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China and the Internationalisation of the Sociology of Contemporary Work and Employment

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Abstract

The China e-Special Issue brings together 11 articles on the sociology of contemporary work and employment in China which have been published in WES in the past two decades, highlighting the increasing frequency of submissions, and also reflecting the diversity, complexity and plurality of work and employment in the region. The foci of debates include the changing fault lines of work and employment; the changing relationships between state, employers and workers; the impact of rural to urban migration and urbanisation on the labour process and employment configurations; the interrelations between production and social reproduction and its gendered dimensions; and the need to develop established methodologies further given the changing nature of the research subject.

Keywords

China, gender, market transition, migrant labour, social reproduction

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Introduction

In September 2019, The University of Hong Kong's Faculty of Social Sciences co-organised an international symposium entitled '*Worlds of Work: Implications of Urbanisation, Technology and Sustainability*' with the support of WES. The symposium brought together UK, Asia and Australia-based emerging and established social science scholars to share and exchange ideas and to reflect on the rapidly changing dynamics and multi-faceted effects of urbanisation, climate change, technological change and mass migration in the context of work. The symposium successfully connected academic disciplines and geographical and social contexts, offering critical insights into the ongoing debates about social processes and structures and power relations in the worlds of work beyond the Global North. There was a particular emphasis on China. The discussions and networking were extremely rewarding: so much so that WES decided to find ways to continue the dialogue about the diversity, complexity and plurality of work and employment in China. Hence the idea for this e-Special Issue to bring together articles on work and employment in China which have been published in WES since 2000.

In the editorial 'Work, employment and society sans frontières: extending and deepening our reach', previous WES editors Beck et al. (2016) outline their reasons for pursuing an internationalisation strategy for the journal and why it is important to pay attention to perspectives from the Global South. Indeed, the journal has since endeavoured to broaden the basis for the production of knowledge and to attract scholarship across a range of country contexts. An analysis of 2019 submissions shows an increase from outside the UK, with the countries from which the submitting authors came being firstly from Anglophone countries, such as Australia, Canada and the US, then Europe, followed by China with 22 articles. This trend has continued into 2020.

In addition to geographical extension, engaging with non-western countries also means connecting with their ongoing debates. Beck et al. (2016: 215–216) suggest that debates in the South merit more attention since they play 'a crucial role against flattening accounts of globalising capitalism, both conceptually as well as in practice'. Such scholarship is not simply relevant on its own terms but because 'it has become increasingly difficult and undesirable to assume a standard model and to specify its "centre"' (Beck et al., 2016: 216). The key foci of debates include issues around the changing fault lines of work and employment; the changing relationships of state, employers and workers; the impact of rural to urban migration and urbanisation on the labour process and employment configurations; the interrelations between production and social reproduction and its gendered dimensions; and the need to develop established methodologies further given the changing nature of the research subject.

China exemplifies many of these ongoing debates and highlights a number of important questions for the sociology of work and employment though it does not fit neatly into the traditional binary model of a North–South divide. While the country has its unique political, economic, cultural and social trajectories, its configurations of work and employment have been continuously (re)shaped by significant enterprise reforms and changing state–employer–employee relations, and by the subsequent responses from workers across different historical periods. Without knowledge of such historical contexts, one cannot fully understand the Chinese changing experiences in the context of

work – from mega-urbanisation to mass rural-to-urban migration; from the decline of state-owned enterprises to the rise of a market economy; and from a hybrid management style to collective worker protests. Furthermore, its rapid economic development since the reform era within and beyond the country – more recently in the context of the Belt and Road Initiative – is also entangled with wider global power dynamics and global labour markets (Arase, 2021; Hessler, 2021; Pun et al., 2020).

Against this background, we have brought together articles published in WES over the past two decades for this China e-Special Issue. We were limited to 11 articles and therefore could not include all the excellent articles published during this period that reflect the dramatic social changes that have taken place in China since the market transition and its rise to become the workshop of the world. The articles engage with long-standing sociological concerns of power, inequalities, social networks, reproduction, relations in the workplace, and their changing manifestations and significance in China. The topics relate to what we see as the central themes of work and employment under China's economic restructuring, labour and welfare reforms, and the responses of international and local organisations and workers under particular state policies and intensified market pressures. Here we summarise the key economic and socio-political changes that are particularly pertinent to our understanding of the contemporary world of work in China.

