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**BEHIND THE CURTAIN WALLS:
LIFEWORLDS OF MIGRANT CONSTRUCTION
WORKERS IN BEIJING**

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**THE HONG KONG POLYTECHNIC UNIVERSITY
DEPARTMENT OF APPLIED SOCIAL SCIENCES**

**Behind the Curtain Walls:
Lifeworlds of Migrant Construction Workers in Beijing**

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**A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Philosophy
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CERTIFICATE OF ORIGINALITY

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Abstract

The skyline of Beijing has been under constant and rapid metamorphosis since economic reforms were introduced three decades ago but its property market did not become a hotspot for domestic and international investment until the time when it was awarded the right to host the 2008 Olympic Games. Behind these bulging figures is the growing demand for large numbers of construction workers which the city is in short supply. As expected, Beijing became a magnet for endless migrant workers seeking better jobs and economic opportunities. However, previous research has indicated that abuse of migrant workers in construction industry is common but only harder to detect as the work environment is usually open, outdoor and shifting constantly, and the many of these workers are working seasonally. In spite of the exploitative work conditions, often including long working hours, inadequate insurance coverage, safety hazards and frequent wage defaults, many migrant workers seem to be willing to engage in construction work. Inspired by Burawoy's theory of despotism and hegemony and based on findings using semi-structured in-depth interviews, this study explores the lifeworlds of the construction workers in Beijing and their reasons for staying in the industry, highlighting in particular the appeals as well as predicaments of their work conditions and the social situations that propel them into taking collective actions to defend themselves against hegemonic

practices imposed on them by their employers and sub-contractors. The research concludes that contrary to common stereotypes, these migrant workers are no longer passive victims but active agents resisting unfair treatments and exploitation. In this context, the appropriateness of the notion of despotic hegemony, when applied in the Chinese setting, needs to be reconsidered.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Migrant Workers and Economic Development in China

China has undergone enormous changes since the Open-Door Policy was introduced in 1979. The extended international economic networks, marketized economy, legalized private ownership system, and decentralized political and economic decision-making, have seen many sectors and regions in China totally transformed (Chen and Maruya, 1992), bringing forward not only a simple economic miracle but one that keeps running for almost 30 years, eventually propelled China to become a “world-factory” when the once powerful economic giants like Japan, the US and other Western nations continued to be plagued by chronic economic difficulties. While the gleaming economic successes have become headlines in Western media, less known and less discussed are those who are holding up the economic foundation – the migrant workers from rural China.

According to the State Council Information Office, there were only 15 millions of migrant workers in the country in 1990. By 2003, the number had grown to 98 millions, a 6-fold increase (State Council Information Office, 2004). In 2008, the number doubled to 210 million (Bai, 2008). Yet the wages,

working conditions, insurance protection, and education for children of migrant workers still remained poor. For example, up to January 2007, the average monthly salary of migrant workers was 966 RMB, yet half received 800 RMB or below each month. Moreover, many had to work 6.29 days per week in average, and 8.93 hours daily. Nearly half also had to live in dormitories or rooms with no kitchen facilities and toilet, while others were not provided any accommodation and had to live in temporally built shacks (Sun, 2007).

In the last two decades, however, the plights of migrant workers in China however gained more attention from sociologists, social workers, and policy makers. Growing interests were directed to investigate the poor working conditions of migrant workers in factories (Richardson, 2008; Harney, 2008), their low wages (Chan, 2003), frequent industrial injuries and illnesses (Richardson, 2008; Harney, 2008). However, factories are not the only place where one finds migrant workers congregates.

Migrant Construction Workers in Beijing: A Question of Social Development

Soon after being awarded the right to host the 2008 Olympic Games, Beijing became a global city, and its property market was instantaneously turned into a

hotspot for domestic and international investment. Since then, the skyline of Beijing has been under constant and rapid metamorphosis. Internationally the city was heralded as the greatest building site where world renowned architects are erecting their signature landmark buildings one after another while locals began to complain about their disappearing old neighbourhoods and heritage buildings one by one. Not surprisingly its property market has been on a continued spin. According to Jones Lang LaSalle (2008), between 2007 and 2008, the market for retail, office and residential properties expanded by 52%, 89% and 58% respectively. Furthermore, in addition to the 3,370 units already completed for the less high-end residential, office and retail markets, a total of 10,361 units aiming for the luxury accommodation market have been added on the property market (LaSalle, 2008). Data of China's 70 large and midsize cities released by the National Development and Reform Commission (Wall Street Journal, 2008) also indicated that Beijing's property prices notched another 15.1% increase in October 2007. Although it was expected to slow to 12.4% in May 2008, property prices will still manage to increase 9.2% in May comparing with a year earlier.

Behind these bludging figures is the growing demand for large numbers of

construction workers which the city is in short supply. As expected, Beijing thus became a magnet for endless migrant workers from all over the country seeking for better jobs and economic opportunities. Yet the lifeworlds of these construction workers belie the glitz and glamour of the curtain walls erected all over Beijing. According to a recent investigative report on Beijing construction workers' well-being conducted by Human Rights Watch (2008), migrant construction workers in Beijing are experiencing severe exploitation and risks, ranging from receiving late, substandard or even unpaid wages, to working under unsafe conditions, with little or no insurance coverage, inadequate food and housing, and denied access to basic welfare due to the restrictions of having their household registration (*hukou*) transferred to the city.

The great disparity between Beijing's sky rocketing property market and the deepening hardships confronted by the millions of construction workers and their families is not only another human interest story that demands investigation, but also an academic question that warrants serious research and examination.

Despite all that, researches on migrant construction workers in China are almost absent in existing literature. Chinese social scientists, such as Anita Chan

(2001;2003), Lee Ching Kwan (1998; 2007)and Pun Ngai (2005), have made remarkable effort on understanding the lifeworlds of migrant factory workers in the past two decades, but papers specify on construction workers are very limited in number. Shen (2007) conducted a mainly quantitative research on construction workers in five cities in China. It may be considered a breakthrough in this area, but the research findings and theoretical implications still have room to debate. Further researches are needed to be carried out so that discussions on the issue can be deepened.

In contrast, the literature about construction industry and its workers in other countries is far richer than those in China. Researches on the industry of both developed and developing countries can be easily found. Various topics have been looked into, including occupational health and safety, working condition and labour rights, discriminations and even culture among the industry. Curiously, as an industry dominated by male, only very few of them specify on male workers in the industry, while most of the existing papers focus on female construction workers in the industry. There is obviously a research gap that should not be overlooked - the lifeworlds and labour condition of male workers which is the issue involves the majority in the construction industry.

Aims of Research

Exploitation of migrant worker in China since its economic reform is not a new topic of research in academic arena. However, the majority of existing research has been focused on those working in factories. This is understandable given the current concern over China as a global factory. Yet this has revealed only an incomplete picture of migrant workers and the exploitation they have encountered. For one thing, many migrant workers, and in particular, men, are found more commonly in construction work rather than in factories where the myth of nimble fingers reign. Yet the abuse they have received is equally relentless, if more brutal given the physical nature and risks involved in their work. Exploitation within factory work is easier to detect because the workplace is relatively closed and contained. Abuse in construction work is harder to observe as the work environment is usually open, outdoor and shifting constantly. Furthermore, as a profession mainly engaged by men who are traditionally delegated with the responsibility as provider for their families, many prefer to submit in silence rather than putting their families at risks when encountering abuse and exploit. This may explain why there has been a complete void in the current literature on exploitation of migrant workers in construction

industry. The aim of this research is thus two folded: the first is to document in detail the lifeworlds and lived experiences of exploitation faced by construction workers through a case study of Beijing; the second is to fill a conspicuous gap in the current literature on the rights of migrant workers, especially in terms of labour rights among men who have been traditionally assumed less susceptible to blatant abuse and violation.

Research Questions

The main research question of the proposed research is: what are the lifeworlds and lived experiences of migrant workers in construction industry behind the glassy curtain walls in Beijing? In answering this question, this research also raises the following sub-questions:

- What are the backgrounds of these construction workers? What drive them to leave their homes and into this industry? How do they get into construction work? What networks of social capital do they have? What are their reasons for working in this industry and did they have other alternatives? How do they perceive themselves, both in terms of their skills, identity and capability? Can their perception explain why they

eventually decided to work in construction?

- What are their expectations of working in construction? What awareness do they have about their duties, wage levels and entitlements (such as insurance, rights, health protection, risks and safety)? What has been their experiences working in construction work? What discrepancies they have observed between their expectations and reality? What violations and abuse have they encountered?
- What strategies have they been employed to resist and struggle to protect their rights and well being? How did they come about? What resources were and are available? What have been implemented and what are the outcomes? What are the lessons learned?
- What implications can be drawn from their experiences for theorising migrant workers and social development? In this case, what can be observed to incorporate a gender perspective as opposed to a feminist perspective?

Organization of Thesis

In the next chapter, I will review the literatures about i) Research on Construction Industry, Workers and Labour Process in Developed Regions, ii) Research on Construction Industry, Workers and Labour Process in Developing Regions, iii) research on lifeworlds of migrant workers in China, and finally the iv) theoretical framework.

In Chapter 3, I will provide details about the methodology of this research, including research setting, research design data collection process etc.

Then I will go on with an in-depth discussion about my research findings on three different aspects, including the labour process, the family and livelihood and the government and institution.

Finally, I will try to compare my findings with some key researches and theories, so that I can make conclusions on theoretical implications and future direction of research.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The subject of migrant workers in construction industry in China has attracted much attention from researchers. For some, they see their problems as a fundamental Marxist concern in the labour process – exploitation (Chan 2001, 2003; Pun 2005). For others, the research interest is in the role and capacity of government policies and related institutions in mitigating these problems, particularly in terms of using labour laws and regulations to protect the rights and well being of these workers (Macdonald 2008). While research in these areas has been productive and important, they are framed by a structural perspective, leaving wide gaps in data particularly pertaining to the lifeworlds of these migrant workers, preventing us from understanding why in spite of the many hardships migrant workers encountered in the construction industry, many remain unfazed and decided to stay put. Furthermore, without a deep understanding of their lifeworld experiences, the organized resistance and struggles made by migrant workers in the construction industry for mitigating unscrupulous and exploitative practices to protect themselves in the industry are often overlooked, making it too easy for some researchers to continue portraying them as passive victims as opposed to active actors in social development. The

following literature review thus survey three major themes in research on migrant workers in construction industry – studies of workers in construction businesses, theoretical analysis of their labour process and government/institutional policies for mitigation – before the need for a research framework based on a subjective, experiential and ethnographical perspective is highlighted. Not surprisingly, the focus of these researches can be very different in developed countries and developing countries. Researches in developed countries explore mainly in the area of occupational health, equal opportunities for both sexes in the industry and the lifeworlds and culture of construction workers, given that the majority of construction workers enjoy basic labour protection by laws. Also, as the host of migrant construction workers, the well-being of migrant workers is also concerned by many researchers in developed countries. On the other hand, researches in developing countries focus more the various social problems faced by workers in the industry. They are also studied under gender perspective, but more effort is made on understanding the particular exploitation, discrimination and hardship faced by women workers.

However, as a developing country which construction industry contributes a large part of its GDP, China has very limited number of researches about the

industry. Most of the worker studies are about migrant workers in factory workplaces.

Research on Construction Industry, Workers and Labour Process in Developed Regions

Occupational Safety

There has been no shortage of research on the construction industry and its workers in the Western world. However, many are preoccupied with matters dealing with issues related to occupational health and safety. This is entirely understandable as worker rights are usually protected and valued. Not surprisingly research on workers in the construction industry emphasized a wide array of health hazards ranging from sun exposure and cancer (Hakansson et al., 2001), on-site injuries (Hunting et al. 1994), musculoskeletal problems and psychological risks (Holmstroem et al., 1992) and their medical intervention measures.

Lifeworlds of Construction Workers

The work by Applebaum (1981), *Royal Blue: the Culture of Construction Workers*, however, deserves special attention as it is a definitive study providing

a most comprehensive overview of the industry. In the book, Applebaum highlighted two very critical theoretical orientations that justified the study of construction workers. First, based on the distinctive working environment and labour process of the industry, a set of very unique ideas, values, beliefs and behaviour patterns have been developed among construction workers. Second, Applebaum believes that occupation is a crucial factor in modern society that shapes people's beliefs and attitudes. He also pointed out several main features of industry, including the dependency of personal relations during recruitment and work process, the high flexibility for workers to manage their own work tasks, worker's sense of uncertainty and reliance on unions rather than their employers. Though the findings of this work may not apply to construction workers in all regions and cohorts, it is still pioneering that inspired researches on construction workers.

Comparing with his first publication about construction workers, Applebaum's another one (1999), *Construction Workers, USA*, is even more comprehensive. This anthropologic research, rooted in meticulous fieldwork and a narrative fully grounded in the everyday experiences of the participants in the industry, has provided a full picture of the industry to the readers, detailing not

only the nature of the industry, including the work conditions, methods and processes of recruitment, training and advancement of the industry and its workers. More importantly it also allowed readers to gain valuable insights into the distinctive culture, values and tradition developed by construction workers through their participation in their work environment.

Haas (1984), on the other hand, interviewed the high steel ironworkers in the States and tries to look through construction workers understanding and reactions to fear and danger in workplace. Haas found that, as the ones who had to face high safety risks every day, these workers treated these risks as if they did not exist, and most of the workers chose to stay in the industry for their whole life. To his surprise, he discovered that the danger of work became a way for workers to demonstrate their fearlessness and enhance their reputation; and it was what bounded them to such a dangerous industry.

These pioneering works have remained a source of inspiration for many subsequent researches on the labour process of migrant workers in various industries, including the construction sector.

Gender Issues

As the gender minority of the industry, women's well-being is under concern of researchers. In spite of the continuous women liberation movements in the past decades, researchers still believe that women's career promotion in construction, even in Western world such as Britain, still has room to improve (Bagilhole, 1999).

On the other hand, some researchers try to go in-depth to understand the lifeworlds of women construction workers. For instance, Eisenberg (1999) has conducted a very detailed anthropological research about female construction workers in the States. It documents the lifeworlds of women in construction industry which covers the gender boundaries, glass ceilings, sexual harassments and discrimination against women workers especially those who were coloured.

As a male dominated industry, it is surprising that there are barely any works specify on male workers but we have so many existing works focus on their female counterparts. The lifeworlds and labour condition of male workers, who are the majority in the industry, have to be looked through in future researches.

Migrant Workers in the Industry

Due to the physically demanding job nature and safety risks of construction work, there has been a significant decline of local workers entering the industry. In contrast, migrant workers have become the majority in the industry in many industries as they are usually the ones willing to accept less favorable employment terms than their local counterparts. Lack of legal protection, poor working condition and wage defaults are the threats they are facing. Concerning these problems, ILO (1995) held an international meeting and published a report about the social and labour issues concerning migrant workers in the construction industry. In the report, major host regions of migrant construction workers were examined, including Japan, Singapore, Hong Kong, Taiwan, the Republic of Korea and Malaysia. It reveals that despite the effort of governments to enhance the well-being of migrant construction workers in their regions, injuries, long working hours, lack of insurance coverage and discrimination were still common in many of these countries. It implies that exploitation over migrant construction workers is not a problem of only a few countries, but a worldwide problem that needs to be probed from time to time.

On the other hand, the report has examined the recruitment pattern of migrant construction workers in various countries. It reveals that recruitment through friends and relatives were the major recruitment practice among tradesmen in many countries. It is similar to the situation in China to some extent, and thus it is interesting to use Beijing as a case for comparative study.

The ILO meeting raised other issues that inspired many follow-up researches. Abdul-Aziz's report (1995) has provided more details and statistics about foreign labour in construction industry in Malaysia, while Ofori (1997) published a report on the workers situation in Singapore. Although they did not go far enough to explore the lifeworlds of construction workers in depth, the preliminary data provided did stimulate heated discussions and critical comments.

