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Entrapment by consent : the co-ethnic brokerage system of ethnic Yi labour migrants in China

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Chapter 5

Yi Workers in the Workplace

I have examined how Yi workers and brokers, respectively, understand the co-ethnic brokerage system within their ethnic community. As I pointed out, the co-ethnic brokerage system could only have been established through the cooperation of Yi workers and brokers. This chapter sets the internal division between Yi workers and brokers aside and shifts to an examination of the ethnic Yi group as a whole in both the labour market and workplaces. By investigating the everyday lives of Yi migrant workers, this chapter shows how the factory regime and negative stereotypes toward ethnic Yi migrants impact the labour market and workplaces, further shoring up the co-ethnic brokerage system of Yi migrants.

The first theme tackled in this chapter reveals that the dualistic nature of temporary employment conspires to distinguish temporary workers from formal workers; in this case to single out the ethnic Yi workers from the majority Han workers. Additionally, the negative stereotypes with which ethnic Yi workers are branded also facilitate the Yi workers' segregation in the co-ethnic brokerage system. While being ethnic minority is an easy target to blame for poor performance in the workplace, the real culprit is not their ethnicity but the unequal employment structure and their consequent lower working class status. As with many other groups, it is often ignored that this inequality is the stumbling-block that paralyses Yi migrants in the labour market and workplaces.

5.1 Hierarchy in the Labour Recruitment

After an interview with a manager named Liu at a labour dispatch agency, she asked me to join her in the nearby square to watch the recruitment of Yi workers. It was 11a.m., and the sun was beaming heavily over my head. In the middle of the square in Xia township, a group of Yi workers sat in a line, waiting to be recruited. Their broker, Boss Ma, stood in front of them. After seeing Manager Liu coming, he stepped out to greet her and, smiling, immediately shook hands with her. Manager Liu explained to me that they have been engaged in this business for quite a few years. “Boss Ma’s workers are fine, as he had some experience in managing workers”, she told me.

I was most concerned about the group of Yi workers — nine female workers and eight male workers — who were sitting on the ground. The workers appeared to be about 20 years old, and the way they were dressed showed the length of time they had been in the city. According to my observations, workers who come to cities for the first time usually dress simply and conservatively, while those who have been in cities longer typically wear modish, casual clothes and have exaggeratedly curled and dyed hair.

The factory recruiter arrived fifteen minutes later, at the appointed time. Although she had higher status and a greater position of power than the labour manager, brokers, and workers, her arrival did not affect the solicitousness of Broker Ma and Manager Liu. She immediately noticed the young the workers and began to fire questions at them directly: “Do they have an ID card”? She approached one Yi girl and asked, “You! How old are you? Is this your first time in Dagong? Do you speak Chinese or not?” Perhaps the Yi girl was overwhelmed by the rush of enquiries, as she blushed and could not utter a word for a few seconds. The other girls there whispered to her, “Sixteen, Sixteen”. Then, after a few seconds, she responded in a very low voice, “Sixteen”. The recruiter expressed her scepticism, “She is certainly younger than sixteen, right? How come not one of them can tell me their age right away? I am afraid that her Mandarin is too poor to communicate properly in factories. Recently the inspection has been stricter. Every worker has to have an ID card, otherwise our factory won’t want them!”

Broker Ma really wanted to pull off a successful deal. He tried to explain to the recruiter that all these workers were of legal working age (sixteen). Those who had not brought their identity card had their hukou document, which is enough to verify their basic information. Moreover, he tried to persuade the recruiter that these workers were very submissive, therefore they would be unlikely to cause the factory any trouble. However, the deal ultimately failed. After the labour agency manager and factory recruiter had negotiated for a while, the factory recruiter added another category. As a tactic that the recruiter uses to avoid making the deal, she said that the factory expected a gender proportion of 1:1, which is a standard that this group of workers could not meet. In the dialogue between brokers and recruiters, the workers become commodities, treated like a pre-packaged bundle of products, and their ethnicity, age, and gender are the relevant product features.

This scenario showcases the hierarchy of the employment structure: on one side are the factory recruiters, whose position is superior to both the brokers and workers, while the Yi workers, who are fairly inferior and subordinate to both employers and brokers, comprise the other side. The brokers standing between the two parts are in an ambivalent situation. To gain the opportunity to successfully send workers to factories, Yi brokers often have to yield to their own interest to the factories. As I have mentioned previously, according to the labour contract law, temporary workers are expected to be offered pre-work training by the labour agencies before being dispatched to the using factories; however, the reality is that neither the labour agencies nor individual brokers are offered proper training.



