

From the Workplace to the Household: Migrant Labor and Accumulation without Dispossession in China

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ABSTRACT: Labor studies on China commonly use the lens of proletarianization to understand class formation among peasant-workers who move into cities to work in China's manufacturing sector. However, in the decade since the 2008 global financial crisis, proletarianization seems an increasingly fading possibility for the Chinese peasantry, as urban labor markets remain saturated. Instead of peasants being transformed into proletariats, new patterns of class formation have emerged, where the interconnections between agrarian and urban remains central to peasant-workers living without dispossession. The Marxist feminist centering of practices and social arrangements of social reproduction, i.e. workforce maintenance, provides a welcome point of departure for redrawing some of our class maps in the shadow of the 2008 crisis. This contribution draws on multi-sited ethnographic research among migrant workers toiling in the petty-commodity workplaces of Kunming, and in the adjacent countryside of Yunnan Province, to document the fluid class formation among families living on labor's frontier. Through examining different experiences of workforce reproduction for families and migrant laborers as they move in and out of the workforce and household self-provisioning for subsistence, alternative imaginations for the possibilities of subsistence autonomy emerge.

Keywords: China; rural-urban; social reproduction; Marxist feminism; peasant-workers

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Introduction

Ananya Roy draws attention to a relational understanding of geography when she asks, "What global city can function without relational dependence on seemingly distant economies of ... cheap labor?"¹ Based on fieldwork among migrant workers in Kunming, the capital of Yunnan Province in Southwest China, and among those "left-behind" in the neighboring countryside, this paper examines the relational geographies of labor in post-global financial crisis China. The more than 200 million strong "army" of China's rural migrant workers (*nongmingong*), who lack urban citizenship yet retain land-tenure rights in the countryside, constitute one of the core elements of the post-Mao Chinese economy. The rural-urban citizenship scheme, the *hukou* system, provides different sets of rights and entitlements for rural and urban citizens, and excludes migrating peasants from access to low-cost public housing or unemployment benefits within cities.² This arrangement of not expropriating farmland from peasant-workers and

¹ 2011, 224

² Solinger 1999

thereby putting the costs of labor reproduction on agrarian households allows urban employers to pay wages to the migrant workforce below family subsistence levels.³ In the existing literature on the working life of peasant workers in post-Mao China, much attention has focused on the manufacturing stronghold of the Pearl River Delta.⁴ This rich body of scholarship analyses class formation (consciousness, aspirations, and struggle) among peasant-workers by focusing on “the process of proletarianization of the peasant-workers in China today.”⁵ To understand the relational geographies of migrant workers seemingly “floating” between their peasant heritage and proletarian futures, Pun Ngai and Lu Huilin characterize working class formation in China as “*an unfinished process of proletarianization, which leads to a deepening sense of becoming incomplete.*”⁶

David Harvey⁷ argues for the need to analyze the economic elite’s projects of accumulation (e.g. workplace exploitation, debt, investments) and dispossession (e.g. land grabs, privatization of socialized services, commodification of environment) as interconnected. From the perspective of accumulation by dispossession, the relational geographies of labor between city and rural hinterlands are “written in the annals of mankind in letters of blood and fire”⁸ as farmers lose their means of survival and are forced into proletarianization. However, the narrative of an uni-linear movement from the countryside to the city defies the realities on the ground in the aftermath of the global financial crisis. The global financial crisis of 2008 revealed the continued importance of landholding for rural migrant workers’ sustenance, as more than fourteen million migrating peasants became unemployed and returned to their smallholdings between late 2008 and the first half of 2009.⁹ By the early 2010s, there were signs that the Chinese economy was no longer able to create enough employment for the rural labor force to keep up with the anticipated rise in rural–urban migration.¹⁰ Notwithstanding the massive dispossession of land from smallholder that has taken place since 2000, mostly by the hands of local governments, most peasants still retain tilling rights over their land.¹¹ This points to the need to redraw the inherited class maps of dispossession and proletarianization.

Rather, in China, capital accumulation generally continues to rely on *not* expropriating migrant labors farmland. Accumulation *without* dispossession¹², not expropriating farmland from peasant-workers and thereby putting the costs of labor reproduction on agrarian households allows urban employers to pay wages to the migrant workforce below family subsistence levels.¹³ As this study will show, in the study villages there have been no sudden disruptive event that marks the beginning of the growing importance of migrant work for survival among smallholder families, such as dispossession of farmland or failed government development schemes. Rather, in these villages “...capitalist relations emerged by stealth,”¹⁴ as rising living costs have made migrant work an irreversible part of life.

From the perspective of smallholder households encountered in Yunnan, unremunerated

³ Chuang 2015.

⁴ Chan and Selden 2014.

⁵ Pun and Lu 2010, 498.

⁶ 2010, 498 original italics for emphasis.

⁷ 2003.

⁸ Marx 1976, 875.

⁹ Chan 2010.

¹⁰ Ruan 2015.

¹¹ van der Ploeg, Ye and Lu 2014.

¹² I want to acknowledge that Gillian Hart 2006 first coined this the term accumulation without dispossession to denaturalize dispossession. I employ the term to refocus the relational geographies of labor in post-global financial crisis China.

¹³ Chuang 2015.