Labour Process

Classical research on labour process mainly focuses on workers employed in factories. Underlying these studies however lies a crucial question begging for an answer: i.e., if workers interests are opposite to those of capitalists, then why do they work as hard as they can, and behave exactly what capitalists expect

them to? This question has long puzzled the Marxists who are expecting workers to rebel against the capitalists and many have been disappointed by the lack of radical action.

To answer this question, Braverman (1974) investigated capitalists' control and management over workers in labour process in his classical work *Labour and Monopoly Capital* and pointed out that workers were deskilled gradually and further exploited by the management through the control of modern technology, i.e., by setting up the notion that workers should only take part in "execution", while "conception" should be completely separated from them and concentrated in the fewer hands of management. On the other hand, Burawoy found the concepts of "despotic" and "hegemonic" regimes in production more powerful. In his book, *Manufacturing Consent* (1979), he found that instead of simply enforcing autocratic control on workers just like capitalists in 19th and early 20th century, which was known as the "despotic regime", modern capitalist took measures to generate "consent" of workers, and made them embrace the essence of capitalism which drove them to work hard on shop floor. This new production regime was known as the "hegemonic regime". As he argued in the book's 5th chapter, the hegemonic labour process was a 'game', and in order for us to

understand why workers are still willing to play the 'game' and stay in the labour process, two concepts are most useful -- "internal labour market" and "internal state" -- in giving us the explanation, i.e., how capitalists can continue to squeeze surplus labour of workers and at the same time conceal the surplus value.

Academic workers about labour process of construction industry in developed regions also lead us to deeper understanding of the issue. Clarke (1992) has conducted research about labour process in the industry, focusing on the problems of skills training and employment in the British Construction. Questioning the notion of "deskilling" stated by Braverman (1974), she stated that after the application of technology in construction work, there was a significant increase of skilled labour. Instead of application of technology, she attributes the deskilling of construction workers to the fragmentation of labour process- subcontracting and piece rate. In other words, their main concern was the productivity of construction workers, and the workers, especially in the field of civil engineering, were always constructed as less productive and subject to improvement, and in need of organization or unionization (Allen 1984).

In Hong Kong, although labour laws and occupational safety regulations have been enforced for many years, workers still suffer from frequent wage default. The Democratic Party (2005) published a public policy research paper on the working situations of subcontractors and their employees under the multi-layer subcontracting of construction works and its impacts on the construction industry. According to the research report, the multi-layered subcontracting system leads to frequent wage default and numerous “casual / self-employed workers” who work in exactly the same way and manner as official employees but are not entitled any fringe benefits stated in the Employment Ordinance. As a developed region with a long history of labour movements, Hong Kong construction workers still suffer from exploitation, we can imagine that the situation of migrant construction workers in China can only be worse. According to my field study, the multi-layer subcontracting system is also common among construction industry in Beijing. In the report, various suggestions on public policy are provided. It may not be applicable to the case in mainland China totally, but it can be regarded as a reference for the research on construction workers in Beijing, especially in the aspect of policy recommendation.

Research on Construction Industry, Workers and Labour Process in Developing Regions

Social Problems

Social problems in the construction industry have always been on the mind of researchers and the agenda of international organizations. In the 1960s, for example, social problems in construction industry were already attracting much attention at international meeting. In 1968, in the international submit of Building, Civil Engineering and Public Works Committee of International Labour Organization (ILO), the social problems discussed were low wages, long hours of work, instability of employment, industrial hazards and so on. Almost 30 years later, in Vaid's research (1997) on the contract labour in construction industry in India, the concerns remained similar: that although construction workers in India were considered skilled labour and high earners, they still had to work extremely hard as they had even heavier family dependency load. And although contractors were obliged to provide accommodation for workers, it was usually overcrowded, the quality and hygiene were usually unsatisfactory.

Labour Process

Surprisingly, labour process of construction industry in developing

regions is seldom studied. Even when the labour process was examined, most tended to focus on construction workers in developing countries and from an employer perspective, highlighting mainly the challenges employer faced because of poor manpower planning (Jayawardane and Gunawardena, 1997), poor nutrition (Wolgemuth et al., 1982), absence behaviour of construction workers (Burch, 1983), poor education, poor training, and skills and subsequent incapability for workers to complete their tasks on time (Kazaz and Ulubeyli, 2005).

Gender Issues

It is apparent that construction is an industry dominated by males in developing regions. Even in India, where female construction workers are most common, the ratio of female construction workers does not exist 35 per cent. In most countries, female workers take up less than 10 per cent of the total number. Yet, researchers are very interested in female construction workers that studies about them can be found in various regions. As the minority and potential “deprived group” among the industry, the working condition of women workers are under concern of researchers. Shah (1996) investigated the payment, maternity, working hours, occupational hazards and living condition of women

construction workers. Researchers also place importance on the studies of women construction workers at policy level. Apart from the above research, Shah (1999) also discussed the career promotion of women in Indian construction industry. The role of unions in enhancing the career promotion of women in India is also the concern of researchers (Passey, et al., 1999).

Studies of Migrant Construction Workers in China: Need for Systematic

Analysis

Researches on Lifeworlds of Migrant Workers

An emerging area of investigation of migrant workers in China in recent years has been the study of their lifeworlds. For instance, in her publication, *Other Modernities*, Rofel (1999) examined many migrant workers' life stories, and how they "managed" their memory about certain incidents and their perception to reflect their feeling towards certain time in history, she found their lifeworlds and the state systems and history were intimately linked. Similarly, Pun (2005) in her study of female migrant workers in a factory in the Pearl River Delta, has also highlighted the many of these workers however could not "manage" their emotions they had when faced suppression and exploitation.

Subsequently, a typical scenario emerged was that female migrant workers frequently found themselves having nightmares and screaming at night uncontrollably. She interpreted this as the consequence of how capital, the state and the workers interfaced with unresolved tension and finally led to a lifeworld of unconscious violent emotional expression.

Other researchers however found that the lifeworlds of migrant workers were far more complex. Yan (2002), for one, at great pains showed that the concept of “modernity” in many ways shaped the identity and everyday life of many migrant workers. Examining the consumption culture among *dagongmei* (female migrant workers 打工妹), she discovered that in upholding the concept of “modernity”, *dagongmei* became active consumers of consumer goods while they were also “consumed” by capitalists. In her subsequent research on *dagongmei* in 2003, she further concluded that economic gain was not the main reason for them to leave their home village. Instead, what motivated them to work in the city was their desire to jettison their rural and ‘backward’ identity to become modern and ultra urban. In other words, it was their desire for self-development or improvement, or the pursuit of better *suzhi* (quality) that formed the core value in propelling them to relocate (Yan, 2006). However, for

Florence (2003), there is yet another way to understand the lifeworlds of migrant workers – i.e., their representation as appeared in mass media. For her, the way how they were portrayed in the mass media should indicate how they had been included or excluded by society.

Recent researches into the lifeworlds of migrant workers have extended to include a new cohort – the new generation of *dagongmei/zai* in cities. According to Pun and Lu (forthcoming), given that the pain, trauma, anger and grievances experienced by the first generation migrant workers have been so well documented, the current/new generation migrant workers are much more ready to express their anger and resentment towards any unfair treatment they experience. And in this context, this research will contribute to offering a new chapter of stories narrated by a new generation of migrant workers in China.

Lee 's(1998) work on comparing the factory regime of a factory in Hong Kong and another in South China owned by the same company is another major piece on labour process. Different from that of Burawoy, however, Lee's findings revealed that gender and locality, rather than class which Burawoy had emphasized, were elements capitalists used most frequently in organizing and

controlling workers and the labour process. Her work reflected Thomas's (1982) earlier research findings of the importance of gender, locality and race in labour process control.

A main characteristic of research on the labour process is that somehow many studies were focused on examining the process only took place in factories, a social and physical setting confined by space (Lee, 1995; 1998; Rofel, 1999; Tam, 2000; Honig, 2000; Xu, 2000, Chan, 2001; Pun, 2005). And although there have been research on labour process outside of factories, particularly in the service sector such as banking (Rohlen, 1984), insurance (Kadt, 1984), hospitality (Otis, 2007), domestic service (Yan, 2007) and sex industry (Zheng 2007), works on the labour process of construction work remain far and few between.

Government Policies, Institutions, Labour Laws and Regulations

Government policies and institutions are also a concerned area for researchers studying migrant workers in the Chinese academic arena. However, most have focused only on the policies and institutional set up of China's welfare and social security system. For example, Li and Peng (2006) analysed the risks

construction workers had to face in their work and concluded that under the current situation, clearly the formal social protection offered by government institutions and policy are not sufficient. Likewise, probing into the question why the problem of labour shortage has worsened in recent years in the Pearl River Delta but not the case in the Changjiang (Yangtze River) Delta, Liu and Wan (2007) found that the labour shortage was attributed to the absence of sufficient social welfare and unemployment support in government institutions for safeguarding migrant workers' well-being, especially against unemployment and strengthening their bargaining power to negotiate with their employers. Moreover, there was also the absence of organization providing them necessary information on the labour market, which also undercut their bargaining power.

Apart from that, the household registration system (*hukou zhidu*) is also the hot topic among the discussion on labour related policies in China. Actually, many researchers have criticized the *hukou* system since it deepens the hardship of migrant workers and even indirectly leads to exploitation over them (Chan, 2001; 2003; Pun, 2005; Lu and Song, 2006). Harney (2008) spent 5 years investigating 'underground' factories and coal mine areas in Shanxi, after interviewing various stakeholders including workers, factories owners, mine

operators and government officials, she concluded that the *hukou* system has driven migrant workers from the public medical care system. While occupational diseases and injuries are very common among migrant workers, they are not eligible to state-subsidized medical care that “city people” are enjoying. It leaves them in a life “as if they were illegal immigrants” – they have to pay for the extremely high medical cost which can be the lion part of their income.

More specifically, in response to the labour problems emerged in recent years, labour laws, regulations and labour rights have attracted attention from researchers in social sciences and management studies. Ng and Warner (1998), for instance, found that among the three main actors in employment relations, namely the State, the trade unions and the employers, the role played by the state had become less dominant. At the same time, although trade unions and their autonomy and status are continued recognized by the state and its labour laws, their influence are diminishing. Employers however, are put into more complex situations – they seemed to have wielded more power but their unfair practices could not be performed too blatantly.

However, both Warner (1996) and the Oxfam International (2006)

criticized that the China Labour Laws had omitted some crucial conventions, such as the right to strike, freedom of association, protection of right to organize and collective bargaining and also workers' representative. They both compared the China Labour Laws and the International Labour Conventions and found that the ratification progress of International Labour Conventions in China was lagging behind, even when compared with a host of developed and developing countries in Asia, such as South Korea, Indonesia and Sri Lanka. At present, the only recognized labour organization in China is the All-China Federation of Trade Unions. Since it is a trade union federation with high level of state control, it cannot truly represent the interests of workers; at the same time, workers are not entitled to organize their own labour organizations.

In addition, researchers also questioned how Labour Laws were enhanced when violations of labour rights and labour disputes occurred. Although legislations related to labour rights, occupational health and safety are very clear and comprehensive, local government officials usually turn a blind eye to even flagrant abuse of laws (Harney, 2008). On the other hand, the legal system is extremely unfavorable to migrant workers suffered from exploitation due to high litigation fee and complicated formalities (Gao, 2005; Harney, 2008). It can in

some sense explain the increasing radical and even violent actions taken by angry workers: when the second wave of migrant workers encounters exploitation, they are more conscious about their unfavorable position, and they are much eager to demonstrate (Harney, 2008).

In her work *China's Workers Under Assault: the exploitation of labour in a globalizing economy*, Chan (2001) offered many cases to illustrate the inadequacy of Labour Laws enforcements in China and how migrant workers continued to face difficulties in reclaiming their rights. Furthermore, Lee (2007) pointed out how the uneven quality and legal knowledge of labour arbitrators due to poor legal training and inadequate supervision of arbitrators, could lead to failure in handling labour disputes, which in turn could cause more serious work stoppage actions by workers, ranging from protests to strikes. She anticipated that with the decentralization of legal authoritarianism, there could be a trend of “hidden alliance or an unorganized convergence of the peasantry, working class and the propertied middle class toward the terrain of the law” (Lee, 2007: 261). The recent introduction of the latest PRC Labour Contract Law in the beginning of 2008 may provide some remedies for workers in the foreseeable future. Its impacts however remain to be seen.

Researches on Migrant Construction Workers

Research concerning the construction industry in China has been scarce. Among the few that are recently published, there does not seem to be a consensus in their findings. For example, according to the report by the Research Centre of the Ministry of Housing and Urban-Rural Development, *Reform and development: a report on construction industry and market in China* (2006), the labour rights protection and work conditions of migrant workers in the industry had been greatly improved thanks to actions taken by the government. For one thing, the subcontracting as well as the wage payment systems for migrant workers had been overhauled. Yet for Human Rights Watch (2008), in their 61-page report on the problems encountered by construction workers in Beijing, the outlook for the workers is less than rosy. The report has confirmed the major findings of the work Shen (2007) did in Tianjin, concluding that construction workers there had continued to be exploited severely. More recent news reporting have indicated that construction workers in Beijing are continually being marginalized (Cockrell, 2008), forced to leave the city during the Games (Cody, 2008; Jacobs, 2008), under-paid (Simpson,

2006) and put in dangerous working environment without adequate protection equipment (Simpson, 2006).

In this context, the research by Shen (2007) on construction workers in China's five major cities, including Tianjin, Shanghai, Quanzhou and Lanzhou, is refreshing although it relied heavily on Burawoy's theory on factory regime. Still, Shen (2007:217) argued that the unique feature of China's construction industry was a "relation-based hegemony", as different from the "despotic regime" or the "hegemonic regime", that continued to keep construction workers staying in the sector even when they knew they were unfairly exploited. However, the investigation he carried out was mainly quantitative and at best it provided a much needed snapshot of the predicaments faced by migrant workers trapped in the construction industry while leaving the workers' lifeworld experiences under-explored.

Still there are important areas deserve further investigation. First is the fact that most previous research has focused mainly on female migrant workers, and the stories of male workers have remained relatively unknown. Second is the culture and the precarious livelihood of construction workers, male or

otherwise. As China continues to prepare itself to transform itself into an economic power, the social injustices experienced by migrant construction workers cannot and should not be ignored.

