

Chinese Worker's Livelihood Strategies: A Zhejiang Case Study in the Garment Industry

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ABSTRACT: This article evaluates the possibilities of individual agency in the case of a group of workers employed by a large garment factory in Zhejiang Province. The issue of workers' ability to exercise power is tested by two sets of facts: workers' job histories and workers' household expenses. The author argues that workers' agency is largely dependent upon gender, age, place of origin, and living arrangements. Workers' main power is the possibility to quit a job. The overall conclusion is that agency remains limited by the precariousness of workers' lives from a lifelong perspective.

KEYWORDS: China, workers, agency, tactics, strategies, garment industry, livelihood.

Chinese labour is the object of a wide-ranging literature that covers the topic from many angles. Most of it deals with the new working class that emerged 30 years ago as a consequence of China's integration into the global economy, the Chinese state's strategies to attract foreign capital, and the massive flow of inland rural residents to coastal provinces. Thanks to its abundant, cheap, and docile migrant workforce, China then became the world's factory. A despotic labour regime (Lee 1999) was gradually set-up in the 1990s, characterised by piece wages, long working hours, informality, weakened unions, and discrimination according to gender and place of origin. Foreign as well as Chinese companies took advantage of the vulnerability of rural migrants under the apartheid-like urban household registration system, a legacy of the Maoist period. The Smith and Pun model of "dormitory labour regime" (2006, 2007) has been helpful in understanding the distinctiveness of the Chinese case in the globalised capitalist world as employers exercise power not only on the shop floor but also over employees' after-hours activities.

Yet, the situation of the Chinese working class has undergone dramatic transformations. In the 1990s, workers from the countryside were employed only temporarily in factories, and almost all were young, poorly paid, and exploited, many of them being young female workers. But as labour shortages have developed since the mid-2000s and as restrictions against residing in China's small- and medium-sized cities have relaxed, workers are not as vulnerable as they were in previous decades. Because of the imbalance between supply and demand of labour in coastal regions and the improvement of the economic situation in the countryside, the new generations of migrant workers are no longer willing to work under any and all conditions. More workers are older, married, and have children. Some have settled with their families on a permanent basis near their workplace. Because of labour shortages, industries that used to prefer employing only

female workers have had to accept male workers. According to the latest figures produced by the National Bureau of Statistics (2019), 65% of migrant workers are male and 10% have a higher education diploma.

As a consequence of increased labour activism and collective organised actions in the 2010s, a series of new public policies have improved legal protection of the working class. The fixing of a minimum wage in 2004 has also led to a significant increase in workers' wages. This has led Chan and Hui (2017) to defend a Marxist analysis of the state, an actor they consider neither all-powerful nor independent, and favourable to the interests of capital without being a direct instrument of the capitalists.

Sharing their life with their spouse and children and aspiring to some privacy, workers are becoming reluctant to be accommodated on factory premises and prefer to live independently, either renting or in rare cases buying their place of residence.¹ Thus, compared to the early 1990s, workers' everyday lives have greatly evolved. Since it is no longer possible to perceive Chinese workers as unilaterally subjugated to structural and institutional forces, Kaxton Siu (2017) suggests qualifying the new modes of domination over Chinese factory workers as a form of "conciliatory despotism," combining coercive power with workers' strategies. This has a methodological consequence. Because the dormitory system has been eroded and factory management doesn't keep an eye on employees' after-hours activities, understanding the workers' situation implies paying more attention to social and material life outside of the factory (Siu 2015). Because today the workers' lifestyle is overall different from the after-work lives of migrant workers in the 1990s, it is necessary to pay attention to workers' lives outside the factory complex. This is what induces us to look into workers' livelihood strategies.

1. According to the National Bureau of Statistics' latest survey (2019), one third of migrant workers live in dormitories and about the same percentage rent their accommodation.

Labour agency has been conceptualised almost solely in terms of collective forms of organising workers' resistance. In the Chinese case, because of the increasing number of collective actions in the 2000s, a large literature argues in favour of the growing empowerment of the working class. Protests used to aim at defending individual workers' rights; then they called for collective bargaining (Chan 2010; Pringle 2016). The development of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) for the defence of workers' interests also contributed to a reversal of the relationship between labour and capital (Franceschini 2014; Froissart 2018). Since 2012, the political environment has significantly deteriorated, and the Party-state has gradually taken back the space it previously conceded. The repression has led to the disappearance of almost all NGOs engaged in both rights' protection and collective bargaining (Franceschini and Lin 2019). To resolve conflicts, local authorities now rely mainly on violence and coercion.

