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Peasant traders, migrant workers and "supermarkets": Low-cost provisions and the reproduction of migrant labor in China

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Abstract

This article analyzes the social and spatial dynamics of the mobile trade in low-cost goods by rural people from a mountainous region of China's Zhejiang province and how these interact with the mobility and social reproductive patterns of the rural–urban migrant workers they cater to. Also formally categorized as peasants, the traders not only supply the goods necessary for the maintenance of the workers but also of their spatially divided household, thus contributing to the reproduction of migrant labor power more generally. In doing so, they assume mobility trajectories that align with those of factory production and experience familial trade-offs commonly experienced by migrant workers. Meanwhile, the provision of low-cost goods to migrant workers has enabled a thriving economy employing peasant families for whom agricultural livelihoods slowly disappear. These dynamics indicate the mutual connection between waged and self-employed labor that works in the interest of capital accumulation at the same time with the differentiation of migrant labor. As in other comparable Asian contexts, their connection lies at the heart of the state-sponsored production regime premised on the low-cost reproduction of flexible migrant labor.

KEYWORDS

China, consumption, low-cost provision, migrant labor, reproduction, rural–urban

INTRODUCTION

A chance encounter in the fall of 2019 led us to a gated dormitory complex housing thousands of electronic factory workers on the outskirts of Hangzhou, the capital city of China's Zhejiang province. It was not the workers we had been looking for but rather the owners of the dozen self-service stores in the complex catering to them. Most came from the villages of Lishui, a mountainous city of the same province, where we had been doing fieldwork and had found many villagers operating what they refer to as supermarkets (*chaoshi*) away from the village. Having worked as mobile street vendors earlier, these villagers started to operate rental shelves in fixed markets in the 1990s before renting vacant urban land to build temporary stands that later turned into the more stable self-service stores called *chaoshi*. These household-based stores cater mostly to migrant workers, especially factory workers.

In recent decades, the villages from which the *chaoshi* traders come, and where their families live, have experienced major changes with the shrinking of agriculture and the development of new residential properties and small-scale industries. While most families remain connected to farming, many have taken on off-farm occupations; almost every extended family has somebody operating *chaoshi* away from the village. As with street vending before, the *chaoshi* trade is highly mobile, with operators frequently relocating. Self-service shelving is the main marker of what counts as *chaoshi*, regardless of the size of the stores, although most are up to 50 square meters in size. In contrast to counter-service or street-vending, the self-service approach to trading, as well as the use of the term "supermarket" to refer to a mini-store, carries important meanings for

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people who used to conduct street vending in the cities and who are categorized administratively as *nongmin* (peasants). Despite recent modifications, *hukou* (the Chinese household registration system) remains a powerful instrument of population control that not only ties people's civil rights and access to social services to where they are registered but also signifies social division between rural and urban people (Lin & Mao, 2022). In China today, *nongmin* as a formal classification continues to indicate backwardness and low level of "*suzhi*" (literally "human quality," i.e., the human capital and cultural knowledge necessary to be worthy members of modern China) (Chu, 2010; Hsu, 2006; Zavoretti, 2016). For decades, this discourse has been produced and reinforced by the construction of rural migrants as strangers in the city (Yan, 2003; Zhang, 2001) who are deemed to be occupying the lower rungs of a hierarchical social order underpinned by what Ban (2018) terms "cultural urbanism." This defines the countryside as the underside of progress and rural people as a homogeneous group (Nguyen, Vo, & Wei, n.d.; Zavoretti, 2016), which is "backward, unsophisticated, homogeneous, conservative, poor, and otherwise lacking in various ways" (Ban, 2018, 11, citing Thompson, 2013, 161). In combination with the social and administrative mechanisms associated with household registration (*hukou*), the discourse helps to hold down the value of migrant labor and the social costs of reproducing it (Jacka, 2018a, b; Lin & Nguyen, 2021), facilitating value extraction from migrant labor for the sake of accumulation in urban centers (Yan, 2003). It is well established that migrant labor has been central for accumulation by both the state and capital in post-reform China since the 1980s (Lin & Nguyen, 2021; Nguyen & Locke, 2014). Similar to other contexts of labor migration for industrialization, the accumulation has been possible largely thanks to the externalization of labor's social costs to the workers' natal families and home regions (Buravoy, 1976; Pearson & Kusakabe, 2012; Shah & Lerche, 2020; Wolpe, 1972). Hundreds of millions of migrant workers (referred to as peasant workers—*nongmingong*) work and live away from their rurally based families, where much of the child-raising, elderly care, and other social reproductive tasks take place (Murphy, 2020; Nguyen & Locke, 2014). The fact that the migrant *chaoshi* traders cater to the everyday needs of the migrant workers and their rural families, thus contributing to the social reproduction of their labor, is significant for our analysis. While a few *chaoshi* traders are able to accumulate wealth to extend into larger businesses, thus setting exemplary goals for others to follow, the trade requires significant level of self-exploitation, risk assumption, and indebtedness that the traders have to take individual responsibility for. Their experiences and trajectories reveal the mutual connection between seemingly separate groups of people of rural origin in the Chinese migrant labor force—those working in factories and urban services and those catering to the former's daily needs. Attending to this connection between different kinds of migrant labor from the perspective of the *chaoshi* traders' everyday practices, we add insights into the migrant labor regime that has been driving capital expansion in China by revealing the complementarity of different labor migration pathways in the reproduction of migrant labor and more broadly of the production system itself. While acknowledging the significance of unpaid kin labor in reproducing migrant labor (Jacka, 2018a, b; Murphy, 2020; Shah & Lerche, 2020), we underscore the role of non-kin rural people in meeting the needs of the migrant workers and their spatially divided households. The connection between the traders and the migrant workers, we argue, engenders both mutual reproduction and differentiation in the migrant labor force. The dynamics of this connection indicate that "social reproduction realms and activities are directly crucial to the structuring of processes of labor surplus extraction" (Mezzadri, 2019, 38).

