

Class and Patriarchal Relations in Shekou: A Structurationist View

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Introduction

With the promulgation of the Four Modernizations Program, mainland China re-enters the world capitalist system. An integral part of the Program is the establishment of special economic zones (SEZ) that aim to attract foreign capital, management and technological knowhow. The socio-cultural changes that are part and parcel of the modernization process are massive and rapid. Shekou Industrial Zone (SKIZ), for example, being one of five management districts of Shenzhen Special Economic Zone, was transformed from a tiny fishing village of 1.32 sq.km. to an industrial city that is hailed as the special zone of special zones. While modernization is often seen as an overwhelming and impersonal process of change, in actuality it is those individuals who toil daily who make it a reality. And while the transformation takes place, it ironically reproduces extant systems--the social agents who bring about modernization by grasping new opportunities and exploiting resources under a new set of rules often resort to what is familiar, such as regional membership, and make possible the rejuvenation of traditional gender relations in the form of patriarchy.

The Structuration of Shekou Industrial Zone

Giddens's structuration theory (1984) provides an action-oriented account of social organization and reproduction which sees human agents as characterized by reflexive capacities and knowledgeability. Agents have the capacity to understand what they do and why as they do it. Their knowledgeability of agents is carried largely in practical consciousness which "consists of all the things which actors know tacitly about how to "go on" in the contexts of social

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life without being able to give them direct discursive expression" (Giddens 1984). Put more simply, actors are reflexive of what they do in the diversity of social contexts.

As agents 'go on' in everyday life, a routine is generated and becomes a basic element of social activity. Routine is then part of practical consciousness as social activities are structured and repeated in like manner day after day. As social activities are continually repeated by social agents, the rules and resources that actors make use of in everyday social life are routinized and constitute the structured properties of social activities. The recursive nature of social life, then, manifests the constant recreation of these structured properties.

In this model, structure is defined as rules and resources that have only a virtual existence-it exists only when it is instantiated in social practices and in the memory-traces of actors. Structure therefore does not exist unless it is invoked by individuals in their memory traces and in their actual behavior in social contexts. Agency and society are thus constituted (perceived and made) in and through recurrent practices. Structure is then the unintended (but not unknowing) outcome of the agents' recursive action and in this sense it is "external" to the agents. But, at the same time, as memory-traces that are recursively instantiated by actors in everyday life, structure is "internal" to individuals. Structure is both constraining and enabling, a medium through which social practices are organized.

The emphasis in Giddens's model is not how structure determines action or how a combination of actions make up structure, but rather how action is structured in everyday contexts and how the structured features of action are, by the very performance of action, thereby reproduced. It is thus the process of "becoming" rather than the state of "being" that is given attention. In this "becoming" process (hence "structur-ation"), action presupposes structure and vice versa. That is, structure and action are dialectically composed in a "duality" rather than diametrically opposed in a "dualism" (Thompson 1984).

The idea of SEZs being economic experiments alludes to its temporary and opportunistic character. In this constant "becoming" of the SEZs, human actors resort to structural rules and resources on different levels of daily life: socio-economic class, regional affiliation and gender relations, constantly

instantiating, manipulating and modifying them.

In the context of Shekou Industrial Zone (SKIZ), young women choose to move to the SKIZ, allow their action to be mediated by structural rules and at the same time participate in the creation of a previously non-existent structure. It is in their action of punching in every morning and noon, of going to evening classes in English and accounting, or in their preference of Hong Kong style entertainment and their working overtime for increased cash income that something called the SKIZ is realized.

Aspiration and Frustration: Conditions in SKIZ

There were two bus-loads of us, sixty each. More than a hundred people ... There were many of us, but the atmosphere was very sad ("hen qi liang"). I don't know how to describe it. Each person took a bucket, a suitcase, some daily necessities. That's how we left [home]...When I first arrived here, I was very confident. I thought if I worked hard, I'd have a future. I worked diligently for a year, a year and a half. But the supervisors are unreasonable when they allocate work. They have no reason. They have power. Whether they have reason or not, they are right. You workers cannot make a sound. I don't understand this.

Aiying's aspiration and how it is frustrated are not uncommon among the 20,000 strong female migrant workers in the zone. To many of them, coming to SKIZ offers a possibility of a future, one that is chosen, not destined. Being born and raised in rural county seats, they have no idea about the industrial zone, nor what it means to work in a foreign enterprise. The decision to go to SKIZ is motivated in large part by a general dissatisfaction with life back home. Aiying, for example, was a temporary technician in a hospital, who was fed up with unfulfilled promises of promotion and personal discrimination in the workplace, and decided to try her luck in Shekou. Others may be fresh high school graduates who have failed the university entrance examination and without the means to go to tuition schools. Going to the special economic zones is a way to escape from the tight grasp of the household, state-owned enterprises and bureaucracy in the rural setting. It is also an environment

where individuals are able to compete on a more equal basis, and where, with hard work, individuals may change their destiny. No longer will they be confined to the rural household and state-owned enterprises for the rest of their lives as their parents have been. These young women choose uncertainty over familiarity because the former offers a future. To quote one informant, going to SKIZ is a way "to breathe some fresh air" .