In this paper, inspired by debates among labour geographers, I shift away from a resistance-focused approach to agency, understood here as both the intention and the practice of acting for one's own self-interest or the interest of others (Castree *et al.* 2004: 159–60). Borrowing this definition, Ben Rogaly (2009: 1977) calls for more attention paid to "everyday micro-struggles over space and time." The aim is to look at everyday informal individual practices through which labourers construct their lives. These strategies, sometimes merely tactics, shape opportunities and possibilities and constitute forms of agency. In so doing, workers are considered actors rather than mere reactors (Herod 2001). Moving away from agency as merely reactive or responsive, i.e. resisting or reshaping the "built environment" produced by capitalism (Harvey 1976), I consider workers "as proactive agents actually capable of shaping the built environment themselves as part of the process of their own self-reproduction" (Herod 2001: 29).

This paper endeavours to assess how much, in a changing context, Chinese workers are able to carve out space and time for agency. They are not seen as passive subjects of exploitation by global capital but are, at some point and under certain conditions, able to elaborate strategies to force their way to better terms and conditions. Such forms of labour agency are neither collective nor formally institutionalised yet reveal workers' ability to act and even shape the landscape within which capital operates, paying particular attention to specific factors framing agency such as age, gender, skills, place of origin and migration, marital status, and living arrangements (Pun *et al.* 2020: 750).

I classify workers' actions into three categories: tactics, strategies, and projects.² Tactics, analysed by Michel de Certeau (1984), are short-term choices made at random without clear awareness of the rules of the game and an overall vision. Tactics can lead to the development of a rationality in purpose and the emergence of long-term strategies such as settling in a locality. Life projects – the commitment to a professional career, buying a car or a house, starting a family – are irreversible and imply long-term and lasting investments. The project defines the objectives implemented by strategies. These three types of strategic actions are complementary and articulated by households. The tactics-strategies-projects trilogy allows us to go beyond a binary opposition between objective adjustment and subjective consent to understand the complexity of the articulation of different types of households' actions under multiple socioeconomic constraints.

The question of how much power workers have to shape their lives on the shop floor and outside the factory is raised in the case of the garment industry. Though the Chinese ready-to-wear industry is undergoing major changes, China is still the world's largest producer and exporter of textiles and clothing. Some players are leaving the industry to invest in more

lucrative sectors. Others are relocating production to countries in Southeast Asia or East Africa, where labour is cheaper and workers more submissive. However, the industry still employs a large workforce in factories as well as in family workshops in urban and rural areas (Guiheux 2015). Instead of looking at collective action (Franceschini 2020), I focus on individual strategies, considering decisions taken by the workers themselves, sometimes together with their family members, related to two issues: choosing a job and managing the household finances.³ The individual is here understood in the broad sense of the worker and their household.

Whereas most research is done in Guangdong Province,⁴ this paper investigates workers' capacity to exert power on the basis of a dozen interviews carried in October 2017 in Zhejiang Province. The investigated factory (hereafter called Factory One) employs hundreds of workers, male and female, of local origin and outsiders. The diversity of workers in terms of origins is of particular interest since most literature usually focuses on migrant workers only. The heterogeneity of workers allows us to test the role of birthplace, gender, and age in shaping workers' agency.

The paper starts with a presentation of the factory, its workers, and the methodology. Then, in order to assess how much individual workers are able to make choices, I use data collected during the interviews on two series of facts. First, I look at workers' careers, how often they change jobs and for what reasons. One's career path is a way to approach the subjectivity of workers and evaluate how they relate to work. Second, moving out of the factory itself, I look at workers' material lives by analysing their budgets and expenses.

A case study: The Silk Road group in Lakeview City

In 2017, through personal connections, I was able to negotiate access to a group of workers in a city here called Lakeview, with a long history in the textile industry. They are employed by a large conglomerate, the Silk Road group, that used to be a state-owned enterprise and became a joint-stock company in 1999. The core of its activities is still textiles, but it has diversified with investments in real estate and more recently in private education. Friends introduced me to the group's main manager, who is also a member of the local Political Consultative Conference. I had met him a few months before in Lakeview to introduce the aims of the interviews, and he accepted a second visit over a one-week period.

