

Bringing Class Back In: Class Consciousness and Solidarity amongst Chinese Migrant Workers in Italy and the UK*

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ABSTRACT

The growing literature on international migration has a tendency to emphasise homogenous elements such as shared ethnic background, social network, and cultural similarities in shaping immigrants' identity. We argue that this underestimates the differences (and sometimes conflicts) of interests between ethnic employers and migrant workers and that class needs to be brought back into the studies of ethnic relationship. Based upon findings from a series of fieldwork in Veneto, Italy and East Midlands, UK, this paper contends that class consciousness has co-existed, sometimes uneasily, alongside co-ethnic and cultural relationship amongst Chinese migrant workers and has played an important part in the making of new Chinese communities. By analysing the perspectives of Chinese migrant workers and their relationship with co-ethnic entrepreneurs, this paper illustrates complex factors behind the formation, diffusion and development of class consciousness amongst Chinese migrant workers.

Key words: *international migration, Chinese migrant workers, class consciousness, labour standards, class solidarity, transnationalism.*

Introduction

The relationship between ethnicity and class is not a new topic in the rich literature on the sociology of immigration; the subject emerged together with the rise of the industrial revolution and the formation of multi-ethnic societies in industrialised nations. Some scholars have argued that class approaches have been 'the most fruitful way to study ethnicity and race' (Bonacich 1980; Wright 1997). John Rex (1986, p. 165; 171) draws attention to 'the value of an emphasis

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on class analysis as an approach to some of the major problems in race relations'. He further argues that there were two interesting areas of study. 'One was that of ethnicity as a source of difference and as a means of collective organisation in non-exploitative, non-oppressive situations. The other was that of situations in which one ethnically or racially defined group exploited or oppressed another'.

By the 1990s, as a result of growing influence of theories of globalisation and postmodernism, transnationalism gained inroads into the studies of international migration and partially led to the dearth of class analysis in the growing body of literature on immigration. Defined as 'the processes by which immigrants form and sustain multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement' (Basch et al. 1994, p. 6), transnationalism is concerned primarily with the powerful and multilayered homeland connections that have bound ethnic migrants. Transnationalists represent 'a growing number of persons who live dual lives: speaking two languages, having homes in two countries, and making a living through *continuous regular contact across national border*' (Portes et al. 1999; emphasis added). It has been a key theoretical framework dominating much of the literature over the past two decades. While recent critiques of transnationalism have pinpointed the politics of transnationalism and the important role of the state in shaping the homeland connections (or the lack of it) (Waldinger and Fitzgerald 2004; Levitt and Jaworsky 2007), critics have not dealt with the uneven impact of transnationalism upon different segments of immigrants and class politics. Transnationalism treats international migrants more or less homogeneously with an emphasis on common elements such as globalisation and international labour markets, human and social capital, and national policies. The assumption of homogeneity, however, ignores or underestimates the differences and tensions between co-ethnic employers and migrant workers in terms of value system, resource access, social behaviours and uneven distribution of income and profits, which have been reinforced by uneven effects of globalisation.

Pun and Chan (2008) have argued that China's integration into world economic system has led to 'the hollowing out of the class'; 'the lived experience of class is very acute for

Chinese workers; however, the discourse of class is seriously subdued.’ In the field of diasporic Chinese studies, class analysis has been applied only on a limited scale and with a small following amongst students of ethnic Chinese studies (Thompson 1979). Recent surveys of diasporic Chinese studies (e.g., Liu 2006; Tan and Chiu 2007) have found that class as an analytical category has been mostly absent from mainstream scholarship on immigration issues. One of the few exceptions has been the work on British Chinese society by Gregor Benton and Terence Gomez (2008), which identifies two key problems in transnational studies: they concentrate on migrants who retain homeland ties, and they are chiefly interested in the networks that facilitate the flows of capital, which in turn creates ‘a false picture of how Chinese migrants view themselves in relation to other Chinese in the world’ (Benton and Gomez 2008, p. 17). Another study (Archer and Francis 2006) uses Bourdieuan-influenced theories of social class to examine the identities, educational experiences and achievement of British Chinese pupils, thus extending ‘existing class theories through a more detailed consideration of the radicalized context of class’.

