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How ethnicity matters in labour studies: harnessing ethnic marginality in Chinese manufacturing

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ABSTRACT
This paper examines how the labour force is segmented through ethnic distinctions. These distinctions can be harnessed to increase capitalist profit. While critical labour studies have documented how gender, race, and migration status are used to generate cheap labour, the ways in which ethnicity structures the labour market are less well understood. We approach this issue with ethnographic data on Yi ethnic minority people from the Liangshan Yi autonomous prefecture who migrate to South China to become manufacturing workers. These labour migrants enroll in factory work via co-ethnic labour brokers. The brokerage system provides workers with a sense of protection and solidarity, but simultaneously repurposes and entrenches existing inequalities. Based on how relationships between workers, brokers, and employers were structured, we develop two connected arguments: Firstly, ethnicity serves in much the same way as gender, race, and migration status to differentiate the labour force, for example by allowing for salary segmentation and flexible hires. Secondly, ethnicity differs from other labour market distinctions in that it is not only an identity marker, but also organises co-ethnics hierarchically through responsibilities and entitlements bestowed by kinship relations.

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Introduction

The labour market in China is marked by rural–urban divides. Low-end jobs in factories, construction, cleaning, and hospitality in wealthy urban regions have been occupied by migrants from rural areas. The notion of 'surplus rural labor' is widely employed by Chinese policymakers and academics both to describe a development challenge (the dual problem of rural poverty and urban labour shortage) and prescribe its solution (temporary migration of working-age people from poor to wealthy areas). Four decades of internal labour migration have made China into a global manufacturing powerhouse, but the growth in rural-urban migration is now abating and real wages have been rising since 2003 (Zhang, Yang, and Wang 2011). This has not spawned

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labour relations characterised by job security and social benefits, but rather engendered a variety of idiosyncratic labour arrangements (Chan, Florence, and Qiu 2021; Wang, Chan, and Yang 2021). Managers look for new sources of labour that is cheap, flexible, and willing to put up with arduous conditions, and exploit distinctions among workers to justify unequal employment terms and pay. Ethnicity represents one type of exploitable distinctions, and this article addresses how ethnicity is put to work to construct the exchange value of labour and segment the workforce.

A key tenet in labour scholarship is that capitalist production is sustained by creating differences within the labour force (Harvey 2011). International governance institutions establish a strong connection between dignified work and minority rights, and it was the International Labour Organization that prepared the forerunner to the *United Nations (UN) Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* (ILO 1989). By contrast, labour scholars pay limited attention to connections between ethnicity and labour exploitation, whereas they comprehensively document the roles of gender, race, and migration status in constructing the exchange value of labour. Insights into how these social distinctions structure the labour market constitutes the theoretical starting point for our analysis of how ethnicity is harnessed to create cheap labour.

Ethnic differences are put to work for the purpose of capital accumulation in many parts of the world. Before labour can be incorporated into capitalist production, it must be made transactable. A necessary first step in making ethnic minority labour transactable is often to constrain the time spent on subsistence activities, such as farming, foraging, herding, and weaving. Labour brokers who straddle subsistence-based societies and urban manufacturing economies can play a crucial role in channelling workers into wage labour. The study of labour brokerage thus provides a window into the concrete ways in which ethnic minority people are turned into workers, making it possible to exploit their labour without confiscating it by force. Co-ethnic labour brokers are entrenched in the social worlds they bridge to the extent that they may be left with little room to maneuver, as demonstrated in studies of caste and kin networks in Indian labour brokerage (De Neve 2014; Picherit 2019). Literature on brokerage in postcolonial contexts more broadly highlights how it enables new forms of political relationships between local tradition-oriented communities and modernistic states (Bailey 1963; Scott 1972).

The context for this study is provided by the labour relations involving Yi ethnic minority people who migrate from inland mountain areas in China to the industrialised Pearl River Delta (PRD). A notable feature of these employment relations is the sustained presence of co-ethnic labour brokers who mediate between workers, manufacturers, and state representatives. Common ethnic ties enhance the potential for social control over workers, and the brokers' bargaining position vis-à-vis Chinese state representatives is bolstered by the high priority placed on preventing labour unrest that involves ethnic minority workers. Ethnicity also shapes the terms of the Yi workers' participation in the capitalist economy after they take up wage work. The PRD is China's manufacturing heartland, and employers must take a flexible approach to hire and manage workers in the face of pervasive labour shortage (Peng and Choi 2013). Research on Chinese labour describes how class, gender, and regional identities intersect to structure relations on the factory floor, including disciplinary techniques and the formation of worker identities (see eg. Lee 1998; Pun 2005; Hanser 2005; Otis 2011; Lin 2013; Choi and Peng 2015;

Choi 2018; Choi and Li 2021). Ethnicity is a less-studied social difference that conditions incorporation into the Chinese labour market. The analysis in this paper demonstrates that brokers, workers, capitalists, and the state were all instrumental in maintaining the system of co-ethnic labour brokerage, causing Yi labour migrants to remain loyal to the brokers long after they had built up the resources to find work on their own.