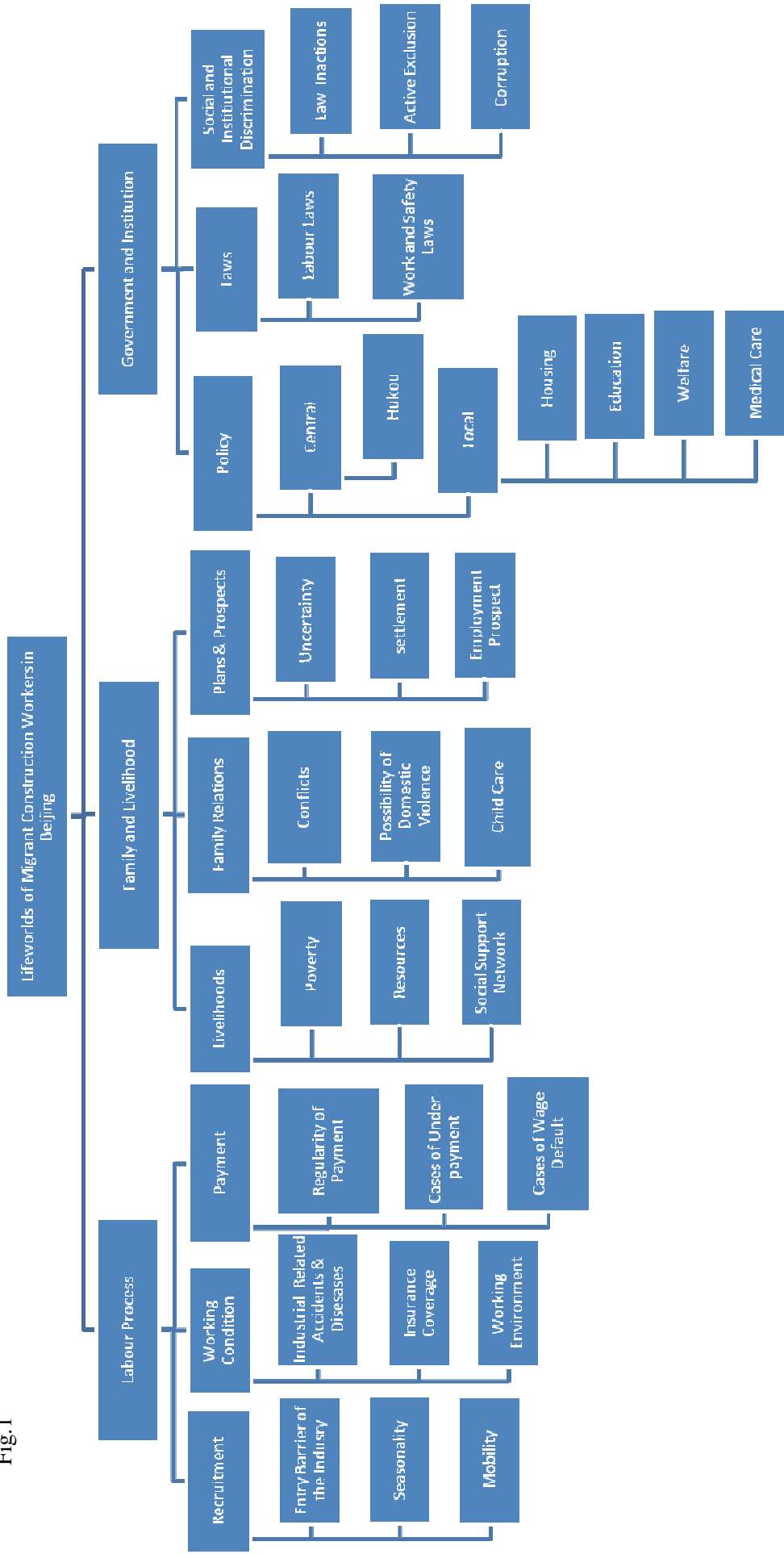
Theoretical Framework

As a way to summarize the research, a theoretical framework has been developed and illustrated in the following diagram as appeared on the next page. It highlights the main foci and the arguments of the study.

The framework is divided into three main parts: labour process, family and livelihood, and finally government and institution. In the first part, I will look at the Marxist's fundamental concern about labour process, examining how different it will be between a construction workplace and a factory workplace. In the second part, I will try to make sense of the role of social network to construction workers, understanding how and to what extent it will help workers survive in the harsh work life but at the same time tying them to employment which is unfavourable to them. In the last part, I will explore workers' lifeworlds with a broader scope, trying to comprehend how the macro environment shapes their work experiences. In this part, some major wage default cases will be

documented as they are the genuine examples to show how workers interacted with various government departments and institutions.

Fig.1



Chapter 3: Methodology and Research Settings

Research Settings

Construction sites: Lengquan Village(冷泉村), Bei Chen Xiang Lu(北辰香麓), Bai Jia Tun(白家疃) and Yang Jia Zhuang (楊家庄)

Lengquan Village was one of the sites at its early stage of development located in the North Ring 5 District when this research was started. For the past decades, it had been a quiet rural village where local villagers were reliant on agricultural production for a living. Prior to the all property development projects initiated by developers here, the area had one state-owned factory and a few small workshops producing low-end consumer goods. The village remained relatively unknown by Beijing citizens until the Chinapoly Corporation decided to build of its most prestigious and luxurious residential projects, WestHill Imagination, here, occupying a total area of 960,000 square meters. It held a population of 20,000 when I first visited the village in April 2008, most were of migrant worker background. More than half of them worked in the construction sites nearby while the rest worked as scavengers or workers in small factories in the village. The village seemed to have a temporary existence -- it was there because most people were employed by the property development

projects and they were expected to move in three years once the projects are completed.

When my fieldwork began in Lengquan in November 2008, the first stage of the WestHill project was close to completion. Understandably only a few migrant workers remained there and those were the ones responsible for completing interior decoration or doing ground work for its second phase development. . Many had already shifted to other construction sites nearby, like Bei Chen Xiang Lu and Bai jia Tun. The only local people there were small business owners and the scavengers.

Similar to Lengquan Village, Bei Chen Xiang Lu was promoted as a high-end residential property project. It is located between North Ring 5 and North Ring 6, occupying about 320,000 square meters. Although the project was yet to be completed when I visited during my fieldwork, the apartment units and detached houses were already selling in the market as an estate targeting clientele preferring a modern and healthy lifestyle and an environmentally sustainable locale.

Given its scale of development, it employed between 700 and 800 construction workers, performing tasks for laying the foundation, wood works, iron works, cement works, electric wiring and cleaning. The workers were from all over China, but a majority were originated from the neighbouring provinces of Hebei and Henan.

The workers were living in dormitories provided by the construction company, located only 15-minutes away from the construction site. There were two types of dormitories: the mobile houses were made of plastic and wood, and were easy to build and taken apart; the other was a former warehouse restructured and divided into different compartments. Large double-deck beds and a central heater were put in these rooms. These dormitories were placed opposite to one another.

There was a canteen situated next to the dormitories. It provided breakfast, lunch and dinners to workers. Each worker was given a swap card to pay for their meals which were quite basic, consisted of meat, chicken, and vegetables. Given that it was the only eating place in the area, long queues were most common during meal time.

There were no tables and sitting places for eating in the canteen. The workers could only have their meals in the open area outside the canteen, squatting and bracing the cold winds coming from the north. Sometimes they had dinner with their friends in the dormitory, sitting on their beds, making the entire dormitory smelled like a kitchen.

The dormitories were basic, cold and damp. There was no door in the warehouse-converted dormitory and the central heater was not switched on until the temperature was terribly low. The mobile houses had no heater. Instead, more than 40 people were made to cramp into a room measuring 200 square feet, with 20 people sharing a large bunk bed. Not surprisingly the sanitation was unacceptable -- rubbish was seen all over the floor, with food particles mixing with dust and dirt; cockroaches and rats were also spotted. There was no storage for valuables, and thus all personal belongings were laid openly on the beds.

Outside the dormitory was a bathroom. This was where hot water was supplied and where workers took their own wash basins to get hot water and had

their bath although there was no central water heating system. There was no flush toilet and thus the place was both smelly and unsanitary in most times.

There were barely any entertainment facilities for the workers. All they could do was to chat, play cards with their friends in the dormitories, or go to the small restaurants nearby drinking beers with their friends.

By the time when my fieldwork was completed, many workers had left because there were few jobs around. I was told many who had moved to other locations could not find new jobs and some had already making plans to return home.

The conditions in Bai Jia Tun were similar to Bei Chen Xiang Lu, but it was a smaller project. There was a small grocery store but no canteen. Still, between 200 and 300 workers were employed and living in the dormitory provided as well as in the mobile houses nearby. A new dormitory area was developed when I completed the fieldwork there and workers were seen moving into the new mobile houses in the area. Between 600 and 700 workers were expected to live there, and basic facilities such as bathrooms, toilets and a canteen were provided.

Another residential development project was located in Yang Jia Zhuang. It was another high-end property development, with 13 apartment blocks constructed by two construction companies, and 6 sub-contractors took responsibility for overseeing the completion of these buildings.

The dormitories and facilities provided to the 1,000 workers there were quite similar to what was offered in Bei Chen Xiang Lu, except that the living area was divided into two, each accommodating workers for one construction company. There was a canteen and a small grocery in the area. The sanitation and living conditions of the living areas were not too dissimilar to that of Bai Jia Tun and Bei Chen Xiang Lu.

The sub-contractors, the cook and the accountant also lived there although they were provided with larger rooms.

Xingongren (New Workers) Activity Centre

Xingongren Activity Centre was located in Lengquan Village. It was established and funded jointly by Peking University and the Hong Kong

Polytechnic University for about 2 years, aiming at providing various social services for migrant workers in the area. It employed 6 staff members and had an office of about 1000 square feet. At the front section it ran a restaurant and had three activity rooms in the back. In addition to providing food for workers, the restaurant was also a popular place for workers to meet or hang out. The revenue generated was ploughed back to the Centre to fund its services. The Centre, however, was also a popular place where students and researchers from the two universities conduct their investigations on issues confronting migrant workers. It was through this centre and its networks I was able to establish the first contacts for my interviews.

Originally the Centre was only providing services for construction workers working for the WestHill Imagination project nearby. When the project was completed, many workers started to drift away, the number of visitors to the Centre also dropped dramatically. It was then the Centre began its outreaching services, providing newspapers, books and magazines and organizing film shows and karaoke sessions for workers who lived in the dormitory area.

Research Design

Qualitative Research

Qualitative research method is the main approach of this research. There are several reasons why qualitative methods are selected. First, for a research that aims to map out in details the lifeworld of individuals, qualitative methods are more suitable as they allow rich qualitative details to emerge from in-depth interviews. These include insights one could obtain from the nuances emerged from language uses, body language, and how emotions, motivations, symbols and their meanings are articulated, all important indicators of the subjective experiences informants have had and expressed in their own frame of mind and setting (Berg, 2004). Indeed, shortcomings are inherited in qualitative methods and there are researches that can be best conducted through quantitative means (Schwartz and Jacobs, 1979), however, for research involving symbolism, meaning, understanding perceptions, subjective apprehensions, qualitative methods seem more fitting (Berg,2004). According to Silverman (2005), qualitative research is most useful for exploring people's life histories and everyday behaviour. Strauss and Corbin (1998) also submitted that qualitative research should be used to obtain intricate details about phenomena such as

feeling, thought process and emotions. In this research, since it deals with documenting the lifeworlds of migrant workers, especially in understanding how they cope with being confronted by the discrepancies between what they had expected and what they encountered in reality, the use of qualitative methods would be more appropriate in examining the meaning of many critical events they had seen and involved in. Qualitative methods are likewise helpful in allowing informants to reveal the subjective reality they had experienced in their own way rather than relying on pre-determined quantitative indicators measuring only single, specific and subjective aspects of their inner world as if they are unrelated, separate and disconnected.

Furthermore, qualitative research is equally helpful in providing researcher more room in exploring unexpected details revealed during the process interviewing and observation (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005). Given the exploratory nature and the uncertainties involved in dealing with research subjects with whom I am not familiar, the advantages offered by qualitative methods are apparent. Denzin and Lincoln (2005) further suggested that qualitative research is more appropriate to allow descriptions of specifics of particular contexts to emerge. For a study on documenting rather than

generalizing the lifeworlds and labour process with which construction workers are engaged, qualitative methods are both realistic and pertinent. Given that a strong tradition of qualitative approach has been established by previous researches in studying migrant workers, (Rofel, 1996; Yan, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2006; Pun, 2005; Pun and Lu, forthcoming), it is also wise to consolidate and build on what has been learned and achieved methodologically, especially when I will be working under severe time constraint.

Finally, an important consideration one must exercise in conducting this research is the feasibility of getting a large enough sample should qualitative method is employed. Given I am a full time student completing a degree in Master of Philosophy, and is confronted by personal, time and resource limitations, a qualitative approach involving a relatively small sample of interviewees will make it much more practical for the research to be completed in time and in good quality.

Narrative Inquiry

Among all the approaches involved in qualitative research, narrative inquiry seems to be most appropriate for interpreting data gathered.

Narrative inquiry is a method that has not been formally established until Clandinin and Connelly's publication of *Narrative Inquiry* in 2000. However, research using life history or narrative approach is not entirely new. Hatch and Wisniewski (1995), for example, began to employ this method in his work, *Life History and Narrative*, emphasizing the importance of using narrative in understanding individual, personal process and orientations in subjective research. Influenced by the works of Dewey (1929; 1934; 1938; 1961), Greertz (1995) and Bateson (1994), as well as other scholars, Clandinin and Connelly (2000) formally introduced narrative inquiry based on their strong interests in lived experiences. One of the key concepts of narrative inquiry is "temporality". They believed that "experience is temporal", and even "experiences taken collectively are temporal" (2000:19). What they concerned was not only the particular experience, but also experiences "on a continuum", that is, there is an "a larger narrative of social science inquiry" involving experience with a longer term historical narrative.

Their notion of temporality and continuity will be instrumental in making sense of the dynamics and varied experiences of construction workers. Given

the high mobility and uncertainty many migrant construction workers are facing, including entering and departing work sites, changing employment prospects and other temporal events, their lived experiences cannot be reduced simply to a static social or psychological mode. As Clandinin and Connelly (2000: 30) insisted, “We take for granted that people, at any point in time, are in a process of personal change...it is important to be able to narrate the person in terms of the process”. Elliott (2005) also suggested that researchers who are interested in documenting process and change over time will have to pay attention to narratives. Likewise, in *Telling Stories*, Maynes, Pierce and Laslett (2008) has illustrated the fine use narratives in their case of German Socialist Party where workers were encouraged to tell their stories for the edification of fellow workers. In these contexts, the use of narrative enquiry in this research is well justified.

When applying narrative enquiry in this research, the stories of construction workers will be examined in their own special contexts to explore how they develop and use their narratives to articulate their emotions and interpret their events. However, as suggested by Sparkes (cited in Hatch and Wisniewski 1995), given that informants often relate their narrative to researchers through “collaborative modes of engagement”, this method thus has greater potential to

allow us to understand the relevance and meaning of the storyteller. Moreover, another advantage offered by narrative enquiry is that it assists me to develop better and trusting relations. As Clandinin (2007) claims, only when the researched stops considering him/herself as an object of study, he/she could collaborate with me to learn and grow in the research process.

Research Methods

Sampling

Snowball sampling was adopted as the main strategy for recruiting informants. There are good reasons why this was done. In the first place, it was not possible to yield a reliable sampling frame for this research as construction workers were known to be mobile and their employment pattern variable. For another, given narrative inquiry necessitates trust between research participants and I, particularly when the informants are required to reveal themselves in the research process (Hatch and Wisniewski, 1995), it was not possible to persuade total strangers to take part in the research without proper personal referral. Nor was it easy to continue to locate further potential interviewees to involve in subsequent interviews. Given these restrictions,

especially in terms of high labour mobility, its exclusivity of outsiders, and the heavy reliance on personal trust, according to Lee (1993), snowball sampling was considered most fitting.

Participants of this research were recruited mainly from the Xingongren Activity Centre (the Centre) set up by researchers from both Beijing University and The Hong Kong Polytechnic University. Before the formal in-depth interviews commenced, I first spent time at the Centre working as a volunteer, participating in activities there to build social networks with the construction workers as well as making my presence known. Snowball samples were then obtained through personal introductions by the staff members from the Centre (i.e., administrators and service coordinators), before the informants were asked to introduce more participants to be involved in the study. Snowball sampling is adopted since construction workers were very sensitive about, if not suspicious of, any interviews conducted by strangers, especially the ones involved handwritten recording, worrying that it would bring negative impact on them. Therefore, after consulting social workers from the Centre, I decided to employ snowball sampling so that anxiety of interviewees would be alleviated. During

this process, attention was paid to recruit a diverse group of workers covering , different work locations, work duties, and duration living in the city.