The necessity of rethinking the relationship between co-ethnic employers and migrant workers can be seen from the case of Chinese international migration in the past three decades. As more and more Chinese citizens have joined the flow of international migration, we have witnessed a rapid expansion of Chinese ethnic economies and the transition of overseas Chinese communities world-wide. According to a recent survey, new Chinese migrants originating from the PRC over the past three decades number more than 8 million (Wang and Zhuang 2011). Despite the rapid growth of high-skilled workers and Chinese international students in the last decade, many migrants are low- or un-skilled with differing migration status including a large number of illegal or irregular migrants (Gao 2010). Generally, overwhelming attention has been paid to the development and contribution from new Chinese entrepreneurs/skilled migrants to the revival of overseas Chinese nationalism and China’s integration into globalisation (Liu 2011). By contrast, less is known about Chinese migrant workers: their voices, needs, contributions, sufferings, and coping strategies. This is because the most of them are not only poor in local language, but also have little communication with and integration with local

societies. As a result, they are likely to be employed by, or dependant on, or controlled by Chinese entrepreneurs, sometimes in contexts of low labour standards and poor working conditions.

The poor working conditions amongst Chinese migrant workers in Western countries have been researched since the late 1990s. Peter Kwong (1997) examined working conditions of irregular migrant workers in Chinese owned factories in New York. K.L. Chin (1999), M.M. Chin (2005) and Yun Gao (2010) explored links between human trafficking and labour exploitation in the USA and Europe. Hsiao-Hung Pai (2008) in her book *Chinese Whispers* offered insights into working conditions amongst Chinese irregular migrant workers in the UK. Zanin and Wu (2009) compared working conditions of Chinese and Italian owned factories in textile, garment and leather sectors in Italy. Frank Pieke (2010) examined the impact of human trafficking on the working conditions of Chinese migrant workers in the UK. Wu et al. (2010) found that poor working conditions and labour exploitation were not limited to irregular migrant workers but also to legal migrant workers coerced by labour brokers and Chinese employers from the beginning of their work permit visa applications. Despite increasing awareness of the unfavourable conditions of Chinese migrant workers, however, little is known about how they perceive the poor working conditions in general, and what their responses are towards and strategies against labour exploitation, especially by the Mainland Chinese bosses who are from the same cultural, ethnic and national backgrounds.

This paper focuses on the perceptions and reactions of Chinese migrant workers to the poor working conditions within some of Chinese owned workplaces, which do not comply with the relevant labour laws and regulations of the host societies in EU countries. More specifically, this paper addresses the following questions: How do Chinese migrant workers view themselves vis-à-vis their co-ethnic employers? What kind of relationship between employers and workers is considered acceptable? How do Chinese migrant workers respond to perceived injustice or exploitation imposed by their employers of the same national, ethnic and cultural backgrounds?

Working definitions and fieldwork methodology

The term *class consciousness* can be understood from ‘particular aspects of the subjectivity of individuals’ and ‘the general domain of consciousness with a class content relevant to class practices’ (Wright 1997). In the context of ethnic migrants which constitute the core of this study, ‘class consciousness’ in this paper refers to the group identity and perspective of Chinese migrant workers based upon their shared experiences in working at factories, restaurants, and other businesses owned by Chinese entrepreneurs, which distinguishes themselves from other groups within Chinese community in terms of economic status, social outlook, group interests and possible space for collective actions. This working definition can be further broken down to meet the three dimensions of subjectivity as understood by Wright (1997, pp. 382, 385-386):

- a) Perceptions and observations - An awareness of belonging to a social group whose members are in the same or similar economic rank and social status, which lead to the formation of some identifiable and distinguishable common interests such as concerns over wage, welfare, social security, and working conditions.
- b) Theories of consequences - An awareness of their rights and protection in accordance to laws and regulations in the host communities rather than those in the sending communities. In other words, migrant workers are interested in and sensitive to their dignity and rights.
- c) Preferences - The above perceptions and observations may lead to a sense of shared identity going beyond the primordial ties such as ethnicity, lineages and locality, and prompt collective actions in realising shared objectives. Depending upon mobilising and utilising external resources, class consciousness can be divided into different levels according to the scale and nature of collective actions, including: internal coalition only, involvement with external force; and coalition with external power.

