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# Precarious Intersections: An Ethnographic Study of the Work, Lives, and Everyday Ethics of Industrial Workers in a Chinese State Railway Company

Ziyu Lian

A Thesis Submitted for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Department of Anthropology

Durham University

2024

# Abstract

*Ziyu Lian*

*Precarious Intersections: An Ethnographic Study of the Work, Lives, and Everyday Ethics of Industrial Workers in a Chinese State Railway Company*

This dissertation explores Chinese industrial workers' labour, lives, and everyday ethics in the context of growing labour precarity. My ethnography, based on a year's fieldwork at a Chinese state railway company's construction site and its headquarters, demonstrates how new forms of precarity profoundly affect all aspects of workers' lives, including romantic relationships, marriage, social relationships with co-workers, plus a sense of security, and changing ideas of achievement.

I propose a fourfold model in which labour precarity intensifies social, affective, and structural precarity. Thus, since the reform of state-owned enterprises in the 1990s, temporary employment has largely replaced socialist, lifelong employment. Structural precarity refers to precarity resulting from particular economic and political configurations. Social precarity is characterised by vulnerable social relationships. Affective precarity indicates subjective experiences of precarity, such as the emotions that emerge in the context of labour, structural, and social precarity. The extent to which workers are affected by these different forms of precarity, or able to mitigate them, largely depends on their positions in a complex, gendered labour hierarchy of permanent state employees, temporary agency workers, workers with oral agreements with the company, interns, apprentices, and migrant workers. Exegeses and experiences of these kinds of precarity are shaped by distinct moral frameworks: Confucian philosophy emphasising filial obligation, socialist ideas of collective worth, and recent ideas of self-improvement and individual advancement. Drawing on all these three frameworks, workers piece together solutions to moral dilemmas, building a patchwork of everyday ethics, which I term the ethics of precarity.

My contributions are threefold. First, I offer new insights to scholarship on precarity by exploring how different forms of precarity intersect and are experienced. Second, I provide a novel analysis of how everyday ethics and precarity are intertwined. Finally, I provide an original ethnography of Chinese railway workers' labour and lives.

# Title Page

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Chinese Communist Party (CCP)

State-Owned Enterprises (SOE)

the People's Republic of China (PRC)

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# Statement of Copyright

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# Preface

When I first began my PhD project in 2018, I was curious about a simple question: with the media frequently extolling the wonders of China's infrastructure development (particularly high-speed rail construction), what is the experience of the ordinary worker—as one of the billions of builders of China's infrastructure miracle—really like? Later, I discovered that state-owned enterprises (SOE) in China had constructed all of the country's high-speed railways. However, most of the workers involved in railway construction are not state workers with permanent contracts and stable incomes. Most are temporary workers and rural-urban migrant workers hired under various short-term or oral contracts, and they are heavily affected by labour precarity.

My conversations with the workers after entering the Ganshen Railway Project Compound (one of my main field sites; see Chapters 1 and 2) reinforced my choice to make the workers' experiences the focus of my research. At noon on a winter day in 2019, workers in the 9th Iron railway company where I carried out my fieldwork, had just finished lunch and were lining up in front of the taps outside the canteen, waiting their turn to wash their dishes in the washbasin. During the waiting period, young workers talked and laughed with those in front and behind them, as usual. My friend Cheng Tianru, a male temporary worker, stood in front of me, and Huang Yingya, another 30-year-old male temporary worker, stood behind me. Cheng complimented me in front of Huang, saying, "Huang, did you know Lian is going to write an article?" "It will be 100,000 words!" Huang looked at me curiously, and I quickly nodded, confirming Cheng's account. Then Huang looked at me with expectation in his eyes, saying, "You must write our stories in it!" Ching nodded and repeated, "Yes, please write about our lives for the world to see!" My interlocutors' requests gave me a renewed sense of mission to write. Since then, my attention has been directed towards the lived experiences of Chinese industrial workers engaged in the construction of China's railways. Specifically, I am intrigued by the ways in which labour precarity has impacted Chinese workers' lives.

