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Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 The Issue of This Dissertation

In July 2011, I worked as a volunteer teacher in the Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture. This is one of the most impoverished and underdeveloped ethnic minority areas in China, but, the winds of change are blowing there. Nowadays, "*dagong*" (打工) —going away to faraway cities to work—is a mounting tide sweeping over the rather isolated mountains in which the Yi people have lived for as long as anyone can remember. Most Yi people ranging in age from sixteen to forty are fascinated by the world outside Liangshan and the opportunities it offers. The consequence of this fascination is that the ethnic Yi Autonomous Region is at present an area populated only by children and the elderly. As a volunteer teacher in a primary school, one of my most important tasks was to persuade students to continue their studies and withstand the lure of out-migration. My first personal interaction with Yi youth left an indelible impression on me. Eventually, it led me to carry out research on Yi migrants' migration experiences.

I began by tracing these migrants' trek to Dongguan, one of the most popular destinations for labour migrants in China. The very first lesson I learned at the beginning of my field research was that it was impossible to approach Yi workers in person unless I relied on another group of

gatekeepers—Yi labour brokers—who firmly control and manipulate the Yi workers. Yi brokers are the subcontractors of the Yi workers. They are their intermediaries with factories, government officials, and delegates of the Yi community in cities. I was aware of some currents of disapproval. One source came from the local newspaper, the *Southern Metropolitan Newspaper*, which ran several articles about the way Yi workers were organized. In these articles, the paper condemned black-hearted foremen who illegally exploited workers and smuggled underage labourers into the workforce. Although, as time has passed, these middlemen have increasingly become the target of the criticism on account of the perceived illegality of the businesses they have been running, no censure has ever really succeeded in ending the chain of Yi labour migrants. Despite the fact that Yi brokers might have an inkling that they are treading on dangerous ground, Yi workers rarely try to stand up to them or rebel against the inequities of this particular system.

Quite by accident, I happened to meet Aga, a female manufacturing worker, who was seventeen years old at the time. She was one Yi worker among the many Yi temporary migrant workers in the factories in the Pearl River Delta area. These workers call themselves "temporary workers" in contrast to "formal workers". This is not only because they are employed in emergency-order factories that are established after the main orders have been filled—a situation that requires them have to leave the factory and find other employment, which, once again is arranged by Yi brokers. They are also temporary because they remain outside the formal employment system—they are usually assigned by brokers to factories that need cheap labour. Their precarious status means that they are beyond the protection of the trade unions. Furthermore, Yi workers are more vulnerable than other workers in the labour market because of their low wages and their lack of entitlement to overtime pay and social insurance. When I met her, Aga had worked passively or actively in almost ten factories over the course of a year in the hope of finding a better factory, but that never happened. In Aga's own words, "There are no good factories. No matter how many factories I try, it all comes down to the same thing—a hard grind."

When our paths crossed, she was involved in a medical dispute with a local private hospital: an injection administered there caused a wound that had festered for months. The injection given as part of a treatment after an

accident cost her about three months' wages and involved endless daily trips between the factory and the hospital that left her totally exhausted. She said that the day she met me was her lucky day, since she had been paid compensation by the hospital with the help of her "boss"—the broker who brought her out of the village and arranged her job in her current factory. In order to "demand justice", her boss had assembled sixteen other Yi brokers and male workers who went to the hospital together. Negotiating and sometimes squabbling with the hospital staff at the local government medical bureau and at the police station until late into the night, the group of Yi men eventually extracted 60,000 RMB in compensation for the medical mishap. Most of this money was eventually given to the men who participated in this collective dispute and Aga obtained only 4,000 RMB for further treatment. To my surprise, in the aftermath Aga's face was alight with rare relief and happiness. In her eyes, her success meant much more than mere monetary compensation. In her own words, "Without the help of my uncle (the broker) and other bosses, I would not have had any access to a solution when I was being bullied." As far as she was concerned, the Yi bosses had sprung to her protection when she ran into difficulties.

This dissertation is a study of ethnic Yi migrant workers who work in the co-ethnic brokerage system in the manufacturing sector in the Pearl River Delta area of China. This story above is just one episode in the life of a Yi migrant worker in a city. Ethnic minority migrant workers once lived in a peripheral region but have now joined this mass migration. Yi is called "Nuosu" in the Yi language. "Yi" (夷) is a word that originally meant a barbarian. It began to be used officially to refer to the "Nuosu" during the era of the Republic (1912–1949). After the Communist Party came into power in 1949, the more neutral term, "Yi" (彝), became the officially recognized name for the Nuosu people. This dissertation uses the term Yi rather than Nuosu to refer to the Yi migrants in cities, that is not because I take the Yi recognized by the state for granted, rather, because it reflects the name under which the Nuosu people present themselves to the outside world at the present days and reveals the Yi ethnicity in the process of formation in migrant-receiving cities.

In both industrial cities and among the ethnic minority regions in general, the Yi people are an economically and socially disadvantaged group. As stated above, the Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture in which

the Yi people dwell is one of the poorest regions in China. Since the first group of pioneer migrants ventured to cities during the 1990s, Yi migrants have overwhelmingly left their homeland. Across the country, they work in a variety of sectors, including small manufacturing plants, coalmines, and cotton-fields. In large part, this is linked with the poor economic situation in Liangshan. Continued poverty in the region combined with the lure of modernity has pushed this rural-based population or peasants to migrate elsewhere to improve their livelihoods.

In the Pearl River Delta, despite recent transformations towards a knowledge-based and technology-driven economy, there are still low-end factories that require large numbers of flexible and low-waged workers to make up their labor force. Approximately 15,000 ethnic Yi migrants—often lacking in Chinese language proficiency, low in literacy, and contending with cultural barriers—fulfill these factories' labor requirement either through dispatch agencies or individual co-ethnic brokers. The work that these agencies or brokers present them is often poorly paid, not to mention precarious, lacking valid contracts and legal protection. Exposed to yet another form of disadvantage through their precarious work conditions, ethnic Yi migrants have engaged in visible, organized collective resistances. Instances of resistance range from street fights to strikes and petitions that are generally referred to by the local government as *naoshi* (闹事), the English equivalent of troublemaking. Needless to say, these acts of collective resistance have increasingly made local governments nervous about the presence of ethnic Yi migrants in cities.

Since mass migration began in the 1980s, millions of peasant workers have poured into cities following in the footsteps of the pioneer migrants. Whereas, while most Han Chinese workers have left the dispatch system behind and gone in search of individual jobs, Yi migrant workers have emerged as the most stable sojourner workers in the precarious labour market in the Pearl River Delta area.[1] Yi co-ethnic brokers, on the one hand, exacerbate the exploitation of the group of Yi workers in an unregulated capitalist market by deducing money from workers' daily wages

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[1] This dissertation does not regard Han Chinese as a single ethnic group. As other ethnic minorities, the ethnic Han category is also the result of a creation and "historically contingent narration" (Joniak-Luthi, 2015). It is fragmented and is made up by different languages, cultures, customs and identities.

as a mediation fee; on the other hand, provide Yi workers with protection against the unexpected danger that Yi workers frequently encounter in cities, including wage arrears, injury, suicide, and so on. Meanwhile, when facing the risks inherent in precarious work, Yi workers play active roles in organizing themselves to take part in collective actions, including strikes, protests, and demonstrations in defence of their rights. The co-ethnic brokerage is not only a system through which Yi migrant workers draw a clear line distinguishing them from Han Chinese workers in the labour market; but also a junction through which ethnic Yi migrants interface with factory employers and the local state.