Scholars have pointed out how, since its 'socialist transformation' from 1949, China's employment policies have encountered significant periods of change to employment structures and labour process. Three periods of distinctive employment policies can be identified, comprising the pre-reform period (1956–79), the early reform period (1980–92) and the further reform period (1993 to the present) (Huang, 2008). One should note that during this extended period under the strict institutional control over labour, the state controlled the employment structure: job allocation, assignment, transfer, mobility, ranking system and wage, as well as life-time job tenure. Labour, in a socialist sense, was then treated as a national resource rather than a collection of autonomous beings. The notions of labour market, individual job searching and mobility, labour rights and protests were then almost non-existent (Knight and Song, 1995).

Under Deng Xiaoping's new reform initiatives in the 1980s, the emergence and gradual development of labour markets had significant implications for the rights of workers. Through experimentation with labour contracts, the implementation of life-time employment became obsolete. State welfare and the centrally controlled wages system gradually faded out as enterprise management emerged (Zhu et al., 2007). Those state-owned enterprise (SOE) workers were at once 'liberated' and expelled from the state-control employment structures – first in certain localities and subsequently extended nationally. Enterprise managers started recruiting and keeping competitive skilled workers based on individual and/or company performance; they also dismissed the ones they deemed 'redundant' amid the intensified market competition, especially after China's accession to the World Trade Organization in 2001. By 2000, tens of millions of China's SOE workers were laid off; between 1994 and 2005, 30 million SOE workers lost their jobs (cited in Danford and Zhao, 2012). The lay-offs disproportionately affected women. At the same time, many workers had their first taste of freedom and the unprecedented right to seek work outside the SOEs (Wang, 1998).

After the implementation of the 1994 labour law, China's labour markets flourished, reinforcing competition between state employers and non-state enterprises, generating a 'flexible human resource policy' and causing worker redundancy. From the mid-1990s onwards, many smaller and medium-sized SOEs also became partially or fully privatised or shut down. Large numbers of rural migrants increasingly competed with urban residents for jobs, escalating the rates of voluntary and involuntary job mobility (Cai et al., 2005). Workers adopted highly complex 'guanxi networks' to help with their job search and acquisition. Instability of the labour market, and the harsh realities of downward wage pressure, layoffs, work intensification and repressive work regimes, led to pervasive labour discontent and workplace tension (Hassard et al., 2008). There were new modes of worker protest and struggle (Chan and Selden, 2017; Chan et al., 2010; Lee, 2007) and many more individual and collective labour disputes (an increase from 19,098 in 1994 to 317,000 in 2006 according to official Chinese statistics) (cited in Danford and Zhao, 2012).

An examination of China also reveals the hitherto under-researched connections between internal migration and labour in particularly stark terms. Internal migration to cities has been a neglected research topic in the Global North where it is generally seen as a phenomenon belonging to the past. On the whole, internal and international migration and migrant labour are studied separately. However, migration in the context of urbanisation remains particularly important in China where the right to the city (including the right to work and entitlements to pensions, housing, medical care and so on) is denied to rural migrant workers, who do not benefit from the formal resources of the city as a result of the application of the household registration system (*hukou*). Control of rural–urban migration was a key component of the strict labour market controls during the Maoist planned economy. Rural migrants were only allowed to work in cities; for example, when a vast amount of labour was needed for large-scale infrastructural projects and later on as state-directed recruits of the urban work units (Solinger, 1999). Rural migrant workers have been the engine of China's economic growth over the last three decades, providing a large reserve of cheap, docile labour. Internal migration and the denial of equal citizenship and welfare rights to internal migrant workers provide the important backdrop to a number of the articles in this collection. In the reform period, as internal migration became market-driven and some aspects of the hukou system became less rigid, rural–urban hierarchies continued to shape the prospects, precarity and the everyday experiences of internal migrant workers in the export-oriented factories (see Peng, 2011; Pun and Smith, 2007), in construction (see Swider, 2015b) and the service sector (see Choi, 2018).

As we will see, a number of empirical studies included in this Special Issue have revealed and theorised these changing configurations of the state and production politics, formal/informal employment, labour process including recruitment and the multi-faceted nature of labour control. The settings range from the former SOEs and large-scale factory regime to the migrant male-dominated construction and taxi sectors. Their methodologies reflect both the possibilities and challenges of conducting fieldwork and the politics of knowledge in China.