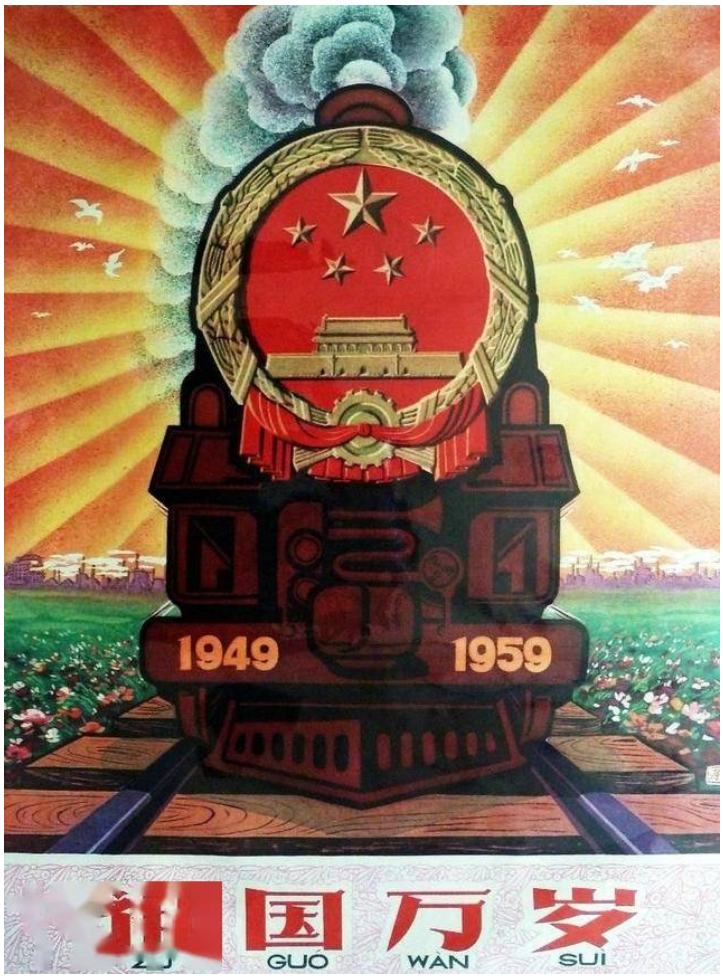
Recently, infrastructure has been characterised by scholars as an assemblage of humans, materials, practices, and organisations (Latour, 1993, 2005; Deleuze and Guattari, 1997; Ong and Collier, 2005; Larkin, 2013; Nunzio, 2018). Nikhil Anand (2011) argues that infrastructures serve as tangible domains where ideology, imagination, and social life are manifested. The links between infrastructure such as railways and statecraft have also received extensive attention in anthropology

(Mitchell, 2002; Harvey and Knox, 2014; Lee, 2018). Harvey and Knox argue that roads are "enchanted sites of contemporary statecraft" (Harvey and Knox, 2014: 521). Nevertheless, the modernity that railways have brought about can often not be accounted for by a simple phase of uniform economic development. Such infrastructure can result in disparate growth of different regions, generate regions of exclusion, cater to specific interest groups, or enforce particular regimes of oversight (Nunzio, 2018). For example, Laura Bear (2007) contends that the modernity that the railways brought to India was based on earlier racial and class divisions. Therefore, railways can bring positive economic benefits but can also cause unwanted disruptions in people's lives (Pine, 2007). In short, the anthropology of infrastructure has primarily examined the affect, imagination, and political implications woven through and emerging from infrastructure (Smith, 1986; Scott, 1998; Caldeira, 2001; Graham and Marvin, 2001; Lefebvre, 2003; Graham, 2004; Mbembe, 2004; Anand, 2012; Rodgers and O'Neill, 2012; Graham and Knox, 2014; Harvey and Knox, 2015; Nunzio, 2018).

Similarly, in China, the railway has had important symbolic significance from the imperial and socialist periods to the present day, with an impact that goes far beyond its physical functionality. Railways have long been associated with state-building ideologies and practices in China. When British businessmen attempted to introduce railway technology into Imperial China in 1865, the Qing authorities refused them, seeing railways as a menace that might upset social orders and jeopardise Qing control (Mai, 2017). During the Qing government's institutional changes from 1861 to 1895, the government shifted its stance towards foreign technologies, believing that adopting them would help China increase its national strength. China's first railway opened in 1882, and the number of railways, railway workers, and engineers rapidly grew. Proving the fears of the earlier Qing authorities, some railway workers and engineers became revolutionaries against the Qing dynasty after learning about European democratic concepts.

In 1910, these revolutionaries launched the Road Protection Movement to protest against the Qing government's decision to hand the right to build railways to Euro-American capitalist groups. This regional political movement, later defined by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) as an anti-imperialist patriotic movement, sparked a nationwide revolution (the Xinhai Revolution) that ended the Qing Dynasty and founded the Republic of China (Zhonghuaminguo, governed by the Kuomintang) (Yue, 2018). During World War II and the Chinese Civil War, the CCP considered railway control a vital factor in winning the war, setting up a special division of the People's Army

dedicated to seizing and maintaining railway control (see Chapters 1 and 4). The CCP's wartime propaganda attributed symbolic importance to its control over the railways, interpreting it as an expression of the Chinese people's resistance against colonial occupation and pursuit of national independence. This propaganda was further developed throughout the socialist period following the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC). The construction of the Chengdu-Chongqing Railway in 1950 increased the CCP's control over minority-populated areas in western China. In socialist propaganda, this railway was portrayed as a great railway that would liberate China's ethnic minorities from feudal exploitation, improve connections between ethnic groups, and accomplish socialist modernisation. Picture P.1 is a 1950s propaganda poster with the PRC emblem on top of a locomotive, implying that the railway would lead the Chinese people to a better life. Consequently, throughout the Maoist period, railway workers had been considered the exemplars and representatives of socialist labour heroes (see Chapter 9).




Picture P.1 The locomotive adorned with the PRC emblem

Since 2008, China has hugely accelerated the development of its high-speed railroads. The mileage of high-speed railways (in operation) expanded by 60 times between 2008 and 2022 (People's Daily, 2024) and is now ten times longer, at 45,000km, than the world's second longest railway in Spain (4,327.1km) (International Union of Railways, 2021). China's high-speed railroads are also the fastest in the world. Alongside the rapid growth of China's high-speed railways, there has been a growing public discourse of nationalism and patriotism in China. According to the CCP's political propaganda, China's high-speed railway leadership on the global stage is a sign of the Chinese nation's great rejuvenation.