The rest of the article is organised as follows: We first review gender, race, and migration status as sources of labour precarity and compare these to ethnic marginalisation. Next, the study's methodological approach is presented. The empirical discussion highlights three relationships: interactions between workers, labour brokers, and producers, the moral economy of intra-ethnic relations between workers and brokers, and interactions between the state and brokers. Our conclusion underscores the importance of attending to ethnicity to understand relations between labour, capital, and the state.

Workforce segmentation through social distinctions

Concurrent standardisation and differentiation lay the foundation for profit in capitalist manufacturing: Standardisation is the hallmark of assembly line production, breaking production complexes into single repetitive tasks, and labour force differentiation allows for salary segmentation and flexible hires. Sites of profitability are generated through employing differences along the lines of gender, race, religion, and other identity markers to split the workforce into factions which interests can be pitted against each other (Harvey 2011).

Traditional Marxist approaches place class at the centre of analysis and regard other identity markers as institutions that prevent workers from uniting around their true interests. By contrast, feminist political economy scholars study interactions between social relations and economic relations without prioritizing either. The current paper is founded in the latter tradition, and builds on and extends scholarship on gender, race, and migration status in labour relations. This scholarship is important to the analysis of ethnic relations and labour in two main ways. First, ethnicity intersects with other social differences, and analyses of ethnicity must attend to how ethnic status and other distinctions interact to produce workforce segmentation. Second, critical approaches to gender, race, and migration in labour relations have analytical purchase in studies of ethnicity as well.

Gender

Feminist scholars broadened the scope of labour research by demonstrating how gender profoundly shapes workers' agency in traditional workspaces. When local understandings of gender come into contact with capitalist logics, whether through industry relocation or through labour migration, gender relations in these societies change (Reid-Musson et al. 2020). Gender-based advantages and disadvantages on the labour market are founded on contextually contingent notions of masculinity and femininity (Otis 2011; McDowell 2016). While the gendered nature of labour relations vary between places, the thrust of new encounters between capital and gendered social relations has often been to offer women poorer employment conditions (Barrientos, Dolan, and Tallontire 2003), cause women to shoulder part of the productive investment (Collins 2009), push women into more precarious work relations (Fudge and Strauss

2013), turning femininity into an asset that can be exploited for capitalist profit (Lan 2003; Hanser 2005), or block women from managerial positions (Wright 1997).

Feminist labour scholars have expanded the concept of work itself through examining women's productive activities. They shifted the focus away from a work model with full-time, stable employment, health and safety regulations, and union representation, which was always reserved for a small section of the global population and mainly white urban men of industrialised countries (Vosko 2011). This model was made possible by the reproductive labour of people who were not afforded the same degree of protection or remuneration, including female family members performing unpaid reproductive work and immigrant care workers whose citizenship status makes them more exploitable. The frontiers of labour studies were further extended through scholarship that followed capital into informal and marginalised sections of the economy and investment frontiers in the Global South (Barrientos, Dolan, and Tallontire 2003; Pun 2005; Wright 2006). Patriarchal structures in the workplace and at home are interconnected, for example as migrant women put up with salary discrimination and poor working conditions in order to escape exploitative social relations at home. Capitalists use flexible hires to transfer costs and risks onto workers in response to downward pressure on prices and just-in-time schedules (Rai 2020; Barrientos 2013; De Neve 2014; Chan, Florence, and Qiu 2021).

Capitalist production has shifted to sites formerly reserved for reproductive activities or the subsistence economy by incorporating new groups into the labour market via subcontracting arrangements, which allows for combining paid labour with other tasks. Workers' self-understandings are consequently subsumed under other identities, such as being a housewife, entrepreneur, farmer, prisoner, or religious devotee (Fudge and Strauss 2013). The ultimate effects of combining wage work with unpaid labour or subsistence activities through subcontracting is to depress wages (Chu 2019; Chuang 2020). Research on gender and labour was spearheaded by studies of female factory workers, but recent scholarship affords greater attention to male labour migrants as a gendered category. This has coincided with a precarisation of employment, as demonstrated in research from Chinese contexts on connections between masculine identities and precarious labour conditions in non-manufacturing sectors, including construction, private security, transportation, and delivery (Lin 2013; Choi 2018; Chuang 2020; Choi and Li 2021; Huang 2021).

Race

Race, like gender, is constructed in ways that beget labour differentiation. While the term 'race' is most commonly used in scholarship on intergroup relations and comparisons between white and non-white groups in North America, racial ideologies have penetrated every civilisation it has come in contact with, including East Asian societies (Kowner and Demel 2013). Capitalism and race are co-produced through the ways capitalism is structurally primed to 'divide populations in ways that correlate with, and fabricate, race' (Fraser 2018, 2). The concept of 'racial capitalism' captures combination of the power of race in justifying dispossession and capital's propensity to produce and exploit relations of inequalities (Melamed 2015). Its plural form—'racial capitalisms'—acknowledges regional differences in how we understand race and thus in how race may be exploited (Strauss 2020).

