

# A generational analysis of Chinese workers responding to social dislocation

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### Abstract

This paper discusses the way in which China's 'Harmonious Society Project' and industrial transformation have intersected in a particular way in Guangdong Province, China, revealing both the consequences and opportunities it poses for migrant industrial workers. Elaborating on Mannheim's generational analysis and using interview data from 37 migrant industrial workers, I seek to show that worker strategies, based on policy and market opportunities, can be understood as fragmented strategies of generations reacting to the transforming political economy. Findings demonstrate that this inter-generational perspective provides tools to grapple with how migrant industrial workers form alliances and negotiate obstacles taking divergent strategies to cope with industrial transformation.

### Keywords

China labour, generations, Mannheim, industrial transformation, political economy

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China's 'Harmonious Society' project – initiated under the leadership of Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao (Former President and Former Premier of the People's Republic of China (PRC) 2003–2013) – was designed to create stability at a time of unprecedented and rapid economic, social and cultural transformation. This was re-cast under the Presidency of Xi Jinping as the 'Chinese Dream Project'. Both were intended to continue to unwind the country's communist history by way of, and through, the market economy.

Scholars have pointed out that the 'harmonious society' project has not been delivering what it pledges owing to the unfolding double crisis of inequality and under-consumption (Silver and Zhang, 2009). Which has been a persistent issue facing the country since the beginning of the market reforms especially concerning the wellbeing of the population of internal migrant labour.<sup>1</sup> Although internal migrant labour has been a fundamental driver in China's steep path of modernization, the same modernization project has inflicted a great deal of suffering and hardship on this group especially as stability has often been quite elusive for them (Lee, 2014). Despite the inadequacies of the harmonious society project, migrant workers are taking steps to create stability in their lives. And while this stability remains partial, the steps workers are taking are fulfilling gaping holes in their material needs although from a class analysis perspective these steps appear highly fragmented.

This paper offers an explanatory perspective on the fragmented steps adopted by workers to achieve material wellbeing. It draws on Mannheim's theory of generations that explains how social class strategies can be understood generationally, by imputing the important dimension of time to capture the fragmentation of strategies which are bound by certain objective realities and mediated by people's subjective experience of a transformative era (Kettler and Loader, 2004). Migrant industrial workers interests change over time as they subjectively respond to particular opportunity structures in their own discontinuous version of time and then objectify them. Rapid change over an extended period of time thus creates fragmented responses and these responses then create their own time horizons based on these objectified strategies. Mannheim's approach to a generational analysis allows us to understand the multiple asynchronous fractures and how this is possible despite having a similar class position.

The paper is organized as follows. I firstly outline a theoretical discussion of generations drawing on Mannheim's (2000 [1923]) seminal work. Then I use fieldwork findings to illustrate how the 'harmonious society' project and the instability that continues to be a feature of it routinely intersect with fragmented worker strategies in such a way that workers

must, on the one hand, nurture strategies to ensure livelihood security but also must frequently adjust those strategies as time passes.

## **A theory of generations**

Generation remains an understudied social category amongst migrant workers in China. Chan and Siu (2012) identify generation as an important tool when trying to understand class conscientization as a process of building collective goals and the articulation of a common agenda. Selden (1992) finds sharp divisions between generations in China which underscore how entitlements are skewed generationally and that these generational divides have persisted quite dramatically for a long period of time. Although these important authors on labour in China have suggested that generation is a significant category for analysis, there remains a dearth of academic work on generations in the region.

Mannheim's Dynamic Sociology is a vast body of literature; however, I will restrict my analysis to how his theory of generations helps to explore the way in which social classes fragment over time, by highlighting the relationship between a speeding up of time and his theory of generations. Even though there are a variety of ways to understand generation, Mannheim was chosen because of the relevance of his work in helping to explain social change.<sup>2</sup> Mannheim's seminal work on generations (1923) is written in one of two periods of exile, first from Hungary and then from Germany. It is certainly a reflection of the turmoil that he experienced throughout his formative years and demonstrates convincingly the way that social turmoil leaves an indelible imprint on those that experience it, as receptors of the turmoil but also as actors within it.