Factory One employs 300 workers: 250 blue-collars and 50 white-collars in charge of technical issues and management tasks. The number of workers is declining, as it previously peaked at 480. Among the workers, 70% are women, 30% are men; 20% are local workers and 80% are "outsiders."⁵ Working conditions are far from the image of giant sweatshops where hundreds of workers labour in the same room. They are equally far from the Huzhou (Zhejiang) garment workshops filmed by Wang Bing in *Bitter Money* (*Ku qian* 苦钱) in 2016. Here, workshops are brightly lit; they are kept clean and tidy, and the temperature is not so high, as rooms are air-conditioned – so

2. I borrow the tactics-strategies-projects trilogy from authors researching the mobility practices of poor households (Jouffe 2007; Jouffe *et al.* 2015).

3. The distinction between individual and collective action is often blurred. For instance, migration processes "reflect complex combinations of individual and household decisions within increasingly institutionalized social networks" (Coe and Jordhus-Lier 2010: 217).

4. A notable exception is Fan Lulu (2016).

5. I will not call them "migrant workers," as the term used during the interviews by informants was "outsider" (*waidiren* 外地人). This type of self-identification is as much a sign of the appropriation of local political discourse as it is the expression of the subjective feeling of workers.

are the factory dormitories. All the workers sign a labour contract, and wages are paid on time on the 20th of each month. The formality of the employment relationship – whereas many garment workshops employ informal workers – is related to the size of the company and its overseas clients, who regularly scrutinise working conditions (Sum and Pun 2005). The company contributes to the five mandatory insurance schemes – pension fund, medical insurance, industrial injury insurance, unemployment insurance, and maternity insurance – and to a housing fund. Among the informants, there are several couples in which both husband and wife work in the factory (sometimes having met their spouse there); there are also older workers whose son or daughter is employed by the Silk Road group. One of the informants has worked all her life for the group, as has the factory manager, who started as a standard line worker before climbing up the employment ladder.

Depending on the tasks performed, wage calculations vary. Standard line workers are paid at piece rate whereas those in charge of storage, for instance, are not. The highest piece wages are paid to those working at the final ironing workshop because of the physical pain and the risks they endure, standing all day in a steamy atmosphere. Besides wages, there are various bonuses, with the aim of encouraging workers to remain in the factory. The annual bonus is given on the first working day after the New Year's holiday and is based on the number of days worked during the past year. At the end of June, there is a half-month salary bonus. At the end of the year, there is a one-month salary bonus. There is a transparent policy regarding wage increases every year. In another form of subsidy, meals are provided free at lunch and at a cost of 3 RMB for dinner.

Regular daily working hours are eight hours, from 8 a.m. to 11:20 a.m. and 11:50 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., with a half-hour lunch break at the canteen. The factory runs six days a week, which makes a total of 48 hours, although there is also overtime work. From Monday to Saturday, Wednesdays excepted, there is an evening shift from 5 to 9 p.m. In fact, total actual working hours are 68 hours a week. The only day off is Sunday, but that can also become a working day when needed (then the company gives the following Monday off).

During my stay, I was able to interview ten workers, the factory manager, and two clerks. All interviews took place without being overseen by the management. They lasted between half an hour and one hour and a half. Among the ten workers, named I2 to I11 in the article, there were three men and seven women, four workers born in Lakeview, six outsiders (from Anhui, Sichuan, and Jiangxi Provinces), married and single individuals, with various levels of seniority within the enterprise (Table 1). Workers were selected by the management, and I was not able to interview young ones in their early twenties.⁶ They were frontline workers with the exception of two who supervised a production line. In charge of cutting, sewing, ironing, and storing, they were mostly machine operators focusing on one or two processes requiring limited skills. Such workers are replaceable and mostly paid on a piecework basis. The biographical interviews were conducted in a consciously open manner. The biographical perspective allows us to understand the changing experiences of individuals in their daily lives, what they see as important, and how to provide interpretations of the accounts they give of their past, present, and future. It enables us to grasp history and biography and the relations between the two (Mills 1970: 11).

Table 1. List of ten workers interviewed

	Age	Gender	Place of birth	Position	Seniority*	Number of employers in career	Home ownership in Lakeview
I2	30	M	Lakeview	Cutting workshop	4	3	Yes
I3	50	W	Sichuan	Cutting workshop	8	4	Yes
I4	29	W	Jiangxi	Production line team leader	10	6	No
I5	31	W	Lakeview	Cutting workshop	3	6	Yes
I6	32	M	Anhui	Ironing workshop	3	3	No
I7	28	M	Sichuan	Production line operator	3	4	No
I8	52	W	Lakeview	Storage	34	1	Yes
I9	26	W	Anhui	Production line team leader	5	4	Yes
I10	48	W	Lakeview	Ironing workshop	10	7	Yes
I11	36	W	Sichuan	Production line operator	9	7	Yes

* Number of years at the Silk Road Group

6. The age of the informants may seem older than expected, the youngest being already 26 years old. The sample can be compared to the age distribution of all employees in 2010, the only year for which data are available: 44% were less than 30 (40% in the sample), 28% were between 31 and 40 (30% in the sample), 28% were older than 41 (30% in the sample).

