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The Dilemma of Foxconn Moms: Social Reproduction and the Rise of 'Gig Manufacturing' in China

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Abstract

As the first ethnographic account of Foxconn in Zhengzhou—the world's largest iPhone manufacturing base—this paper argues that a new labor regime features 'hegemonic precarity' has arisen since capital's move to inland China. Despite being offered formal contracts with long-term benefits, inland Foxconn workers choose a more precarious employment status. I argue that this surprising pattern is a result of the interaction between dynamics at the point of production and that of social reproduction. Through the mechanism of 'hoarding of time', Foxconn's management pays relatively high wages to a minority of workers while keeping the majority's wages minimal. Meanwhile, changing dynamics in the realm of social reproduction makes Foxconn workers, especially women with children, constantly struggle between work and the family. Working together, these factors have led to extremely high turnover rates, bleak prospects for labor solidarity, and the rise of 'gig manufacturing' in China.

Keywords

sociology, labor, social reproduction, precarious employment, gender, gig economy, Foxconn, China

Introduction

During the past decade, Ho Hai Precision Industry (better known as Foxconn), a Taiwanese multinational electronics contract manufacturer operating the majority of its production lines in China, has become a prototypical site for global labor studies. As Apple's primary supplier, Foxconn drew worldwide attention after 18 young workers attempted suicide on its Shenzhen campus in southern China in 2010.[1] After meticulously scrutinizing Foxconn's labor recruitment, management system, and its role in the global production chain, scholars and labor watch groups argue that a 'dormitory labor regime' has characterized Foxconn and other labor-intensive manufacturing companies in China's coastal Special Economic Zones (SEZs; Chan et al., 2020, 2021; Deng, 2018; Pun, 2016; Pun and Smith, 2007). By tightly controlling labor's daily reproduction in the dormitory and

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externalizing the long-term and intergenerational reproduction to the inland countryside, this labor regime has provoked strong labor unrest on one hand, while preventing workers from forming greater collective power on the other hand.

More recently, in response to rising labor costs, manufacturing companies operating in China including Foxconn have resorted to a 'spatial fix' (Harvey, 1999), which is to relocate production lines to inland provinces and, increasingly, to other countries where labor is still relatively cheap. Along with the inland move is a profound transformation in the demographic composition of the Chinese manufacturing workforce. Many migrant workers who used to work in the coastal SEZs now have returned to the inland, working in newly built factories in their home provinces. In addition, those who had not joined the migrant workforce in the past are now entering these nearby factories. Compared with their coastal counterparts, the inland workforce are much older, typically in their late thirties and forties, with a large proportion being married women with school-aged children.

What also distinguishes these workers is their rising consent to a highly precarious employment pattern. In 2014, the central government promulgated a new law that restricts employers from hiring dispatch workers, who are temporary contractors recruited by a dispatch agency independent from the enterprise (Feng, 2019), giving rise to a wave of 're-formalization' in the Chinese migrant workforce (Gürel and Kozluca, 2019). Yet, despite being offered formal positions with social insurance, a large portion of inland Foxconn workers have turned themselves into de facto informal labor: they enter the factory, work there for a few months, and then *voluntarily* leave after the peak season; the next year, many return to the same factory as new hires. While in the past the Chinese migrant workforce would usually stay in the same factory or city for multiple years and only visit home once a year, today, a manufacturing job resembles a temporary job in the 'gig economy' that has prevailed in post-industrialized neoliberal societies. For this reason, I name the current labor system as a 'gig manufacturing' regime.

Existing literature on work and employment suggests that a formal job—defined as an employment status linked to standard social insurance systems—is generally more desirable than an informal gig. Then, why do migrant workers voluntarily enter and exit the factory frequently when they are offered an opportunity to maintain long-term employment with protections and benefits? What sociological factors are at work in producing this novel pattern?

The current research addresses these questions by drawing on a case study in a Foxconn plant in Zhengzhou, the capital of Henan province where Foxconn's largest facility is located. Based on participatory observation on the shop floor and interviews with workers, and aided with national-level data, this study is among the first to offer a comprehensive assessment of labor politics inside the Foxconn workshop after the company's massive inland move. I conceptualize the core feature of this new 'gig manufacturing' regime as *hegemonic precarity*, that is, workers give *consent* to a more precarious employment status despite being offered a formal contract with long-term benefits. Whereas earlier labor regime studies have well explained how consent is manufactured at the point of production (Burawoy, 1979, 1985; Lee, 1998, 1999), it cannot explain why and how consent is made regarding labor's intention to continue or quit the job. In other words, only looking at the point of production is insufficient to explain workers' consent to a precarious employment status. To better solve the puzzle, I draw on the Social Reproduction Theory (SRT; Bhattacharya, 2017b; Federici, 2019) and develop a new framework, showing how dynamics at both the point of production and social reproduction co-produce the sociological conditions that give rise to hegemonic precarity.

My argument can be summarized as follows: At the point of production, Foxconn relies on a mechanism that I call 'the hoarding of overtime', in which the management hoards opportunities for overtime—the means to higher wage—to a small portion of workers while keeping the base

wage low. The wide wage range (from US$281 to US$888) of the same Foxconn assembly position, therefore, makes the job sound good to attract labor while keeping the pay too volatile for labor to stay long. In the realm of labor's social reproduction, two loci are examined. First, in the dormitory where labor's daily reproduction takes place, cross-cutting dorm assignments atomize workers and create an isolating daily experience. Second, in the rural household where labor's intergenerational reproduction happens, the family's need for cash income compels mothers to find factory jobs and, meanwhile, emerging intensive motherhood expectations demand them to be available whenever the children need them. Overall, it is the earning uncertainty and contradictory forces in social reproduction that make Foxconn moms oscillate between work and home on a seasonal basis. Such contradictions, however, also open up space for women workers to exercise agency and build solidarity.