¹⁴ Li 2014a, 9.

tasks undertaken on their land and wage work undertaken in the metropolis of Kunming more often than not do not represent a choice of either rural agrarian work or urban capitalist work, but rather form a chain of activities carried out as part of a households' ongoing struggles to secure sustenance and autonomy. Thus, Roy's provocative question of what global city can function without seemingly distant economies of labor requires deeper probing. What work and what type of workers do we include when we investigate the workforces upon which cities depend? Marxist feminists have long challenged the conceptions of work that narrowly understand it as wage labor. Seen from this perspective, unremunerated work, which is often carried out by women, is an indispensable amalgam of practices that are crucial for the maintenance of the most basic commodity of capitalism: labor power.¹⁵ Geographer Cindi Katz refers to all the countless acts of unremunerated work as the heart of capitalism, by which she means the attendant mental and physical work (e.g. childcare, cooking, and cleaning) and materials (e.g. food, housing, and water) that are sometimes referred to as social reproduction, which needs to be carried out in order for laborers to be able to return to work the next day.¹⁶ Importantly for understanding the relational dependence of cities on seemingly distant economies of cheap labor, a social reproduction perspective is an antidote to creating "a false dichotomy between migrants and the left-behind,"¹⁷ since in this framework "the household takes center stage."¹⁸

The article is organized in three parts. In part one, I outline the contributions made by China-centered working class studies to understanding class formation among peasant migrant workers, then show how Marxist feminism expands the notion of work to include unwaged care and housework, captured by the concept of social reproduction, which serves to decenter the urban workplace as the privileged place of understanding class formation. Thereafter, I place this body of scholarship in dialogue with critical agrarian studies, to place the questions of workforce reproduction at the center of studies of class formation. In part two, I briefly describe my fieldwork in Yunnan then detail differences among smallholder families. My goal is to show the fluid process of class formation that occurs as they move between the workforce and the surplus population. In the final section, through centering movement and organization for workforce maintenance at the center of class formation, this paper attests to the coming together of the rural and the urban as sites of work in post-global financial crisis China.

Factory work in post-Mao China and going behind "the hidden abode of production"

Inspired by Marxist notions of class and the cultural approach to class championed by English historian E. P. Thompson and French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, scholars of the working class in China approach class less as a social location and more as a contingent-making of class through agency and context of conditioning. Possibly due to a resemblance to the British experience of the Industrial Revolution or even due to the familiarity of the manufacturing landscape in the Pearl River Delta,¹⁹ these places and their assembly line workers have come to occupy a particularly prominent place in the scholarly literature on rural migrant workers.²⁰ The manufacturing workplaces found particularly in Guangdong Province are characterized by a dormitory labor regime (in which workers live and work in the same location), high turnover,

¹⁵ Bhattacharya 2017.

¹⁶ 2001a, 709; see also Laslett and Brenner 1989.

¹⁷ Nguyen and Locke 2014, 856.

¹⁸ Douglass 2006, 421.

¹⁹ A familiarity sometimes acknowledged; see for example Pun and Lu 2010.

²⁰ Chang 2009; Pun 2005.

and demeaning working conditions.²¹ Moreover, scholars have detailed episodes when such workers have organized collectively to claim their salaries in times of non-payment or in other work-based violations against their rights as workers through strikes or when they have taken their case to court.²²

Despite the important contributions by these studies to the debate on working class formation in post-Mao China, interpreting class formation through the language of “unfinished” and “incomplete” risks replicating “unilinear modernist assumptions.”²³ The modernist myth, within which class maps are constructed around categorical opposites such as peasant-worker, rural-urban, and traditional-modern, interpret the relationship between agrarian and urban as replacing each other in historical succession and “evolutionary time.”²⁴ It is not my intention to restate the critique against unilinear modernist assumptions here. Rather, if ten years after the Great Recession, for peasant-workers in Asia “...the transition path promised in modernization narratives is a cruel hoax[as]they cannot march off into proletarian futures because no such future is available to them,”²⁵ then the time is ripe to redraw some of our inherited class maps.²⁶

Particularly the central insight that the context of conditioning and agency of peasant migrants’ involve straddling the agrarian-urban divide for subsistence and aspirations remains undertheorized. That is, working class studies of China that center on urban workplaces when theorizing the link between work and class formation, shy away from the question of what still lies behind Marx’s concept of “the hidden abode.”²⁷ Kathy Weeks and Nancy Fraser suggest that the shift in perspective offered by a Marxist feminist conception of work is similar to the move made by Marx against the typical political economy perspective on work that focused on the exchange between buyers and sellers within the market place.²⁸ Marx exposed the secret of value-making by redirecting the gaze of the observer towards the “hidden abode of production, meaning the factory floor.” In doing so, Marx demonstrated that wage work involved not so much men selling and buying labor within the perceived freedom of the marketplace, but subordination for workers, valorization of capital, and extraction of a surplus by the owners of capital by not paying laborers the full amount for their work.²⁹ Thus, the expression “behind the hidden abode” entails decentering work—a move from focusing on the workplace as the primary site of experience, livelihood, and politics of the working class. While this shift in perspective has been discussed by different authors in other contexts, the retreat of workers to the farm following the global financial crisis and the recent questioning of the Chinese economy’s capacity to absorb the anticipated migrants who will move from the rural to the urban, highlights the need for alternative maps of interpretation to understand the shifting relational dependence of the city on seemingly distant economies of labor.

Social reproduction, smallholders and class formation

Meg Luxton (2006) has highlighted the chain of practices that forms part of the same economy of unremunerated work and wage labor that secures the sustenance of households worldwide:

²¹ Chan and Selden 2014; Pun and Chan 2012

²² Chan 2013; Lee 2007.

²³ Huang 2011, 460.

²⁴ Ferguson 1999, 4.

²⁵ Li 2014b, 2077.

²⁶ Kashmir and Carbonella 2008, 6; 2014.

²⁷ Fraser 2014

²⁸ Fraser 2014; Weeks 2011

²⁹ Weeks 2011

Starting from the premise that in capitalist societies the majority of people subsist by combining paid employment and unpaid domestic labor to maintain themselves and their households ... social reproduction analyzes the ways in which both labors are part of the same socio-economic process.³⁰

Marxist feminists³¹ have used this more expansive notion of work for decades to unsettle the categorical divide between the household as a private realm of leisure and consumption and the workplace as a site of public labor and production.³² This way of conceptualizing work has been put forward particularly by Anglo-Saxon Marxist and Italian Socialist feminists since the debates in the 1970s on household labor, often referred to collectively as the domestic labor debate.³³ These approaches challenged the Marxist conception of work, as feminists argued that the pioneering work done by Marx to publicize the central place of work and workers as well as their subordinate relationship compared with the interests, needs, and positions of capitalists formed a necessary but insufficient critique of dominant ways of perceiving capitalism.³⁴ Rather, Marxist feminists questioned the concept of work itself, particularly the separation of labor that take place within the home and the labor that takes place within the workplace.

