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

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Chapter 8

Conclusion

This study of ethnic Yi labour migrants in cities engages the dialogue about social transformation in China from the perspectives of ethnicity and class. Class and ethnicity are becoming increasingly salient, and they are especially central when it comes to understanding social inequality in China. Over the past one hundred years, China has experienced significant social transformations—from an empire to a modern nation, from the period of revolution and reform to authoritarian governance, and from restricted mobility to globalization. Ethnic minorities were a part of the territory of what is now China long before the modern Chinese nation-state was established. Throughout the dynasties, the central government attempted to exercise control over non-Chinese people by resorting to a series of instruments, including the appointment of non-minority officials (*tusi* 土司) among ethnic groups. In the early twentieth century, governance of the ethnic minorities became a main arena of competition for the KMT (Kuomintang, Chinese Nationalist Party), the CCP, and Japan.[1] After its foundation, the People's Republic of China recognized 55 ethnic minority

[1] In the late Qing and the early Republican eras, China began to transform from a multiethnic empire into a modern nation-state. Ethnic minorities became a main arena of competition for the KMT, CCP, and Japanese during the Republican era. Recognizing ethnic minorities (*minzu*) helped the CCP to establish legitimacy among these groups at a time at which national ethnic diversity was denied by the KMT (Mullaney, 2011).

groups; these groups have been officially categorized and included in the Chinese nation.

In just the last twenty to thirty years, Chinese society has experienced mass migrations, and ethnic minorities, who used to live in the peripheral regions, have spontaneously joined these flows (Chapter 3). Some ethnic minorities stand out in the cities they flock to, where they bring great diversity by forming ethnic communities and enclaves and even developing their own ethnic economy. Although some have been significantly assimilated into the dominant Han society, many others, including the ethnic Hui, Tibetan, Uyghur, and Yi, remain relatively segregated, refusing assimilation into Han society. These recent transformations challenge territory-based ethnic policies and provide both the grassroots government and ethnic minorities with a new arena in which to negotiate with each other (Chapter 7).

Chinese society has been undergoing substantial social changes, which have manifested distinctly in class transformation. In the era of the planned economy, the *hukou* system officially categorized people into two categories—urban citizens and rural peasants. In the post-socialist era, the boundary between urban and rural citizens is no longer restrictive. Despite the existence of the *hukou* system, it has become possible for people to move freely across geographical boundaries. People are beginning to redefine their own social class, using their economic status, as well as the social stratification given by the state, to do so. Meanwhile, the emergence of the working class has produced another enormous social transformation in China. Migrant workers have acquired a higher degree of class-consciousness, and they participate in class-defined actions like protests and strikes. These are regarded as the outward and visible signs of the tumultuous struggle between the emerging consciousness of the working class and the efflorescence of the capitalist world. Consequently, like ethnicity, the meaning of class has changed in the context of the emergence of industrial capitalism in China.

The experience of ethnic Yi migrants in cities reveals the entanglement and intersectionality of class and ethnicity, the ways in which new forms of social inequality are reproduced among labour migrants in China. Instead of treating ethnic minorities as just a part of the class relations or ethnic networks of labour migrants, in this study, I pinpointed the different forms of class and ethnicity in relation to the experience of Yi labour migrants in

China: In other words, the ethnic identity of Yi migrants is not only a social category applied by the stated group or categorized by others; it is also a legacy of their traditional Yi society and part of the experience of individuals in the process of social transition. In this study, class not only refers to the experience of the working class as they are subjected to exploitation in the capitalist system. It also refers to the class hierarchy among brokers and workers that is reproduced in the co-ethnic brokerage system. In addition, I observe how Yi migrants are suspended in a sort of time warp; they are sojourners in a precarious labour market and pawns in the scheme of migration. The interfacing of the ethnicity and class, which are simultaneously elements of opposition and connection, is articulated through the Yi co-ethnic brokerage system.

