

Afterword

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It is a great pleasure for us to see that the notion of a "multiplication of labour," originally elaborated in our book *Border as Method* (2013), is spurring research on labour in China. The notion emerged from a critical engagement with theories of the international division of labour and a related attempt to develop a critique of the political economy of borders in the current global conjuncture. China plays quite an important role in the analysis we pursue in the book. On the one hand, we look at the way in which internal migration has deeply transformed the composition of the labour force over the last decades, particularly focusing on the management of mobility predicated upon the *hukou* system. On the other hand, we carefully investigate the proliferation of special economic zones in the country, emphasising the ensuing multiplication and heterogenisation of economic, legal, and even cultural conditions of labour and life. Following the lead of such scholars as Pun Ngai and Wang Hui, we attempt to shed light on the specificity of the bordering processes resulting from such a situation and at the same time to map the multifarious practices of workers' resistance and struggle.

There is a need to underscore that our notion of "multiplication of labour" aims at providing a theoretical framework for the analysis of what we describe as the explosion of the "standard labour relation," which means a system of labour relations centred upon "free" wage labour.¹ This is not the place to reconstruct the history of "free" wage labour and to discuss the critiques that have targeted this notion, ranging from Marxist to postcolonial and feminist critiques. Suffice it to say that it steadily became the standard labour relationship in the West in the framework of processes of industrialisation also under the pressure of workers' struggles. While in many parts of the world it always coexisted with other forms of regulation of labour relation (forced as well as informal), the generalisation of "free" wage labour was promoted by discourses and projects of "development," and although it never became statistically hegemonic, it worked as a norm for the organisation of the labour market even beyond Europe and the West.

What we call the explosion of the "standard labour relation" is part and parcel of the dramatic reorganisation of capitalism over the last decades. It took place, although with different characteristics, in different parts of the world, beyond the great divide between the Global North and the Global South. While "free" wage labour deployed powerful homogenising tendencies with respect to the composition of the working class (although we do not forget that they were predicated on the reproduction of a panoply of hierarchies and of patriarchy), what we witness today is a huge increase of the role played by heterogeneity in that composition (which means, for instance, by race and gender, nation and migratory status, legal conditions and "skills"). There is a need to take stock of such a powerful shift, regarding both the working of contemporary capitalism and the possibilities of struggle and organisation for social justice. And this is even more urgent in a situation in which labour has more and more cooperative features while its fragmentation works as an obstacle for the acknowledgment and political

valorisation of that cooperative dimension.

When we started our research for *Border as Method*, China was still widely considered the "world's factory"; manufacturing and export appeared to be the keys to its development. Such a notion as "peripheral Fordism" was still circulating in critical debates, and many people looked at the Chinese working class as the heir of the Fordist working class in the West. While we emphasised the relevance of workers' struggles in China in the first decade of the twenty-first century, we were wary of such notions and attitudes. We rather underscored in our analysis the volatility of class formation, the heterogeneity connected with movements of internal migration, and the impact on labour of widespread processes of zoning. Today, in the framework of China's transition toward a technological superpower (that will be probably even more accelerated by the aftermath of Covid-19), it is clear that labour relations are changing and evolving in a direction that has nothing to do with the "standard labour relation." Factories continue to be crucially important for an analysis of labour in China. But they are immersed in a wider fabric of labour and cooperation that criss-crosses society as a whole and in particular the metropolitan centres. It is here that processes of intensification, diversification, and heterogenisation of labour (the three dimensions of what we call "multiplication of labour") appear in full light and deserve careful investigation.

The three essays included in this issue of *China Perspectives* make an important contribution to this task. Focusing on ethnic performers in Southwest China, Jingyu Mao takes a different angle and effectively shows the tensions surrounding the labour and life of ethnic minorities and migrants compelled to negotiate forms of "differential inclusion" in their everyday experience. Focusing on platform labour in food delivery, Ping Sun and Julie Yujie Chen join a lively debate in labour studies in many parts of the world, investigating the "volatility" of platform labour in China as well as elsewhere along the "logistical supply chain." The high degree of migrant participation in platform labour goes hand in hand with the proliferation of differences in their status (intermittent/sub-contracted/full-time). Using the notion of "contingent agency," they nevertheless describe the "workaround strategies" and the "counteractions" that foreshadow the emergence of a collective power of platform workers. Lulu Fan describes the "flexible specialisation" driven by e-platforms in the garment industry in China. She provides us with an effective instantiation of what is often discussed in terms of a "platformisation of labour" (which means of the impact of the

1. We put free in quotation marks following the usage of Marx, who emphasises the contrast between freedom of contract and the material compulsion for proletarians to "sell" their labour power. In general, we understand "free" wage labour as a contractual relation between employers and workers that lays the basis for the establishment of specific rights and protections for the latter. In the course of industrialisation, and as an effect of labour struggles, collective labour agreements further entrenched that trend, and the standard labour relation became associated with permanent employment, a set of rights, as well as benefits. For a critical assessment of "free" wage labour, see Mezzadra (2011).

operations of platforms in sectors that are not directly organised by the latter). Fan also sheds light on the ensuing diversification of labour relations, employment forms, and figures of labour.

These are pioneering pieces of work. We hope they will lay the basis for new research in the years to come.

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References

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