While there have been a number of notable ethnographic studies of the world of work in recent decades (Chan, 2001; Choi and Peng, 2016; Lee, 1998, 2006; Pun, 2005;

Swider, 2015a), the conduct of field research has been fraught with difficulties, risks and ethical dilemmas. Getting access to those protesting against worsening conditions of work and tighter regulations is even more difficult. According to Thøgersen and Heimer (2006: 12), the 'largest challenge' of doing fieldwork in China is the 'dominant presence of the party-state', characterised by 'direct political-ideological control, and the more intangible influence of the dominant Party discourse'. Researchers have to negotiate not only the restricted access to data collection but also official research permits and visas; navigate the ambiguous and shifting boundaries of topics considered politically sensitive; and overcome the suspicion of 'foreign' researchers while protecting the safety of local informants. As Fuchs et al. (2019: 149) suggest, these challenges have increased in the past decade under 'an intensified form of authoritarian governance' in China. Common channels for gaining field access through informal networks have become 'less viable', as 'key gatekeepers and informants operate in an evolving atmosphere of fear and caution' and 'NGOs and local academics are increasingly cautious of labour research-related collaboration'.

In the remaining sections, we contextualise and summarise the 11 articles by situating them within these broad themes and conclude by raising a few pointers for the way forward and the implications for the sociology of work and employment.

Enterprise reform and the tripartite state–employer–employee relations

Under China's rapid transition from the planned economy to the market economy from the 1980s, the state employed a series of top-down industrial restructuring strategies to rationalise and modernise a whole range of SOEs and collectives and to open up the non-state sector to foreign-funded enterprises and private firms. The decline of state control over the production process (including labour hiring and allocation) and of state authority in the workplace meant that employees became increasingly subjected to managerial domination and the market forces of supply and demand rather than the Party and bureaucratic control. The resulting labour reforms and the modern enterprise system have fundamentally reshaped the relationship between the enterprise and the state, with greater decentralisation and more discretion for managers, the use of the labour contracting regime linking performance and rewards and, ultimately, far-reaching consequences for the labour process and workers' experiences and welfare.

In 'The consequences of China's socialist market economy for seafarers', Minghua Zhao (2002) traces the introduction of major structural reorganisation and modern management mechanisms to rationalise and modernise the state-owned, male-dominated shipping industry and the unfolding impact on Chinese seafarers' labour experiences. Through examining the industry database and a series of visits to Chinese-owned ocean-going shipping companies and interviews with Chinese seafarers, Zhao shows the scale and the effects of the enterprise reform. In China's ocean shipping, a number of strategies have been formulated to streamline the labour force since the late 1980s. As in other sectors of the country's economy, the increasing competition in the world shipping market and the pressure to rationalise the workforce meant labour contracts were introduced,

breaking the Maoist 'iron rice bowl'. Although the 'diluted attention to ideology and politics' and the resulting declining role of Political Commissars aboard meant seafarers experienced a certain degree of relaxation of political control on-board, they faced an intensification of labour as a result of reduced crew levels and other labour cost-saving strategies. Furthermore, they became subjected to a hierarchy-oriented differentiation of ranks, positions and welfare treatment, which reflects a broader 'process of the country's movement towards a class society' (Zhao, 2002: 176).

Significantly, the development of 'modernisation' had a particularly constraining impact on women seafarers. New forms of gender-based occupational segregation emerged, as the revolutionary sanctity of labour as the site of 'modernity' and 'liberation' for both men and women was replaced by market logic. Women were no longer encouraged to 'hold up half the sky'. Instead, they were channelled into the roles traditionally defined as 'proper' for women: for example, in the passenger shipping sector and service departments. This finding is actually reinforced in a more recent study (Zhao et al., 2017: 45), where persistent gendered biases in the training and recruitment of female cadets prevent them from 'go[ing] to sea on "real" ships in "real" commercial shipping'. Ultimately, as Zhao (2002: 181) concludes, the empirical case study of China's modernising shipping industry shows that 'neo-liberal economic globalisation brings with it the deterioration of working conditions and welfare treatment for workers and that a class society is being shaped both in the workplace and in the larger society' at the turn of the millennium.