Workers' careers

I first look at the configuration of workers' careers, assuming that career paths reveal the plans and strategies pursued. Looking at job history enables testing the hypothesis that, far from being passive and atomised individuals submissive to global capital, workers may be able to work out individual strategies under certain circumstances. Changing jobs on the labour market may appear as a succession of moves into which workers throw themselves at random, almost blindly, a mere tactic. Gradually, they discover economic calculation, the art of sacrificing immediate profit for a more important future goal. If young, low-skilled workers mostly experience their employment relationship with tactics focused on the present, they can develop a rationality in purpose and create strategies and projects.

Almost all interviewees, independent of age or gender, have worked for various employers. Hopping from one job to another was always a decision taken by the worker, but in a few cases the employer went bankrupt or was closed down following an administrative decision – excessive pollution being mentioned once. According to the factory manager, about one fifth of the workforce is renewed every year, which is quite a low percentage.⁷ A second career feature is that most workers have worked for the garment industry in various positions. Some started as apprentices in rural tailor shops before joining small workshops or larger factories in urban areas; some received special training at the end of their schooling or even have attended private institution courses during their career. There are a few exceptions of workers changing from another industry.

"Mobility power"

The main space for opportunity is the local job market, which allows workers to change employers when they are dissatisfied. "Mobility power" is the power to move between firms, to quit one employer to another; according to Chris Smith, "this ability to change employers to overcome or escape a problem is special to capitalism as a political economy" (2006: 390). I first give examples of mobility cases before reviewing problems leading to this choice.

None of the interviewees is worried about finding a new job, because in Lakeview, as in most coastal provinces, job supply exceeds demand. I2 is a 30-year-old outsider male worker from Anhui Province. He started working at age 15, then was employed in a middle-sized factory in Wuxi, Jiangsu Province, where he remained for a very long period of 13 years holding various positions. When he arrived in Lakeview in 2014, he first worked a few days for a small workshop before finding a job at Factory One. According to him, "There were many garment factories where I could have worked in Lakeview." He used to be in charge of cutting the fabric in a previous factory and is now employed at the final ironing workshop: "I can cut, I can iron. *As long as it is a garment factory, I can have a meal.*" So it's easy to find a job."

When workers are dissatisfied for any number of reasons, there is always the possibility of exit because of the favourable job market. The present situation sharply contrasts with the previous decade. I11 is a 36-year-old female worker from Sichuan. After a one-year apprenticeship in a tailor shop in her native village, she got a job in a male pants factory in Chengdu. At that time, she was working extremely long hours with lots of overtime, often from 8 a.m. to 12 p.m.:

At that time [1998-2002], I was working 10, 15 or even 16 hours a day. It was really tough. But at that time, China was poor and backward. *If I wanted to earn money, I had no choice.*

She embraces the official discourse on the backwardness of the country back then, which left migrant workers with no other choice than to work extremely hard, but also implies that this is no longer the case and that today she has several options.

She remained in the Chengdu factory for four years, then moved to Shenzhen (Guangdong Province) where she was recruited to work in a shoe factory for one year. In 2003-2005, she was back in her native village, where she got married and gave birth. After two years working again in the same male pants factory in Chengdu, she arrived in Lakeview in 2007. On the recommendation of a cousin, she found a job in a garment factory. Two years later, she was recruited to work in Factory One, first as a production line operator and later as a line leader. In 2017, she had worked in the factory for nine years.

Albert O. Hirschman (1970) showed that social actors have two ways to react when dissatisfied: either through "exit" – withdrawing from the organisation – or "voice" – making their grievance heard. In China, migrant workers have long favoured the "exit" strategy, as they had no commitment to a particular factory. Starting in the 2010s, notably because of tensions on the labour market and their long-term settlement in cities, "voice" – i.e. protests – became a more common way to express discontent.⁹ In this case, because of the constraints on collectively raising their voice – although one worker mentioned having taken part in a strike – they would choose the individual exit strategy. Labour mobility offers workers a means to avoid the worst forms of exploitation and gives them access to new sources of livelihood; it is a common tactic and a form of agency (Rogaly 2009: 1978-80).