8.1 Summary of This Study

The "co-ethnic brokerage" is the lynchpin of this dissertation. With its central theme of the formation, transformation and perpetuation of the Yi co-ethnic brokerage system, this dissertation is organized as follows:

Chapter 2 began by elaborating the social structure of Yi society, constituted by factors such as clan identity, the Black-White Yi hierarchy, the spirit of public participation, and so on. It showed that "ethnic Yi" is not a homogenous category, as the Chinese government portrayed; instead, Yi society is constituted by its own characteristics. Without first understanding these characteristics, we cannot gain a better understanding of the inherent logic of the co-ethnic brokerage system. As I explained in chapter 3, Yi workers' perception of the co-ethnic brokerage has been influenced, presumably, by their hierarchical social structure, including patriarchy, community values, and psychological affiliation with their clan and kinship group. For instance, Yi workers are most likely to take the hierarchy of the brokerage system for granted, and their acquiescence has contributed significantly to the persistence of the co-ethnic brokerage system in cites.

Nevertheless, while social stratification in traditional Yi society is mainly determined by descent (Black Yi or White Yi), the new hierarchy in migrant-receiving cities transforms to fit the language of economic status: brokers and workers. In other words, the co-ethnic brokerage system replicates, rather than abandoning, the traditional hierarchical system in

Liangshan society, but it does so in economic terms. The existing social stratification in traditional Yi society means that a Yi worker is more likely to assimilate to the new hierarchy and social inequality. This gives Yi brokers the opportunity to manipulate workers in cities.

Chapter 4 unfolded the story of ethnic Yi workers' experiences in migrant-receiving cities. In the present employment structure, Yi workers are exposed to the vulnerabilities of precarious employment; they receive lower wages and fewer opportunities to assimilate into the dominant society. Despite the blatant exploitation and control of the co-ethnic brokerage system over the past two decades, most Yi workers have submitted voluntarily to the cocoon of the co-ethnic brokerage system instead of taking the plunge to become individual workers. Apart from a few exceptional cases that prove the rule, Yi workers are regulated by violence or compliments, and they are literally indebted to work for the brokers to redeem the borrowed money they have already spent. Contrary to the prevailing studies of legal and illegal migrants, including those that highlight the fact that language and lack of skills restrain workers in co-ethnic brokerage systems, this study found that, although language, literacy, and skills do matter at the early state of their outmigration, these elements are not determinative in the persistence of the co-brokerage system. I have isolated two factors that have contributed to the persistence of the co-ethnic brokerage system: the incongruous, haphazard flexibility provided by precarious employment and the unwavering expectation of clan and kinship reciprocity. Indisputably, and although otherwise problematic, precarious employment does allow workers certain flexibility in terms of employment, which is highly valued by Yi peasant workers. Meanwhile, their sense of clan and kinship reciprocity means that Yi workers trust brokers from their own ethnic community more than others.

Chapter 5 focused on the everyday lives of Yi workers in the labour market and workplaces. In these two environments, workers are frequently stereotyped and stigmatized by the dominant Han group, and their minority ethnicity has been blamed for their poor performances in workplaces. However, in an analysis of the interaction of Yi workers with Han managers in factories, this chapter found that the low performance of Yi temporary workers is largely related to their low class status, being marginalized as poor and unskilled workers and lacking training in the labour market, rather than their ethnicity. However, the continual ethnic stigmatization

fuels worker' discontent and resentment. The result is that ethnic Yi workers, especially young workers, use everyday forms of resistance, such as stoppage, absenteeism, slowing-down, taking sick leave, and refusing to do overtime work, to express their discontent. Their social exclusion from the outside world makes them rearticulate their Yi identity more precisely than they once did, which reinforces the self-identification of Yi migrant workers in migrant-receiving cities.