Mannheim often blurs the lines between generation as cohort and generation as life stage situated within a particular history, of a certain age, with particular linkages to kin and in a context. He does this to highlight the disjunctions of experiences between different generations responding asynchronously to socio-economic change. Mannheim transcends the aforementioned categories by recognizing their interconnectedness; he does not privilege them individually rather he uses generation to show the internal dynamism of these categories which offers two benefits; first in demonstrating that these categories are not fixed rather they change for individuals and groups over time and second in illustrating how generational categorization allows for the study of the interaction of different interests and ideas to uncover how generations can be seen using a Weberian understanding of Social Action, that is the way individuals and collectives take up change (Weber, 1978).

In order to understand the way in which the categories change over time, Mannheim explains that ‘the time interval separating generations becomes subjectively experienceable time’ (Mannheim quoted in Pilcher, 1994: 486). This subjectively experienceable time must at some stage be objectified. And this objectification can put similar social classes at odds with each other, or at least ambivalent to the others material needs. In other words, in periods of rapid transformation as time quickens, social classes entering this transformation, either through migration or birth, requires their subjective understanding of their structural position to be slowly objectified, for them to act in the material world. Due to the ongoing transformation of the socio-economic conditions, the structural conditions under which this process happens will be different to those that previously experienced this process and thus what emerges will not be the same. It is through this objectification process that material interests are identified which recognizes their intersectional positions as people exerting agency. Mannheim’s theory puts the question of time front and centre to explain why social classes can be seen to take different positions based on both the time in which, and the structural conditions present, at the time they enter the transformative space and how the transformative space itself shapes this process.

Mannheim organizes generations into three nested categories: *location*, *actuality* and *unit*, I pay particular attention to the *unit*. The first category is *location* and is based on a geographic analysis of generation: ‘In order to be able to passively undergo or to actively use the handicaps and privileges inherent in a generational location, one must be born within the same historical and cultural region’ (Mannheim, 2000: 182). *Location* illuminates the ways in which culture, geography, demography and history interact by uncovering how structures, which are inherited by current generations from previous generations, create particular meaning for particular groups.

Nested within *location* is the second category called *actuality*. Mannheim describes *actuality* as a ‘common bond based on social and intellectual symptoms of a process of dynamic destabilization’ (183). Dynamic destabilization like mass proletarianization provides the seeds for generations in *actuality* based on common experiences of significant social change. For example, people from two different provinces in China who came to Guangdong to work in industry would share a similar *actuality*. Thus, *actuality* can be thought of as a common generational location *and* common experiences, which markedly break from previous understandings of generational *actuality*.

Finally, Mannheim describes *unit*, nested in *actuality*, comprising of people who respond to social destabilization in certain ways. Whereas *actuality* would be all people who experience the destabilization, a generation

*unit* would be those who internalize ‘new conceptions which are subsequently developed by the unit’ (187), such that *units* create new ‘styles’ or ‘impulses’. These new ‘styles’ or ‘impulses’ are the ways that groups respond to social destabilization by internalizing various opportunities and constraints. Mannheim calls these ‘styles’ or ‘impulses’ generation *entelechy*: a ‘distinctive pattern of interpreting the world’ (191) based on structural and other available resources, especially in times of accelerated social change. Thus, *units* can be thought of as the embodiment of generational actions whereas *entelechy* can be thought of as forms of generational action. Mannheim explains that inter-*unit* change is not a directly linear process where each *unit* becomes a part of the successive *unit*; rather the creation of a *unit* signifies a new *entelechy* or style representing a significant break from previous *units*. In other words, a new fragment in the temporal order, thus a generational break.

There are two types of *entelechy*: unconscious and conscious (190). Unconscious is being intuitively aware of a group with similar values but not consciously recognizing those values collectively. People make unconscious choices that will impact their lives based on available resources, like deciding to leave the countryside, which is normally done on an individual level. Conscious *entelechy* is when an unconscious group ‘experiences and emphasizes their character as a generation unit’ (190). Conscious *entelechy* describes the process by which a previously unconscious orientation becomes internalized or organized around particular issues important to that generation. Conscious *entelechy* is of interest in the Chinese case because of a deliberate and collective espousal of a common cause and course of action. In 2014, the Yue Yuan (YY) strike of more than 40,000 workers (Schmalz et al., 2017), including workers from two generational *units* joined together as a way to ensure that particular policy benefits inscribed in law were delivered. This strike galvanized inter-generational relationships between typically active younger workers and older workers, who, up until that point, had not been important actors in strikes in Guangdong. This is because embezzled social insurance payments compromised the future security of older workers. What follows is an explanation of the underlying interests of each *Unit* as the fragmentation of time becomes more apparent from the synchronous one into two complementary understandings.