Working in SKIZ provides a chance to see the outside world, access to imported goods, and fashion and gold ornaments from Hong Kong. While the young women enjoy a modern and independent lifestyle, a clean and quiet environment and the efficiency of city life, they fulfill their responsibility of filial daughters by sending cash home to upgrade their family's standard of living and help their younger siblings through school. The young women, on average, remit around one tenth to one quarter of their salary home. The monies may be remitted monthly to help out with the daily expenses, or they may be sent in larger sums through a family friend on occasions such as birthdays, Chinese festivals and a new school term. Economic relations are also maintained through the exchange of goods, such as daughters sending home imported commodities including household appliances from Japan and chocolates from USA, and the other way comes homemade rice cakes and agricultural produce dried dates and tea leaves. On an intellectual level, SKIZ's openness and structural reforms ensure an access to information, a more democratic atmosphere and the possibility of leaving the ranks of worker through an accumulation of academic and professional qualifications. Nonetheless, these new opportunities are achieved often at the expense of things the young women value: familial support, close-knit interpersonal relations, marriage, and a sense of security. The gains and losses, the old and the new, constitute a dilemma into which young women workers are thrown as they migrate to Shekou.

Commonly workers are recruited from the poorer county seats in Guangdong such as Wuhua, Buoluo and Meixian, where there are large numbers of unemployed youth, with scarce natural resources and underdeveloped infrastructure in a relatively rural setting. In such setting exporting labor becomes an important source of remittance and hence low wages are acceptable. Young women, mostly eighteen or nineteen years of age, many of Hakka origin, having just graduated from high school or with very little working experience, respond to the recruitment announcement displayed at the county government

office. After sitting for a written examination of simple arithmetic skills and speed, those who pass will attend an interview during which they are asked to recite the English alphabets, given an eyesight test and asked to demonstrate that their fingers are nimble enough to assemble micro articles. The successful applicants will then pay for a medical checkup and be issued an SEZ temporary resident card. The local labor bureau then arranges a bus to deliver the women to their employer in SKIZ.

The primary role of the state is to provide foreign investors with an economic environment that will generate profit for both. The SKIZ is invested and run by China Merchants Holdings (CMH), a Hongkong-based subsidiary company of the Department of Communications, State Council. The CMH and the individual worker enter into a employer-employee relationship as they sign a three-year labor contract (*lao dong ke tong*). Upon expiration, the contracts may be renewed at most twice. When the contract expires and the worker has not been able to either renew the contract with the current employer or find a new employer, she is required to return to her place of origin.

In everyday life, workers are under the direct jurisdiction of a second employer which is the specific enterprise that purchases their labor. Most employers retain the contracts without giving the workers their own copy. Certain enterprises simultaneously retain the workers' temporary residence card, in order to more effectively control their workers.

The contract entered into by the SKIZ/CMH and the foreign investor is an agreement of labor affairs (*lao wu xie yi*), by which the investor is bound to pay a flat amount of 800 dollars (reminbi, same below) for each individual worker for the legal and effective control of the workers' labor. The set of negotiated terms specifies the welfare to be provided by the factory including dormitory space, cafeteria facilities and benefits as laid down by the PRC Labor Law. However, the expenses incurred by the workers' migrating to the SKIZ are borne by the workers themselves. Monies for compensating their local work units for the loss of their labor, service fees for the local labor bureaus, municipal expenses such as infrastructural development and highway and dormitory maintenance, and individual medical insurance and social security are all deducted from the 800 dollars. After these deductions, what an individual worker gets is only half the amount. Workers are only told that their monthly

salary consists of the basic salary of rmb135, a position salary of HK\$135, plus floating remuneration such as bonus for full attendance and production beyond target, and fluctuating allowances such as for meals and overtime. Workers, however, are not aware of the agreement reached between the SKIZ and the foreign investor concerning their own labor.

Living conditions and facilities provided by employers are strictly graded according to rank. Expatriates, Hong Kong staff and high ranking Chinese personnel are provided with large apartments situated closer to the factory and in more respectable neighborhoods. Workers are assigned to conspicuously less desirable living conditions. Irrespective of marital status, all workers are required to live in single dormitories. Thus if one is married, she has to live separately from her spouse. Six workers share a suite that is consisted of a room, a lavatory with shower, and a space with a sink and faucet. The room is meaguely furnished with three double bunks and three desks, with two individuals sharing each of those. A hanging fan and a flourescent light are all the electrical luxuries they enjoy. Individuals have to provide their own necessities from buckets for bathing, to bedding and wardrobe, to electric stoves and pots and pans for cooking. This space totalling 20 sq.m. in area is where six adults sleep, cook, study and meet friends.

There are fifteen of these suites on one floor, and seven to eight floors per building. The dormitory buildings are so closely situated that one can easily see what others in the next building are doing. Some privacy is attained only through the mosquito net on each bed and the newspaper pasted on windows to serve as curtains. But noise can hardly be avoided. It is normal to hear people talking, cassette recorders playing or individuals practicing a Chinese flute right into the small hours. Workers complain about the living conditions. While at home most of them have a room to themselves, now they have to share it with five other people with different habits and schedules. And while their family customarily pays a few dollars for the whole flat back home, fifty-five dollars are deducted from their salary every month for only a bed space and another ten dollars for utilities. This high standard of living becomes all the more intolerable when promises by the management are not fulfilled. These include, for example, a TV set on every floor, which is no where to be seen. Basic recreation facilities are grossly lacking. In the Sihai area where the majority of Shekou's 50,000 migrant workers are housed, there is one skating

ring, a billiard room, two discotheques and a small library. Paid entertainment is expensive and uninteresting. Workers usually play badminton or pingpong on the lawn, which is free. Occasionally they go to one of the less expensive discotheques or to the free monthly movie organized by the union. Leisure activities are monotonous. So while most workers read, meet friends or watch TV in their rooms, the crowded environment makes others take prolonged evening walks out in the streets.