In this sense, Yi migrant workers are not completely powerless in the face of the exploitation of brokers and their battles with social exclusion. Instead, they have grown more powerful in terms of organizing themselves collectively. As I showed in chapters 6 and 7, apart from the everyday forms of resistance in workplaces, Yi workers engage in various forms of collective action, which others term "making-troubles". In the last two chapters, I unearthed the causes, forms, and mechanisms of Yi workers' collective actions that lie buried beneath the "troublemakers" epithet so often attached to them.

In Chapter 6, I tried to unpack the overarching "troublemakers" label that is used to target ethnic Yi migrant workers. By showcasing different forms of collective resistance, this study highlights the internal heterogeneity among Yi migrants covered over by the overarching label of "troublemakers" as well as the various roles that Yi brokers play in the co-ethnic brokerage system. I pointed out in this chapter that the precariousness and insecurity of their employment, not their ethnicity, must be taken into account as factors that aggravate workers' resistance. In addition, scholars have generally overlooked the traditional Yi society value of participating in collective actions, which is at odds with the dominant cultural logic of Han society. In all cases of collective action, Yi brokers have played decisive roles–sometimes for the benefit of the group. In some cases, the brokers were definitely a positive help to workers in demanding their labour rights by preventing arrears in wages and finding settlements to various disputes; however, in other cases brokers are the initiators of collective actions for their own economic profit.

Chapter 7 showed the multiple strategies that the state uses to cope with ethnic Yi disputes, focusing in particular on the local governments that have direct encounters with ethnic minority migrants. Its findings differ from studies on the ethnic riots that have broken out in Xingjiang and Tibet, which are principally devoted to underlining the political suppression

of ethnic minorities.[2] In the case of ethnic Yi, local governments have strategically adapted ethnic Yi elites into the political arena and pay attention to their collective claims. The unspoken purpose of the former is to serve the core agenda of the government policy of "maintaining stability" rather than any real consideration of protecting ethnic minorities' rights. In addition, over the past few years, ethnic policies have been devised principally for implementation in the ethnic autonomous regions, leaving the non-autonomous regions a virtually blank canvas. This vacuum in ethnic policies in the urban non-autonomous regions has opened up a space for public and informal engagement between the local state and ethnic minorities. Under the pressure of maintaining the social order, the Chinese state pays particularly close attention to efforts to quash any collective actions that pose a threat to social stability.

In this chapter, I suggest that the vacuum left by ethnic policies and the special concern extended to mass incidents have provided ethnic Yi workers with additional bargaining chips when making collective claims. Labour disputes involving ethnic minority migrants are right at the heart of these highly sensitive actions from the perspective of local governments. In this condition, ethnic Yi workers articulate their rights collectively is an unintended consequence of the vacuum left by the interaction of two sorts of politics- the ethnic minorities' policies and the Maintenance of Stability System. The collective actions of Yi migrants are as much the result of the political opportunities allowed by the ethnic policy of the state power as they are a matter of the dominant society's social stereotyping. As a consequence, rather than empowering ethnic Yi workers, the so-called "ethnic privilege" empowers Yi brokers and victimizes Yi workers, who are already stuck in a marginalized status.

In the final analysis, by examining the actions of Yi migrants, this study demonstrates the fragmentation of the working class and ethnic group. In brief, the experience of Yi migrants sharply contrasts with classic Marxist studies which argue that ethnicity is false consciousness that will eventually be replaced by the consciousness of shared class interests. The evidence presented in the preceding chapters indicates that the ethnic identity of Yi migrants in cities displaces any class solidarity of workers that might be felt.

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[2] Riots in Western China Amid Ethnic Tension. See, http://www.nytimes.com/2009/07/06/world/asia/06china.html

Meanwhile, the research findings have exposed that, within the co-ethnic brokerage system, ethnicity has modified the characteristics of the class relationship between brokers and workers, counteracting the potential tension between them. Moreover, the ethnic community embedded in the co-ethnic brokerage system is the foundation of the labour resistance displayed by this group. In a nutshell, Yi migrants' actions confirm and testify to the plight of a new working class, but they should never be simplified as class action.