Three other articles in the e-Special Issue examine the new tripartite state–employer–employee relations and focus on the hiring and job search practices in the post-reform Chinese market economy. Each article reframes or extends particular 'Northern' theories: for example, Granovetter's social network theory and weak ties; the concept of countervailing power in the liberal capitalist state, employer associations and trade unions; a simplistic blend of the western concept of unitarism with traditional Chinese values in the so-called 'Confucian HRM'. Taken together, they contribute to a more pluralist conceptual approach in the study of work and employment in China.

The article by Andy Danford and Wei Zhao (2012) on stated-owned enterprise examines workers' attitudes to job quality, management reform and workplace change and questions the managerialist conception of 'Confucian HRM' with its emphasis on reified Chinese values of harmony and loyalty. Much of the existing HRM literature assumes that Chinese workers are passive, business practices are based on *guanxi* (personal connections) and that Chinese management–labour relations are characterised by paternalism. Using mixed methods of quantitative surveys and interviews with workers of different levels of seniority across three state-owned automotive enterprises located in Hubei in Central China, Danford and Zhao challenge the ahistorical and uncontextualised notion of 'Confucian HRM' theory and its assumption of a consistent set of 'harmonious' management styles and values. Importantly, they reveal workers' divergent views, their dissatisfaction with pay, work conditions and workplace influence, and the underlying dynamic of disharmony and conflict in the post-reform Chinese economy. Tracing back to the SOE reform launched by Deng Xiaoping nearly four decades ago, the authors discuss the reform's lingering impacts on SOE's managerial practices, workers' employment rights and the ongoing recasting of power relations within SOEs. They succinctly

portray the emerging attitudinal differences with pay among workers and interest disso-
nance between managers and workers. The findings suggest that Chinese workers were
sceptical of engaging with more 'humanistic' western management styles and provide an
important critique of the prospects for harmonious workplace relations sketched out by
the HRM analysts.

The article by Xianbi Huang (2008) investigates social behaviour and social interactions
in China's workplaces and re-examines whether guanxi networks are still influential in
China's labour market amid economic liberalisation. Against the background of China's
changing employment policies, Huang comparatively analyses the culturalist and institu-
tionalist approaches to guanxi in contrast with the social network approach. She then recon-
ciles the two approaches' seemingly contradictory findings by offering a more refined
theorisation of guanxi networks and its empirical relevance with regard to varying job char-
acteristics, job searchers' educational level and skill marketability, and the actual job search
experiences in both state and non-state sectors across different Chinese cities. Her findings
provide several key insights into China's considerably transformed state sector. First, while
becoming less relevant in the market-oriented, non-state private firms, guanxi ties still play
a significant role in China's state sector through the screening and hiring processes. While
using guanxi alone is insufficient to win a job, it provides a basis for distinguishing among
an enormous pool of competent job applicants. Second, the higher the desirability of jobs,
the greater the intensity of competition, and the higher the probability that hiring authorities
are subject to the influence of guanxi mobilisation. Professional ties are also more likely to
transform into deeply embedded, characteristic Chinese guanxi ties. Lastly, Huang argues
guanxi influence can sometimes be resisted, minimised or eliminated by a particular
employer's merit-based hiring policy and transparent recruiting procedures.

In 'Chinese employer associations, institutional complementarity and countervailing
power', Judith Shuqin Zhu and Chris Nyland (2017) build on Barry and Wilkinson's
reconceptualisation of employer associations (EAs), engage with the International
Relations (IR) theory on employer coordination and contribute to the civil society versus
the state debate about polity in China. Through a series of interviews with a range of
respondents (including China Enterprise Confederation (CEC) officials, government offi-
cials, enterprise managers, representatives from both state-owned and privately owned
firms in major cities), Zhu and Nyland point to the shifting role of Chinese EAs impacted
by economic and social changes. Specifically, they provide empirical evidence using the
CEC as a case study (the only employer association recognised by the Chinese govern-
ment). The authors highlight the CEC's actual role as a 'quasi-state agency' and its inabil-
ity to act as an agent of countervailing state power and sustaining complementary
relationships with other social partners. Nonetheless, Zhu and Nyland argue that CEC is a
genuine EA, providing a voice for employers and numerous services that help members
clarify government policies, acquire specialised management knowledge and engage in
networking platforms for liaisons with state officials and potential business partners.

