

Chapter One

Two Worlds of Labor in South China

Since the mid-1980s, China has become the world's new "global factory," with the southern province of Guangdong (including Hong Kong) as its powerhouse. Millions of women workers are toiling in sweat shops and modern factories, churning out Mickey Mouse toys, Barbie dolls, Nike sports shoes, Apple jeans, watches, radios, televisions, and computers for worldwide consumption. These mass-produced commodities may be highly standardized, but the factory regimes that produce them, which spring up along the trail of mobile international capital, are not. The stories of two Chinese women, Yuk-ling and Chi-ying, highlight both the differences and the similarities between the worlds of labor where the south China economic miracle is manufactured, and where labor politics and women's identities are made and remade.

Yuk-ling: Working Mother amidst Economic Restructuring

On a brightly lit, air-conditioned shop floor in a modern factory building in Hong Kong, about a hundred women workers sat along both sides of three conveyor belts, assembling mini hi-fi products. They worked for Liton, an electronics factory producing household audio equipment. Starting with printed circuit boards, then cassette decks, CD players, tuners, and remote controls, these women assembled hi-fi products to be sold under international brand names like Schneider, Mitsubishi, Packard Bell, and Techwood to German, Japanese, Mexi-

can, and American households. No one cared to pronounce these names correctly. Instead, women workers deliberately blended Cantonese accents into, for instance, the German “Schneider,” to result in the playful but meaningless sounds of “Si-nai-daa.” This was one of the ways to bring some collective authenticity to bear on the nine-hour-fifteen-minute work day. For many of these women, days like this had filled more than twenty years. “I have spent half my life in this factory,” they said with pride and occasional sighs.

Yuk-ling, age forty-three, the line leader of Line HK1, was a short, slim, spirited woman who would look much younger than her age if not for the bulging bags under her eyes. Like other young women of her generation in the 1960s, Yuk-ling quit school after sixth grade and started working full-time when she was thirteen. At the age of nineteen, after several factory jobs, Yuk-ling came to work at Liton in the early 1970s, which at that time was still named Mo’s, a subsidiary of an American electronics corporation. Attracted to an industry that provided factory work then considered more modern, clean, and feminine than alternatives like garment-making and wig-making, she came to try it out. “And then, one day you counted and it was already some twenty years,” she said. She started as a line girl, assembling printed circuit boards and transistor radios, and was later promoted to tester, material handler, and finally line leader. Yuk-ling met her husband through her coworkers, got married at age twenty-nine, and had two little girls by the time we met in 1992. Her husband was the leader of a group of construction workers and was responsible for getting project contracts for the group. Although he earned more than Yuk-ling when he worked, his contribution to the family income fluctuated. Yuk-ling’s monthly income, around HK \$5,000 (US \$600), was critical for the entire family, especially since they started paying the mortgage on their apartment under a government subsidized home-ownership program several years ago.

Like many of her coworkers, Yuk-ling had a tightly packed daily work and family schedule, and her physical mobility was confined to the neighborhood where she worked and lived. Each morning at 7:30, Yuk-ling prepared breakfast for her eldest daughter and got her dressed for school. At 7:45, she took both daughters on a ten-minute bus ride to deposit her older daughter at kindergarten, repeating her routine motherly advice of “no fighting with other kids, no sweets, listen to your teacher, and work hard.” She then took another bus to a

nearby public housing estate where her baby-sitter lived, and left her younger daughter with the woman, who would prepare breakfast and lunch for the girl. By then, Yuk-ling had exactly seven minutes to walk to Liton, where work began at 8:15. If she was late, other women workers knew it was because her daughters were sick and she had to take them to the doctor before coming to work. When that happened, the line leader from another line would pitch in for her until Yuk-ling showed up. On an average day, however, she was seldom late, but she had to hide behind the pantry door to eat her breakfast—fried noodles or freshly baked bread that Lan, a woman coworker, bought for her. Everyone, including her foreman and the production manager, knew that she was sneaking away to eat breakfast, but no one found it problematic. They knew that she had to do this, and that when she came back from behind the door, she would be a brisk, responsible, and indispensable line leader as she had always been for the past two decades.

