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The “Rights Awakening” of Chinese Migrant Workers: Beyond the Generational Perspective

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ABSTRACT: In the spring of 2010, the strike of the Honda workers in Nanhai instigated an on-going discourse on the “rights awakening” of the “new generation of migrant workers.” Since then, much has been written about these young workers, generally described as more pro-active and ready to stand up against their employers than the older and more subservient generation. Drawing from statistical findings from two factory-gate surveys in the metal mechanics and garment sectors in Shenzhen, this paper tests two hypotheses: (a) that workers of the younger generation are more cognizant of their legal rights than older workers; (b) that the younger generation wants to work fewer hours and to enjoy life more. We argue that this popular image of the younger generation of migrant workers is one-dimensional and reductive, as it focuses only on generational differences as an explanatory factor for worker activism, while ignoring other issues such as types of industries and payment systems. In this paper, we purport that these elements play important roles in shaping the attitude of this younger generation toward their work and rights.

Keywords: new generation of migrant workers; labor rights; rights awakening; industrial relations; piece-rates and time-rates; minimum wage; work hours

Introduction

Since 2001, when the scholar Wang Chunguang first coined the term “new generation of migrant workers” (*xin shengdai nongmingong*), much has been written about Chinese migrant workers born after 1980.¹ Still, this expression appeared in a policy directive only in 2010, when in Document No. 1 of the Chinese Communist Party Central Committee and the State Council, the Chinese authorities stressed the necessity to “adopt specific measures to strive to solve the

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¹Wang 2001.

problems of the new generation of migrant workers.”² Soon after, two events brought the plight and militancy of this younger generation of workers to the attention of the public: the tragedy of the “multiple jumps” (*lianhuantiao*) suicides in the Shenzhen factories of Foxconn (the main producer of Apple products in the world) in April, and a strike by Honda auto parts workers in Nanhai, Guangdong province, in May.³ While the former, in despair, ended their own lives, the latter, outraged by a sense of injustice, went on strike for nineteen days demanding an unusually high salary increase and the right to elect their own union representatives. Both incidents received wide domestic and international media coverage, bringing home the message that young migrant workers in China were not going to tolerate their plight in silence. In May and June 2010, a host of international magazines and newspapers carried front page headlines such as “The rising power of the Chinese worker,” “The rise of a Chinese workers’ movement,” and “An independent labor movement stirs in China,” while the Chinese press, usually very constrained when reporting labor issues, was no less vocal, offering long features on the new “labor wave” (*gongchao*) and the “rights awakening” (*quanli de juexing*) of young migrant workers.⁴

The term “new generation of migrant workers” generally refers to the 125 million migrant workers in the PRC born in the 1980s and 1990s, 46.6 percent of the total migrant workforce in China in 2013.⁵ The academic literature usually compares these young migrants to their older (“first generation”) co-workers and concludes the former are better educated, have higher occupational status, and expect more from their jobs. They are also described as more discerning when looking for jobs, more disdainful of occupations that require long work hours at low wages, and more attracted to urban lifestyles as their ties with their rural places of origin weaken.⁶ For example, a survey carried out in 2010 by the All-China Federation of Trade Unions, the Chinese official union, highlights six characteristics of younger migrant workers. Their purpose in migrating is to “gain life experience” and “follow a dream,” and they attach more importance to personal fulfillment than material needs. Moreover, they want decent jobs and opportunities for professional development, self-identify as “workers” not “farmers,” want to be permanent urban residents, and are conscious of their legal rights and more active in pursuing these.⁷

This generational shift in Chinese labor divides scholars between those who stress the elements of change between the two generations and those who focus on continuity. The former emphasizes a sharp increase in activism among younger workers compared to their elders. For example, Kam Wing Chan (2010) has argued that “the present (second) generation of migrant workers are more educated, more rights-conscious and perhaps less tolerant of abuse and injustice, as well as readier to defend their interests.”⁸ Pun and Lu (2010) wrote that “unlike the first generation of peasant-workers who were lost and passively accepted their fate, the second generation has refused to remain quiet.”⁹ Chan and Pun (2009) explain that “with the development of a new generation of migrant workers who were born after the 1980s, we also observe that exclusive locality networks and gender lines can be transgressed to create a

²Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party and State Council 2009.

³On Foxconn, see Pun et al. 2011; Pun and Chan 2012. On the Nanhai Honda strike, see Chan and Hui 2012, 2014; Ou Yang 2015.

⁴*The Economist*, July 29, 2010; Bradsher 2010; Roberts 2010; Sanlian Shenghuo Zhoukan [Lifeweek], June 7, 2010; Nanfengchuang [South Reviews], June 16, 2010. For the “rights awakening” label, see Li 2010.

⁵National Bureau of Statistic of the People’s Republic of China 2014. We refer to the data for 2013 because in the report for the following year the NBSC organised the data by age cohort and not by year of birth.

⁶Chen 2009; Liu 2010; Liu, Li, and Breitung 2012.

⁷All-China Federation of Trade Unions 2011.

⁸Chan 2010, 660.

⁹Pun and Lu 2010, 499.

broader sense of ‘workers’ networks’.”¹⁰ Chan and Hui (2014) thought that the proliferations of strikes and a higher level of self-organization after 2010, was because “the new generation of migrant workers have been less tolerant of unfairness and injustice and are more ready to take action to advance their rights.”¹¹ As these quotes illustrate, these authors see quite a sharp break in labor activism between the pre- and post-1980s generations of migrant workers.