## **A generational analysis of industrial workers in Guangdong: Findings from field work**

Research was conducted in the Pearl River Delta (PRD) region of Guangdong province in southern China. Fieldwork took place from June

to September 2014. Interviews with workers were structured as life histories that specifically focused on the transition through education and migration, especially emphasizing workers' lives once they began to work for a wage or once they were responsible for their own livelihoods through agriculture. The interviews questioned how workers understood and reacted to the confluence of migration and industrial restructuring in Guangdong.

This qualitative study comprised a total of 69 semi-structured interviews, of which 37 were with migrant workers, 13 with factory owners, 9 interviews with persons from other occupational groups and another 10 interviews with experts. Interviews were conducted with 16 workers in Dongguan. Dongguan is located between the provincial capital of Guangzhou and the high-tech industrial hub of Shenzhen and represents a centre of export-oriented industrial enterprises in sectors such as electronics, plastics, textiles and shoes, the owners of which are often from Taiwan or Hong Kong. In addition to that group, 21 migrant workers were interviewed from Shunde in Foshan. In contrast to Dongguan, in Shunde, many companies produce for the domestic market. The goods produced include household appliances, furniture, machinery, and textiles. Factory owners here are mostly mainland Chinese.

Respondents were from distinct industrial and service sectors: occupations ranged from the electronics industry, shoes and textile industry, processing of plastics, furniture production and the food service industry. That said, it proved difficult to group respondents by sectorial affiliation, as their occupational biographies were fluid and changes between industries is a common occurrence. The group of interviewees included 23 women and 14 men. With regard to age, 16 respondents were 24 years old or younger, 12 were between 25 and 34 years old and seven were 35 years and older.

The research highlights that the work biographies of Chinese migrant workers can be divided into distinct generational *units* sharing a similar *actuality*, caused by the dynamic destabilization and social upheaval, and the resultant need for migration in the post-Mao (reform) period. This upheaval has left indelible marks on institutions and individuals that share common socio-historical experiences. Recognizing that *unit* is nested in *actuality* which is nested in *location*, the analysis section will focus on two distinct *units* that are particularly revealing in terms of the way they enact social action to achieve individual and collective social protections and also how they leverage inter-generational linkages to achieve collective social protections. The two generational *units* are: (i) the 90s unit, (ii) the transition-stability unit. These two generational units represent how needs are perceived in terms of *unit* both in the context of their own time – *actuality* – and in relation to the present time, how those needs are accounted for in

the Guangdong labour market, and also how they are being translated into concrete actions which are unique to each *unit*.

### 90s *unit*

The first *unit* has a variety of different names, including the 90s generation in the media, or the second generation because they are the second generation in the family to migrate for work, or the left behind generation because their parents left them in the countryside with family to facilitate migration for work. The characteristics of this *unit* are popularized as a relatively new phenomenon and perhaps a sign of China's growing wealth (Hook, 2012). This *unit* has far more formal education than previous *units* (Chan, 2014, 2010).<sup>3</sup> Additionally, the 90s *unit* are often the children of previous migrant workers and, consequently, many of its members have not experienced the poverty of their parents (Int24w). In interviews with factory owners, managers, employment agencies and the head of a large Hong Kong industry association, this generation is described as lazy and unstable: 'The 90s generation, they like to play, they don't want to work hard but they want to make lots of money' (Int11b). The 90s *unit* is known for jumping jobs quite quickly for small increases in salary and for electing day labour as opposed to more traditional longer term employment. Interviews demonstrated that on the one hand, factory owners and business representatives had quite a negative opinion of this generation, yet, on the other hand, the iconic 90s generation worker was difficult to find. Most workers of the 90s generation that were interviewed were making very rational decisions within the labour market but were faced with the early prospect of moving to a type of transition-stability *unit* due to life pressures. A 90s *unit* worker provides one view, 'because I think I'm still young, I don't want to be restrained, but the jobs available do not offer much benefit' (Int36w).