The Myth of Formal Work and the Precarity of the Migrant Labor Force

With the erosion of the postwar welfare state and the rise of the gig economy, the field of work studies has seen heightened interest in 'informality'—an employment status that is not regulated or linked to standard social insurance systems (Lee et al., 2020). While earlier scholarship focused on explaining the novelty of such changes (Kalleberg, 2009; Standing, 1999), recent literature pushes forward the field in new directions. By extending the scope of inquiries beyond the franchised workforce in the postwar global North, researchers show that the Fordist social contract that promised formal work with job security and benefits was more of a historical outlier than a universal norm, as social groups who are deemed marginal based on their race, gender, class, and citizenship have never enjoyed the same level of job security and social benefits (Betti, 2018; Hatton, 2011; Mosoetas et al., 2016; Scully, 2016).

New literature on informality also goes further to challenge a key assumption of previous frameworks—a Lewisian model of development assuming that the majority of labor in the low-paid, low-productivity agricultural sector will ultimately move to the urban industrial sector and the latter sector will eventually replace the former (Mezzadri and Banerjee, 2021). Yet, in reality, the informal sector and individuals' informal employment are anything but an ephemeral stage on the way to industrialization and formalization. On the contrary, informal sectors in many places in the world have survived industrialization and sometimes even expanded in tandem with industrial growth, as the rise of the middle-class demands a large army of informal service labor (Agarwala, 2013; Roberts, 2014). In addition, within the formal sector, there also exists a significant portion of informal workers who are excluded from regulations and protections by formal labor legislation (Lee et al., 2020, Longo, 2020). To many enterprises, dividing the workforce into the formal core and the informal periphery has been an effective strategy to prevent labor solidarity, sustain domination, and boost profitability (Zhang, 2015).

Besides being functional to capital accumulation, informal employment sometimes also works better for the individual. In many industrializing economies in the global South, unskilled workers either have no preferences between formal industrial jobs and informal alternatives, as the former does not necessarily pay well but is more demanding (Blattman and Dercon, 2018), or are more likely to turn down or quit low-quality formal factory jobs and find better opportunities in the informal service market or start micro-enterprises themselves, contingent on social sources (Dong, 2020; Peng, 2021; Zizzamia, 2020).

While these new developments effectively debunk the myth that a formal factory job is universally better than its informal alternatives, no existing frameworks can explain why workers in

the current case of Foxconn have turned a purported formal job into gig work, frequently entering and exiting the factory, while not necessarily having better employment options. To fill this gap, the next section develops a new analytical framework that synthesizes existing labor regime analyses and the SRT, highlighting the centrality of workers' livelihoods outside the workplace in shaping labor politics.

Embedding SRT to Labor Regime Analysis: An Integral Approach

While the term 'social reproduction theory' is a recent invention, the intellectual ground of SRT has its long genealogy in Marxian theory. When Marx (1976 [1867]) well established that the extraction of 'surplus value' relies primarily on extending the working day and squeezing the time of labor's daily reproduction, he did not further theorize how the generational reproduction of the labor power constitutes labor politics but just took the former as a given condition. Communist revolutionaries of the 20th-century, such as Alexandra Kollontai (1977 [1916]), have pointed out women's essential role in providing domestic and reproductive labor and accused such work of dragging them from doing more meaningful and socially important work—a condition impeding women's liberation. In the 1970–1980s, Marxist feminists further contended that women's unremunerated labor in the domestic sphere, instead of being an externality or minor issue, lies at the very core of capitalist accumulation (Federici, 1975; Humphries and Rubery, 1984; Mies, 1986). Present-day SRT scholar, in response to the dismantling of the welfare state and the marketization of social reproduction sectors such as childcare, eldercare, and healthcare in the global North, extend the locus of analysis from the domestic realm to a broad range of processes and institutions that constitute the renewal of the labor force and the maintenance of the social order (Bakker, 2007; Bhattacharya, 2017b; Ferguson, 2016; Fraser, 2016).

In labor studies, the reproduction of labor power (or labor reproduction)—a concept overlapping but not identical with social reproduction—has been widely deployed in labor regime analysis. Michael Burawoy (1985) in his seminal work on comparative factory regimes further conceptualizes labor reproduction, as well as competition among firms, labor process, and state intervention, as four variables that shape politics at the point of production (p. 90). Later scholarship draws on evidence from China's export-oriented manufacturing factories—the quintessential workshop of global capitalism in the last three decades—and develops a *dormitory labor regime* thesis that focuses on the disciplinary power of the management and the function of the dormitory form of labor reproduction (Chan and Zhu, 2003; Fan, 2004; Pun, 2016; Pun and Smith, 2007). In a typical dormitory regime, workers, who are predominantly female, young, and unmarried, would be temporarily compressed into single-sex dormitories adjacent to the factories while their rural household registration (*hukou*) status dictates that they cannot access urban welfare benefits. This spatial mode of labor control minimizes the cost of labor reproduction by making sure that workers live close by, their time is tightly controlled, yet all other costs of reproduction are externalized to their rural home villages, producing a generation of left-behind children (Murphy, 2020). What is working hand in hand with the workplace-based labor control is the 'patrilineal, patrilocal, and patriarchal' family system embedded in rural China that has helped produce a generation of socially disadvantaged women migrant workers, who are deprived of land and other resources in the village and have to sell their labor in this paternalistic factory regime, in which there is a self-regulated, patriarchal, native place-based network (Lee, 1998; Pun, 2004).

However, existing approaches to the question of labor reproduction in labor regime studies fall short of grasping three crucial issues (Mezzadri and Banerjee, 2021; Mezzadri and Majumder, 2020; Rao, 2021). First, these studies usually exclusively focus on the dormitory system, one particular site of labor's daily reproduction, while missing other sites of social reproduction in which

workers reproduce their livelihoods and communities. As evidence from the less-studied care service, hail-riding, and construction sectors show, alternative patterns of social reproduction are crucial to understanding labor's employment choices (Dong, 2020; Kwan, 2022; Swider, 2015).