In this case, however, not only the temporality of production, as Mezzadri and Majumder (2020) point out in their analysis of factory work in South Asia, but also its spatial dynamics are interwoven with the well-known patterns of social reproduction by Chinese migrant workers (Nguyen & Locke, 2014). As elaborated below, the notion of social reproduction that we use underscores the tension between how the capitalist production system reproduces itself for the sake of accumulation and how workers of the same system sustain themselves and their dependents, especially their next generation. In post-reform China, whose production system has been almost entirely dependent on migrant labor, this tension has long been partially resolved through translocal householding, in which labor power's daily maintenance and generational renewal are often spatially separated from each other so that the household can reproduce itself (Jacka, 2018a, b; Murphy, 2020). The daily involvement of *chaoshi* traders in the work of reproducing migrant labor by addressing the maintenance of migrant workers and their spatially divided households reveals a further layer of the externalization of the reproductive costs of migrant labor that has until now received little attention.

The article draws on ethnographic fieldwork we have been conducting together within and beyond a Lishui peri-urban village since 2018 as part of a long-standing study about changing rural livelihoods and welfare. Lan Wei is originally from the area and her insider status enables easy access and rapport with local people, including local cadres. Although we might have missed issues that cannot be mentioned in her presence, we could obtain intimate knowledge about local life otherwise not accessible. Soon after we started, we realized the necessity to extend our inquiry beyond the village in order to capture the translocal nature of local livelihoods and welfare underlying how villagers have over time developed their mobile *chaoshi* trade. Hence, we followed some villagers to their store locations, looked up places where others might be operating, and conducted remote interviews with further traders around the country as identified through snowball sampling. Within the village, we visited people in their homes, had meals with some, hung around at the market and local stores, conversed with people at family events apart from conducting formal interviews, including with the current and former village heads, the village's production team leaders, the village women leader, the village doctor and pharmacist, local factory owners, and the county officer in charge of rural development. Outside the village, we visited 12 *chaoshi* stores in a factory dormitory in Hangzhou and in

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TABLE 1 Approximate breakdown of monthly expenditure by migrant workers in a global electronic company further inland.

Monthly cost items	Monthly expenditure (in CNY, equivalent to 0.14 USD)
Food (groceries, eating at the canteen, snacks, drinks)	500
Housing (dormitory, rent, utility bills)	300
Transportation	200
Phone bill	100
Clothing	500
Miscellaneous (laundry or other daily necessities)	200
Remittance (workers with rurally based dependents)	1000–2000
Savings and/or social obligations (young people spend more on entertainment)	500–1000
Total	3300–4800
	Monthly wage: 3000–4000 (varies according to the number of overtime hours worked)

Source: Fieldwork conducted by Yueran Tian in 2020–21.

Lishui city center; Lan Wei conducted 12 additional online and phone interviews with *chaoshi* traders based in Guizhou, Shanghai, and Huzhou and has been following their online forums. As usual for ethnography, participant observation was central to our fieldwork, but we also conducted formal interviews and extended conversations with over 60 adult men and women of different age groups.

These translocal investigations made us keenly aware of the linkages between the traders and the migrant factory workers in terms of mobility and the reproduction of migrant labor—without the needs of the latter, *chaoshi* would not have unfolded in the same way, or even come into being in the first place. Furthermore, their operations sync with the well-documented temporality and spatial mobility of factory work as a result of this connection. How the social and spatial dynamics of the trade are shaped by the social reproductive and mobility patterns of the migrant workers is the focus of this article. Our empirical material is focused on the traders, and we mostly draw on the extensive literature on Chinese migrant workers for the characterization of the latter's experiences and trajectories, except for the original data in Table 1 made available by our colleague Yueran Tian, who conducted research on the provision of welfare for migrant factory workers. The number of *chaoshi* traders from Lishui, although sizable in the thousands, might be relatively small vis-à-vis the 300-million-strong Chinese migrant labor force. However, they form but one of the many similar networks of goods and services providers of rural origin that cater to the needs of the latter, such as those specialized in selling cheap street food from Shanxi and Lanzhou or other similar networks of low-cost provisions. While catering to only a part of the everyday consumptive needs of the migrant, they play a significant role in the maintenance of migrant labor by ensuring that its costs are low enough to make translocal household reproduction possible.