Ideas and practices that racialise labour are embedded in laws and other institutions. Obvious examples of labour expropriation enabled by racialisation include direct appropriation through chattel slavery and violent extraction through sharecropping, prison labour, trafficking, or predatory lending. Scholarship on racialised accumulation establishes connections between past direct expropriation and current racial status hierarchies in waged labour (Fraser 2018). Historical patterns of land expropriation condition how race is mobilized to enable accumulation today. In North America, settler colonisation eradicated native peoples to appropriate their land, laying the foundation for all subsequent settlements on the continent, through immigration, slave trade, or indentured servitude (Pulido 2018). However, racialised identities that produce cheap labour are not necessarily associated with inferiority. A case in point is masculine identities among the white US veterans foraging for wild matsutake mushrooms in California and Oregon, who present themselves as resourceful, poverty and their weak position on the labour market notwithstanding (Tsing 2015, 85–87).

Migration status

Migration regimes rely on and produce gendered and racialised identities. This is evident in historical studies of migration flows. A case in point is the anti-immigration laws in North America targeting Asian women in the late nineteenth century. Contemporary migrant worker schemes tend to facilitate mobilities that sustain the racial and gender composition and geographic trajectories of past mobilities (Chartrand and Vosko 2021). Present-day policies include measures to control sexuality and family formation among labour migrants, for example through requiring contract workers to submit to their employers' supervision in their time off work or by legally restricting interaction between migrants and the community at large (Luibhéid 2002; Wee, Goh, and Yeoh 2019).

Migration policies are shaped by ideas of race and gender, but migration can also be a means for individuals to challenge prevailing gender and racial identities. For example, female labour migrants can achieve an arms-length distance to familial patriarchy and gain greater economic independence, but simultaneously subject themselves to the rules that govern their migration and employment (Pun 2005). Relatedly, racialised rural people have put up with exploitative labour relations in part because urban factory work branded their bodies as less 'dark' than those of rural workers (Traub-Werner 2010, 143–145).

Migration brokers influence who migrate and under what conditions. International and internal migrants may depend on brokers to raise capital to travel, find housing, and connect with employers. Furthermore, brokers can help migrants cope with everyday challenges, such as language barriers and inter-caste discrimination, and surmount the legal difficulties entailed by internal or international migration (Carswell and De Neve 2013; Rolf 2019). Successful brokerage often requires a good understanding of the social relations in the migrants' places of origin (Kelly 2001; Barrientos 2013; Carswell and De Neve 2013). Brokers must also know the needs and preferences of the employers, including their gendered and racialised ideas about suitability (Johnson–Webb 2002). The mode of arrival combines with the migrants' legal status to shape labour conditions. The state is an actor in most migration brokerage. Some brokers are licensed by the state, others operate informally or illegally (Lindquist, Xiang, and Yeoh 2012). State-sanctioned

labour migration agencies can operate in conjunction with unofficial private agents who have closer links to the migrants and their home places, constituting 'agent chains' where each link charges a commission. The relationship of the state and the agent chains can be one of symbiosis rather than antagonism, which explains how agents chains are sustained through times of deregulation and reregulation of migration (Xiang 2012).

Ethnicity as the basis for labour differentiation in China

The scholarship discussed above elucidates how the extraction of value from labour interacts with gendered and racialised boundary making. Ethnicity has long been approached through the negotiation of boundaries between groups rather than cultural traits in isolation (Barth 1998: originally 1969). Though arbitrary in its origin, ethnic classifications are real in their consequences. The People's Republic of China's ethnic classification project was a legal-political scheme officially launched in 1954, and classified China's population into 56 ethnic groups (*minzu*) based on the criteria of language, territory, economy, and culture (Han 2010). All Chinese citizens are now assigned a fixed and singular ethnic identity at birth. The designation masked great internal heterogeneity in the groups and did not necessarily coincide with how people self-identified. Once established, however, the ascriptions had great power to establish notions of common ethnicity through the rights they conferred, including the right to partial territorial autonomy in certain areas. One intergroup difference stands out in the classification system: that of ethnic minorities versus the purportedly more modern and developed Han majority (Wang and Roche 2022). This difference is distinctly hierarchical, as Han-ness is constructed as unmarked in relation to the minorities and a civilised and non-exotic benchmark against which the ethnic traits of the others can be defined (Carrico 2017).

Integrating ethnic minorities into China's labour market is informed by three broader policy objectives. The first is to enlarge the pool of workers to keep labour costs down and improve national competitiveness, which became urgent after the demographically induced workforce expansion of the 1980s and 1990s was exhausted (Hess 2009; Zhang, Yang, and Wang 2011). The second objective is to integrate new groups and areas into the monetary economy, which boosts domestic demand and enhances the supply of the natural resources by incorporating rural areas more tightly into national economic circuits. The third objective is to secure greater political legitimacy among ethnic minorities by promoting minority area economic development and a convergence in lifestyles and aspirations between minority and majority populations (Gustafsson and Yang 2017, 526).

Ethnic minorities now make up to 8.9 percent of the total population of China (National Bureau of Statistics 2021). They are more likely to live in poorer parts of China, and overall more poverty prone than the majority (Gustafsson, Ding, and Sato 2020, 310). The current labour market participation, education levels, demographic structure, location, and social organisation of different minority groups vary widely between groups and influence their employment levels. Earnings development has overall been poorer for ethnic minorities than for the Han, although some minority groups have lower levels of poverty and higher earnings than the Han population (Gustafsson and Yang 2017). Hiring discrimination contributes to entrenched poverty.