As a group of workers, this generational *unit* remains highly fragmented but extremely important in collective struggles because, as individuals with a relatively high education and a strong sense of right and wrong, they are often willing to resist exploitation by either changing jobs or through negotiation with employers. Workers are making calculated decisions and basing them on values that are particularly important to them such as ethical, moral or other reasons of some intrinsic value. Yet a strong sense of right and wrong combined with a youthful idealism makes them important actors in strikes in the PRD.

Young workers are representatives of the workers. Compared to the older workers, the young worker's mentality of protecting rights is stronger,

besides, they have received more education, their organizing ability and the ability of using the internet is better, therefore the labour movement is easier to organize. (Int57r)

90s unit workers can transcend often-contradictory values so that as a conscious *unit* this generation may be fragmented but is willing to organize when necessary. In the YY strike, some of the strongest actors were youth even though they had the least instrumental reasons to join because of their high Marketplace Bargaining Power<sup>4</sup> (Int56r, Int57r). Although the 90s generation may be scorned anecdotally by much of Chinese society (Int25r, Int13o, Int7o, Int8o), they represent a new consciousness of worker whose political voice is quite different from previous generations (Schmalz et al., 2017). While many of their habits and behaviours may seem counter-productive, they are creating a new generation *unit* based on values which are incrementally different from previous ones. This, for many, means that they at least have an awareness of not needing to tolerate the exploitation endured by their parents.

Although less willing to tolerate exploitative conditions in the workplace, workers from the 90s *unit*, when asked about labour contracts and social insurance, had little understanding of their entitlements or the protections offered through the law and did not base their decisions on legal entitlements except through an understanding of basic minimum wages (Int32w, Int34w, Int36w, Int37w, Int74w, Int75w).<sup>5</sup> Workers in this generation use their strong Marketplace Bargaining Power, because of their position as the most desirable age group of workers (Chan, 2010), to achieve particular objectives based on their needs. The interviews demonstrated that workers achieved improvements in their position in the labour market through market mechanisms due to the reduction in surplus labour, evidenced by the tight labour market in Guangdong, rather than through legal channels. An example of a market-oriented strategy is maximizing salary through frequent job changes.

Frequent job changes are chosen because options for social insurance<sup>6</sup> are not desirable for this *unit* which is one of the main reasons given for workers to stay at a company. The high proportional cost of social insurance in relation to their salaries for workers who earn near minimum wage is significant and one that some workers, especially young workers will forego, choosing not to sacrifice today for the future (Wang, 2012). Further, contributing may impact the present, especially if workers have a young family or support family members in their hometowns. Until the trust problems of the Social Insurance Law are sorted out, along with a proportional rise in incomes, social insurance will not be widely subscribed

to by this *unit*. Thus, in terms of social action, the 90s *unit* is responding to the current situation mostly through the benefits of strong market opportunities availed to them by decentralized accumulation.<sup>7</sup> However, they are also willing to act collectively when the promises of the ‘harmonious society’ project are under-realized as evidenced by them being some of the strongest actors in recent strike actions in the region (Elfstrom and Kuruvilla, 2014; Schmalz et al., 2017).

### *Unconscious entelechy – Transitional–stability unit*

The transition-stability *unit* are first generation migrants with close ties to the countryside and have typically been in Guangdong for more than 10 years. As a group, these workers have been the loyal servants of Chinese modernization, yet they are finding that their contributions to this dream are only variably matched by the state expect by way of an increased variety of market opportunities and a so far poorly implemented social insurance system. Their work biographies began much earlier and what they want is becoming much clearer although instability of the market and incomplete social insurance implementation is making their ability to get it unclear. Through fieldwork it was found that the transition-stability *unit* is divided into two entelechies: the transition part is an unconscious *entelechy* and the stability part begins a phase of conscious *entelechy*.

