

*Development Paths, Proletarianization, and the Association of Workers in China's Garment Industry: A Comparative Study of Humen and Pinghu**

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Abstract

From the perspective of development, this article examines the power relations among local states, capital, and migrant laborers that shape the making of proletarians/semi-proletarians in two famous garment manufacturing areas, Humen in the Pearl River Delta and Pinghu in the Yangtze River Delta. It emphasizes the distinct forms of association in the daily production process of workers against the exploitation by capital and the control of states embedded in two different power relations. In Humen, a high proportion of external investment in the garment industry and lack of local authority regulatory resources, accompanied by highly mobile migrant workers without local *hukous*, undermines the foundation of daily association in production. Migrant

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* The project was funded by the China Postdoctoral Science Foundation (Grant No. 2019M662935), the Fundamental Research Funds for the Central Universities (The South China University of Technology, Grant No. 2018BSXM03), and the Chinese Ministry of Education Project of Key Research Institute of Humanities and Social Sciences at Universities (Grant No. 17JZD019). The authors would like to thank Prof. Chris King-Chi Chan for his helpful suggestions.

workers generally work with subcontractors and “vote with their feet.” In Pinghu, the historical heritage of collective economies enhances the control of local authorities over both labor and capital, which has led to the full proletarianization of garment industry workers. Meanwhile, embedding deeply in local communities empowers local workers to associate in cooperative production teams and negotiate with capitalists collectively, resulting in a relatively higher payback. Both forms of imperceptible daily struggles generate transformation of labor institutions in the two areas.

Since 1978, China has been constructing a “particular kind of market economy that increasingly incorporates neoliberal elements interdigitated with authoritarian centralized control.”¹ The rapid growth of China’s economy could not have happened without the low-cost labor supplied by millions of its migrant workers, especially given its location at the lower end of the global production chain. In reality, however, migrant workers regularly experience non- or late payment of already low wages, compulsory overtime, poor working conditions, occupational injuries, and sometimes even physical intimidation.² Over time, this has led to mounting resistance by workers, even rural workers who are stereotypically considered controllable, obedient, and passive, and victims of the export-oriented development strategy, poor labor legal system, and collusion between local governments and capitalists. This has inspired an increasing amount of research on Chinese workers from various perspectives, including the labor process in factories, impacts of the broader political economic transformation of capitalist development, the everyday life of migrant workers, control within factories, and the creation of proletariats and the formation of the working class. Also, as China is large and unevenly developed, the varieties of worker resistance have aroused scholars’ curiosity. Influential factors such as labor regulation institutions, forms of ownership, and geographic location are included in the interpretation framework.

This article draws the development perspective into the framework in order to explore the everyday resistance strategies of migrant workers and their effects on shaping regional labor relations. It first discusses the development pathways and formation of power relations between local states, capitalists, and workers that influence the proletarianization process of garment industry workers. Then, based on empirical fieldwork