The second school of thought stresses the continuity between these generations. Lian (2014) maintains that what marks the emergence of a new generation is the product of economic, political and social forces; she also believes that there are variations within a same age group that can blur the divide between two generations.¹² Based on a large quantitative survey in Zhejiang province, Zhu and Lin (2014) demonstrate that the differences between the two generations are exaggerated by popular perception and argue that the scope for change for Chinese migrant workers is limited due to the continuation of structural constraints that mire them in a condition of labor exploitation.¹³ On the basis of another large survey, Zhang (2011) demonstrated that younger workers born after 1980 actually work longer hours and earn lower salaries than their elders, debunking the idea that the new generation of migrants is more discerning in occupational choices.¹⁴ Although these studies are not specifically concerned with generational differences in rights awareness, they alert us to the fact that we should also consider other external socioeconomic factors that may impact change and continuity between one generation of workers and the next.

Much of the research that emphasizes a generational rupture in Chinese labor activism is qualitative. In addition, these studies usually do not examine the attitudes of the older generation of migrants. Are older workers really as passive, willing to tolerate hardship, and uninformed of their rights as it is commonly assumed? Is it not possible that years of experience on the production line have made them just as aware of their legal rights as younger workers, or maybe even more aware, despite their waning health and disenchantment with life?

Using a nation-wide study of workers’ awareness of the 2008 Labor Contract Law, Mary Gallagher and her colleagues (2015) found that awareness of the law increases with age and education, although with significant regional differences.¹⁵ Similarly, after analyzing the data of a 2005 survey of 2617 peasant workers in four Chinese cities, Linda Wong (2011) concluded that “education level and pre-migration status appeared to be more important in shaping migrants’ awareness of laws, while age did not seem to be relevant.”¹⁶ Our own experiences working with and interviewing Chinese labor NGOs’ staff and activists also suggest that older workers in China are much more likely to resort to the assistance of these organizations when seeking redress for a violation of their legal rights. According to a middle-aged migrant and NGO activist in Dongguan, Guangdong Province,

The workers of the new generation just care about themselves in a very narrow way. They don’t even want to pursue [their salary when the employer doesn’t pay]. We [older workers] would pester the boss for half a day, but they don’t want to bother. Anyway, they can just pick up the phone and call their parents to ask for money, that way they will not have to bother at all.¹⁷

¹⁰Chan and Pun 2009, 292.

¹¹Chan and Hui 2014, 229.

¹²Lian 2014.

¹³Zhu and Lin 2014.

¹⁴Zhang 2010.

¹⁵Gallagher et al. 2015.

¹⁶Wong 2011. This finding did not prevent Wong from concluding that “the so-called post-1980s and post-1990s generation of migrants are likely to be more knowledgeable, determined and skilled in asserting their rights as citizens in a more open and rule-based society.”

¹⁷Interview with NGO activist, Dongguan, October 31, 2014.

In such a context of divided opinions and contradictory perceptions, the questions of whether younger workers are more aware of existing labor laws and whether they have higher expectations do not yet have definitive answers.

A Labor Standards Approach

To further explore these questions, this paper focuses on a factor that has been neglected thus far in the studies of generational differences: labor standards as expressed in wages and work hours. These two factors are not only of greatest concern to Chinese migrant workers and to workers in general, but have also been main targets of regulatory reforms carried out by the Chinese authorities since the early Nineties.¹⁸ As such, they can be used as indicators of the level of legal rights awareness among Chinese workers, as well as a means to understand what workers regard as the optimal wage and work hours in exchange for their labor. From this point of view, a significant gap between workers' expectations, actual wages and work hours, and legal standards may pave the way for a break-through from right-based protests circumscribed by the law to interest-based protests that go beyond the officially set legal minimum wage.

Actually, the relationship between legal knowledge and activism is not as straightforward as it may appear. Minimum wage and maximum work hours in the labor laws are instruments used by the Chinese authorities not so much to protect labor rights, but to contain, diffuse, and divert labor activism to legal channels. As Chan and Siu (2011) have noted:

[The fact that] the Chinese government and trade union incessantly espouse the importance of “protecting rights” ... amounts to a right to be compensated up to the legal minimum wage. “To protect” is in itself a passive behavior; only if one's legal rights are being violated does one need to be protected. It does not suggest an active assertion of rights beyond the minimum ... China's legal minimum wage distorts the perceptions of the workers, the authorities and even the critics, including ourselves.¹⁹

Similarly, Lorentzen and Scoggins (2015) have argued:

A rights-granting policy is appealing [to the authorities] because it entices the workers into making narrower claims that do not pose a fundamental challenge to the existing system. In this model, rather than being a dangerous force pushing the regime from below, what is labeled as “rights consciousness” is actually just a recognition of the government's rights-granting policy, which itself has primarily stabilizing effects.²⁰

Still, an awareness of legal standards empowers workers by enabling them to frame their demands within the constraints of an authoritarian political system. This is one of the main reasons why labor NGOs in China attempt to raise migrant workers' consciousness by educating them on how to read pay-slips, look for missing itemizations, keep track of their own work hours, and calculate overtime pay rates.²¹ Although some researchers argue that this kind of legal mobilizing has led to an atomization of workers' rights instead of fostering solidarity,²² ultimately, “through legal mobilizing, labor NGOs [are able to] foster consciousness and the skills of organizing.”²³ Chinese labor NGOs can take advantage of legal compliance campaigns to propagate

¹⁸Cooney, Biddulph, and Zhu 2013, 6.

¹⁹Chan and Siu 2011, 92.

²⁰Lorentzen and Scoggins 2015, 647.

²¹Chan 2013; Franceschini 2014.

²²For a critical perspective on Chinese labor NGOs, see Lee and Shen 2011.

²³Xu 2013, 250.

this knowledge among workers, in the hope that legal knowledge will raise workers' rights awareness, engender agency, and ultimately lead to resistance and protests. Furthermore, if workers are aware of their legal rights, their widespread disappointment with the failures of the party-state to enforce its own labor laws and regulations may end up fueling labor activism.²⁴

We argue that eliciting workers' expectations for better work conditions and better livelihoods through legal dissemination is not a straightforward process of putting knowledge into action. Moreover, legal awareness and personal expectations are not explainable only by generational factors, gender, educational level, or occupational status before migration. Instead, these are also mediated by payment systems, piece rates and time rates. In emphasizing the importance of payment systems in shaping the attitudes and expectations of workers, we draw from a vast array of literature that goes back to Marx.