Institutional Constraints: Temporary Residence and Marriage

One important reason why welfare facilities and leisure activities are lacking in the zone is the fact that special economic zones are structural experiments which, once failed, negative effects must be minimized. This temporary and opportunistic character of the zone as an economic experiment dictates that Zone authorities provide community facilities and social security requiring state investment at a minimal.

Compared to other Southeast Asian countries, labor in mainland China is cheap, which is the primary reason why foreign enterprises invest in SKIZ. Typically, workers are young women who have good eyesight, nimble fingers as well as being docile and willing to work for long hours in a stretch for low wages. After serving two contracts, however, most workers are considered by their employer to be undesirable because their eyesight and health will have deteriorated. They also increase production costs because of salary increments, and they are more weathered in organizing themselves to stand up for their rights. To maintain low-cost, high-efficiency production, foreign investors regularly hire new batches of young women to replace those who have served their term. The SKIZ's official policy of issuing only temporary residence for workers helps to keep a constant flow of personnel through the zone; and in practice it means that most workers will have to return home when their contracts expire. Under this policy, women workers in the SKIZ are faced with two particularly serious problems: firstly, job insecurity; secondly, the difficulty of getting married. Most workers prefer to stay in the zone, having adapted to the style and quality of life here, in addition to the fact that it was the

unsatisfactory social or economic conditions that push them out of the home region in the first place. A line leader, for example, with her skills and years of experience in the SKIZ, will not be able to find a comparable job back home. There is no factory with a similar production line and hence her experience is not relevant. Secondly, there would not be a job opening for her, given the serious unemployment situation and importance of personal relations in job-seeking.

More importantly, by the time these workers return to their places of abode at the end of their contracts, many of them will have deferred their marriages. While people may officially reach the age of marriage (22 years old for men and 20 for women), they are generally encouraged to marry late. Women workers enter SKIZ employment at the average age of 18, by the time they finish two contracts of three years each, they are 24 years old and are already considered old maids back home. Finding a spouse in the SKIZ is a top priority for most women, but because of the demographic makeup in the zone, it has become a personal, familial and social problem. Males have increasingly out-numbered females in SKIZ since 1979. By 1985, the proportion has become 100 to 125.7. In addition, the distribution of men and women across industrial sectors, as well as between migrants and local residents is extremely skewed.

Sex segregation is particularly conspicuous across industries. In light industries such as electronics and toy manufacturing, over 90% of the assembly line workers are women. In construction, steel molding, cargo container making and glass making, workers are almost all male. The demographic facts that the majority of the SKIZ population are young, single people of marriageable age, that they are segregated by their jobs, and that the majority of them are temporary residents, manifest themselves in the marriage problem which has reached alarming levels for the SKIZ authority. This latent unrest has caused the SKIZ authority to step in, namely in the form of a matchmaking service called Jing Jing Service Counter run by the SKIZ Union. The woman cadre and the only staff for this service sums up the problem:

there are several factors that cause difficulties in women workers' getting married. First, there is a disproportion of females to males. There are more women than men. Second, there is an age gap. Since the early

immigrant workers are female, the women here are older than the men. Third, individuals take the SKIZ residency as an important consideration of spouse choice. Fourth, the turnover rate of party leaders here is high. And with the coming of each new decision-maker, the marriage policy changes again.

The problem of women's difficulties in marriage is made all the more significant by the very fact that the SKIZ administration perceives it as a problem, ie, all women have the right to and in fact are supposed to get married. Women on the one hand sense an informal pressure imposed on them that, at a certain age, they should be "talking friends" (tan peng you) or having a steady boyfriend. But, on the other hand, they find themselves circumscribed by formal regulations and contradictions in the social environment that prohibit them from achieving this status. For most women workers, particularly those in light industries, there is very little chance to meet prospective spouses in the workplace due to job segregation by sex. Female workers dominate, if not monopolize, assembly lines. Male employees in the same enterprise are either higher up in the power hierarchy, working as engineers or administrators, or they are lower in the hierarchy, working as non-skilled menial laborers. In both cases, they occupy a different physical workplace from female employees. In addition, this physical distance overlaps with a social distance. Women in general prefer to marry up to men who are higher in the hierarchy, and for women it is a means to leave the ranks of workers. Although it is normal practice for men to marry down, women workers are however considered too lowly for managers and engineers, though receptionists and clerks do qualify for potential spouses. Furthermore, many of the executives are married. Thus, choices for mates are very limited indeed. Women rely on off-work opportunities to meet single men of similar ranks. These include social activities with fellow hometowners and evening classes. However, since they generally work long hours and on most days are required to work overtime for two to four hours, in addition to shift duties enforced in most factories, there is scarcely time for leisure activities where women meet the opposite sex regularly.

The temporary residence policy also imposes problems on marriage. The transient nature of the SKIZ discourages huge infrastructural investment by the CMH. Since workers are supposed to return to their place of abode in a few

years'time, housing for workers are only conceived of on a temporary and rotary basis. As such, SKIZ suffers from severe housing shortage and married couples are eligible to be placed on the waiting list for housing only if both or the man hold residency in the Zone. Couples a lot of times have to live in separate places after they get married, most likely in the single dormitories provided by their employers. A more long term reason for zone residents not to marry non-residents is that, once the contract is over, the non-resident has to return to his/her place of origin if another job in the SKIZ has not been secured. SKIZ residency will definitely not be granted this person. The spouse is therefore left with two alternatives: leave the zone with the spouse, or live separately from the spouse. In either case, further problems will arise for the marriage.