Yuk-ling's work involved everything required to keep production on schedule. In the past few years, after Liton extended its production lines into Shenzhen, China, the work pace in this Hong Kong plant had slowed down a bit. Instead of 400 hi-fi units, average daily output was scaled down to 300. This was partly because the orders for the Hong Kong plant tended to be for small volume, but involved more design changes than the orders filled by the Shenzhen plant. Moreover, this plant now concentrated on pilot production of models that would then be mass-produced by the Shenzhen plant. Both these trends meant that Yuk-ling had to rearrange the production lines more frequently and that her "line girls" had to change their line seats in response to different assembling procedures for different models. "Line girls," once an apt description, had become an anachronistic reminder of the length of time these women had spent working on the lines. Although women workers at Liton were around forty years old on average and were married with children, they enjoyed exploiting the absurdity arising from the gap between their actual age and the youthful "line girls" label to have some fun. From time to time, they yelled loudly, "Mother, Mother, help, I've messed up!" to get Yuk-ling's assistance when they had problems with electronics components that had become smaller and smaller over the years.

The few men on the shop floor were repair workers, foremen, or production managers. All these middle-aged men were also longtime

employees of Liton, but unlike the women, who stayed on the line, they had moved up the plant hierarchy from positions of apprentice and quality control operator. Women workers understood the reason for the men's promotion: when men had families, they needed and wanted promotions, whereas for women, having a family meant that they could not be managers or be given similar opportunities. On the shop floor, women were not shy about teasing their foremen whenever the latter made production mistakes, or embarrassing them with sexual innuendoes. In this factory, labor control seemed invisible, unnecessary, and above all hardly felt by women workers.

About half of these women were local Cantonese, while half came from Fujian, a province neighboring Guangdong. Most of these Fujianese women had moved to Hong Kong with their families more than ten or twenty years earlier, and most of them spoke Cantonese. The two groups of women got along well at work, although Cantonese women tended to make fun of Fujianese frugality and dietary habits. In vivid exchanges of family news or purchases of discount items for each other, these women knew no local boundaries. As "line girls," these women earned about HK \$3,000 (US \$400) per month, with some individual adjustments of a few hundred dollars depending on the length of service. The lack of promotion prospects and the meager income might have led to self-teasing remarks, but not to utter frustration.

What seemed to have anchored them so permanently in this factory was that this employer allowed them to integrate their dual responsibilities as mothers and workers. Yuk-ling and other women with children found that the fixed working hours and the five-day work week that Liton offered more than compensated for its lower wage rate. "When the kids have their school holidays, we also have our day off," they said, justifying their acceptance of low wages. Moreover, when women had emergencies to take care of, such as when their children's school teachers wanted to talk to them or when their children were sick, Liton's management turned a blind eye to their absence if it was restricted to an hour or so during the work day. Women at Liton, therefore, found themselves in a low-level equilibrium—they managed to balance family and work, their lives were stable, and everything was within the neighborhood. In the meantime, on the shop floor, years of repeating similar work procedures had made work bearable and routines a source of relative comfort. The work day was

punctuated by women's talk, which, at times playful, at times sour, was satisfying enough to make the day feel shorter.

"Work life is hard. Whatever I do, I do it for my kids, so that they will have a better life in the future," Yuk-ling remarked. She found her husband dependable, "as long as he supports the family and does not gamble or smoke." She preferred her role as a mother in a network of kin bounded by familial interdependence and mutual obligations to my independence and freedom as a single, professional woman. "In the end, women need to have families," she advised me.

Recently, Yuk-ling and other women at Liton were concerned about losing the stability of the integrated family and work life they had managed to maintain for so long. The general trend of plant relocation to mainland China might push them into the service sector, where work hours were not compatible with family hours, upsetting the tightly coupled daily schedule they had cherished all these years. That would threaten not only the amount of money they brought home, but also their deeply cherished beliefs about proper motherhood.

Chi-ying: Peasant Daughter in the Borderland

Liton operated another electronics plant just across the northern border of Hong Kong. Traveling from Liton's Hong Kong plant to this Shenzhen plant would take an hour and a half by bus. The same range of hi-fi products was made on production lines arranged in exactly the same way as those in Hong Kong. Every step of the production process was specified by "work procedure sheets," xeroxed copies of those used in Hong Kong, which were hung above every work station in this Shenzhen plant. Two senior production managers and several foremen commuted between Hong Kong and Shenzhen every three days to oversee production on both sides of the border. Other managers, who were stationed in Shenzhen six days per week, had worked in the Hong Kong plant for a long time before they were assigned to Shenzhen. Yet the world of labor here could not be more different from that in Hong Kong.

Chi-ying was a twenty-two-year-old peasant girl from a rural village in the northern Chinese province of Hubei. She came to Shenzhen two years ago and, through an introduction by Hubei locals who worked at Liton, she was recruited as a material handler. All her co-

workers were young women, usually in their late teens or early twenties. Several Hubei locals worked on the line, and Chi-ying would talk to them in their village dialect. With women from other provinces, such as Jiangxi, Hunan, and Sichuan, she would speak in Mandarin, the national language. Her line leader was a Guangdong woman and her supervisor a Guangdong man, so she had picked up a few words in Cantonese.