However, while grand nation-state narratives have captured the focus of Chinese society and the world, the daily lives of railway workers have received less attention in academia and the public sphere. Thus, this thesis concentrates on railway workers and the forms of precarity they experience rather than discussing the different symbolic meanings attached to China's high-speed railways. While the CCP's propaganda presents the construction of China's high-speed railway as a highly technological and efficient process, workers' stories show a different perspective: in their daily labour and living, they face different forms of uncertainty and insecurity, as I will illustrate in the upcoming chapters.

Picture P.2 Two temporary workers cutting holes in the rock wall of the railway tunnel.

# Chapter 1 Introduction

## 1. Introduction

On the morning of January 10, 2020, I travelled from Shenzhen's railway station to the Shenzhen suburbs. After three long bus journeys, I arrived at my field site, Ganshen Railway Project, one of the 9th Iron Railway Company's construction sites, where I had already spent four months. The 9th Iron is a government-owned railway construction firm. One of its projects was in Shenzhen, where it was constructing a high-speed railway tunnel linking the coastal city of Shenzhen with the central mainland city of Ganzhou. At this point, word of the Wuhan epidemic had spread, and many were terrified of the as-yet-unknown virus; only a few people were seated on the bus that used to be full. Aunt Wang, a middle-aged woman who worked at the 9th Iron firm's canteen, walked towards me as I entered the gate of the company building with a big, warm smile on her face. She quickly pulled out a little bottle of sanitiser and sprayed it on me. She made a hand signal and told me to turn around so she could spray my back. Aunt Wang said after spraying me, "You have been on the train for a long time. Aren't you exhausted? I've saved some beef soup for you. Microwave it in the kitchen." Chen Xiaoyi, a 19-year-old male worker, overheard Wang and said, "Auntie, what delicious food have you hidden? May I have a taste?" "Eat, eat, eat!" said Wang, waving her hands. "I think you forgot what the leader told you a few days ago." Chen raced away, laughing, since he knew Wang was not upset with him.

According to Wang, the building project's director, Li Jianhua, had criticised Chen during a staff morning meeting the previous Tuesday because company leaders wanted Chen to drive for them but found him sleeping in the dormitory. Auntie Wang recalled Li shouting at Chen and saying, "I will kick you out next time, so you can sleep as long as you want." Chen had been recruited by the 9th Iron without a contract, which meant that managers, including Li, could fire him at any time without any notice. His informal employment status also meant that leaders could order Chen to do extra work and work longer hours without paying him. Chen was an apprentice who was learning tunnel-surveying techniques from a licensed site surveyor. Aside from his professional work, Chen was also obliged to be available when company leaders needed a driver to transport them between different construction sites. Chen's circumstance typified the precarious situation of informally employed workers in China's state-owned enterprises. Because of their precarious employment

status, they are sometimes required to perform unpaid personal services for managers or work extra hours. On the one hand, these workers hope to earn a formal contract by doing these tasks. On the other hand, it is difficult for them to refuse their leaders' demands because the leaders have the power to fire them. Precarious work has become common in China's state-owned firms and public institutions (Brødsgaard, 2002). In contrast to the lifelong employment that the CCP state guaranteed to every worker during the socialist era (1949-1979), a considerable percentage of labour is now engaged on short-term or verbal contracts, even in firms that are state-run.

Chen and other young workers were not alone in facing insecure employment. Aunt Wang also had to deal with the difficulties that precarious employment brought into her life. Wang, who was born into a rural family in northern Anhui province in 1960, dropped out of junior high school to work at a state-run paper box factory with her uncle's assistance. After marrying Gao Yongbing, a 9th Iron engineer, in 1979, she was transferred to work in a 9th Iron-affiliated parts-processing plant. She lost her employment when the affiliated plant closed in 2001 and followed her husband to several construction projects. From 2012 to the point of my fieldwork, Wang had been working as a deputy chef in the 9th Iron's personnel canteen without a contract.

After introducing the market economy to China through reform and opening policies[1] in the 1980s, the state began reforming the public sector in the mid-1990s and accelerated reform of state-owned enterprises in the late 1990s. The reform required state-owned enterprises to adjust to a market economy, resulting in large-scale layoffs. After the reform, the 9th Iron kept a small group of state workers who had formal permanent contracts and various benefits, but other workers had to take short-term employment contracts. Many workers, such as Aunt Wang, had to adjust to the shift from officially hired state workers to informally employed workers, with all that such a shift meant for their status and sense of identity. The previous worker community, which had consisted of socialist workers, was separated into groups with distinct identities: various types of short-term workers recruited by the 9th Iron, migrant workers hired by private firms but conducting the work outsourced by the 9th Iron, workers hired by various labour agencies, and so on. All of these diverse types of staff members worked and lived on the construction site while I was doing fieldwork (from September 2019 to September 2020). Aunt Wang said, "The composition of people on the

[1] Reform and opening up started on December 18, 1978, at the Third Plenary Session of the Eleventh Central Committee of the CCP. The second-generation central leadership of the CCP, headed by Deng Xiaoping, proposed and enacted a series of reforms aimed at abolishing the socialist planned economy and establishing a market economy.

construction site is now more complicated than before. There used to be only 9th Iron staff members, but suddenly there were people from all kinds of companies. Some employees left after only a month of work. I have to be careful not to become too close to other people at times because I don't want to be upset when they leave." Labour precarity was coupled with significant staff turnovers, prompting Wang to reconsider her way of handling interpersonal interactions. People felt the fragility of social relationships in the post-reform era and believed that they had to be cautious in maintaining social relationships, which resulted in affective experiences of anxiety about life and interpersonal relationships.