Experimental studies of how Chinese firms respond to job applications submitted from fictive ethnic minority and Han applicants shows that minority applicants have lower callback rates, especially if they are from groups that are seen as culturally distant from the Han (Hasmath and Kay-Reid 2021; Hou, Liu, and Crabtree 2020). Since 1994, Chinese government has greatly expanded its minimum wage intervention in response to concerns about income inequalities (Du and Pan 2009; Li and Lin 2020). Studies of the effects of the minimum wage programmes find that while such programmes reduce wage discrimination, they may also lead to disempowerment for young adults and low-skilled workers in the manufacturing sector, whose employers demand that they work overtime without compensation (Li and Lin 2020).

When notions about ethnicity come into contact with capitalist logic, articulations of capitalism and ideas of ethnicity change. This is the case for gender, race, and migration status too, but ethnicity differs from these social categories in one important way: Gender, race, and migration status identify individuals, whereas ethnicity ascribes membership to particular social organisations in addition to identifying individuals. Ethnic belonging is therefore more than a descriptor of social difference: it makes up a field of communication and interaction. Ethnic boundaries define the parameters for social life among people who understand themselves, and are understood by others, to share some critical social characteristics. In being both a tool for social classification and an organisational form that ties people together through kinship relations, ethnic grouping has the potential to shape labour profoundly.

The Yi ethnic minority

We address the question of how ethnic minorities are brought into the labour market by focusing on one minority group: the Yi. They constitute China's sixth-largest formally recognised ethnic minority (Zhang and Tsung 2019). The people labelled 'Yi' are made up of groups who live across vast stretches of mountainous areas in southwestern China, including the Liangshan Yi autonomous prefecture in Sichuan province (Heberer 2005). The Yi population officially counts 9.83 million persons, 28.9 percent of whom live in the Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture (National Bureau of Statistics 2021). Yi from Liangshan are known for more conservative attitudes about culture, religion, and social customs than Yi from other parts of Sichuan, Guizhou, and Yunnan provinces. The traditional orientation and greater concentration of Yi in Liangshan implies that the labour organisation described in this study may be more pronounced than for Yi labour migrants from other parts of China.

Liangshan Yi people speak at Lolo-Burmese language mutually unintelligible with Mandarin Chinese. The Yi identify themselves horizontally according to clan membership. Within a clan, there are expectations for mutual support, prescribed modes of conflict resolution, and protection against outside violence. Clan alliances are corroborated through inter-clan marriages, whereas inter-ethnic marriages have low cultural acceptance. Vertical internal stratification among Yi runs between nobles and commoners, respectively called 'Black Yi' and 'White Yi'. The marriage system is built on ideas of preserving the purity of one's bloodlines, and Liangshan Yi people therefore hardly ever intermarry with other ethnic groups. Outmigration in recent years provides Yi youth with opportunities to encounter other ethnic groups, but marriages with non-Yi is still not a common choice among Liangshan Yi.

The Yi is one of many ethnic minorities that have established pathways for migration to the PRD. No official numbers exist for how many Yi people work in the region, and the Yi community leaders interviewed for this study estimated that approximately 150,000 Yi migrant workers were dispatched by brokers to factories in the PRD. Among factory owners, the Yi are reputed for providing readily available labour power through work teams for hire in the PRD but also for engaging in collective disputes. The historically contingent hierarchical in-group stratification among Yi based on class, gender, and age takes on new forms in capitalist and urban contexts.

Methodology

The Yi workers and brokers recruited for this study hail from the mountainous Liangshan Yi autonomous prefecture in Sichuan province. Influenced by feminist and critical scholarship, we adopted a multisited method that situates the global in specific relations and demonstrates how capitalism underwrites power differences within communities and families. The fieldwork was designed around social relations that were stretched out geographically and spanned the Yi-Han ethnic division. The focus on a single ethnic group allowed us to develop sufficient ethnographic depth to study in-group power relations and how they are developed in conjunction with intergroup relations. We coauthored this article with different entry points for understanding labour in South China. Ma collected observational data for seven months among Yi workers from the Liangshan Yi autonomous prefecture in the PRD manufacturing cities of Dongguan, Huizhou, and Shenzhen between 2013 and 2016. Her data collection focused on the lived experience and agency of the Yi workers and brokers. The main fieldwork sites included outdoor labour markets, labour agencies run by Yi brokers, electronics factories, and factory dormitories, and she spent time in the workers' and brokers' hometowns in Liangshan prior to and during the fieldwork. In the PRD, he lived in rental housing for migrant tenants and dormitory rooms reserved for ethnic Yi workers during the fieldwork and joined in social activities organised by Yi labour brokers and workers. The fieldwork provided opportunities to observe some of the many short but intense labour conflicts involving Yi workers, brokers, employers, and local government representatives (for more details about the fieldwork, see Ma 2018). Haugen studied manufacturing in the PRD from the perspective of transnational traders, sourcing agents, and owners of small-scale factories during three extended periods between 2009 and 2019. The traders and agents were operating at the low end of the market, often placing small orders for custom-made products with manufacturers with short lead times and fluctuating labour needs that spawned temporary labour hires.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 63 Yi migrant workers, 25 Yi brokers, 20 Han migrant workers and labour brokers, and 13 local government officials. 37 of the informants were female (four of them brokers, the rest were workers). The interviewed workers were mostly youth whose ages ranged from 16 to 26 years, and the PRD was generally their first point of arrival, though some had experience from construction work in Chengdu and Beijing or as cotton-pickers in Xinjiang. The average wages of the Liangshan Yi workers are lower than their Han counterparts due to short-term contracts, wage discrimination, and wage-sharing with brokers. The workers first interviewed were introduced by Yi brokers. To avoid selection bias, Ma

later worked in an electronic factory with a group of Yi labourers and followed these workers on holiday to their hometown in Liangshan to interview more Yi workers. These workers, it turned out, were also employed through labour brokers.