A total of 9 workers were invited to in-depth interviews between late October and the end of November in 2008. The small sample size was mainly due to the Olympic Games hosted in Beijing. To mitigate the impact of air pollution on the Game, all construction work (except the ones for the Game) were prohibited from July to September, making it impossible for me to conduct the interviews in September, which is normally the peak season of works coming from village to Beijing. Then I had no choice but to postpone the fieldwork to late October. Then it came the global financial crisis triggered by the bursting of the US's subprime bubble. It severely damaged the Beijing's real estate market; the turmoil made many construction projects in Beijing suspended. When I was conducting the interview, it was about the time they found that there were very few jobs available and they had to leave for their hometown. One of the main field set, Bai Chen Xiang Lu, had only about 200 workers left given the normal number of workers there was over 1000.

However, the economic downturn led to more intensive wage defaults which triggered more collective actions of workers. It took much shorter time for patterns in interviews and observation to emerge. I decided to follow up the

participants in hand to dig out more information, especially about wage defaults, instead of finding new participants that there was only a slim hope to find in that situation.

Using snowball sampling method, this research interviewed a total of 9 informants and their profile is as follows:

Informant	Age	Place of origin	Type of Work	Education Background
A	21	Henan	Iron work	Middle School (Incomplete)
B	28	Hunan	Water pipe and electricity setup	Middle School(I)
C	20	Hebei	Foundation building	Middle School(I)
D	50+	Sichun	Cleaning	Elementary School (I)
E	22	Henan	Crane operation	Middle School(I)
F	40	Hebei	Wood work	Elementary School (I)
G	35	Hebei	Iron work	Elementary School (I)
H	45	Shandong	Wood work	High School (Completed)
I	25	Hebei	Iron work	Middle School(I)

Given the time and resource constraints, it was the intention of this research to interview only workers and not other stakeholders.

Data collection techniques

Stage 1 – exploratory research

An exploratory research was conducted in Beijing in April 2008 for this research. I first visited Lengquan Village (冷泉村), a large settlement of migrant construction workers in Beijing, located between the 5th and 6th Ring Road at the city's rural fringe.

On my way to this potential fieldwork site, it was evident that construction sites were expanding rapidly. According to a volunteer working in Lengquan Village, these construction sites would be transformed into a vast luxurious residential estate in less than 3 years and each house was expected to fetch 10 million RMB.

During this stage I worked as an outreaching volunteer, helping to set up the film screenings and distributing newspapers and books to workers. This allowed me to establish rapport and trust in the local community and enabled me to talk with workers from time to time before my formal interviews began because the more I showed up there, the workers felt more comfortable with my presence, particularly when some of the staffs of the Centre who were once construction workers themselves introduced me to meet specific construction workers they knew. We began to work together and later I moved to live in the staff hostel to be closer to the workers to build stronger rapport and trust.

Apart from providing me a basis for networking, the staff members of the Centre also shared with me their experiences of communicating and interacting with migrant construction workers. They advised me what I should and should not do when talking with construction workers so that I could conduct my interviews smoothly and receptively. They enlightened me with their insights into how to read the narratives underlying the stories they learned from the construction workers. The familiarization of the research setting and the research population throughout this period was most valuable and useful in preparing myself for commencing my interviews.

Stage 2 –Individual in-depth interviews and on-going and occasional participant observation

In-depth interview was the major information collection technique used in this stage. Semi-structured interview schedules were written and pilot tested to ensure the questions used in the interviews would encourage workers to tell their own stories, especially their working experiences and critical events to narrate their goals, meaning and hope in life. As a measure to make sure informants telling their stories comfortably and honestly, and relating their authentic experiences truthfully, a set of proper protocols were developed and adhered before each interview commenced – e.g., informants were assured that confidentiality would be maintained, they could also withdraw from the interview without penalty and prejudice, and their consent must be obtained before the interview started. They were also given time and opportunities to seek clarifications about this research and my background. At the end of the interview, their consent for granting me an opportunity for a follow up interview as well as referral for new informants was also obtained.

Apart from construction workers, *informal* interviews with social workers and other researchers working on site were also conducted. The information gathered was not used for writing up the thesis but it proved most useful for providing me a holistic view of the daily lifeworlds as an outsider. This added new layers and meanings for me to consider when designing more questions for subsequent interviews and for data interpretation.

In addition to informal interviews, participant observation was also carried out to observe and connect with the workers before in-depth interviews begin. More specifically, the ways the workers interacted with one another and acted towards their sub-contractor(s), their attitudes and how they related to outsiders as well as people working in the Activity Centre were recorded and reflected upon. Questions derived from these observations were taken as talking points with workers so that I could gain a deeper understanding of the more important issues they had faced.

Data Analysis

Narrative Analysis

Based on the narrative inquiry approach adopted for investigation and data collection, narrative analysis is definitely the choice of data analysis method.

Labov and Waletzky identified six key steps for narrative analysis, which I found useful for analysing the narratives I collected. They are named Orientation, Complication, Evaluation, Resolution, and Coda. Orientation means the scene of the story; Complication refers to the main body of what was done by the narrator or what happened to him/her. Evaluation “reveals the attitude of the narrator towards the narrative by emphasizing the relative importance of some narrative units compared to others” (Labov and Waletzky 1997, p.32). Labov and Waletzky emphasizes evaluation as an important structural part that it helps to the complicating action stand out from the result. Coda, on the other hand, brings the “verbal perspective” back to the “present moment” (Labov and Waletzky, 1997) . My field note was basically analysed based on these steps, so that I could have a more organized way to cotton on the participants understand certain experiences.

In a paper published later, Labov (1999) added the sixth step, Abstract, which seems to be the recurrence to the beginning of the story, trying to dig in-depth for the underlying reason that why a story was told that way. This is essential for a final review of data authenticity as the main concern of narrative analysis is not whether the narrative is “true” in an objective sense but the

understanding of how and why the narrator constructs, emerges and explains a particular experience. Narrative analysis theories also reminds me of picking out some seemingly exaggerated narratives and narratives contradicting with one other, especially when compared with my own participant observation experiences. For this reason, it is important for me to comprehend the reason behind such inconsistencies, especially by knowing more about the interviewees' backgrounds, ideologies and vested interests.

Constraints and Limitations

Language

Although I am proficient in *Putonghua*, before my fieldwork commenced, language remained an important concern of mine as I worried that I might not be able to understand those workers whose *Putonghua* was spoken with strong regional accents. Fortunately, after spending the first month during my fieldwork as a volunteer in the Activity Centre, I became more familiarized with the different languages used in the area.

Cultural challenges

The issue of researching into cultures and lifeworlds of those who are different from my own background was a regular concern of mine and this has been a topic of heated discussion in the literature. While some believe that it is possible for a researcher to identify with the culture and lifeworld of his/her research subject, as Paul Willis (1977) did in his classical work *Learning to Labour* in which he recorded the lifeworld and meaning of working class culture among the English working class boys (“the lads”) from their viewpoints, others consider it dangerous as the analytical and critical power of researchers could be compromised (Hammersley and Athkinson, 1995). Not surprisingly, they believe that it would be best for researchers to keep some distance between themselves and their research subjects to maintain some intellectual independence.

Such an argument between familiarity and strangeness can also easily fall into a dichotomy. As a researcher on the lifeworlds of construction workers in Beijing, the viewpoint of Coffey (1999) seems particularly pertinent. On one hand, it is important for a researcher to get closer to one’s subjects; however, one must also realize that no matter how one tries, it is completely “self-centred” for one “to think that one can ever be a ‘fully paid up member’” (Coffey 1999: 37)

in the field one studies. In her view, the best suggestion for coping with this predicament is for “myself” to be the ‘friend’ or ‘honorary member’ of the setting, and to “be open” about one’s attachments to and emotions about fieldwork and one’s hosts (1999:37). Therefore, it is important to be reflexive as a researcher interpreting the narrative landscape and to maintain active in the research setting.

Practically, as a young woman brought up and educated in Hong Kong, there are inherent difficulties for this researcher to involve in researching to the lifeworlds of workers in a male-dominant industry and in a city with culture very different from Hong Kong. However, having developed the necessary awareness and consciousness of the living conditions of the construction workers at the Activity Centre, I learned to develop appropriate strategies to overcome the barriers. These included volunteering in the activity centre and workers’ canteen as a way to overcome the cultural challenges and gain acceptance and trust from the workers/potential participants.

Ethical Considerations

It is important to protect and respect the privacy of all informants involved in this research. To this end, a strict protocol of ethics was adhered to ensure

the confidentiality of all participants. This means that under no circumstances their names will be used and revealed. At the same time, no recordings were made because all informants indicated that it would make them feel uncomfortable. They were also made known that they could withdraw from the interview without penalty should they feel unhappy about the interview. They were also briefed that all field notes based on interviews and observations would be destroyed five years after the research is completed.

The data gathered was handled with great caution. They have been used only for this thesis and will be stored in a secured hard drive of a computer accessible only by my personal password.

Chapter 4:

Lifeworlds and Social Existence of Construction Workers

The Labour Process in Construction Industry

In documenting the lifeworlds and social existence of the migrant workers working in the construction industry in Beijing, it is important to understanding how they were recruited into the industry, what their work conditions were, how they were taken advantaged of, especially not being paid timely and fairly by both their sub-contractors and company employer as well as mistreated by government authority and confronted by discrimination, institutionalized or otherwise. However, it would be misleading to see them as passive victims because when pushed to a situation where they had to defend themselves, their resilience as well as their strength ultimately will pull them together to find their way out of their predicaments. In this context, this chapter is not only a documentation of their lifeworlds and existence, but also a tribute to their own resourcefulness and integrity.

Recruitment

Entry of the industry

In the construction industry, normally three types of workers are required: the skilled, semi-skilled and the unskilled. The skilled workers typically are those who work on renovation and air-conditioning system, are usually recruited by the construction companies, and they are normally under contractual arrangement. The semi-skilled and the relatively unskilled workers, who are found working on laying the foundation, iron work and frame construction, are mostly recruited by sub-contractors and are rarely offered labour contracts. This is a particularly common practice for developers who demands a large number of labourers but find the recruitment process too cumbersome to implement, especially having to comply with the government labour laws and subsequently choose to outsource the task to construction companies that in turn, farm out to individual sub-contractors who will then recruit these workers, about 20 people at a time, from their own village. The workers recruited will only work for their subcontractors, and receive payments for their wages from them directly. Gao¹, an iron construction worker, for example, described how he and other workers were recruited:

Normally the subcontractor will find someone he knows in the village when jobs are available and ask this person to recruit some guys for them. Then the subcontractor will negotiate with the workers on what the wages are and how frequent payments are made.

¹ All the names of the informants are pseudonyms.

Not surprisingly most workers recruited by the sub-contractors had no formal contractual relationship with the construction which in theory was their employer. According to Xiao Qiang, a former construction worker,

Most of us don't have any contract with the construction company. In some cases, some workers did sign some agreements with their sub-contractors, but nothing of an official nature. We very rarely had a contract offered to us directly by the construction company.

However, in one interview, one interviewee indicated that he had "signed a contract." When probed in greater detail, it was found that the situation was quite the opposite – "we didn't sign any contract directly with anybody; our sub-contractor was the one who had a contract with the construction company."

Seasonality

Most of the workers participated in this study were from the rural areas from Hebei and Henan, provinces located adjacent to Beijing. The physical proximity had allowed them to work seasonally in the city. For example, after the harvesting their wheat crops in spring, and before harvesting corn in autumn as well as before Lunar New Year, normally considered low seasons in farm work, they would go to work in the city as construction workers. Typically these are

the times between late February or March and early June; late June and August; and between September and December.

Mobility

Given that these workers were not formally under contract, it was easy for them to change jobs or return home whenever they felt like leaving. All they had to do was to inform their sub-contractor, make sure they got paid and went on to work on another construction site or return home. There was no formal resignation involved. Typically at the time when my interviews were carried out, there was a significant drop of the number of workers working on the construction site in Bei Chen Xiang Lu. One of the sub-contractors on the site explained,

They left because there is not enough work for them to do. They went to other construction sites to try their luck (*peng peng yun qi* 碰碰運氣). There were nearly one thousand workers working here last week, but in just a week, only 400-500 hundred remained. It is not unusual to see workers leaving us or returning home everyday.

Of course, when work was really slow, the sub-contractor would also take a whole team of workers to go elsewhere or ask them to leave. It might sound quite drastic and sudden, but for these workers who had had plenty experiences

working as casual labourers or *dagong*, they knew exactly how to fend for themselves by building a strong job search network helping them to find new jobs efficiently. As one of the informants commented in a nonchalant way, ‘we have developed strong networks in many cities; with just one phone call, we will find out where to get a new job.’

Working Conditions

Work Environment

As a construction worker, many were faced with hardship (*xinku* 辛苦) at work. To begin with, their working hours were long and their tasks involved were physical demanding. These were the first two main features most commonly indicated by workers interviewed in this study. Normally they were expected to start work from 5.30 a.m. to 6.30 p.m. with a lunch break of 1 to 2 hours, particularly during the summer. Overtime was common -- especially when the weather is fine and the temperature not too extreme, they were expected to work until 8 or 9 in the evening even though according to the Labour Laws, workers are not supposed to work for more than 8 hours daily.

Understandably, “tiredness” (*lei* 累) was the first word that came out

from many of the informants when they were asked to describe their feelings about their work. In Yang Jia Zhuang, the first words of one of the woodwork workers said were that “construction work is far too tiring, really very tiring. You wake up early and work all day. It is just very hard”. And this feeling was repeated throughout the interview, and getting nods and spontaneous responses of yeses from others who happened to be sitting around him every time when he indicated how physically demanding and exhausting the work involved was. Apart from that, workers were equally concerned about the danger involved. One informant also commented,

Construction work is always tiring, but it is not dangerous. We woodwork workers are expected to log things around, often heavy, bulky construction materials like steel bars or wood blocks, to another floor but for those whose work was ‘lighter’, like those driving the crane, their work is usually more dangerous.

For the workers, however, what made life even more difficult was that they found it hard to even access food to replenish their energy. Considering a lot of the construction sites were newly developed areas located outside of well established local communities, frequently there were no decent eating places. This means that most workers would have to rely on meals supplied to them every day at the canteen operated by the construction companies. Normally,

each worker was given a “meal card” but some sub-contractors preferred to pay for these meals without giving them cards. Usually meals were served in the morning between 5 and 5.30, then between 12 noon and 1.00 p.m., and around 6.30 in the evening. For breakfast, the meal would cost 2 RMB, while for lunch or dinner, each dish would cost between 5 and 7 RMB, depending on how much meat the dish contained. Generally a construction worker would spend between 15 and 20 RMB a day on meals but sometimes they would have to top-up their meal cards to buy better meals at the canteen because the food provided by the meal card was of poor quality. Workers complained that it had no taste -- “no salt, no meat and no oil the foods are badly prepared, with stir-fry dishes tasting like boiled ones”. Another worker explained further their predicament;

We come here to make money but not to enjoy life. We are prepared to endure hardship (*chiku* 吃苦), but our work is physically demanding – eating food without oil and meat all the time simply won’t provide us enough energy.

It was thus not unusual to see from time to time workers went to neighbourhood restaurants to get better meals, ordering “chicken feet, chicken legs, ham, peanuts and alcohol”, but that could become prohibitively expensive. Worse still, some workers had to pay for their own accommodation when they worked for their sub-contractors who refused to provide them with a dormitory.

Given these harsh conditions, sometimes one would wonder why they remained willingly working in construction, their answer was that there were few other options. As one informant candidly confessed, “We don’t have any qualifications. We can only work in factories or on construction sites. But wages in factories are even lower.” However, others had more reasons than just money -- the perceived flexibility and autonomy they seemed to have at work.