Class consciousness is a useful concept for observing and analysing the phenomenon of Chinese migrant workers abroad for a number of reasons. First, there is clear distinction between owners

and migrant workers who are called as *Laoban* (boss) and *Dagongzai* (working boys/girls) respectively in Chinese. These terms signify differences in not only economic rank but also social status and political positions in overseas Chinese communities. As Ngai Pun (2005, pp. 12-13) explained, ‘*dagong* denotes a process of turning an individual into working subjects, particularly for the capitalist “boss”. The term *dagong* signifies the change to capitalist relations and the *dagongzai/mei* [working boys and girls] is a new configuration imbued with a new awareness of labour exploitation and class consciousness.’ A research question arises here: How do Chinese migrant workers perceive the internal relationship between *Dagongzai*, as well as their relationship with the *Laoban*?

Second, class consciousness is not limited to job division between *Dagongzai*, and *Laoban* but other indicators such common needs shared by group members, and collective actions toward common objectives and interests. For the *Laoban* group, they are more likely to network amongst themselves for various objectives and functions across economic, social and political arenas, which subsequently set them further apart from *Dagongzai* (Pun 2005).

Third, class consciousness in this paper is limited to a specific relationship between Chinese entrepreneurs/owners and migrant workers¹ in which unequal/unfair labour exchange takes place in a systemic and persistent manner. In other words, class consciousness is demonstrated by way of migrant workers’ perceptions toward different labour standards between ethnic employers and their counterparts in the mainstream society. It is also manifested through attitudes and strategies the workers undertake to cope with such different labour standards and perceived exploitation. In this sense, class consciousness is a phenomenon of the change from the traditional views of labour and industrial relationship in sending countries to an emerging sense of citizenship in the hosting countries, even though many workers are not citizens and many are undocumented migrants. The influential conception of citizenship-as-rights has been closely associated with the welfare state, including in the UK and Italy which are the geographical sites of our field research.

The working definition above provides a base for analysing the empirical data collected from a series of field observations, in-depth interviews and focus group discussions in Italy and

the UK respectively. Evidence displayed in the rest of this paper mainly came from two fieldworks conducted in 2006 and 2009 respectively. One focused on the working conditions of Chinese owned factories in Veneto, an industrial cluster located in northeast Italy (the ‘Veneto Survey’). The other focused on the impact of the economic recession on the employment conditions of Chinese migrant workers in the East Midlands of the UK (the ‘East Midlands Survey’). We have selected and brought the two surveys together for two reasons: 1) they represent two popular but different types of jobs for local Chinese migrant workers: manufacturing industry in the case of Italy and the service industry in the case of the UK. 2) they offer a unique opportunity for us to compare labour relations between Chinese workers and co-ethnic entrepreneurs in different sectors and locations. Such a comparison, which has not been attempted before, may yield some new insights into the changing characteristics of new Chinese diaspora at a time of globalisation.

In practice, the Veneto Survey concentrated on the textile, garment and leather sectors, the most important area for Chinese entrepreneurs’ investment and Chinese migrant employment (Wu and Sheehan, 2011). In order to engage with multiple stakeholders (including Chinese entrepreneurs) and get them to participate and contribute to the research, the field work had to seemingly address the issue of China migrant worker’s access and use of local medical services (Zanin and Wu, 2009). In reality, whilst the real focus was to examine the working condition of the Chinese owned factories and the impact of health and safety of Chinese migrant workers, it became very apparent that class consciousnesses were on the minds of these Chinese migrant workers. In contrast, the focus of East Midlands Survey was on the catering sector which still dominates the Chinese ethnic economy in the UK. Other relevant economic sectors such as Chinese herbal medicine and construction/internal decoration are included in the discussion on the impact of the 2008/2009 economic recession. An additional investigation was conducted in 2012 in London with a focus on the latest development of a Chinese workers’ organisation, the Chinese Migrant Support Network, and responses from both Chinese participants and UK trade union officials toward this recent development.

The two fieldworks adopted similar process and methods, mainly workplace observations and in-depth interviews. Based upon a systematic connection of official data or online information about Chinese business in local areas, a number of Chinese factories or restaurants were randomly selected and visited by a team of 3 or 4 people, including the first author of this paper and a research assistant with one or two local experts who were familiar with Chinese business. The workplace observation was imperative for researchers to learn about business history, environments and mobility of both Chinese owners and workers. Equally importantly, it offered an opportunity for us to build up mutual trust and a collaborative relationship with different groups in local Chinese community in order to identify the access and suitable candidates for in-depth interviews. Balance and representativeness were emphasised in the selection of interviewees to ensure that the participations and voices were heard from all groups, not only Chinese owners and community leaders but also migrant workers, both regular and irregular, male and female. In addition, both fieldworks were outside of Chinese enclaves or Chinatowns, so that we could analyse labour mobility between Chinese and non-Chinese-owned workplaces and the authentic relationship between Chinese entrepreneurs and workers in an environment that was substantially the same as the host society.