All workers wore blue uniforms with shoulder stripes of different colors to distinguish their roles and ranks. Control at work was very explicit. A clerk from the personnel office appeared intermittently to check on operators' fingernails. Anyone who had long nails was fined two *renminbi* (RMB) and had a misdemeanor record put in her personnel file. Every visit to the bathroom required a permit from the line leader. A normal work day lasted eleven hours, with a one-hour lunch break around noon. Whenever Chi-ying was late to work, the time clock would print her card with red ink and her supervisor would warn her in rude Cantonese. That was also why many northern workers learned foul language in Cantonese well before they could use the dialect in everyday life. Because absenteeism was heavily penalized and fined, Chi-ying came to work even when she was sick. Many times, she had seen line girls suffering from fever or menstrual pain clinging to the line, sobbing or cursing. Overtime shifts were frequent and mandatory. In busy seasons, work lasted until eleven at night. If workers refused to do overtime work, they would first be fined and later dismissed if they repeatedly refused.

Like many *buk-mui* (literally, maidens from the north), as women workers from outside of Guangdong were pejoratively called in Shenzhen, Chi-ying believed that her supervisor only promoted his own locals to be line leaders. Easier positions on the line were also reserved for Guangdong women. Position on the line made a difference in how hard they had to work, but all workers were paid the same fixed daily wages. Women workers especially disliked soldering because of the smell of melting iron and the smoke they inhaled while doing that job. Everyone noticed that only women from the north who had no locals in the managerial ranks were assigned to do soldering. Because some of Chi-ying's locals were line leaders, she knew she was marginally better off than those from Jiangxi or Hunan "with no one up there." Yet, she also realized that she was in no way comparable to women workers from Longchuan, her supervisor's county. These Longchuan

women were all testers, line leaders, or senior line leaders, the best positions available to women at Liton. Although all senior managerial positions were occupied by Hong Kong people, shop-floor management was monopolized by the kin group from Longchuan, headed by four young men who were cousins.

Lacking the ambition to get promoted in any particular factory, Chi-ying was satisfied knowing that if she wanted, she could switch to another factory that would want her for her factory experience. Factory jobs were plentiful in Shenzhen. Nevertheless, while at Liton she learned to make good use of her locals in eluding management's strict control. In trying to get permission to take a two-week home-visit leave, she carefully orchestrated an emergency telegram from home and asked her locals at Liton to spread the news that her mother was deadly sick so that her supervisor would not doubt the authenticity of the telegram. She also asked one of her male locals who was a technician and a roommate of her supervisor not to deduct the RMB 100 for her leave. Deduction of wages was a normal practice when workers took home-visit leave, although exceptions were allowed for "good" workers with legitimate grounds to take leave.

Chi-ying's closest friends were all from Hubei. Because it was company policy to disperse workers from the same village or county into different production lines, Chi-ying and her locals got together mainly in the canteen and the dormitories, where they exchanged gossip, complaints, and news from home. Her aunt and her cousins all lived in the same dormitory room, and Chi-ying would inform them of her whereabouts every time she went out. That was her pseudofamily away from home. Although resentful of the despotic management, long hours of closely monitored work, and poor food in the canteen, Chi-ying wanted to work in Shenzhen. From what she gathered from other locals, Liton might not be the best factory in terms of pay and work conditions, but neither was it the worst. Her monthly paycheck amounted to about RMB 300, about one-third more than that of an assembly worker. She could make as much as RMB 400, given more overtime shifts. Back home, her peasant father earned on average RMB 700 a year.

Having a cash income to herself epitomized a totally new way of life that would have been beyond her means had she stayed in her Hubei village, and above all, her factory job in Shenzhen allowed her to decide on her own marriage. Several years ago, when she was twenty,

Chi-ying's parents found her a fiancé through a matchmaker. "The guy had a residence in Wuhan [the capital city of Hubei] and they thought I'd have a better life in the city," Chi-ying recalled. It was the usual practice in the village to wait for several years before the couple formally married each other. Chi-ying did not resist the arrangement although she hardly knew the young man. Then, one Chinese New Year, when some of her cousins and uncles went back to their village from Shenzhen, she decided to try out something new while she was still young. "The name Shenzhen had an aura of excitement to us village kids. I had never seen a high-rise or paved road that people talked about," Chi-ying said, nostalgic for her past innocence.