Second, existing labor regime analyses tend to take labor reproduction as a static, given condition rather than fully grapple with the dialectical relationship between the domains of production and social reproduction. While economic sociologists and labor scholars have analyzed how social factors including patriarchal norms shape employment patterns (Granovetter, 1973; Lee, 1998; Lin, 1999; Pun, 2004, 2005; Peng, 2021), the novel contribution of SRT-inspired feminist political economy lies in its systemic analysis of the role of social reproduction—a constellation of gendered processes—plays in economic processes. The crux here is that the interaction between production and social reproduction are fundamentally mediated by female labor's dual role across the boundary: On one hand, women in industrializing countries are increasingly drawn into the labor market as producers for the Global Production Networks (Barrientos et al., 2011); on the other hand, they are still deemed as primary caregivers in their patriarchal families. As a result, most migrant women's employment trajectories cannot easily fit into a masculinist pattern that typically features a one-time entry to the labor market and longer period of employment. Instead, their employment patterns tend to square with the rhythm in their reproductive life and are usually restrained within a short time window—typically from late teens to mid-twenties, after which they would return to their village homes to assume the role of mother and caregiver for the elderly (Chuang, 2015; Mezzadri and Majumder, 2020). These two roles are often at odds with each other.

Third, SRT also provides a more powerful framework to conceptualize women's agency in negotiating with and resisting capital and patriarchal domination. With deindustrialization and informalization, traditional sites of labor struggle, that is, the point of production such as the factory workshop and the office, are losing their strategic relevance. On the contrary, it has become increasingly urgent and promising to organize labor in the realm of social reproduction, such as the domestic work sector and the communicative space shared by female hail-riding workers, as well as to organize around issues regarding living conditions, social welfare, and sexual harassment (Bhattacharya, 2017a; Kwan, 2022). At the same time, as Lisa Vogel (2013) and Susan Ferguson (2020) emphasize, the renewed SRT also offers a unitary theory of capitalism and patriarchy, 'dislodging unpaid housework from the cent[er] of its analysis and insisting instead on the necessary-but-contradictory relation of social reproductive to productive work' (p. 6). This implies that women workers' struggle between the productive and social reproductive sphere has itself become a site of bargaining and negotiation, as women's definite strategies navigating between the two spheres can either facilitate or disrupt capital accumulation.

In this study, joining the call for better capturing the intersections between productive and reproductive dynamics and especially the constitutive, instead of complementary, role social reproduction plays in labor politics (Mezzadri and Banerjee, 2021), I deploy an integral approach that incorporates the SRT-inspired insights with labor regime analyses. In addition to looking at the tension between industrial production and labor's social reproduction, I also conceptualize the realm of social reproduction as a multi-locus sphere in which forces in different directions are at play. In particular, I identify three factors in two loci of social reproduction that are at work: the factory dormitory where labor's daily reproduction takes place; and labor's intergenerational reproduction that includes material demand as well as the needs of parental care. As I will demonstrate, all these factors within social reproduction, together with factors at the point of production, have co-produced a complex system in which workers choose a precarious mode of work over a formal mode. Straddling the two spheres, these Foxconn moms are continuously negotiating with the complex system by actively construing their dual role of both breadwinner and caregiver, and the alternative caring space they create has the potential to foster solidarity and future struggles.

In the following sections, I first explain why I choose Zhengzhou Foxconn as my case study in the context of China's manufacturing relocation. Second, I lay out labor patterns in this inland 'gig manufacturing' regime that is characterized by what I call 'hegemonic precarity', a term to highlight newly emerging characteristics including extremely high turnover and seasonal employment, which are distinct from the earlier dormitory regime in the coastal SEZs. Third, I explain multiple factors in the sphere of labor's social reproduction that co-produce hegemonic precarity. In the conclusion, I discuss implications of the findings in understanding labor dynamics in China and beyond.

Contextualizing the Case of Zhengzhou Foxconn

During the time when the serial suicides took place in Shenzhen in 2010, Foxconn was already starting to move its production lines to inland China—the beginning of a long-term spatial fix. In summer 2010, Foxconn opened its first Zhengzhou campus with a labor force of 250,000, which made Zhengzhou exceed Shenzhen to become the largest among its multiple global sites and the sole base for its high-end iPhone production (Barboza, 2016). In the next few years, Foxconn built another two campuses in Zhengzhou, making the province the largest labor supplier for the company. As of today, Foxconn has built 45 campuses across China, the majority of which are in inland provinces. From 2007 to 2019, the total number of Foxconn employees in the Great China region increased from 600,000 to 813,000—peaking at 988,000 in 2017.[2] This is part of a large wave of manufacturing relocation that involved most overseas companies operating in China and the top destinations are former agricultural provinces that had the largest rural populations.

The massive capital relocation has also profoundly transformed the landscape of China's internal migration. From 2008 to 2021, in-province migration from major inland provinces increased from 29% to 43.4% (National Statistics Bureau (NSB hereafter), 2021). Inside Foxconn's facilities in Henan, the proportion of in-province migrants has reached 95%. Rather than traveling thousands of miles to a remote city and only visiting home once a year—a typical pattern among long-distance migrants in earlier decades—Zhengzhou Foxconn workers are from nearby regions within Henan. The increase in proximity between work and home has enabled a large number of women with young children to go out and work. From 2009 to 2021, nationwide, married peasant workers of both genders increased from 56% to 80.2% while singles dropped from 41.5% to 16.8% (NSB, 2021). Such changes are in tandem with the problem of aging in the Chinese migrant labor force: Between 2008 and 2021, the proportion of migrant workers older than 40 increased from 30% to 52%, with the average age rising from 34 to 42 (NSB, 2021). Meanwhile, the proportion of Foxconn's employees under 30 years old dropped from more than 90% to 48%. These demographic changes have produced a new landscape that challenges our former impression that the majority of electronics manufacturing workers are factory boys and factory girls.

The coming of Foxconn has brought one of the most populated agricultural provinces in China spectacular growth.[3] In 2016, Henan's total foreign trade in *yuan* reached 471 billion (US$67 billion), for the first time ranked top 10 among all provinces in China, and 67.3% of it was contributed by Foxconn (Anonymous, 2017). To attract capital, Henan's local governments are actively helping Foxconn recruit labor from all possible avenues. In addition to the student intern system that Foxconn has been relying on since its beginning (Su, 2011), the provincial government directly subsidizes the labor recruitment process. For each worker recruited by a labor agency, the government would pay the agency a commission fee of 400 *yuan*.