Unremunerated work taking place within the household is not an externality or a minor issue but forms the ground on which the economy moves as it provides the background conditions for the existence of wage-work, the accumulation of surplus value and the way capitalism functions.³⁵ One of the main aims of this critique is to publicize the often unaccounted for and as such misrecognized forms of work taking place within households and to start imagining other possibilities for the future of work.³⁶ This expansion of the conception and location of work breaks down the separation between household workplace and unremunerated/ wage work.

Recently, critical agrarian and labor scholars have highlighted how dispossession of farmland in the situation of jobless growth and saturated urban labor markets potentially undermines the capacity for households to sustain themselves.³⁷ A narrative of dispossession highlights the linkage between agrarian transformations and urban life, to explain how smallholders are drawn into the ranks of the urban labor force. Nonetheless, in this paper I suggest that accumulation *without* dispossession provides an alternative way of reconnecting the geographies of agrarian transformation and processes of urbanization. Access to land is the means through which smallholders strive to maintain limited yet shifting subsistence autonomy from dependency on urban labor markets. This feature sets smallholders apart from the urban proletariat, who are fully dependent on commodity markets to get hold of the means necessary for reproduction such as food and shelter.³⁸ As such, to the extent that peasants retain some measure of subsistence autonomy through access to land, the smallholder semi-proletariat marks the limit of the unstable and changing labor frontier of capitalism.

³⁰ Luxton 2006, 37.

³¹ The label “Marxist feminist” is used as shorthand for feminist approaches that are broadly conceived as socialist, materialist, social reproduction feminism, or Marxist feminist, which goes beyond the second-wave feminist struggle for equality between the genders in terms of work within the household and the workplace with an agenda to “publicize work, politicizing it, and radically transforming it” (Weeks 2011, 24).

³² Bakker 2007.

³³ Costa and James 1975.

³⁴ Weeks 2011.

³⁵ Fraser 2014. 59-60.

³⁶ Meehan and Strauss 2015; Mitchell, Marston and Katz 2003.

³⁷ Araghi 2006; Arrighi 2007; Kashmir and Carbonella 2014; McMichael 2006.

³⁸ Wood 1998.

However, despite the affinity between, on the one hand, Marxist feminists' central concern for unwaged household labor and the functioning of capitalism, and on the other hand, the widespread recognition within peasant studies that most contemporary smallholder households combine remunerated labor with semi-subsistence agriculture,³⁹ there has been little dialogue between these bodies of scholarship.⁴⁰ Common to both bodies of literature is the argument that capitalism depends upon semi-proletarian households, as most people "derive a significant portion of their sustenance from sources other than cash wages, including self-provisioning ... informal reciprocity ... and state transfers".⁴¹

What does the above discussed understanding of work entail for us methodologically? Cindi Katz suggests a methodology based on fieldwork combined with "scale-jumping and geography-crossing," to trace relations beyond discrete places.⁴² This involves tracing and reconnecting the material practices, lived experiences, and trans-local processes influencing people's lives, which are often understood as separate and unrelated. This is suggestive, as it highlights the practice of drawing connections between places, practices, and categories often encountered as discrete and separate, such as unwaged labor in the countryside and wage labor in urban areas of post-Mao China.

In the context of contemporary China, maintaining a sufficient workforce relies first on unremunerated housework and subsistence food production that happens outside capitalist principles of profit, undertaken by laborers situated at the social and geographical frontier of the officially recognized workforce, such as smallholders. Second, as food, education, and health-care have become mediated through market relations, investments in the reproduction of the household increasingly involve engagement with wage-work for some household members. Third, as the reproduction of the workforce involves some relationship to markets, either one is excluded from the urban labor market, or transform from family style farming towards more entrepreneurial forms of agriculture, or straddle the agrarian-urban divide for survival through migrant work, a process of differentiation takes place. Fourth, through the differentiated experiences of workforce reproduction for families and migrant laborers living without dispossession, alternative imaginations for the possibilities of work and life emerge.

Methods and field sites

To understand the fluid process of class formation in China in the aftermath of the global financial crisis, I chose a multi-sited ethnographic approach, focusing on the practices and social relations of peasant-worker families across the agrarian-urban divide. For eight months in 2012 and 2013, I lived with my family in Yunnan. I conducted my fieldwork in three stages. First, I hired two local research assistants, both of whom were recent graduates from eastern China who had learned the Yunnanese dialect and had considerable field experience working with marginalized groups in Kunming and the Yunnan countryside. They assisted me with interpretation, logistics, and setting up interviews with migrant workers' relatives and friends. In addition, I hired a third person to transcribe and translate tape-recorded interviews with migrant workers.

³⁹ Rigg, Salamanca and Thompson 2016; Van der Ploeg 2009.

⁴⁰ Although some scholars have worked in the intersection between these traditions. See for example Federici 2004; Tilly and Scott 1978.

⁴¹ Fraser 2014, 59.

⁴² Katz 2001b.

Second, we conducted fifty-two interviews⁴³ on livelihood resources, perceptions on migration, and local policies on turning farmland into forestry with smallholder households in two villages. The village of Baicai⁴⁴ had fifty households, while the village of Kaoyan had forty-six households. We conducted the interviews with members of households either in their homes or while they were farming. These villages are located on the Yunnan-Guizhou Plateau, also known as the Yungui Plateau, which has an elevation of approximately 1900 meters and a landscape characterized by rolling hills. The residents of both Kaoyan and Baicai are mainly Han, with a smaller number of in-married minority women.