Labour control, migrant labour and factory regime

One of the recurring themes in the sociology of work in contemporary China is the
reconfiguration and consequences of insecure and irregular forms of employment. Rural

migrant workers who are regarded as needed but unwanted 'outsiders' have been at the centre of a significant body of research from the perspective of citizenship (Chan, 2012; Solinger, 1999); gender (Lee, 1998; Yan, 2008); class (Chan and Siu, 2012); ethnicity (Zhang and Xie, 2016); and native-place-based networks (Pun and Lu, 2010), among others. In 2020, there were an estimated 286 million rural migrant workers, comprising more than one-third of the entire working population in China (China Labour Bulletin, 2020). They are subject to different forms of state crackdown, from being arrested by the police and public security (Pieke et al., 2004) to other forms of exclusion under the hukou system (Wang, 2005). The proliferation of mass accommodation of the rural migrant workforce in factory dormitories in the non-state sector has led to the theorisa-tion of a distinctive form of work-residence and labour process where control over the lives of Chinese workers is uniquely pervasive (Pun, 2005). Others note both continuities and changes in the patterns of migrant workers' social and material practices beyond the dormitory labour regime (Siu, 2015) and in their exploitation in other contracted-labour systems in the expanding informal economy (Swider, 2015b).

The article by Theo Nichols et al. (2004) charts the rise in insecure and irregular forms of employment as a key structural change in East Asia. The article is based on a larger comparative study (Nichols and Cam, 2005) of the changes in management strategy and employee response in three major refrigeration manufacturing plants in China (a former SOE which became a joint venture company then wholly foreign-owned), Taiwan (a joint venture company) and South Korea (a Korean company). By drawing on interviews with managers and trade union officials, observations and engaging explicitly with Michael Burawoy's concept of hegemonic despotism, the authors examine the issue of contract in factory labour alongside labour control and material support in the analysis of factory regimes. The authors reveal the different processes of change from permanent employment to contract or agency labour in the three East Asian sites. In the Chinese case study, they suggest the implementation of the 'smashing of the iron rice bowl' and the drastic changes to non-wage material benefits and the wage system need to be under-stood in the specific context of the enterprise reform and the state's decision to introduce the new labour law from the 1990s. Under the new labour contract system, life-time employment has largely been replaced by employment on fixed or temporary contracts. Contract workers who were on performance-related wages were no longer entitled to the same work-based benefits that applied to established workers. Although the process of change took a different route with different implications for job loss in each case study, the transformations amount to a 'dismantling of established labour as a proportion of the workforce' (Nichols et al., 2004: 681) and an overall weakening of the worker's position and the means of material support.

The article by Pun and Smith (2007) theorises the 'dormitory labour regime' – the employers' use of industrial dormitories close to production facilities to accommodate rural migrant workers – as a distinctive spatial politics of transnational labour process and a form of control. Their study draws on a series of fieldwork visits; interviews with managers, supervisors and workers; and documentation on labour management policies and development plans in two garment factories set up in the mid-1990s. In one, the labour process – from recruitment, connecting individual migrant workers to different work positions, work behaviour on the shop floor to quitting – was heavily structured

through family or village-based social networks under what they characterise as a 'neo-paternalistic regime'. Furthermore, the factory operated a 'paternalistic dormitory labour system' on the basis of tightening freedom of movement and having labour supply on tap 'through absolute control of labour time and living space' (p. 36). In the other factory, characterised by an ambition to become 'the most advanced and modern enterprise in the Shanghai region', the management provided a more modern dormitory regime with better living conditions and 'a subtler regime of control' for predominantly female migrant workers to keep 'a more stable and disciplined workforce' (p. 40). Notwithstanding the specific institutional, organisational and spatial contingencies in the two contrasting case studies of dormitory labour regimes, the results have been an extension of management powers over migrant workers' lives and 'flexible controls over working time in a manner which is not provided within home–work separations within conventional market economies' (p. 42). Overall, as Pun and Smith (2007: 43) argue, 'the systematic use of dormitory labour gives rise to a new theorisation on the spatiality of global production [and] new relations between employment and accommodation'.