Picture5.1 Yi workers waiting to be recruited

The employment hierarchy between employers, brokers and workers also emerged very clearly in another case in my research encounters. This time, I attended a recruitment event with Haiying, the female manager of a Yi labour agency in the Pearl River Delta area, Haiying could rely on her broad social capital to successfully obtain orders for recruiting temporary workers even when dispatch employment went into a recession (see Chapter 4). After becoming familiar with Haiying, I was offered an opportunity to accompany her to sign a contract with a factory. When Haiying and I joined the factory manager in the meeting room, the discussion immediately turned to the outward appearance of the Yi workers. The factory manager emphasized that they do not recruit male workers with tattoos on their bodies, nor those with long hair or long fingernails. Thus, the outward appearances that Yi workers consider fashionable, such as exuberant curls, long hair, and tattoos, emerge as barriers to their employment. An example of how this manifests occurred when the manager warned Haiying, “You have to guarantee that they do not damage our products. Last time, just

because I recruited a group of Yi workers, their long fingernails scratched the products”.

Despite the grumbles about Yi workers, the factory manager still wanted to get the deal done, because, apparently, they urgently needed these workers for a new order. The manager took out two different versions of contracts. One was the actual contract that the factory and Haiying’s dispatch agency signed, while the other contract was prepared for the inspection of labour bureaus. Haiying and the manager signed the first contract after merely glancing at it. I found that almost all the items were weighted in the factories’ favour. It stated the following:

1. The dispatch agency should assign a specific person to act as a foreman to supervise the dispatched workers and take full responsibility for the workers in the factories.

2. The factory would pay the temporary workers’ wages collectively to the agency at a rate of 10 RMB per hour per person, and the dispatch agency would take full responsibility for paying the wages to individual workers.

3. Insurance and subsidies would be paid by the dispatch agency.

4. The factory would not deal with any problems arising from the terms to do with wages, insurance, subsidies, and the like.

In contrast to the first contract, the contract prepared for the inspection of labour bureaus was drawn upon according to the Labour Contract Law and stipulates the actual roles of the workers according to this Law. Haiying explained to me later that the fake contract drawn upon according to the Labour Contract Law is nothing more than a piece of paper to be produced if and when the authorities might make an examination.

From the conversation between Haiying and the manager, I sensed that the power structure leans heavily on the side of the factory. Notwithstanding the confirmation of the deal, Manager He reminded Haiying frankly, “Dispatch agencies like yours are just bogus agencies that exploit labour and will soon be a thing of the past. You should get the new certification ready as soon as possible because the Labour Bureau inspection is being tightened up, and we have to comply with the law. Next year we plan to train some workers who have graduated from the technical school instead of hiring workers from agencies like yours”. His comments clearly embarrassed Haiying, as she had planned to demonstrate her ability to do business in front of me. On the way back to her car, Haiying said, “Manager He is too hidebound.... Most factories still recruit temporary Yi workers

from those individual bosses who cannot offer any certification at all.... Anyway, no matter what he says, eventually he will take on the dispatch workers because they urgently need our temporary people to work on their latest orders.”

The unequal power dynamics between brokers and employers are further undermined by the new articles in the revised Labour Contract Law in 2013, which reinforce the regulation of the dispatch labour market. The revised Labour Contract Law stresses the importance of “equal work, equal pay” between formal, contract workers and temporary, dispatched workers. In 2015, when I visited the labour agencies for the third time, the falling number of factories willing to accept temporary workers had caused panic among Yi brokers.

Finding suitable factories is particularly difficult for those Yi workers who are illiterate and do not possess identity cards. In this circumstance, to find appropriate factories that accept ethnic Yi workers, brokers have to adopt a series of strategies to succeed amongst the fierce competition they face. Conversations among brokers tend to revolve around finding factories by relying on shared resources. For instance, one tactic is to bribe the factory bosses or human resource managers with gifts or money, which increases the cost of running the brokerage business. The increasing sense of insecurity among the Yi brokers and the managers of labour agencies reminded me of an atmosphere of under-the-table dealings. When I began my research, I could drop into the dispatch agencies and join in the brokers’ conversations, but gradually, as the talk between brokers and workers became more sensitive, I was excluded from even chatting with my acquaintances there. A broker I met for the first time once said to the others, “Who knows, she might be a journalist and have her recorder in her bag. We should be more careful at this current stage!” He shot a glance at me and continued to discuss their business in a hushed voice. This experience of being treated differently by brokers indicates the increasing insecurity among Yi brokers in the period of the economic downturn.

The unequal power structure between brokers and managers is created before workers even reach the factories. As I will demonstrate later, it continues to function to control labour and divide the labour force on the shop floor once the workers have made it to the factory.



Picture 5.2: Buildings in Factory X

5.2 Dormitory Labour Regime and Factory Regime

Given the current circumstances, most temporary workers are recruited by factories that are on the verge of collapse, where they are used as buffers so that the factory can adjust their workforce to fluctuations in demand (Zhang, 2015, 23). Consequently, since they are regarded as merely a tool for reducing the risk of an economic slump, these short-term temporary workers are hardly likely to be viewed as on par with formal employees in the same factory. As one manager of a canned food factory said during an interview, “We recruit temporary workers to cut costs. Temporary workers are not an institutional part of our factory. We are not obliged to provide them with the same benefits we give our formal workers. That should be the responsibility of the dispatch agency.”