Table 1 provides details of the workplaces we visited in Veneto and East Midlands respectively. In Veneto, all of the 28 workshops were located in textile, garment and leather sectors of which 25 or 89 per cent were owned by entrepreneurs from either Wenzhou or Fujian, both located in South China. We managed to visit three Italian owned workplaces nearby, which recruited many Chinese migrant workers for similar jobs. In East Midlands, workplace observations were mainly located in the catering sector, leaving a few (10 out of 61) such as traditional Chinese medicine shops for comparison purpose. With respect to the region of origin of Chinese owners or entrepreneurs, over half were established Chinese groups (e.g. Cantonese, Vietnamese, Malaysian Chinese) while the rest were new immigrants from the South (mainly Fujianese) and North China.

Table 1 Sampled workplaces by sector, owner's region of origin, and location of our survey

Location	Sector/Product	No	%	Region of origin	No	%
Veneto (Italy)	Clothing	21	75.0	Wenzhou	21	75.0
	Leather	3	10.7	Fujian	4	14.3
	Shoe	4	14.3	Italian	3	10.7
	Total	28	100	Total	28	100
East Midlands (UK)	Catering	51	83.7	Established Chinese	32	52.4
	Chinese medicine	3	4.9	Southern Chinese	18	29.6
	Other	7	11.4	North Chinese	11	26.3
	Total	61	100	Total	61	100

Table 2 shows profiles of interviewees. In reflection to the gender division by sector, more females were selected for interviews in Veneto which is different from East Midlands where over 70 per cent of interviewees were male². Regarding migration status, 36 per cent of interviewees in East Midlands were irregular migrant workers, more than doubling the figures in Veneto. Nonetheless, Table 2 shows a range of participation from Chinese entrepreneurs, community leaders, TCM (traditional Chinese medicine) physicians, and in particular Chinese workers who accounted for over half of our interviewees in both cases. In addition to interviews with Chinese workers, we also interviewed local trade union officials in Italy and the UK to learn about their contacts with and views on Chinese migrant workers.

Table 2 Profiles of interviewees by gender, status and position

Category	Item	Veneto		East Midlands	
		No.	%	No	%
Gender	Male	26	36.1	30	71.4
	Female	46	63.9	12	28.6
Status	Legal	62	86.1	27	64.3
	Irregular	10	13.9	15	35.7
Position	Entrepreneur	13	18.1	14	33.3
	CC Leaders*	14	19.4	3	7.1
	TCM Doctor**	3	4.2	2	4.8
	Workers	42	58.3	23	54.8
Total***		72	100	42	100

Notice: *CC – Chinese Community;

**TCM – Traditional Chinese Medicine;

***Total interviews in East Midlands include 5 additional interviewees conducted in 2012.

Collective identity and shared common needs amongst Chinese workers

‘Class consciousness’ amongst Chinese migrants can be observed from two different but related dimensions: the workers’ requests for equality and respect as well as clear distinctions between workers and entrepreneurs in terms of different interests. For instance, many workers expressed their disdain of the cruel behaviours and inflexible attitudes of some Chinese employers. Mr. Lin, a 37-year old migrant worker from Wenzhou, for instance, chose to work in a local Italian factory despite the language/cultural barrier and less total income earned in comparison to Chinese-owned factories. Besides fixed and shorter working hours, he emphasised the atmosphere of relative equality between multinational workers and the Italian owner, which was different from most of the Chinese owned factories (Interview with Mr. Lin on 24 July 2006).