8.2 Rethinking the Co-ethnic Brokerage System

This dissertation has showed the co-ethnic brokerage system from insiders' points-of-view, including how they make sense of the self-exploitation of the co-ethnic brokerage system. Here, I draw on Bridget Anderson' arguments in her studies of labour migrants in Britain:

> Despite such limited rights, so many migrants still attempt to enter, legally and illegally, in order to live and work in wealthy countries, which suggests not only that those migrants who are admitted are better off than those who are not, but also that they are prepared to tolerate limitations on their rights as part of a trade-off that facilitates their entry. (Anderson, 2013, 180)

I use the term "entrapment by consent" as a key concept to illustrate the nature of the co-ethnic brokerage system. It refers to two things: "entrapment" refers to the negative effects experienced by Yi workers in terms of finding self-employment, while "consent" refers to the voluntary side of the matter –workers are not coerced by but compelled to rely on the co-ethnic brokerage system. I have tried to convey the idea that employment structures and ethnic politics paralyze workers in an exploitative system and that workers seem to accept their lot voluntarily, even though they are in fact marginalized and paralyzed. As a consequence, ethnic Yi migrant workers are constrained in a disadvantageous condition under the guise of the ethnic nexus.

In brief, the following factors entrap Yi workers in the co-ethnic brokerage system. Firstly, Yi brokers consolidate workers in the co-ethnic brokerage system by claiming a moral economy and ethnic bonds of

solidarity. Nevertheless, the co-ethnic brokerage system failed to provide them with any "training scheme" in which "the examples and skills of successful entrepreneurs and ethnic bonds of solidarity facilitated the emergence of new firms which produced, in turn new employment opportunities" (Bailey and Waldinger, 1991; cited from Portes and Shafer, 2007, 159). Secondly, Yi workers are trapped by the lack of alternatives. Their precarious employment situation and the negative stereotypes that handicap ethnic minority workers conspire to prevent them from finding employment opportunities outside of their co-ethnic brokerage system. Feeling that they are disadvantaged, workers sometimes express their discontent either collectively or individually. Unfortunately for them, their actions simply reinforce the existing stereotypes, and the (negative) ethnic Yi identity is consolidated. Thirdly, despite the so-called ethnic privilege policies of the Chinese state, the majority of ethnic Yi workers do not gain any actual benefits to facilitate their upward motility. The so-called ethnic privilege policies have contributed little to improving the welfare of marginalized minority migrants. Instead, these policies seem to push workers into the segregated brokerage system. These are the three most important factors that compel Yi workers to rely upon the co-ethnic brokerage system.

This study has problematized the effects of co-ethnic brokerage in terms of assisting labour migrants in assimilating to the dominant society and facilitating their upward mobility. I found that ethnic Yi workers are on an opposite tack to the studies on ethnic enclaves that emphasize the co-ethnic brokerage system as "mobility machines" and emphasize the positive effects of co-ethnic brokerage in terms of assisting labour migrants in assimilating to the dominant society and facilitating their upward mobility.[3] Ethnic Yi migrant workers are constrained in a disadvantageous condition under the guise of the ethnic nexus. As I have showed, Yi migrant

[3] For instance, while examining China towns in the USA, scholars have found that "employment in ethnic enclaves has positive effects both for entrepreneurs, in the form of higher incomes and, for employees, in the form of opportunities for self-employment" (Zhou, 1992; cited from Portes and Shafer, 2007, 159). "While workers could initially receive low wages and worked longer hours, these disadvantages were compensated for by on-the-job training and social ties, facilitating their acquisition of their own business after some years" (Zhou, 1992; Zhou and Logan, 1989, cite from Portes and Shafer, 2007, 159). For more about the ethnic trap, see Portes' and Bach's study on the Cuban and Mexican immigrant males in the late 1970s, and the Jewish enclave in the lower East Side of Manhattan, and the Japanese enclave in Los Angeles (Portes and Bach, 1985).

workers are hardly given any "training scheme" through which they gain opportunities of getting new work as individuals, nor do they have the reference in their lives beyond their co-ethnic brokerage system. As ordinary workers, due to a lack of on-the-job training and social ties that facilitate their accumulation in migrant-receiving cities and their acquisition of their own business after some years, all they can ever hope for is to be co-ethnic brokers.