Thomas Peng (2011) builds on the work by Pun and Smith and probes the nature and extent to which workers' citizenship status as rural migrants help shape the labour process and workplace regulation. Through working on the assembly line, staying in the dormitory and conducting participant observation in the managerial departments of a manufacturing factory in southern China, Peng examines the institutional arrangements that shape migrant workers' attitudes towards work and organise their perceived interests. Drawing on Burawoy's conceptualisation of state politics and production politics, Peng reveals how rural migrant workers' discriminatory citizenship status under the hukou system ('state politics') interacts with global capitalist production ('production politics') to shape different dimensions of the labour process. Rural migrant workers continued to be deprived of urban citizenship and subject to a range of stereotypes and discriminatory treatment. They were compelled to rely on their employers for temporary residential status in order to legally stay in urban areas. As Peng argues, their lack of citizenship rights shapes the internal migrant workers' sense of personal safety and their consent towards the institutional arrangement of dormitory curfew as a form of protection. They felt safe 'not because of the juridical system, but rather the wall of the factory compound' and the entrance security guard (p. 737). 'The foundations for this experience were the workers' own personal safety, the threat and lack of resistance from urban public security forces and the protection provided by the company' (p. 738).

In this context, as Peng (2011: 731 and 739) points out, the manufacturing labour process is organised as 'a game of making out' on an everyday basis: the workers comprehend and pursue the game of getting off on time as 'innocent, individualised and legitimate'; the rewards of the game (i.e. free time, to experience modern urban life outside the factory compound) and the social relations among the workers, shape the workers' attitudes towards hard work and efficiency. On the basis of the game, the workplace culture of making out individualises the labour process and conflicts and manufactures consent on the shopfloor and within particular spatial confines.

In her article on precarious work and construction workers, Sarah Swider (2015b) explores the growth of precarious and informal employment in this sector due in large part to the growth of migration and urbanisation. This leaves migrants in precarity in

terms of their work and their existence in the city, the latter due to the hukou system and the lack of social protection. Swider analyses the diversity of labour market situations, working conditions and work relations through the concept of 'employment configuration', bringing together employee, market and state through three ideal types of mediated, embedded and industrialised employment.

Mediated means being protected from the state and invisible within gated dormitories (see factory system) where there is collusion between state and employers. Wages are not paid until the end of year contract, thus tying workers to contractors who provide work and cover upfront migration costs and city living costs. Permanently temporary migrants come every year and return home for a week or two. *Embedded*, unlike mediated employment, draws on both urban and rural labour markets by using new and old social networks which also create the potential for migrants to move across occupations, employers and industries. Such networks not only shape the labour market in embedded employment, but also serve as the main mode of regulation on the jobsite. Workers may be more secure with employers and greater incorporation into city life, but they may be vulnerable to the state which may try to cleanse an enclave. *Individualised* employment, the third kind, is characterised by migrants operating in a space of lawlessness in which both the labour market (hiring process) and the employment itself is highly atomised. In this employment configuration, the labour market is a 'spot market' or a physical place where potential employers and workers meet. Such an urban labour market involves only migrants or workers already in the city. There are frequent violent outbreaks among workers, between labour market bosses and workers, and between workers and potential employers. As workers in individualised employment tend to have the lowest wages, they also face the highest risk of not getting paid. Overall, the concept of employment configuration captures employment relations beyond those based on legal contractual arrangements and includes those based on kinship, personal ties and other types of socioeconomic arrangements, as well as those based on relationships defined by the unregulated despotic market. Employment configurations show how the state colludes with different agents and how social networks play different roles across employment configurations.

While Swider (2015b) conducted ethnographic research in Beijing, Menghan Zhao and Yongai Jin (2020) analysed statistical data from the Studies of Migrants' Conditions of Work in Beijing (2012) to examine the outcomes for those reliant on hometown migrant networks for income and informal employment. They argue that after adjusting for the potential bias that results from the workers' self-selectivity into the use of hometown ties in finding jobs, the hourly income of migrants is lower if they depend on hometown ties to find jobs. In addition, these migrants are more likely to be informally employed, which in turn has a detrimental effect on their overall welfare and their incorporation into the labour market of the city. However, it should be noted that those with higher educational attainment are less likely to use informal methods to get jobs.