In June 2016, I made daily visits to the dormitory area of this Foxconn plant and interviewed 24 workers in their after-work time. In July 2017, I did participant observation by working on the assembly line inside the same factory and lived in the factory dorm for 2 weeks, where I worked,

ate, and lived with five co-workers. I had to end my fieldwork inside Foxconn after 2 weeks of working as my overseer started to question my identity. While all my interviewees in 2016 gave me oral consent, my participant observation in 2017 had to be totally anonymous due to the political sensitivity in investigating Foxconn in China. All names in this paper are pseudonyms.

Strangers in a Labyrinth: Manufacturing Hegemonic Precarity Inside the Foxconn Plant

Drawing on my participatory observation as an assembly line worker inside one of the Foxconn plants in Zhengzhou, this section delineates how hegemonic precarity works at the point of production. To narrate, I organize this section following the ways in which my ethnographic data emerged to give readers a more holistic picture about the world inside Foxconn. After summarizing the historical manifestation of labor precarity in Henan, my analysis starts at the point of entry, that is, Foxconn's labor recruitment policy. Second, I illustrate how the labor process on the shop floor and labor's daily reproduction alienate and atomize workers. Finally, I explain how the mechanism that I call 'the hoarding of overtime', in combination with the first two factors, produces an extremely high turnover rate at Foxconn.

Manufacturing Labor's Precarity in Henan: A Brief Review

So far, no studies have systemically documented the trajectory of the manifestation of labor precarity in inland agricultural provinces, but a brief review of the three-stage trajectory in Henan is telling. In the first stage between the 1950s and 1990s, Henan's industrial sector was dominated by state-owned enterprises, which offered permanent employment and a comprehensive scheme of social benefits including pension, healthcare, housing welfare, and childcare services (Zhao, 2012). In the second stage between the late 1990s and 2000s, the nationwide industrial restructuring turned all former state-owned, labor-intensive manufacturing enterprises into private ones. From 2000 to 2010, the percentage of employees in private enterprises among employees of all types of enterprises in Henan increased from 14.6 to 61.7 (NSB, 2001, 2011). These new private enterprises recruited labor from two pools: the laid-off state workers who desperately needed a job and migrant peasants who came from rural Henan (although during this period of time the majority of Henanese migrants worked in the SEZs in the coastal areas). In these private enterprises, not only labor protections and welfare provisions were meager, but labor contracts were constantly violated (Dong, 2020; Zhao and West, 2002). As a result, workers in this stage experienced the highest level of precarity. In the third stage since the 2010s, with the coming of relocated manufacturing industry and the state's push for formalization (Gürel and Kozluca, 2019), the number of formal jobs significantly increased. For example, between 2014 and 2016, 260,000 formal manufacturing jobs were added in Henan (Xu and Chen, 2019).

It is in this third stage that we see the rise of 'hegemonic precarity', in which workers are offered formal contracts with welfare benefits, yet, paradoxically, they prefer a more precious, seasonal employment pattern. For instance, in the year 2017 when I did my fieldwork, Foxconn's *Corporate Social Responsibility Report* showed that 93% of all its employees were under formal contract. However, for the *pugong* (irank-and-file assembly line workers who usually hold a middle-school degree or lower) who account for 90% of all employees, the turnover rates have been high even before Foxconn's inland move. In the Shenzhen Foxconn system, the main reason for *pugong*'s high turnover was harsh working conditions and lack of upward mobility (Chan et al., 2020). In Foxconn's 13-level hierarchical management system, *pugong* and student interns occupy the bottom level; the manager positions are usually reserved for professionals from Taiwan; and only a

small number of entry-level employees with higher educational attainment and outstanding performance would climb up the hierarchy to become a supervisor. According to a survey conducted between 2010 and 2011 in Shenzhen Foxconn, the average length of employment of a *pugong* was 25.6 months while that of an employee ranked higher than *pugong* was 64 months; 49% of the *pugong* would quit within a year (Yang, 2013). In the Zhengzhou Foxconn plant during summer time, for the reasons I explain in the following sections, the turnover rate among *pugong* is even higher.

Liberal Recruitment Policy and the Diversified Labor Pool

The first thing that would strike an observer on the ground is Foxconn's surprisingly liberal recruitment policy—a drastic change from its recent past. As multiple informants told me, a few years ago when Foxconn first arrived in Henan, it was competitive to get in. One had to be under 30 years old, with at least a high-school diploma or equivalent, and candidates with tattoos would be screened out. Now, anyone between 20 and 45 with a government-issued ID is welcome; no one is asked to show proof of their education credentials. Foxconn is also encouraging referrals. For any current employee who has helped recruit a new one, if the newcomer has not left after 3 months, the employee who has done the referral will receive a bonus of 1000 *yuan*, about half of the basic monthly wage.

Such changes in recruitment policy were confirmed as soon as I walked into the factory's recruitment office to apply for the job. When I entered the room, I overheard an officer complaining to his colleagues, 'Ten years ago in Shenzhen [Foxconn], people were fighting each other to get in; but now, we are experiencing a severe labor shortage'. When I told the officers that I wanted to become a *pugong*, they did not show much suspicion, only warning me that this would be hard work and I may not be able to pull through. Upon my insistence, they gave me a few forms to fill out, which collected information such as government-issued ID number and educational background. I also completed a questionnaire assessing my psychological state—a measure to preempt workers' suicides. Following that, I joined many more recruits who arrived on the same day to do a physical checkup that would screen out HIV, TB, and hepatitis-B positives. The same afternoon, together with another few hundred men and women from Henan and some nearby provinces, I settled in the dormitory building next to the workshop.

While waiting for our blood test results, we had to attend a 2-day orientation camp, during which every new recruit was asked to sign a labor contract, confirming the formal employment status. New employees also had to attend a team building training program and to watch multiple hours of recorded lectures covering enterprise history, workplace code of conduct, attendance and benefits policies, and a section on labor rights. Having briefly mentioned that workers 'have the freedom of association under the Chinese Constitution', a surprise to me, this section focused on introducing the government-sponsored union inside Foxconn, which asked workers to channel their complaints to the union before taking other action. The section about benefits and protections emphasized that suicide would not count as fatal work injury and was thus ineligible for any compensation. Instead of organizing workers' collective bargaining, the function of the union is to monitor the mental state of the workers who are seen as a legal liability and to harmonize capital–labor relations.