The language of interaction with workers and brokers was Mandarin, which is widely spoken by young Yi migrants. Conversations with elders in Liangshan were carried out with the assistance of two Yi workers who accompanied Ma during the field visits to Liangshan. The participants were informed about the study's objectives, and consented to participating. In addition to observation and unstructured conversations, semi-structured interviews were carried out supported by lists of questions and topics. These lists were adjusted as the fieldwork progressed and we learned more about how labour relations were structured. Handwritten notes from the interviews and participant observation were made on-site and typed out within 24 hours. All of the material was analyzed manually.

The initial research focus concerned why most Yi migrants remain in the labour dispatch system while Han workers tended to find jobs individually and reflected a teleological expectation for labour market differences to be obliterated over time, eventually making intermediation redundant. These assumptions had to be revised when confronted with the ethnographic data, which motivated a more open-ended exploration of interactions between workers, labour brokers, capitalists, and the state.

The making of workers through co-ethnic labour brokerage

Critical scholarship has followed capitalism as it moves to include new sites and groups and changes meanings of gender and race. How are ethnic identities and inter- and intra-ethnic relations affected when ethnic minorities engage in capitalist production? Whereas four decades of Han migrant experiences with labour migration for factory work had an individualizing effect, Yi labour migrants remained reliant on co-ethnic brokerage and embedded in their ethnic community after they moved to cities. The co-ethnic labour brokers were not only situated between Yi workers and capitalist producers but also retained a central position in the workers' relationships with people in their rural hometowns. Brokerage systems are not exceptional in a Chinese context. Since the 1990s, majority rural-urban migrant workers have largely relied on native-place (*laoxiang*) based intermediaries, whether informal or organised by local labour bureaus, to find informal employment in cities (see eg. Pun 2005; Chuang 2020). However, the co-ethnic brokerage of Yi has proved particularly persistent, both because of how it is embedded in clan-based moral economy and because it has been bolstered through the actions of capitalists and government representatives, as we discuss below.

Yi workers, co-ethnic brokers, and capitalist producers

Yi migrant workers in the PRD are concentrated in low-end, labour-intensive manufacturing and consigned to informal work by structural disadvantages. The capitalist producers who hire Yi workers are by and large Han Chinese, and they operate in global markets with a heavy downward pressure on costs and volatile demand. Contracted teams of Yi workers allow manufacturers to adjust their capacity to account for unpredictable demand, pay lower wages, and evade taxes, pension, and insurance expenses. The teams were organised by Yi brokers, who collected salaries on the workers' behalf and deducted a commission of 10–20 percent. In 2014, the labour brokers said that

factories paid them about CNY 9 ($1.4) per worker per hour, a low rate compared to what individually employed workers received at the time. Informal workers in general put in longer hours and are paid less than those formally employed (Xue, Gao, and Guo 2014). The wages received by the ethnic Yi workers were paid at around the minimum wage rates for the number of weeks they worked, but their working hours were longer than regulated (12-hour workdays was not uncommon) and contracts were short and intercepted by periods without income. This is consistent with surveys from China, which establish that low-skilled workers are required to work overtime hours without additional pay as an unintended consequence of the minimum wage policy (Li and Lin 2020). Few Yi labour brokers had the capital needed to officially register their businesses and secure large factory contracts. Brokers usually operated in multiple tiers that were connected through debt chains, leaving workers beholden to a hierarchy of superiors entitled to a share of their salary. The low salary and lack of benefits notwithstanding, Yi workers tended to remain in brokered employment relations.

The Yi migrants are understood as different and inferior to the Han majority population in multiple and intersecting ways that affected employment relations. Migrants from the countryside in general tend to be deemed low-quality and abuse from superiors or customers undermine workers' sense of self (Lin 2013; Choi 2018). When the workers themselves described a feeling of being vulnerable, they did not necessarily distinguish between vulnerability due to ethnicity, rural status, age, and gender. For example, Xiaoli, a 17-year-old worker recalled how the social distance between her and potential employers had seemed unsurmountable when she arrived in the PRD. 'I knew nothing about Han society. I was shy and blushed just from speaking, so how could I find a job myself? Only when I am with other [Yi] workers who also work with my uncle [the broker] do I feel relaxed and comfortable.' The migrants were also structurally disadvantaged by their lack of Mandarin proficiency, another alleged sign of backwardness, and by the stereotype of Yi men as hot-tempered and prone to fighting. Some job advertisements in the PRD stated that Yi workers, as well as Uyghurs and Tibetans, need not apply due to their alleged propensity to cause trouble. Employers used allegations about low productivity to justify the low wages paid to Yi work teams. Employment through co-ethnic brokerage meant that ethnic markers would stick with the workers but also helped them cope with the risks of engaging in wage work. The Yi workers have few resources to protect their interests in the case of injuries and disputes but expected protection from the Yi ethnic community as long as they worked for co-ethnic brokers.