Aunt Wang had established tight relationships with most of the young workers. Most co-workers referred to her as 'auntie' (*yi*) rather than her first name. Extending the kinship title to include familiar non-kin members is a common way for people to grow closer to others in Confucian philosophy. Wei Fang, a 23-year-old female temporary worker, said, "When I first arrived at the construction site, I felt very nervous. Auntie Wang consoled me. She was like a caring aunt in my hometown. She spoke loudly and was attentive to younger women." However, Wang did not see Confucian morality, which requires seniors to look after juniors, as the motivation for her concern for young people. Rather, Wang saw herself performing the function that the Women's Federation[2] had played during the socialist era. She said, half-jokingly, half-seriously, "I am actually the director of the Women's Federation without a title! I stop young workers from fighting and mediate conflicts between young married couples. Yang Fengfeng and Chen Bing (a married couple who both work for the 9th Iron) once wanted to divorce. I criticised and educated Yang and talked for a whole night with Chen. They reconciled after that. In our time, the work unit leaders would have long conversations with any workers who mentioned divorce." A proud smile appeared on Wang's face. She continued to say, "The Women's Federation is no longer establishing branches at construction sites. People would vote for me if there were one!"

Wang, who was born and reared in the socialist era, was used to having strong personal relationships with her co-workers. In contrast to the capitalist context, where there is often a clear distinction between life and work, the socialist era had work units overseeing every aspect of individuals' lives, while people also depended on the resources provided by these work units (Bray,

[2] The full name of the Women's Federation is the All-China Women's Federation. The federation is an official organisation of Chinese women, under the leadership of the CCP, with the objective of protecting women's rights and fighting for the liberation of women. The organisation was established in 1949.

2022). For example, as Wang recalled, the Women's Federation often played a role in preventing divorce and maintaining a low divorce rate. Many such moral traditions that had formed during the socialist period continued to exist in the 9th Iron after the company's reform. These traditions, however, might be challenged. For example, Zhang, a 20-year-old accountant, expressed his surprise at Wang's intrusion into other people's lives, saying, "I think she's nosy. People in modern society should respect each other's private space." The pursuit of private space represented neoliberal moral perceptions, which contradicted Wang's understanding of social relationships. In addition to realising that her opinions clashed with the perspectives of young workers, Aunt Wang sometimes found also herself oscillating between different moral understandings. Wang's daughter, Gao Xiao, was a 9th Iron accountant, and Wang and Gao's only child, born in the mid-1980s. Gao Xiao decided not to marry after a disastrous relationship. Although Wang still thought the communist manner of divorce intervention was good, she was gradually giving up the idea of convincing her daughter to marry. Wang said, "I began to accept that young people have their own ideas. I have to respect her freedom to choose." According to Yan Yunxiang, the emergence of individualism has made the quest for freedom one of the mainstream moral values in Chinese society (Yan, 2020). Aunt Wang's shifting thoughts are just one example of workers' attempts to adjust their understandings and practices of ethics to a changing world.

In anthropology alone, there have been numerous studies discussing unstable, insecure employment under the term of precarity (Alexander, 2018; Alexander and Sanchez, 2019; Butler, 2009; Standing, 2011; Matos, 2010; Allison, 2012; Kesküla, 2012; Breman, 2013; Molé, 2013; Millar, 2014; Das and Randeria, 2015; Kofti, 2016; Prentice, 2017; Smith and Pun, 2018; Hann and Parry, 2018; Han, 2018; Kasmir, 2018; Schober, 2019; Trevisani, 2021; Bao, 2022; Xiang et al., 2023). Expanding upon the existing body of research, the main focus of this dissertation is precarity in China. But, I also extend my discussion beyond the issue of labour precarity to examine the profound impact of precarity on many other aspects of people's social and intimate lives, including romantic relationships, marriage, colleague relationships, conceptions of achievement, and ethics. This thesis provides two distinct contributions to existing research: First, I demonstrate the influence of labour precarity on people's lives when it is combined with other forms of instability in life, as well as how these other forms of instability exacerbate labour precarity. For instance, the ethnography vignette above demonstrates how labour precarity has increased the vulnerability of social relationships. As Wang said, the composition of the 9th Iron staff members has become more complex compared with that of the socialist era. Therefore, she must take extra caution when

handling social relationships. Second, I demonstrate the connections between different kinds of precarity and the ethical dilemmas individuals encounter in their daily lives. I also illustrate how people variously draw upon Confucian philosophy, socialist ideology, and recent neoliberal ideas to come up with solutions for these ethical dilemmas. As the conflicting viewpoints of Wei Fang, Zhang, and Aunt Wang suggested, Confucian philosophy emphasising filial obligation, socialist concepts of collective value, and more recent ideas of individual freedom and achievement coexisted in the 9th Iron. Furthermore, Wang's changing opinions on her daughter's marriage suggested that not only might different groups of workers have different moral beliefs from one another, but that in different situations in everyday life, the same person might need to make different moral judgements with reference to different moral frameworks.

