

# *Ethnicity-Based Labor Dynamics in Contemporary China: Case of Ethnic Yi Workers in the Pearl River Delta\**

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## *Abstract*

Existing studies have mainly focused on the labor politics of migrant workers but have inadequately accounted for ethnic minority workers, especially with regard to the importance of ethnicity to labor control and resistance. This article focuses on ethnic Yi workers in the Pearl River Delta area of China. By examining the co-ethnic brokerage of ethnic Yi migrant workers, this article illustrates that ethnicity operates in labor control and resistance from three aspects. While ethnicity is used by managers and co-ethnic Yi brokers to implement labor control, it also plays multiple roles in Yi workers' resistance. Ethnicity is the collective identity forming the Yi workers' solidarity. Additionally, ethnicity is the instrument used by ethnic Yi brokers to gain their own benefits. Over time, the ethnic interest of group members is compromised by brokers to retain their long-term relationship with factories. Analysis of this complicated picture contributes to the existing studies

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of labor politics by showing the dynamics of ethnicity in labor control and resistance on the one hand and the complex roles of co-ethnic brokerage on the other hand.

China's economic development over the past decades has been greatly facilitated by migrant workers who moved from rural to urban areas, among which Han Chinese workers are observed as the main labor force. Nevertheless, ethnic minority migrant workers are witnessed emerging largely in the informal labor market, working as cheap, flexible, and precarious workers in industrial cities in recent years. To date, a growing body of literature has found that locality-based networks have facilitated migrant workers' outmigration and become a source of labor resistance.<sup>1</sup> We know much less about the experience of ethnic minority migrant workers in China's industrial cities, their form of outmigration, and their labor politics in relation to control and resistance. To better understand the complex labor politics in China, we must look at ethnic minority migrant workers in China's industrial cities.

The ethnic Yi from the Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture of Sichuan Province are one of the most impoverished ethnic groups in China. They have been known for strong ethnic and clan identity in their traditional society.<sup>2</sup> Since the 1990s, Yi migrant workers have largely followed their co-ethnic brokers to migrate out to cities and rely on their co-ethnic brokers to find employment in the industrial environment.<sup>3</sup> Meanwhile, the co-ethnic brokerage system in which Yi migrant workers are embedded plays significant roles in both controlling workers and organizing Yi workers' collective struggles. While examining the dynamics of the ethnicity-based labor politics of Yi migrant workers in cities, this article scrutinizes co-ethnic brokerage and its multiple roles in Yi workers' labor politics. The following specific question will be investigated in this article: how does ethnicity function in labor control and labor resistance under the co-ethnic brokerage system?

This article is structured as follows. First, it reviews a sample of the literature to highlight the context for this article's theoretical points and perspective. Second, it analyzes the social relationship between co-ethnic brokers and ethnic Yi workers in the co-ethnic brokerage system. Third, by providing empirical cases based on interviews and participant observations conducted by the authors, this article demonstrates the dynamic role of ethnicity in controlling labor and organizing and disorganizing