In fact, the co-ethnic brokerage system is not an isolated case. It has been a consistent element throughout the history of migration. In labour migration, the brokerage system has often been linked to free and unfree, legal and illegal and guest worker labour paradigms, human trafficking and the formation of ethnic enclaves. In brief, existing studies have overwhelmingly depicted the co-ethnic brokerage system from a number of fixed aspects. The two prime causes of the existence of a co-ethnic brokerage system have been identified as institutional handicaps (Pieke and Xiang, 2010; Li, 2010) and information asymmetry (Faist, 2014). In the early stages of migration, migrants usually follow brokers when they lack both the information and skills to find jobs independently (Molland, 2012). Later, the significance of this dependency is paramount among those migrants who face such barriers as lack of citizenship, legal status, or being undocumented migrants. Once information and resources become available and have been shared by migrant workers, workers can leave the brokerage, adapt to other ways of living, and become independent workers in migrant-receiving societies (Faist, 2014).

Secondly, a burgeoning literature is prone to emphasizing the positive consequences of co-ethnic brokerage and ethnic entrepreneurs within the ethnic enclaves in migrant communities. Co-ethnic brokerage is regarded as a "training system" that provides ethnic minorities with employment opportunities (Bailey and Waldinger, 1991). For ethnic entrepreneurs, access to lower-cost labour is gained through their social capital (Portes and Bach, 1985). As for workers, "workers trade low wages and harsh conditions upon arrival for the chance of advancement and independence later on" (Portes and Bach, 1985, cited from Massey and Sánchez 2011, 10). According

to Zhou Min's early studies of Chinese and Vietnamese migrants, co-ethnic brokerage (ethnic entrepreneurs) facilitates upward mobility and migrants can achieve social mobility through ethnic capital in a co-ethnic network (Zhou, 1992; 2004).

However, as I will illustrate in this thesis, the persistence of Yi workers' co-ethnic brokerage system in this study has nothing to do with their institutional handicap, namely their lack of legal citizenship. Nor is the brokerage system an economic mobility ladder provided for workers to achieve upward mobility through out-migration. Although there are a certain number workers who eventually become brokers, the majority of them fail to become brokers or independent workers. This dissertation, therefore, highlights the two-sided nature of the co-ethnic brokerage system—on the one hand, it facilitates the mass labour migration from rural Liangshan to industrial cities and provides protection to Yi workers; on the other hand, it constrains workers in the co-ethnic brokerage system and thereby intensifies the exploitation and control of Yi migrant workers.

This dissertation aims at untangling the complex nature of the "entrapment by consent" of the co-ethnic brokerage system. Inspired by the term "intermediary trap" (Xiang, 2013b) that is identified in Xiang Biao's study of labour migrants from the Northeast of China[2], I use the term "entrapment by consent" to illustrate the complexity and paradoxes of Yi migrants within the co-ethnic brokerage system. This term refers to two aspects. "Entrapment" refers to the negative effects experienced by Yi workers in terms of finding self-employment; whereas "consent" refers to the voluntary side of the matter—workers are not coerced by or compelled to rely on the co-ethnic brokerage system. In other words, although they fully understand the exploitation and control exerted by the co-ethnic brokerage system, the majority of them choose to stay within the co-ethnic brokerage system because of the security and protection that it provides.

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[2] Using the term "intermediary trap" in studying labour immigrants from North-eastern China, Xiang emphasizes that labour migrants are trapped as "both the state and the migrants depend on intermediators—commercial labour recruiters—to manage and facilitate labour migration overseas" (Xiang, 2013b, 1); "the actors were trapped not by coercion, but by the lack of alternatives" (Xiang, 2013b, 4).

1.2 Research Questions

This research focuses on the intersectionality of class and ethnicity to investigate labour migration in China in general and the co-ethnic brokerage system of Yi migrant workers in particular. Besides describing Yi workers' particular pattern of labour migration—defined in this dissertation as a co-ethnic brokerage system—my work contains a critical examination of the dynamic cultural, social and other structures that lie at the heart of the social inequality of Yi migrant workers. More specifically, this dissertation demonstrates how class, ethnicity, gender and state policy intersect and work to produce the social inequality of Yi labour migrants through the co-ethnic brokerage system. The central question about which this research revolves is: How and why is it possible for an exploitative and controlling co-ethnic brokerage system to continue to be conducted and sustained among Yi labour migrants? To answer this central question, the following interrelated questions are investigated in this thesis.

Yi migrant workers are subjected to structural constraints –these social, economic and political curbs form an obstacle that makes it almost impossible for Yi migrants to step out of their co-ethnic brokerage system and strike out on their own. How do status hierarchy and reciprocity shape the co-ethnic brokerage in the early stage of migration? In what way do social exclusion and stereotyping prevent Yi migrants from assimilating with the mainstream society? What strategies does the local Chinese government in the Pearl River Delta area use to cope with ethnic Yi in cities – while complying with the broader overriding policy of stability maintenance?

Despite the political and social constraints that Yi migrants encounter, both workers and brokers can still demonstrate their agency through their co-ethnic brokerage system. This thesis, therefore, asks the following questions: How do Yi workers and brokers understand the purpose of the co-ethnic brokerage system in migrant-receiving cities? What makes most Yi workers content to remain within the confines of an exploitative brokerage system instead of escaping from it to become independent workers? How does the social and political fragility of Yi workers and their brokers manifest itself in the name of the Yi ethnic group in its responses to

local government management? In its investigation, this dissertation unpacks the complexity of the brokerage system and its imbrication with the complex relations of trust, reciprocity, status hierarchy and power.

1.3 Relations to Other Bodies of Work

Quite apart their categorization as working class, migrant workers are gendered, place-based and ethnicised. However, while scholarship prominently focus on class or gender analysis, the intersectionality between the class and ethnicity omitted. In fact, without an intersectional framework, revealing how race, gender, sexuality, age, ability, and citizenship relate in complex and intersecting ways, we could not fully understand how social inequality is produced (Collins and Bilge, 2016, 16).

In the following sections, I will review two mainstream studies on labour migration in China: one is the approach of class analysis that emphasizes class formation in the process of industrialization and capitalization; the other is the approach highlighting the ethnic and native-place networks embodied in migrants community. Both of these two perspectives of studies have gained numerous attention by scholarship on labour and migration studies, however, less research has been done on the intersectionality between class, ethnicity and gender. To fill this gap, I examine how class interfaces with other social elements, such as ethnicity and gender, producing the disadvantage status of certain groups.

It is worth noting that the purpose of this dissertation is not to generate new theories on class and ethnicity—that is a topic that gained considerable attention in the past century. Rather, by examining the case of ethnic Yi migrants in the Pearl River Delta area of China - a frontier of worldwide industrialization in which the framing of class and production of ethnicity are key dimensions of social stratification, this dissertation investigates the application, conscious or otherwise, of the concepts of class and ethnicity in the context of China in general and in the Pearl River Delta area in particular.