Factory X is representative of many low-end outsourcing factories that are battling to survive. As previously explained, the factories in the Pearl River Delta area, the so-called “factory of the world”, have recently been

undergoing a transformation due to industrial upgrading in the manufacturing sector, leaving behind low-end, outsourcing factories and moving toward more high-technology industries. In its wake, this industrial transition has left a rising number of small, low-end manufacturers filing for bankruptcy, as well as driving many others to the brink (see Zhang, 2015). In order to weather an economic slump, these low-end factories on the verge of collapse have to suppress their labour costs in order to meet the challenge of the redemption demands from upstream clients worldwide. Thus, under these conditions, recruiting temporary dispatched workers is a means widely utilized to reduce labour costs and achieve the necessary efficiency.

The labour force of Factory X, like the thousands of small manufacturers in the Pearl River Delta area, was made up of both daily contract workers who work on a daily basis and received their wages monthly and temporary contract workers, who were hired to meet a specific emergent order in a short period of time. In addition to these formal contract workers, the factory irregularly recruited temporary dispatched workers to supply extra labour for a short period of time, ranging from a few days to a year, particularly in response to emergent orders. The temporary dispatched workers include both Han and Yi workers. In total, Factory X employs approximately 450 contract workers, including approximately 300 long-term contract workers who worked on a daily basis and received their wages monthly and 150 temporary workers who came to work for a short period of time. Given the fact that temporary workers are recruited simply to achieve efficiency and raise the rate of production, being forced to work overtime and night shifts is considered normal.

Employing transient and disposable workers help such factories reduce their costs; however, it creates a dramatic division between workers, marginalizing the temporary workers. In the next section, I will show that the division between temporary workers and contract workers, Han workers and ethnic Yi workers, which is systematically maintained by several factors, chief among them are the segregated dormitories, despotic factory regimes, and the dualistic treatment of ethnic minority workers and Han workers.



Picture 5.3: Labouring in factories to produce mobile phones

5.2.1 Dormitory Labour Regime

The five-floor building was a typical Chinese dormitory built in the industrial zone. As with many other dormitories built by labour regimes in China, the dormitory provides a living-working space for workers. On the one hand, the dormitory as a form to accommodate migrant labour is a systematic feature of factory production that provides workers' living space, while on the other hand, "the dormitory labour regime exerts greater breadth of control into the working and non-working day of workers" (Pun, 2016, 102). It is a site of control where employers divide and manipulate workers (Pun and Smith, 2007, 42). To prevent workers in the same location from forming solidarity and organizing collective resistance, some factories try to separate workers across different dorms (Chan, 2009). However, this kind of control of workers is not applicable to the ethnic Yi workers that I observed in factories. Given the transient and disposable status of this group of dispatch workers, the factory managers do not exercise the same strategy of dividing people; instead, they assign the

temporary workers to three dormitories. The dormitory-assigner explained that this is because of both the convenience of managing workers and so that factories do not need to invest too much in managing the temporary workers. Knowing that I wanted to be assigned to the same dormitory as the Yi female workers, the dormitory-assigner, a relative of the factory manager, glanced at me and warned, “Are you sure that you want to live with them? The way those Yi workers live is different from us Han Chinese. They are usually slapdash about hygiene, and the relationship between Yi males and females is chaotic”. These ideas are similar to those I have usually heard about the habits of the Yi workers in the labour market.

I moved to Room 301 in the dormitory building, where I lived with ten Yi female workers. In the about eight-metre square room, there were six bunk beds. The only other furnishing in this room was a fan dangling from the ceiling, barely stirring the air in the 37 degree weather. It was about 4 p.m. when I moved in, and three girls had just woken up: Huajie, thirty-six, Jinzhu, seventeen, and Amo, fifteen. They worked the night shift from 8p.m. to 8a.m. and slept during the day. In contrast, the other seven roommates were day workers, and they were working on the production line at that moment. The workers’ names were written on the end of each bed in the dormitory. These names corresponded to the name list that I was given by the human resource manager. However, after living with workers in the same dormitory, I found that although they maintain these “formal” names in the workplace, when they come back together with their own community, they start to use their real names, especially when speaking to one another in their own Yi language. After a few days, I discovered that this was because many workers were under the legal age, sixteen, required for working in the factory. In order to be allowed to work in the factory, Yi workers often find other workers’ identity cards to create false names under the arrangement of their brokers. For example, in Factory X alone, half of the Yi workers were using the names of persons unknown to them.

The dormitory is a space for workers to share their joys and sorrows that they will never speak of anywhere else. For instance, the sensitive topic in factories, child labour, which has is discussed openly. For instance, the experience of Jinzhu’s, seventeen years old and had been a child worker for a few years before, exemplifies her perspective of child labour in factories. Jinzhu was seventeen years old, and she had been a child worker for a few years. The issue of child labour has been a hot topic in the media since it

was first reported in the public press in 2008. When I asked Jinzhu about the irregular inspections by the government officers in the first few years she was in factories, to my supervise, she said that she found it amusing.

I have experienced the government check twice. We were very happy when the government official came to check. Why? The factory (managers) and our bosses (brokers) would send us away for a few days. They did not want the government officials to discover us. For us, what a happy occasion it was! On those days, we had a few days off and were paid by the factory as usual.