Although I have problematized the key actors–the ethnic Yi brokers throughout the analysis, the purpose is not to crackdown on the Yi brokers. Rather than simply condemning the "black-hearted" brokers as accomplices of capitalists who victimize Yi workers, or regarding them as illegal smugglers of people, I have shown throughout this study that Yi brokers, like the majority of Yi workers, are in a suspended position. By suspension, I mean that they are also restrained within the structure, facing the difficulties of integrating into mainstream society and obtaining other economic opportunities on the one hand. On the other hand, within their ethnic community, Yi brokers face a moral dilemma while struggling on the verge of the economic downturn. That is to say, most Yi brokers, just as ordinary workers, have to operate their business within the constraints of an institutional structure that provides them with few opportunities to achieve upward social mobility. Therefore, despite being the accomplices of the industrial capitalists and profiting from the co-ethnic brokerage system, brokers, just as ordinary workers, are marginalized politically and economically in the institutional structure.

Is the co-ethnic brokerage of Yi labour migrants a transitory phenomenon that is happening within a certain period of time? Do workers gradually extricate themselves from the ethnic brokerage system and become individual labourers? These questions remain important. My latest experience visiting ethnic minority migrants shows that in spite of economic and political transformation, the co-ethnic brokerage system continues to struggle against the brink of a downturn, but it has, thus far, continued to demonstrate great resilience.

Toward the end of this research, I revisited some of my informants in Liangshan at the celebration of the ethnic Yi New Year. Some chief informants have found a new means of livelihood. One of the key female informants, Xiaowei, became a barmaid after she had tried to bring workers out as a broker but failed to profit from the enterprise. Recalling the

experience of working for brokers in factories, she told me that, two years ago, she was too young to find her own means of livelihood; however, many workers in her age group who used to work in the Yi brokerage system have either gotten married or become barmaids or small shopkeepers, which are less arduous jobs than being temporary factory workers.

Additionally, the brokers expressed their increasing exasperation regarding the running of their businesses. In the wake of on-going industrial transformations, many factories have moved from the Pearl River Delta area to the burgeoning industrial areas in other areas of inter-China or in neighbouring countries in Southeast Asia. The majority of those factories left in the Pearl River Delta area are in the high-technology industry or are low-end workshops on the verge of bankruptcy. The inexorable economic decline of the area has been forcing Yi brokers to readjust their employment strategies and pay Yi workers higher wages so that they can find their feet in the industrial system.

In terms of local governments, the governments of both the migrant-sending and the migrant-receiving areas have seen the need to set up official channels to regulate the mass outmigration. As I have mentioned in the previous chapters, the fragmentation between the government bureaus of both the migrant-sending and migrant-receiving areas remains a big problem because of the *hukou* system in China. In 2016, the Liangshan government established two "Service Stations for Yi Peasant Workers" (*nongmingong fuwuzhan* 农民工服务站) in the Pearl River Delta area. However, these measures neither successfully formalize the problematic co-ethnic brokerage nor terminate it as it is expected.

8.3 Contributions and Limitations

This study contributes to our understanding of migration, labour relationships and ethnic politics in general and China in particular.

