Book Reviews

Pun Ngai


Ten years after publishing Made in China: Women Factory Workers in a Global Workplace, Pan Ngai has revisited the subject in her new work, Chinese Migrant Labor: Post-Socialist Transformations. By incorporating multi-sited ethnographical cases, this new book extends her previous research, which focused on female workers employed at a single factory, to the whole population of migrant workers across different labour-intensive industries. The result is a panoramic view of the Chinese “new working class”.

According to Pan Ngai, the “new working class” refers to migrant workers (nongmingong) who are the protagonists behind the global production system in post-socialist China. This class is significantly different in nature compared to the old working class, which consisted of city workers who enjoyed sufficient social welfare and privileged social status in socialist China.

In the opening chapter, Pan Ngai argues that the formation of this special working class is shaped through the combined forces of neoliberal global expansion, on the one hand, and the open-door policy and social reform launched by the Chinese government beginning in the 1980s, on the other. The author argues that this collaboration of global capital and Chinese reform following the Cultural Revolution was by no means the result of the natural consequence of the “free” market under the age of globalisation (p. 18). It is rather a state-led process of embracing globalisation (for example, institutional reforms that created a labour market, such as the household responsibility system, or privatisation of state-owned enterprises) and withdrawal from the social arena (for example, the refusal to provide labour rights protection). These paradoxical roles of the state are called the “state-in” process of economic global globalisation and the “state-out” process of improving the livelihood of the working class discussed in Chapter 2.
After analysing the historical context of the formation of the Chinese new working class, the author sets out to depict the working and living experiences in specific industries (construction, electronic production and the garment industry, covered in Chapters 3 to 6). Social issues from construction workers pursuing wage arrears to the serial suicides of Foxconn workers, which drew wide public concern, are examined by Pan Ngai in terms of the lives and struggles of the new working class under global capitalist exploitation. In particular, she contributes critical discussions about the sub-contracting system of construction industries and the Dormitory Labor Regime in the garment and electronic devices production industries. In an industry organised by multi-layer, sub-contracting processes, the construction labourers were “marginalised” (p. 55), and the boss of each project disappeared when problems of wage arrears arose. The Dormitories that accommodate the migrant workers in the city served as a means for suppressing wages, and increasing and lengthening the working hours in various industries. The author defines this worker-controlling system as a “Dormitory Labor Regime”. She argues that the collective and limited living space of the dormitory regime “nurtures double alienation” of the new working class both in terms of production (in the sense of Marx) and in terms of social reproduction (in the sense of cutting the social ties of workers). The suicides of 18 young workers in Foxconn were merely an extreme manifestation (p. 133) of their lonely and fragmented lives under this repressive mode of management.

The author argues that migrant labourers working and living under the control of fully equipped global capital are becoming a new labouring subject of resistance. “Second generation migrant workers,” as a label referring to the migrant workers who were primarily born and raised in post-socialist China, have shown more initiative in struggling against global capital than the previous generation explored in Pan Ngai’s earlier study. Instead of abreacting their pain and anxiety by screaming in their dreams (Pun Ngai, 2005), the second generation of working labour is more inclined to take action to protect their rights. From the first generation of migrant workers to the next generation, from the silent, inarticulate workers to the better educated, more individualistic young workers who harbour a deeper, more intimate understanding of the rural-urban chasm (p. 66), the “minor genres of resistances” turn into collective action. The struggle against global capital presented in the subconscious world turns into resistances based on awareness of the migrants’ situation and power in the global production system. These new generation workers choose to take action, such as legal litigation, defiant resistance in their daily lives, as well as sit-ins and strikes to protect their own rights, which represent a departure from the previous generation, according to Pan Ngai.