The transition *entelechy* seems to begin around the time that thoughts of marriage emerge (typically around 25 in China), although economic reasons may force this stage to begin earlier. This worker’s explanation captures the typical transition period: ‘when I started to work, all I thought about was earning enough money for myself. But now I need to consider my family. I have two kids. I have more pressure now’ (Int14w). This stage is still characterized by job changes, but the job change strategy is more calculated. Job changes seem to happen when workplaces offer something deemed to be an improvement on the existing workplace, which is anticipated to have ameliorative impacts on individual workers’ lives. This group is not a conscious *unit* because their strategies are not cohesive and their livelihoods are not under immediate threat, as they scramble to secure the best position possible before their Marketplace Bargaining Power diminishes; an individual project happening on a macro-level. Ms. Ma who works at a water bottling plant and has worked in seven companies in the past 10 years, explains ‘I think it’s easy to find a job, but the jobs I found were not good, they were not suitable for me’ (Int15w). Associational Power<sup>8</sup> is quite weak here because workers do not stay long enough in a workplace to develop secure relationships, as workers

become increasingly selective to secure the best position for themselves amongst rather undesirable options.

Although still predominantly market-oriented, the unconscious *entelechy* is characterized by a turn towards stability whereby benefits, relationships with colleagues, future prospects of the company, and other considerations become factors in an increasingly important quest for a stable reliable job. For example, Ms. Ma thinks that her job will become more stable because it satisfies her criteria for available resources in the labour market, 'there is no overtime. Even if we have to do overtime, it won't be too late so I can go home to my son. It also pays social security and there is not too much working pressure' (Int15w).<sup>9</sup>

As mentioned previously, workers in this generational *entelechy* have a clearer sense of the labour market but also face increased family pressure both to care for children and ageing parents. There is a turn to balancing the benefits afforded by a tight labour market and the skills that workers have developed over time with the social benefits provided by the state through the enterprises they work for. Also factors such as housing affordability play a role in where they ultimately decide to settle down and starting a family becomes increasingly important. Finding a partner and marrying is common and after a short time of saving some money, the couple desires to become pregnant. Women in this stage face increased pressure as family considerations become a priority and there are limited allowances for industrial workers to balance both productive and reproductive responsibilities (Pun, 2007).

Whereas in the 90s *unit*, women occupied a relatively privileged place in the workforce by way of easily obtaining work, productive advantages come at a high cost of having a family. The high cost is manifested in the intensive surveillance of workers' personal lives in the factories and company dormitories (Pun, 2007). Women's position in production, coupled with the privileged position production occupies in the economy, makes it hard to negotiate with the demands of child-rearing. Thus, in the transition-stability *unit*, women can quickly fall out of favour in a production facility when they have caregiving responsibilities or other factors that limit working long hours since women are overwhelmingly responsible for unpaid reproductive work (Dong and An, 2012). Further, while many women can easily find work in the factories after having children, the paucity of adequate childcare facilities, combined with the economic need of families, limits women's caregiving choices and pressures them to leave their children with grandparents or other family members in rural communities far from industrial worksites in Guangdong (Lee, 1998, 2007; Pun, 2005). Additionally, because salaries are relatively low, one of the main

reasons women return to work more quickly than the cultural standard is that economic needs become too great (Int35w, Int36w).<sup>10</sup> When asked about why her children are in her hometown Mrs. Meng explains ‘because there is no one here to watch them’ and ‘both my husband and I work long hours’ (Int35w). In response to some of these hardships, women have had strong roles in collective struggles in Guangdong and continue to occupy an important place in articulating the adversities of industrial work there (Lee, 1998; Pun, 2005).

Workers who are unconsciously acting begin to see the problems of those that are consciously acting, the two main problems include: first, they recognize that their Marketplace Bargaining Power is diminishing, as Marketplace Bargaining Power, especially in sunset industries, is only beneficial until workers reach a certain age and then value in the labour market begins to decrease rendering changing jobs more difficult (Yang et al., 2010). Second, as a generation *unit*, many of the transition workers recognize the value of social benefits because they worked and saw people retire without them and are also beginning to trust that these benefits will be provided, especially by more reputable employers (Int15w). For this *unit*, social benefits availed through the ‘harmonious society’ project are becoming increasingly important and workers try to use their Marketplace Bargaining Power to secure benefits for the future when that power will diminish.