1.3.1 Class: China and the Yi

Formation of the Working Class, Class Struggle and Class-Consciousness

Class is a central analytical tool in understanding social and political changes in China. As a Communist state whose political ideology was established on Marxism in the Mao era, China has long claimed to represent the interests of workers and peasants. The state officially categorizes citizens into particular classes, and it portrays the working class as the masters of the nation. During the era of the Cultural Revolution, class struggle more closely resembled a political ideological slogan used to mobilize the masses in both rural and urban areas than a reproduction of their actual status in relation to their economic position (Perry, 2007). In the post-socialist society, in the wake of the increasing social inequality generated in the era of the growth of market forces, class analysis is no longer a political identity; rather, it is fast becoming an important analytical tool in labour migration studies in contemporary China.

The status of "peasant workers" (*nong min gong* 农民工) in relation to the *hukou* (户口) system (see, for example, Solinger 1999; Lee, 1998; 2007) is critical to understanding the characteristics of the working class in China. In nineteenth-century England, many agricultural labourers were driven off their land and had to sell their labour to the newly emerging industrialists who owned the means of production. Unlike the status of English agricultural labourers, Chinese migrant workers have not been born into an industrial setting, nor have they completely turned their backs on agriculture and become industrial labourers. Instead, most Chinese workers keep one foot in their villages in the rural areas and the other in the factories in an urban industrial setting. In contrast to the "proletarianization of the working class" in classic Marxism studies, Pun Ngai and Lu Huilin have labelled this particular "peasant-worker" status in China the "unfinished proletarianization of the working class" (Pun and Lu, 2010). The numerous incidents of protests and strikes can be explained as a process of the class struggle—the oppressed classes will eventually rise against their oppressors and workers will form a working-class alliance to combat exploitation by the capitalists.

The increasing occurrence of labour resistance in the form of strikes, roadblocks and suicides of workers over the past decades gives some

indication of the divergence between workers and capitalists. A multitude of studies of labour relationships in China has been conducted in recent decades, and these have predominantly emphasized the formation of the working class during the process of industrialization (A. Chan, 2011; A. Chan and Siu, 2012; C. Chan and Pun, 2009; Pun and Lu, 2010; Wong, 2011). The analytical framework of these studies tallies pretty much with classical Marxist studies. In Karl Marx's theory, class structure is categorized into three groups: the bourgeoisie (capitalist class), the petty bourgeoisie, and the proletariat (working class). Class structure in capitalist society is structured according to ownership of property and its relationship to the productive process in society (the means of production): the working class has to sell its labour to the owners of the property, the capitalists (Marx, [1847] 1995; [1867] 1990). Adhering to the classic Marxist approach, mainstream labour studies explain the collective actions of labour migrants as an indication of their desire for both labour rights and civil rights.

As members of the younger generation of labourers have become the mainstay of the Chinese labour force, the gap between the first and the second generation has become more profound than ever (J. Chan and Selden, 2014). In the past, the older generation peasant workers came to cities only to earn money, and most of them afterwards would return to their home areas. In contrast, the younger generation of workers, who have been born in or have worked in cities for years, have grown more accustomed to urban living and are less interested in participating in agricultural production on farms. Importantly, labour actions are pretty much the preferred means by which second-generation migrant workers have addressed their grievances about what they see as capitalist exploitation, and they are more daring and more willing to mobilize because of their subjective experiences of anger, pain, and exclusion (Chan 2013; Lv, 2013; 2015). Compared to their parents' generation, second-generation migrant workers are more skilled in asserting their labour rights by resorting to social media and technology, and they are also more able to use the law to protect their rights (Wong, 2011, 890). Furthermore, second-generation migrants are considered to have more consciousness of class and their rights than did the first generation (Pun and Lu, 2010). Despite the fact that the younger generation peasant workers are more willing to live and work in cities, most of them are unable to settle

down there on account of the restrictions imposed by the *hukou* system and the lack of both social welfare and equal educational opportunities, and the challenge is compounded by the high cost of urban living. To some extent, the second-generation working class validates the idea of the "unfinished proletarianization of the working class".

Thus far, based predominantly on the observation of Han migrant workers, the existing scholarly literature on labour migrants has sketched a general picture of the rise of working-class power in China. Yet, this picture of working class formation would be incomplete without taking the very large numbers of ethnic minority workers into consideration. It is therefore necessary to probe some of the assumptions and premises underlying these arguments to find out whether they are relevant to ethnic Yi workers. This dissertation addresses this deficiency by demonstrating the ways in which Yi brokers and workers frequently participate in collective resistance. As I shall show, ethnic Yi workers are segregated from their other working-class fellows in a precarious-work brokerage system and this prevents them from forging a sense of solidarity with other members of the working class.

This dissertation shows that, although there have been quite a few cases of collective resistance among Yi migrants themselves (Chapter 6), these instances have been intra-ethnic and ethnic Yi migrants rarely form alliances with Han or other ethnic minority migrant workers in cities. This does not happen and they stick to their own Yi communities and make collective claims through the agency of their co-ethnic brokerage system. In addition, Yi workers are mostly first-generation workers who come with their pioneer migrants to work in cities, and have stronger connections with their linkage and ethnic community and weaker consciousness of labour rights compared with other formally employed second-generation Han Chinese workers. Ethnicity serves as a useful mobilizing force among Yi migrant workers, but it becomes an obstacle to forging a sense of solidarity among all migrant labourers.

An alternative to Straight-line Class Analysis: Precarious Employment

Besides the mainstream studies that focus on the formally employed workers, an emerging branch of studies is now concentrating on the large group of precarious workers, highlighting the divisions within the Chinese working class (Kuruvilla, Lee and Gallagher, 2011; Park and Cai, 2011;

Chan, Pun, and Selden, 2013; Zhang, 2014; Swider, 2015). The flexible and low-cost labour employment termed precarious means workers "not only lack recognition, protection, and redistribution under the law, but also lack recognition, representation and redistribution offered through unions" (Swider, 2017, 25). This greatly matters with the increasingly precarious employment worldwide in the age of global neo-liberalism. Informal and precarious workers account for more than sixty percent of the whole migrant worker population in China, and these workers are currently circulated primarily in state-owned enterprises (SOEs) and private companies (Huang, 2013). In the Pearl River Delta area, factories rely largely on dispatch labour agencies to recruit cheap employees so as to reduce their labour costs.

Unlike the formal workers who are directly employed by their employers, precarious workers are employed by multiple layers of employers, such as individual middlemen, intermediary agencies and state agencies. This situation requires that we turn our attention away from the dyadic framework of labour versus capital and to examine the complexity of the employment relationship in the precarious employment sector. Studies point out that the dualist employment structure results in the different forms of collective resistance among temporary workers. For instance, investigating temporary workers in state-owned auto factories, Lu Zhang finds that workers' collective resistance is the result of a double standard in employment: temporary workers and contract workers are treated differently in terms of social welfare and social insurance. As awareness of this inequality grows, temporary workers have been organizing bottom-up strikes to force employers to abandon this double standard and provide equal treatment for contract and temporary workers (Zhang, 2015). Smith and Chan's study of student internship workers finds that, in carrying out a particular form of precarious work in the industrial sector, student internship workers do not express their resistance to the capitalists; rather, they direct their dissatisfaction towards the intermediaries (Smith and Chan, 2015). By examining construction workers, Swider classifies three types of employment configurations—mediated employment, embedded employment, and individual employment, which lead to different forms of collective resistance (Swider, 2015).