This experience sounds familiar to other workers - the dormitory provides a space for Yi workers to cement their group solidarity within their own community. Although Yi workers in the same dormitory neither come from the same places nor know each other before the same broker takes them to the same factory, they soon get to know each other in the dormitory. After working intensively for about 12 hours a day, the day-shift workers watched dramas until midnight, clustering around the only form of entertainment in my dormitory, a mini DVD-player. On the other side, the Yi guys usually gathered together, chatted, and played basketball with their Yi peers in the factory yard. On the weekends, going skating and hanging out together with Yi peers was the most common form of relaxation among Yi workers. As they are all sharply aware, sharing the same dormitory is only a temporary situation. After a few months working in the same factory, they will be dispatched to a different workplace according to the plan devised by the brokers.



Picture 5.4-6: Yi female workers in their dormitories after work

5.2.2 Factory Regime: Dual Employment System

It is not only the living space in the dormitory that divides the workers. In the process of labour production, there is also a strict division between Yi workers and Han workers and dispatch workers and long-term contract workers. For many factories, the reason for recruiting temporary dispatch workers is quite simple and straightforward: to minimize labour costs and maximize production efficiency while also being able to adjust their workforce to fluctuations in demand. As the manager of one canned food factory stated clearly during an interview, “We recruit temporary workers to cut costs. Temporary workers are not a formal part of our factory. Thus, we are not obliged to provide them with the same benefits we give our formal workers. That should be the responsibility of the dispatch agency.” This confirms the fact that temporary workers are hardly seen as to be on a par with formal employees in the same factory.

The workplace in Factory X is a good example that showcases the inferior status of the temporary dispatched workers in comparison to the contract workers. For instance, even though both contract workers and dispatched workers sat side by side on the same production line on the same shop floor, the difference between them was clearly apparent in the clothes that they wore. Contract workers were issued blue uniforms sporting the factory logo, while temporary workers wore their own casual clothes. Among the temporary workers, the Yi workers were especially conspicuous, as their hairstyles and skin colour made them instantly recognizable among the other workers.

What is even more significant than the differences in their appearance was the difference in the treatment they received (See also Zhang, 2015; Lv, 2015). Although contract workers and temporary workers worked side by side on the same production line and did the same work, they were treated very differently in terms of their wages and welfare. The contract workers' wage packet was usually made up of their basic wage, overtime payments, bonuses, and other perks, as well as direct monthly wages from the factory. In contrast, despite doing the same amount of work, temporary workers were not entitled to an equal amount of overtime or work-related subsidies, nor did they have the same opportunities to be promoted or go on holidays. In addition, their wages come from labour agencies or individual workers rather than the factory directly.



Picture 5.7: Contract workers and temporary workers in X factory

Despotic Management

In Burawoy's early study of the factory regime, he demonstrates two forms of factory regime: the hegemonic regime and the despotic regime (Burawoy, 1985). Following Burawoy's early research (Pun and Smith, 2007), scholars pointed out that in the early stages of industrialization, Chinese factories could basically be categorized into these two types of regimes. The scholarship on labour relationships in China in the 1990s and 2000s demonstrates that workers were subject to all kinds of blatant ill treatment in factories with a particular emphasis on the despotic and punishment-centred factory regime (Pun, 2005; Pun and J. Chan, 2012; Zhang, 2009).

Over the past thirty years, the situation documented in Pun's *Made in China* has started to change in many firms. However, the leftover small-scale and low-end factories have not undertaken any dramatic changes. As an exemplar of this type of factory, Factory X still employs a combination of

Taylorism and Fordism to manage workers according to a despotic management system; the two chief instruments employed are strict control and punishment. More specifically, workers are strictly controlled to work at a certain pace and efficiency that meets the regulations regarding the amount of work to be done, working hours, speed, quality, and so on. To keep up with production demands, many factories, including Factory X, run a day shift (*baiban*) and a night shift (*yeban*) regime. This means that workers usually work for ten to twelve hours a day with lunch or dinner as their only rest times. The day shift works from 8:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m., and the night shift works from 8:00 p.m. to 8:00 a.m. Night workers earn slightly higher wages than day workers; however, they have to pay greater attention, as the roar of the machines on the shop floor can them them sleepy.

In Factory X, the hierarchical factory management teams, consisting of the production-line managers (*la zhang* 拉长), workshop managers (*ke zhang* 科长), and head managers of departments (*zu zhong* 组长), are the authorities that workers encounter in their workplace. Among them, the production-line managers, located at the bottom of the management pile, are the actual authorities that interact with workers everyday and execute management over them. As Zhang Lu finds in her study of automobile factories, the production leaders (production-line managers) are responsible for supervising and coordinating workers in a variety of daily tasks, including allocating daily jobs, assigning positions, drawing up a rotation schedule for their group members, checking equipment, tracking the production process, and assessing product quality (Zhang, 2015, 133). Apart from a few nice production-line leaders, most line-leaders' style of management is despotic and punishment-centred. That is to say, workers are required to work strictly according to the regulations of the production-line leaders. For instance, once they are assigned to specific workplaces, workers are not able to change to another place without the permission of the line leaders. In addition, workers have to follow the schedule precisely in order to produce at the required speed. Any disobedience against the factory rules, such as reducing the amount of work and prolonging working hours, results in a deduction from their wages.