This chapter will start with a brief history of the 9th Iron company and a short introduction to my main fieldwork site. Subsequently, I will elucidate my research methods, ethical concerns, and my interlocutors' perspectives of me. I will next present my theoretical framework, which includes a fourfold model of precarity and what I am terming ‘the everyday ethics of precarity’. The fourfold model comprises labour, structural, social, and affective precarity. The everyday ethics of precarity sheds light on the ethical dilemmas, deliberations, and ethical practices that occur in the setting of precarity. I will conclude this chapter by providing an overview of the structure of this dissertation.

# 2. The 9th Iron company and my field site

I will first briefly introduce the history of the 9th Iron company, and then introduce my main fieldwork site, the Ganshen Railway Project. I expand on the introduction of my main fieldwork site in the next chapter, which aims to immerse the reader in the spaces and rhythms of the 9th Iron’s work and life. I stayed on the Ganshen Railway Project from September 15, 2019 to July 15, 2020. After that, I did around two months’ fieldwork in the head office of the 9th Iron, where I read the company’s historical and administrative files and had conversations with the 9th Iron’s managers and top leaders. Besides, I conducted one month of pilot fieldwork in the winter of 2018 in Shanghai. I visited a 9th Iron's tunnelling project in the suburbs of Shanghai and some former 9th Iron workers' apartments (i.e., the 9th Iron Workers’ and Families’ Homes, see Chapter 6).

## 2.1 The 9th Iron company

As a state-owned enterprise, China Railway Group currently owns the 9th Iron. The construction project where I conducted my research was one for which the 9th Iron was responsible. The municipal governments of Shenzhen and Ganzhou jointly invested in the project and named it Ganshen Railway Project. China Railway Group was known as the National Ministry of Railways and Engineering during the Communist era (1949-1979), formally coming into existence in 1950. The department consisted of the Ministry of Railway Construction of the Republic of China (1912-1949) and the railway armies[3] that the CCP established during the Chinese Civil War (1945-1949). In 1998, the central government initiated a reform of the state sector, with state-owned enterprises as its primary objective. The reform was known as the 'Grab the Large and Let Go of the Small' movement (see more about the reform and its effects in Chapter 4 and 9). In 2000, China Railway Group separated from the national ministry. This reform was known as "the separation of government from businesses" (*zhengqifenkai*). Since this reform, China Railway Group (along with the 9th Iron) has been considered to be a commercial company, as opposed to the Ministry of Railways, which has remained a government department. Since the reform, the Ministry of Railways has been responsible for administering the nation's railway development strategies and railway policies. Construction of railways has been the responsibility of China Railway Group. The latter entered the market with the intention of making a profit. The State Council's State-Owned Assets Supervision and Administration Commission has supervised China Railway Group since 2003.

At the time of my fieldwork, there were two broad categories of workers on the 9th Iron's railway construction project: 9th Iron staff and migrant workers. The 9th Iron workers were those who lived in the 9th Iron compound. Migrant labourers resided in dormitories for rural-to-urban migrants, which were also built by the 9th Iron. The first category included state workers, agency workers, interns, trainees, and informal *guanxi* workers among the 9th Iron workers. Only state workers had permanent labour contracts. In this thesis, I refer to agency workers, apprentices, trainees, and informal guanxi workers as temporary workers. Since agency workers, apprentices, trainees, and informal guanxi workers were all temporary workers with high mobility, the total