### *Conscious entelechy – Transitional-stability unit*

In this entelechy, there is a movement from individual awareness of impending problems (the unconscious) to shared consciousness, mobilization and resistance. Although noting, shared consciousness does not necessarily lead to shared action, this group is becoming far more conscious and is often acting in its own interests. Stability is highly important in this *entelechy* as the economic and social demands of parenting increase. As workers begin to think more seriously about retirement, social benefits become an increasingly important consideration. In an interview with a worker in the food industry, he describes the uncertainty of his retirement, which would take place after one year: ‘I want to go back home when I pay the social insurance for 15 years. I still have one year left. I am going to raise goats’. When asked about how much he would receive from social insurance per month, he responded, ‘The new policy now says male workers can get the rewards at 60 years old. I’m not so sure [how much]. It may be about 2,000rmb’. And when pressed whether that would be enough, he responded, ‘Of course not! That’s why I am going to raise goats’. (Int42w). Another example is Ms. Hu (55 years old) who works in a jeans factory

who also expressed her fears for the future because of the limited time she has left to work and her limited earning capacity:

Ms. Hu: I plan to work until the boss thinks I'm too old.

B: How old do you think that would be?

Ms. Hu: 60 I think.

B: Why are you going to continue to work that long? You are over 50. You can retire already.

Ms. Hu: Our family needs money, and the retirement money isn't enough (Int45w).

The relative position of workers in this *entelechy* depends on the opportunities they had and the choices they made previously along with the skills they have accumulated, as their Marketplace Bargaining Power is very low due to their relatively advanced age. As a generation *entelechy*, this group of workers is increasingly involved in labour disputes, because when the stability of their workplace is compromised, they are often the most vulnerable. This was the case for the YY strike where older workers became very involved in the strike, this reflected in the demands that were oriented towards older workers, especially to ensure social insurance (Schmalz et al., 2017).

As with the transition *entelechy*, the Social Insurance Law is very important. Despite steps to increase security through social insurance, there are several reasons why social insurance continues to be a problem, especially for this entire *unit* and why there is an increased conscientization, especially for this *entelechy*. This includes insecurity and distrust around whether payments will be made, costs for employees and employers, and technical implementation problems. There is also a great deal of insecurity regarding how much workers will receive when they retire and they mistrust that all the payments they made into the system will be available to them when they retire. This insecurity stems from two sources, which were at the centre of the YY strike and at the heart of the problems of decentralized accumulation namely the fluidity between local businesses and local governments and their complicity. When asked about whether she will benefit from social security, a worker at YY explains, 'I have to wait and see. The government has made a commitment. I will only know if they will honour that commitment after my retirement' (Int63w). Many workers have come to rely on the policy as an important instrument in increasing security but are unable to feel fully secure that the program will provide

enough financial support for their retirement. This worker at a furniture fittings factory explains,

Basically we only pay for 15 years. I have paid for 8 years. In 15 years, I might retire. Even if I pay more, I will get almost the same amount after I retire. There's just very little difference. 15 years is a very long time. We don't know what will happen in the future. Even if we pay for the welfare now, we're not sure if we can get this money or not. (Int24w)

Another worker (Int15w) explained that one of the main reasons she chose to work at her current factory is because she trusts her boss to buy social insurance for her. Thus, trust is an essential part of social insurance; workers must trust that they will receive payments otherwise they will simply ask that it not be deducted from their salaries. Furthermore, the central government must enforce promises imbued in the system to moderate decentralized accumulation otherwise the objectives of the policy will fail.

Another example of the ways in which this *unit* is developing consciousness is through plant closures and relocations as an effect of industrial upgrading, increased costs and labour shortages. The brief case of a jewellery company Tongxin in Foshan highlights some of the difficulties of being an older worker. This jewellery company was taken over by a larger company and moved.

When the new factory was completed, most of the equipment in the old factory was moved to the new factory and the workers who worked less than 10 years in the company were brought to the new factory. From June of this year, the old factory almost stopped producing. But there were still about 50 old workers who worked more than 10 years in the factory. Before moving the factory, these workers used to earn 6,000 or 7,000 yuan per month. But their salary has been decreasing since the company moved the factory. Up until June of this year [2014], they received only 2,000 yuan. (Int57r)

For the older workers who will not be moved to the new factory, Associational Power has the potential to be quite high because they have limited Marketplace Bargaining Power, which means there is little potential for them to find work and they have little to lose in their relationship with the enterprise.<sup>11</sup> The power the enterprise has over them to threaten termination of employment is low because they have already, in effect, been fired. Additionally, their impending precariousness, due to cut pensions

and future unemployment, means that they will be less nervous to mobilize even considering a political climate which does not permit mobilization. Other older workers are in a similar situation because they rely on workplace contributions to save for retirement; yet if the workplace fails to meet its obligation, then there is little to stop workers from organizing collectively. The conscious-stability *unit* is extremely important, as workers must contribute at least 15 years of social security to receive state benefits. Additionally, the one child policy (Chan, 2010: 520) has caused them to worry about their retirement as single child adults find it difficult to handle the double burden of taking care of their parents and their children. Thus, grandparents try and stay in the workforce if possible. The jeans worker interviewed previously discusses her fears for the future: 'I'm afraid that my children would not take care of me. And I'm not so sure I can save enough money to take care of myself, but at least I have my retirement money' (Int45w).