The brokers supervised and disciplined workers on behalf of the factory owners, thus enabling the extraction of labour from a marginalised population. This allowed manufacturers to harness the labour power of ethnic minorities without relating to their vulnerability and potential for resistance. Many manufacturers ignored unlawful practices, such as hiring underage workers and subcontracting from unregistered labour agencies. Some brokers employed disciplinary methods that Yi workers would not have accepted from factory owners but tolerated from supervisors with whom they shared a kinship relation. This allowed manufacturers to exercise paternalist management by proxy (cf. Choi and Peng 2015). Many Yi workers, like Xiaoli, were young and female, while the brokers were more senior and almost exclusively male. The hierarchical broker–worker relationships thus reproduced clan-based, patriarchal, and gerontocratic social orders from the migrants' hometowns. A male worker had left the broker he was employed by to find

a job by himself in Tianjin, but was unable to endure the unfamiliar climate on his own and eventually returned to the PRD to work for a broker again. He said had come to realise that the best he could hope for was to find a broker who confiscated only a moderate proportion of his wage and placed in factories with good working conditions.

The Yi workers did not necessarily reject the ascription of ethnically based difference, and rationalised some of the discrimination and exploitation they experienced with ethnic traits. However, they inverted the status of Yi as inferior to Han by proclaiming freedom to be a superior value to money and job security. This reproduced central features of Chinese official discourses about ethnicity, whereby ethnic minorities are portrayed as less productive and uncivilised, but challenged the conclusion that modernizing the ethnic subject is desirable. Working for a broker meant moving between factories and changing tasks, rather than remaining in the same workplace over time, and foregoing economic advancement. With reference to Han workers-turned-managers, one Yi worker said, 'Yi people believe human life is short, so it can and should be more colourful. Leading the type of boring life they have is a waste.' Another worker explained that the discipline demanded by her production-line leader went against her nature. 'What she wants is just a docile subject, like a machine. I just cannot do it!' she said. By placing a unique value on every person's time, they confronted the key capitalist idea of the disposability of individual labourers and resisted work protocols that collided with their understandings of dignity (cf. Wright 2006; Otis 2011, 10).

Notions of freedom among Yi workers were gendered. Men, who found spatial confinement in the factories emasculating, particularly emphasised the liberty to roam. Some young women, by contrast, saw factory work as a way to escape social oppression, particularly unwanted arranged marriage to establish solidarity with other clans. Xiaoli was among the women who rebelled against the custom of arranged marriages by asking her parents to cancel the engagement contract they had arranged after she became a factory worker. Working in coastal cities exposed women more intensely to ideas of marriage based on romantic love rather than clan interests. They also gained economic independence that made divorce a viable option to escape from an unhappy marriage. Overall, working in the city gave women greater independence in their personal lives in exchange for surrendering control over their labour power.

In some respects, the workers' autonomy was enhanced by brokered employment. The workers wished to stay on the Yi annual calendar and return home for traditional celebrations. Some men wanted to spend several months at home farming. The brokers would schedule assignments to allow for such leaves, an example of the soft tactics employed by brokers to preclude disputes between workers and managers (for a discussion of such tactics employed to buffer relations with majority ethnic workers, see Peng and Choi 2013). They also served as a social buffer when Yi workers felt disrespected by Han co-workers or superiors, expressing sympathy when the contracted workers complained, and in some cases reassigning them. Yi workers, therefore, related to the labour broker as their superior, referred to them as 'boss,' and were less willing than Han workers to submit to factory owners' schedules and disciplinary schemes.

The moral economy of labour brokerage

By moving to the city with brokers, Yi workers become more embedded in ethnic networks of reciprocity. Some workers borrowed from brokers to finance their travel, and

the brokers helped them get identity papers, including false identity cards for underage workers, and find somewhere to live. Though the financial debt could be repaid in a few months, the social debt retained Yi in the co-ethnic brokerage system, and thus in the capitalist system, for much longer. In return, brokers helped workers leverage intra-ethnic solidarity to temper the perils of factory work. Brokers were expected to protect the workers they represented and standup for relatives and clan members in this way garnered esteem from the Yi communities.

Relationships between workers and brokers were underpinned by long-standing moral codes that governed interactions across class, clan, generational, and gender lines. These relationships were spatially extended when the migrants left their rural hometowns. Labour arrangements were structured by the notions of reciprocity and rightful gains as much as by workers' wage optimisation, reappropriating moral codes initially developed in the context of subsistence-based ethnic economies to become compatible with capitalist accumulation. The case of a 19-year-old Yi migrant illustrates this process. He already had four years of experience in the electronics industry in the city of Dongguan when we met him in 2014, and got along so well with Han co-workers that he was appointed team leader. The factory owner offered to formally hire him, and he wanted to accept. However, clan obligations ultimately discouraged him from taking the position. 'Our boss is my dad's uncle,' the young man explained, referring to the broker. 'My dad said I could not leave because he had done us a favour. Without him, we would never have been able to find jobs in this city, so we should let him earn the money.' Just as his filial commitments continued into adulthood, his social obligation to remain under the broker's control did not expire once he found better employment on his own.