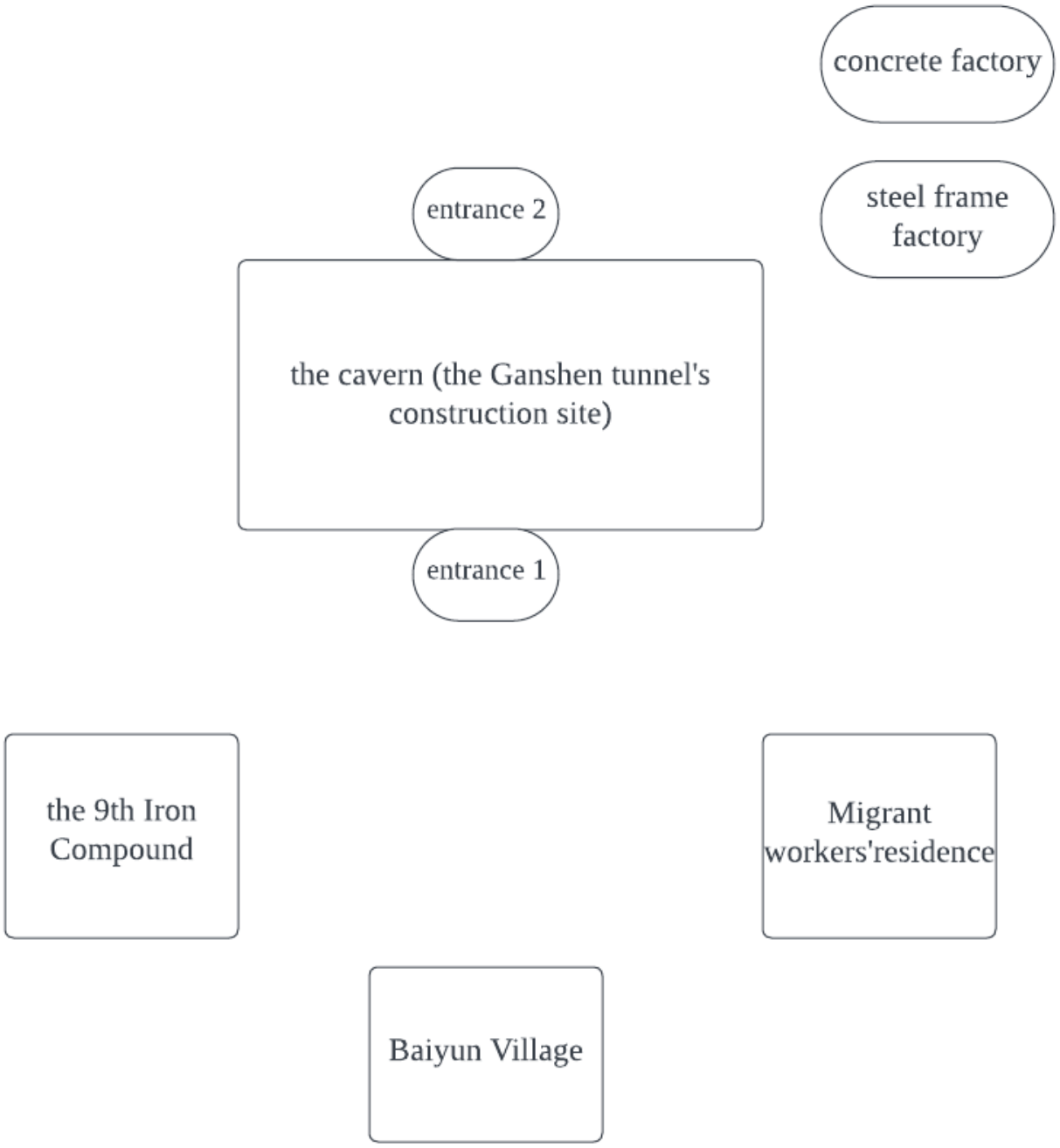
[3] During the civil war, the CCP constructed the railway armies as a specialised division of the People's Army. This division specialised in seizing control of railways and trains from the hands of the enemy (i.e., Chinese Nationalist Party) as well as repairing shell-damaged railways in order to facilitate the transportation of soldiers and provisions.

number of 9th Iron workers fluctuated around 300 (including workers at both ends of the tunnel). In terms of rural to urban migrant workers, most of them lacked employment contracts. The total number of migrant workers fluctuated around 700 (including workers at both ends of the tunnel).