Firstly, what does the Yi co-ethnic brokerage mean for our understanding of labour migration in general? Migration through the intermediation of the co-ethnic brokerage system is not a modern development, a present-day phenomen. From the seventh to nineteenth century, there are records of those who have been interested in brokers and migration infrastructure and have regarded it as a problem that undermines

the potential seen in the ideal-type of the free, self-determining immigrant (Mckeown, 2012). In the Golden Age and the eighteenth century, migration run in the form of co-ethnic brokerage system was an undeniable factor in the labour migration from the impoverished German states to the more affluent Netherlands (Lucassen, 1987). In the nineteenth century, labour brokerage in China, India and Malaya supplied the “man power supply chains” that supported the industrialization of Britain (Schwenkel, 2014). Mexicans heading to the United State in the latter half of the nineteenth century encountered brokers who functioned both as facilitators and controllers in the process of border crossing and finding employment. This sort of of brokerage died away in the early twentieth century because of the rise in border controls and the concomitant construction of the free, self-motivated individual who was a proper subject in immigration law and theory.[4]

Nevertheless, with the resurgence of global migration and the mounting refugee crisis in recent decades, migration brokerage has again been growing as an industry. This agency is needed, as the issues of refugees, segregation, lack of citizenship and xenophobia inevitably associated with labour migration are still problematic across the world. In Asian countries, migrant brokers have emerged as important players in migration trajectories across the continent (see, for example, Lindquist, 2009; Xiang, 2005, 2013, 2014; Chu, 2010). Brokers can always find opportunities at the interstices between the illegal and legal, formal and informal jurisdictions and step in to provide information, organize the actual process of migration, and negotiate contracts, alongside a host of other practicalities that might arise (Mckeown, 2012; Krissman, 2005; Gammeltoft-Hanson and Sørensen, 2013).

Despite the diverse forms the co-ethnic brokerage system has taken over the course of migration – undocumented migration, black-market smuggling and early-stage ethnic entrepreneurs plus others - the discussion about the migration brokers is often presented as a stark dichotomy. From a legal standpoint, the co-ethnic brokerage system that obscures knowledge of migration and exploits workers often leads to the formation of the image of brokers as the personification of migration evils. In contrast, another branch

[4] Jan Lucassen, 1987. *Migrant Labour in Europe, 1600–1900. The Drift to the North Sea*. London: Routledge. Christina Schwenkel. 2014. “Rethinking Asian Mobilities”, *Critical Asian Studies*, 46(2): 235–258.

of literature on migration networks often focuses on the facilitation side of these intermediaries. These sorts of discussion tend either to demonize migration brokerage or, conversely, over-egg the pudding of the brokerage as a positive network. Of course, these two simplified illustrations are never going to account fully for the sophistication of migration brokerage, its structure and agencies, and the dynamics inherent in the labour brokerage system.

In the light of the discussion about the opening of the brokerage system (Mckeown, 2012; Lindquist, Xiang, and Yeoh, 2012), this thesis suggests that brokers should not be regarded as the personification of migration evils, nor should they be relegated to the position of a cog in the social network that facilitates labour migration. Instead of this stark dichotomy, opening the black box of the co-ethnic brokerage should be considered within a spectrum ranging from exploitation, protection, control to facilitation. Moreover, as I have shown in this thesis, brokerage is not restricted to the social network, it is also intertwined with state policies; markets that function together to produce a migration industry. In other words, brokerage is becoming an industry that is only feasible within the infrastructure that is provided by the government and the market (see also, Gammeltoft-Hanson and Sørensen, 2013).

To broaden an understanding of it, this study provides an empirical account of and a comparative perspective on labour brokerage. Unquestionably, compared to the labour brokerage on an international scale, apart from some administrative hurdles, the rural-to-urban migrants in China are not confronted with the problems of a lack of legal status or citizenship.[5] However, although spared legal problems of these proportions, rural-to-urban ethnic minority labour migrants do encounter similar problems arising from lack of integration, difficult assimilation and xenophobia and they also not have to wrestle with legal constraints faced by international migrants. Moreover, the gray zones that have characterized

[5] *Hukou* is the domestic indication of citizenship or identity card in China. During the period of planned economy, its function was to prevent people from moving freely from one region to another. Now, the picture is somewhat different. Since the late 1980s, peasants have been encouraged to come to cities to work in the manufacturing, construction, and service sectors, to meet the soaring need for a labour force in cities. However, in cities migrant workers are entitled to far fewer rights in terms living conditions, education, and medical services than citizens who hold local *hukou*. In this sense, non-*hukou* migrant workers in cities are legally domiciled but are unequal in terms of citizenship.

most brokerage activities – between legal and illegal, licit and illicit – are situated beyond the tangible border and citizenship, expanding the possibilities for labour brokerage to be implemented in a single nation-state.

