

Pun Ngai, *Migrant Labor in China*, Polity: Oxford, 2016; 200 pp.: ISBN 978-0-7456-7174-1 (hb) £50.00; ISBN 978-2-7456-7175-8 (pb) £15.99

The internal migration in contemporary China is one of the most phenomenal movements in human history. Hundreds of millions of migrants move from rural areas to urban areas, from inlands to coastal cities and from traditional communities to modern metropolises. This huge migration is accompanied and driven by China's transformation from a socialist economy to a market economy, a change David Harvey described as highly significant: "The complicated history of how the absolute limit against capital accumulation in China under communist rule was dissolved . . . is, of course, one of the most significant political and economic stories of our times" (Harvey, 2010: 70).

Migrant Labor in China by Pun Ngai attempts to recount the significant story and analyze related migration issues from the perspective of Marxist sociology. The author brings class analysis back to the scholarship on China and migration, stating, "...class is still the central concept of this book, providing an effective analytical weapon with which to discern the lives of the working class under the major contradictions of contemporary capitalism" (p. 1). Ironically, Chinese scholars used to be very familiar with this approach, but they seldom adopt it to explain domestic social phenomena because of political sensitivities. Pun Ngai, a researcher based in Hong Kong, reminds her mainland colleagues what they have ignored in this sense.

The first two chapters of the book give a grand narrative on how the world became neoliberal and how China in particular was reintegrated into the capitalist system from the 1970s. As global capital expanded transnationally and China eagerly welcomed foreign direct investments, its huge surplus of cheap labor started to join transnational production chains. The so-called "China speed" actually reflects new forms of capital accumulation at an unprecedented pace. During this process, Chinese rural migrants were proletarianized and became the primary population of the new working class.

There is a large body of literature on urbanization and internal migration in China, but it is still important to summarize the ongoing process in a Marxist framework to reveal the very nature of social transformation and class relationship in China. In the view of Pun Ngai, China's economic reform followed the policy recommendations of neoliberal economists, who borrowed their theoretical foundations from Western mainstream economics. The Chinese leadership intentionally opened the national market and industries to foreign capital, and turned China from a revolutionary center to a global workshop.

The big story told by Pun Ngai is largely consistent with the official historical account, except that some policy decisions might not be guided by the neoliberal agenda. For example, in the author's view, the neoliberal economists pushed the household responsibility system in rural China and established a small peasant farm economy. The institution led to "a long-term absence of growth" (p. 23) and drove peasants to migrate to the urban

sector. However, she does not mention that the Chinese government has actually been banning commodification of land property, the very same policy which has been advocated by the neoliberals for decades. Without liberalization of the land property market, Chinese peasants will continue to be trapped in the small farm economy.

Chapters 3 to 7 present several case studies based on the author's interviews and fieldwork. These cases include the struggle of construction workers, the spatial politics of the "dormitory labor regime," and the daily experiences of employees at Foxconn, one of the largest manufacturing companies in China. The central theme of these cases is the class relationship between workers and capitalists, as well as the formation of the new working class.

Pun Ngai describes the working conditions of migrant workers and their struggles against capitalists with a sympathetic tone. Her critique of the dormitory regime is one of the most impressive parts of the book. Migrant workers often live in condensed dormitory buildings close to their factories in China, an arrangement that facilitates controlling their mobility and maximizing production. Detailed accounts of spatial arrangements reveal the intervention of the state and capital, and how both of them channel massive migration flows into the global production chains. Pun Ngai also points out that the very process helps Chinese migrant workers generate their collective consciousness of class identity.

For students of migration, *Migrant Labor in China* is more about "labor" than "migrant." Its primary sources come from the literature on labor issues rather than migration. At times, the author cites inaccurate statistical figures. For example, the book mentions "270 million peasant-workers" several times without noting that only 168 million of them are migrant workers and the remaining work in their home villages according to an official report. The migrant labor force also includes a significant portion of professional workers moving between cities, which the book does not address.

Despite simplifying the dynamics of labor migration in China, the book attempts to be analytical in emphasizing the roles of the state in shaping the social status of migrant workers. The state assists capital accumulation mainly in two ways. On one hand, it retreated from social reproduction and limited social protection in the rural areas, rendering the rural population vulnerable. On the other hand, it maintained an exclusive institution in urban areas, so that the majority of migrant workers cannot get access to local welfare, thereby transferring the cost of reproduction to their home communities. Pun Ngai thus criticizes that "it (the state) has already abandoned its representation of the interests of the peasantry and working class, as it works boldly and hastily to serve the interests of capital . . ." (p. 28).

The book exposes many policy issues, such as minimum wage protection, enforcement of labor contracts, and protection of labor rights. It does not have a concluding chapter. It tends to blame neoliberalism for all the sufferings of

the new working class, which can be solved by class struggle. The author claims that “the creation of new laboring subjects . . . could challenge this history (the end of history) and potentially create a new one (p. 2).” However, most of the issues Pun Ngai mentions could be resolved within the capitalist system, as liberal democracies in the developed world have done in the past decades. As for China, whatever kind of capitalism it would adopt in the future, its political institutions would have to incorporate migrant workers.

Reference

Harvey D (2010) *The Enigma of Capital: And the Crises of Capitalism*. London, UK: Profile Books.

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