MAINTENANCE AND RENEWAL IN THE REPRODUCTION OF MIGRANT LABOR

The article combines insights from several strands of literature for its analytical framework. These include Sidney Mintz's (1986) analysis of global capitalism through the history of sugar production and consumption, the social reproduction literature (Bhattacharya, 2017; Brenner & Laslett, 1991), and earlier studies on the reproduction of migrant labor (Buravoy, 1976; Wolpe, 1972). Mintz tracks the linkages between the two components of the early global industrial labor force, namely slaves in colonial plantations and workers in Britain's mines and factories. In the double move of empire expansion and absorption of sugar as a national habit, the capitalist class in the metropolis gained huge profits from the use of slave labor in the colonies and the consumption of sugar by the laboring masses in the metropolis. Mass consumption of sugar and other plantation products sustains both the market for much greater outputs and the labor power of the proletarian class. Capital was thus accumulated from both the slave-driven production of sugar in the colonies and its consumption by the proletariats in the metropolis, which in turn helped to increase both the labor productivity of workers and tax revenues. While addressing a different context, Mintz's analysis reminds us of how capital expansion depends on a division of labor that absorbs mutually reproducing forms of labor that are differentially positioned in and yet part of the same system (see also Harvey, 2018). This insight draws our attention to the role of self-employed migrant labor in the reproduction of migrant factory labor for the sake of a production regime built on low-cost migrant labor.

The reproduction of the migrant labor force in the capitalist system has been a long-running concern. As Wolpe (1972) and Buravoy (1976) note, the migrant labor that produces surplus for the mines and factories in apartheid South Africa of the

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1970s could be kept low-cost thanks to subsistence agriculture in the villages and the social obligations between migrants and their families. Others point out the continuing mutual constitution of subsistence-based forms of security in the countryside and the migrant labor force today (Rigg et al., 2016). Feminist analyses address some missing links in this scholarship by pointing out the significance of unpaid kin labor in the reproduction of the migrant worker's rurally-based family, especially regarding childcare and the maintenance of the household's subsistence bases (Jacka, 2018a, b; Shah & Lerche, 2020). In China over the last several decades, this has been instrumental in suppressing wages while relieving capital and the state from welfare responsibilities for the workers (Lin & Nguyen, 2021; Murphy, 2020; Nguyen & Locke, 2014).

The feminist notion of social reproduction refers to activities and relationships involved in the daily and intergenerational maintenance of life, or as Brenner and Laslett (1991, 314) describe, "how food, clothing and shelter are made available for immediate consumption, how the maintenance and socialization of children is accomplished, how the care of the elderly and the infirm is provided, and how sexuality is socially constructed." Therein lies Buravoy's (1976) distinction between the maintenance and the renewal of labor; the former refers to its day-to-day sustenance and the latter to the creation of a new generation. These aspects are normally interwoven in the functions of social institutions such as the family or the welfare state, but are separated from each other in the case of migrant labor because they take place in different locations. The work of renewal is thereby largely carried out by institutions external to systems for which migrant labor is deployed, thus externalizing the associated costs to the latter (Buravoy, 1976). While this dynamic of renewal has been extensively addressed by the literature on migrant labor in China, the social mechanism of maintenance has hardly received any attention. Our account reveals the importance of rurally based networks of low-cost service and goods providers for the maintenance of migrant labor. In turn, they also rely on rural areas for their renewal, and their mobilities are similarly shaped by China's institutional and discursive context.

FAMILY BUSINESS AND LOW-COST GOODS PROVISION FOR RURAL MIGRANTS AS A TRAJECTORY OF MIGRANT LABOR

The *chaoshi* traders we worked with come from villages of Lishui city, which lies in the southwest of Zhejiang, a wealthy coastal province with three major cultural and trading centers: Hangzhou, Ningbo, and Wenzhou. As a point of reference for our analysis, the rise of Wenzhou from a poor mountainous area into a major economic center was largely driven by family entrepreneurship and labor mobility (Krause, 2018; Zhang, 2001). Like Lishui, Wenzhou's rough natural conditions had been partly responsible for local people's extensive involvement in the unofficial economy long before the late 1970 reform. Ethnographic accounts of the Zhejiangcun (*Zhejiang village*) in Beijing (Xiang, 2005; Zhang, 2001) underscore highly flexible social and spatial dynamics of the Wenzhou networks that have evolved into an economic hub. Originally viewed with suspicion, family enterprises, along with ideas of self-entrepreneurship, came to be endorsed by the state as exemplary models of regional development. This regional affinity with commercial activities might have played an important role in the easy entry of Lishui villagers first into mobile vending and then into the *chaoshi* trade.

From farming to modern retail

Until recently, Lishui was considered a disadvantaged city with its mountainous topography, remote location, and poor infrastructure, although it's new connection to the express train network is gradually changing the image. The village from which the *chaoshi* traders originate is located in the city's periphery. Largely rice-growers before the 1990s, villagers then changed to planting mandarins and vegetables, which are still a main source of income for some, while local entrepreneurs have set up five small factories producing valves and bricks. Nowadays, older villagers continue to farm, younger ones work in the village-based factories or an industrial park further away, while middle-aged villagers are often the ones behind the *chaoshi* trade.

A genealogy of the term *chaoshi* indicates its reference to the super-marketization of retail associated with the Chinese state's modernization agenda. Until the 1990s, government stores, wet markets, and street vending had been the most common ways of providing for everyday household needs, and villagers from Lishui had been active in mobile street vending. The rapid expansion of supermarkets in the 2000s was facilitated by a government policy to modernize the retail sector (*nonggaichao*) by converting wet markets into supermarkets and banning the former out of tax and hygiene concerns (Hu et al., 2004). The average supermarket in China is between 300 and 700 square meters in size and tends to have a large selection of fresh food. While they cater to a broad spectrum of the urban population, their main customers are families and people with relatively stable residence. In contrast, the stores operated by villagers from Lishui tend to be small, rarely sell fresh food, and cater to migrant workers almost exclusively. In calling their stores supermarkets, the traders invoke the social

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meaning of self-service shelving that distinguishes it from their earlier approach of selling (i.e., street vending) and realigns them with the state-approved approach to retail.