In contrast to studies that found that the majority of production-line leaders were local citizens who held an urban *hukou* (Pun, 2005; Lee, 1998), the majority of line managers at Factory X were contract workers from

other provinces who used to work on the production line and had later been promoted to the position of team leaders after years of working in factories. Being promoted to line leaders increased their status, making them superior to other production-line workers. In the hierarchical structure on the work floor, some line leaders had the tendency to exhibit this sense of superiority over workers, especially over temporary workers.

The management also imposed a punishment-centred regime on workers. On the first day I moved to the factory, Mrs Chen, the manager of the Human Resource Department looked me up and down and warned me,

Make it clear to your Yi workers: be careful to keep your slate clean! The first time anyone is absent from work without the permission of their team-leader, he/she will have three days' wages deducted! Absenteeism on three separate occasions means that he/she will be fired by the factory without wages!

In Mrs Chen's words, the transgressions leading to a bad record included all kinds of misdemeanours, such as absenteeism, shoddily produced goods, lack of proficiency, dilatoriness, and moving at will to other workplaces on the shop floor. Any of these misdemeanours would ultimately result in a cut in that worker's wage.

From the workers' point of view, the production-line leaders are the common opponents they all confront regardless of whether they are Han or Yi or contract workers or dispatch workers. In their everyday experience, workers do not directly encounter the capitalists running the show. Instead, the production-line leaders are seen as the representatives of the capitalists even though they used to be migrant workers. More specifically, the confrontation between capitalists and workers clearly manifests in the hierarchy between workers and management as a class confrontation between working class and capitalist.

The common experience of being temporary workers engenders a certain degree of class-based solidarity among Han and Yi workers that overrides their ethnic differences. On the shop floor, both Han and Yi workers shared the some nostalgia for their remote hometowns, and their conversations were often related to their lives in villages and the other places where they had worked. Moreover, the Han workers often showed sympathized with the worse economic status of their Yi peers. For example, Xiaoling, the Han worker sitting beside Ase, the Yi female worker in the

same assembly line, expressed her displeasure when the production-line leader scolded at Ase due to her slowness. Xiaoling said that her heart bled for Ase:

Manger Liu bullies her. He said that Ase worked too slowly on the assembly line. I really took up cudgels on her behalf. Sometimes she is, but she tried her best. Are those contract workers really better than the others? No! The reason that contract workers are slightly more proficient is because they have been here working longer here than we have. They [the managers] say the formal workers never absent themselves. This is simply not true. Many of these managers are just partial to their formal workers. Who can keep on working like a machine?!

When managers' surveillance was not very strict, workers gossiped about the team leaders, especially those who showed their partiality for contract workers and looked down on temporary workers.

I feel these production-line leaders tend to have a jaundiced view of life. Did you feel the same? They scowl at us [workers], especially those whom they look down on. They are likely to vent their anger whenever workers make just a small mistake... With the exception of a few nice managers, the rest are a wet blanket every day.

Saddled with the same status, both Han and Yi temporary workers gained a certain degree of solidarity beyond their ethnic boundary. However, in spite of the common experience of being workers, the division between ethnic Yi and Han was as obvious on the shop floor as it was in dormitories. The Han temporary dispatched workers on the shop floor are more likely to gain opportunities to become contract workers. As some of them told me, after working as dispatched workers for a while, they sense their inferior status and try to either find a new place to work after their temporary contract ends or become contract workers after passing the three weeks' internship, so as to have the same income and welfare as the contract workers. However, this same mobility is not available to the Yi workers. Within the co-ethnic brokerage system, Yi workers have to bind themselves to a particular broker for a year, which restrains their opportunities to search for jobs away from the co-ethnic brokerage (Chapter 4).

In sum, the configuration of the factory regime reinforces the division between the contract workers and dispatch workers and the Han workers

and ethnic Yi workers. Among them, ethnic Yi workers are at the bottom of both the class and ethnic structure: as temporary workers, they have neither the same guarantees nor the pre-work training as the long-term workers. Moreover, the status of temporality makes it impossible for most temporary workers to establish a sense of belonging that the long-term workers learn to foster within the factory regime.

5.3 Everyday Forms of Resistance

As a “foreperson” in the factory, an important part of my job was to deal with the disputes in relation to ethnic Yi workers and communicate with the managers on behalf of the workers. Over the course of my work, the major comments I heard from managers regarding Yi workers included two types: the first type is related to the passive epithets of “backwardness” and “savage”, while the second type is associated with “misdemeanours” in the factory. Counted among the misdemeanours were persistent absenteeism, dilatoriness, laziness, disobedience, pretending to be sick, loafing around on the job, wildcat strikes, and quitting jobs en masse. Below, I demonstrate three cases of Yi workers’ everyday lives.