For individual workers, the ideal is to secure legal permanent residence, which, with population quickly expanding, has become an impossibility for those without relations in the bureaucracy. One way to acquire zone residency is to marry a man who already has established residency in the zone. But, as mentioned earlier, people with SKIZ residency do not wish to marry those who do not. Most workers therefore will find ways to at least prolong their sojourn. While a job recognized by the CMH is a prerequisite to reside in the zone and to remain on the same job for more than three contracts is impossible, one may switch to another factory. But it would mean that one has to start from the bottom of the hierarchy again, and face the same problem after two contracts. Another way is to get a promotion to the management category, thereby avoiding the employment and residence rules applicable to workers as a class. The third way is to find work with a different job nature, such as a receptionist or clerk. The two latter alternatives require higher academic qualifications and/or professional skills in, say, English, import and export trade, secretarial duties and computer operation. Vocational classes are therefore extremely popular and diplomas are the key to leaving the ranks of workers. Workers are often seen to rush out of the factory, hop on their bicycles and dash to the evening classes, gobbling on the way a bun that will serve as dinner. But even this kind of hurried and anxious lifestyle is a luxury. Because of expensive course fees, a shift-duty system, constant overtime requirements and severe punishment for absence, the majority of women workers cannot afford to go to evening school. The wish for either an upgrading in career or a permanent Shekou residence remains a wish.

Class and Patriarchy at Work

The problems of residence and marriage in SKIZ are only a syndrome indicating deeply-rooted class and patriarchal relations in the socio-cultural milieu.

Classes are essentially clusterings linked via common mobility chances, which are large-scale, non-localized groupings. They are loosely formed aggregates of individuals who actualize classes as they move in and out of their boundaries. Classes are therefore structured in the process wherein class relationships are used by social agents in interpreting their own and others' social conduct (Giddens 1973).

In the process of class structuration, individuals' market capacity becomes very important in determining their class membership. The presence of class within the factory is salient. Since women workers do not have ownership of property in the means of production, and they have relatively low educational and technical qualifications, their class membership is defined, and their mobility chances are mediated, by their possession of manual labor-power. As delineated by Giddens, localized factors play an important role in class formation and they come from three main sources: "the division of labor within the productive enterprise", "the authority relationships within the enterprise", and the influence of "distributive groupings" (Giddens 1973). Within the enterprise, a division of labor on the basis of technique most significantly brings about proximate structuration by creating a "decisive separation between the conditions of labor of manual and non-manual workers". This relates back to the mediate structuration factor of mobility chances, in which individuals are ranked according to their job nature and in which mobility from manual to non-manual ranks is most decisively distinguishable and difficult. This division of labor is intimately related to and heavily influenced by the enterprise authority relationships which tend to create a triadic authority hierarchy that parallels the overall class system, that of an upper class, a middle class and a lower (working) class. Distributive groupings are "those relationships involving common patterns of the consumption of economic goods" regardless of any conscious evaluation of honor or prestige. Distributive groupings interrelate significantly with other structural factors, forming for example neighborhoods segregated on the basis of the division of labor, creating working

class, middle class, or upper class neighborhoods.

Within the population, distinguishable classes exist where the bases of mediate and proximate structuration overlap. The triadic class structure consisting of upper, middle and lower classes is seen as generic to capitalism. However, the mode in which these elements are merged to form a specific class system in any given society differs significantly according to variations in economic and political development. In Shekou, for example, though a proletarianization process is clearly established in the name of management and technological transfer, state intervention is maintained through the participation of CMH in decision-making concerning production and employment policies in joint-ventures, and more indirectly through population and trade policies in all enterprises. Within the major class divisions, there are internal differentiating factors of structuration among the workers, most notably the possession of marketable skills such as knowledge of English and technical dexterity.

The hierarchy in the factory as understood by its participants is tripartite, consisting of the upper management (shang zang guan li ren yuan), the middle management (zhong zang guan li ren yuan) and workers (gong ren). It parallels the social triadic hierarchy of upper, middle and working classes. The low social status of a worker is defined by the formal power hierarchy in the factory; but it also hinges on the very nature of her work--manual labor, in contrast to mental labor. A clerk is a wen yuan, "literary personnel", implying the use of one's mental abilities. A worker, on the other hand, is a gong ren, "manual personnel" and implies the non-use of the brains. As mental labor is diametrically opposed to manual labor, management stands directly opposite to laborers. As such, any kind of work not mainly consisting of manual labor becomes "management work", and those who do not engage in direct production on the assembly line are categorized as part of management. Thus workers look up to people who belong to such ranks as receptionists, telephone-operators, security guards and clerks. In fact, the term for working at the assembly line is xia sheng can xien, or "go down to the assembly line", being a worker is definitely of lower status. To the Chinese employees, then, "workers" (gong ren) as a meaningful category exists vis-a-vis "management" (guan li ren yuan). While "management" is the top, "workers" constitute the bottom. While "management" has power, "workers" have not. While "management" dispenses scarce resources, "workers" can only wait to be given. Thus while

management is the normative, workers exist only in relation to it, or at most being a periphery to the core.

Xiangmei, a young woman from Swatow area, joined the factory 3 years ago as an assembly line worker. While she worked on regular shifts, she took time to attend a basic accounting course at the SKIZ Training Center. The course lasted for four months and cost her 250 dollars. Upon completion of the course, she was assigned a new job-- as a clerk responsible for tabulating production statistics for the same assembly lines at which she had worked. To the Chinese employees, this is a rare opportunity of promotion; not only does Xiangmei receive a higher basic salary, but more importantly she now enjoys a higher status--she is considered part of the management.

However, employees of the lower rungs of "management" often receive less income than the workers (see Table 1). New workers having passed a three-month probation period receive a basic salary of 135 dollars, which is the same amount as that received by a lower level clerk. But workers have the opportunity to earn more. Once they have fulfilled the basic production target, the rest is calculated at piece-rate.