Third, we conducted thirty-two interviews with rural migrant workers who had worked or were working in Kunming. Twenty of these workers had migrated from Baicai and Kaoyan. Additionally, an additional six migrant workers were recruited for interviews by our driver, five were recruited through acquaintances of an interviewee from Baicai, and one was an acquaintance of one of the research assistants. While these migrant worker interviewees differed in age, gender, and work experiences,⁴⁵ they shared the common situation of being casually employed in low-paid and low-skilled jobs in petty capitalist workplaces.

The rest of the paper is organized in three sections. The first describes agrarian transformations in Baicai and Kaoyan since the early 2000s. Peasant subsistence autonomy has been undercut as prices have increased, returns to smallholder farming remained stagnant, and educational costs increased, which have made families more dependent on markets. In the second, I focus on the differentiated outcomes of emergent capitalist relations, through the trajectories of eight families and the aspirations of migrant workers. These trajectories adhere to three dominant outcomes of living without dispossession. In one, migrant labor households invest earnings from urban work in their children's education, maintain their land, raising livestock, and scale down cash crop production. In the second, families increasingly sustain themselves outside of peasant agriculture production by either becoming full-time wage-earners or scaling up their farming operations. In the third, families spend most of their time and energy outside capital accumulation, either due to bad health or a lack of contacts, which potentially undermines their capacity for absorbing the costs of labor reproduction faced with increasing costs of living. In the final section I focus on the aspirations of and differences among young migrant workers, who seek out subsistence autonomy by moving in and out of the agrarian and urban places of reproduction.

Agrarian transformations at labors frontier

In a recent overview of agrarian policies and processes of transformation since 2008, Alexander Day and Mindi Schneider argue that the policies of the Chinese Communist Party during the last decade have been geared towards "...agricultural modernization, urbanization, and depeasantization" under the banner of "Building a New Socialist Countryside."⁴⁶ While it is difficult to see many signs of government investment in Kaoyan and Baicai, the provincial government's abolition of the increasingly unpopular agricultural tax in 2006 and recently

⁴³ The age of the interviewees from the household interviews ranged between twenty-four and seventy-four years. We interviewed twenty-nine men and twenty-three women. Fifteen of our interviewees had worked outside their village or were currently working outside for parts of the year.

⁴⁴ To preserve anonymity and to avoid any possible negative consequences for interviewees, I have used fictitious names for the villages and interviewees.

⁴⁵ The migrant worker interviewees' ages ranged between sixteen and forty-seven years. These interviewees comprised eighteen men and fourteen women. Some had worked outside for only one year, while others had done so for more than thirty years.

⁴⁶ Day and Schneider 2017, 11

introduced national programs targeting issues such as poverty alleviation, healthcare expenditures, and education costs under the slogan of “Building a New Socialist Countryside” have partially alleviated some of the difficulties faced by smallholders in these hamlets. Three forces are currently reworking the conditions under which smallholders achieve social reproduction.

First, are the increasing costs of financing important sites for workforce maintenance, including costs for agriculture, education, and healthcare. The rising costs of farm inputs, such as seeds, fertilizers, plastic sheeting, and pesticides, remains a lingering source of concern for households. Additionally, as more and more people find work outside, families have started hiring agricultural laborers to assist in agriculture during the planting and harvesting seasons. Added to the increasing costs of agricultural production are the recent investments of man and animal labor saving technology to increase yields, such as two wheel tractors, maize milling machines, and motorized cargo tricycles. Furthermore, for many families the costs of medical treatment has been a financial burden, despite the introduction of the New Rural Co-operative Medical Care Scheme in 2007, as out-of-pocket payments for treatment are paid for through credit gained from borrowing from relatives. Finally, as housebuilding remains a central concern for long-term household reproduction, families increasingly must employ bricklayers.

Second, while the government campaign launched in 2005 involves investments in human capital in rural areas, particularly education and healthcare, these policies remain ambiguous in terms of agricultural production. On the one hand, several subsidies have been introduced, so that Chinese farmers now on average are provided with five to six percent of their annual income in subsidies. Nonetheless, limited production subsidies, grain procurement programs in place to shield peasants from the worst market fluctuations, and the abolishment of the agricultural tax in 2006 have allowed families to sustain agriculture that combines self-provisioning with profit making⁴⁷ On the other hand, the agricultural policies rolled out under the banner of constructing a new socialist countryside have encouraged land consolidation, encouraged dragonhead enterprises and agribusinesses to take a lead role in modernizing agricultural production, and provided various credit schemes for entrepreneurial farmers who wish to scale up their operations.⁴⁸ Thus, while dispossession constitutes one of the propelling forces remaking the social fabric on the labor frontier, less overt forces are emerging to differentiate the lives of peasants living without dispossession.

The third major force reworking the agrarian-urban landscape of social reproduction is the growing importance of formal education among villagers. Children now spend most of their weekdays in boarding schools from aged six until they complete middle school at the age of fourteen or fifteen, only returning home on weekends. As several mothers and fathers told us, they board their children despite the relatively short distance to the school because, as one parent said, “the learning environment in the schools is better there than it is at home.” Investing in their children’s education has become an imperative in less than a generation, while farming has become an occupation to avoid, which echoes the results from similar studies of agrarian transformations in South-East and East Asia.⁴⁹ In terms of financing education, the government provides annual subsidies of RMB 1000 (US\$136) for primary students, RMB 1500 (US\$205) for middle school students, and RMB 2500 (US\$340) for secondary school students. While these subsidies cover the expenses for pupils in primary school and middle school, for students in upper-middle school the financial burden on the parents become substantial.

⁴⁷ Hayward 2017; van der Ploeg, Ye and Lu 2014.

⁴⁸ Day and Schneider 2017.

⁴⁹ Rigg, Salamanca and Thompson 2016.

Social reproduction and surplus-workforce differentiation

Faced with increasing living costs, stagnant returns from farming, and the willingness of smallholders to invest in their children's education, migrant labor has become an irreversible income source for financing the reproduction of labor in these villages.