5.3.1 “She’s a Loafer and a Bad Influence”

On the first few days when I moved to the factory, the production line leaders told me that the group of workers I lived with were problematic. Before I came to the factory, Semo, the seventeen-year-old girl who lived in the same dormitory with me had called a strike when her foreman was away. The production line leader said to me, “All of them said that they were sick, offering different symptoms to back up their case. Well, I could understand if one of them was sick, but it is not possible for all of them to have been sick at the same time!” He believed that Semo had suggested this plan to the other workers.

The production-line leaders use the term “strike” to refer to collective stoppage in the literal sense of the word. In fact, the five girls did not see themselves as having organized a “strike”. They said they were simply are too tired to work. Despite slowing down the speed of production a bit, their behaviours neither gave rise to any repercussions nor generated a wave of

stoppages among the other workers. The manager was insistent that Semo should have been dismissed from the factory, but as there was such an urgent need for temporary workers to catch up on the production line, the shop-floor manager reluctantly agreed to allow her to continue working but separated her from the other Yi girls on the same assembly line. Because of the stoppage, Semo was seen as a troublemaker and a loafer who could have a bad effect on the whole workshop.

Right after the Moon Festival, almost all the workers in Dormitory 301 went down with the flu in the summer heat. Having previously been fined due to the three-days' stoppage, the girls insisted on working in the suffocating weather in compliance with the requirements of the factory. Semo decided not to work because, as she reported, her head had been aching for the past few days. She shrugged off the others' suggestion that she should ask for sick leave. "It is useless to ask for a sick leave. I know him (the production-line leader) won't agree. He has never taken what we say seriously." She said,

I have a headache and I cough whenever I go onto the shop floor. I only feel better when I do not go. Sitting on the production line makes my headache worse by the day. I do not know why... but if I do not work on the production line, my headache is a lot better. The smoke and the environment combined make me feel sick, and I cannot concentrate.

Indeed, the work on the shop floor was exhausting and repetitive. In the assembling line, the workers' job was to remove small pieces of plastic out of the root components on a plastic board that was part of the mobile phones. Due to the impending orders, workers were only given one day off per week. Even the national statutory holiday, the two-day Moon Festival holiday, was reduced to half a day because of the mounting urgent orders at Factory X. Consequently, the whole factory was very subdued. In order to encourage workers, the factory promised to pay the contract workers a double wage and give a bonus for overtime, but the temporary workers, who were paid on an hourly basis, were not entitled to these perks.

This time, Semo was sacked by the factory. In addition to her absenteeism, her previous actions marked her as a troublemaker, and none of the shop floors were willing to take her on. The next day, Semo delightedly packed her luggage and planned to move to another factory where her friends were working. On the day she left the factory, the smile

that had been missing for so long once again lit up her face. However, Semo's leaving did not strike a chord among other Yi workers. Most other workers, including those who went on strike with her for a few days at first, were dubious about the advantages of leaving for another factory.

Huajie's opinion, the "big sister" in the dormitory, represents a typical attitude of the majority of Yi workers. Sitting for more than ten hours a day on the production line had caused Huajie's ankles to swell, but Huajie argued that leaving jobs was an immature decision as there were not as many good factories as they expected based on her experience over the years. Huajie persuaded other younger workers in the same dormitory, "the only reason that we do the work here is to make money. [The bad times] will pass if you endure them". In fact, the greatest worry for the majority of workers in the factory was losing wages or having their wages cut.

5.3.2 "She Howls on the Shop Floor"

The second case that was regarded as troublemaking was that of Ayi, the youngest girl in our dormitory. One day, the production line manager, Zhang, hurriedly summoned me. Over the past week, he had complained to me a few times about the laziness and disobedience of the Yi workers. This time, he seemed frightened and anxious when he called me out and said, "The Yi girl, Ayi, shrieked terrifyingly on the shop floor a few times a day, which has frightened the other workers. I suspect that Ayi has some psychological problem. Sometimes she howls on the shop floor...like a wolf". When he described the experience of the Yi workers, he emphasized psychological problems. Ayi's behaviour reminded him of the spate of suicides that had recently occurred in a number of factories across the industrial zone, including the well-known multinational firm Foxconn.

On the assembly line, Ayi's job, like that of most of the other female workers on her shop floor, was to take the small pieces of plastic components out of the root plastic board. The work was less arduous than that of the male workers who worked in the oil pressure and machine tool workshops, standing and driving the machines with all their strength all day, but it did require a high degree of concentration and was repetitive and exhausting. I noticed that on the shop floor, Ayi did behave differently than the way she did in the dormitory. In the dormitory, she was talkative, shared food, and watched TV together with her roommates. In contrast,

sitting on the assembling line, Ayi hardly spoke to anyone or smiled at anyone. When I asked her what was causing her depression, Ayi explained to me, “Because there are no *laoxiang* (people from the Liangshan Yi area).” Ayi is typical of many Yi girl workers who are young, shy, and lack the courage to speak to other non-Yi people. More than just age, however, a lack of language proficiency also prevents many Yi workers from engaging. As another Yi worker reported, “As you have seen, we Yi are too upright...You Han Chinese are more expressive, but we Yi people are not. It is difficult especially when our Mandarin is not good enough to express ourselves properly”.