The moral codes that underpinned broker–worker relationships included procedures for monetary punishments rooted in customary laws that historically governed slavery in Yi societies. Informal contracts dictated that workers must commit to an individual broker for at least one year. If the worker changes brokers, the new broker must pay a compensation fee of up to CNY 30,000 ($4350) to the original broker. This convention is intended to prevent brokers from 'stealing workers.' The notion that people can be stolen dates back to before the founding of the People's Republic of China, when Black Yi owned slaves. A family that took in a slave from another household had to compensate the original owners. This logic of compensation has been revived and re-contextualised in Yi labour brokerage and is enforced by White and Black Yi brokers alike. A worker who changes brokers must pay a compensation fee to their original broker and often relies on their new broker to do so. This system exacerbates dependencies between brokers and workers.

Unequal power dynamics between Yi brokers and workers were reinforced by traditional gender roles. As in the village, female workers were expected to undertake emotional labour in their off hours, although in new ways. Male brokers invited dependent female workers to karaoke bars and taught them to serve alcohol. The invitations precipitated loyalty conflicts: refusal to accept a broker's invitation openly defied their authority, whereas accompanying them was dishonorable for the women in ways that could implicate their families back home as well. Some Yi female workers reclaimed agency under these circumstances by engaging in more long-term intimate relationships with brokers. This allowed them to move out of the workers' dormitories, get a break

from the factory toil, and receive material benefits in the form of gifts. A few of the Yi women in our study proceeded to cut ties to the ethnic economy altogether by finding work at entertainment venues run by Han managers, which increased their earnings but put their social standing in their home communities at risk.

Brokers might deliberately allow workers to build up debts to consolidate their control and keep workers committed. The borrowed money could be spent on anything form assisting relatives in a health crisis to drinking and gambling. Brokers organised events at which male workers could drink and gamble on credit, easily spending a month's worth of salary. Lending money was called 'advancing wages,' and brokers often described the arrangement as an adapted version of traditional mutual support systems. However, Yi workers complained that brokers might deliberately force them into bondage by letting them run up debts. 'Advancing money is deceptive,' a male worker who had spent several months of advanced salary on entertainment said. 'It is not the kind of leading-and-borrowing money between the family numbers or relatives in our hometown. The bosses want to make money from us rather than standing for the good of workers.' While working off his debts, he frequently got into fights or abandoned jobs the brokers arranged, and the brokers had to smooth things over with the manufacturers and find him new jobs. As debts locked workers into employment relationships, the lines between benevolence and shrewdness and between consent and coercion were blurred, casting the labour brokers as morally ambiguous figures.

Brokering social stability

The Chinese state is important as a regulator of the labour market as well as an employer of dispatch workers through state-owned enterprises (Huang 2017). In these roles, the state has actively promoted precarity in the working conditions of a large section of its citizens (Wang, Chan, and Yang 2021). While linguistic differences and socio-cultural complexity can justify salary discrimination and inhibit class-based labour activism, ethnic diversity also generates potential for alternative forms of labour organisation. The labour brokerage system is a tool for local governments to regulate the low end of the PRD labour market through alliances with ethnic leaders. Urban politicians and bureaucrats are conscious that ability to promote stability in their interaction with minority communities affects how their performance is assessed. Officials in the city of Shenzhen claimed that government agents were therefore more permissive toward ethnic minorities than toward Han Chinese. One official said: 'We should be more concerned and tread more cautiously with some ethnic minorities […]. As government staff, we don't want to upset national unity and lose our jobs.'

While the designated minority autonomous areas in China have formal structures for interacting with ethnic minorities, migrant-receiving regions lack such institutions and local governments in the PRD have to find their own ways of coping with disputes involved ethnic minorities. This interacts with increasingly non-legalistic approaches, to settling labour disputes, whereby local bureaucratic agencies are given the discretionary power to resolve conflicts through mediation without having to comply with legal standards (Zhuang and Chen 2015). Nationwide suppression of representative labour unions further contributes to ad hoc solutions to labour conflicts. Responses to labour disputes that involve ethnic minorities are therefore locally contingent, varying across space and government units in China.

Ethnic Yi labour brokers are cognizant of the priority placed on maintaining social order. They would often step in to help the local government contain 'troublemaking' (*naoshi*), thus preventing the geographic and social displacement of Yi workers' experience from resulting in social unrest. The troublemaking varied from verbal and physical fights between Yi and Han workers to collective strikes in factories and public petitions. The brokers defined parameters within which fights were acceptable. Spontaneous fighting inside factories was heavily sanctioned because brokers risked losing pay and clients. By contrast, off-hours street fights were tolerated, and brokers sometimes joined in. Fighting was seen as an indication of male courage and ability to protect the household and community's honor among the Yi migrants. As a signifier of manhood, it took on added significance for migrants who found the spatial confines of factory work emasculating (for a discussion of other strategies to reclaim manhood among male migrant workers in China, see Choi and Li 2021). The migrant workers recognised that fighting could get them into trouble and trusted the brokers to resolve problems in the wake of fights. 'People can get into a fight because we do not know how to communicate in the way the Han Chinese do. To resolve these problems calls for a boss,' one worker said.