The multiple-layered employment structure in China is part of the

nature of the precarious employment worldwide in the era of the global neo-liberalism. A leading Neo-Marxist scholar, Erick Wright has noted the steps needed to readjust orthodox Marxist class analysis. Illustrating the diversification of class structure reveals that one big difference in contemporary industrial society is the emergence of intermediaries who do not fit into the classical capitalist class structure: bourgeoisie and proletariat. Wright calls these intermediaries the "middle class", namely: those "who do not own their means of production, who sell their labour power on the labour market, and yet do not seem part of the working class, people between capitalist and workers" (Wright, 1997, 15). The middle-class people in Wright's study tend to become more like capitalists as these intermediaries earn money by supervising workers and introducing workers to their workplaces. This dissertation draws on what Wright has suggested with respect to integrating the multiple layers of the employment relationship into an analysis, but does not use the ambiguous concept of "middle class" to refer to the multiple layers of agencies.

Undertaking the precarious work, Yi labour migrants are facing similar kinds of structure constraints that give rise to labour resistance. However, it is not self-evident that they arguments developed in these contexts are relevant for Yi workers. This dissertation addresses this deficiency by depicting a different scenario of collective resistance involving the multiple levels of employment relationships of the precarious employment. As I will show in this dissertation, the employment configuration includes two forms: brokers vis-à-vis workers (chapter 5) and Yi migrants vis-à-vis employers (chapter 6). Workers are found to mobilize to resist the upper-level employers collectively (chapter 5); but are relatively submissive to their own brokers within the co-ethnic brokerage system despite the exploitation and control (chapter 4). In terms of the different forms of resistance and non-resistance of Yi migrants, this thesis shows the o-ethnic brokers, as the middleman between Yi worker and Han employers, play significant roles in both mobilizing and appeasing the collective resistance among Yi migrants. By illustrating the different forms of resistance and non-resistance used by Yi migrants, this dissertation sheds light on the unravelling of the complicated labour relationships in China. The multiple identities of Yi labour migrants— as both members of ethnic Yi society and temporary workers—involve more contestation in terms of

the power geometry of employment relationships.

Alliance Between the State and Capital

An important dimension that reveals the interaction between the state power and migrant workers in China is an examination of the functioning of the legal framework. When the state first passed labour laws in the 1990s, migrant workers were quick to use them as weapons to protect their rights during protests and strikes (Lee, 2007). Now, nearly thirty years on, recent studies have been unearthing an opposite pattern. After changes in the law made the legal route more complicated, migrant workers, who have neither the time nor often the legal understanding to unravel the complicated legal procedures, are finding it difficult to navigate the legal channels available for solving their disputes. Moreover, for purposes of local economic development, local governments are often leaning more heavily towards the interests of capitalists/manufacturers to boost prosperity (Pun and Chan, 2012; Chan and Selden, 2014). This preference undercuts the position of the workers and undermines their capacity to organize and act on a collective basis (Lee, 2016). Without any doubt, these political and structural constraints handicap Yi workers who might be contemplating legal channels as well.

Keeping pace with the legal reforms introduced since the 1990s, the System of the Social Stability Maintenance (weihu shehui wending 维护社会稳定, abbreviated weiwen 维稳) has been put in place by the state as the main mechanism to cope with labour disputes across China.[3] As an authoritarian state, China is largely "coercive and repressive, and places enormous political constraints on any organized movement in society" (Chen, 2015). In this atmosphere of constraint, one of the greatest social problems with which China has had to cope in recent decades has been the movement of the labour force. Ever since the Tiananmen Square student movement in 1989, the Chinese government has invested considerable resources in attempts to dissipate, accommodate or crush the collective actions of workers (Wang and Minzner, 2015). Since the Communist Party

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[3] There is no accurate definition of mass incidents in official documents and regulations. The only document describing mass incidents is the Law on Penalties for Administration of Public Security and Criminal Law, which lists a few categories of disturbing the peace: blocking traffic, street fighting, and endangering social security.

General Secretary Xi Jinping came to power in 2013, policies designed to maintain social stability have been regarded as a very important means of coping with labour disputes across China. The formulas of controlling labour and quell labour activism by coercion and violence fit into broader strategies of maintaining social stability.

Does this mean that the Stability Maintenance System is purely confrontational? In contrast to those studies highlighting the apparently inflexible confrontation between local governments and labour migrants, recently some scholarly attention has been paid to the multiple non-confrontational strategies that local governments deploy. For instance, Ching Kwan Lee and Yonghong Zhang's empirical research demonstrates that local governments actually deploy various stability maintenance strategies, including protest bargaining, bureaucratic absorption and patron-clientelism. These have emerged as three microfoundations of authoritarian domination. Pertinently, they emphasize that the strategy of "buying stability" (*huaqian mai pingan* 花钱买平安, literally "paying cash for peace") has been the most prevalent means of pacifying aggrieved citizens involved in labour, land rights and property disputes (Lee and Zhang, 2013). It seems to have been an effective tool in assuaging popular unrest and depoliticizing state-society confrontation at the grassroots level (Lee and Zhang, 2013). This study makes a pioneering contribution to our understanding of the micro-foundations of the Chinese authoritarian regime for managing labour resistance. However, the question of to what extent this conclusion can be drawn from empirical fieldwork still needs to be explored.

To date, we know relatively little about the means that the local governments in Pearl River Delta cities use to deal with ethnic minority migrant workers or, conversely, of the ways in which ethnic Yi migrants and the local government negotiate their own socio-economic and political spaces in non-autonomous regions. To examine these questions, I associate myself with Ortner's argument by going beyond the dualistic repression-resistance relationship and by demonstrating a complete picture of how the constellation of different actors works in the complex relationship between the authorities and the resisters in the making of ethnographic studies (Ortner, 1995). I will show that the constellation of different actors works to produce a complicated relationship between the

authorities and resisters. The political and structural constraints – the Stability Maintenance System and the ineffectiveness of the legal framework - do form an obstacle for Yi workers; nevertheless they also provide Yi workers with opportunities to organize collectively as an alternative course of action. Ethnic minority status and the customary law also emerge as special factors that assist Yi migrant to organize collectively. In these cases, the co-ethnic brokerage system is the vehicle of the power struggle between Yi migrants and local governments.

Class Stratification in Yi Society

At this point, it will be useful to take a step back and clarify what I mean by class in this dissertation. This dissertation examines the mixture and juxtaposition of the two-fold class stratification among Yi labour migrants. The class status of Yi migrants in this study refers to both ascribed status – Black Yi and White Yi; and achieved status – brokers and workers.