At the orientation, new recruits were not yet assigned to any particular department but organized in large groups to do team-building activities. There, I had the best chance of getting a sense of where all these workers came from and who they were. After notoriously hiring student interns and being criticized for that, Foxconn has become more cautious in recent years and started tapping into unchartered waters in seeking alternative cheap labor. During my fieldwork, I identified four

types of labor sources: *veteran migrant workers* who used to work in factories in the remote SEZs but now work somewhere close to home; *college students* who took Foxconn work as a summer job for pocket money; *rural residents*, especially women, who had never taken an industrial job before or had been out of the labor market for years but now are (re)entering the factory as it now gets closer to home; and finally, *laid-off state workers*. While the first three types have given consent to a short-term, unstable employment pattern, as explained in later sections, the last type are forced to work here.[4]

Labor Process and Labor's Daily Reproduction

While many workers came here with their classmates, fellow villagers, and even spouses and relatives, they would soon find themselves being alone most of the time in the gigantic complex of workshops. The process of atomization starts immediately with job assignments. At the end of the 2-day orientation, hundreds of newcomers are randomly assigned to five major departments. The following day, they would stand in lines waiting for division heads or supervisors to take them to different assembly lines. For most entry-level jobs, no qualification or experience is required. However, implicit biases and discrimination are pervasive. For instance, supervisors from a division that involves computer operation or basic technician work would always choose men over women. Such types of work would also provide more bonuses. Entry-level clerical assistant positions are given to young girls, especially the 'good-looking' or 'student-like' ones. All supervisors prefer younger workers over older ones, welcoming the former as they can 'bring in youthful energy', as my section supervisor, a middle-aged man, opined. At the bottom of the informal hierarchy are rural women of older ages, who are usually the 'leftovers' that no supervisors wanted to pick.

Before a worker gets into the workshop, there are three levels of security and attendance checks. At the last one, which is the entrance of the production workshop inside the building, every employee has to go through a full-body search, both when entering and exiting. The purpose is to make sure that no one can sneak in any device like a smartphone or memory chip to spy on the new products or to take any materials out of the workshop. To reduce chances of a false alarm, workers are simply asked not to wear anything with metal materials head to toe. This includes phones, keys, glasses with metal frames, rings, necklaces—all have to be put in a locker outside the workshop. In fact, even metal eyelets on a sneaker have to be uprooted and bras have to be wire-free as well.

Inside the windowless workshop, the space is divided into many subsections based on production processes. One may have to walk through several different subsections before reaching her own assembly line. While disposable caps, masks, and gloves are distributed at the beginning of every shift, they are for protecting the products, not the workers, who have to put up with chemical odors and potential radiation without being informed about the risk. In principle, chatting is prohibited, but after a worker's suicide in 2015, management relaxed a bit. Yet, it is still very unlikely that one can get to know anyone except for immediate neighbors on the assembly line.

Workers' sense of isolation gets further worsened by their experience in the dormitory. In a room with four bunk beds for eight persons, it is not only that one's roommates are from different native places, age groups, or departments, but they may also take different rotation shifts. There are two shifts in this Foxconn plant: a regular day shift between 8 a.m. and 5 p.m. and a regular night shift between 8 p.m. and 5 a.m., and a worker rotates between the two shifts once a month. At 5 p.m., those who are just off the day shift come back, making some noise that may wake up their night-shift roommates, who might have just had a few hours of sleep after overtime. One evening when I returned to the dorm after a day shift, Yaping, my 19-year-old dormmate, told me that she just had a fight with Shuna, a 39-year-old dormmate. 'Shuna scolded me

when I was having lunch. She was sleeping after night shift and the sound I made bothered her. But she has to understand that I have no control!'

Segregation at work, quick shuffling, heterogeneous backgrounds, unavoidable sleep interruption, and physical exhaustion made roommates not willing to socialize with each other. After a long shift, the most typical activity inside the dorm is quickly handwashing one's clothes, taking a shower, and then lying in one's bunk bed scrolling WeChat messages. To these workers, the dorm is just a place to rest, not a space to belong.

High Turnover and the Hoarding of Overtime

During my fieldwork, I frequently encountered workers who decided to quit after staying only a couple of weeks or even just a few days. The reason, however, was not only rigid discipline or feelings of isolation, but, more importantly, not being able to work overtime. This seems counterintuitive at first glance. It has been well established that forcing workers to take 12-hour instead of 8-hour-long shifts to prolong the workday—the way exploitation works—is the most obvious evidence proving Foxconn's abuse of labor rights. Why, in the factory I study, were workers willing to put up with longer hours, and would quit the job if they were not able to do so? While factors both at the points of production and social reproduction have to be considered to solve this puzzle, in this section, I focus on production, showing that workers' decision was a result of Foxconn's response to the state's push for formalization.

Since the series of suicides in 2010, Foxconn has been closely scrutinized by global labor watch groups and has been under the pressure to follow China's labor regulations more strictly: For overtime hours on the weekday, that is, after working 8 consecutive hours, the hourly rate is 1.5 times that of the regular; on the weekends, the rate doubles; and on national holidays, the rate triples. So, even though in 2017, Zhengzhou Foxconn's base wage was 1900 *yuan*/month (US$280), which was identical with the municipality's minimum wage, workers were able to earn much more at the peak season. During the summer months before Apple releases its new products in September, when workers spend 12 hours on the assembly line every day including holidays, they can make more than 4000 *yuan* and sometimes as much as 6000. This bonus rate is the primary reason that workers want to come to work at Foxconn.