According to Marx, although piece rate and time rate pay systems are both tools to extract surplus value, in piece rate systems,

the quality of labor is controlled by the work itself, which must be of average perfection if the piece-price is to be paid in full. Piece wages become, from this point of view, the most fruitful source of reductions of wages and capitalistic cheating.²⁵

In *Capital*, he explicitly argues how piece rate systems confuse workers to think that their personal interests are in line with capitalists even when their work load increases and working hours are lengthened:

Given the system of piece-wages, it is naturally in the personal interest of the worker that he should strain his labor power as intensively as possible; this in turn enables the capitalist to raise the normal degree of intensity of labor more easily. Moreover, the lengthening of the working day is now in the personal interest of the worker, since with it his daily or weekly wages rise.²⁶

Marx stressed that piece rate systems have a deep impact on workers' attitudes toward their labor. In particular, he highlighted how piece rates often lead to competition among workers, changing the workplace into a space that not only hinders the development of worker solidarity, but also actually individuates labor.

The dynamics of exploitation related to piece rates have remained largely unchanged in time. Writing in the 1960s, Baldamus explained how management makes use of the piece rate system to develop a scientific method to measure work.²⁷ In his view, for management "the true purpose [of piece rates] is to guess as consistently as possible the purely subjective element of effort standards and subsequently to adjust rates of pay in accordance with them."²⁸ In other words the setting of piece rates is subjective and manipulative and not based on objective measurements. The impact of piece rates on workers' expectations is best described in the writings of Burawoy, based on his experiences in a Hungarian factory in the 1980s.²⁹ Answering the question, "what keeps piece rate workers going?" he concluded that while money is an underlying factor, there is something else involved in getting workers through the day. In his view, "the machine and its rates are an assault on [the worker's] self-respect" and achieving the prescribed quota becomes a "series of

²⁴Gallagher 2007.

²⁵Marx 1976, 692–700. On the similarities between time rates and piece rates, see also Chand 2012.

²⁶Marx 1976, 692–700.

²⁷Baldamus 1961.

²⁸Ibid., 47.

²⁹Burawoy 1992.

games” in which operators attempt to achieve levels of production that earn incentive pay, which keeps them from getting bored.³⁰

Our own field observations in China reveal that piece rate systems are confusing for workers. Chinese garment supplier factories have to respond to fast-changing fashion styles; very often, factory managers request workers to sew different types of garment pieces during the same month, each type requiring a different length of time and skills, and each paid by a different piece rate. However, payment slips only show the total number of pieces a worker has produced in a month, not the number and pay rates of various types of pieces sown. Consequently, workers have no way of calculating whether the amount of labor they spent on a particular type of garment piece during production is accurately reflected in their wages.

Time rate, on the other hand, is more regular and can be more easily calculated. For sure, management can vary the amount of work that can be squeezed into a particular unit of time, but at least the length of work hours is roughly regulated. For workers, one of the advantages of being paid by time rate is that it is much easier to calculate received compensation against the legal minimum wage. This helps to prevent employers’ manipulating the payment system with impunity and this is why in most countries the contention over the “normalcy” of number of hours worked a day and the “sufficiency” of the hourly wage has been a major battlefield between labor and capital since the Industrial Revolution. In most developed countries, various bargaining mechanisms and legal institutions (such as industrial trade unions or nation-wide trade unions) have been established to settle official time rates. But, in China, where independent trade unions are prohibited, these collective mechanisms and legal institutions are often underdeveloped or not strictly enforced.

The underdevelopment of collective mechanisms, institutional and enforcement frameworks, side by side with the widespread usage of piece rate systems in labor intensive industries in China over the past three decades, has resulted in a situation in which Chinese workers are not accustomed to using the logic of time-wage to calculate their wages and focus only on the total amount of monetary wages received at the end of a working month. In fact, the predominant usage of piece-rates leads workers to believe that increasing their work intensity and working more hours are in their personal interest. Thus, garment workers interviewed for this research who are paid by piece-rate generally preferred piece-rate to time-rate. When asked about their extremely long working hours under a piece-rate system, most said that their long working hours had nothing to do with the pay system. They instead attributed this problem to individual differences in ability and productivity. They firmly held that the system is “fair” to everybody and subscribed to the work maxim in Chinese factories today – “more labor, more reward” (*duolao duode*).

By including payment systems in our data collection, we are also mindful that different industrial sectors and different types of workers receive different treatment.³¹ Recognizing this, we examine two industries (textile and metal) each of which uses a different payment method (piece rates for textile workers, time rates for metal workers). We will examine the most common assumptions in the existing literature on the new generation of migrant workers: that workers of the younger generation are more cognizant of their legal rights than older workers; and that the younger generation wants to work fewer hours and to enjoy life more.

We begin by describing our methodology. After this, we discuss workers’ legal knowledge and expectations in terms of work hours. From there, we move on to compare what workers in

³⁰Ibid., 35–58.

³¹Gallagher et al. 2015, 211.

our sample receive in wages, what they know about wage rates, and what wages they desire. We conclude with suggestions for further research.

Methodology

To test our hypotheses, we undertook two factory-gate surveys. The first was conducted in 2010 at six factories owned by Hong Kong companies in the city of Shenzhen in Guangdong Province. Two of these factories employed approximately 100 workers each, two employed approximately 500 workers each, and two employed approximately 10,000 workers. The second survey was carried out in 2012 at three Italian-owned metal mechanics factories employing approximately 200, 2000, and 7000 workers, respectively. A total of 389 questionnaires were collected in 2010 and 148 in 2012. While the garment factories were quite homogeneous in their output, the metal mechanics factories manufactured a variety of products. These included semiconductors, mosquito traps, air conditioner components, and coffee machines. Yet, even though the manufactured goods were different, all these factories employed unskilled migrant workers.