As for Wenzhou people, our study participants' migration into the *chaoshi* trade distinguishes it from other pathways of labor mobility into industrial factories and urban services (Jacka, 2006; Nguyen & Locke, 2014; Otis, 2012; Pun, 2005; Yan, 2008) on account of the family-based nature of their work. The social and spatial dynamics of the *chaoshi* trade resemble those of Wenzhou networks in how rural migrants start from a marginal position to carve out viable economic spaces in urban areas (Xiang, 2005; Zhang, 2001). Unlike the Wenzhou networks, however, Lishui's *chaoshi* traders have built up an economy around the low-cost provisioning of foodstuff and everyday household items for migrant workers and their families. The principles of *chaoshi* trading include maintaining a low profile as a family business and continuing to move as one identifies new profitable locations. *Chaoshi* stores require the collaborative labor of at least two adults, often a married couple, thus requiring their simultaneous migration and separation from their children, whose care and schooling are difficult to fit into the temporal regime of their work. A start-up fund of about 50,000–70,000 CNY (about 6,800 to 9,500 USD) is necessary to cover the costs of setting up and the first several months of rent, which can be obtained through bank loans with proper creditworthiness.

Distribution, networks, and the significance of proximity to migrant workers

Unlike the concentrated settlements of Wenzhou migrants on the edge of major cities (Xiang, 2005), *chaoshi* traders tend to be more scattered, with individual stores occupying locations with a high concentration of migrant workers. Generally, there is a balancing act between competition and collaboration with others doing the same business. One needs to be within a certain distance from the others for a sufficient catchment area, while maintaining relationships with those in the proximity and exchanging information, for example regarding the identity of thieves and swindlers. Although the traders do not cluster, they network with each other via social media, finding suitable suppliers, and stores through family or *laoxiang* (home-place) contacts. Jianxin, a villager who runs a store in Huzhou city said, "I started by helping my cousin to operate a *chaoshi*, and once I had gained some experience, I set up my own. My acquaintances (*shuren)* introduced the suppliers to me. You can always find acquaintances from Lishui in this business" (interview, August 10, 2019). Jianxin had found his current store through an online group; its former owner is also from Lishui and readily introduced him to his existing network of suppliers. Meanwhile, salespersons come to find a new *chaoshi*, and once a relationship has been established, they visit the store regularly to ensure prompt delivery of replacements. Salespersons tend to be locally based people working for wholesale companies. Unsold and expired goods can often be returned to the suppliers with some deductions. Until recently, the traders could easily obtain goods on consignment with the guarantee of a trusted acquaintance in their network, but since quite a few facing insolvency have fled without paying the debts to the suppliers, the latter have become wary of consignment selling. According to Laojie, who runs a store in Anhui province, Lishui's *chaoshi* traders there are notorious for defaulting on their debts to the suppliers, and suppliers there no longer allow consignment selling.

In this trade, location counts. A good location must meet the following requirements: (1) there are no other stores in the vicinity; (2) there is a high density of people walking by; and/or (3) the shop is located within or close to residential areas, factory dormitories, or a cluster of migrant workers. One storeowner had been looking for six months for a suitable spot until he walked by his current store, which had a sign-on for a transfer, and was instantly convinced by its location. He came in to make an offer at 3 pm for a transfer, including of the unsold goods on the shelf; the previous owner agreed to the transfer; he made the payment by 7 pm on the same day, asked the previous owner to move out, and started selling the following day. In search of suitable locations, local people are ready to move to provinces where migrant workers are concentrated or to the latter's home places. Only certain people master the art of finding a good location, and without suitable instinct or experiences, many would buy existing businesses from others who sell theirs for a mark-up. Over time, a sort of marketplace emerges in which people trade in stores themselves—a neighbor of our host family in the village made a fortune out of setting up stores for sale in different provinces. There is a *wechat* forum with hundreds of members from Lishui actively buying and selling stores. The transfer of a store could bring an average mark-up of ∼30% profit.

A small number of people who team up with friends and families with ample resources manage to scale up into large supermarkets. One of them is the Yangs, who left in 2012 to set up a store in Guizhou. At the time we visited in 2019, the family-owned a supermarket employing about 100 people. Yet, for most in the village, *chaoshi* represents an alternative or additional livelihood option to vegetable farming or factory work by some family members. Their stores are commonly registered as "individual household businesses" (*geti gongshanghu*), or more casually *fuqidian*, literally "couple business," referring to a business occupying about 50–70 m^2 operated by a married couple. In many other villages of Lishui, thousands of households have been taking part in this mobile network across China. To illustrate, there are about 6,000 to 7,000 stores run by Lishui people in Guizhou alone, according to a leader of Lishui's Traders' Association in the

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province. The possibility for accumulation demonstrated by wealthy traders such as the Yangs acts as an exemplar for others to follow in their footsteps, despite major uncertainties and risks associated with the changing dynamics of labor mobility in China.