The conflict between work and family life

The first reason repeatedly mentioned by several female informants for quitting a job was excessive working hours.¹⁰ I5 is a local woman who has had five different jobs since she started working at the age of 18 in 2004. One year later, she changed job because of exhaustion. Regular working hours were 8 a.m. to 9:30 p.m., and could be extended to 11 p.m. during the peak season. Sometimes, she had to work overnight until the following day at 12 a.m. In her second job, her working hours were still long, but more reasonable: from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m., with occasional overtime from 5:30 to 8 p.m. A few years later, in 2013, as a young mother, she took a salesclerk job. She worked from 8:30 a.m. to 10 p.m. every other day. For a period of time, this was manageable because her son was taken care of by her parents, who lived with her. But then the couple decided to move out on their own, so she needed to be at home earlier at the

7. In some factories, the yearly turnover can reach 100% (Unger and Siu 2019: 767). Various factors may explain the low turnover in this case study. The legacies of a former state-owned company and the requirements of well-known international clients press for decent salaries and better advantages. The local government is also eager to present itself as progressive, notably when it comes to protecting outsider workers' interests.

8. Emphasis by the author.

9. On Chinese workers' frequency of "exit" and "voice" strategies, see Chan (2010); Unger and Siu (2019).

10. Whereas most of the existing literature focuses on split households (Siu and Unger 2020), I focus on how female workers living together with their husband and children are bound to choose between work and family duties.

end of the afternoon. Her position at Factory One – to be responsible for preparing fabrics before sewing – doesn't include overtime and allows her to do this. The key issue is the conflict between work and family life. In this case, changing jobs is part of a rational strategy to cope with family responsibilities.

I9 is an outsider female worker from Anhui Province, aged 26 and married to a local worker she met at Factory One. After getting married, she gave birth to twin girls; that's why she quit the factory and worked as a clerk for a small trading company. At that time, she worked only eight hours a day, six days a week without overtime. "With this job, I can take care of the family." Once her daughters were a bit older, they could be taken care of by their grandparents, and that's why she went back to Factory One. In the near future, she wants to be able to take care of her daughters when they come back from school at the end of the day. Nowadays, her parents-in-law take care of the children, who attend kindergarten. But once they enter primary school, she will need to be home at the end of the day. So she is considering two options. The first one would be to change to another department in the factory that doesn't require overtime. The second option would be to get an office job: "I would have more time to look after the kids and more time for myself."

The issue is the sustainability of such a labour regime. These working conditions do not allow young parents to take care of a child unless there is a relative in charge of raising them. This is possible for local workers since their parents live locally. For outsiders, one well-known option is to leave their children behind in their native village with their grandparents. When asked if she is considering looking for another job, I5 answers that she would look for a job that is not in the garment industry:

Working-hours are too flexible and there is too much overtime (...). We are only the three of us at home! My husband's parents are not here, neither are mine. Who will cook for our kid? *We cannot take care of anything in life.*

Trying to regain control over labour time is a clear strategy with a long-term objective – such as taking care of a young child.

Inadequate labour contract and wages

In some other circumstances, workers can change jobs because of the conditions of employment; they are leaving an employer because of excessive levels of exploitation. I5 quit her job as a salesclerk partly because she had no labour contract and didn't contribute to any social insurance. She explicitly mentioned that she then looked for a job where she would enjoy the benefit of social insurance, and that was the case at Factory One.

Workers are quite aware of the level of wages they can claim. I5 is in fact considering leaving the company. Her team used to have three workers, but there are only two left to achieve the same tasks, with the consequence of an increasing workload, while her salary has remained the same:

The salary is still the same as before, and it is not so much, so I am considering leaving over the New Year (...). *If they raise the salary, then I will definitely stay here. If not, I will definitely leave.*

This suggests that I5 may not be in a position to negotiate an increase of wages, which leaves her the exit option.

I6 does the final ironing, a physical and risky job. Would he consider leaving that job and look for another one?

I don't know of a better position, so I don't plan to leave for the time being. Moving to another city or another factory is possible, but you have to consider the salary and it is about the same. I am used to my present job, I am familiar with it, I don't want to leave for now. *Only if I get a better salary would I leave.*

His statement suggests that he is very much aware of the opportunities available on the job market and the salary levels in the industry.