On one hand, it emphasizes class status from a Marxist point of view as I have discussed previously. On the other hand, this dissertation understands the class stratification from the Weberian view. The ethnic Yi society was vertically structured into the Black Yi, who are the ruling class, and the White Yi, who were and still are subordinate to the Black Yi. Such class stratification in traditional Yi society is not determined by economic status; rather, prestige, ancestry and knowledge of the *Bimo* (毕摩) ritual among other factors are key determinants. [4] Although during the Demographic Reform in the 1950s and the Cultural Revolution in the 1960s and 1970s, class hierarchy in Yi society had been dismissed, the class stratification remains of significant importance in ethnic Yi groups after Yi people migrated to cities.

Class stratification in the traditional Yi society is transposed to the industrial setting. Alongside the hierarchy between the "Black Yi" and the "White Yi", a new form of class stratification is now emerging among ethnic

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[4] According to Weber, social stratification is based on the following components: economic status in the market, status based on the non-economic qualities such as honour, prestige, religion, and party affiliation. All of these relate to market-based life chances, by which Weber means the opportunity to improve one's position in life (Weber, 1978).

Yi migrants in the industrial context—the hierarchy of Yi brokers and workers. To some extent, the brokerage system provides a ladder of social mobility in cities. White Yi, who used to be the lower class, now have the chance to reach a higher class in the industrial setting; conversely, Black Yi who belong to the upper class in traditional Yi society might have to become lower-class workers (chapter 4). Taking the mixture and juxtaposition of class status into account helps us to achieve a better understanding of the dynamics of ethnicity and class that ethnic Yi migrant workers has been experiencing.

1.3.2 Ethnicity: China and the Yi

Apart from being part of working class, migrant workers are gendered, place-based, and ethicized. According to the tenets of classical Marxism, those who own the means of production extract workers' surplus labour; as a consequence, workers will eventually form a working-class alliance and fight against their exploitation by the capitalists. Social ties such as kinship, ethnicity, and the like are regarded as barriers and hindrances that prevent workers from achieving freedom from the control of employers. In their efforts to become free labour unfettered by social ties, workers will eventually overcome "fault consciousness" and form a class alliance to fight against their exploitation by their employers (Marx, 1894; Meillassoux, 1981).

In search of an answer to the question: has working-class solidarity ever existed? Perry's historical study of the strikes in Shanghai in the early 1900s illustrates that "depending on their geographical origin, migrant workers fell into occupational niches" (Perry, 1993, 36); later, these became the foundation of the labour strikes.[5] By tracing the workers' geographical networks, Perry finds that workers' native-place identity usually determined which social networks and associations workers joined in cities. As Perry states, later these networks and associations were adapted by the Communist Party to mobilize mass revolution and achieve its political agenda. Similarly, the locality-based gang organizations (*bang pai* 帮派) are

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[5] Native-place (老乡) identity is used by scholars to refer to identity based on the same region and socio-cultural origin.

activated to organize workers collectively in present-day industrial cities. For instance, studying workers in factory dormitories in the Pearl River Delta area, Chris Chan finds that workers have formed their own living groups based on their kinship relationship. Within these living groups, some leaders who are called "elder sisters" and "elder brothers" in dormitories autonomously become worker representatives during strikes. In order to divide workers' power, the factory uses place-of-origin based gangs to manipulate workers through appointing particular individuals as the members of supervising teams (C. Chan, 2009). These studies demonstrate the division of the working class: while ethnicity or native-place identity serve as a useful mobilizing force among the Yi sojourners in cities, it is also an obstacle to transcending ethnic (or native-place) differences and forging a sense of solidarity among all migrants labourers.

In sharp contrast to the aforementioned studies that fit with the class analysis in labour studies, social networks including ethnic and native-place networks have been key tools in analysing migrant communities and ethnic enclaves in cities. For instance, Ma and Xiang (1998) and Zhang (2001) respectively provide ethnographic proof of the creation of social networks based on migrants' places of origin and of the formation of non-state spaces produced by the interaction between migrants and the government. Fan and Taubmann (2002) present case studies of migrant enclaves in Shanghai and Beijing. Their studies place greater emphasis on emerging social inequality and spatial segregation in Chinese cities. Over the past few decades of urbanization and migration in China, urban villages (*chengzhongcun* 城中村) have been a hot spot as a choice for migrant workers seeking new lives in cities. Similar approaches emphasizing the function of ethnic networks can also be found in studies of ethnic minority hubs in cities (Zang, 2007; Zhang, 2009; Liu, 2016). Unfortunately, as labour study scholars have emphasized, a similar myth of "class solidary" has also been used to elaborate on the "ethnic solidary" among ethnic networks, and this choice has led to the omission of class stratification within the ethnic group in their studies.

With the ongoing mass migration in recent decades, studies of ethnic minorities in China have begun to shift their focus away from the framework of centre-periphery and are turning to investigate the issues related to mobility (Zhang, 2009). Specific to the ethnic Yi migrants, to date,

we have have been able to build up a growing awareness of the life experiences of ethnic Yi migrant workers in cities from social media and recent academic studies. One of the latest studies about Yi migrants is the work of Liu Dongxu, who has coined the term "*linggong zhi*" (领工制) for Yi migrant embeddedness in the labour market, literally translated as the system of leading (or bringing) workers (Liu, 2016). Liu's study provides a vivid depiction of the situation of Yi migrants in cities. Unfortunately, because of their conspicuous social network the Yi are generally portrayed as an ethnic group that is constructing an order in migrant-receiving cities; the other side of co-ethnic brokerage system that is driven by profit is overlooked. In addition, although it dies endeavour to build its analysis on class formation, the class struggle, especially the internal hierarchy and complex relationship between Yi workers and brokers, is ignored. My study confirms Liu's depiction on Yi workers' everyday lives in the Pearl River Delta area and, taking it a step further, it aims to explore the intersection of class, ethnicity, gender and state and how it matters with the social inequality of Yi migrant workers.

The Ethnicization of Yi Migrant Workers in Cities

To understand the way the co-ethnic brokerage system works, at this point I shall set out what I mean by ethnicity in this study. Despite its complexity and fragility, ethnicity remains a useful tool to illustrate the power dynamics of ethnic minorities in China in general and of the ethnic Yi in particular. Ethnicity, as I take it to mean in this thesis, consists of three dimensions: ethnicity as identified by the people themselves, ethnicity as recognized by the people themselves, and ethnicity as defined by the state.

Firstly, ethnicity is both a self-identified culture category and a social category given by others. The original idea of ethnicity is firstly seen as a static cultural category. Ever since Max Weber wrote that ethnic groups are "those human groups that entertain a subjective belief in their common descent because of similarities of physical type or of customs or both, or because of memories of colonization or migration (Weber, [1922] 1968, 369)", ethnicity is regarded as a cultural identity by which people cognitively and emotionally categorize themselves and consequently others (Smith, 1992). The ethnicity of individuals is expressed by their descent,

language, cultural practices, and sense of belonging among other factors. Specific to ethnic minorities in China, debates engendered by the tension of ethnic identity perceived by the people themselves and recognized by the state emerged as a central theme in the study of ethnic minorities in China during the 1990s. Drawing on ethnographic studies that focus on such cultural characteristics as language, culture, and the legal system (see, for example, Harrell, 1994; 2001) as well as my own fieldwork experience, I show that the highly heterogeneous nature of the "ethnic Yi" perceived by the people themselves is a highly heterogeneous category and it contrasts sharply with the social category recognized by the Chinese state (chapter 2).