Working in factories is boring and uninteresting (*meiyisi* 沒意思), and the working hours are equally long. There is also a long list of rules and regulations, giving them every reason to deduct your wages when they throw these bloody rules at you. We don’t have such rules working on construction sites.”

A cement worker further even described his work as “fun”:

I can take a nap after moving a couple of loads of bricks. I can chat with my co-workers, smoke and tell jokes, as long as it doesn’t slow things down. The sub-contractor will not give us a hard time because he knows working for only 5 minutes it can be very tiring. It is common for us to take a break after an hour’s work. Sometimes, if you’re sitting down without having a cigarette, the sub-contractor would think that you have already rested for an hour; but if you are sitting there smoking, he would think that you are just starting to take a break!

Accidents and diseases

A well known fact however was that accidents and diseases are commonly

sighted and reported on construction sites. Lower back pain, cuts and bruises, sprains, strains, broken arms and legs were easily found among workers. Some even became permanently disabled due to these injuries. These incidents frequently became the subject of gossips among workers, as well as a kind of reminder that their work was generally dangerous and that they should be extra careful when performing their work. Stories of this sort were rampant throughout my interviews at Bei Chen Xiang Lu:

A 23 year-old young man fell from the frame some time ago. He injured both his legs seriously. He can't walk anymore, and had only several thousand dollars for compensation. Who knows how he would survive the rest of his life with this money? It's obviously not fair, but we can do nothing.

Indeed most workers had the sense to wear safety helmets to give them basic protection while some wore protective gloves and put on "better shoes". But it was a rarity to see any of them using respiratory protective equipment or ear protectors. These however were not the only risks workers faced. For those working as crane drivers, they also perceived they were under extreme risky conditions. One worker described the danger involved:

The work involved is not physically hard...but it's dangerous. You'll have to climb up 30-40 meters high on a crane and do your job...and you'll need a walkie-talkie to receive instructions from people on the

ground. It's difficult to coordinate your activities while taking good care of yourself. That's why it's so dangerous.

Working on the building site on the ground, however, also had its share of hazards. Falling objects were frequent and posed a constant threat to the personal safety of workers. For those working with steel reinforcement bars and wood work, sprains and strains were also common.

When they were injured, almost all workers interviewed claimed they would not seek help from the government. Instead, they would go to their boss for assistance or, if the injury was not complicated, they would simply rely on their own resources. A middle-aged wood worker with more than 20 years experience in the construction business summed up the general situation during the interview:

If it is a minor injury, we would normally get some medication from the chemist and take one or two days' sick leave. But we'll have to calculate carefully how much we have made by how many jobs we have done. If we don't work, we'll have no money. We try not to take sick leave as far as possible.

If we had a serious accident, or injured badly, the company would never report to the Labour Department or other government department. They would just pay us the medical expense --in situations where workers were seriously injured, they may receive between 30,000 and several hundred thousands *RMB* as compensation. Whatever happens, the

bottom line is, never report to the government.

This is, of course, a violation of the Labour Laws which clearly state that it is compulsory to report any industrial injury to the government. As explained by another informant, the reason why violations persisted was because many construction companies did not want to be ‘investigated’ by the government. Once they were investigated, and if they were found they had done something wrong, someone would have to bear the responsibility and lose their job. Understandably many injury cases were settled ‘internally’ or ‘in private’ (*siliao* 私了).

Insurance coverage

Although accidents and occupational diseases were common, workers remained unprotected without any insurance coverage. In the words of Zhang who is working with steel reinforcement, it was “normal practice” for them to work without proper insurance protection.

[We have] no medical insurance. If we are injured, we’ll have to pay all the medical expenses ourselves. Sometimes we go to our boss and ask him for money, but whether we’ll get anything depends on how badly the injury is, his [the subcontractor] personality, and what *guanxi* (*relationship* 關係) we have with our boss.

In here, if you are injured and sent to the hospital, the boss will give you a card...(as a proof of the workers' eligibility for getting their medical expenses paid by the construction company. He will pay for the medical expenses with this card. Not long ago, a 60 year old worker was hit by a falling object and had a severely broken leg (粉碎性骨折). He was sent to the hospital and the boss gave him the card and paid all the medical bills but I know some other bosses will deduct the medical expenses from the workers' wages. So it really depends on how good they are.

What was surprising was that although most workers did not have insurance protection, some decided it was not an important concern. For instance, one informant admitted frankly,

I don't mind having no insurance. It doesn't mean that I don't worry about it, but it is 'normal' practice in this work. If you want to have better protection, there are prices you'll have to pay. If you want to earn more, you'll choose to take up heavier, dirtier and more dangerous jobs. If I had to choose between being safe or getting higher pay, I will certainly choose the latter. Taking up a construction job means that I am willing to take more risks, so I don't mind having no insurance. I guess if I were injured, somebody will have to look after me.

Payment

The wages construction workers received varied greatly according to the type of work they performed. Those wood workers were the highest paid as their work was considered most physically demanding, and requiring special skills. Cement workers however were paid relatively low because their work did

not require much skills albeit physical demanding.

Another way of determining how much a construction worker was paid was the relative difficulty involved in the task they were told to perform – i.e., big job (*dagong* 大工) and small job (*xiaogong* 小工). In general, the former required higher level of skills and more experiences and vice versa for the latter. This means that for each type of construction work, for example, steel work, there were big and small jobs – those who were responsible for bending steel bars for constructing steel frames were classified as big jobs while those transporting steel bars were categorized as small jobs. Understandably the former was paid much higher than the latter: big jobs in iron work were paid between 70 and 80 RMB per day while small jobs were paid between 50 and 60.

Regularity of Payment

Most construction workers were paid on a daily basis, meaning that they were paid only for their day's work with no paid annual leave and sick leave.

This was confirmed by one of the informants interviewed:

If it rains, the construction work stops, and we don't get paid. The way we get paid is simple: you get paid for the day if you work for a whole day; you'll be paid half-day if you work half day. If you don't work all, you'll get nothing.

In reality, however, many workers did not receive their pay daily but at the end of every season, just before they return home to resume their work or for festivities. Worse still, some were paid only when the project was completed. Not surprisingly, it was common for workers to run into financial difficulties, especially when they had spent all they had brought with them with no additional income to replenish their reserve. Ironically, many had to resort to lending from their sub-contractors who were supposed to pay them. According to one informant,

The most we could get from our sub-contractors were about 200 to 300 RMB to cover our daily expenses, like buying clothes and paying for our mobile phones. But whether they would lend us anything would depend highly on whether you had good relationship with them.

Underpayment and Wage Default

In addition to the problem of irregular payment of wages, workers frequently encountered underpayment and wage default. Underpayment occurred very often as overtime was not paid as legally stipulated. Sometimes they were not paid at all. According to the law, employers are required to pay the penalty rate of 150% for overtime. However, all the interviewees reported that they never had received the legal penalty rate, and most stood by the fact that they had never

known of a single case where a worker was paid as legally prescribed. One informant concurred, but his sentiment was shared by all.

We are paid a bit more than what we normally get for overtime, but never the legal rate as prescribed by the government. We consider ourselves lucky when we get a free meal for working overtime.

We are expected to work overtime several times a month, depending on whether there is a tight schedule...we don't have overtime payment, but if we work consecutively for several days, our subcontractor will take us to a restaurant and give us a free dinner.

Worse still was that most workers were frequently experiencing wage defaults – in fact, almost every informant participated in this research had either encountered such a situation, or had similar stories told by their co-workers. Moreover, wage defaults were not isolated cases but a common and widespread phenomenon often involving between 50 to over 300 workers each time. Usually these took place at a time when workers were in a hurry to return to their hometown to resume farm work and were in need of cash to take home. However, in many cases their payments were denied, leading to labour disputes and sometimes strikes. Over the period of my field investigation, I encountered three labour disputes over wage default.

Most workers attributed the blame to the developers and construction companies rather than their sub-contractors. Many would agree that most of the time the company was the one who refused to make payment but not their sub-contractors. In their view, their sub-contractors were also victims. A wood worker explained further,

The sub-contractor is really caught between the workers and the company/developer. He makes profit but not from our wages. And he has to keep good relationships with the company as he depends on the company to offer him building projects. He knows if he can't get along with the workers, he will have no one working for him [and he'll get nothing]. So he is anxious to pay the workers.

Nevertheless, during the time of my fieldwork, there was actually one case of wage default caused by the sub-contractor because he skipped after being paid by the construction company without paying his workers. However, many informants were adamant that this was a rare case. One informant insisted that:

Something like that does not happen all the time. Normally workers know the sub-contractor quite well, as they are from the same village. We heard a lot of cases like that. When workers found that their subcontractor appropriated their pay, they would immediately circulate the news about what he did to his fellow villagers; and some would break into his house and took his belongs, from furniture to electrical appliances, as payment!

Given most wage defaults were caused by companies, it was common for workers to fight back by using various strategies which will be discussed later in this chapter. What needs to be highlighted though is that even when the workers eventually got their money back, particularly after staging labour disputes or strikes, they were paid less than what they had been promised. This was because the process of fighting the developer or company was always difficult and the workers were anxious to return to their farms without further delays, and decided to cut their loss by accepting what they could claw back.

One of the informants had this to say,

Most of the time, the big boss will delay making payments and doesn't have the nerve to go for total default, particularly if the workers are openly fighting for their pay. He however will pay the workers less whenever there is a chance. For example, you clocked up 2,000 RMB worth of work hours, but he will pay you 100 or 200 less at the end of the day. Most workers just don't bother to argue anymore for a mere 100 or 200 RMB, especially if they want to hurry home.

In general, those who were less-skilled performing small jobs were much likely to encounter wage default. That was because the company knew that it was much more difficult to recruit skilled labourers doing the big jobs. Therefore it was common that when the sub-contractor was not paid sufficiently to settle what he owed the workers, he would usually pay the skilled labourers

first. A *xiaogong* cement worker recollected one of his stories during the interview:

When we found out the sub-contractor had collected money from the developer and the *dagong* were paid, we became anxious because the *dagong* were paid much higher, chances were that there was nothing left for us.

Family and Livelihood of Construction Workers

Livelihoods

A common comment one frequently heard from the construction workers working in the city was that “had I been educated with skills and knowledge, or had I been born wealthy, I wouldn’t be working as a construction worker.” Indeed, all of the workers participated in this study were farmers and they were classified as such by the official *hukou* (household registration 戶口制度) system, when their other family members remaining farmers at home. Not surprisingly many claimed they were not able to make ends meet relying on farming alone as their family responsibilities were heavy – paying school fees for their children, providing for their family members and paying medical expenses for their aging parents. Some confessed that they also had to pay their family debts.

In all fairness, however, despite all the problems they had, it must be pointed out that construction work was relatively well-paid when compared to other blue collar jobs. Many workers could afford to purchase their own mobile phones and dress fashionably. An iron worker who was helping his family to pay off its debt stated candidly while showing off the bowling bag he just purchased, “Sure I am paying off all the debts, but that does not mean that I’ll have to look like a beggar. As long as I give half of my income home, I can spend my money on buying nice garments and accessories.” It was also unusual to find that it was popular for these workers spending over 100 RMB a month on using the Internet with their mobile phones. “I think it is quite reasonable to pay this amount of money on chatting with friends online after work and keep myself updated with what’s happening in society after work.” As expected, mobile phones with camera, MP3 player and other advanced functions proved most common among them. For this reason, it was not uncommon that some workers overspent and ultimately having to borrow money from their sub-contractor. Of course, there were those who did not have to resort to borrowing. In their view, they felt they were debt free not because of how much they made, but how long their work hours were – if they had to work longer hours, they would have less time to spend money. As one worker said,

Prices in big cities like Beijing are very high. You'll easily spend 2000 RMB buying just a mobile phone and some pieces of garments. It is lucky that I work all day so I don't have time to spend my money.

In the end, some also complained that their lives became so dull and boring:

We just work, eat, and sleep. Life is also too tiring. You just want to do nothing but rest after working for a whole day. We don't do much in our leisure other than having a few chats and playing cards. The younger workers, may read some magazines like *Gushihui* (《故事會》) or books with quizzes... There's not much to do after work, actually.

Family Relations

Most workers generally would go home to help their family out performing farm work during planting and harvesting. They considered these the most important duties and sometimes they would rush home even without being paid. Unlike the female factory workers featured in other previous researches (Pun, 2005; Yan, 2003), construction workers seldom wanted to leave their villages and families for good. Instead, they maintained very close to their family and always wanted to return. Many genuinely believed in a popular saying, "A house of gold and silver is no better than your own messy home" (金窩銀窩，不及自己的狗窩).

Interestingly, many workers would not admit openly they missed home. An informant insisted that he was there to make money and what he should do was to work hard. And for this reason, he had no time to miss home. Another worker who had a three year old son also bluntly indicated that he didn't have to because a simple phone call to home would be sufficient. Similar responses were also observed among other informants and it seemed that on an average most would call their family once every 5 to 7 days.

What was most interesting about the workers and their family was that almost all the workers interviewed indicated that they would never take their family with them to the city. One informant commented bluntly that "Nobody would want to take his wife and children to work [in the city]." When probed further for the reason why this would be the case, one informant attributed this to the "tradition" he held -- that "if others find your wife [working there], they will look down on you." Another informant explained further and said that as a man, traditionally it was his obligation and duty that he would never allow his spouse or children to suffer from hardships. And for this reason, he would not allow his daughter to marry someone with no capability of providing her with a good life.

In his view, it was important for his wife to stay behind and work in a local bike shop rather than in the city in order to support their daughter and family.

Relationship with co-workers

Given most workers were recruited from the same village by the same sub-contractor and assigned to work on the same project; many considered their co-workers as comrades upon whom they could depend when in need. For example, one informant insisted that when he was sick or injured, his co-workers would stand in for him and vice versa. More importantly, when one was fronted by a wage default, others would jump in and help. As one informant recalled,

We'll update people on the progress of the situation. Once we know that there is a call to go on strike, every one will come around and join the cause.

The bonds and networks they formed among themselves likewise would be most valuable for job hunting should they wish to work on another construction project or a different construction site. One of the research informants, for example, bragged about what his network could do for him:

Construction works are everywhere in Beijing and similarly in other big cities. It is not difficult at all to find jobs. You just called up your co-worker, or ex-co-worker, or *laoxiang* (老鄉) who came from your

own village, and one of them tell you where to go and what to do.

Another young iron worker also insisted that such favours would not be restricted to people he knew from his own village. As long as one remained friends with other co-workers on the construction site, the privilege stayed.

I have many “iron-brothers” (*tiegeme* 鐵哥們), here [pointing to the workers sitting near him]. I am going to be his wedding planner although I only get to know him since I started working here. We have become good friends since [and there’s nothing we won’t do for one another].

However, the strong friendship networks these workers had formed did not mean there were no conflicts among individual workers or groups. In fact, according to the informants, fights were not uncommon on construction sites. One experienced worker reported that group feuds did take place on his construction site even people knew one another well. Still fights occurred because of management problems. Most common was that when everyone was working on tight schedule and for some reasons that there were insufficient building materials left on the site for all work groups, fights would erupt if one group member was found taking building materials from another group without asking, causing not only delays for the latter in completing their job but also their earnings. A young worker had this story to tell:

Not long ago, about a week or two before, I saw a group of 16 workers beating up 3 people from another group using thick iron bars, about 8 cm in diameter. Those 3 people were injured seriously and are still in the hospital.

Another experienced worker on the Bai Chen Xiang Lu site witnessed a similar situation:

If someone grabs all the iron bars and leave nothing for the other group to do their work, there will be a brawl. Usually you'll see a village group fighting another group from a different village for good reasons. You see, everyone who is here is trying to make as much money as possible. No one really wants to pick on another just to start a fight unless their work and income are badly affected.