Table 1 PAYMENT SYSTEM FOR CHINESE STAFF

Rank	Basic Salary (rmb) per month
New worker	125
Regular worker	135
Deputy group leader	180
Group leader	210
Deputy supervisor	290
Supervisor	320
Deputy manager	360
Manager	390

A worker who assembles the micro electronic parts on average finishes 80-85 good products per day. A skilled worker can work all day if she chooses to, giving up all her breaks and meal hours, and can finish as many as 95 to

100 pieces. My fieldwork observation shows that most workers assembling such parts do make use of all the available time to make as many products as they can. Workers assigned other jobs will be figgeting in their seats ten minutes before each break, and, at the ring of the bell signalling the break, immediately file out or fall on their desks to take a quick nap. In great contrast, these workers are always sitting up straight and busy manipulating the pincers. Translated into wages, the work over which a worker toils ten hours a day brings her a basic salary of 135 dollars per month, plus a position salary of 135 Hongkong dollars, and an overtime allowance at 2 dollars per day. When business is good, she also gets a monthly bonus that fluctuates with the number of products she makes. Since production beyond the target is remunerated at piece rate, a few workers who have become skilled over the years get over 700 dollars in total per month. On the other hand, a clerk receives only the basic salary and a bonus that depends on the production performance of workers in the assembly line to which she belongs. Even a group leader, who does not participate in direct production and is therefore considered part of the management, relies mainly on her basic and position salary. Plus bonus and allowances, she gets an average of five hundred remimbi. A worker thus often earns more than her superiors.

The contrast in cash income, however, has not brought the workers a higher status in the system. To them, even a lowest level clerk who receives the same basic salary as they has much more authority and access to things which they as workers do not enjoy. They are thought to enjoy closer relationship with the management and hence receive more information in the administration. Social status obviously is not in direct proportion to cash income. The following incident will illustrate this point. I was visiting Xiangmei in her dormitory one evening and met her roommate, Lanhua. Lanhua's cousin, Weiyu, was visiting. I asked Weiyu where she worked. Lanhua was the one who answered, "fired". Xiangmei casually remarked that her factory was hiring, both in the processing department and on the assembly lines. Lanhua jumped at the opportunity and asked Xiangmei to introduce her cousin to a job, stressing, "Xiangmei, you're a clerk, you introduce her." Xiangmei, however, complains that "it's no use working in this factory;...I started with 125 dollars three years ago, now the starting wage is still 125;...[I keep] sitting all day long till [my] back aches and [my] bottoms hurt; activities are limited to a small area; the eyes get very tired. At the end of the day, [I am] so tired [that I] can't go to

the aerobics class nor learn anything” . Lanhua disagreed with Xiangmei because she thought the latter's job was much more comfortable than hers, given the same eight-hour work day. She added, “ after looking into the microscope all day my head spins. When you're a clerk, you come back after work, sleep, and then you're O.K. But if you're a worker, even after a rest, you still feel dizzy.”

Though the relative physical comfort enjoyed by clerical positions is used as a reason for the women's preference for those jobs, it assumes only secondary importance when compared to the social label carried by the job, along with a set of socially significant implications, such as social status. Aiying, a native of Lufeng, came to the SKIZ two and a half years ago as an assembly line worker in a radio factory. She has managed to upgrade herself to a clerk in another factory within nine months. This is indeed very extraordinary because many young women who have entered the SKIZ for over three years are still workers and see no hope of changing their destiny. In Aiying's own words, being a worker is “ ai ya, hau ku de” (literally, “ Oh! So bitter”) and, particularly for those who go on night shift, “ working there is terrible” (na li gong zuo hen can de). Indeed three days after she first arrived in the SKIZ, she ran home. Although she did return to the factory a week later, she was determined to lift herself out of the ranks of workers. Being the daughter of an intellectual and having just failed the university entrance examination, she realized the importance of a diploma in job-hunting. But most important of all, she considered being a worker as not having a future at all (mei chu xi). Despite the Communist romanticization of the proletariat, Ailing shares a folk belief with most Chinese that being a worker leads to nothing (gong zi bu chu tou). Eight months after she arrived in the SKIZ, Aiying sat for an entrance examination for a secretarial course organized by the Shenzhen University. With the best results in the examination, Aiying was admitted. With this achievement alone, she convinced the personnel manager of another factory to hire her as a clerk. Aiying now goes to evening school four nights a week and firmly believes that the only way out of the working class is “ through studying. Knowledge creates [favorable] conditions for one to materialize one's wish to move up.”

As workers dichotomize themselves from management, they accept the management's definition of their own existence in the system based on the

division between non-manual and manual labor. The differentiation is reinforced within each generation of workers, whether they choose to accept the fate of remaining a worker all their lives, or choose to climb up the social ladder by accumulating more diplomas. Within the working class, such class awareness differ according to the levels of skills as reflected in different positions along the assembly line and ranks within the hierarchy. As individuals respond to factories' mass recruitment in the county seats, they are taking a step towards confining their own movement in the labor market. They will be limited to jobs that generate a similar range of material outcomes, and as such their life experiences are being homogenized. Such homogenization is reinforced over the generation with succeeding batches of workers joining the temporary labor force in the factory. And as workers move into the SKIZ to assume their places in the labor-intensive industries, the triadic class structure is reproduced again and again.