Learning new skills

Another factor leading workers to quit a job and look for another one may be the search for opportunities to learn new skills. I7 is an outsider male worker from Sichuan, aged 28. For his first job, he was employed in a local restaurant in his native town; he then realised that this kind of position is fine when you are young but when you grow older, "you need opportunities to open your own restaurant and become the boss," and also that "he wanted to learn something." He then quit and looked for a job in the garment industry to learn how to make clothes. He arrived in Lakeview because relatives were already working there; he worked in a garment factory making male suits. After four years, he decided to leave because he didn't learn anything new: "The suits were all the same, and I stopped learning." In 2017, he had been working for Factory One for three years. One reason that keeps him in this factory is the great variety of clothes being tailored:

I have learnt quite a lot. (...) Because we are doing fashion clothes, we have a wide range of clients. Many garments are different from suits. There are many patterns (...). It's been so many years since I came to this factory, but the harvest is quite big.

Here, I recognise the figure of the migrant worker as an entrepreneur of himself, who should challenge themselves and improve their quality, a social type that has been actively promoted by official narratives for decades (Guiheux 2007). It also shows that some workers are subjectively able to consider their career as a cumulative process of acquiring knowledge or know-how. In capitalising on experience and qualifications, they demonstrate an ability to consider long temporalities. In so doing, workers have moved from a tactical to a strategic posture. The initial choice of a job may not be part of a coherent project, but in retrospect and through a subsequent reconstruction, it may appear to be realistic and well adapted to a long-term strategy.

Other reasons mentioned to explain job hopping were related to life cycle and to place of residence. As expected, several female workers getting married and then giving birth would stop working for a while to take care of their children. It may also be because of that special period in their life, if they are outsiders, they may travel back to their native village or their husband's. I8, a local female worker, left the factory for more than a year at the time of her wedding and her first pregnancy. Stopping work and leaving an employer is part of women's lifecycle. Another reason is related to mobility and convenience: work has to be close to the place of residence. I5 quit her second job because the factory moved to another location far from home. I10, a 48-year-old local female worker, chose her first job in a small metal factory employing a few dozen workers merely because it was close to home, a 20-minute bicycle ride.

Constraints on space mobility

Informants also mentioned factors that would limit their ability to leave an employer even if they were dissatisfied with working conditions or wages. Their agency is constrained. Age is one factor. I7 has considered changing jobs and leaving the factory, but has not done so:

I have been in this industry for a total of eight years. Yes, I have thought of leaving, but didn't do so. When you are 20 years old, you can choose what you want to do, but *now I am close to 30. Staying in a stable place for a long time* is the right thing to do. I can't run everywhere.

I7 has developed a sense of responsibility, which makes him less mobile than when he was younger. He is married, has two daughters, and has bought a property in his hometown with a loan he has to repay each month. Not surprisingly, the exit strategy is easier for a young single worker in his twenties who has not yet made any commitments to a family or a bank. Confronted by intolerable work conditions while encumbered with a family or a bank loan makes seeking employment in another location no longer an easy option.

From the career accounts gathered, exit appears to be the most common strategy adopted by workers willing to resist exploitation – excessively long working hours, insufficient wages, no employment contract, inconvenient location, etc. In a context of excess labour demand over supply, in a locality with a strong presence of garments enterprises, resigning seems an easy option. However, in Factory One, if workers have one day off on Sunday and one free evening on Wednesday, they still have long working hours, which makes it difficult, especially for young mothers, to raise their children. Local workers have a clear advantage, since they can rely on their parents to take care of the kids, whereas outsiders – unless they belong to the second generation of migrants and their parents are in Lakeview – have to rely on other options such as leaving their children in their native town. Earning a decent living and also having a family life is still a challenge.

Another important lesson of these career narratives is that, in the Lakeview context, some workers are able to project their futures and elaborate strategies and projects. Aware of their social rights, they look for employers who contribute to social insurance schemes that would protect them in case of unemployment, illness, maternity, and retirement. I have also encountered the case of one worker who is concerned about the skills he learns when he accepts a position, a sign that he has aspirations for his future professional life.

Workers' lifestyles

Labour agency is located both within and outside the sphere of production, as workers are also family members and consumers (Coe and Jordhus-Lier 2010: 218). To approach their daily lifestyles, I raised questions about their budgets and expenses. Looking at workers' budgets – through an established way of analysing workers' lifestyles dating back to Frédéric Le Play – is not commonly used in China labour studies, with the exception of Kaxton Siu (2015). Budgets reveal workers' life projects: getting married, raising a child, buying a car or a house. Based on the data I gathered, I build a typology that is a function of both age and place of origin, identifying three types of workers: local workers in their late twenties and early thirties, outsider workers of the same age, and mature

workers. Whereas gender plays a key role in shaping workers' careers, household lifestyles depend on age and place of birth.