These two industries also use different payment systems, a fact which we use as an independent variable. In addition, these sectors are fairly representative of two distinct stages in the development of the Chinese industrial economy. The garment industry, being labor intensive and relatively low-tech, has played an important role in the first stage of China's economic reform. The metal mechanics industry is labor-intensive too, but being more sensitive to technological innovation and having a higher-added value, it is fairly representative of the current stage of Guangdong's current economic development in its strive to upgrade its industrial economy.

In a study of generational change, the choice of how to divide different age cohorts is crucial. The popular image of the new generation of migrant workers is based on a clear temporal division between migrant workers born before and after 1980.³² 1980 was indeed the watershed year that marked the end of the Maoist era and the beginning of the economic reform period. Yet, using this demarcation line, the post-1980 generation of migrant workers in 2012 (the year when the second survey was conducted) includes all workers under thirty-two years old. We believe this is too expansive a cohort, as it collapses individuals in different stages of their life cycle into one group, obfuscating significant differences within the group. Consequently, taking life cycle as a factor that influences aspirations in life, we have refined our sample into three age cohorts: (a) workers born before 1980, who entered the workforce in the 1980s and 1990s and today could be in their forties and fifties; (b) workers born between 1980 and 1990, who entered the work force in the late 1990s; and (c) workers who entered the work force in the mid-2000s. At the time of the survey, some of the latter were still in the late teens. This youngest cohort is still largely single, while a portion of the middle cohort is likely married and some no doubt have children. Some of those in the oldest cohort might have married children working alongside them as migrant workers.

Table 1 summarizes the basic demographic data of the respondents in the two surveys. The garment workers in the sample are much older than the metal mechanic workers, with only 3.8 percent being younger than twenty-two, a finding that reflects an aging workforce in the industry. In the metal mechanics industry the under twenty-two cohort was forty-eight percent, accounting for a higher ratio of unmarried workers. As a whole, the garment workers in the sample were slightly less educated, while the metal mechanics workforce had a higher percentage of people

³²For a theoretical discussion of the post-1980 generation in China, see Lian 2014.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of sampled garment and metal mechanic workers.

Average age	Garment (2010) 27.5 (N = 391)		Metal mechanic (2012) 24 (N = 148)	
	Count	%	Count	%
Age group				
>32	104	26.4	14	9.5
22–32	275	69.8	62	41.9
<22	15	3.8	72	48.6
Total	394		148	
Education level				
Primary school	21	5.3	5	3.4
Junior high	267	67.8	79	53.4
Senior high	73	18.5	22	14.9
Sec. vocational	29	7.4	32	21.6
Technical college	2	0.5	10	6.8
University	2	0.5	0	0.0
Total	394		148	
Marriage status				
Single	183	46.4	103	71.5
Married	200	50.8	40	27.8
Divorced	3	0.8	1	0.7
Cohabiting	8	2.0	0	0.0
Total	394		144	
Gender				
Male	162	41.1	76	51.4
Female	232	58.9	72	48.6
Total	394		148	

with vocational training. The gender ratio of men to women in the metal mechanics industry is almost equal, while woman account for sixty percent of garment workers.³³ Based on our general field observations, due to a shortage of young women entering this industry, employers are now more willing to hire men, abandoning their previous discriminatory recruitment policies. In this respect, the image that only young unmarried women work as garment operators no longer holds for China.³⁴

Work Hours

For the past two centuries, the length of the working day has been a central issue in workers' struggles. In a chapter in *Capital*, Marx described the history of class struggles in England over the length of the working day.³⁵ The Factory Act of 1819 was the first formal regulation to control work hours and it was violently resisted by capitalists. Excessive work hours continued

³³After analysing a number of indicators using gender as an independent variable, no significant differences can be observed. As a result this paper will not deal with gender issues. This is also the case in the results of our logit models where the gender variable is not significant in affecting workers' legal knowledge (see Table 7).

³⁴According to a recent news report, Chinese garment factory owners today find it extremely difficult to recruit female workers. One factory manager even said that the male-to-female sex-ratio of applicants in his factory's last recruitment was 9:1. See Chen 2015.

³⁵Marx 1976, 340–416.

despite repeated legislation.³⁶ As E. P. Thompson pointed out, capitalists invented a number of ploys to extend work hours, such as the creation of “the relay system” and “the shift system,” or making workers start work fifteen minutes earlier and fifteen minutes later than stated in factory rules.³⁷ These methods are still used by employers in China.³⁸

But what are Chinese migrant workers’ preferences regarding their work hours? Collective actions aimed at demanding the state to better enforce existing regulations on work hours are scarce in China today. The relatively few industrial actions against excessive work hours are directed against management (as opposed to against government) and take place only when work hours have become so long that the workers cannot physically endure them anymore, or when overtime has been compensated at a very low rate or not paid at all.³⁹ Since there have been no coordinated protests beyond the company level to demand for shorter work hours, we think that Chinese migrant workers’ awareness of the necessity to struggle for shorter work hours is generally low. This can be seen in [Table 2](#), where no age group in either industry wants to have an eight-hour work day. On the contrary, the workers in our sample invariably wanted to work more than eight hours a day (9.4 hours on average for the garment industry and nine hours for the metal mechanic workers). There are, however, variations between the workers in the two industries. The actual work hours of the garment and metal mechanic workers in our two surveys offer new insights into the factors behind these differences in their desired work hours.