In negotiations with the local government, labour brokers skillfully leveraged Yi migrants' reputation for being unruly. A case in point was an incident when Yi brokers requested compensation on behalf of a worker following a medical error at a private hospital in Dongguan. The teenager was unable to work for several months, yet the hospital initially refused to compensate her. She solicited help from the broker who had arranged her employment. He organised a meeting with the hospital manager and the government medical bureau. Fifteen men showed up to support the girl and the broker. The broker instructed her to say that the protesters were relatives from her hometown who had travelled far to demand justice rather than reveal that they were Yi brokers and workers who lived nearby. The government first tried to defuse the situation by asking Yi representatives to initiate a process of petition, mediation, and litigation, but the labour brokers rejected a bureaucratisation of the problem. They feigned complete lack of understanding of formal processes and instead presented the hospital with a list of demands ostensibly based on Yi customary law, including covering travel expenses for the protesting relatives, fees for carrying out necessary ritual services, spiritual compensation, and money for medical treatment and disability compensation for the worker. After the government office closed for the day, negotiations continued at the local police station. More Yi men were called to gather outside as the night went on, adding urgency to the brokers' demands. Government officials responded to the pressure by instructing the hospital representatives to not 'make mistakes' in relations with an ethnic minority. By bringing more Yi representatives into the dispute and aggravating the conflict, the Yi brokers compelled the local government to acknowledge and remunerate the work they carried out to prevent ethnic unrest and reminded government officials that they were dependent on keeping on good terms with the brokers.

Making a public scene paid off. Coerced by the local government, the hospital accepted most of their demands and paid out CNY 60,000 ($8,700), of which the injured worker received CNY 4,000 ($580). Despite her modest share of the compensation, the worker expressed relief and gratitude that the brokers had stood up for her.

The remaining money was divided among the men who had participated in the collective action, for whom such entrepreneurial arbitrage yielded much higher rewards than traditional labour intermediation. The incident illustrates that brokers claimed to represent the interests of workers and that workers generally accepted this claim while fully aware that the brokers enriched themselves in the process.

The brokers are both agents who make a capitalist profit through controlling labour and political actors whose authority comes from their standing in the ethnic community. By operating outside of formal regulatory institutions, they contain the political volatility that otherwise could result from consigning segments of the workforce to a state of precarity. Politicians improve social stability through encouraging the patronage-like character of broker–worker relationships. Such relationships between capital, government, and brokers entrench existing class and gender hierarchies and reify the Yi as a uniform ethnic group.

Conclusion

This article has analyzed how ethnic Yi people were inserted into capitalist production in the PRD through co-ethnic labour brokers, who accommodate ethnically based social organisation as well as the manufacturers' need for cheap and flexible labour. Labour migration has reworked ideas about Yi culture and the basis for intra-ethnic hierarchies without diminishing the overall importance of ethnicity. The migrants experienced ethnically based discrimination, but also found ways to creatively leverage their ethnic identity, both in relations with the ethnic majority population, as with the brokers who extracted compensation after the work accident, and in intra-ethnic relations, as with the workers who demanded that brokers forgave transgressions by referring to their ethnically determined needs. By working with the co-ethnic brokers, the Chinese state achieved its objective of inserting the minority population into the monetary economy without direct engagement with the workers themselves.

The study of relationships between Yi workers and brokers substantiates three arguments about ethnicity and labour. First, ethnic discrimination is not the only reason labour remains organised along ethnic lines. The Yi workers remained in co-ethnic brokerage systems to feel protected while far from home, to fulfill moral obligations, and to lead urban lives that were compatible with lifestyles that they knew and preferred. The brokers were as responsible for ensuring that they remained in the capitalist system as for recruiting them in the first place. Second, recruitment into the labour force reworked ethnic identities and intra-ethnic hierarchies but did not diminish their importance. This finding in the case of Yi workers is similar to how the social categories of gender and race are reworked when they come into contact with capitalist logic, as documented through critical labour studies. Third, ethnic marginalisation can be strategically leveraged by capitalists and the state, but also by members of the ethnic group in question.

Recent developments in the Chinese labour market highlight that much is left to be understood about how ethnicity and labour interact. The rise in platform solutions ('the gig economy') promotes precarious employment, and precarity typically touches the economic lives of marginalised groups first. Farmland has taken on a new significance in labour mobilisation: As the government launches peasant relocation programmes

aiming to relieve poverty and encourage peasants, including ethnic minorities, to relocate from their farmlands, a livelihood safeguard for rural-urban migrants has come under threat. Developments at the labour market's margins provide glimpses into the future of work for larger groups. The study of ethnic minority labour should therefore not be relegated to otherness and idiosyncrasy. Decentering the white, male, full-time worker in labour studies has shifted our understanding of work and yielded deeper insights into capitalist labour relations. Marginalisation along ethnic lines creates reserve pools of labour that are integral to the functioning of the entire labour market, and ethnicity ought to be considered alongside more well-studied social distinctions in analyses of workforce segmentation and labor relations.

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