## Conclusion

Noticeable from these examples is that all the respondents occupy a similar class position, yet as agents acting in the world (Archer, 1995) they respond differently to the structural conditions of their time. One could make the argument that these responses are simply a matter of waiting the requisite time and all will have similar responses in the long run. Yet, time in this region is certainly not standing still and it would be categorically false to expect similar reactions from each of these *units* as the structural conditions around them are changing dramatically. With this comes new ways to subjectively understand the current structural conditions and objectively putting them into action. Mannheim's theory of generations, in fact, encourages thinking about generation and time as multiple intersecting moments where time continually runs and generational locations motivated by presence, actuality by events and as events happen *units* coupled together are moments of agency where one's subjective understanding of events becomes objectified in action. This may happen consciously or unconsciously and may take significant time to realize but the seeds are sown as structural properties change and then action begins.

Thus, in the example from this paper, the 90s *unit* has a relatively privileged place in the labour market but finds itself limited by market choices which do not meet their expectations. Although it may seem from the media that this *Unit* is extremely influential, they are only beginning to objectify their subjective views of the current situation especially in light of significant structural shifts, e.g. the labour shortage but also increased cultural assertiveness in terms of higher education. Time will be the

ultimate explainer of how these shifts are objectified in action. The transitions-stability *unit* is double-disadvantaged, having spent more time in the labour market yet finds its Marketplace Bargaining Power decreasing. Moreover they have invested time and resources in social and economic institutions which are not always realized in the way they were envisioned. Thus, this *unit* finds itself excluded from many measures of security both market and through the state, opening questions about how traditional East-Asian family based welfare models (Saunders and He, 2017) may be relied on and how these may be strained through migration. This *unit* has objectified a reality based on their response to the structural situation of their time. Yet, it also shows how the objectification process must be seen as the past in the present and as such, fallible to inconsistencies, yet the inconsistencies themselves are the foundations of Social Action.

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### **Notes**

1. The number of internal migrants (floating population) in China according to official sources is 245 million (2016) (China Statistical Yearbook <http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/ndsj/2017/indexeh.htm>). The floating population in Guangdong is 40 million – 10 million from inside Guangdong and 30 million from outside of Guangdong (2017) (Health and Family Planning Commission

of Guangdong Province [http://www.gdwst.gov.cn/Pc/Index/search\\_show/t/all/id/17435.html](http://www.gdwst.gov.cn/Pc/Index/search_show/t/all/id/17435.html)). Guangdong's population is 8% of China's total and represents 16% of the total floating population.

2. For an extensive review of a variety of conceptualizations of generation, see Huijsmans (2016).
3. The idea of more formalized education needs to be problematized here because on the one hand, more formal education means that the overall general level of education has risen. But on the other hand, the large gap in education between rural and urban areas and the systemic gap between the changing socio-economic demands of society and the educational system means that workers on the whole are still poorly equipped to deal with the demands of their workplace especially where increased levels of knowledge are required. In other words, in relative terms to their parents, this generation is better equipped but in relative terms to changes in the overall economy the evidence is not so clear.
4. Marketplace Bargaining Power is characterized by the degree of (1) tight labour markets, (2) the ability to support oneself on non-wage income and (3) scarce skills (Wright, 2000: 962).
5. Besides workers who had begun to work in Labour NGO's, I did not interview workers from this generation that were politically active who might have a different impression and understanding of the laws as they are, because they were not easily accessible, as after a conflict many were fired and moved on.
6. The Social Insurance Law (SI) (2011) covers five programs: pensions, medical insurance, unemployment insurance, work injury insurance and maternity. It requires workers to make contributions for at least 15 years to be eligible to receive pensions. The traditional age of retirement since the Mao-era is maintained, according to which women qualify at 50 years of age and men qualify at 60 years of age. Pensions currently pay about 44% of the average wage for each region, as pensions are calculated based on the average labour rate in that region. As part of the SI, pension payments will be gradually coordinated nationally while other social insurance payments will be coordinated provincially. The 2011 law ensures that all workers qualify to contribute to the pension program, either through the standard urban plan or through the new rural social pension (SI, 2011; Wang, 2012). Yet, loopholes inhibiting universal access are causing tension points creating problems of trust and insecurity for many workers which will be discussed in subsequent sections.
7. The concept highlights the competing interests of different levels of government with the revolving door with business and the contradictions that ensue (Lee, 2007).
8. Associational Power is the power of collective organization of workers – for example unions, works councils and informal collective organizations (Wright, 2000); in the case of China, Associational Power comes exclusively in the form of informal collective organization as strikes and other work action is organized informally on the shop floor as the trade union ACFTU plays little role in representing workers (Chan, 2013).