The desire for an equal and respectful relationship was a common demand from our interviewees in Veneto and East Midlands. Such a demand is associated with a sensibility of differing socio-economic statuses between workers and bosses and a desire to live a dignified life. One of our informants told us

I have to say the boss didn’t care about us, they just treated us as a working-machine. He bullied us all the time, during the work the boss cursed us in dirty languages, and he never treated us as human. For example, when the emergency fire happened in our restaurant, I tried my very best and risked my own life to stamp out the fire, but after that, the boss didn’t express any thanks to me. I didn’t expect any money as reward, but at very least I was expecting ‘thank you’ which was not said, this was the key reason why I left the restaurant in Manchester. (East Midlands, Interview 17, male)

Demand for respect was particularly strong from those new migrants who had previous employment experience in state-owned enterprises (SOEs) mainly from Northeast China (Dongbei), or who were white-collar workers from urban China. According to local informants, since the 1990s there had been a significant increase of the proportion of new immigrants to Veneto and East Midlands who were previously urban residents in China. It is supposed that due to the large scale inflow of immigrants from urban China that provided the impetus for the emergence of class-consciousness amongst Chinese migrant workers.

It would be mistaken to assume that relationships between migrant workers and entrepreneurs are similar amongst all Chinese-owned factories. Mr. Hu, an irregular migrant worker who came from Wenzhou to Italy in 2004, offers an insight into the varied relationships between Chinese employer and workers. According to him, Chinese employer also relies upon migrant workers for not only stable and hard work but also introducing qualified workers when needed. A kind boss can gain a good reputation through using workers' social networks which could attract skilled and reliable workers to come. By contrast, a bad boss will find it difficult to cope with the shortage of skilled workers because nobody in his shop would like to recommend their friends to come. At the end, Mr. Hu used a phrase, 'there are no kinship or relatives but friendship in Europe', to highlight the importance of mutual help and friendship amongst migrant workers (field note on 29th July 2006).

The story above reminds us of the diversity and heterogeneity of Chinese entrepreneurs³ who can hardly be treated as a homogenous group. Nonetheless, it is a common phenomenon that 'successful' Chinese businesspeople are more likely to join together to create their own associations (Kwong, 1996). Chinese associations may claim to represent the interests of the Chinese community in a certain region but no such organisations claim to represent migrant workers. Such organisations provide a private platform or a social space for mutual support, business collaboration, and more importantly, communication with the Chinese embassy in the host country as well as with local governments in home communities.

Consciousness of labour exploitations and abuses

Our study showed that class consciousness manifested in four different but closely related dimensions: 1) workers' recognitions of *poor* working conditions which are in violation of local regulations; 2) workers' awareness of labour exploitations which are against their rights; 3) their understanding of factors behind the poor working conditions and/or labour exploitation; and 4) some preliminary and organised attempts to cope with the class inequality within the Chinese community.

In Veneto, for instance, Chinese migrant workers were keenly aware of the poor working conditions of Chinese owned factories, which was also openly acknowledged by entrepreneurs themselves. The differences in working conditions between Chinese and Italian owned employment resulted in a strong desire from Chinese migrant workers to work for Italian employers. According to a local informant, it was estimated that more than 10 per cent of Chinese migrants worked in Italian-owned factories during the period of our fieldwork⁴.

Poor working conditions are not just confined to the garment sector in Veneto- they exist in other economic sectors such as catering and traditional Chinese medicine in some of the Chinese workplaces in the UK. This is clearly illustrated from our interview with a chef in a Chinese restaurant in East Midlands.

First of all, the boss is not nice to us. He would often shout at us for no reason....The second thing in this restaurant is low salary. I earn around £210 a week but I have to work at least 60 hours..... Normally, I have one day off on Sunday. However, I have to go back to work if the restaurant is busy. I think that boss is squeezing my last sweat. (East Midlands, Interview 25, male)

Just like regular migrant workers, many irregular migrants also expressed their distain for the poor working conditions within some of the Chinese owned business.

The boss of my previous job is *my home mate from Hunan province*. I was only paid £400 per month as she said I had no relevant work experience at all. After one month, I asked her to raise my salary, or else I would go back home to China. After discussing with her husband, she told me they decided to pay me £500 per month, but would keep £100 per month as a deposit. I strongly disagreed with that. She refused to give me any more explanation, and so I said, you must give me the full amount of my salary every month, or I will call the police. Therefore, she had to pay me my full salary. (East Midland, Interview 1, female, emphasis added)

Taking a deposit is a major means used by some Chinese employer to control migrant workers, whether or not they irregular or regular. For the latter, this is particularly true for those new comers who hold a valid work permit (WP) or resident permit. Below is such a case.