Yet another young worker interviewed indicated that there were fights where he worked but he was more philosophical about the situation. In his view, he believed that given so many people working on the site, it was impossible not to have any conflict; and the only way to avoid a physical showdown was to have someone willing to accept things as they were, otherwise a brawl would ensue.

Plans and Prospects

Unlike the recent migrant workers employed in factories, most construction workers rarely wanted to stay in the city for long. A young worker indicated

that was because he did not find good opportunities for his future in the city. As he reflected,

In Beijing, whatever I did, no matter how hard I work, I remain a *dagongzai* (working man with no good prospects 打工仔). It is only a place for making a quick buck. My opportunities are not found here, but in my hometown. So when I earn enough I will return to where I come from.

Likewise, a middle-aged worker shared the same sentiment but for a different reason. For him, “moving to city is only good for the young. For people in my generation, it’s best to stay in your hometown”. Understandably, many earlier workers who felt that they had accumulated enough money would simply return home and stay there permanently.

There were exceptions, of course. For the more recent workers in their middle age and had a family to support, their preference was still to work in the city seasonally. As one worker indicated,

There are construction works in our hometown but the numbers are so small that one cannot get enough work to support your family. I have a son who studying in school and a family to support, and I’ll need to work in the city to supplement my income.

And for those who did not have a family to support, working in the city was also their priority because they felt there was little to do in the village. A 45-year old worker, for example, found himself totally bored when staying back home:

My oldest son is all grown up and doesn't need me to support him financially. I am still capable to work. Staying at home and being idle is boring. Why shouldn't I continue to work? I am happy to work in the city when I have time.

Government and Institution

For many workers, the mere mention of the words “government” or “laws” would invoke anxiety and silence because traditionally, many considered themselves totally powerless in front of the government and the law, and hence the common saying, “one should never get involved with the government when one is alive, and one should never go to hell when dead” (生不入官門，死不入地獄). Understandably they felt intimidated to talk about labour rights and government policy not only because they worried about the consequences, but also because these terms sounded too abstract when they considered themselves “not having any culture or education” or *mei wenhua*(沒文化). However, it was a different matter when it came to wage defaults and their experiences fighting for themselves. They became very forthright and strong willed regarding the

government, the law and the institutions involved. In fact, many had little hesitation in relating to me in detail their experiences in dealing with wage defaults. In particular, three cases were especially illustrative of their predicaments and coping strategies.

Wage default cases

Case 1: Cement Worker Xiao Qiang

Xiao Qiang was a 20 year-old cement worker from Hebei working on a luxury villa construction project. He encountered his first wage default situation in early June 2008 when he and the other workers were in a rush to return home to help out in harvesting the crops. Initially there were no signs of a wage default until one day, accidentally Xiao Qiang saw a van parked outside the company's project management office (*Xiang mu bu* 項目部).

I saw two men getting out from the van and rushed into the office, one dressed in a suit and the other looking extremely strong and muscular. Some time later the burly man came out with the Project Manager, grabbing him by his collar and shouted, "I will never let you off if you take advantage of us!" Then they got tangled up with one another, and the man in suit came out and said, "Alright, I'm taking part of the money now but I will be back and get the rest in two days". The two men then left. For me it was definitely not a good sign! I realized that if these two people couldn't get their money back, we wouldn't be able to get anything and our income for the whole season will go down the drain!

Xiao Qiang began to panic and ran back to the construction site, telling his team leader and several fellow workers, including two female workers about what he had seen. Some became angry and immediately put down their work, vowing that no one should work for nothing. Some began to worry whether they

could fight to get their money back without delaying their journey home.

Eventually a long and heated discussion was called to decide on what they should do:

We learned that it was no use going to the Labour Department for assistance, we began to explore alternatives. Someone suggested we should approach the Beijing Municipal Commission of Housing and Urban-Rural Development because, according to a story from a Henan subcontractor, he had his wage default case successfully settled the very next day after he consulted the government department. We decided to do the same the next day by taking a day off under the pretence of having a serious case of dysentery. A total of four eventually went to seek help from the government department. The outcome however was most disappointing. The official there simply tried to dismiss our case in saying to us, “You did sign a contract with the construction company, didn’t you? If you didn’t, there’s nothing we can do.” We then decided to go to the Labour Department, but then we didn’t have the address and we gave up.

Upon returning to their construction site, they ran into their subcontractor who not only did not blame them for taking sick leave in a group, instead he offered to buy them dinner in a nice neighbourhood restaurant. At the dinner, the sub-contractor took out several hundred RMB, and started passing them around. Immediately they smelled something fishy – that they were treated a sumptuous dinner and were offered cash. According to Xiao Qiang,

We all knew there’s no free lunch! My team leader then winked at me, and I took my mobile phone out, pretending that I was busy sending

messages while I was actually activating the recoding function!

As expected, the sub-contractor told us there was a delay in wage payment as the project management department hadn't received money from the developer; and we wouldn't be able to get our pay until 6 June. We said that by then we wouldn't be able to work. The sub-contractor tried to persuade us to keep working and told us that we had no ground to ask for money if we couldn't finish the job. After bargaining for the entire evening, we came to an agreement that we would keep working only if the company paid us in three days and provide us with a written guarantee. We remained suspicious of the sub-contractor, but at the time that was all we could do.

After dinner the sub-contractor went to the project management office to ask for a written guarantee. Afraid that the sub-contractor would break his promise, Xiao Qiang rang his friend at the New Labour Activity Centre, for advice in developing a contingency plan. His friend suggested that he should try their best to obtain formal evidence proving their employment by the construction company, such as working permit, photos, videos and records of their work. When the sub-contractor returned, he claimed that the company refused to provide workers any guarantee on when the payment would be made. The workers at that point made up their minds that they would no longer trust the sub-contractor.

We should have expected that to happen. On the following day, we heard that another group of workers were going to stage a rally with banners demanding their payment. We went to visit them and found

what they had confronted was much worse. The sub-contractor apparently told them if they kept working, they would get paid soon. However, not only did they not get paid on time, they were told their work was substandard and thus they had to redo it. Yet they were not given sufficient building materials and left there sitting around for days. The more we talked the more we found that not only we suffered from similar unfair treatment, we were also recruited from the same province, Hebei. So we exchanged contacts and agreed that we would band together to stage collective action when necessary.

Several days later, we went to the New Labour Activity Centre after work to read up on labour laws. Although many of us did not trust the law, we went there to find out more about it anyway. Then I found myself developing a much clearer concept about labour laws and I understood who should be responsible had we not signed a labour contract with the company. I became more confident to fight to claim what we were owed. While I was waiting for the pay day to come, 6 June, I also made plans to take action if we were not paid on the date. We began to work hard collecting evidence of our employment with the company. We took photos, collected documents and talked with our subcontractor over wage and terms of employment and had it recorded it on our mobile phones.

Many workers decided to stop working because there was not enough to do.

On June 5, people felt it was a waste of time doing nothing, so Xiao Qiang and his team leader went to the office of the construction company to find out what had been happening.

We went there and the receptionist at the counter asked us the same question, "Did you sign a labour contract?" Only this time I knew exactly how to respond and said, "I know who should be responsible for not offering us a formal contract to sign! What nerve do you have asking me for a contract!" Then the receptionist replied coldly, "We

are not responsible for paying workers. If you want to get paid, you should see the manager, and he doesn't work here." We knew we had failed at our first attempt.

As expected, bad news kept popping up in the following days. First the sub-contractor kept putting off the date for paying us, from the 6th to the 8th, and then to the 10th. The sub-contractor then told everyone that he had not been paid by the construction company.. Xiao Qiang remained suspicious about the whole thing.

I heard the other Hebei group was going to stage a rally with their banners in front of the sales office. I decided to join them, but my team leader stopped me, saying that our group was too small to stage a rally. I disagreed and called several more co-workers to join me to form a rally. At the sales office, we held up our banners with slogans. We took photos of ourselves demonstrating with our banners but the security guard rushed out and ordered us to put away the banners. We insisted that unless his boss shows his face we would not put the banners down. Eventually he went to ask his boss to meet us.

A man identifying himself as the property manager came out to meet us. Initially he tried to calm us down in a diplomatic way, but learning from our last failed attempt, we decided we had no option but to take a hard line. We insisted that we would not put the banners away unless we got paid. Then the property manager became irritated and phoned for help. Several minutes later, two angry men came out and shouted at us and asked us to go to the construction company for our demands. We told them there was no one at the construction company. Then one of the angry men told us to put down the banners and he would find out for us who would be responsible for our payment. I suggested the group to do so but no one listened to me. Then the two men threatened to beat us up. We struggled a bit and then some of us got slapped on the face and

kicked. Some of us began to flee while more and more guards, about 10 of them, rushed in. Given some ran away, our number became small and gave them a chance to take our banners away and we were made to squat.

The security guards then called the police. In no time, the first police car arrived and a policeman came out, shouting to Xiao Qiang and his fellow workers without asking one question. Then another police car arrived and another cop came and checked the group's identity cards. As Xiao Qiang recalled,

The first policeman was acting like a 'mad dog'. He shouted at us and even wanted to take me to the police office. I thought I had ground to fight for my wages, and he could not arrest me without reason and I resisted. He knew he could not arrest me, but he still accused me loudly for staging a riot. I protested but he kept shouting without listening to any of my words. The second cop was much more reasonable. After checking our identity cards, he told us we should seek official and legal channels to settle our disputes. Although I didn't agree with him, I didn't want to argue. We were told that the manager of the construction company was coming.

But the one who finally turned up was not the manager, but our subcontractors. They tried their very best to explain what had happened to the two policemen, and finally we were let off. On our way back to the construction site, I asked my subcontractor why he was there and not the manager. He said, "Who else could they call except us?"

Back to the dormitory, I started to wonder why and how could people be so irresponsible? Isn't it the job of government departments to make life better for people? After this incidence, I realized that many people in the government were like me, working with no passion and

without a mission.

In the next two days, the morale of workers sank lower in terms of their work and their will to fight to recover what they were owed. Xiao Qiang who went to see the Labour Department on the day when the group demonstrated in front of the sales office found that they were in fact in a most difficult situation. According to the officials from the Labour Department, their case would not be easy to settle officially because the workers were outsourced and unless their subcontractor was willing to declare formally that they had worked for the company, there would be no case. It would have been more direct and beneficial for the workers to confront directly with the general manager of the construction company also because there was already a huge backlog of similar complaints in the Department. Worse still, one sub-contractor came in and told them their pay was further delayed.

The sub-contractor was frustrated too. He admitted he was disappointed by the company and said that he would give us his blessing if we wanted to go on strike or take legal action. We all thought that it was too late to go to the Labour Department, and too complicated to take legal action and the only option we had was to take more radical actions like protesting. We decided to wear a placard on our backs to draw people's attention that our company did not pay us. We had a group of 12 people and started making placards and writing slogans like "XX Company, pay back what you owed us". Some suggested that on one side of these cards should contain moderate slogans while more radical

slogans could be written on the other so that we could change our slogans depending on the situation.

Finally the subcontractors came to inform us that they had been to the construction company to demand for payment and they found out that the General Manager was coming to inspect the construction site that afternoon. Xiao Qiang and his co-workers decided to take more drastic action until they get back the wages.

We had our minds made up that we would not allow the General Manager to get off easily. If he started to leave, we would lie in front of his car and see if he dares to run us over!

Ten minutes later, the General Manager showed up and the workers immediately crowded around him demanding for wages. He vowed to settle the matter and requested the workers to put away the placards. At the same time he told the workers he would need time to phone the boss and would be back in 20 minutes. Given his sincere manners, the workers gave in and let him go. About 30 minutes later he returned but kept calling. Meanwhile someone at the office uttered something offensive to the workers.

We didn't know who the person was, but what he said made everyone in the office very angry. He said, "Peasants should stay in the village. I don't understand why you people left your land lying idle and came to work in the city? Why do you keep making trouble here?" Almost

everyone was angered and in return shouted back to him, “How dare you looking down on us peasants? You will be starved without us!”, “Have you not any conscience?” Ultimately he was drowned by the voices of protest and shut up.

In another room, the General Manager was talking to his boss on phone. He passed the phone to one of the sub-contractors. The sub-contractor talked loudly, and we could hear him crying, “You told us we would get paid on June 6, then it was postponed to June 8, and now we still receive nothing! We even don’t know where you are! Are you going to let us die?” He started weeping and sounded really desperate. He was an adult sub-contractor. Imagine him weeping before twelve people!

Many of us were moved. Some female workers started sobbing and began to elaborate on how difficult their lives had been as a working mother and having nothing to live on. All in the room started looking very sad.

Finally the Manager hung up and told us we would be paid on June 10, each receiving 1,000 RMB. My team leader refused to take his words again and demanded to get paid immediately. The Manager explained that he could not possibly withdraw any money from the bank as it was a public holiday. After bargaining for more than 2 hours, one of the sub-contractors promised that everyone they would get 1,000 RMB so that they could return to their home village and he would try his best to recover the remaining amount later. However, people decided to stand firm and demanded to be paid fully before returning home.

Eventually, the workers were paid fully the following day. Still the question remained —i.e., would workers have the time to fight for they pay every time when the employer refuses to pay up? For some informants, the important lesson they learned was that if they did not make time to protest and demand, they would have received nothing. For some sub-contractors, their answer was

that had they done nothing, their reputation in their own village would be damaged and they would have difficulties in recruiting workers. Most important of all, this case clearly illustrates that it was not an isolated incidence.

Case 2: Iron worker Gao

Gao was an iron worker from Bao Ding , Hebei Province. He encountered twice wage defaults which shared many similarities. For the convenience of presentation, the following case is presented as a composite example.

Twice I couldn't get paid. The first time was in Tianjin in 2006, and the other was in Beijing in 2007. In 2006, I was working on a commercial-residential project in Tianjin hoping to earn more to bring home for the winter harvest. I was much younger then and I did not think wage default was real until it happened to me. I was simply too naïve.

According to Gao, the project he worked on involved more than 800 people.

Workers were demanding their pays two weeks before they were returning home.

Some workers however were told by the construction company office that they had not received payment from the developer, so they did not have the money to pay the workers. Other workers were informed differently and were told that they could not be paid because parts of the project were not finished. In sum, many different excuses were given to workers to justify why their pay was delayed. Some experienced workers remained calm and knew right away that “whatever reasons were given, a wage default was inevitable.”

In the following days, groups of workers, ranging between 10 and 30 each time, visited the office demanding for payment, but none had any success. The workers then started exchanging contact details, updated information and shared

experiences of what they went through in their attempts at the office.

The workers were growing more and more impatient as time got closer to when they had to be home. It was most important for them to be home for the Lunar New Year, long considered as the most important time of the year for family reunion. Understandably every worker was anxious to come up with a way to get their pay. Some suggested asking the government for help or take legal actions, but the experienced workers objected because they knew you would not get anywhere unless you had signed a formal contract indicating you were formally employed by the company. And the fact was that none had signed anything and given the low education level the workers had, no one was really confident to take the lead to take any action. Some also believed that even when one had a contract, it was not easy to convince the Labour Department to take any legal proceeding. We have little legal knowledge and we were uncertain as to what department was best to approach. It was also evident that it would take up a lot of time and money to fight and get back what you were owed.

Some were skeptical about taking radical actions like going on a strike or staging a demonstration as they could be risky. Many were afraid that they were not powerful enough to take on the company as their numbers were small. Although there were many discussions, eventually nothing was decided and people remained worried and waiting for things to happen. About a week before everyone was supposed to depart, there was a phone message circulating that a large group of people were heading to block the main national highway (*guodao* 國道) as an act of protest. Others heard from the grapevine that up to 80 people would be there, a size large enough to get noticed from the government. We decided to join them because we are men and we should have the courage to fight for what is right! After all, with the size of a big group, we believed there was little the company could do to us.