To date, migration studies tend to be about the role of the co-ethnic brokerage system in tracking migration, the individual and collective actions of these migrants are often ignored. By illisturating the Yi migrants in the context of rural-to-urban migration in China, this study has undertaken an analysis of the interaction of class, ethnicity, gender and state policies. As I have pointed out previously, the multiple identities of labour migrants, both members of ethnic groups and ordinary brokered workers involve more contestation in terms of the power geometry. Therefore, the agency of labour migrants - who accept or resist the brokers, employers and governments, accordingly - must also not be left out of the picture.

In the second place, this study sheds light on unravelling complicated labour relationships in general and in China in particular. So far, scholarship has focused overwhelmingly on the resistance of labour migrants in China. Relatively little research has explored the non-resistance part. Thereby adding to the many discussions about labour movements in the recent years, this study fills this gap by illustrating why and how the complicated labour resistance involving ethnic Yi migrants occurs, and why workers accept the exploitative brokerage system.

This research provides insights into ethnic and class relationships in contemporary China. Firstly, previous research on labour migration in China has focused predominantly on Han Chinese migrants and ignored ethnic minorities, who account for 8 percent of the Chinese population. This study adds an ethnic dimension to the scholarship on Chinese labor migrants. It shows that class has been interwoven with ethnicity and gender in the production of the social inequality of certain disadvantaged groups in China, and that ethnicity remains an obstacle to transcending ethnic boundaries and forging a sense of solidarity with all members of the working class. Therefore, the case of ethnic Yi migrant workers reveals a divergent scenario in class formation in China.

Thirdly, in most cases, the literature on issues of ethnic policies in China in concerned with “grand politics” (nationalities’ policies, Tibet, Xinjiang or regional autonomy). Studies on specific social issues within a given ethnic group are rather rare, especially if sensitive issues are involved. By examining the empirical situation in which local governments interact

with the Yi migrants in producing ethnic politics in the Pearl River Delta area, this study sheds light on the tension between the local governments and ethnic minorities. Recently, looking at how the state handles popular unrest in China in general, scholars such as Ching Kwan Lee and Yonghong Zhang have demonstrated the multiple soft strategies that Chinese local states have adopted to prevent the disruption to social stability. In this study, I have showed that underneath of the overarching purpose of maintaining stability; the local government has been reluctant to show extra tolerance towards some ethnic minority migrants in comparison to non-ethnic minority workers. Nevertheless, rather than depoliticizing the confrontation, the Stability Maintenance System and the ineffectiveness of the legal framework also provide workers with opportunities to organize collectively as an alternative course of action.

One limitation of focusing research on one ethnic group in a particular region is the issue of representativeness. As the fifty-five ethnic groups in China vary enormously in their cultures, ethnicities and religions, this study does not make any claims about that can be expanded to other ethnic groups. In order to paint a general picture of the relationship between the local state and ethnic minorities in China, more research reflecting the situation of different ethnic groups in different regions shall be conducted. In addition, specific to the case of ethnic Yi migrants, what are the impacts of the Chinese demographic transition, tightened labour market, "Go West" development policies and the expansion of vocational schools on Yi migrants? "What is next?" is the question that has to be more fully explored in the future. As one of the few studies on ethnic minority labour migration in China, this study hopes to have epitomized the transformation of class formation, ethnic boundary making and new forms of labour/ethnic politics and hence have revealed another aspect of the cultural, socio-economic and political transformations in Chinese society.