Last week one of my friends from Birmingham told me that he wanted to change his job and convert his work permit. But his boss had already kept back over £2,000 in unpaid wages, and if he quits, he would not get it back We know that bosses have exploited us, but we dare not change jobs as we are too scared that we will lose our work permits. That was why I refused a job offer in London, which was £ 300 per week for my wages, and kept working for the first boss instead for £180 per week.All we want is to not

lose our work permits as we don't want to become illegal workers in the UK. Unfortunately, bosses realise all too well what we are worried about and use it to control us tightly and exploit us badly (East Midlands, Interview 19, male).

Abuse of workers' rights is also evident in the traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) sector. Like Chinese chefs, Chinese physicians have to pay a large amount of money, about 80,000 yuan (or £8,000) to labour brokers in China and Britain to process their application and travel documentations. An effective means for employers to control TCM physicians, according to an interviewee, is to recruit as many physicians as possible, leading to an over-supply. This gives them heavy pressure to keep their current jobs as any employment gap or job discontinuity means the end of their dream of gaining permanent resident status in the UK. As a result, they have to accept any working conditions without any bargaining power to defend their rights. Similar stories can be heard from Veneto where many people talked about the costs for legal migration from China to Italy as high as 170,000 yuan (or 17,000 euro) to complete all documents for a work permit (excluding air ticket).

The costs for Chinese migration to the UK and Italy reflect the unequal power relationship between Chinese workers and entrepreneurs. According to Mr Wang, a Wenzhouese migrant worker who came to Italy in 1995, this relationship has worsened over time.

Firstly, the large wave of immigrants led to an increase in competition within the existing Chinese labour market. Secondly, for some time, the Italian central government's process for legalising irregular migrant workers required those migrants to bring documentations which proved their identity/origin. However, irregular migrant workers could not go directly to the Chinese embassy to obtain this document as the embassy often required a referee letter from local Chinese associations. The problem lie in that local Chinese association consists of Chinese entrepreneurs i.e. they were the bosses of these irregular migrants which created a big inequality in power as the bosses could unilaterally enhance their powers as they so wished. (interview on 14 July 2006).

Linked with the above, the inequality in power relations was more commonly evident when a migrant worker needed to renew their residential document. In such a case, they would still need to go to the Italian authorities to renew the leave permit for two years and then for a further four years. Each time during this process, migrant workers would need to go to their bosses to obtain a referee letter for validation to show the Italian authorities that they had continuously worked

and paid tax in the previous years. This gave Chinese entrepreneurs power to control and sometimes abuse migrant workers without having to fear the consequences of their behaviour.

Another indicator reflecting the unequal relationship between Chinese workers and their co-ethnic employers was the uneven distribution of income between entrepreneurs and workers. In Veneto, many informants suggested that it is common practice that once Chinese entrepreneurs obtain their contract from Italian partners, they take a half as their income or profits and another twenty per cent for the cost of accommodation, food and other expenses which are then shared by entrepreneurs' family and workers, leaving just thirty per cent of income for workers. Using a piece accounting system, they divide all of the work into different types according to the nature of activities, type of machines and skills, and then determine the price of each piece of work.

Workers' responses and empowerment

Class consciousness is not limited to the creation of a collective identity and awareness of migrant worker rights against labour exploitation and abuse, but more importantly it can also lead to formation of unions, strike action and rebellion.

The avoidance of Chinese labourers to work for their co-ethnic employers in the case of Veneto not only questions the common assumption that the Chinese prefer working for people of a shared ethnic origin in a foreign land, but also highlights a nascent class consciousness derived from Chinese labourers' desire to be treated decently.

In XX factory I visited today, a worker from Hunan asked to give an advice in order to find a channel to access to local legal support for his case of injured finger during peak-time work period a year ago. He was sent to an Italian hospital for temporary treatment and on the next day, he was asked to continue his job which lasted for one month. Once the end of the peak time, he was kicked out from that factory without any compensation. (field note on 31 July 2006)

It would be simplistic to say that workers can do nothing except to tolerate exploitation or labour abuse. Given the varied working conditions amongst Chinese workplaces, the most

frequent means used by workers was to change workplaces in order to improve working conditions which resembled to some extent James Scott's 'evasion of landlord' strategy as a form of resistance (Scott 1985). The physical movement of workers is closely associated with the flow of information amongst them, which is not confined to traditional ties such as kinship and hometown connections. It is rooted in a broad range of social communication networks, comprising of friends, factory colleagues and sometimes even travel mates.