Social reproduction, precarity and gender

Economic liberalisation has produced growing gender inequalities as a number of articles highlight. As Zhao (2002) noted in her analysis of the impact of liberalisation in the

shipping industry, women have been pushed back into traditional roles and low paying jobs. Studies have generally highlighted growing gender inequalities in the transition to a market economy as the state reallocated social reproduction and care responsibilities to individual families through privatisation (Ji et al., 2017) and dismantled welfare provided by the workplace (danwei) which deprived women of childcare services.

In their article, Guange He and Xiaogang Wu (2018) consider the reasons for the growing gender inequality experienced by women due to China's increasing marketisation and a state which has not legislated against gender discrimination nor instituted social policies to ease the increasing conflicts between work and family. The authors argue that marketisation can exacerbate gender earnings inequality and the disadvantages facing women in transitional labour markets, whereas the upgrading of the economic structure and the expansion of education arising from economic development can conversely reduce gender earnings gaps and elevate the socio-economic status of women. There has been an enormous rise in those employed in the private sector and at the same time limited intervention from the state and labour market regulation. Against this background, Chinese women find themselves in an even more disadvantaged position and face greater discrimination than before.

He and Wu show that the most salient differences in income and benefits now exist between government/public institutions and all other sectors rather than between state and non-state sectors or between the public and private sectors. SOEs now behave similarly to private enterprises, whereas government agencies and public institutions continue their redistributive role in providing public goods and promoting social equality. At the prefectural level, once the differential returns to education across regions are taken into account, while both marketisation and economic development increase earnings in local labour markets, women and men appear to benefit differently. Multi-level analyses confirm that marketisation tends to enlarge gender earnings disparities, whereas economic development can help reduce such inequality. In China, marketisation has been accompanied by rapid economic growth, which may have allowed Chinese women to compensate for their increased disadvantages.

Marketisation itself has led to not only more open discrimination against women in the labour market but also increased tensions between women's paid work and unpaid household work. This heightens the obstructive role of marriage and family in women's career advancement and socio-economic attainment, which results in an increase in delayed marriage and singlehood among career-minded women. Among those who have pursued a career in the private sector as entrepreneurs, Song and Li (2021) suggest that women may deploy flexible negotiations in pursuing non-traditional careers while seeking to avoid conflict with their family roles without returning to traditional roles.

Although most research on growing gender inequalities focuses on women, the impact on masculinities deserves more attention. Male internal migrants with second-class citizen status confront the increasing insecurity of working conditions that has undermined their sense of being male breadwinners (Choi and Peng, 2016). Choi (2018) examines how male rural-to-urban migrant taxi drivers experience loss of control over their working conditions and increasing financial insecurity as a result of state regulation and market reorganisation of the taxi industry, and their consequent status as second-class citizens in urban China. Low paid work may prevent men from providing for their families – that

is, undermining their ability to contribute to the social reproduction of their family in their role as a breadwinner. Yet, in China, the ideal of the male breadwinner has not declined as in the West. So, while rural migrant men generally lack the resources to live up to the urban hegemonic masculine ideal that values entrepreneurship, wealth, educational credentials and professional occupations, many nevertheless seek to set up their own businesses. However, none have household registration so cannot access urban welfare (see Swider, 2015b and Zhao and Jin, 2020). While the taxi drivers in the study saw themselves as individual operators running their own businesses, they were increasingly treated by taxi companies as service workers whose emotions and aesthetics had to be managed and controlled to meet the expectations of customers. Although older and married taxi drivers struggled to provide for their families, younger and single taxi drivers battled to save enough money to marry and set up a family (i.e. a crisis of social reproduction). Taxi drivers entered the trade thinking that it was an appropriate occupation for a man because it was dominated by men, required what were considered technical skills and seemed to offer opportunities to become one's own boss, to run one's own business, to have autonomy and control over working conditions, and to be able to earn an income sufficient to support one's family. Instead, under the new regulations, they were increasingly required by taxi companies to do emotional and aesthetic labour, and the new regulation tipped the balance of power in favour of customers, which meant they struggled to support families and saw themselves as failed men.