ON THE MOVE WITH MIGRANT FACTORY WORKERS: A MOBILE AND UNCERTAIN BUSINESS

Most of the stores in the dormitory complex we visited in Hangzhou were smaller than 50 m^2 in size. Yue's store, occupying an area three times larger, is the biggest and is most likely the one with the largest revenue. Yue, a 50-year-old woman from a Lishui village, was running the store with the help of one of her brothers, who came to work for her after trying unsuccessfully to operate his own stores. Yue's husband was operating another store in Shandong, about 750 km away from Hangzhou. In her parental family, she was the only one who had succeeded; she said, all her other siblings had to give up because of store unprofitability or indebtedness. Growing up in the village, Yue had come to work in a state-owned towel factory in Lishui for ten years until 1999, when the factory was closed. She and her husband then left to open a store in Jiangsu village where migrant workers had started arriving with new industrial developments, which then turned into a thriving business. In the years afterward, the couple opened several other stores in various locations, each time upscaling their operation with their accumulated earnings and transferring the stores they left behind to their siblings. In 2009, they took over the store in the Hangzhou dormitory complex for a transfer price of about 1 million yuan (about 140,000 USD). The rent was 400,000 CNY a year, increasing by 15,000 annually, against the store's yearly turnover of about 1 million yuan (generating monthly profits of about 6,000 USD against which they had to pay off bank loans in the first several years).

Compared to Yue's, the other dozen stores in the complex were much more modest in terms of size, turnover, and profit, as those of most people we knew from the village—many were just making enough to get by. Yue also said that her family was the only one among several in their extended family in the business that had done as well. Yet, even Yue's store had been seeing a fast drop in turnover in the preceding months because of the rapid decrease in the number of workers in the complex. About 50,000 workers had lived here, half of whom had left for other regions where the industries were being relocated, often in more remote areas of less wealthy provinces such as Guizhou, Henan, or Yunnan. Other traders mentioned having to relocate to follow the movement of the workers along with the overall industrial relocation away from the coast to places further inland. The movement was partly the result of stricter environmental and social protection regulations (Shen et al., 2017), partly because of rising wages and living costs in the richer coastal provinces. On their part, our *chaoshi* traders simply see it as a necessity to follow the tide of the workers to where the latter's labor is in demand, for it is in contributing to the maintenance of this labor that they can make their living and sometimes even accumulate wealth.

THE ROLE OF LOW-COST GOODS AND PROCESSED FOOD FOR THE MAINTENANCE OF MIGRANT LABOR

Yue's store sold a mix of toiletries, household goods from bedding to cleaning equipment, personal hygiene items, underwear, teas, and a selection of processed foodstuffs. We counted several dozen brands of sanitary napkins and combs on the shelves, which suggested the high number of female workers in the dormitory. The goods were priced ostensibly lower than those on offer at supermarkets more frequented by middle-class people: toothpaste costing between 4 and 10 CNY, duvet sets for 30–60 CNY, and skin care/beauty products more or less 10 CNY in 2019. The 20-something factory workers, coming back from their shift in their uniforms, called in frequently, leaving with a handful of items, often a sugared drink, a packaged cake, or packets of instant noodles. Seeing so many people leaving the shop with instant noodles, one of the authors could not help blurting out her observation. In response, Yue explained that the workers were not allowed to cook in their dormitory room (cooking oils are hardly seen in these stores, unlike in the regular supermarkets where countless brands are on display)—they would buy their shift meals in the factory canteen, and instant noodles were the best option between shifts. While factories in coastal provinces often subsidize the canteen food of their workers, to be provided by third-party caterers to whom the employers pay a small fixed daily amount per person, those further inland such as the one mentioned in Table 1 would advance the meal costs to be deducted from the workers' wages at the end of the month. In any case, the low quality and hygiene of factory canteen food are commonly considered major problems in factory working conditions.[1] Yet, even if they were permitted to cook and wanted to fix something to eat between their shifts, it would be difficult because of the time pressure, a major issue in the life of factory workers. Given wages that do not suffice to meet the rising costs of living in an increasingly commodified context, working overtime is often a necessity for the workers, which limits the time they can spend on activities outside of the assembly line (Nguyen et al., n.d.).

Among others, instant noodles and sugar-enhanced drinks and foodstuffs thus provide a ready solution to meeting the workers' necessary supplementary nutrition needs, given their deprivation in terms of space and time. The tall shelves laden

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TABLE 2 Profit Margins Of Common Goods.

Food items in general	10%–20%
Sugared drinks	20%–40%
Instant noodles	15%–20%
Cigarettes	10%
Sanitary and household items*	30%–40%
Bottled water	40%–50%
Small electric appliances (cooker, fan, kettle)	50%

*Napkins, soaps, detergent, towels, and so forth.
(fieldwork data, August 2019)

with colorful brands of instant noodles stood out in all the *chaoshi* stores we visited. We counted 63 types of cup noodles and more than 56 types of packet noodles in Yue's store alone. The mass-produced instant noodles are cheaply available, convenient, and shelf-stable. As the authors of *The Noodle Narratives* (Errington et al., 2013) point out, noodles are the hunger-stilling and comfort-bringing food of working people all over the world. In China, it helps to feed the hundreds of millions of migrant workers: in 2011, with the migrant labor force peaking, consumption climbed to 43 billion bowls and packets (Minter, 2019). The sale patterns of *chaoshi* stores also indicate that this labor force is avidly consuming sugary drinks. Following instant noodles, sugary drinks such as sweetened tea and milky or fizzy drinks, and high-energy beverages with low nutritional value occupy the most space here. While these are also on offer in standard urban supermarkets, one would find there a variety of unsweetened fresh milk and fruit juices that are conspicuously missing here.