Apparently observing the labor law, Foxconn's managerial control has developed a mechanism that can keep the costs as low as possible while not jeopardizing their productivity. This mechanism is what I call 'the hoarding of overtime', in which labor management turns working overtime from a forced measure to a manipulative incentive. While almost all workers came to Foxconn expecting to make more than the minimum wage, only those who were most self-disciplined, dexterous, and submissive could be picked by their supervisors to work after 8 hours or on weekends and holidays. While this mechanism works across different departments, my observation in the workshop that grinds phone surfaces is quite telling: In this workshop, there were 45 workers (all women) on the assembly line, and the majority of them had just arrived recently. Due to inexperience, some workers would drop and smash the glasses that make the phone surfaces. This would result in a collateral punishment—not only the worker herself would be fined but so would be the line overseer and the workshop supervisor. One day, when, once again, someone dropped a piece of glass, our overseer lost it:

> This is the fifth time during one week! I will be criticized again at the [management] meeting. In our workshop, whoever has worked here for three days is already a senior worker. This is so troubling. Our standard daily rate for each person is 800 pieces, but your clumsy hands could only make half of the number! This is because you are not serious at all. Well, if you are not serious, I don't have to be serious

> either when calculating your overtime [by underreporting]. In fact, if you keep performing poorly, *you'll never get a chance to work overtime*. I will only let the more serious and dexterous 20 of you to do overtime this Saturday, not everyone!

In fact, not being able to get overtime assignments is the foremost reason for workers to quit, as the base salary is barely above subsistence level. One day during my lunch break, a co-worker came to me asking a question. 'Can you help me read my paycheck? Where did all my wages go?' I looked at her paycheck, which showed that out of the 1900 *yuan* monthly payment she received, 321 *yuan* (15.3%) was deducted as mandatory contributions to housing, healthcare, pension, and other welfare schemes, as required by law. Yet, in practice, in order to claim the benefits, a worker has to work for 15 consecutive years in one city, which is unrealistic for the majority. Therefore, a seemingly advantage of having a formal contract actually works against labor's interests. With the deduction of the 150 *yuan* dorm fee, one can get about 1600 *yuan* in cash. As living in the factory dorm means spending at least 20 *yuan* a day on food and daily consumption, one cannot save more than 1000 *yuan* at the end of the month. As the next section shows, this is far from enough and not even worth the family absence they suffer from.

This game of 'working overtime' explains why Foxconn has a relatively liberal policy in recruitment and can tolerate extremely high turnover. Spatially close to a vast pool of cheap labor, every day, Foxconn is able to find hundreds of newcomers easily. With minimal training, these new hands start filling up the assembly line immediately. To abide by the labor law, Foxconn has to pay by the hour rather than the piece. Yet, it only picks the most disciplined, dexterous hands to work longer hours. Those not picked would not stay for long but leave soon. Overall, the profit that the dexterous hands make will exceed the compensation for their overtime. Complicit with capital's manipulation of overtime is the government's suppression of wages. With the minimum wage remaining so low in Zhengzhou, workers can only earn 'enough' by pushing themselves to work longer.

Dilemma of the Foxconn Moms: Manufacturing Hegemonic Precarity in the Realm of Labor's Social Reproduction

While discipline, isolation, and the hoarding of overtime combined can explain why many workers do not stay long in their jobs, they cannot fully explain why, for many workers, going to Foxconn is not a one-time thing, but an oscillation between the factory job and their home community in a seasonal pattern. This section explains how, in their home villages, social-reproductive factors are at play and complicating workers' employment pattern. In a nutshell, these Foxconn moms are being pulled in two opposite directions: the rising cost of social reproduction that pushes them to come to the factory in the hope of increasing their cash income, even just temporarily; and changing culture and infrastructure in the realm of social reproduction that pulls them back to the family in the hope of providing the best care to the next generation.

Commodification of Social Reproduction in Rural Henan

The structural reason behind workers' desperate need for cash income is the commodification of social reproduction. In 2014, Premier Li Keqiang launched the 'peasant worker urbanization' campaign, aiming at transforming 'qualified peasants' into urban residents. The goal was to make 100 million, that is, two-fifths of the total number of peasants working in cities, become urban *hukou* holders by 2020, through building up a new system of public services and household registration (Chinese State Council, 2014). From 1995 to 2020, the portion of urban population at the national level increased from 29% to 63.9%, while that of Henan increased from 17% to 55%.[5]

Accompanying urbanization is the commodification of social reproduction in rural China. By 2017, 62% of the 47.64 million peasants in Henan were taking non-agricultural jobs (among which about 60% were in-province migrants) to subsidize their household economy (Henan Statistics Bureau (HSB), 2018). Yet, only less than 20% of the in-province peasant workers in Henan were enrolled in the urban healthcare and pension programs. This means the majority of the peasant workers have to rely on their home villages for generational reproduction, which is getting ever more expensive due to the mushrooming of real-estate development, private education, and care service in the countryside. While keeping their rural residency, many young couples are pulling together all resources, sometimes even taking loans, to buy apartment housing in the county. As my informants told me, for a typical marriage in rural Henan today, the groom's family needs to provide a car, a new house or apartment, as a form of 'bride price', which would cost more than 200,000 *yuan*. The bride's family is expected to provide a dowry of 30,000 *yuan*, while the average household annual cash income from farming is only about 5000 *yuan*. 'Having two sons is bad luck; it means you have to provide two apartments!' One worker joked bitterly.

What has made the situation worse is the concentration of educational resources to the county level and the diminishment of primary and junior high schools at the village level. In the past four decades, 916,000 village-based primary schools disappeared nationwide, accounting for 80% of the total primary schools that had been built by the late 1970s (Anonymous, 2018). In Henan, between 1978 and 2016, the number of rural primary schools shrunk from 48,772 to 22,881, and that of junior high schools from 22,822 to 4557.[6] Meanwhile, private boarding schools are rapidly expanding to capitalize on the needs of the left-behind children and their parents. Without quality public school services, the majority of my informants had to rely on private kindergartens and schools, which means much higher fees, 1500 to 2000 *yuan* per semester or more. It is against this backdrop of commodification, with skyrocketing living standards and rising costs for children's education, that these moms felt obliged to leave home to earn more.