Sometime later, the arranged marriage dissolved when Chi-ying declared her intention of working in Shenzhen for a few more years. She sent back part of her wages to compensate for the presents and money the young man had sent her parents when they were still engaged to each other. She kept half of the money herself, for future use, and she sent the rest to her parents. In Shenzhen, Chi-ying met a Hubei local and they decided to get married in a year's time. On one of her home visits, Chi-ying brought him home to meet her parents, and they agreed to her plan.

Despite the hardships inside the factory and the daily discrimination against out-of-province workers, Shenzhen offered young peasant women like Chi-ying an expanded horizon of modernity. Interestingly, for Chi-ying and her friends, hardship rather than idleness was what a modern way of life entailed. A pair of cheap earrings bought with her own money, a visit to the barber shop, a trip to the shopping mall, going to the movies, and simply strolling along the main street seeing other young people all brought her the satisfaction of feeling "I have been there." The realization that she had to go back home eventually only reinforced her attachment to her life as a Shenzhen sojourner: modern, free, and young.

Watching Hong Kong television broadcasts from across the border, Chi-ying was aware of a supposedly more modern pattern of womanhood than what she followed in Shenzhen. From time to time, she expressed her polite admiration for Hong Kong women's opportunities and their glamorous, comfortable lives as portrayed in television series. But then, occasionally, she would ponder aloud whether women could really be happy in a city as competitive and stressful as Hong Kong. Most of the time, though, when Chi-ying contemplated her life,

she compared herself with her grandmother and her mother at home. "They have never left the village. They have not had their own jobs," she remarked with quiet complacency.

The Puzzle and the Extended Case Method

Factory production lines such as those at Liton join together the lives of two generations of women workers like Yuk-ling and Chi-ying. Assembly lines cross national borders and weave a regional mosaic of diverse production patterns and work experiences. On the one hand, there are factories like the Hong Kong plant, where women workers enjoy a high degree of autonomy and describe their work life as "we come here, laugh and chat, and a day flies by." This is, of course, an exaggeration, but it underscores the general atmosphere of easygoing and orderly flexibility on the shop floor. On the other hand, there are shop floors like that in Shenzhen, where constant arguments, tears, and fights abound. Rules and punishment are facts of life for everyone, everywhere inside the factory. Women workers are given different kinds of demeaning *mui* suffixes: *buk-mui*, *Guangdong-mui*, *Sichuan-mui*, and so on.

These differences are not merely interesting but sociologically puzzling: Yuk-ling and Chi-ying work for the same employer under the same team of managers, produce the same range of hi-fi products, and use the same technical division of labor. However, these two women and their coworkers are subject to very different mechanisms of labor control, engage in very different strategies of obedience and resistance, and in the process, construct different identities. I call the regime in the Hong Kong plant "familial hegemony" and the one in the Shenzhen plant "localistic despotism." The regime of familial hegemony is characterized by hegemonic, rather than despotic, control. Management uses shop-floor discourses of familialism, factory policies facilitating women's fulfillment of familial responsibilities, and the construction of women as veteran and domineering "matron workers" to establish control. On the other hand, in localistic despotism management controls a migrant workforce by institutionalizing a coercive disciplinary regime, exploiting workers' local networks, and constructing women as "maiden workers." But why do two regimes of production emerge, given so many similarities across the two facto-

ries? To resolve this puzzle, this project uses participant observation as a research technique and pursues the analytic strategy of the "extended case method," most systematically expounded by Michael Burawoy. Taking a social situation as the point of empirical examination, this method "works with given general concepts and laws about states, economies, legal orders, and the like to understand how those micro situations are shaped by wider structures."¹ In thus tying the social situation to its determining context, the researcher seeks to constitute the case at hand as anomalous with regard to existing theories so as to reconstruct the theories accordingly. Preferably, the focus should be on differences between similar cases, so as to allow for a comparative analysis based on a method of difference (as opposed to a method of similarity), leading to the establishment of more robust causality.²

More specifically, in this study I make systematic comparisons of the two plants in terms of their respective embeddedness in the larger political economy. A number of anomalies emerge from the case materials that compel reconstruction of three strands of theories pertaining to production politics, gender, and Chinese women. Existing theories of the labor process explain different patterns of labor-management relations with reference to the technical and organizational aspects of production. But these aspects are already held constant between the two factories in this study. Labor process analysts might also point to the product sector and the skills required for production: flexible autonomy would be granted to core, craft-oriented workers, while direct control would be exerted over peripheral workers. But again, the product sector and the skills required of the workforce are the same in the two factories. Therefore, the labor process tradition offers little guidance in our search for a grounded explanation. Michael Burawoy's more sophisticated analysis would have us look into the form and the level of state intervention. Yet, in this case, the states in both Hong Kong and Shenzhen do not directly regulate or intervene in Liton's internal management as long as it dutifully observes customs and taxation duties. The colonial and clientalist states in Hong Kong and Shenzhen, respectively, are notoriously noninterventionist in labor-management relations.