Gao was surprised to find that more than 120 people showed up to

demonstrate. They occupied the highway and blocked all traffic. In less than half an hour, 20 police cars arrived. .

Still our number was larger than the police. At first, they wanted to arrest us, but there were too many of us and they could do nothing. One of their leaders came over and tried to persuade us to disperse, telling us we had caused enough troubles, leading to serious traffic congestions to paralyze all traffics between Tianjin and other cities. The leader of the demonstration then believed that the incidence had been effective in gaining public attention and decided to call off the demonstration.

As expected, the construction company was shocked. We threatened to block the highway again if we were not paid. The incidence must have been reported to the local government, and the company eventually did not delay their payment - all workers were paid in full 5 days later.

In 2007 when Gao worked on another construction site in Xiao Tang Shan (小湯山) involving the development of an estate of luxurious villas, he encountered another case of wage default. .

Although the project involved a big developer, we were not paid as required. Instead, it was delayed for 20 days and again it was very close to the Lunar New Year when everyone was anxious to get home to see their family.

Based on what he had learned in the past, Gao decided to organize some 50 workers to block the main highway and again, causing heavy traffic congestion

for an entire day as well as attracting immediate police intervention. The outcome was that they received their pay the very next day.

Reflecting on his experience in organizing a mass protest to block the highway, Gao did not hesitate to admit that it was not difficult:

I didn't do much thinking and organizing because when you have a group of workers who have been taken advantage of, people will sit down and think about what to do next. And every worker knows the best way to get their money back is to block the main highway.

In his view, if actions were to be taken, like staging a protest or mounting a rally, they had to be visible and create an impact to attract public attention. Thus "it's useless blocking the developer's or the construction company's office as it will be considered merely as an incident and attracts little public attention".

Case 3: Iron worker Jimi

This was the case I witnessed during the time when I conducted my field work. One of my informants, a 21 year-old worker originated from Henan Province who identified himself as Jimi told me that there was another case of wage default when I saw him in his dormitory. Normally there were lots of activities in the dormitory in the evening with people doing karaoke and reading

and chatting in the mobile library. Yet the place was almost empty when I arrived.

Initially I thought that the majority of workers might have returned to their home village as the construction business was going through a rough patch and started downsizing. Or some might have moved to another site and another dormitory.

But when Jimi showed up half an hour later, my speculation was proved incorrect as he said,

I just came back from the project development department demanding to get paid. We have been here with nothing to do for more than 14 days. There is really no point for us to stay here so we should be paid for what we have done and return home. But the people in the office keep delaying in paying us. So we rounded up more than 50 people to block the project development office and the construction site to stop workers from entering these places to work.

What angered the workers was not only their wages were not paid on time, but also that they were kept there with no job assigned to them. As Jimi elaborated,

It was not that there was nothing for us to do. We asked the company why we had no work assigned to us, and they said that was because they had no iron rods supplied to them. However, we found out later that another group of workers were actually assigned to do our job, and they did have the building materials!

Jimi was clearly very frustrated about the situation. He was not particularly

certain why their pay was held up but he speculated that perhaps his sub-contractor had allowed his workers to block the office and that the workers were perceived as hostile and violent to the company that they were ultimately penalized. Admittedly there were incidences of verbal assaults and physical confrontation and conflicts between the security guards and the demonstrating workers, and not surprisingly the dispute was not settled.

Jimi felt that as a worker, he was relatively powerless, especially when the government was not always interested in protecting the workers. At least that was his previous experience:

I don't know if going to the labour department is any good...
Actually...it's not very helpful. The government will always favour the employers. Or you will be made to wait indefinitely. We workers cannot afford to spend our time waiting. That is why in most cases we just return home. I once worked in Tianjin when. I was a very young man about 14 or 15. I worked hard all day and made less than 20RMB a day. But after a year's hard work, I did not receive a single cent and ended up returning home with nothing. The boss just kept you waiting indefinitely ...and it was tough staying in the city with no money. You'll have no other option but going home.

However, there was another side of the story as told by a team of social workers who were there at the demonstration. Their report on the incident was that the sub-contractor had promised the workers to pay them 80RMB a day,

while others were paid monthly between 2,000 to 3,000RMB. For some unknown reasons, the company however recruited another group of workers to take over and left these workers completely idle. The sub-contractor then went to the company to ask for money to pay his workers but the company only wanted to pay 50RMB a day for each of the workers because they had been idle. The sub-contractor was of course not happy as this would incur a personal loss for him. For this reason, he took his group of workers, more than 50 of them, to form a blockade at the front door of the project office. According to the social workers, it was the sub-contractor who called them for help, and that was how they knew about the story. This means that it was the sub-contractor who had used the workers to vent his dissatisfaction with the company and it was not that the company was not willing to pay the workers at all.

Policies

The lives of the migrant workers were also greatly affected by China's *hukou*, (household registration) system that was used to discourage rural-urban migration. Although it has been extensively liberalized in the last two decades to allow huge numbers of rural residents moving into urban centres to work in manufacturing industries, in particular in garment, shoes, toys, electric appliances and other industries such as construction and service, construction

workers were still facing severe difficulties living in the city. For example, they were not eligible to access social welfare or social assistance in the city as their household registration is still based in their home village. Thus, they had no other social support and had to depend solely on their wages to survive. Were they unemployed, sick or in any financial difficulties, they had no one to turn to but their co-workers and villagers. It also means that they were more open to mistreatment by their sub-contractors or construction company because they could not afford to be out of a job in the city for an extended period of time. In fact, one of the informants indicated this was the very reason why workers could not insist on getting a formal labour contract as both the subcontractor and the construction company wanted to maximize their powerful position.

They just won't give you a contract to sign. Everyone in the industry is like that. If you insist in having a formal contract, no one will give you the job. Moreover, given the sub-contractor is from your village, you think you can depend on him when you work in the city. You don't expect he will take advantage of you. In any case, once you're not home and in the city, even if you don't trust him, you'll have little choice but to stick with him, because you cannot afford being jobless in the city. You'll have to pay for your food, accommodation and medical expenses if you do not have a subcontractor to give you some protection. You'll just have to try your best to be on good terms with him.

Laws

Given the common occurrences of wage default cases, understandably the informants were very suspicious of the effectiveness of law and came to the conclusion that it was a most complicated, time-consuming and frequently ineffective process to access, let alone dependable, legal assistance from the government to for settling labour disputes, including getting their employers to pay them timely and fairly. In their view, while many knew exactly where to file their complaints and seek justice, however, based on their experiences of dealing with government departments, in particular the Labour Department, the process was never easy nor fruitful as the departments and their staff always seemed too busy to give them proper attention and in most cases, made them wait for a long time before their cases were even accepted. In emergency situations when workers needed immediate attention, such as suffering from severe industrial injuries and wage defaults, none of the informants interviewed had received timely intervention or assistance from government departments. It became apparent that any legal resource and process supposedly designed to provide protection and support to the workers were made irrelevant in reality.

Social and Institutionalized Discrimination

It was ironic that in China, in many official publications highlighting the impressive achievements of urban development, ranging from provision of modern infrastructure to urban renewal, construction workers were portrayed as the builder of urban prosperity, yet in reality they were the group who regularly and persistently encountering discrimination and perceived insignificant and irrelevant in the everyday life in Chinese cities.

In many ways the discrimination the workers experienced was quite blatant.

One of the informants had little reservation in indicating how he had been treated:

City people discriminate us because we are migrant workers, and also because of the way we look – dirty. But that was because construction work has made us looked dirty.. There was one time when I went to the China World Trade Centre (國貿大廈), a well-known up-market shopping mall in Beijing’s Central Business District, just to have a look but the security guard just wouldn’t let me in. He told me that just judging from my appearance I wouldn’t be able to afford anything in the shops and that my appearance would chase people away. At the time I thought I wouldn’t want to look around anymore since I was refused entry, and I tried to tell myself that the mall wasn’t that special anyway. But I realized deep down I was really hurt. After all, we are the ones who constructed these fancy malls!

Perhaps because of this, as well as their long working hours and their lack of financial resources, many informants indicated that they rarely spent time in the city, not even for the sake of sightseeing. As a number of informants suggested, somehow they felt segregated and leading a different existence, making them feel they were completely separated and not part of the city at all.

Although I have been working in Beijing for 8 years, I hardly knew the city at all because I had no time. I didn’t see the city until my wife decided to visit Beijing last year. You know, it isn’t easy for a woman from the rural area to see a big city like Beijing, so she was quite excited when arrived and to keep her happy, I took her to the

Tiananmen Square, the Forbidden City and the Temple of Heaven and so on. But I couldn't spend too much time with her sightseeing as my work was very busy, and it was quite expensive sightseeing in the city. I couldn't afford having her staying in Beijing very long. Personally I don't think I want to see more of the city because I felt uncomfortable hanging around in the city. I didn't know exactly why, but I just felt really uncomfortable – you know, the way people looked at you suspiciously as if you were going to commit something, you know, bad or illegal. They seemed to tell me that I was different and did not fit in...

Chapter 5: Conclusion

Many researchers have observed that with the wide acceptance of economic neo-liberalism in advanced capitalist economies in the West in the last two decades, there has been a proliferation of nonstandard employment practices, i.e., part-time, temporary, seasonal and contractual work, generated to employ those who are less-skilled (Beck, 2000; Kalleberg et al., 2000; Gonos, 1997). While these arrangements offer flexibility often welcomed by those who have difficulties working under standard practices, critics are also mindful that these employments in fact have made individual workers and their families more vulnerable. This is particularly true in the case of migrant workers who are working longer hours on shorter contractual basis or informal employment arrangements, thus exposing them to risks in work because of inadequate safety and insurance protection. In sum, these new forms of work favour more the interests of business when the burden of occupational hazards is off-loaded to these workers. Yet the number of people working under such conditions remains large, and researchers point out that a controlling labour regime has also emerged to construct a new form of hegemony for regulating their productivity.

One of the most prominent proponents of hegemonic labour control is

Michael Burawoy (1985) who argued that any labour control system is determined by policies enacted through the labour process as reflected by the firm-level policies governing the organization of work and through the political apparatuses of production indicated by state-level policies regulating various aspects of the economy. However, as capital becomes more mobile and labour markets become more flexible, management gains new and more powerful means of disciplining their workers but becomes less interested in upholding social welfare that used to underpin hegemony. Under the new form of labour control which he calls hegemonic despotism, not only individual workers are threatened constantly with job losses, collective labour unions are also warned by management that it can close down entire factories and move all affected jobs elsewhere should overstep their lines and misbehave. Moreover, for those who are employed temporarily or under non-standard practices, this process of hegemonic despotism further emphasizes the rights of employers to dismiss those workers who are uncooperative without government intervention. Still the irony continues to perplex as large numbers of workers choose to remain as part of the temporary workforce even without reasonable wages and adequate social protection. This is especially puzzling and relevant in the case of China when the size of migrant workers continues to expand while the incidence of unfair

treatments, injustices and hazards as well as wage defaults has also escalated.

There have been numerous studies conducted previously to understand the predicaments encountered by migrant workers in China but many are more focused on enclosed factory labour regime while labour control in more open workplace like construction site is left unexamined. A majority too are descriptive of how labour control functions, i.e., how management induces consent and commitment, albeit grudgingly, among workers, but few had little to say about agency and actions, highlighting how these workers have responded to the policies and practices of the labour regime. Inspired by Burawoy's notion of despotic hegemony, the present study of migrant construction workers in Beijing thus represents another step in bridging the conspicuous gaps in the current literature on labour regime of migrant workers in China as well as another attempt to review whether Burawoy's theory needs to be reconsidered when its social setting is transposed from the West to East Asia.

Summary of findings

Informed by Burawoy's theory of labour regimes (1983, 1984, 1985), this research sets out to answer the main research question of why the number of migrant workers, in particular those working in the construction industry remained climbing despite the seemingly worsened situation of labour control through an in-depth exploration of a case study of the construction workers in Beijing. A summary of the findings is presented below.

Based on the findings from the interviews and current literature, in general the migrant construction workers were still experiencing various forms of unfair treatments and exploitation, including long working hours, continuous exposures to occupational hazards due to inadequate provision of safety measures, limited medical and insurance coverage, no formal contractual employment arrangement, restrictions on accessing social welfare in the urban welfare system and wage defaults. In addition, many also faced blatant and subtle social discrimination. Yet seemingly there was no sign that rural-urban migrant workers were dropping out from working in this industry.

In many ways, their departures from home, or their decisions to work in urban construction sites were voluntary, and often organized and encouraged by

their connection, or the immediate trust they had developed with the sub-contractor(s) originated from their same home village. The principle reasons for their move were the prospect of earning a higher income, particularly during the less busy agricultural seasons to supplement their low family income and to bolster resources and investment in agriculture so that they could overcome the hardships they were facing. Moreover, many found that working on a construction site more flexible, with less rigid rules and regulations governing their work routines much more appealing than working in an enclosed locale like a factory. In these respects, it was clear that the informants displayed a rational choice of action when they decided to work in the construction industry. However, it was also clear that their rationale was not one that was based on survival, or that the pressure for survival they faced was not pressing; it became more intriguing why many decided to leave home and work in the city.

What became critical in understanding their decision to leave their village was the role of the sub-contractor. And it seemed that his position and influence could not be under-estimated, particularly considering that a) he was known as a local, having the same location origin as the workers, and thus b) as a local, especially in a traditional social setting where anyone who commits a

wrong deed would be collectively and negatively sanctioned, the sub-contractor would gain much credibility and trust as well as persuasiveness among local residents as one who would protect and look after the well being of the workers. For these reasons, the sub-contractor would be perceived as a reliable and dependable protector of the local workers and hence made it much more palatable, especially in terms of reducing the costs and uncertainties for the villagers willing to leave home and work in the city seasonally.

And for the same reasons, the research also finds that it was too easy to portray the sub-contractor as a villain who set out to exploit the ignorance and good nature-ness of his fellow villagers. On the contrary, one would find that the position assumed by the sub-contractor was far more complex than commonly expected by previous research (Shen, 2007; Li and Peng, 2006). In Shen's argument of relation-based hegemony, subcontractors were more like middlemen who took advantage of their relationship with workers, created "consent" of workers and exploited them; while workers passively endured the exploitation. Nonetheless, this research found that Shen's view was lopsided. For one thing, he had to rely on the good will and not just cheap budgets in order to be given construction jobs by the construction company or the developers. At

the same time, even when he was offered a project, without maintaining good relations and ensuring reasonable work conditions, including satisfactory wage levels, work loads and timely payment of wages, the project would not be completed on time and under budget. Seen in these contexts, the role of a sub-contractor was more than a broker for labourer recruitment but also a custodian of welfare for his workers and fellow villagers, compelling him to straddle and maintaining a fine balance between the management and the frontline workers. As indicated in the interviews, the sub-contractor could also be a victim of financial default himself when developers or construction companies failed to pay him on time to meet his expenditures. It was thus not unusual that at times it was necessary for the sub-contractor to, visibly or otherwise, allowed or even encouraged his workers to initial direct actions against the developers or construction companies for wage defaults as he was caught in the same boat when labour or wage disputes erupted. Certainly in these cases the sub-contractor acted mainly according to his self interest rather than for altruistic reasons, and in this regard, one could reasonably argue that the role of the sub-contractor was often less than noble, if not entirely exploitative.

However, more disappointing for the migrant construction workers was their gradual discovery of their “non-citizenship” in the city and how the central government and the self-serving local administrations did little to help them to protect their rights when they realized they fast became ‘the third class’ and assigned a 'third identity' (Chen 2005) in Chinese society, receiving little legal nor practical assistance from the Labour Laws and the Labour Department in dealing with wage default cases as a consequence of bad practices among unscrupulous developers and construction companies because they did not sign any formal employment contract or produce any concrete proof they were employed formally with them.