Our field trips to Chinese factories in Veneto have found that social contacts through mobile phones played an important role in information exchange and mutual support amongst workers. It is through social ties and information networks that workers were able to disseminate information about labour market and working conditions, and make judgements about whether a boss was good or bad (based upon many criteria including salary). Due to the shortage of skilled workers in the fieldwork period, job mobility was an effective weapon for workers to reward or penalise a boss.

Job mobility, however, is just one of many means used by Chinese workers to protect their rights or bargain for the better working conditions. The second means is to 'strike'. In order to block an unrestrained increase in the workload imposed by the boss, workers may join together to stop work or quit the factory in order to force the boss to renegotiate a subcontract, price or working hours, and so on. The feasibility and effectiveness of such actions is dependent on the unity and leadership amongst workers, which does not always exist in Chinese workshops.

The third pattern of response is direct and, sometimes, violent confrontations between workers and employers. This is not common but can be effective. One example given by a Chinese entrepreneur in Veneto concerned a migrant worker from Northeast China who found himself unable to bear the dreadful working conditions and being frequently blamed by the boss. He decided to teach 'the evil boss' a lesson before returning to China. So he called several of his friends from Northeast China, tied up the boss and his family members, and damaged all the machines with hammers. The boss chose to remain silent rather than report the incident to

the police because he knew that he had treated the worker badly. This case represents a radical response to the poor working conditions.

Finally, many migrant workers contemplated the possibility of establishing workers' associations in Italy and the UK. According to statistics from an Italian Trade Union in Venice, more than ten Chinese employees in Italian factories had joined local trade unions. During the period of our visit, a female worker cheerfully talked about the benefits she enjoyed as an Italian trade union member which included seeking compensation from her Italian employer who had not paid her salary for two months due to temporary closure of the factory. A number of workers in Chinese-owned factories mentioned that they wanted to contact local trade union in cases of labour abuse but did not know how to do so.

In the UK, a Chinese workers' association, 'Chinese Migrants Support Network' (CMSN) was established in 2009 to 'help vulnerable Chinese migrants attain a minimum standard of living using resources currently available in society' (Pai 2010). With the support from London Citizens, a British companion with the mission of 'regularisation of irregular migrants', this organisation has successfully attracted over 200 Chinese migrant workers to not only join the rallies organised by London Citizens but also organise a number of training courses for their English, health and safety knowledge two years ago. Some CMSN members have joined British trade unions, which described by Mr. Rowlatt, a Unite Unions official, as a good beginning of Chinese labour movement in the UK'. Despite some success in organising Chinese workers into unions, however, both CMSN leaders and Mr. Rowlett acknowledged that the lack of leadership and poor English skills were two major barriers for Chinese migrant workers to develop an effective community and to interact with local trade unions. Therefore, there is still a long way to go before class consciousness could be further enhanced.

Conclusions

This paper aims to illustrate the existence and development of class consciousness amongst Chinese migrant workers in Italy and the UK. Having examined experiences and perceptions of

Chinese migrant workers' relationship with their co-ethnic bosses in Veneto and East Midlands, we can reach the following preliminary conclusions.

First, evidence displayed in this paper shows the existence of class consciousness amongst Chinese migrant workers, which can be manifested by the emphasis on companionship, identity, common needs of mutual respect and fair treatment. There is no doubt that ethnic and social connection which is based upon kinship, place of origin, family, and dialects remains an important element in linking Chinese migrant workers abroad. This is particularly true for the new comers to a strange society where they have little or no connections to rely on. However, as time evolves, shared sentiments amongst workers, including class consciousness, are increasingly becoming a demarcation in the social and cultural lives in the migrant communities. While it is true that some migrant workers had experience of being exploited in China, the realisation that their dream of a better life abroad was shattered by repeated exploitation at the hands of some Chinese bosses in a foreign land could lead to radicalisation of various forms.

Second, the existence of class consciousness amongst Chinese migrant workers can be substantiated from their perception to and awareness of poor working conditions, labour exploitations and abuse, which violate relevant labour law and regulations of the host societies. Rather than to tolerate unfair treatments from Chinese employers, Chinese labourers had taken actions ranging from avoidance (of employment with Chinese bosses), denouncement (of Chinese bosses' moral characteristics) to direct confrontation. However, it is still hard for them to organise themselves in order to articulate their needs and take collective actions in a more institutionalized manner in their efforts to fight against labour exploitation and abuse. This is because of many constraints including language barriers, social isolation, and unfamiliarity with the political systems of the host countries. With support from external groups, nonetheless, there are signs of increasing interests from migrants who long to join local unions or establish their own trade union (Pai 2010).

