE FOR LABOR CONTROL AND RESISTANCE**

As a special social space, China’s factory dormitories, where which appeared in the universally, should be viewed as a significant part of production politics. In a factory, no matter capital or labors enhance their power through controlling the space. The dialectical relations between labor control and anti-control are fully demonstrated in dormitories.

On the one hand, capital directly control labors’ work and lives, sharp their lifestyle through dormitory system and enable labors to meet the requirement of machinery production, increase working hours and allow flexibility in use according to

production needs by fine microscopic manipulation, so as to reduce the uncertainty of labor use and maximize the use of labor force. In this sense, dormitory labor system is a unique and effective approach of labor control and management. It puts the labors completely into a space facilitating supervision like Foucault's panoptic space observed at every point.

On the other hand, although labors' lives are almost under comprehensive and systematical control, dormitory labor system does open up another space for labors' anti-control fight. To allay the industrial violence across the world, most of labors must try to control and make full use of their dormitories. Overcrowding and excessive nervousness cause conflicts among labors, but the same destiny links their working life very closely.

When we take a close look at labors real living world, dormitories' significance to labor unity and to the space and society produced by collective production will be presented. Labors are not completely passive and obedient; in contrast, they are smart and rebellious. They are skilled in using their living space to develop interstitial power, openly and secretly challenging the great power of controlling and management, meanwhile, forming their informal relationship networks. No matter in the past or at present, taking collective practice in social relations or reflected from their cultural resources is labors' daily strategy of persevering resistance against the industrial power of controlling and management.

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