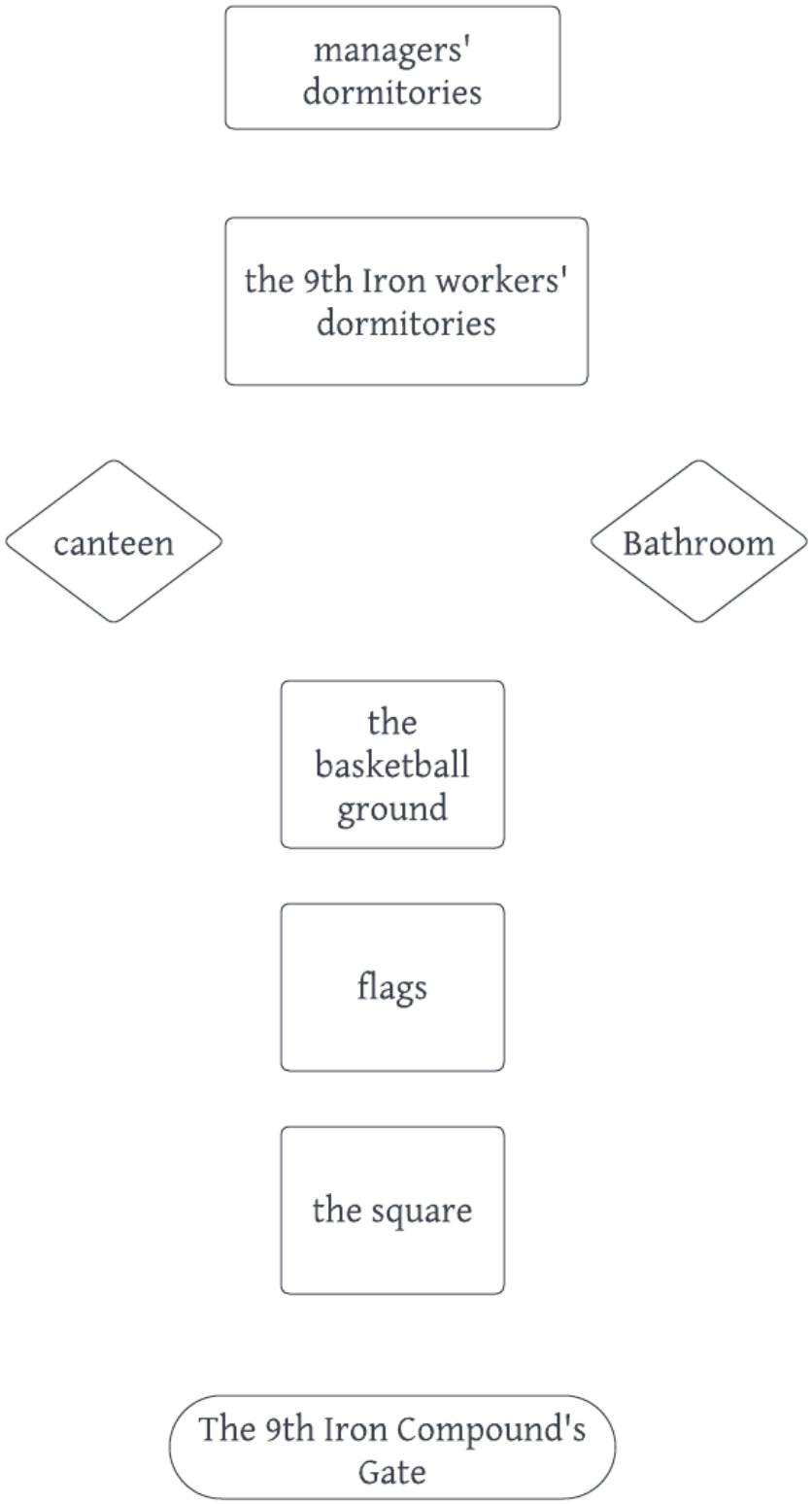
Based on workers' personal relationships with their subcontractors (*guanxi*), Cai He and Jia Wenjuan (2009) classify migrant workers as core or marginal workers. They argue that migrant core workers are those who have intimate relationships with subcontractors, whereas migrant marginal workers are those who do not have such connections (Cai and Jia, 2009). I also observed this distinction at my research site. In addition, the number of migrant workers employed as unskilled day labourers increased after the pandemic. Unskilled day labourers would be paid at the end of their day or night shifts, unlike migrant workers, who received their annual salaries at the end of a lunar calendar year. This personnel structure is typical for Chinese state-owned enterprises' construction projects. Workers of different categories had significant differences in their contracts, educational background, wages, wage payment methods, insurance coverage, and household registration status (*hukou*), resulting in varying degrees of precarity (see Chapter 4).

## 2.2 On the Ganshen Railway Project

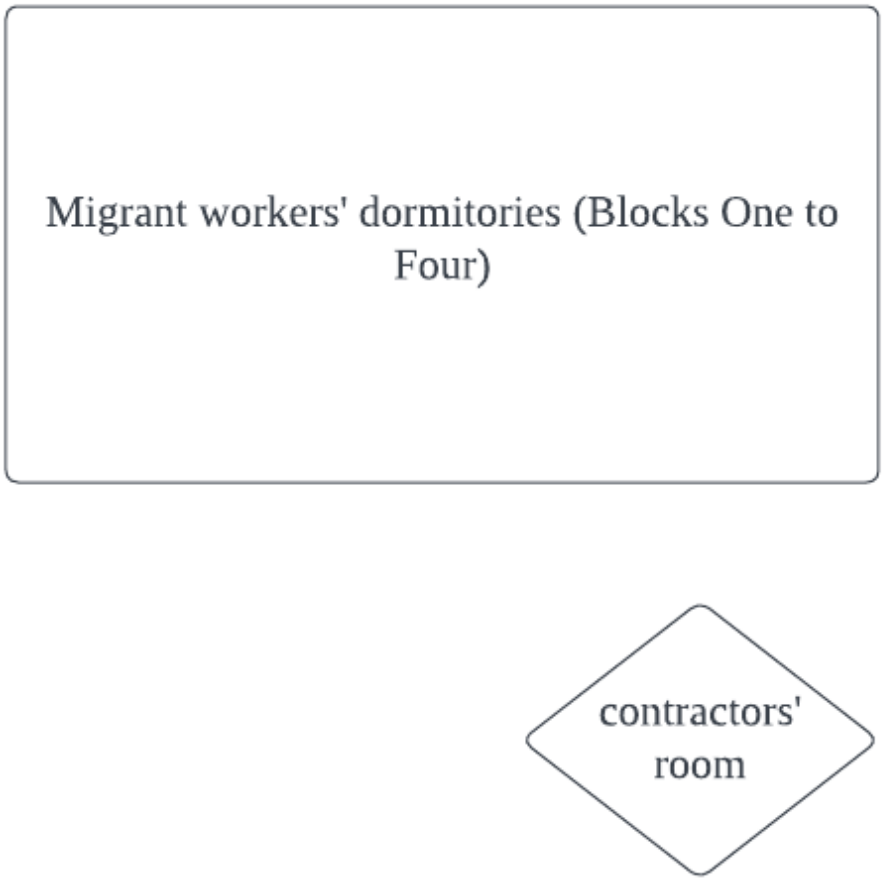
The 9th Iron compound and migrant workers' dormitories were located on opposite sides of a gravel-paved road. Thus, the distinction between migrant workers and the 9th Iron workers was clearly marked out spatially and re-confirmed daily as the migrants walked together across the road to the compound. The geographical configuration of the Ganshen Railway Project sites is depicted on Map 1. Map 2 shows the configuration of the 9th Iron compound, and Map 3 shows the layout of the migrant workers' residence.