To avert collective actions based on native-place networks, factories disperse workers from the same village or the same place to different production lines (see also C. Chan, 2009). Hence, Ayi was stationed at a place where she was surrounded by Han workers. Once I convinced the line manager of the cause of Ayi’s problem and she was moved to another work position, her howling disappeared. Nevertheless, her simple answer indicates the feeling of isolation and loneliness that assails many Yi workers in the workplace when they are surrounded by unfamiliar persons. Cut off from her family’s affection, her feeling of loneliness was intensified in the isolated workplace to which she was assigned. Only after she returned to her familiar Yi community after work was the loneliness offset by feelings of familiarity derived from a shared language, culture, and mutual understanding of values. This case confirms other studies of workers’ health and mental problems; the dehumanizing management in factories causes mental health problems among workers, and the management system that cuts people off from their ethnic ties can culminate in tragedy (J.Chan, 2013; Chan, Pun and Selden, 2016).

5.3.3 “Managers Just Want Docile Subjects”

The following case involving Zheng Liping shows a typical contradiction between Yi workers and their Han managers. One day I saw that Mrs Li, the line manager of the quality management workshop, was reprimanding Zheng Liping. Zheng Liping had the nickname “Booming Hair”, as she curled her hair in the most fashionable “smart” (*shamate* 杀马特) style among Yi workers. Seeing that I was moving closer, Li raised up her voice,

Yesterday morning you were absent from work without having asked for leave. You and the other Yi female workers are the most undisciplined on my shop floor...I am always finding one of you leaving your place to chat with another Yi girl. Working in a factory is not like living in your country village where you are welcome to chat whenever you want. Did you know that? You said that you cannot put up with this amount of work, but you see, all my formal workers can do exactly the amount of production I ask them to do! Why can't you!?

This time, the manager focused on the lack of work ethic among Yi migrants. Workers are required to stick to a strict working schedule, sitting in their workplace for the whole day, and they are not allowed to move around. Apparently, Yi workers have learned to be good labours, but this was not an immediate habit for Zheng Liping. She liked to go to her Yi friend for a chat and then come back to work. Zheng Liping hiccupped out her grievance, repeating, "I am too tired. I just do not want to work extra hours after 8 p.m. The amount of work that she [the production-line leader] requires is more than what I can sustain... What she wants is just docile subject like a machine. I just cannot do it!"

When Zheng Liping was being reprimanded, three more Yi workers gathered quickly. At that moment, I could feel the strong sense of injustice and resentment brewing among the group of Yi migrants. After the line leader left, the other Yi workers said to me, "They do not give us Yi people face". The expression of "not being given face", meaning not being treated with respect, is resorted to often by Yi migrants on many different occasions. For Yi people, "having-face" (being treated with respect) is highly important. On another occasion, a similar case happened to another worker, and she and two of her peers said that they would prefer to leave that place of work rather than stay on and feel wronged in the workplace.

These examples reveal the confrontations that take place in factories on a daily basis. On the one hand, managers express their disapproving, condescending attitudes towards ethnic minority workers and associate the poor performance of workers with their status as ethnic minorities; on the other hand, workers often express their defiance by being absent from their jobs and organizing strikes and other forms of collective resistance. Yi brokers, who are supposed to be workers' representatives in cities, do not represent Yi workers substantially, which also exacerbates the confrontation between workers and employers.

5.4 Negative Stereotypes

As I have shown in the previous cases, the social stereotypes toward ethnic Yi migrants are significant in the labour market. By and large, in both the factory and labour market, ethnic Yi workers are accused of two shortcomings: the first is that they are backward, lazy, inferior, obstreperous, less than fastidious in their personal hygiene, and plagued by a host of bad habits in the eyes of many Han managers, and the second is that they lack a “work ethic”.

The first type of comment belongs to the inferior-quality discourse. Lacking the perception of cultural relativism, Han Chinese managers believe that workers’ habits are the result of economic and cultural backwardness, as in the case reported above. As I demonstrated at the beginning of this chapter, many factories have never employed Yi workers, but from hearsay, they know that some minority groups, including ethnic Yi, are difficult to manage. As one recruiter in the labour market said explicitly,

Our factory does not employ ethnic minorities... Strictly speaking, we do not recruit the following ethnic groups: Uyghur, Tibetan, and Yi. You know, the three ethnic minority groups mentioned by name are quite troublesome. They have a whole range of cultural differences with us Han, and many of them have irascible tempers and are prone to fight in factories.

In addition, as I have mentioned previously, Yi workers are presumed to practice poor hygiene and engage in chaotic personal relationships, which is why they are assigned to segregated rooms in dormitories. However, there is little evidence to support these stereotypes. Living in the same dormitory with the Yi female workers, I found that they learned to take showers and do their laundry every day after they had only been in the city for a few months. As with most other people, they regarded poor hygiene as embarrassing.