Surplus households (Those surviving primarily via nonmarket relations)	Migrant labor households (those surviving via a combination of farming and migrant-work)	Post-peasant households (those surviving primarily via market relations)
The Yan family Mr. Yan, age 54, smallholder Mrs. Yan, age 50, smallholder Daughters aged 17 and 12	The Li family Mrs. Li, aged 22, grocery store attendant Mr. Li, aged 22, construction worker Daughter, aged 2	The Zhou family Mr. Zhou, age 42, agrarian entrepreneur Mrs. Zhou, aged 42, smallholder Daughters aged 22 and 16
The Wang family Mr. Wang's father, aged 75, retiree, and mother, aged 66, smallholder Mr. Wang, aged 44, agricultural laborer Mrs. Wang, aged 43, smallholder Sons aged 21 and 17	The Ning family Mr. Ning, aged 43, fertilizer handler Mrs. Ning, aged 40, smallholder Daughters aged 21 and 15	The Yuan family Mr. Yuan, aged 64, fruit picker Mrs. Yuan, aged 55, canteen worker Eldest son, aged 30, construction worker
	The Zheng family Mrs. Zheng, aged 60, smallholder Zheng Xiaoting, aged 22, unemployed	The Ru family Mr. Ru, aged 43, security guard boss Ru Guo, aged 27, construction worker Ru Chen, aged 24, hairdresser

Table 1: Differentiated survival-pathways for smallholders living without dispossession

Households display divergent trajectories amidst a saturated labor market in the aftermath of the global financial crisis. First, for migrant worker households, their combined access to subsistence land and labor markets enables their reproduction. In migrant worker households, some family members engage in informal service work at family restaurants, grocery stores, car repair shops, cafeterias, or on construction sites, while other family members work the land and raise children. Second, post-peasant households respond to the forces undercutting smallholder farming by fully capitalizing land or labor. They either scale up their farming operations as they become entrepreneurial farmers, engages in local agricultural wage-work without access to subsistence land and rely on children's remittances, or become permanent city dwellers while retaining their farmland. Other families, generally remain surplus to the need of capital

accumulation, surplus households⁵⁰, as they work the land and maintain prudent lifestyles to minimize costs of basic subsistence (table 1). Some of the surplus households are barred from access to wage-work, either due to poor health or limited social networks, and they borrow money from relatives in order to pay for children's education or their own health-care, producing a potential crisis for the long term social reproduction of the household.

Migrant labor households

In one urban village in Kunming, we met Li Mei, age twenty-two, at the grocery store where she worked. The store was located on a street bustling with street peddlers, pedestrians, schoolchildren drinking sweet tea, cars and tricycles, and shops such as barbecues, hair salons, small stores, and vegetable and meat markets.

Mrs. Li had worked in the store for a little more than one month. Before this she had worked different jobs, all of which she had left because she was exhausted or had problems with her boss. She had left her village in 2007 after she failed her high school entrance examination. She soon found a job at an internet cafe where she earned around RMB 600 (US\$100) a month. In 2008, she married and moved to her husband's village, where she stayed for three years and raised their daughter. When we met, her father-in-law's health had recently deteriorated and her mother-in-law had doubled her workload by taking full responsibility for farming the family plot alongside raising her grandson. Li Mei earned around RMB 1500 Yuan (US\$245) per month in the grocery store, the official minimum living wage in Yunnan.⁵¹ However, she can only earn this amount by working overtime and on weekends.

For the Li family, survival is precarious. If Li Mei's mother-in-law's health worsens the family will not be able to farm and her daughter would have to live with her parents in Kunming, constraining Li Mei's own wage-work. If the Li family cannot farm their food security is put at risk. Li Mei's situation attests to the way that migrant work functions through accumulation without dispossession, as her parent's in-law absorb the costs of labor reproduction by raising her daughter. Moreover, it also emphasizes the importance of understanding changes transpiring in the countryside, the location of China's reserve army of labor, as the work performed by smallholders who subsist through non-market forms of reproduction (i.e. subsistence land and unremunerated care work) constitute the background condition for workforce maintenance.

These connections are further illuminated through tracing the spatial fluidity of the arrangements of social reproduction. Forty year-old Mrs. Ning, was planting tobacco, a highly labor-intensive crop, when we met her. As Mrs. Ning's husband was working outside the village, she alone hoed the land and planted tobacco seeds in the early days of the spring season. Her husband had remained at home for eight years after her eldest daughter had been born, then became first a seasonal migrant and more recently was away most of the year. However, with the money earned from Mr. Ning's salary, they were able to hire laborers during the harvesting. Mr. Ning worked at a Kunming fertilizer production plant, where he loaded and offloaded trucks. Mr. Ning sent most of his monthly salary, approximately RMB 2400–2500 (US\$411–428) to his wife, who used this for their youngest daughter's education and farm inputs such as fertilizer, seeds, labor costs, and pesticides.

⁵⁰ Surplus in this context refers to households who generally remain surplus to capital accumulation and who work under subsistence logics where they rely on family labor and subsistence land. This is not to say that these families are surplus *per se*, rather that they mainly subsist outside labor market participation.

⁵¹ The minimum living wage in Kunming in 2015 was set at RMB 1570. For more on this, consult http://www.mohrss.gov.cn/lbgxs/LDGXqiyegongzi/LDGXzuidigongzibiaozhun/201509/t20150929_221690.htm (accessed February 2, 2018).

Mr. Ning solemnly explained his point of view on the need to combine wage work, subsistence farming, and cash-crop production for his households' short and long term survival:

You have to pay for everything for tobacco growing, like water and labor fees. It looks like we can make about twenty thousand, and only ten thousand and a bit more is left after the costs are covered. And working outside [the village] is no easier, [because] everything costs money ... The reason I have been working outside for so many years is to sustain my family, or to support our daily expenses. If we stay home, we have no income sources except for tobacco; and we have nothing to do every year after tobacco is finished. Then we will have no way out except for applying for loans to support our daily expenditure, and [we] cannot repay the loans until we sell tobacco. We have to rely on loans to buy fertilizer. We have no way except for *dagong* [working for the boss] outside. If you just stay at home instead, your whole family will be reduced to starvation ... Yet, you can barely survive without farming. My [first] daughter has no job ... What can you eat if you don't do farming?