[Table 2](#) shows that garment workers worked almost two hours longer per day than metal mechanic workers. This cannot be explained as an individual choice, since Chinese migrant workers are subject to a coercive labor regime and have no means to negotiate work hours or wages with management.⁴⁰ Nor can it be explained by age group, since the cohorts in each of the industries work roughly the same number of hours. The actual number of work hours therefore cannot be used as an indicator that reflects whether young workers want to work less and enjoy life more. On the other hand, their subjective preference of how long they want to work is a good indicator of their willingness. [Table 2](#) shows that all three cohorts of garment workers desired to work less hours, whereas all three cohorts of metal mechanic workers wanted no change in their working hours.⁴¹ Among garment workers, age made little difference, but among metal workers younger workers wanted to work less hours. The one similarity among cohorts in both industries was a desire to work approximately 9.5 hours per day, which is 1.5 hours more than stipulated by Chinese labor law.

[Table 2](#) however only shows a general desire. It does not show how current work hours might affect the desire to work more or less. The relationship between workers’ actual and desired work hours, shown in [Tables 3](#) and [4](#), provides an answer.

Our survey shows that for the garment industry, working eleven and twelve hours a day was the norm (see [Table 2](#)). About seventy percent of respondents worked these hours. Consequently, almost all workers, regardless of their age group, wanted to work less. About forty percent of garment workers hoped to work only eight hours, a drop of as much as three hours from their

³⁶Ibid.

³⁷Ibid., 296; Pollard 1963; Thompson 1967.

³⁸For the current “relay system” and “shift system” exercised in Chinese garment factories, please refer to Siu 2015.

³⁹We are not discussing the “legitimate” nature of labor protests in China. Our point is that in China labor protests on work hours (and not only on that) are directed against the management, not the state. In other words, these protests, when they happen, are aimed at demanding the respect of the provisions of the labor law, not larger structural changes.

⁴⁰Lee 1998.

⁴¹Of the three age groups among the metal mechanic workers, the oldest group is the only one that want to work 0.6 hours longer, but we should take into account that the sample size is small.

Table 2. Actual and desired work hours per day by age group.

Industry		>32 (<i>N</i> = 103)		22–32 (<i>N</i> = 272)		<22 (<i>N</i> = 15)		Total (<i>N</i> = 390)	
		Actual work hours	Desired work hours	Actual work hours	Desired work hours	Actual work hours	Desired work hours	Actual work hours	Desired work hours
Garment (2010)	Mean	11.3	9.3	11.1	9.3	11.5	9.4	11.1	9.3
	SD	1.4	1.6	1.1	1.2	1.0	1.2	1.2	1.3
Metal mechanic (2012)		>32 (<i>N</i> = 14)		22–32 (<i>N</i> = 56)		<22 (<i>N</i> = 68)		Total (<i>N</i> = 138)	
		Actual work hours	Desired work hours	Actual work hours	Desired work hours	Actual work hours	Desired work hours	Actual work hours	Desired work hours
Metal mechanic (2012)	Mean	10.4	11.0	9.7	9.8	8.9	9.0	9.3	9.5
	SD	0.5	1.5	1.1	1.5	1.4	1.4	1.2	1.6

Table 3. Relationship between actual and desired work hours for garment workers by age group.

	Actual work hours > Desired work hours (want to work less)	Actual work hours = Desired work hours (satisfied with current situation)	Actual work hours < Desired work hours (want to work more)
>32 (<i>N</i> = 103)	81.6%	16.5%	1.9%
22–32 (<i>N</i> = 272)	90.4%	8.1%	1.5%
<22 (<i>N</i> = 15)	100.0%	0.0%	0.0%
All cohorts	88.4%	10.0%	1.6%

Table 4. Relationship between actual and desired work hours for metal mechanic workers by age group.

	Actual work hours > Desired work hours (want to work less)	Actual work hours = Desired work hours (satisfied with current situation)	Actual work hours < Desired work hours (want to work more)
>32 (<i>N</i> = 14)	21.4%	14.3%	63.3%
22–32 (<i>N</i> = 56)	14.3%	58.9%	26.8%
<22 (<i>N</i> = 68)	13.2%	61.8%	25.0%
All cohorts	14.5%	55.8%	29.7%

actual work time. No respondents below the age of twenty-two were satisfied with his/her current hours and all wanted to work fewer hours. In contrast, a higher percentage of older workers were satisfied with working long hours.

Metal mechanic workers worked shorter hours, with a norm of about ten hours a day (see Table 2).⁴² Table 4 shows that a higher percentage of metal mechanic workers thought their current work hours were appropriate. In all three age groups a large proportion wanted to work more hours, a pattern which is opposite to that of the garment workers. Indeed, on average 55.8 percent of the metal mechanic workers were satisfied with their current work hours, 14.5 percent wanted to work less and 29.7 percent wanted to work more. On the contrary, 88.4 percent of garment workers wanted to work less. This reveals how the length of actual work hours shapes workers' desire to work. When work hours were excessive (eleven to twelve hours per day), respondents wanted to work fewer hours. When work hours were moderate (about ten hours), a quarter or more of respondents wanted to work longer hours. As shown in Table 2, the most desirable length for all age groups was 9.5 hours.

While the majority (63.3 percent) of the metal workers older than thirty-two wanted to work longer hours, only about one-quarter of those under this age did. Moreover, while the majority of the latter were satisfied with their current work hours, only 14.3 percent of the oldest group felt the same way. Our data shows that approximately sixty percent of the youngest cohort wanted to work only eight hours a day (their actual work hours); among the middle cohort twenty-six percent wanted to work less than eight hours; and for those over aged thirty-two no respondents wanted to work fewer than ten hours. In other words, in both industries older workers wanted to work more hours than younger ones. In this regard, our findings support the popular assumption that young workers are less willing to work long hours than older workers.

⁴²The metal mechanic workers in our sample work roughly the same number of hours as the average Chinese migrant worker, who, according to statistics collected nationwide, works 69 hours a week. See Gao and Smyth 2011.

Table 5. Workers' responses to questions regarding knowledge of legal maximum overtime per month.