Secondly, instead of seeing ethnic Yi as a static culture component in cities, I am fully aware that ethnicity is a social construction. As Fredrik Barth argues in *Ethnic Group and Boundaries*, "the ethnic boundary defines the ethnic group" (Barth, 1969, 15). Albert Cohen points out that migrants adjust to the new situation "by reorganizing its own traditional customs or by developing network customs under transitional norms and ideologies to enhance its distinctiveness within the contemporary situation" (Cohen, 1969, 1). It often plays an instrumental role for ethnic members especially when elites mobilize their ethnic fellows and enhance the political cohesion inside ethnic groups (Cohen, 1974; Brass, 1991).[6]

Drawing on the studies of ethnicity as a social construction, this research is more concerned with the process of ethnicization, that is a process of constructing the self and the other. The ethnic boundary between "us" and "them" is formed by interaction with and confrontation between different ethnic groups (Lamont, 2000; Massey and Sánchez, 2011). It often happens that "ethnic minority migrants arrive with their own aspirations, motivations, and expectations about what the host society will be like. Over time, they learn… about the stereotype that natives have about their group" (Massey and Sánchez, 2011, 14). The unconscious bias and outright discrimination towards ethnic minorities expressed by the mainstream

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[6] By emphasizing the role of the ethnic elite, Paul Brass points out that the bulk of the economic benefits go to the ethnic elite rather than to ordinary people. This is because the ethnic elite constructs ethnic boundaries in its own interests (Brass 1991). For the dynamics of ethnicity, see Comaroff & Comaroff's *Ethnicity INC* (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009). In this book, the authors provide an overview of ethnicity and point out two threads: ethnicity as cultural identity and ethnicity as politics.

becomes a self-filling prophecy—"the label of backwardness becomes part of an ethnic group's view of itself" (Eriksen, 2002, 59).

As I depict in this thesis, migration creates a condition in which individuals from one ethnic group encounter other people and have to interact with people, institutions, and policies in migrant-receiving cities. Any mainstream society is apt to harbour negative stereotypes—and in this case the ethnic Yi migrants are condemned as lazy, criminal and violent. Confronted with negative stereotyping in migrant-receiving cities, ethnic Yi people reconsolidate their ethnic Yi identity, while differentiating themselves from the dominant society. The official discourse that treats ethnic minorities as backward, uncivilized groups contributes to the hostile attitudes adopted towards ethnic minorities, and consequently this negativity pushes Yi workers and brokers to cementeven more closely together in the co-ethnic brokerage system; a system to help find employment and allows them to act cohesively to demand their rights collectively (Chapter 6).

The third important component is the politicized aspect of ethnicity. States often distribute rights and recourses according to ethnic categories recognized by the government (Omi and Winant, 1994; Comaroff and Comaroff, 2009). Once people are eligible to be members of an ethnic group by the state, the ethnic identity can be politicized an instrument for them to claim interests or rights in relation to their ethnicity. In this study, the absent of ethnic policies in non-autonomous regions provides a space for ethnic minorities to negotiate their rights by claiming their special ethnic identity. Since the Communist Party came to power, the Chinese state has officially recognized fifty-five ethnic minority groups, and it has granted ethnic minorities preferential policies in terms of education, economic distribution, and employment. However, these ethnic policies are mainly territory-based, and they tend to be enforced only in ethnic minority regions. With the mass ethnic minority coming to work in cities, the absence of ethnic politics in non-autonomous region opens a political opportunity for ethnic minorities to negotiate with the local government. Through this process, the ethnic minority identity that is underpinned by the state is activated and politicized in the non-autonomous region (Chapter 7). This is also the way that the ethnic Yi category imposed by the state becomes a self-identifying ethnic denominator.

Last but not least, it is worth noting that Yi co-ethnic brokers actively participate in the process of ethnicization. Pei-Chia Lan points out in her study of domestic workers in Taiwan that labour brokers present "racialized discourse about migrant applicants as a display of their market knowledge and professional screening… They also apply racialized stereotypes to naturalize division of job assignment and establish nationality-based niches in the segment labour market" (Lan, 2006, 17). Similarly, in this study, I emphasize that Yi co-ethnic brokers, who are both intermediators and ethnic elites among Yi workers, play multiple and significant roles in the ethnicization of the co-ethnic brokerage system.

1.4 Fieldwork and Methodology

The fieldwork was conducted during three periods for a total of seven-and-a-half months: July to December 2013, July 2014, and November 2016. This research was conducted in two main research sites: the nuclear region, including Zhao Jue, Meigu, Butuo, and Puge prefectures in the Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture in Sichuan province, and in various industrial cities in the Pearl River Delta area, including Dongguan, Huizhou, and Shenzhen in Guangdong province.

Picture 1.1: Sichuan and Guangdong Province in China

The Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture in Sichuan province, known for its poverty, low literacy and high birth rate, was officially recognized as an ethnic minority prefecture by the Chinese state in the 1950s. In 2013, it consisted of seventeen prefectures, eleven of which are counted as key national poverty-alleviation prefectures. One thousand one hundred and eighty-eight villages are counted as poor, and 1.72 million people in Liangshan have an annual income of less than 1500 RMB (around 180 euros).

As Steven Harrell, who carried out long-term research on the identity of ethnic Yi, insightfully points out, "The members of these groups have all been incorporated, unquestionably, as citizens of the Chinese state and as members of state-defined 'nationalities' (*minzu* 民族). But the differences in the nature and boundaries of these groups have not been eradicated by the state project; there are still different ways of being ethnic in the region" (Harrell, 2001, 26). It is worth noting that under the overarching

designation of "ethnic Yi" recognized by the Chinese state, ethnic Yi identity is divergently perceived and promoted by different communities in different regions (Harrell, 2001). Language, culture, and intermarriage customs vary significantly within the culturally Han Chinese areas and the ethnically mixed areas of Liangshan.

This research has been principally based on interviews and participant observation with Yi migrants from the nuclear region of Liangshan—Zhaojue, Butuo, Puge, and Meigu prefectures. People in this region perpetuate their own Yi traditions and ethnic characteristics as more authentic than those who live in closer proximity to the Han Chinese.