As "favoured child[ren] of capitalism" (Mintz, 1986, 214), sugar-enhanced food products such as instant noodles and sugared drinks fast-feed the migrant labor force of China while generating huge profits for the food industry, also powered by migrant labor. The migrant workers' consumption of these commodities in turn provides livelihoods and profit-making opportunities for *chaoshi* traders. Among the goods they commonly sell, instant noodles fetch a profit margin of about 20%, whereas sugared drinks gain returns of between 20% and 40%. Since the workers purchase them more frequently than most other goods, even when the latter generate higher mark-ups (Table 2), they tend to be among the top profit earners.

Migrant workers make good customers, according to *chaoshi* traders, not just because they consume more processed food and drinks, but also because, as they frequently said, "They buy everything!" As migrant workers live in temporary housing and relocate frequently (Xiang, 2021), they must purchase all their daily necessities when on the move. Apart from their limited budget, their intensive work shifts mean less time on shopping further away, and they thus have to rely on stores close by. Further, since they can only afford low-priced goods, the targeted provision of these commodities by the *chaoshi* traders ensures that the price range is tailored to their needs. Conversely, the low-cost provision of these goods ensures that the price of labor power (i.e., workers' wages) can be kept relatively low for the sake of value extraction, in ways similar to Harvey's (2018) observation that the availability of cheap Chinese imports in Walmart helps to depress wages in the United States. To give an indication, the Chinese labor costs in the final manufacturing amounted to about 1.8% of the selling price in 2011, while Foxconn took a cut of 14.3% and Apple 58.5% (Kraemer et al., 2011, 5). Table 1 gives a breakdown of monthly wages and expenditures by an average migrant worker with dependents at home. Given the small proportion of the income the migrant workers can devote to their daily maintenance (e.g., to food and other necessities), the provision of these through rural networks such as the *chaoshi* trade plays a key role in keeping their maintenance costs low for the sake of the renewal that takes place in the countryside (i.e., the remittance). The *chaoshi* traders thus forge a crucial link between the mass production of cheap commodities and the mass consumption of such goods by the laboring class that staffs the Chinese production system. Despite their differing locations in the system, the *chaoshi* trader and the migrant worker are thus connected in the reproduction of the labor power that drives capital expansion in China, a connection that is solidified by their shared rural origin and common experiences with translocal householding (Jacka, 2018a; Nguyen & Locke, 2014). As shown below, this linkage goes beyond the satisfaction of the migrant workers' daily maintenance needs to include those of their rurally based households.

CARING WITH MIGRANT WORKERS (AND THEIR REMITTANCE)

Lishui's *chaoshi* traders set up shops not only around the factories but also in rural regions with a high degree of labor outmigration. What makes these rural places attractive for them is the availability of the remittance sent home by migrant workers for the daily needs of the rural household (Table 1), especially of their children living with grandparents (see Murphy, 2020 for a recent account). According to traders operating stores in these rural places, sales during the summer school vacation

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tend to be much lower since the children visit their parents at the latter's workplace. Grandparents normally do not spend much money in the stores other than for the sake of their grandchildren, and when they do, it is mostly on daily necessities and foodstuff. In contrast, the Spring festival (Chinese New Year), or shorter traditional holidays such as the tomb sweeping festival, is the best sale time for *chaoshi* stores, as most migrant workers return to the village and are willing to spend on goods for family consumption during the festivities. Li, the operator of a store in a rural town called Hongji, said she has twice as many customers during the spring festival period and much greater turnover as during the rest of the year. This also means that stores around the factories have fewer customers during this time, although the operators also visit their own home village then.

The spatial movement and expansion of the *chaoshi* trade alongside the mobility of migrant workers reveal their differing consumption patterns at the two ends of their translocal lives (Nguyen & Locke, 2014). This difference is shaped by how the translocal family of the migrant workers is reproduced, namely through the pooling of unpaid reproductive labor within the family and the mobilization of reciprocal kinship obligations for care of the young and the old (Jacka, 2018a; Murphy, 2020). Part of this familial contract is also the expectation on the migrant workers to be able to display the fruits of their migration through their material contributions to the rural households. This is especially important at times such as the spring festival, when the success and failure of the translocal family are up for communal evaluation. The *chaoshi* sale patterns reveal the balancing act by the migrant workers between maintaining themselves as part of the migrant labor force and fulfilling their part in the maintenance and renewal of the family itself from afar. The *chaoshi* traders and the migrant factory workers thus are linked together by their translocal mobility trajectories and by the separation of the renewal of Chinese migrant labor from its maintenance. In their translocal lives, as we show below, *chaoshi* traders go through trade-offs and sacrifices similar to the well-documented experiences of Chinese migrant workers and their families (Fan & Wang, 2008; Jacka, 2018a; Murphy, 2020). Their narratives often distinguish their mobility trajectory from that of the migrant workers by a notion of being their own masters, which they contrast with that of the workers who are subjected to the factory's temporal and bodily control. This sense of autonomy is, however, contradicted by the temporality of their work, which is to a large extent dictated by that of the production line.