The importance of understanding the relationship between labor reproduction and the ability of families to invest in formal education is illustrated by the struggles of the Zheng family, who lived in Baicai. Mrs. Zheng was sixty years old when we met in 2013. In 2007, her husband died in a car accident that involved fourteen villagers, nine of whom died. Recently she had remarried to a widower from a neighboring village and she rented two rooms in a village house. Between she and her husband they cultivated six mu of land. Mrs. Zeng received between 400 and 500 Yuan each year in poverty relief (*di bao*), while her twenty year-old son, Zheng Xiaoting, usually assisted them during the busy season. In 2010, he had graduated from middle-school and joined a construction crew with a friend.

In 2012, Xiaoting stayed with his mother and step-father for three or four months after his boss did not pay him his owed wages. He often earned as much as RMB 2000 (US\$320) per month. When we asked him about his future he says, "Well, we are kind of stuck. I graduated from middle-school [so] I need to keep my expectations low or else I will not be qualified. Anyway, I can take any job that pays well." When we met again in 2013 he was unemployed, still single, and his mother was sick, so he felt torn between staying home to work the land with his mother to help provide food security and earning money to pay for his mother's medical bills.

Post-peasant households

In Kaoyan, a limited, albeit increasingly important market for renting land from neighbors and adjacent villages has emerged. Mr. and Mrs. Zhou, both forty-two years old, have embraced these new opportunities. They now contract forty mu of farmland from neighbors in Kaoyan and smallholders in a neighboring village to plant tobacco. Normally villagers are only allowed to plant two *mu* of farmland for tobacco, but the Zhou family has been able to scale up their production with a loan and subsidy of RMB 100,000 Yuan from Kunming tobacco company to build a new tobacco drying chimney. The Zhou household has a five year production contract with this company. The Zhou's hire people from a neighboring village to work in their fields, which costs them RMB 14,000 (US\$2,377) per season. These farm workers receive on average less than half of the RMB 1500 (US\$ 245) average monthly wages received by migrant workers in this study. The Zhou's eldest daughter was in her third year of studies at a university in Kunming. Her tuition was RMB 30,000 yuan (US\$5093) per year. The Zhou's are one of

three families in Kaoyan to become farmer entrepreneurs, an emerging subject position that has emerged as part of the state's campaign aimed at "Building a New Socialist Countryside."

However, while the Zhou family has taken advantage of the new opportunities that have arisen in the wake of government policies directed towards agricultural modernization, other families who temporarily leave their farmland in the custody of others are struggling. In Kaoyan, we met Yuan Zhou, sixty-four years old. He had been the village doctor from 1966 until his retirement in 2007. However, he does not receive the pension that he is entitled to as it is withheld by the village committee and despite having reached retirement age, he now works for an agribusiness that produces blueberries. The same agribusiness rents his six mu of land for RMB 6000 (US\$816) per year under a fifteen year contract. Yuan Zhou's wife, fifty-six years old at the time of our interview, was for the first time in her life compelled to work as a migrant laborer, in a Kunming canteen, which enabled her to "cover her own living expenses."

The couple's thirty year-old son was a construction worker in Guizhou, where he lived with his wife and their two-year-old son. He sent money each month to his parents. In addition to the income received from Mr. Yuan's wage-work, Mrs. Yuan's migrant work, leasing out their land, and their son's remittances, the couple received RMB 1000 a year in social assistance. Yuan Zhou feels that his future hangs in a balance; his wish is for his son to find a stable (i.e. government) job, for him to receive his pension, and for his wife to be able continue covering her own living costs. The different trajectories of the Zhou and Yuan family illustrates how workforce maintenance among smallholders in the shadow of "Building a New Socialist Countryside" involves a transition from peasant agriculture to land exchange and concentration, producing new opportunities and risks for the long-term reproduction of post-peasant households.

While differentiated trajectories related to land reveals part of the picture, other families become post-peasants by leaving the land altogether. Mr. Ru was forty-three years old at the time of our interview. His wife died in 2002 and left him a widower with two sons, aged thirteen and sixteen. He then moved to Kunming where he found a job as a security guard. Since then, he has worked his way up to being a team leader of several other security guards. In 2008, his eldest son and in 2010 his youngest son joined him in Kunming. After working for their father, they have left for other opportunities. Mr. Ru's his older drives an excavator machine for a construction company, while his younger son works as a hairdresser, earning around RMB 2000 (US\$320) per month. In 2012, the family bought an apartment in Kunming for approximately RMB 400,000 Yuan (US\$65,000). Now de facto post-peasants, the Rus nonetheless retain their four *mu* of land, which they lease to their neighbors in exchange for food and money. The Ru family's trajectory into post-peasanthood illustrates the different outcomes of depeasantization.

Surplus households

For post-peasants, their social reproduction becomes increasingly mediated through the emerging market for land and the evolving urban labor market. Other households, however, sustain themselves primarily outside relations of capital accumulation. Fifty-four year old Yan Long and his fifty year old wife Yan Nan grow cabbage, corn, and barley on nine *mu* of land. A few months before our interview, Mr. Yan was diagnosed with a lung disease. Unable to afford the prescribed medication, he did not take action. He was often unable to work, putting more of a burden on his wife. As the cost of pesticides, seeds, and fertilizers has increased, the Yans have changed from plowing with an ox to a mechanized tillage cultivator, which cost them approximately RMB 5000 Yuan (US\$840) in 2011. They have two daughters, both in boarding schools. Education fees amount to one fourth of their yearly total income. In 2013, they had to borrow RMB 8000 from relatives. They also receive RMB 1000 in poverty relief each year. In

2013, Mr. Yan's medical expenses cost RMB 10,000 Yuan. For the moment, the family reproduce almost entirely outside relations of capitalist accumulation. However, the investments into their daughter's education, place them on a needed trajectory gaining entrance into the workforce.