The distribution of mobility chances within the factory system primarily governs the mediate structuration of class relationships in the factory. The restrictedness of mobility, both intra- and inter- generational, facilitates the formation of identifiable classes. In the PRC, once an individual is classified as a worker, it normally means that he/she will stay in the worker category for the rest of his/her life. Even in Shekou where social mobility is possible, a change of status in the hierarchy is still very rare. Lianli, a clerk in the Administration Department, insists that she has not seen any worker promoted to clerk within the two years she has worked there. Xiangmei's promotion is an extremely rare case, and may be only possible because she joined the factory in its establishment stage, early enough when there was an urgent need of clerical staff. This is confirmed by all others with whom I talked. Even horizontal mobility such as switching to another job in the same department is considered very difficult (*hen nan de*) or impossible (*bu ke neng de*), let alone vertical mobility.

When mobility does occur, it happens not only in an upward direction, it also goes the other way--an employee can be demoted. Understandably, then, when Xiangmei was told that she would be sent "down to the assembly line" , she was extremely depressed though it would mean an opportunity to earn more cash. She keeps telling me that she is "very tired" . "I am not physically tired," she explains, but " tired in terms of personal relations. Working here

gives me so much mental pressure.” This psychological anxiety results from the social downgrading based on the manual-mental dichotomy. It implies to others that Xiangmei is no good as a clerk, and therefore the demotion to the working class. The loss of dignity through reclassification as gong ren is a great blow to Xiangmei. Thereafter she will be selling her manual instead of mental labor power. Her market capacities are re-defined.

How jobs are switched in the factory seems a mystery to the workers. Most of the workers attribute it to “luck” . “If you're xing yun (lucky), you get promoted” . This seemingly superstitious comment turns out to be manifestive of a resigned attitude or feeling of helplessness towards things over which one has no control--one of these things being good relations with management. Most workers and group leaders joined the factory at around the same time, ie, about three years ago when the factory was first established. I asked workers why some of them were promoted while others were not. The answer is unanimous--those who are “liked” by their supervisors get promoted. One comment is particularly forthright: “Supervisors judge people by their first impression. If you give them a good first impression, then they'll always like you. But if you give them a bad impression the first time, then nomatter how well you do later on, they'll keep picking on you. If they like you, even if you make a lot of unuseable products, they'll just come to you and quietly say, you're making mistakes today, are you not feeling well? But if they don't like you, they'll shout at you, What's the matter with you? Why all these unuseable products?” .

According to assembly line workers, beneficiaries of favoritism are those who are good at making the superiors happy. This means that some people are good at remembering their superiors' birthdays and always able to appropriately admire their new dress or hairdo. The means to get favors from a superior seems to boil down to sweet-talking. What is at the root of this relation of favoritism, however, is patriarchal relations. Production supervisors, who are female except two, are the ones directly in touch with the workers, supervising their job and division of labor, and recommend whenever appropriate for promotions or switches to other jobs. They receive the production target from the shop manager everyday and practically design the day-to-day running of the assembly lines. They are directly responsible for both the quantity and the quality of products. They oversee the workers' initial training and their

subsequent participation in the production process. They are responsible for workers' behavior as well as their work attitudes in the workplace. Indeed, they socialize workers into the system. When production figures go up, supervisors are rewarded with bonuses for managing their workers well. But if it was the opposite, supervisors get the blame for not controlling their workers efficiently. When production schedules are tight, they have to coax or threaten workers into working overtime. When orders are short, however, they will have to think of ways to manage the workers in the workplace, such as giving them examinations to occupy their time. Like powerful mothers-in-law in traditional Chinese families, they are in charge of direct production in the household, dispensing resources and improvizing methods of sanction, as they carry out the orders from the head of the family. On appropriate occasions such as when production schedule is tight, supervisors reward their "girls" with an extra smile or even share a joke with them. On other occasions, they may withhold certain favors that they have access to, in front of the workers or at their back. Since they recommend promotion of group leaders and job switches, they in effect have access to resource distribution in the factory system. This power to control workers' prospects is at once envied and feared by the workers, and is part and parcel of the class structuration by all those who participate in the process. It is also clear that class and gender work side-by-side in the construction of the factory hierarchy.

Classes are thus social realities manifesting common styles of life, common patterns of behavior and attitude. Workers undoubtedly manifest commonalities in attitudes and belief. But they generally fail to recognize the class basis of the commonality and spend little time on pondering over the differential power they and their superiors enjoy within the factory system. What their grievances concerning their working conditions and career prospects represent then can only amount to class awareness. Class consciousness, on the other hand, involves the recognition of the class based definition of consciousness. Giddens (1973) delineates three levels of class consciousness. The first involves the mere recognition of class identity and differentiation. The second level is the conception of class conflict. That different classes have different and conflicting interests lead the workers to be united. The third level is a revolutionary class consciousness involving a recognition that the reorganization of the state and economy is possible through class action. Ironically, though theories of class conflict is very much part of state indoctrination, workers do not seem to be

much influenced by such ideas. Although class differences are obviously visible, even among the very few who feel that they are being exploited by their employers, they are not ready to do anything in the socialist tradition of class action. Rather, they believe that it is the union's responsibility to represent them in negotiating [sic] with the employers and are satisfied with the union's activities remaining on a recreational level.

The Union and Patriarchal Relations Reinforced

In the everyday life of workers, the factory union plays a low-key yet salient role. Workers, once having joined the union, are assigned to a "union group" which is the primary unit through which union activities are held and important messages disseminated. However, even union officials express the frustration of not being able to stand up for workers' rights. To go to the extreme, union activities are but one means to bring workers' grievances under control.