TRADE-OFFS, SACRIFICES, AND RISK ASSUMPTION

Repeatedly, we heard of villagers having to give up, going bankrupt, or ending up in indebtedness. One villager told us of how his elder son gave up after setting up shop in different places to return to farming in the village, expressing much disappointment over the latter's failure. Another talked about a close friend who was blacklisted by the bank after defaulting on the loans he took out for expanding his business—"now that he can no longer obtain bank loans," he said, "his future is lost" (interview, August 6, 2019). A couple lost their store after the local government appropriated the land on which the store had been standing for urban development, offering only a nominal compensation. Yet another had to give up an unprofitable store and had been searching for a suitable location to restart without success; when we met him in the village, he had been back for about half a year and was anxious about his family's accumulating debts. However, it is difficult to estimate the exact proportion of those who have to give up, as people tend to be secretive about failures for fear of losing face. Apart from the increasing number of people entering the trade, online commerce is also affecting store profitability, although the effect remains modest. The price advantage of online shopping does not make a difference for the low-cost range of everyday items that workers purchase, while online shopping requires waiting time that does not necessarily coordinate with the temporality of their work on the production line. In one informant's words, therefore, "business is hard now, but it is still possible to make money" (interview, August 6, 2019).

Even when things go well, however, it is no easy life. Store operators commonly work from 7 am to 12 pm, seven days a week and take about seven days of vacation a year during the spring festival when the migrant workers go home, with some occasional visits to their village for the tomb sweeping ceremony or a major family event. The traders often talk about the monotony of time working in the store and its constraint on their freedom, sometimes comparing their work time to prison time. They can hardly leave the store, and to cover the regular costs of rent, electricity, and other fees, they have to keep going. In order to optimize sales to the migrant workers who work varying shifts from early mornings to late nights, they have to stay open in conjunction with factory times. The temporality of their work thus is shaped by that of the production line, and it seems hardly less constraining than factory work (Pun, 2005). This sometimes takes a toll on the relationship of married couples. Because of their incessant quarreling, which they attributed to the *chaoshi* work environment, a couple gave up their profitable store in Jiangsu to return to the village and has since resumed farming.

Similar to the migrant workers whose lives are shaped by the demands and challenges of translocal householding (Jacka, 2018a; Nguyen & Locke, 2014), *chaoshi* traders also have to conduct family lives between places. When their children are small, they tend to live with grandparents or other relatives in the village; when they are older, they might be sent to a boarding school, if the parents can afford the annual fee of 20,000 to 30,000 CNY per child (about 2,700 to 4,000 USD). The traders consider the boarding school an extra cost, since if they lived at home, they could send their children to public schools

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at a fraction of the cost. Some parents arrange for their children to live with a school teacher who supervises a group of children with migrant parents for a monthly fee. Like the children of migrant workers, the traders' children often come and live with them during the summer vacation, often in a room adjacent to their stores. Observing the reunions of traders and their children in the village, we noted an undercurrent of tension and conflicting emotions over the family separation that sometimes boils over. In one incident, a mother was overwhelmed by the constant attention-seeking of her 9-year-old son who had come home from a boarding school and started shouting and spanking him in front of her extended family, visibly creating tension. Another mother coaxed her 13-year-old son, with visible anxiety, to say something about life with his teacher. Sullenly, the teenager said he preferred to live with the teacher, which embarrassed the mother who then tried to explain her son's seemingly indifferent statement by blaming it on the teacher's liberal attitude. These emotional burdens are similar to what Murphy (2020) finds in her study of Chinese migrant workers' children. The temporality of industrial work and the limited access to public goods and services for migrants outside of their place of household registration (Lin & Mao, 2022) shape the translocal lives of both groups in similar ways.

At her age, as Yue told us in her Hangzhou store, she would rather retire when her business stopped paying off, since her children would soon be grown-ups and hopefully would go to university. Her children had been attending private boarding schools. They no longer came to the store, Yue said, as they disliked their parents' line of work. When they were operating the store in Jiangsu, they had a small living space with a bed in the corridor, and the daughter developed a rash when visiting them in the summer. Like the other traders, Yue emphasized that the money she earned in the trade was *xin ku qian* (bitterness money); other informants use an even stronger term, *xue han qian* (blood and sweat money) to refer to their hardship. While this talk of "eating bitterness" features strongly in Chinese moral discourse around how to be successful as a person, a community, and a region (Chu, 2010), it is not unfounded in the trade-offs in their translocal life that are similar to those faced by the migrant workers, even though they might have greater autonomy and the possibility to accumulate wealth.