Knowledge of monthly overtime limit	Garment (2010)		Metal mechanic (2012)	
	Count	%	Count	%
No idea	329	83.5	54	36.5
Know	58	14.7	85	57.4
Omitted	7	1.8	9	6.1
Total	394		148	

Having established this, we are interested in further exploring the mechanism that leads to this difference among the three age cohorts. Our data also shows that quite a high percentage of all age groups except for the youngest of the metal mechanic workers desired to work more than eight hours a day. Considering that there have been no large campaigns in China to struggle for shorter hours this begs the question of what other factors might come into play. Could this willingness to work long hours be related to a lack of knowledge of the standards set by the law? To measure this, we sought to gauge our respondents' knowledge of Chinese labor law, which limits overtime to thirty-six hours a month, which on average means no more than nine hours of overtime and two days off every week.

Table 5 shows that a great majority of garment workers responded they had no idea of the legal overtime limit, whereas 57.4 percent of the metal mechanic workers stated that they knew. However, a further examination of the data (Table 6) shows that even among the sixty-five garment workers who claimed they knew the overtime maximum, only eight were able to provide the correct answer. In contrast, fifty-nine of a total of eighty-five metal mechanic workers who claimed they knew the answer responded accurately.

To analyze this difference, we have run a logistic regression analysis by fitting accuracy of workers' knowledge of maximum overtime work per month as a binary dependent variable, while using gender, educational levels, age cohorts, pay systems, monthly work hours, monthly wages, and industry as independent variables. Table 7 (model I) reports the odds ratios based on estimated results. Age and education are relatively unimportant variables, whereas occupation, wage rates, and work hours have an impact on workers' legal knowledge.⁴³

If the amount of hours worked in a month is an important factor shaping the accuracy of workers' legal knowledge, why did a high number of garment workers report that they wanted to work fewer hours than their current arrangements? And in spite of not knowing the legal limit? Conversely, why did over a quarter of the metal mechanic workers want to work more hours, although a much higher percentage could correctly identify the legal maximum work hours? We suggest that exhaustion plays a bigger role than knowledge of the law. Working eleven to twelve hours a day, day in and day out, is exhausting. Had garment workers been able to report maximum work limits, would more of them have chosen eight hours as their desired work hours? Of interest is the fact that almost all the workers who answered incorrectly *over-estimated* legal work limits. A tentative explanation is that since long work hours for them are the norm rather than the exception, these workers were under the impression that the legal work hours must be closer to their actual work hours.

⁴³Gallagher et al.'s survey also shows a similar result – for migrant workers who do not have college education, their age and level of education are relatively unimportant. See Table 3 of Gallagher et al. (2015).

Table 6. Accuracy of workers' knowledge of maximum overtime per month by industry and age group (garment: $N=58$; metal mechanic: $N=85$).

Garment (2010)	<36 h	36 h ^a	>36 h	Total	Metal (2012)	<36 h	36 h ^a	>36 h	Total
>32	5.6% ($n=1$)	11.1% ($n=2$)	83.3% ($n=15$)	100% ($n=18$)	>32	0% ($n=0$)	0% ($n=0$)	100% ($n=3$)	100% ($n=3$)
22–32	7.7% ($n=3$)	12.8% ($n=5$)	79.5% ($n=31$)	100% ($n=39$)	22–32	0% ($n=0$)	63.6% ($n=21$)	36.4% ($n=12$)	100% ($n=33$)
<22	0% ($n=0$)	100% ($n=1$)	0% ($n=0$)	100% ($n=1$)	<22	2% ($n=1$)	77.6% ($n=38$)	20.4% ($n=10$)	100% ($n=49$)
All groups	6.9% ($n=4$)	13.8% ($n=8$)	79.3% ($n=46$)	100% ($n=58$)	All groups	0% ($n=0$)	69.4% ($n=59$)	29.4% ($n=25$)	100% ($n=85$)

^aThis is the percentage of workers with the correct response to the maximum overtime under the Chinese labor law (i.e. 36 hours).

To sum up, while our sample size is quite limited, our descriptive analysis of the relationship between actual and desired work hours for textile and metal mechanic workers confirms the two hypotheses we posed at the beginning of this article. Younger workers are more cognizant of their legal rights in matters related to work hours and want to work fewer hours than “first generation” migrant workers. Our descriptive analysis reveals that younger workers were more aware of the regulations concerning overtime limits, but this knowledge remains abysmally low, especially in the garment industry (see Table 6). The data also show that other factors such as extremely long work hours for textile workers impacts on desired work hours. As for workers in the metal industry, although they are relatively more aware of labor law, they still want to work more than the legal work hours. Importantly, neither type of workers demonstrated any necessity to struggle for shorter work hours. Legal knowledge in this case has not translated into agitation. We believe this is related to the different pay systems.

Payment Systems and Wages

To understand how pay shapes workers’ legal knowledge, we ran a similar logistic regression analysis using accuracy of workers’ knowledge of the legal minimum wage as a dependent variable (see Table 7, model II).

Logit analysis demonstrates that age is still a relatively unimportant factor while payment system is strongly associated to accuracy of workers’ knowledge of legal minimum wages.

Table 7. Odds ratios from logit models of accuracy of workers’ knowledge of maximum overtime per month and of legal minimum wage per month.

Variables	Model I Accuracy of workers’ knowledge of maximum overtime per month (1 = correct; 0 = incorrect)	Model II Accuracy of workers’ knowledge of legal minimum wage (1 = correct; 0 = incorrect)
Gender (ref. = female)		
Male	0.771	1.218
Education (ref. = primary)		
Junior high	466,062.5	1.054
Senior high	1,743,983.8	0.977
Vocational high	4,991,844.0	0.460
College or above	1,277,455.6	0.750
Age group (ref. ≥ 32)		
22–32	1.663	1.407
<22	1.036	2.757
Pay system (ref. = other system)		
Time rate	0.698	1.127
Piece rate	0.703	0.302**
Industry (ref. = Metal)		
Garment	0.0824*	1.820
Monthly work hours	1.050	0.992
Monthly wages	1.007*	1.002
Monthly work hours \times Monthly wages	1.000*	1.000
Observations	372	372
Pseudo- R^2	0.4721	0.1972

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

*** $p < .001$.

Table 8. Workers' responses to questions regarding knowledge legal minimum wage per month.