Both a Breadwinner and Caregiver: Foxconn Moms' Dilemma and Their Agency

This section shows that, on one hand, migrant mothers are being expected to bring cash income home and to provide quality childcare at the same time—a mission nearly impossible and thus puts the Foxconn moms in a thorny dilemma. On the other hand, however, these Foxconn moms are actively construing and embracing their new dual-identity—a breadwinner and caregiver, which boosts their power in bargaining with the patriarchal family and also has the potential to increase their bargaining power vis-à-vis capital. Moreover, to cope with their inevitable absence in offering parental care, these moms have developed an informal institution—self-organized care groups in which mothers take turns to be in charge of several children's living and studying while other mothers working in the out-of-town factory. Still in their nascent stage of development, such care groups, as I discuss in the Conclusion, may have the potential to become a new site of solidarity building.

In this case study, most Foxconn moms had migrant experiences before marriage. Typically, they worked in manufacturing or service sectors far away from home after middle school. In their early twenties, after marrying someone usually from the same hometown, they would go back to the village, giving birth to two or three children within a few years, and when the youngest kid gets old enough to go to kindergarten, they would resume working as paid labor.

While every mother I met expressed their anxiety over not having enough income to support their children, at the same time, they worried about being away from their children. This has much to do with the changing parenting culture. Unlike the first generation of migrant mothers, who often left their children to their in-laws as most couples could not afford bringing children to the

city, these new parents do not trust the grandparents, as the latter are considered to be 'not educated', thus unable to provide quality education to their grandchildren. In fact, among my informants, the majority did not want to leave their school-aged children with in-laws. As one informant said, 'I'd rather send my son to an expensive childcare place than leaving him to my in-law. She knows nothing but playing mahjong all day. Even worse, she smokes like a chimney!'

Not relying on the grandparents means that mothers have to be strategic about when to leave home and work in the city—usually in the summer when they do not have to closely monitor their children's schoolwork—this season-based, restricted availability to work is the core mechanism in the social reproductive realm that enables 'hegemonic precarity'. One informant told me,

> Summer is the best time because when my children do not have to go to school, I do not have to cook and watch them finishing homework every day. I can just leave them to their grandparents and come over here to work, to bring in some extra cash. When school starts in the fall, I'll have to go back!

At the same time, mothers are actively construing and embracing their dual role as both breadwinner and caregiver to gain moral authority in the family and over their children. Shuna, my 39-year-old roommate, has a son, 14, and a daughter, 4. She used to work in Kunshan Foxconn near Shanghai, which is much farther away, but came back to Henan in order to stay closer to her son who is a rebellious juvenile now. It was summertime and her son was not at school. Shuna then sent her son to a Buddhist temple where he was supposed to do volunteer work and get some discipline, which Shuna believes to be good for him. In addition, she asked her sister-in-law, who lives close to the temple to help watch her son.

Shuna was the most frugal one in our dorm. 'I'll save every single penny for my son to go to college', she said. She never joined others for a meal in those small eateries outside the factory—a simple dish with rice would cost about 10 *yuan*. Every time I saw her having dinner, it was either instant noodles, steamed buns, or a small rice noodle dish, all less than 5 *yuan*. Every day, Shuna would call her son, making sure he was doing well. But the teenager was quite resistant and wanted to run away from the temple. Shuna tried to teach him by emphasizing her own sacrifice:

> You shouldn't complain about the vegetarian diet there. You earned every bite of it by hard work; it is much better than being fed meat every day at home! The point is to make you a stronger and better person. Look, I cannot be with you because I have to make more money. It's all for you. No matter how tough it is, I wouldn't complain, as long as you behave well and get into college one day!

Aside from arranging their factory job around children's school reasons, migrant mothers in Henan have developed an informal institution, that is, self-organized care groups, in which one mother takes care of several school-aged children from different families in addition to her own child(ren), and every family chips in with a modest fee. But this does not mean that the Foxconn moms are free from the psychological stress resulting from navigating between gig work and parenting.

Xiaojuan, a 32-year-old mom with two sons (11 and 7 years old), came to Foxconn because she believed that 'women must have a job; being able to make money is always better than not'. In the past few years, when Xiaojuan was out of town for work, every Friday, her mother-in-law would go to pick her son up from an informal care group and send him back Sunday afternoons. But recently, her mother-in-law passed away and it became a challenge to find a substitute. As her husband who works in their hometown is too busy and her father-in-law too old to take the job, Xiaojuan's own mother had to do it, which is a less common practice in rural Henan. 'It's been quite a few years', Xiaojuan grudged with a sense of guilty, 'both I and my son got used to [this

kind of separation]. My younger son is of school age now; he has to start using the [informal care] service this year'.

In my fieldwork, I got to know a mother who used to work in an informal care group and came to Foxconn recently. Coming from a village near W County, 60 miles away from Zhengzhou, Lirong is 36 and has a 14-year-old daughter and an 11-year-old son. A few years ago, she and her husband found temporary jobs through a labor agency in a Foxconn campus in Kunshan, which is 600 miles away from W county. Worried that her son's academic performance might get worse without her being around, she left the job after 4 months. While her daughter was staying with the grandparents and going to school in the hometown, Lirong lived with her son in the county seat, where the boy could go to a much better school. In the same school, many students are from the countryside but far fewer families can afford having a parent living with their child(ren) at a rental place in the county seat, as Lirong did.

So, Lirong, in addition to taking care of her own son, worked as a 'housekeeping teacher' in an informal care group. Teamed up with two other teachers like her, Lirong was responsible for taking care of a small group of children whose parents could not afford living with them by walking them to school, picking them up, cooking, helping them with homework, and sending them to bed on weekdays. Over the weekends, the students' parents would take them home.

Lirong could earn 1500 *yuan* a month for her teacher job. Holding a vocational school diploma and having a pleasant personality, she was very popular among students and parents. What made her come to Zhengzhou Foxconn, though, was that she was told the monthly wage here can reach 3000 *yuan* and the location is close to W County, only 2 hours by bus, so that she can go home every week. However, after working here for just a few days, Lirong decided to quit and get back to her teacher job.