The transdisciplinary feminist literature on women workers in global factories focuses more squarely on the situation of female labor. Many of these studies subscribe to a heuristic framework of analysis,

arguing that women workers worldwide are subject to collusion by the state, multinational corporations, and the patriarchal family. Minority women suffer from additional domination based on ethnicity. Yet, such frameworks do not provide many causal linkages among analytical signposts, and we are still at a loss to explain the diverse shop-floor politics and cultures found in the two factories. Why are different gender identities—"maiden workers" in Shenzhen and "matron workers" in Hong Kong—constructed and organized in similar labor processes in the two factories? If gender is socially constructed, as feminist researchers have convincingly insisted, the literature is so far silent on how to explain either the diversity in gender constructions or how such constructions constitute class and production relations. Research on service work has revealed how labor control in the service workplace relies on appropriating notions of femininity and masculinity, inscribing them in work requirements and organization, and legitimizing labor control by cultural constructions of gender. However, this study finds that in factories, no less than in airplane cabins or behind McDonald's counters, labor control and resistance take place as much on the cultural and subjective levels as on the technological and organizational, and power relations at work are based on class as much as on gender.

Studies of Chinese women and Chinese labor, a third source of insights, would point to the centrality of the Chinese family and native-place networks in all arenas of Chinese social life. Yet, in conceiving these in terms of omnipresent cultural traits of the Chinese, China studies analyses fail to explore the institutional contingencies that make familialism and localism important in different contexts. For instance, why is localism a less prominent force in the Hong Kong plant than in the Shenzhen plant, given the fact that Hong Kong women workers, like their Shenzhen counterparts, come from different provinces in China? Besides, the general image of Chinese women as docile, compliant, and oppressed by the Chinese patriarchal family does not fit the women workers I encountered in this research. By assuming that Chinese women are victims of Chinese social structures, the literature has for a long time suppressed women's voices and denied their subjectivities. Hearing what they have to say and observing what they do is an indispensable point of departure for recasting Chinese women as subjects.

Overview of This Book

In the following chapters, I locate and assess the theoretical significance of a series of macroinstitutional forces in shaping the diverse patterns of shop-floor politics within the two plants. These factors include the south China political economy, the imperatives of capital and managerial strategies, the degree of state regulation and intervention, and the social organization of the labor markets. The crux of the argument is this: the colonial state in Hong Kong and the clientalist state in Shenzhen pursue noninterventionist policies to guarantee a high degree of enterprise autonomy. In this situation, when the social organization of the two labor markets from which the enterprise draws its labor force differs, the conditions of workers' dependence differ accordingly. This difference determines management's strategies of incorporating labor, workers' collective practices, and their mutual construction of workers' gender, resulting in two gendered regimes of production.

Chapter 2 situates the present study in three major sociological debates: labor process theories, feminist theories of gender and work, and studies of Chinese women. I shall argue that ethnographic data in this case study constitute important theoretical puzzles that challenge these existing theories and can be resolved only by reformulating some of the theories' premises and hypotheses in the light of these data.

Chapter 3 depicts the formation in the past decades of the south China political economy that forms the context of industrial production of the two plants. Open-door industrialization in Guangdong and industrial restructuring in Hong Kong combine to remake a regional economy that has a century-long history. This chapter documents the institutional contingencies for the meeting of mobile capital from Hong Kong and mobile labor from rural China, and the ways by which enterprise management maintains autonomy under diverse state apparatuses in Hong Kong and Guangdong.

Chapters 4 and 5 focus on the distinct structures and processes of the local labor markets from which the two factories draw their labor forces. Based on aggregate statistics and in-depth interview data, these chapters show that the ways women workers are channeled from the fields and their families to the respective factories have much to do with the regimes of production inside the factory.

Chapters 6 and 7 present the comparative ethnography of the two worlds of factory women, “localistic despotism” and “familial hegemony.” These chapters illustrate how gender works in constituting regimes of production—how management and women workers cooperate and contest, how gender and class relations intermesh in social and cultural processes on the shop floors, and how a politics of identity is constitutive of and constituted by production politics.

Chapter 8 sums up the empirical findings of the study and discusses their relevance to theories and methodologies. I propose a feminist theory of factory regimes and the elements therein. The appendix is a reflection on doing ethnographic fieldwork in south China. It describes the political, moral, and human landscapes of the “field,” as well as critical events and dilemmas encountered in the course of fieldwork. I also discuss the implications these have for the generation of data and the arguments presented in the book.