In Shekou Industrial Zone, unions exist in the bigger enterprises and workers act as union officials off-work. Among the two-hundred plus enterprises, only three employ full-time personnel to organize union activities. There are no trade-wide unions in SKIZ. In-house unions in individual enterprises, established under the guidance of Shekou Industrial Zone Union, are also unable to establish bargaining power in championing workers' rights. As such, despite the slogan of uniting workers against the exploitation of capitalists, unions in SKIZ are no more than organizers of leisure activities such as Christmas balls, New Year parties and monthly free movies. When conflicts arise between employer and employee, unions take up the role of peacemaker, while the foreign investor always has the last say. A union cadre once expressed her own frustration in fighting for workers' rights, "The biggest share always belongs to the foreign investor. The middle share goes to the government. Workers get nothing."

According to the description of Chen, a factory union cadre who heads the women's protection committee (fu nu bao hu gong zuo wei yuan hui), her job seems to amount to carrying out the State's birth control policy. The union processes marriage and childbirth applications, makes recommendations according

to the monthly quota, gives out birth control devices, advises married workers to terminate their pregnancies and to wait for their turn, and gives out monthly awards of five dollars to individuals who abide by the one-child policy.

Thus, being low in the power hierarchy of the factory and without bargaining power, women workers as individual suppliers of manual labor virtually have to accept whatever is laid before them. Besides the eight hours of work as laid down in the contract, assembly line workers normally participate in two to four hours of overtime per day. In some incidences, workers in a toy factory are known to have worked round the clock for three days. Compared to state-owned enterprises outside the SKIZ, women workers come under much stress and experience a strong feeling of helplessness.

The study of women workers in SKIZ also illustrates the part women play in the Chinese economy, particularly in relation to the family and a social division of labor derived from it. The crucial role of women in industrialization is evidenced by the high percentage of women laborers in the early phase of industrialization the world over, particularly in the textile industry, and also more recently by the almost universal development of light industries such as electronics. Chinese women, like their counterparts in other industrializing countries, have participated in the development process in large numbers. Factory job and wages have to some extent given women an autonomy from their families, especially physical control by their fathers and husbands, yet whether these have effected changes in the traditional family institution and the division of labor within is not clear. There is not necessarily a causal relation between the two. In fact, the patriarchal order under which women are subjected in traditional as well as socialist China is seen to have been reproduced in the workplace in Shekou Industrial Zone. The power over women's labor is now jointly shared by the family, the state and the company.

To women workers, Shekou Industrial Zone is what home is not. Personnel officers admit that housing and general living conditions in Shekou are definitely not as good as those individuals experience at home, especially in terms of *zhao gu*, or, being looked after. A personnel manager whom I interviewed tells me that the workers are "all kids (*xiao hai*) without a family (*duo mei jia ting de*), working here alone". This in effect means that the workers are all young, unmarried and migrant. What the company has to do,

therefore, is “ to create conditions for them as much as it can” . Creating conditions, in the Chinese usage, implies improvement on the day-to-day level. Here the personnel manager gives two prime examples of how this can be done. He believes that workers must be better taken care of (since they are “ kids”) firstly through the union which assumes a parent role in lieu of the workers' family, and secondly through the provision of “ home-made” meals in the cafeteria by cooks from the respective native places. Such an idiom obviously illustrates the importance of familial support in the Chinese cultural reality, and the assumption of the parent role by the company comes as a natural and necessary responsibility.

Evaluative categories based upon ethnic or cultural differences have an extremely important influence on economic classes. Membership in status groups such as ethnic and regional groups as well as gender often coincides with economic organization to generate greater market capacity for an individual. Class structuration is thus in its strongest form when economic relationships overlap with non-economic social relations, whereby developing “ clear-cut attitudes, beliefs and style of life between the classes” . Ethnically or sexually defined underclasses thus significantly relate to their members' disqualification from entrance into “ primary” labor markets. The formal hierarchy in the factory shows clearly how one's sex contributes to her/his class status. The top management level is consisted of all males. The highest ranking female in the factory is Zhang Peirong who is an executive officer called “ administrative secretary” . An electronic engineer herself, Zhang's most important job is to receive visiting delegations and show them around the factory. Another high-ranking female is the vice-chair of the in- house union. She is directly responsible to the executive director who also acts as chair of the union. In the factory, then, women do not enter the management level except in jobs that are highly related to human relations, which is traditionally a female realm.

For some, especially development theorists such as Boserup, education is seen as an essential liberating process for women who may gain access to more rewarding employment and less constraint by their gender. Yet modernization experiences in Western countries as well as Japan point to the contrary--that women's social position vis-a-vis men changes little no matter how well educated and how economically established women are. It is true that women in Shekou have made good use of the opportunity to higher education in the zone that is

not available in their hometown and that they are rewarded with upward mobility, but it only gives them a higher social position in relation to other women.

The patriarchal attitude prevails in the formal power system of the factory. It not only is held by the male members of the hierarchy, but also by the females. While men in the management seem to be eager to provide patriarchal protection for its workforce which is 90% female, women themselves also play their part as in the Chinese family. Female members of management such as the supervisors on the shopfloor resemble mothers-in-law who are responsible for the socialization and management of daughters and, in particular, daughters-in-law into the family. Not only are mothers-in-law the value-defender, they are also the rules-enforcer.

Regionalism for Security

For most young women, working in the zone is a novel experience. Living in dormitories and away from families, in particular, place the young women in a situation in which each individual has to fend for herself. For these young women who have come from a mainly agricultural background, familial support is an important part of their social experience. But the need to fend for oneself also becomes the impetus to self-improvement in order to stand out in the selection process. This same fending, taking various forms and shades, is the instantiation of structural rules and resources which set the SKIZ apart from the rest of China. There is the possibility of moving up the social ladder through education, through accumulation diplomas as social capital.