Knowledge of legal minimum wage per month	Garment (2010)		Metal mechanic (2012)	
	Count	%	Count	%
No idea	276	70.0	57	38.5
Know	118	30.0	90	60.8
Omitted	0	0	1	0.7
Total	394		148	

Work hours and wages are closely related in the eyes of Chinese migrant workers. From their point of view, shorter work hours mean lower monetary compensation and overtime means more money. This is the principle that guides them when they try to figure out how many hours they have to work in order to earn enough for their livelihood. When wage rates per unit time or per unit piece are set very low, it is not surprising that quite a few of these workers prioritize money over work hours. To some extent, they are willing to sacrifice leisure time to gain a better material life. This raises another question. Are workers any more aware of the regulations concerning wages than they are of those concerning work hours? Approximately thirty percent of textile workers and sixty-one percent metal workers thought that they knew the current minimum wage (see Table 8).

Of the 118 textile workers who claimed to know the legal minimum wage, approximately seventy-five percent (eighty-eight) correctly identified this as RMB 900 per month. In contrast, a large majority (eighty-three of a total of ninety) metal workers could provide this answer. Looking at all respondents, only about twenty percent of textile workers knew the answer, as opposed to approximately sixty percent of metal workers. Significantly, textile workers tended to overestimate the legal minimum wage (see Table 9, column 1). And for both industries, younger workers are not necessarily more aware of the official minimum wage than their older co-workers.

What about hopes for a higher pay rate per hour? Table 10 shows that the desired wage (*qiwang gongzi*) for both types of worker decreased with age (see Figure 1).

The legal minimum wage in Shenzhen in 2010 was 900 RMB and 1500 RMB in 2012. We recognize that the two sets of data on wages cannot be compared in absolute terms but only in terms of the ratios between the various types of wages within each set. Nevertheless, this shows that, on average and including overtime, garment workers earned twice the minimum wage per month, while metal mechanic workers earned approximately eight-four percent more than the minimum wage. However, neither type of workers were paid what they were entitled. Garment workers were paid on average 1807 RMB per month, 2407 RMB less than what they should have earned. In contrast, metal workers received 2755 RMB per month, 886 RMB less than they should have been paid. In other words, garment workers received just forty-two percent of their legal entitled pay, while metal workers received approximately seventy-five percent. If work hours were reduced to the legal 40-hour week, the average desired wage of garment workers was about the same as their current actual wage, whereas metal mechanic workers desired just eleven percent more than their current actual wage, though still short of what they were entitled to.

Generally speaking, the garment workers were satisfied with their wage level, though the majority would have preferred to work fewer hours. The metal mechanic workers wanted only a slightly higher wage and most were satisfied with their current work hours. Why were their expectations so low? In our opinion, this is because they probably thought that if they did not

Table 9. Accuracy of workers' knowledge of legal minimum wage by industry and age group (garment: $N=118$; metal: $N=90$).

Garment (2010)	<900 CNY	900 CNY ^a	>900 CNY	Total	Metal mechanic (2012)	<1500 CNY	1500 CNY ^a	>1500 CNY	Total
>32	5.26% ($n=2$)	57.89% ($n=22$)	36.84% ($n=14$)	100% ($n=38$)	>32	0% ($n=0$)	100% ($n=3$)	0% ($n=0$)	100% ($n=3$)
22–32	4.94% ($n=1$)	79.01% ($n=64$)	16.05% ($n=12$)	100% ($n=77$)	22–32	0% ($n=0$)	97.15% ($n=34$)	2.85% ($n=1$)	100% ($n=35$)
<22	0% ($n=0$)	66.67% ($n=2$)	33.33% ($n=1$)	100% ($n=3$)	<22	0% ($n=0$)	63.89% ($n=46$)	36.11% ($n=6$)	100% ($n=52$)
All groups	2.5% ($n=3$)	74.5% ($n=88$)	20.5% ($n=29$)	100% ($n=118$)	All groups	0% ($n=0$)	92% ($n=83$)	7.7% ($n=7$)	100% ($n=90$)

^aThis is the percentage of workers with the correct response to the legal minimum wage (900 CNY in 2010; 1500 CNY in 2012).

Table 10. Desired wage by age group (garment: $N = 391$; metal mechanic: $N = 144$).

Garment (2010)				Metal mechanic (2010)			
	>32	22–32	<22		>32	22–32	<22
Count	103	274	14	Count	13	60	71
Average Desired wage	1895.15	1.735.04	1.550.00	Average Desired wage	3.269.23	3.031.67	3.067.61

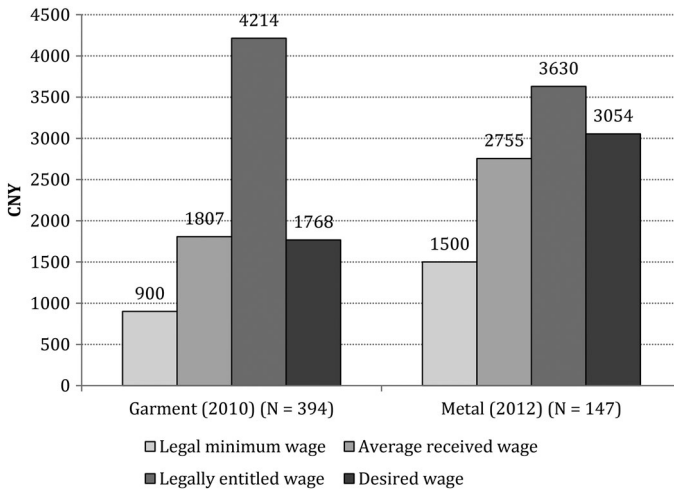


Figure 1. Legal minimum wage, received wage, legally entitled wage and desired wage per month.

have to work overtime, to be fair they should have asked only for what they had already been making, not much more. Additionally, neither of the two groups of workers realized that they were earning a lot less than they were entitled to. Nor were they aware that through collective bargaining it is possible to achieve higher pay, as in other countries.⁴⁴ Their real life experience circumscribed their imagination and expectations. In other words, were work hours to be shorter they would not agitate for higher take-home pay.