The second type of comment is used by managers to support the first. For instance, managers refer to the backwardness of Yi workers by indicating their lack of “work ethic”. In factories, work ethic is defined by the norms generated in the industrial setting: a good worker should arrive to work on time, be disciplined and obedient, and so on. As I demonstrated in the last chapter, in the eyes of Yi workers who grew up as peasants or

herders in a non-industrial setting, these regulations are not so easy to adapt to. Instead, such regulations indicate monotony and the loss of leisure and amenities, as well as the lack of any opportunity to work flexibly (see also chapter 4).

Ironically, most of the factory managers also come from a peasant background, which the state discourse, according to the existing studies, historically referred to as of an “inferior quality” and in need of being turned into modern Chinese citizens (Murphy, 2004). In this case, “quality discourse” was used to refer not only to the divergence between rural and urban citizens, but also as a way for the majority ethnic group to express their superiority over ethnic minorities, even though they were both from the rural areas.

5.5 The Consequences of Negative Stereotypes

Admittedly, many of the stereotypes did develop from direct interaction with Yi workers; however, most of them were just hearsay and lacked any rigorously obtained evidence. Nevertheless, in the labour market recruiters and employers often judge Yi workers on the basis of their ethnicity and associate workers’ poor performance with their status as ethnic minorities. The characteristics of Yi migrant workers is simplified and lumped together in a monolithic ethnic category with negative stereotypes.

The consequences of the negative stereotypes toward ethnic minorities are two-fold. Firstly, the stereotypes regarding ethnic minorities amplify the ethnic differences between Han and Yi. The negative stereotypes prevent Yi workers from acclimating to the mainstream labour market and establishing class solidarity with other Han Chinese workers in the same workplaces. Meanwhile, the negative stereotyping and social exclusion push Yi workers and brokers to cement together in the co-ethnic brokerage system to preserve their ethnic culture, find employment, and participate in collective actions, which helps to reconsolidate the ethnic Yi identity while undermining working class solidarity.

Secondly, the unconscious bias and outright discrimination toward ethnic minorities expressed by the majorities becomes a self-filling prophecy: “the label of backwardness becomes part of an ethnic group’s view of itself” (Eriksen, 2002, 59). As Steele and Aronson point out in their study

of stereotype threat, people who are treated with negative stereotype are likely “at risk of confirming, as self-characteristic, a negative stereotype about one’s group” (Steele and Aronson, 1995, 797). Once workers are stigmatized as being disobedient and are consequently subjected to close surveillance, they are more likely to be caught or blamed (Steele and Aronson, 1995). Such a self-fulfilling prophecy appears in the cases of Yi workers’ everyday forms of resistance in the factories. Being labelled as lazy, disobedient, and slow, workers acted according to these labels and adopted some forms of everyday resistance, such as stoppage, absenteeism, slowing down, and refusing to work overtime. Thus, labelling ethnic Yi workers with these negative ethnic stereotypes can deteriorate the performance of an individual who identifies with this ethnic group.

It is worth noting that workers’ response to social exclusion and stereotyping was gendered. As previously demonstrated, female workers were prone to adopt the sort of “everyday forms of resistance”, such as stoppage, absenteeism, slowing down, taking sick leave, refusing to do overtime work, and hindering the regular production of a factory. In contrast, Yi males were more likely to organize collective actions, such as striking, gang fighting, and taking to physical violence to express their grievances. As I will show in the next chapter, Yi workers, mainly male workers, rustle up crowds of onlookers, injure police, block factories, and organise public protests and street fights. Consequently, Yi migrants are seen as a threat to public security and have always been the group on which officials keep a watchful eye.

5.6 Conclusion

This chapter has examined the function of the brokerage system in the two scenarios that matter most to the workers’ daily lives: the temporary labour market and the factory regime. It has shown that the factory regime and the dualist nature of temporary employment act to distinguish the temporary workers from the formal workers and to single out the minority Yi workers from the majority Han workers. In the factory, ethnicity has been blamed as the reason for workers’ poor performances in the workplace. However, this chapter has shown that it is actually the dualist structure of their employment that positions them at the bottom of the hierarchy. In addition,

the abuse of the status of ethnic minorities, and of lower class workers in general, has reinforced the stereotyping of ethnic Yi workers.

This does not mean that Yi workers have been completely paralysed in their lives in the factories or that they have been absolutely subordinated to the factory management regime. Apart from the “everyday forms of resistance”, such as stoppage, absenteeism, slowing down, taking sick leave, and refusing to do overtime work, collective resistance are the ways that Yi migrants battle their social exclusion and unequal treatment. In the next chapter, I shall demonstrate that ethnic Yi migrants are powerful in terms of organizing themselves collectively. Squaring up to the pressure exerted by the factory regime, workers frequently instigate stoppages, absent themselves, and refuse to work overtime in order to express their resentment.

In the following chapters, I will investigate the *naoshi* (making trouble 闹事), for which the ethnic Yi in cities have been blamed, and demonstrate the complex mechanism behind incidents of collective actions. I put forward examples of different forms of troublemaking in which ethnic Yi migrants have been deeply involved and show the multiple roles that Yi brokers in the collective actions in which Yi migrants are involved.