9. Another unit in this phase is petty entrepreneurship when workers employ their savings and leverage their social networks to attempt to leave the class of paid labourers and join the petty-capitalist class (Sommer, 2017).
10. Ching Kwan Lee (1998) explains that there are a myriad of reasons beyond purely economic for why women go out to work, including freedom from the control of parents, getting away from an unwanted arranged marriage and unwanted familial pressure.
11. Associational Power for older workers results from a degree of desperation and requires a great deal of persistence. Some workers who can find new jobs will simply move on but others remain hoping for some remuneration for their years of service. As many of the companies have moved to other districts the workers' petition the local and, in some cases, provincial governments to try and receive compensation for the benefits (pension contributions) and income that was lost during the closing (Int57r). Often coalitions are needed in order to exert sufficient pressure on the governments or for the governments to exert pressure on the businesses (Xu and Schmalz, 2017).
12. Directly cited interviews conducted between June and September 2014 by Brandon Sommer and/or Stefan Schmalz.

### Primary Sources<sup>12</sup>

- 14w Bathroom fitting manufacturer – worker, female 30 years old, from Guangxi with rural hukou, seven years of education, married, earns 2100 RMB per month, 13 years working in Guangdong
- 15w Bottling company – worker, female 30 years old, from Guangxi with rural hukou, nine years of education, divorced, earns 2700 RMB per month, 10 years working in Guangdong
- 24w Trading company – purchaser, female 34 years old, from Hunan with rural hukou, 12 years of education, unmarried, eight years working in Guangdong
- 32w Coffee shop – server, female 23 years old, from Hunan with rural hukou, 12 years of education, unmarried, earns 3000 RMB per month
- 34w Coffee shop – server 2, female 22 years old, from Hunan with rural hukou, nine years of education, unmarried, earns 2500 RMB per month
- 36w Shoe accessory manufacturer – worker, male 24 years old, from Anhui with rural hukou, nine years of education, married, earns 2000 RMB per month, six years working in Guangdong
- 37w Retail sales – cellphones, female 24 years old, from Guangdong with rural hukou, nine years of education, married, earns 3000 RMB per month
- 42w Food stuffs manufacturer – forklift driver, male 43 years old, from Guizhou rural hukou, seven years of education, married, earns 2500 RMB per month, 21 years working in Guangdong
- 45w Jeans manufacturer – worker, female 50 years old, from Guangdong with urban hukou, nine years of education, divorced, earns 3000 RMB per month, 20 years working in Guangdong

- 63w Shoe manufacturer – office workers × 2, female/female, from Henan/Hunan with urban/urban hukou, 15/16 years of education, unmarried/married, 12 years working in Guangdong
- 74w Jeans manufacturer – worker, male 21 years old, from Chongqing with rural hukou, eight years of education, unmarried, earns 5000 RMB per month
- 75w Jeans manufacturer – worker, female 20 years old, from Jiangxi with rural hukou, unmarried 3000 RMB
- 7o Lighting manufacturer – manager, male, from Taiwan, 18 years working in Guangdong
- 8o Shoe accessory manufacturer – owner, male from Taiwan, 17 years working in Guangdong
- 13o Wine cooler manufacturer – manager, male from Mainland China
- 25r Industrial Association Hong Kong, male
- 56r Labour lawyer, male
- 57r Labour NGO, male

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