Yet, the traders often use the notion that they have risen up from their experiences of "bitterness" to mark themselves out as morally superior to the migrant workers. They tend to look down on their customers for having low *suzhi* (human quality). In their view, the latter do not know how to economize, are not able to distinguish the quality of goods, and are often dishonest. As Mrs. Yang said of her customers in a Guizhou village: "People there have very bad *suzhi*, they eat a lot and spend all their money on eating, which makes it good for business. But they steal a lot [demonstrating thieves hiding small items in their bodies]. They are poorer and less smart" (interview, August 7, 2019). Asked how he avoids being supplied with fake goods, a male trader laughed and said he would welcome such suppliers, for migrant workers "wouldn't know how to tell the difference between fake from genuine goods anyway," although he later corrected that fake goods sale was no longer common (interview, August 6, 2019). The moral evaluation seems influenced by how the *suzhi* discourse not only relegates migrant workers but also peddlers (*getihu*) to a lower rung on the moral and social ladder (Anagnost, 2004; Hsu, 2006; Yan, 2008). It indicates an attempt to identify with the definition of the good and modern citizen that the traders aspire to be, given their or their parents' earlier experiences of working in the streets of urban China and being seen as "peddlers standing in the corner of the street with a cart of clothes" (Hsu, 2006, 7). Their self-distinction from their customers in terms of *suzhi* aligns with their identification with the term "supermarket," which evokes cosmopolitan sophistication, a sense of entrepreneurship, and the modern orientation that the Chinese state seeks to cultivate. In reality, they normally do not have long-term property rights and are subjected to the unpredictable terms of rental, urban planning, and their landlords' whims. Yet, while the narrative of being their own masters and not laboring for others (*bang ziji zuo*) contradict the temporal constraints and uncertainties of their work, it allows them to imagine the possibilities to move up the social ladder in their migratory trajectory—if they would just persist, be prudent, and have the right strategies. Their distinction is thus an act of exclusion vis-a-vis their fellow migrant workers that seems congruent with the dominant logics of self-entrepreneurship in post-reform China, one that, however, has to remain within the bounds of state power (Zhang & Ong, 2008). It thus plays into the Chinese state's promotion of entrepreneurship as an important path for unlocking people's market potential for growth (Hoffman, 2006) without recognizing the considerable level of individual risk assumption and self-responsibility in dealing with market uncertainties. The competition of online commerce aside, they can be pushed out of the trade by increasing rental fees or inflation, while indebtedness could spiral into insolvency. The social costs of this risk assumption, as those of their labor, are borne by no other than the translocal households in which they are grounded.

CONCLUSION

The mobility trajectories of *chaoshi* traders, similar to those of other rural networks supplying cheap food and consumer goods and services to migrant workers, indicate the mutual connection between waged labor and self-employed labor in the reproduction of the labor power driving capital expansion in China. Despite their differing trajectories of labor and social mobility, the two forms of labor are joined by the coordination of their temporal and spatial orientation in the maintenance of migrant labor power. Thus linked to each other, they jointly contribute to sustaining the production regime dependent on migrant labor. The labor power provided by the Chinese migrant labor force can be kept relatively low-cost not just through

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having most of its renewal needs addressed by unpaid rurally-based kin labor (Jacka, 2018a; Murphy, 2020) but also via the involvement of rural people and networks in servicing the day-to-day maintenance of migrant labor and the migrants' spatially divided households.

The familial and emotional trade-offs of the *chaoshi* traders as they follow the migrant factory workers' spatial movements in addition to their risk assumption suggest further layers of social reproductive cost externalization toward the countryside. Their parallel movements toward factory locations further inland along with the migrant workers is part of the broader spatial restructuring that shifts the environmental and social costs of production to poorer regions. These dynamics are integral to the consistent exploitation of rural labor and resources for the sake of capital expansion in China (Lin & Nguyen, 2021). As in Asia's other late socialist contexts, it is the doing of both the market and a Communist party state (Wilcox et al., 2021) that is supposed to represent the peasants. This state sponsors a discourse that constructs a social hierarchy deeming them as lacking in "human quality" (Ban, 2018; Hsu, 2006; Yan, 2003) while promoting self-entrepreneurship as a path for them to lift themselves out of that status, as also does the Vietnamese state (Nguyen, 2023). These discourses help to naturalize social hierarchies and inequalities in the post-reform economy. That the *chaoshi* traders distinguish themselves from the workers in terms of *suzhi*, however, indicates how rural people actively deploy the discourse to map their own mobility trajectories onto the social order of the market economy in ways that align with the differentiation of migrant labor.

Along this line, our account reveals the economic significance of the low-cost provision of goods for the maintenance of migrant labor. This provides rural people whose agricultural land is gradually disappearing with alternative livelihoods and, for some of them, with possibilities to accumulate wealth, thus inducing social differentiation in the migrant labor force (see also Zavoretti, 2016). In ways that are similar to the Wenzhou networks, the economic impacts of *chaoshi* trading on their home villages are becoming visible. In the village, people who used to look down on the traders now start to recognize the latter's contributions to local employment and wealth accumulation. As we last heard in 2021, the provincial government planned to promote the trade as a model of local development. This maneuver of the Chinese state to formalize on-the-ground economic formations into exemplary models of development is familiar. In doing so, it can put claims on a transformation process initiated by ordinary people who have created economic spaces out of the reproduction of the migrant labor force that powers capital expansion in China, despite its central role in ensuring that the social costs of that reproduction remain with them.

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ENDNOTE

[1] See reports by China Labor Watch on the issue of canteen food provided at different kinds of factories in China at: https://chinalaborwatch.org/follow-up-on-foxconn/ and https://chinalaborwatch.org/workers-in-misery-an-investigation-into-two-toy-factories/, or media reports following a 2012 survey by the NGO Fair Labor Association such as: https://www.reuters.com/article/us-apple-foxconn-workers-idUSBRE82S1GV20120329, all accessed on August 27, 2023.

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