Understandably the workers learned very quickly how important it was for them to draw upon their own resources to resolve their face-to-face daily problems as well as collective crises such as wage defaults or unfair deduction of wages by strengthening their original nexus and personal bonds. This was particularly important in the case when they found themselves tired of being pushed around by developers and construction companies and their appeal for assistance snubbed by responsible government departments, leaving them having

few other options than staging their own collective actions such as holding rallies and staging traffic blockage on national highways.

Considering the difficulties and issue of construction workers in China, and based on theories developed by Burawoy, one would expect that migrant construction workers in Beijing would only willingly accept the risks associated with their seasonal jobs if they could gain some huge advantages, such as above-market wages or additional benefits. But this did not seem to be the case. There seemed to be little evidence suggesting that their seasonal work had offered them much other than supplementary income and to a certain degree, greater labour flexibility. Nor was there much evidence suggesting that labour control was exercised through coercion. Instead, Burawoy's notion of hegemonic regime, or Shen's concept of relations-based hegemony, seems to play a more appropriate role here on the construction site than in a factory in persuading the workers to stay and aligning the interests of construction workers with their sub-contractor rather than their employers -- the developers and construction companies -- in spite of the risks and predicaments they had experienced.

Still, his role should not be overstated for a number of reasons. To begin with, given the workers were recruited in the same village, sharing similar background and common interests, it was not entirely appropriate to manage them through a labour control regime that emphasizes piece rate, formal rules, systems of rewards to encourage competition and individualization among individual workers as a way to increase their productivity and generate surplus value. At the same time, given that the workers shared highly similar backgrounds and ties, they were more likely to see themselves as active agents rather than passive victims, banding together to resist unfair treatments and struggle for their rights in settling labour disputes and conflicts.

It was also apparent that although the sub-contractor was seen as a local by the informants interviewed, they were also very much aware of the fact that their sub-contractor(s) could align themselves with the developers and construction companies to take advantage of them in getting rich while leaving them under-protected. In other words, despite a certain degree of trust they had extended to their sub-contractor in work management, simultaneously they also remained suspicious of his loyalty.

Theoretical Implications

What becomes quite clear from this research is that while Burawoy's concept of hegemonic regime or Shen's notion of relation-based hegemony are useful in explaining the self-regulating system of labour control in factories, it is less effective in answering the question of why migrant workers would voluntarily choose to remain working in the construction industry in spite of the risks involved. Unlike what was suggested by Burawoy, the drive of workers' hard work was not really their "consent" to join the "production game" of "making out", (i.e. actively increase their own production efficiency so that they can earn more in a piece-rate system), instead, the drive of their hard work was rather traditional and rational – fulfilling their role in the family.

Based on the information gathered from this research, it was shown that the real and strong reason for them to continue to seek construction work was the cultural sentiments and ideological frames they had as the head of their families, being a provider and protector, and fulfilling their familial obligation and affording their family members a better life through honest hard work, knowing

that they had little education and training and few other options for earning more.

These are the aspects overlooked by both Burawoy and Shen.

It was also clear from the research findings that they saw themselves as a transitory group in the city who, unlike their younger counterparts *dagong mei* or *dagong zai* whose identity, as described by Pun (2005) and Lee (1998), had become more urban than rural, not only felt obligated to return home to help out in planting or harvesting in the fields, but also to return home for good. For this reason, they tended to see themselves not as passive recipients of jobs meted out by paternalistic corporations or developers, but rather as active entrepreneurs who could create their own opportunities. Seen in this context, they cannot be put in the same picture as Burawoy and Shen painted earlier.

In most previous research on migrant workers, it was common to find gender featured prominently (e.g., Lee 1998, Pun 2005, Chan 2001, 2003), but the focus was more on the labour process of female workers. The findings of the present study have shown that as migrant workers, the issue of exploitation, or unfair treatments in the labour process, should not be seen as exclusively feminist. As Fan (2004) has rightly pointed out, it was the Chinese state who had taken on a developmentalist mandate, and because of this, it fostered a migrant labour

regime that incorporated not only young, single rural women, but also married, mature rural men, into the urban labour market. At the same time, it did so by retaining the restrictive institutionalized household registration system so that rural men and women were channeled specifically to selected sectors and jobs, and created different forms of exploitative migrant labour regimes. The situation confronted by the construction workers has indicated that not only theirs is only one of the different labour regimes, but behind these regimes lie an institutional or policy control that needs to be explored further and to be integrated with perspectives of gender, class and locality.

One could be easily persuaded to become pessimistic about the future of migrant workers in China, particularly considering what Lee's (1999) idea that it is the Chinese state that plays a key role in demoralizing and containing collective labour activism, thus leaving an effective, large-scale labour movement in China almost impossible. Halegua (2008) believed that in the long run, as a solution, the balance of labour relations in China must be shifted, and not just for the sake of protecting migrant workers in particular. In this, the state should encourage stronger unionization, labour contract, and criminalizing wage defaults. In the short run, however, he also acknowledged that this would not

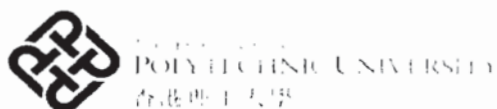
be easy to implement. In his view, considering the complications involved in the formal labour dispute resolution system, discrimination in the local Labour Bureau, dominance of the arbitration process by Labour Bureau, the limited meaningfulness of the right to appeal, prohibitive high costs in litigation, complications involving labour brokerage by sub-contractors, and the lack of legal education and representation of workers in the formal system, mediation seemed to be the best way ahead to protect these migrant workers, especially through a mediator outside of the formal resolution system typified by the system employed by Little Bird Beijing, a Canadian NGO set up to assist migrant workers to settle labour disputes with their employers. To him, an NGO with trained local personnel knowing how to leverage with government authority, representing itself with an appearance of neutrality, while having an army of volunteering lawyers, and the knowledge to engage other government bureaucracies and media, it could become a very effective force in solving disputes between migrant workers and employers and in balancing the regimes of labour control.

Future Research

Having this said, the findings of this research must be kept in perspective. Admittedly, the design of this research allowed for only limited contact with workers, not because the views and action of other workers are unimportant, but rather because the time and resources available made it infeasible to broaden both the sample scope and size. Consequently, the role of NGOs and their influence in China's labour process and labour control regimes had to be left out. Nonetheless, as suggested by the findings, the workers were clearly resourceful in their own ways in developing their strategies and actions to respond to the emerging labour control regimes they faced, and some indeed began to find ways to connect themselves with NGOs such as the New Worker Activity Centre for advice and support, indicating that what Halegua (2008) documented indeed was reflective of an emergence of a new arena of labour resistance that deserves much greater depth of future research.

Appendix

Appendix 1 - Sample of the Participant Information Sheet



香港理工大学
应用社会科学系

参与研究邀请书

敬启者：

本人为香港理工大学应用社会科学系研究硕士生，现正进行一项有关北京建筑行业打工者的研究。这项研究的目的是了解这个打工者群体的打工和城市生活的经验，以及打工者遇到的困难和克服问题的方法。基於阁下在建筑行业的丰富经验，现诚邀阁下参与是项研究，提供宝贵的资料。

为保障阁下的利益，所有访谈和会面将安排在双方同意之时间及地点进行；进行任何录音之前亦将先徵得阁下同意，而访谈时间不会超过 60 分钟。虽然本人预见是项研究将不会为阁下招致任何风险，但访谈期间，阁下仍可拒绝回应任何不想回应的问题。阁下甚至可以随时要求中止访谈，而不会对阁下及是项研究造成任何影响。然而是一项研究属自愿参与，参与者将不会因而获得任何报酬。此外，是项研究并无涉及任何执法活动；所有参与者的身份资料（如姓名、年龄）等将立刻从访谈资料中删除，而访谈内容则会加密保存并於研究完成后销毁。本人将竭尽所能确保阁下的身份及所提供的资料得以保密及妥善处理。

如蒙答允参与研究，不胜感谢。谨附本人及本人导师之联络方法，如阁下希望了解研究结果、就研究提出意见，或有任何查询，欢迎随时与我们联系。

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如阁下意参与研究，请填妥以下「参与研究同意书」。

此致

梁凯旋 谨启
二零零八年 月 日

Appendix 2 – Sample of Informed Consent Form



Polytechnic University
POLYTECHNIC UNIVERSITY
香港理工大学

香港理工大学
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参与研究同意书

研究题目：玻璃幕墙背后：北京建筑工人生存状况研究

院校及学系：香港理工大学应用社会科学系

研究员姓名：梁凯旋

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导师：叶富强 副教授

电邮：ssdavid@

本人已仔细阅读参与研究邀请书，并已完全了解研究目的、本人在研究中担当的角色及研究的结果。研究员梁凯旋已保证，本人可随时中止参与此项研究，而本人的身份资料将得以保密。本人亦已知悉参与是项研究将不会获得任何报酬。

参与人签署

.....

日期

.....

见证人签署（口头同意者适用）

.....

Appendix 3 – Interview Framework

一. 個人背景資料

1. 姓名
2. 電話
3. 年齡
4. 婚姻(及配偶子女)狀況
5. 籍貫/出生省份
6. 農村/城市戶口
7. 教育程度家中排行第幾?
8. 家庭成員狀況 (父母兄弟姊妹、年齡、婚姻狀況、有沒有出外打工?)
9. 你現時需要有經濟壓力嗎? 每月需要寄錢回家嗎?

二. 從出外打工的經歷:

1. 第一次外出城市工作的年齡? 年份?
2. 為何外出打工?
3. 為何選擇在北京打工?
4. 出外打工的期望?
5. 有沒有同鄉或其他人一起出來打工?
6. 外出前從哪裡得到對城市的印象? 有何印象?

三. 勞動過程

i. 招聘及入行過程

1. 職位?
2. 為何選擇投身建築行業?
3. 第一份工作什麼時候找到? 如何找到? (透過同鄉/中介機構介紹, 自己看招工廣告等?)
4. 到目前為止, 轉工了多少次? 工種有沒有改變? 如有, 為甚麼轉工?
5. 至今, 合共已打工多少年?
6. 入職: 包工頭/ 承建商有沒有收取押金 / 介紹費? 簽訂勞動合同? 有沒有購買社會保險 (包括工傷保險、養老保險等)?
7. 有旺季淡季之分嗎? 如有, 什麼時候是旺季和淡季? 工作旺季時工作情況如何? 淡季時你會有什麼安排? (如回鄉? 另找工作?)
8. 工時: 有規律嗎? 會否經常加班? 或等待開工?
9. 工地上有什麼規矩? 你對這些規矩有什麼意見?

ii. 工作情況

1. 工地有沒有訂定「安全守則」？如有，實行的情況是如何？
2. 工地上的工作環境：包工頭/ 承建商有沒有給予適當的防護措施？你接受過什麼上崗培訓？你有沒有做過身體檢查？
3. 有沒有因工受傷的經驗？如有，情況是如何？工地上的工傷情況普遍嗎？
4. 現在/ 以前有沒有(曾)患上職業病？如有，情況是如何？工地上的職業病情況普遍嗎？
5. 外出打工後，身心精神有沒有經歷變化？如有，那是什麼？
6. 你負責甚麼工種？工作是一組人合作，還是相對獨立，自己趕工？
7. 你的勞動強度大嗎？需要倒班嗎 (分多少班)？自入行以來，有沒有改變？如何改變？
8. 包工頭包吃嗎？收費多少？飲食質素如何？
9. 宿舍條件：距工地多遠？多少人一間房？衛生情況？有沒有基本的設備？
10. 宿舍收費：水費？電費？租金？其他雜費？
11. 你與工友的感情如何？平日有在一起活動或聚會嗎？與工友的溝通情況如何嗎？為甚麼？

iii. 支薪及晉升情況

12. 工資：你平均每月工資多少？知道工資如何計算嗎？有加班及有薪假嗎？你對工資安排有什麼意見？
13. 拖欠薪金情況普遍嗎？拖多久？
14. 其他工友的工資與你的的是否差不多？為甚麼？
15. 你曾否晉升？曾否調換其他職位？
16. 你與包工頭、組長的關係如何？
17. 整體來說，你喜歡這份工作嗎？為甚麼？

四. 生活及家庭

i. 生活

1. 你現在面對什麼生活的問題？你會怎樣解決這些問題？(例如：社會資源、人際關係等)
2. 工人在**城市**的老鄉、朋友、家人等有沒有提供經濟或其他方面的支援？
3. 工人在**家鄉**的老鄉、朋友、家人等 提供有沒有經濟或其他方面的支援？

ii. 家庭

1. 你跟與你一同出來打工的家人(如有)關係如何?跟家鄉的親人關係又如何?
(例如:會吵架嗎?有家庭暴力的情況嗎?)
2. 你有小孩嗎?小孩由誰照顧?他們到哪裡上學?讀書情況如何?

iii. 計劃與前景

1. 你對將來的看法如何?(樂觀/悲觀?)為什麼?
2. 你仍打算跟這個包工頭打工嗎?為甚麼?
3. 總的來說,你對打工生涯有什麼感受?為什麼?
4. 未來計劃:期望繼續留在城市?會否回鄉?甚麼時候?個人儲蓄多少?回去後可能從事甚麼經濟活動?結婚/照顧孩子、父母親?

五. 政府與有關機構

i. 政策

1. 你認為「戶口政策」對你有什麼影響?為什麼?
2. 你怎樣評價這裡(北京)的房屋、教育、醫療、福利等政策?為什麼?

ii. 法例

1. 你對勞動法和工業安全的相關法例有什麼認識?有什麼意見?

iii. 歧視

1. 會遇到歧視/不公平的情況嗎?如有,情況如何?
2. 如遇有歧視、不公平的情況,你會向什麼人/機構求助?(例如:民間組織/官方機構(勞動局、總工會、工商局[查商業登記]/勞資爭議仲裁委員會/派出所/市政府/人民法院/防疫站[查職業病患]/大眾媒體/律師/其他社區人士)
3. 你認為哪一個途徑最有效幫助你解決問題?為什麼?

六、工潮(如有)

1. 工業行動種類(可多於一項):罷工、怠工、靜坐、集體辭工、集體仲裁(30人

或以上)、抗議、談判、協商、調解、使用暴力等？

2. 詳細述說你參與過的工業行動：事發時間、地點、衝突原因。
3. 你的角色是甚麼？參與程度大小？整個過程中有沒有轉變？是甚麼情況下意識到需要主動抗爭？
4. 工地內的情況：
 - 工人
對事件的理解、資源動員過程、集體力量？不同鄉、族、性別、年齡、工種、職級、年資、言語等的工人會一同參與還是各自組織行動？有沒有清晰的行動綱領？曾召開工人會議商討？聯署寫投訴信？工人合作修改信件初稿？參與人數佔總工人百份之幾？多少工人旁觀？多少工人退出？整體工人士氣？整體工人情緒？
 - 工人代表
數目？如何決定誰是工人代表？民主選舉？性別？學歷？負責提供或尋找法律意見？訊息傳遞清楚有效？與工人平等溝通？講話？
 - 資方
對事件的理解、對內及對外所採取之行動（例如解僱工人）？
5. 工人有什麼集體訴求？工人的底線是甚麼？
6. 資方的回應、態度怎樣？
7. 以法疏解勞資矛盾，這是否被採用的方法？為甚麼？
8. 工潮結果是什麼？
9. 工業行動持續了多久？
10. 你個人有甚麼總結？你覺得付出的代價是否值得？有甚麼反思？這次工業行動的歷史對你的影響是什麼？若將來有相類似的事件發生，你會怎樣做？

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