Picture1.2: Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture in Sichuan Province

The Pearl River Delta, particularly Dongguan and Shenzhen is chosen as my main research site because it is one of the largest manufacturing areas in China. This region hosts the largest number of manufacturing industries producing electronic appliances, shoes, cell-phone components, and other industrial goods, and it has emerged as one of the principal magnates for migrant workers from a variety of places and backgrounds. This city was also selected as my main research site because it has been the

premier destination of ethnic Yi migrant workers ever since the commencement of their out-migration. The co-ethnic brokerage system initiated in this region later became a common pattern in other places in China.
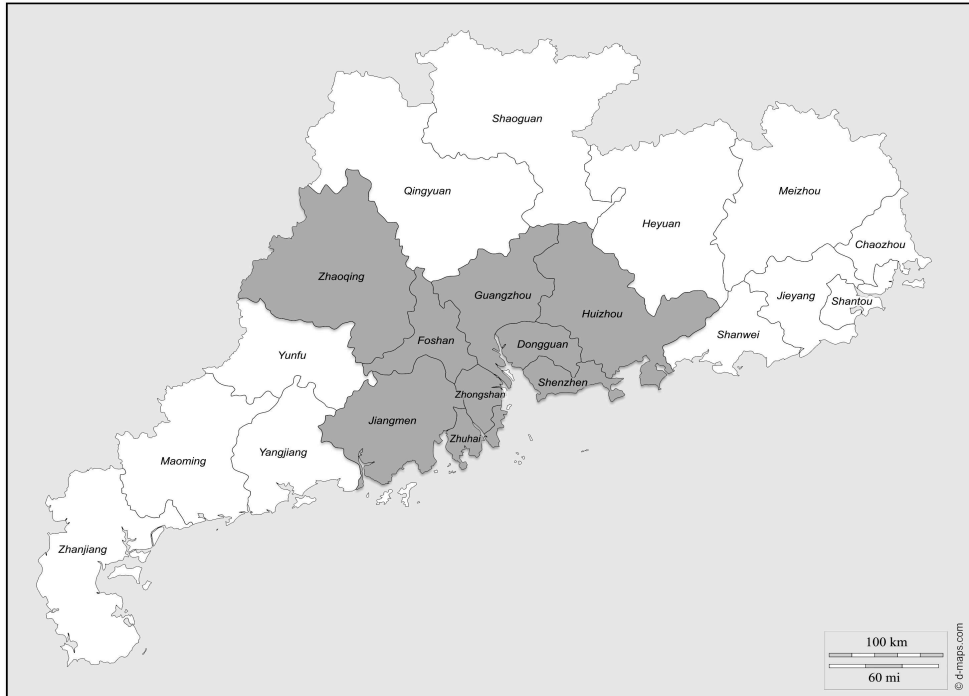
Picture 1.3: the Pearl River Delta area in Guangdong Province

Although Yi brokers tend to be fairly stable in their place of residence, they also frequently travel to different towns to bring workers to several factories located in various regions. The frequent mobility of my interviewees made it necessary for me to conduct multi-site fieldwork research in different townships including Xiegang, Houjie, Tangxia, Zhangmutou, Humen, and Qingxi in Dongguan city.

Although workplaces (factories) and dormitories are undeniably important places in which workers can be differentiated, these are not the only sites where this happens. This research goes a step farther by taking into account not only the factory and dormitory labour regime but also the migration trajectory. This broader perspective shows that the division of the working class is demonstrably apparent throughout the whole migration

process—in the lives of the ethnic community after work, in the labour market, and in the process of building collective labour resistance.

In the summer of 2012, I began to conduct the preliminary fieldwork in Houjie and Xiegang townships in Dongguan city. Through the generous help of two scholars at Minzu University in China, Pan Jiao and Liu Dongxu, I was introduced to two key Yi brokers in Dongguan and was also invited to the Yi Fire Festival organized by one of these brokers. Some other Yi brokers from the nearby towns as well as local government officials from the Bureaus of Ethnic and Religious Affairs and the Political Bureaus on the township and city levels were also invited to this celebration. Later, I conducted open interviews with these participants in an attempt to probe the situation of Yi migrants in the city.

Two main issues raised during these first a few open interviews struck me. Firstly, Yi workers were not able to attend the Fire Festival Celebration as they would have done in their hometowns. This is because most cultural celebrations were controlled by brokers, dispatching agencies, and employers. Secondly, it was clear that Yi brokers were patently trying to establish a good relationship with local government officials. Nevertheless, during my interviews, government officials frequently mentioned that Yi migrant workers were "troublemakers". But what kind of trouble do ethnic Yi migrant workers cause? And why do they so frequently find themselves in this situation? Bearing these questions in mind, I turned these observations and my previous theoretical review into a proposal.

I returned to Dongguan for six months between July and November 2013. Despite my previous preliminary fieldwork experience, I soon encountered a number of unexpected problems. Having lived in Houjie township for a few weeks, I realized that the types of collective actions among the Yi workers that I initially wanted to study would not be easy to access. The main reason for this is that Yi workers' collective actions in townships are usually small-scale; generally they are quickly resolved in a matter of two or three days. Yi migrants, especially brokers, have to bear the brunt of their reputation as "troublemakers" and "racketeers", which makes them very circumspect about such incidents. Even when I knew that some disputes were happening, without the permission of the brokers, I would have had great difficulty in gaining access to carry out interviews with those taking part or even just to be a spectator by participant observation.

The interview questions I had prepared to address Yi identity and *hukou* system restrictions were not particularly important to the Yi people's every lives. The *hukou* system does not feature heavily in Yi migration and collective actions. This was an unexpected challenge but also part of the magic of doing fieldwork. The contradictions I encountered meant that my research outline needed to be adjusted. It is more important to know what concerns interviewees and what the perceptions of insiders are than to stick to the questions based on the existing research. Therefore, I decided to put my initial design aside and allow the fieldwork to guide this research.

After living in these places for a while, I become familiar with Yi brokers in the townships of Humen, Houejie, and Xiegang. I was introduced to other Yi brokers, whom I was then able to interview after attending Yi brokers' birthday parties and gatherings. The dispatch agency run by the Yi bosses in the townships and the street labour market nearby became one of my most important research sites. It was here that I was able not only to observe the process of recruitment but also to conduct interviews with both the employees and employers. It also allowed me to observe the "illegal activities" involved in running dispatch agencies, including the production of fake ID cards, recruitment of underage workers, and the signing of illegal contracts with factories. These were all part of the tacit knowledge in the "grey zone" that could not be acquired by interviews.

Working in an Electronics Factory

After living with different Yi migrant communities in two towns for two-and-a-half months, I noticed that an important part of the overall picture—the voice of workers themselves—was obstructed in the information provided by the Yi brokers. Although I could meet temporary workers and have conversations with them, I was unable to gain in-depth insights into workers' perceptions because of the intervention of Yi brokers. Bearing these questions in mind, I looked for opportunities to work in the factories.

It is not uncommon for labour scholars to work in factories and carry out participant observation as a way to gain access to workers' daily lives. However, being an ordinary Han worker on a production line probably meant that I actually had fewer chances of acquiring an in-depth understanding of Yi workers' experience. The reason is twofold: the boundary between Yi workers and Han workers and their distinctly

indicated residential dormitories and work sites. By chance, I had the opportunity to work as a temporary foreman, when his actual foreman happened to be away at that moment. A foreman is a leader of a group of Yi workers appointed by a "bigger" broker whose main responsibility is to supervise workers, monitor their production and liaise between Yi workers and Han managers in the production lines. Working in this capacity, I tried to work together with workers on the production line when I had opportunities. The Yi workers' position as temporary workers, their low rate of literacy and poor mastery of Mandarin mean that they have trouble expressing their grievances as articulately as Han Chinese workers do. Consequently, workers need foremen to act as their spokespersons on a regular basis. I, as a female, chose to live in the same dormitory as ten Yi females and thereby gain opportunities to understand their struggles as much as possible. While living in the same dormitory as Yi workers, I tried to explain that I was doing my doctoral research about their lives and working experiences in cities; however, the concept of being a graduate student was something too remote from Yi workers' experience. Most of them had never heard of "doing research" as a type of work, nor had they ever heard about a university student working as a factory labourer. This made me wonder if revealing my identity as a researcher would be necessary after all.