Local workers in their late twenties and early thirties

I2 is a young married local male worker aged 30. His wife stopped working two years before when she gave birth to twins, so he is the sole breadwinner in the couple. They are exempted from heavy financial burdens since his parents gave him both an apartment and a car, and they don't have to contribute to their parents' living expenses. I2 was willing to talk about how he spends the 4,100 RMB he earns each month. Half of this salary goes to his wife who is in charge of all the expenses for their twins; when the twins were babies, the parents spent a lot on diapers and milk powder, both costly items. The second most important expenses are groceries and clothes bought once a week (20% of the expenses). Then there is the cost of a Sunday meal out. The rest of the income is saved (17%).

I5 is a 31-year-old local female worker. She earns around 3,400 RMB a month and her husband around 5,600 RMB – figures that should be compared to the minimum local monthly wage of 1,800 RMB and the average monthly wage of 4,698 RMB. The husband has a side job as a taxi driver at night and on off days, making an additional 4,000 RMB a month, so the couple's total income is about 13,000 RMB. One fourth of the family resources is spent on daily living expenses – groceries, clothes, and other necessities. On top of that, there are expenses related to the husband's second job (insurance and gas for a second-hand car bought from a relative); the couple is considering buying a brand-new car since it would be a comparative advantage for the taxi business. They bought an apartment with a 25-year mortgage in 2011, and pay 10% of their income every month on the loan. Almost the same amount is spent on their only child for school fees, school uniforms, books, daily breakfast and lunch outside home. As in the previous case, the family has one meal out a week on Sundays, a kind of leisure that can be considered a form of agency over both time and space. They give a small amount of money to their parents, usually over the New Year. The rest of their income, about one third, is saved for their son's future to cover the cost of his studies and later his marriage.

Compared to the previous couple, the share of savings is much higher, probably because they are anticipating the time when expenses related to their son will be higher. If I add the share of savings to the share of the money repaid to the bank, it is more than 40% of the monthly income that is saved.

Outsider workers in their late twenties and early thirties

For outsiders about the same age, married and with one child, the amount of wages saved is strikingly higher, a sign of great uncertainty towards the present and the future. They are not in the position to enjoy their present life by spending money.

I6 is a outsider male worker, aged 32, who lives in the company's dorm while his wife and two children (ten and three years old) have remained in their native village. He saves about half of his income. Here is how he manages his personal budget:

I don't plan to spend. *There is not much money at home, so I have to save.* At home, my wife takes care of the two children and spends a lot of money. Children drink milk powder. *I don't buy any big thing.* I can't make much money in a year, so *I can't be extravagant when it comes to spending money.*

His personal expenses are limited to meals, some clothes, cigarettes, and telecommunications. He lives in the factory dorm, sharing a room with five other workers – the room has three bunk beds – and common bathroom and kitchen. He describes this type of life as temporary; a few years from now, when the two girls are older, his wife will join him, and the two of them will make money while the girls remain with their grandparents. There is no possibility to improve things at the present time, but he is able to project on a future when he and his wife will be able to increase the family income.

I7 is another example of an outsider worker, aged 28. He is married and the father of a five-year-old daughter who lives with her grandparents in their native Sichuan village. The couple doesn't want to live in the factory's dorm – as a family, they would have only one room, "too noisy and too dirty." They rent an apartment in town and have bought a property in Sichuan. After buying food, paying rent and utilities, the rest is either sent to the grandparents or saved. They spend only one third of their income on their daily life in Lakeview, putting two thirds aside.

Compared to the local workers mentioned earlier, these outsiders, who are the same age and like them are married and in charge of young children, have many more burdens: accommodation in Lakeview (either renting or buying a place with a bank loan) and sending money to their elderly parents who are taking care of and raising their children. All of them have to prepare for the future, mostly described in terms of the cost of raising their children (education and finding a spouse). A key differentiating factor is the financial relationship between this generation and their parents. In the first case, the young couples may receive financial support from their parents (for instance in the form of apartment ownership), and in the second case, they have to send money to their parents in their native village. As a consequence, the leeway for discretionary spending, considered a form of agency, varies greatly.

Mature workers in their fifties

I end this typology with two mature female workers at the end of their careers, one local and one outsider. I8 is a 52-year-old local woman who retired at 50 – the legal retirement age for women – but is still working while waiting for her husband to reach 60, as she doesn't want to remain idle at home by herself. The couple's income has several sources: her pension, her present salary, and her husband's salary – a total of 11,100 RMB a month. They live with their grown-up daughter who is employed and not yet married. The family owns two properties: one bought in 1998 and another bought recently, for which they repay 3,000 RMB a month on the mortgage. The couple plans to sell the old apartment in the future, and I8 confesses that once it is sold, "they won't have to worry about money anymore," a sentence I had never heard before and that suggests an undisputed financial ease.