While the Yan family survive overall without direct access to the labor market through own accord farming and in-kin exchange of work and commodities, other families at times switch between workforce participation and residual surplus population on a seasonal basis. As more and more members of families find work as migrant laborers and other families scale up become agricultural entrepreneurs, there is a growing demand for temporary labor during the planting and harvesting. Mr. Wang, 44 years old, worked in his neighbor's tobacco fields during planting and harvesting. He earned approximately RMB 10,000 Yuan (1650 USD) a year. He invested his earnings in his two sons' education, agriculture inputs, and Mr. Wang mother's healthcare. In 2012, their eldest son, aged twenty-one, borrowed RMB 12,000 from relatives to pay for his driver's license and now works for a car dealer in Kunming. Thus, for the Wang family, their trajectory involves a seasonal move into the emerging market for agricultural workers, supporting the reproduction of entrepreneurial farmers, while the rest of the year they live off food they have grown.

As the reproduction of the workforce involves some relationship to markets, subjects are excluded from the urban labor market, shift from subsistence farming to more entrepreneurial forms of agricultural production, or straddle the agrarian-urban divide through simultaneous engagement with migrant work and subsistence farming. Through the different experiences of workforce reproduction for families and migrant labor living without dispossession, alternative imaginations of work and life emerge. Due to space limitations, I limit my analysis to the young generation of migrant workers, who over time move in and out of the urban workforce to sustain themselves.

Aspirations and struggle among migrant workers

The urban villages where Chinese migrant workers live resemble those described in the recent subaltern urbanism literature, spaces "typified by 'flexibility, pragmatism, negotiation, as well as constant struggle for survival and self-development'".⁵² Similarly, Dorothy Solinger has described peasant migrant worker life in Shanghai as a "...a conglomeration, a mélange of collectives," their claims on urban life centered around economic rights and subsistence needs and efforts of individually securing viable livelihoods rather than at institutionalized workplaces, formal citizenship claims and collective action.⁵³

The middle-aged migrant laborers we interviewed take on wage-work to support their village households, returning to farm in the harvesting, investing their remittances in their children's education, housebuilding, agriculture, or daily expenses. The aspirations of younger migrant workers, roughly those between sixteen and thirty years old, differ according to their urban market situation. Those with a middle school education generally yearn for subsistence autonomy from the demeaning wage-work of Kunming. Young migrant workers who have graduated from a vocational school, in contrast, strive for a regular position within the limited market of stable employment.

Aspirations of young migrant workers who graduated from middle school

⁵² Bayat 2007, 579 in Roy 2011, 228.

⁵³ Solinger 1999, 287.

Those who quit school after graduating from middle school and wanted to live outside their village spoke about their need “to keep struggling” (*fen dou*) to stay. Zheng Xiaoting (see table 1 above), who we meet in a park in Kunming, said “I wish I could live a better life than I do now, and I prefer to stay in my natal village and if I am allowed to have bigger wishes, I wish to start my own business...because that is much better than “working for the boss” (*dagong*) in a way”. Similarly, Wei Ru explained how, at the age of twenty-four, she realized that “*dagong* is not a long-time feasible plan.” Migrants with limited education talked about their desire to set up their own businesses. Many spoke of the demeaning conditions of their jobs, the working hours, having their salaries withheld, and being scolded by their bosses in front of their fellow workers for what they perceived were minor mistakes. Some had lost their jobs when their workplaces were demolished. Others were more ambiguous and hesitant regarding their future, and wanted to live at home, but not as farmers.

Aspirations of young migrant workers who graduated from vocational school

Na Min, twenty-four years old, with five years of work experience, explained to us how “...everybody who has received vocational education never returns to the countryside...” This is illustrated by the story of Shi Tu, twenty-three years old when we met her in a restaurant in Kunming after her workday was over. She had attended a vocational school in the outskirts of Kunming, after which she worked as a clerk in the Bureau of Public Security. Since moving to Kunming in 2009 she has had several jobs. Each holiday she goes home to visit her parents in Baicai, but she has not done farm work since she moved to Kunming. She sends her parents RMB 3000-4000 each year. In Kunming, she lives with her boyfriend and has no plans to ever return to Baicai.

Subsistence autonomy and moving in and out of the workforce for labor reproduction

Notwithstanding differences in gender, age, and cultural capital, migrants used a uniform narrative frame to show the opposition between working for the boss and laboring in agriculture. According to nineteen year-old Sun Bao, “life in my hometown is...there is less restraint/restrictions, and more freedom,” while twenty three year old Wei Ru as she explained how, “people control you when you work outside, but when you are at home, you are always at your free will.” As elicited to us by Zheng Xiaoting (see table 1),

The biggest difference [between *dagong* and village life] is that I have more control of my life in the village. While working outside, I am working for my boss, [and] I don't have much freedom and control. For example, when it gets too hot back home, I can just take these days off, but that's never possible when I work outside.

This opposition between village life and *dagong* in the city is not founded upon romantic images of working the land. Rather, lived experience of working for the boss for wages below minimum subsistence levels and with little control over one's own time and labor process fuels the resentment of these agrarian youth who draw a line between life and work. Rather than engaging in collective action to further their interests, the migrant workers we interviewed were more likely to change their jobs. However, searching for better paid jobs was not an end in itself for Li Mei, as she told us that her work in the city was a matter of preparing herself for what was to come: “I will have to do it [return to do farm work in the future], so I get to earn more money to save up for a tough life in the future” and by Chen Li (aged twenty-two years, who completed vocational school and had four years of migrant work experience) who retorts

that “You have been to my hometown, you know about that place right? My family has paid so much to support me to go to school. They would never want us [my generation] to go back there again.”