Moreover, while younger workers wanted to work fewer hours, this pattern does not apply to desired wages. Young workers in both industries aspired to lower wages than the older workers (see Table 10). This finding goes against the popular image that the younger generation today is demanding very high wage hikes, a view which arose in the wake of the Nanhai Honda strike of 2010. There, the young workers indeed demanded an unprecedented pay raise of 800 yuan for both formal workers and interns, eventually reaching an agreement to raise formal workers' wages from 1544 to 2044 yuan (+32.4 percent) and intern students' wages from about 900 yuan to around 1500 yuan (+70 percent).⁴⁵ But could that have been an isolated incident? Looking at the bigger picture, it appears that most of the strikes and other labor protests since

⁴⁴An extended survey carried out by one of the authors between 2012 and 2015 among 1379 employees in the nine Italian metal mechanic factories considered in this study revealed that 98.2 percent of the workers had no clue about what "collective bargaining" was.

⁴⁵Chan and Hui 2014, 658.

2010 have still been instigated by inadequate compensation, unpaid wages and social insurance contributions, low severance payments when factories relocated elsewhere or closed down, rather than motivated by demands for big wage increases. In other words, the protests remain right-based rather than interest-based.⁴⁶

To sum up, our data only partially confirm the hypothesis that younger workers are more cognizant of their legal rights than older workers in matters related to wages. Age did not make much of a difference in the accuracy of their responses. Questions concerning their knowledge of the minimum legal wage also yielded mixed results, with the middle cohort more aware than their older and younger colleagues. Yet, the most astonishing finding of our survey is that younger workers' expectations about their wages were not only lower than their older colleagues but also much less than the amount to which they were legally entitled. We realize our sample is small, but such a finding challenges the idea that migrant workers of the new generation are more aware of their rights than their older co-workers.

Conclusion

To summarize the findings relating to the two hypotheses put forward in the opening remarks of this paper, we offer the following conclusions:

- (1) Younger workers would like to work fewer hours and enjoy life more, a finding consistent with the popular view that the new generation of migrant workers is less willing to "eat bitterness." Still, it must be noted that in reality garment workers of all ages worked the same long hours, and therefore they cannot be characterized as "lazy."
- (2) Our findings partially confirm the second hypothesis that younger workers are more cognizant of their legal rights. Our respondents were more aware of the regulations concerning overtime limits, but their knowledge remained very low, especially those who worked in garment factories. While questions concerning their knowledge of the minimum legal wage yielded mixed results, the most interesting finding of our survey is that younger workers' expectations about their wages were not only lower than their older colleagues', but also much less than the amount they were entitled to.

Although there is indeed an element of change between the various age cohorts of migrant workers, there is also continuity in the way that external factors such as payment systems shape these expectations. We found that, regardless of age, piece rate confused workers' understanding of the value of their labor and made it more difficult for them to figure out how much they earned per hour. For piece rate workers, the regulations on overtime and minimum wage did not seem relevant to their personal situations and therefore they often ignored these official standards. When one of the authors of this paper interviewed piece rate garment workers in 2010, he found that they commonly believed that a piece rate system was better than a time rate system because it gave them the opportunity to work more hours and make more money. This common belief is best captured in a quote from a twenty-three year old man who worked in a garment factory: "The change of legal minimum wage only affects time-wage workers. As a piece-wage worker, it doesn't affect me." When asked if he would think he was actually

⁴⁶Chan and Siu 2012. There are no official data about strikes in China, but for an overview of the recent developments, see the China Labour Bulletin Strike Map available online at <http://strikemap.clb.org.hk/strikes/en> (accessed April 11, 2016).

earning less if he had to work much overtime, he without hesitation rebuked, “No, the more you work, the more you earn!”

Our findings open up for discussion and further research a series of fundamental questions. In particular, in a situation in which Chinese workers’ desired wages are lower than the amount they are legally entitled to and in which they want to work more hours than legal limits, what are the prospects for labor activism? Should we consider a few interest-based strikes, such as the Honda strike, as the dawn of a new era for the Chinese labor movement? We believe that skepticism is warranted. In our opinion, until workers recognize the necessity to demand higher wages *without* working longer hours, or even demand shorter work hours, the very idea of a “rights awakening” is questionable. Of course, our sample is small and much more research on this topic needs to be done, but this study sheds light on the puzzle of why in China the most exploited part of the industrial working class has not staged any large industrial-level and cross-regional level collective action to demand shorter hours and higher wages, unlike what is happening today in India, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Cambodia or what happened in Europe a century or two ago.

Since these two surveys were conducted, an increasing number of labor protests in Guangdong province have led to greater police suppression and violence. These have been caused mainly by the relocation of factories to other areas of China or even abroad, to poorer countries like Vietnam or Cambodia, in search of cheaper labor, or by businesses collapsing in a global economic downturn. One could call this new wave of protests the awakening of Chinese migrant workers. Yet these demonstrations tend to be started and led by the older generation of workers, now in their forties,⁴⁷ who desperately are fighting for unpaid employers’ social insurance contribution, severance and overtime pay, and mandated employer contributions to housing schemes before they retire back in their home villages or towns. This is not a struggle for higher wages or reduced work hours, but in hopes of working a few more days or months to make the last bit of wages before their factory lives are over.

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⁴⁷The official retirement in China is fifty-five years old for women and sixty for men.

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