These factors posit the immigrant workers in a situation in which they have to acquire the most gain, in cash or kind, and the most desirable spouse with the least social resources, within very limited time. Subsequently, these young women live with a constantly high level of anxiety. As many of them termed it, working in SKIZ gives "no sense of security (mei an cuan gan)". They do not know how long they can stay in the zone and when they will be asked to go home. They worry about not being able to "marry out" (jia chu qu) and whether they can re-adapt to the rural situation back home. They find it

unfair but helpless as see their co-workers get promoted and themselves staying in the same position. They fear the loss of their job or a switch to less respectable positions in the workplace and hence a loss of face before their fellow workers. They are constantly given promises by the management and the SKIZ authority but always finding these unfulfilled. For the majority of workers, the only way to release some of these feelings of uncertainty is to "tell bitterness" (su ku) among fellow natives.

Regional affiliation is therefore workers' way out of a stifling sense of insecurity. Away from familial networks and their protection, and faced with an impersonal management and unsympathetic union, the native group becomes a familiar, reliable and immediate source of support. It affords workers "predictability, continuity and sameness", qualities that provide individuals "a rudimentary sense" of identity.⁽¹⁾ The consolidation of regional group membership is then a reflexive process and an essential motive for workers as they conduct their day-to-day lives. The routinization of workers' social engagements in a regional context thus serves, to use the words of Giddens, to maintain a continuity of both the individuals' personality and the institutions of society.

This sense of regionalism is reinforced by the factory's informal categorization of persons, albeit unintended. As workers are mass recruited from a certain county at a time, they are assigned to the same dormitory and placed on the same assembly line. So fellow natives are roommates as well as fellow workers. They enter the factory at the same time, with similar educational background and working experience. They help one another at work and are company in leisure activities. Fellow natives are sources of financial, material and emotional support, and, for single workers, substitutes the family as the primary social group. In Shekou where there are no counsellors and social workers of any sort, nor "Dear Abby" columns in the local newspaper to provide emotional support and solutions to immediate personal concerns, regional membership is a channel for individual women workers to break out of the self and participate in a larger social circle and engage in wider social relationships. Most workers indicate that they prefer fellow natives of the opposite sex as

(1) See Giddens 1984: 53-60 for his discussion of Erikson's concepts of anxiety and trust in *Childhood and Society* (New York: Norton 1963).

their spouse.

In the workplace, a region-class cleavage is salient. Employees of different ranks come from different places, and regional origin becomes an important identification. Thus there are groups of "Shantowese", "Hong Kongese" and "Hunanese" on the shopfloor. In addition, those who occupy the management and engineering ranks have come from foreign countries, Hong Kong, or big cities such as Beijing and Shanghai; while the majority of workers are Guangdong women. Thus regionalism is reinforced by job segregation and the formal hierarchy in the factory.

One special form of communication which women workers use in consolidating regional membership is graffiti (Tam, forthcoming). Graffiti found on the doors of toilet stalls in the factory are recorded and their thematic content analyzed. The majority of graffiti are found to involve regional hostility, in which groups throw derogatory terms at one another. For these women workers, graffiti writing has become a way to reinforce their regional membership, by slashing at the opposite group. Graffiti as an informal way of communication is thus one way of routinizing social encounters.

Conclusion

By virtue of the fluidity in its social systems, Shekou Industrial Zone provides a hotbed for disillusionment and discontent. Constraints imposed on women workers come from relations of production in the workplace, from the administrative structure of the SKIZ, from institutions of socialization and moral values. However, this same fluidity provides women workers as individuals with opportunities of self-improvement through further education and professional training, with access to information through foreign mass media and with direct contact with people from other cultures. These are resources that have hithertofore been undreamed of and that have enabled women workers in their strive for more individual independence and higher social status both as members of the female sex and of the working class.

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階級與父權關係在蛇口： 一個「結構化」的觀點

譚少薇*

(中文摘要)

本文以「結構化」理論為出發點，討論深圳經濟特區內蛇口工業區的女工的各種社會關係。女工作為「能知」的媒體，活動於複雜文化環境的各種資源與規條之間，其中包括社會上和車間裏的階級和地域群體，以及跨國企業建於中國父權制度上的剝削手段。這些因素體現於女工對家庭和車間內權威的服從和作為女性對自身及婚姻的看法。在這個指涉框內，女工不斷重估自己的價值觀以及事業與婚姻的前景，並由此而衍生強烈的無安全感。

關鍵詞：女工，結構化，經濟特區

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Class and Patriarchal Relations in Shekou: A Structurationist View

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(ABSTRACT)

This paper uses a structurationist approach in discussing different forms of social relations that are significant to women workers in Shekou Industrial Zone, Shenzhen, China. The constraints and resources affecting individuals come from various sources and constitute a complex environment in which workers as knowledgeable agents move. These include the structuration of class in the workplace and in the larger society of Shekou Industrial Zone (SKIZ), and the formation of salient regional groups in the workers' everyday locales of activities. Exploitative measures at the workplace have been re-introduced by multinational corporations through the connivance of the industrial zone authorities, building on traditional Chinese patriarchy. Docile submission by female workers to authority in the workplace and in the family, and women's view of themselves and marriage, all point to the tight grasp of patriarchal gender relations. Within this frame of reference, women workers constantly reformulate their value orientation and calculate the prospects of a self-chosen career and marriage. A sense of insecurity is keenly felt as a result of being torn by all these forces.

Key Words: Women, Workers, Structuration, Special economic zones

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