Slowly, I began to find that the Yi workers accepted me when I tried to understand their difficulties and helped them to communicate with the factory managers—rather than treating them mechanically as had the typical foreman of their experience. The daily interactions, including working with them, taking sick workers to the hospital, and listening to their concerns, complaints, and personal stories in their irksome workplace, gradually enabled me to establish trust with them. The vivid stories they told me about their experiences answered most of the questions in my mind about the complex relationship between workers, brokers, and factory managers. Despite my rapport with them, I am also aware that, as a Han Chinese who only worked with them for a few weeks, it would have been impossible for me to transcend the ethnic and class boundary to become a real insider. Also, the way I was introduced by their brokers as a "foreman" even made workers keep quiet about some of their negative comments about their brokers.

Participant Observation: Labour Disputes

My participant observation in the factory ended when I was struck down by a serious illness and the regular foreman's return. After I had quit factory work and returned to the Yi community, unexpectedly the experience of working in the factory did intensify my relationship with other Yi migrants beyond the factory walls. When some disputes or collective fights involving Yi brokers broke out, I was given the opportunity to follow and participate in observing and resolving disputes that involved Yi workers and brokers.

In addition, I conducted in-depth interviews with government staff about ethnic policy, labor law implication, and their attitudes towards Yi mass incidents (*quntixing shijian* 群体性事件). I investigated the government bureaus, including the Ethnic and Religious Affairs Bureau (民族与宗教事务局), the Labor and Human Resources Bureau (劳动与人力资源局), the Petition Office (信访办公室), the Comprehensive Management and Stability Maintenance Office (综合治理维稳稳定办公室), and the Social Affairs Bureau (社会事务办公室) in two townships. The local government bureaus provided me with documents written from the perspective of the Han Chinese officials about mass incidents involving ethnic Yi that had occurred in the townships, which helped me understand government attitudes towards these mass incidents. This was possible partly because of my ethnic identity as a fellow Han Chinese that somehow made some Han Chinese officials more open and direct in expressing their dissatisfaction with the ethnic Yi. To guarantee their validity, I tried to confirm these cases with Yi brokers who had heard of similar cases.The collective disputes of ethnic minorities' are considered sensitive in China; the Internal Security Protection Section (国内安全保卫大队) of Police Bureau is charged with their overseeing them. When I met officials from the Internal Security Protection Section, I sensed their scepticism about my research as an anthropologist based in a Western university.

Tracking the Migration Trajectory to the Yi Hometown

During the Yi New Year in November, I followed the trajectories of Yi acquaintances I knew in Dongguan back to Liangshan. I travelled to Puge, Meigu, and Zhaojue prefectures and conducted interviews not only with

migrant workers but also with local government officials, at schools, and at NGOs among other agencies. In Luobu village, I lived in a left-behind child's shabby house in which I was plagued by fleas. Thanks for the hospitality of workers and villagers, I had the opportunity to attend Yi weddings, funerals, Bimo ritual observances, New Year celebrations, clan meetings, and conducted interviews with Yi people in nearby villages.

After the first fieldwork period, I returned to the cities in the Pearl River Delta area two more times in June 2014 and November 2015, and to Liangshan for interviews once again in November 2016. These revists helped me deepen my understanding of Yi traditional society and complete the picture of Yi migrant workers in both migrant-sending and migrant-receiving areas.

1.5 Outline of This Dissertation

This dissertation consists of the following chapters:

Chapter 1 introduces the dissertation. It describes the background, gives a theoretical review, and presents the fieldwork methodology.

Chapter 2 draws on the official categorization in an attempt to discover the meaning of what it means to be ethnic Yi as ascribed by the state. It also shows how the Yi people themselves perceive the category of ethnic Yi. By illustrating the tension between the official category of "Yi" and "Yi" as re cognized by the Yi people, I show the heterogeneity inherent in the ethnic Yi group.

Chapter 3 examines the formation of the co-ethnic brokerage system in the pre-migration setting. I show that, on the one hand, the formation of the co-ethnic brokerage system is facilitated by the state infrastructure and policies in both migrant-sending and migrant-receiving regions. For Yi workers, the desire to join the march towards modernization and aspirations to shed their stereotyped identity are among the principal factors motivating them to participate in mass migration. Brokers take advantage of the power imbalance rooted in the incomplete knowledge of the outside world within Liangshan Yi society. The existence of asymmetrical information coupled with the desire to participate in the process of

modernization have conspired to make their job of organizing out-migration easier.

Chapter 4 unfolds the story of the experiences of ethnic Yi workers in migrant-receiving cities and discusses the persistence of the exploitative and dependent brokerage system. This chapter demonstrates that the current prevalence of precarious dispatch employment has opened up opportunities for "illegal but tolerated" Yi brokerage. Yi brokers are undoubtedly part of an exploitative brokerage system that takes advantage of their workers from their own ethnic group. Nevertheless, co-ethnic brokerage could only have been established and continued through the cooperation of Yi workers. To find informal employment in capitalist industries, Yi workers have accepted the hierarchy and dependency inherent in the co-ethnic brokerage system.

Chapter 5 focuses on the segmentation of the ethnic Yi both in the labour market and in factories. It reveals that the factory regime and the dualist nature of temporary employment conspire not only to distinguish temporary workers from formal workers but also to single out ethnic Yi workers from the majority Han workers. In the factory, ethnicity has been blamed for workers' poor performances in the workplace. To counter the boldness of this statement, I demonstrate that this dualist factory regime co-exists alongside negative attitudes towards Yi temporary workers; both factors shore up the segregation caused by the co-ethnic brokerage system.

Chapter 6 unfolds the different forms of collective actions undertaken by Yi migrants. These actions include strikes, public protests, street fights, blocking traffic, and other obstructive tactics. These open expressions of discontent are regarded as threats to public security by the local authorities. Contrary to what is generally believed, it is often the Yi brokers, not the workers, who play the decisive role in collective actions. Nonetheless, Yi workers are caught in a vicious circle and end up as victims whenever they are inveigled into taking collective action.

Chapter 7 concerns the ethnic politics in the non-autonomous regions. It analyses the multiple strategies that the local government uses to cope with ethnic Yi disputes on the one hand, and the means by which Yi labour migrants respond to government intervention on the other hand. The conclusion of this dissertation is that, under the disguise of "ethnic minority privilege", the local government attempts to establish a patronage relationship with Yi elites. However, overemphasis on the Maintenance of

Law and Order System results in further victimization of Yi migrant workers, who are already caught on the back foot as marginalized outsiders.

Chapter 8 summarizes the main findings and draws conclusions. It revisits the broader debates on co-ethnic brokerage systems introduced above, explores the implications and suggests its potential contribution to current scholarship for ethnicity, labour and migration studies in China.