I3 is an outsider female worker, aged 50. She and her husband have an income about the same as I8 – 10,000 RMB a month. They have very few compulsory expenses. They have already bought their apartment. Their only son, 29 years old, is employed in another factory of the same group and is financially independent. The couple is able to save about half of their income: "*Our consumption has nothing special. I don't spend much money. I spend between one or two thousand [RMB].*" The only large expense concerns health issues: "When the elderly become ill, and when they pass away, this will cost money (...) and also in case of bad health on our side." She gives an example of her father-in-law passing away recently, and for which they had to spend tens of thousands of RMB.

At an older age, when children are married and financially independent, financial insecurity is generated by the cost of illness, either for oneself or for relatives.

When it comes to consumption practices, the reviewed cases reveal that workers are able to make a certain number of choices. Some can make long-term projects and afford to own the place where they live and sometimes a car, and to enjoy a few outside meals. However, this capacity for agency outside the workplace is also heavily constrained by family duties, which explains the need for a very high level of savings: providing for the children's education and marriage, as well as their parents' possible illness.

Conclusion

This paper offers empirical data for understanding the economic and social situations endured by Chinese workers, and the individual strategies they negotiate to cope with it, shedding light on how "people with very limited material means make viable lives" (Rogaly 2009: 10). The careers and the consumption practices of a group of workers reveal that opportunities for agency are shaped by gender, age, place of origin, and living arrangements.

On the issue of the degree of control of their working life, the main power in the hands of dissatisfied workers is their ability to change employers, the exit strategy. It is strongly related to the state of the labour market, which has been favourable to workers since the mid-2000s. In a context where labour offers exceed the supply of workers, and in a locality where there are many garment factories, quitting a job is always a possible immediate tactic, since there is no fear of unemployment.

Workers have a knowledge of local market conditions, as well as of their social rights, and they are able to choose between several options. Then tactics may become strategies. A mother could prefer to be employed by a small workshop without a labour contract along flexible hours while she has to take care of a young child and needs to spend more time at home. Once her child goes to school, she may consider working in a larger factory, with a formal labour contract and the associated advantages in terms of social insurance. Working hours may be longer, but the income would be higher. Workers, and especially women in charge of family duties, have to prioritise between more time for family life versus a more formal and stable job. Priorities – controlling labour time or increasing income – vary according to gender and age. Another feature of the cases is how workers relate to their own futures and commit themselves to long-term projects. Some use their professional experiences to seize opportunities to accumulate skills. Having the ability to project oneself in the future, to elaborate projects for oneself and the family, is a form of agency.

Available options also depend on the workers' place of origin or living arrangements. Consumption practices reveal the importance of current and future costs of raising a child and leading them to adulthood. Local workers benefit from the resources of their parents. They may live nearby or even together, and when parents are retired, they can take care of the children so the workers can spend more time at the factory. The latter may also have benefitted from financial transfers from their parents; for instance, one local couple did not have to carry the burden of buying a place of residence, since the groom was given an apartment before his wedding, a common pattern among the urban middle class (Davis 2014). Outsider workers, on the other hand, have to struggle to find other arrangements. The easiest

option is to live in the factory dorm if they can bear the lack of privacy and the small size of the allocated space. Other options that carry a much heavier financial load are renting or buying a place.

When it comes to lifestyles, it is striking that even mature workers who have grown-up children and have solved the issue of property ownership still have a high level of savings. Young and mature, male and female, local and outsider workers restrict their consumption and put a large part of their income on the side. They save to cover future expenses for themselves, and for their parents and children: their elders' and their own illnesses, and a better future for their children in terms of education and finding a spouse. Because they have to take care of both ascendants and descendants, it is clear that workers have not joined the frenzy for consumption that characterises the Chinese middle classes. Only a few types of workers are able to spend part of their income beyond non-compulsory expenses: young ones not yet married and living with their parents, middle-aged ones living close to their parents who continue to provide them with financial support, and older ones who already own property and do not need to support their adult offspring. Chinese workers share with the middle classes the concern over buying housing, taking care of their parents, marrying off their children and financing their education, but there is not much left in their budget for leisure and

pleasure spending. When it comes to consumption practices, workers are still socially marginalised. In the end, because of economic and social constraints, workers' agency or the power of control over their lives remains limited.

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