Third, our empirical cases have shown that co-ethnicity, common cultural backgrounds, shared identities, similar geographical origins, which have often been stereotyped as the

defining and changeless characteristics of Chinese international migration and conceived as the foundation of modern Chinese transnationalism, should be contextualised against the shifting backdrop of global division of labour. This institutional framework has subjected Chinese migrant workers to a multilayered set of complex relationships with their co-ethnic bosses. While we cannot deny the continuing relevance of kinship and ethnic solidarity in shaping diasporic Chinese identities and internal relations (Liu 1998; 2006), class consciousness provides an important lens to observe, analyse and conceptualise different interests between different groups amongst the Chinese diaspora. Class, therefore, should be forcefully brought back into our analysis of Chinese international migration. We believe this attention to class and class consciousness amongst Chinese immigrants should in turn enhance the scholarly field of international migration studies and relevant policy deliberations.

Fourth, class consciousness amongst new Chinese migrant workers in Europe is contingent upon many factors, within or outside of Chinese society. Within Chinese society, class consciousness is closely associated with not only social status, educational background, work experience (e.g. government officials, SOE employees, or farmers) in China, but it is also associated with the duration of international migration, status and work experience in host countries which as a norm has a higher standard of labour regulation and its compliance regime. Outside of Chinese society, our research has also shown that class consciousness amongst Chinese migrant workers is not only a reflection to the different environments between sending and receiving countries in terms of labour regime and policy, immigration regulations, etc, but it is also a process of reaction or empowerment of Chinese migrant workers against labour exploitation and abuse. It would be overly simplistic to assume that all Chinese migrant workers share similar views about their relationship with Chinese employers. This is because neither Chinese workers nor their Chinese bosses are homogenous groups. From the worker's side, two categories can be easily recognised. On the one hand, there is an emphasis on or appreciation for friendship, trust, mutual help and support, and, common interests between workers regardless of different origins and regional identities in sending communities. On the other

hand, a smaller group of workers tend to privilege horizontal linkages (shared dialects and geographical origins) over vertical differences (relations between bosses and workers).

Finally, the evidence for the existence of class consciousness amongst Chinese migrant workers in Italy and the UK should be placed in the larger context of China's rapid integration into the global capitalist world order which has led to fundamental transformations in China including unprecedented scale of internal migration (from the poor inland provinces to the coastal regions). The growing disparities between the city and countryside, between the rich and poor, between the privileged (sometimes corrupt) officials and ordinary citizens have generated a heightened sense of discontentment and anxiety. It is against this background that the past decade has seen various 'rights-defense activities' (*weiquan huodong*), such as workers claim a right to 'labour and subsistence', pensioners claim the 'sacred right not to have to labour', and migrant workers claim the right to organise unions (Li 2010; Perry 2007). These activities have in one way or another created awareness amongst migrants about the existence of class consciousness. This structural and sentimental framework has undoubtedly impinged upon the mindsets and behaviours of recent migrant workers in Europe who left China over the past decade (some as victims of the bankruptcy of the SOEs) and remained in close contact with their homeland. While there is a need for more empirical researches to backup our suggestion on the linkages between Chinese domestic and international labourers as an explanatory factor behind heightened class consciousness, some recent conceptual advancement on the potentials of 'integrating the study of internal and international migration, at both the theoretical and the empirical level' (King and Skeldon 2010) has pointed us to the right direction.

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NOTES:

1. Hsiao-Hung Pai (2008) mentioned that the control of Chinese labour is multinational, and even though some of the agents are ethnic Chinese (from outside China, including Malaysians), others are non-Chinese.
2. With respect to gender differences, it seemed that male workers in our interviews were significantly stronger in class consciousness than female in terms of the number of interviewees who expressed clearly their opinions about the differences between co-ethnic entrepreneurs and workers. Owing the limit of words, it is difficult for us to discuss this dimension in detail.
3. According to our observation, many Chinese family workshops did not register their businesses with local authorities. Of those not registering, the majority only recruited a few (3-5) Chinese workers.
4. See Wu and Sheehan (2011) for the detailed comparison of working conditions between Chinese-owned and Italian-owned factories in Veneto.

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