Looking ahead

Looking forward to the future of the sociological studies of work and employment in China, we foresee both obstacles and promising topics for future research. The influence of politics on the transnational production of knowledge remains a significant concern. Xu et al.'s (2019) observations of the political constraints in the development of the cultural sociology of China are equally pertinent to our discussion here:

> Chinese state's censorship of published studies and possible research topics . . . is now reaching beyond Chinese-language writings. It attempts to prevent English-language articles from being read in China – for example, blocking some articles in flagship journals like *China Quarterly* – and, in a pre-emptive practice, to fund existing English-language journals or even create new ones to screen out unwanted topics. (Xu et al., 2019: 403)

Scholars will need to find ways to overcome these constraints and be creative in exploring the possibilities of research in a number of important areas. First, there has been an upsurge of technology industries and the gig economy, as distinguished by short-term contracts or freelance platform-mediated work performed by gig workers in China as elsewhere (Sun et al., 2021). The study of ride-hailing has dominated the existing scholarship on the forms of gig work (Ticona and Mateescu, 2018; Wood et al., 2019), leading to a common description of the rise of the gig economy as the 'uberisation' of work (Rosenblat, 2018). Platform work embodies a distinct type of governance mechanism distinct from markets, hierarchies, or networks (Vallas and Schor, 2020). In principle, it replaces a top-down governance with a bottom-up user/worker empowerment

(Van Dijck et al., 2018) and offers workers greater flexibility, autonomy and control over their working life in a utopian sense. In practice, the gig platforms both mediate and constitute economic and social relations, and construct a new work order and subjectivities of gig workers. Workers especially in the ride-hailing and delivery services are regulated by mobile logistics technologies, supervisors and customers, resulting in steady intensification of labour and securing of higher profit for the company at the expense of workers (Healy et al., 2017; Ravanelle, 2019). This has prompted new tensions and forms of resistance (China Labour Bulletin, 2019) which merit further investigation and the exploration of mobile methodologies.

Revisiting and reconceptualising the labour process of gig/platform work through a spatial analytical lens is rare (Heiland, 2021). Analysing a gig or platform worker with both 'temporal and spatial dynamic' would help us understand how Information and Communication Technologies decentre work from a physical site to a much wider spatial setting (Gandini, 2018; Kidder, 2009). For example, Gandini (2018) theorises labour process in the gig economy by looking at how relations of production, control and surveillance at work change through digital technologies, consumer-generated rating and feedback systems, and occur beyond a fixed workplace. Nonetheless, Gandini's theorisation of labour process in the gig economy is insufficient to capture the gender and class dimension of the platform organisation of work and managerial control. The extent to which the social relations of production, the performance of emotional labour and techniques of gamification are operated in a gendered and classed organisational logic, and how such intersectional ideologies are utilised as a means to mobilise, control and exploit platform workers through the labour process in China require more nuanced investigation.

Second, the changing nature, scale and implications of internal migration deserve critical investigation. The rate of growth of the migrant worker population has been slowing in recent years even before the COVID-19 pandemic, partly due to demographic changes and fewer younger migrants entering the workforce (China Labour Bulletin, 2020). Furthermore, the hukou system has been relaxed in many cities under the New Urbanization Plan (2014–2020). The goal is to promote the 'orderly conversion of rural migrants into urban residents' and to spread the locus of development to the inland and western regions, among others. While the hukou reforms have been described by some as a positive move, crucial questions remain regarding the impact of the newly introduced differentiated *hukou* systems on rural migrants, their limited access to urban social benefits and on uneven regional development (Chu, 2020).

Finally, current concern with weak demographic growth is likely to lead to discussions of the relationship between state, market and the family in a context where support for affordable social reproduction is lacking. Childcare, for example, is still largely provided by the family or privatised, although there have been attempts, especially in first tier cities, to improve childcare (Wallace, 2020) and maternity leave. As has been commented:

> Social mobility is stalling, costs of living are high, public childcare is rare, and workplaces discriminate. Women are rejecting the higher cost that parenting puts on their bodies, careers and personal lives compared to what it puts on men's. (Davidson and Ni, 2021)

Taken together, we suggest that the scholarship on China has made a significant and exciting contribution to WES and to the ongoing debates about sociology of work and employment. We are encouraged by the steady flow of submissions from scholars working on a range of topics in China, and we hope this Special Issue will serve as both a celebration of the excellent scholarship and a testimony of the journal's commitment to an internationalisation strategy for many years to come.

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