> My son is starting grade 5, which is so crucial. We secured him a spot in this school through *guanxi* (i.e., special ties) and we really count on it. My mother in-law is 60 and not healthy enough to take care of him.

It is only through trying it out that Lirong figured what she cares about most.

The majority of Foxconn moms I talked to cannot fully trust either the grandparents or the informal care service. Neither can they afford the more formal, private services such as a private boarding school which is quickly expanding in rural China. As a result, they are straddling the work-home border seasonally to fulfill their dual role as breadwinner and caregiver. While this is a dynamic that favors 'hegemonic precarity' at this moment, as I discuss in the 'Conclusion' section, such a contradictory condition also creates a space for potential solidarity and change.

Conclusion

Previous scholarship on China's labor regimes has well exposed how mechanisms of coercion and resistance work in the coastal manufacturing factories. In the former dormitory labor regime that helped produce the 'China miracle', capital accumulation and patriarchal norms were aligned with the state-imposed urban–rural divide, producing a gender dynamic in which the tension between a migrant woman's productive and reproductive burden was divided by her life course: In her teens and early twenties, she would travel to the coastal economic zones working inside the sweatshop, and after a few years, she would return home to marry, have children, and stay behind taking care of the youngsters and elderly.

Then, what can we learn from the current case of Zhengzhou Foxconn when capital has moved to China's heartland? This paper demonstrates that a new labor regime is on the rise when a similar enterprise setup intersects with changing dynamics in the realm of labor's social reproduction.

Proximity to work has led to lower stakes to entering and quitting a factory job. Through the hoarding of time, Foxconn's management hoards opportunities for overtime and thus higher pay to a minority of workers, paying the majority of workers only base wage. Meanwhile, rapid commodification of social reproduction in rural China has made mothers working in Foxconn constantly struggle between work and home. Badly in need of cash income to provide for children's education and their future marriages, these moms find necessary to work at Foxconn; yet, paradoxically, it is also the children, especially their schooling, that make many of the mothers unable to afford being absent from home for too long. This is the dilemma that the Foxconn moms face. When these factors at both the point of production and social reproduction work together, the new regime gives rise to higher turnover, worsening potential for solidarity at the point of production, and a world of what I call 'gig manufacturing'. Nevertheless, with new dynamics in the realm of social reproduction emerging, this study also points to new arenas where alternative forms of labor struggle and solidarity building may take place.

This research makes interventions in three avenues. First, by uncovering workers' rationales of doing gig work in spite of formal employment opportunities, I complicate the dominant approach to informality that concerns primarily the stability and related benefits (or the lack thereof) a job can offer. On one hand, my findings suggest that with the global trend toward casualization—characterized by a shift from regular employment to the use of workers in short-term employment arrangements—some forms of precarity can exist under the façade of a nominally formal job through the mechanism of 'hegemonic precarity' documented in this research. Future research about formal and informal employment should go beyond the nominal definition and look into the substantive nature of the job. On the other hand, joining a growing number of feminist scholars working outside the post-Fordist work regimes, my research suggests that in a broader context, it is dynamics in workers' social lives rather than the nature of the job per se that matters most when it comes to employment decisions. With the uneven but rapid expansion of the gig economy over the world, further research should move beyond a job-centered approach to paying close attention to social and cultural factors that play crucial roles in shaping workers' employment trajectories.

Second, this study seeks to push forward an integral approach to studying labor politics that pays equal attention to the sphere of production and that of social reproduction, as well as dynamics between them. Having gathered impressive steam in recent years, the SRT literature rightly points out that there are structural contradictions lying *between* capital accumulation and labor's social reproduction in capitalist societies. This study shows that contradictions *within* the sphere of social reproduction also play a crucial role in shaping labor politics. While commodification of social life—the political economy factor—has led to the rising cost of labor's social reproduction, which propels more women with children to work in the relocated factories, the rise of intensive motherhood—the ideological factor—has been pulling these working mothers back to the home. In other words, it is not enough to just recognize the indispensable role social reproduction plays in conditioning capital accumulation; we also need to develop adequate conceptual tools that can effectively capture complex interactions among different factors within the realm of social reproduction, the outcome of which can either facilitate or undermine capital accumulation in turn.

Finally, in line with the current SRT literature, this study identifies women's agency in their tough battle with the production-reproduction dilemma and also points to potential sites for future struggle and solidarity building. First, instead of passively taking up the dual role of breadwinner and caregiver, the Foxconn moms are actively construing this new identity through narrating a new moral discourse that helps them gain more autonomy against their rural patriarchal family, especially their in-laws, and it also enhances their authority over their children. In addition, positioning themselves as a breadwinning mother may work as an effective strategy in collective bargaining with capital, as such strategy has historically worked for male workers

(Seccombe, 1986). Future research should empirically testify this thesis. Second, the development of informal care groups in the countryside, despite their current limitations, may in the future serve as a social reproductive space for working mothers to develop a sense of solidarity. Considering the ever-intensifying control at the point of production that alienates and atomizes workers, the self-organized care space outside the factory labyrinth deserves special attention and systemic investigation.

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Notes

1. In 2010, 18 young rural migrant workers attempted suicide at Foxconn facilities in and near Shenzhen, resulting in 14 deaths; 4 survived with crippling injuries. See Pun et al. (2016).
2. Compiled by author based on Foxconn's annual Corporate Social Responsibility Reports.
3. By 2021, Henan's population reached 99 million, the third largest in the country (HSB, 2021).
4. The state workers I met in this factory came from H mine. As a former state coal mine, in 2014, H mine was privatized and started a mass lay-off. While desperately looking for re-employment opportunities for its 'excessive' 10,000 workers, H mine heard about Foxconn Henan's 'significant labor shortage'. After a deal between the two enterprises, more than 1300 coal miners had been dispatched to Foxconn. Foxconn shows that they were forced to join Foxconn. If they did not work for Foxconn for at least 6 months, H mine would stop contributing to their pension and healthcare funds.
5. Data compiled from National Statistics Database by author. Available at http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/ndsj/
6. Data compiled by the author based on Henan Statistics Year Books (1978–2016). Available at http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/ndsj/

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