Switching between city and countryside, moving in and out of the workforce for survival and self-development, with hesitation and ambiguity as they approach the question of their aspirations, was further elicited to us by Chen Li from Baicai, when we met him in a public park close to where he was living in the outskirts of Kunming:

Research assistant: How [what] do you think about your life back then when you first came out to work?

Mr. Chen: You can tell him [the author] that this person [referring to himself] has seen the immensity of the dark side of society ... To make it simple, I just work to live. Simply speaking, I live to live ... I think we [compared with his peers staying in the village] are at the same level in terms of materials, but psychologically I am not as happy as they are. I think I have been exposed too much to the dark side of the world, which makes me a very pessimistic person ... It's not that I like farming, it's just ... like I told you just now, I will go back to my village for sure sooner or later, when I return there, I will lose my income source, so I can only ... [rely on farming for living].

After his parents had invested heavily in his education and with meager prospects for surviving on smallholder farming alone, Mr. Chen was cautious about returning to work on the farm. His parents' smallholding provided sustenance for him when he was exhausted or in between jobs. The aspirations of Sun Bao, Wei Ru, Li Mei, Zheng Xiaoting, Shi Tu, Ru Chen, Chen Li and the rest of the youth born and raised in the countryside who we met in Kunming or when they were visiting their parents in Baicai or Kaoyan, attests to their feeling of indeterminacy when it comes to the future of work and citizenship. Cautious about the prospects about returning to farm, their work situation in Kunming nonetheless highlighted the continued place of land in their lives. Hesitation, indeterminacy, and the lack of a public identity made planning their futures and even just imagining their futures difficult. Thus, the often discontinuous, transient, and uncertain work they were able to find within the city influenced the migrant interviewees' aspirations. Even perceiving themselves as a working subject (“I work to live ... I live to live”) was difficult for some under these conditions.

Social reproduction, differentiation, and conclusion

This brings me back to the question posed by Ananya Roy: “what global city can function without relational dependence on seemingly distant economies of ... cheap labor?” While there is much that separates the lives of Li Mei, Yan Long, and my other interviewees, their stories highlight how relational dependency goes both ways under the present conditions, in which countryside residents increasingly depend on distant economies of money and labor from the city. This is not to say that within these rural households, relations of harmony, love, and an equal division labor always trump conflict, opposed interests, and exploitation based on gender and age. Feminist scholars have long problematized the tendency of treating households as conflict-free domains.⁵⁴ Thus, Li Mei, Mrs. Yan, Li Mei's mother-in-law, Mrs. Zheng, and Mrs. Ning's stories are about the internal division of labor within families and the gendered work of social reproduction, where women across generations marry, give birth in the hamlets of their

⁵⁴ Wolf 1990

husbands, and stay on the land to raise children, grow food, and care for the elderly and infirm, while men migrate for work in Kunming. However, women also migrate and the middle-aged men we interviewed emphasized that staying at home during their children's upbringing had been important to them. This highlights how the Chinese economy continues to rely on a migrant labor regime where enterprises accumulate capital by not dispossessing the surplus population of their farmland, instead enlisting them in absorbing workforce reproduction.

The inhabitants of Baicai and Kaoyan live on the frontier of this system of accumulation without dispossession. However, even for smallholders living without dispossession, the capacity to absorb the costs of workforce maintenance has its limits. The increasing cost of living, stagnant incomes from smallholder farming, and necessary investments in their children's education undermine subsistence autonomy and push people into the workforce. As a response, laborers move in and out of land and labor markets to achieve subsistence. Yet, this movement is far from unidirectional, e.g. from pre-capitalist relations towards capitalist, or from peasantization to proletarianization, but entails moving in and out of the urban and agricultural workforces. As the access to markets for land and labor becomes increasingly important for labor force reproduction, new patterns of differentiation emerge.

These fluid dynamics have had different outcomes for families in Kaoyan and Baicai. Increased costs and stagnant incomes have led to a crisis of social reproduction for surplus households without access to wage-working opportunities who fall into debt and remain "one illness" away from destitution. On the other hand, "post-peasants" engage in wage-work or scale up their farming operations. Moreover, as petty-commodity workplaces in Kunming can sustain themselves only through paying their workers below or just above a minimum living wage, migrant labor families combine moving in and out of wage-work with producing food and raising children at home, on their land. For these migrant workers, their smallholding remains vital in times of unemployment, sickness, exhaustion, or during life-course transitions such as child rearing, pregnancy, and old age. While working in the city, migrant laborers' survival and aspirations become differentiated within the younger generation, as stratified educational trajectories give rise to different labor market situations. However, for aspirations and practices of subsistence, there are more commonalities than divergences in the yearnings and self-provisioning that ties them together around common struggles. The struggles of the young generation are sparked by resentment and yearning for autonomy as they come to learn how they are stuck in dead-end jobs.

Common to all migrant workers, is how they return to their smallholding whenever they face major and minor life events. They return home when sick, exhausted, injured, or fatigued, when they lose their jobs, or when they become pregnant, get married, or need to raise their children. As they lack a collective voice and are poorly paid, their means for self-development entails seeking another job that pays a little more or where they are treated better, or by returning home permanently to farm. The migrant workers we interviewed, rather than subduing to the requirements of work or displaying nostalgia for the countryside, wanted more: more freedom from the relations of work through claiming forms of subsistence autonomy within the economic and cultural limits imposed upon them by as they moved in and out of the labor force.

The conception of work forwarded by Marxist feminists problematizes the inherited class maps used to interpret the relationship between the countryside and city in post-Mao China. A social reproduction perspective emphasizes the importance of understanding changes transpiring in the countryside, the spatial relations of labor reproduction, as the work on subsistence land and unremunerated care work performed by smallholders who "stay behind" constitute the background condition for workforce maintenance. This paper adds to the existing literature on rural-urban migration and rural-urban linkages through the lens of social reproduction. I have suggested that tracing the fluid movement of laborers in and out of the

surplus population and urban workforce, and their common struggles for subsistence autonomy, provides a fruitful point of departure for sketching new class maps in post-global financial crisis China.

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