**Map 1 My Main Field Site (the Ganshen Railway Project)**

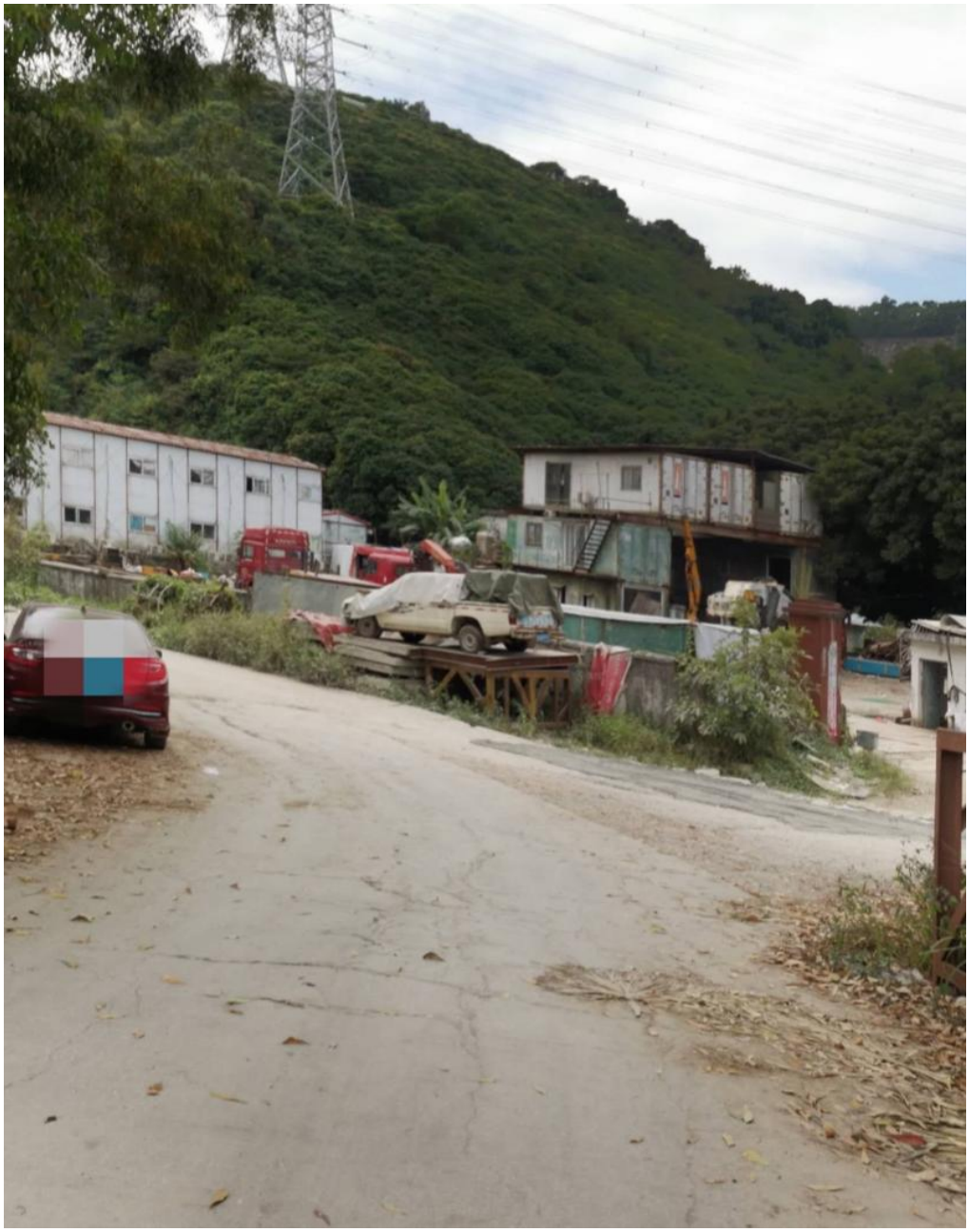



Map 2 The 9th Iron Compound




**Map 3 Migrant workers' residence**

The 9th Iron built this route to connect a nearby village (Baiyun village, about 15 minutes walking distance from the compound) to the tunnel entrance. Every day, huge trucks came from the highway, passed through the village, and then along this road, delivering sand and cement to the building site, creating clouds of dust. When a truck drove by, there was usually a group of dogs chasing it and barking. The dogs were adopted by a subcontractor named Tong Dawei and his wife, Yang Li. This couple, in their late 30s, rented the upper floor of a small, two-story building on the side of the migrants' dormitories (See Picture 1.1). This small house was illegally built five years ago by a local resident of Baiyun village. The lower floor was turned into a garage for Tong's truck.



Picture 1.1 Tong Dawei and Liang Li's house

Tong Dawei and Liang Li were in charge of approximately 20 migrant workers who resided in dormitories. Their team size was bigger than that of a foreman (who usually led a team of ten) but less than that of big subcontractors and labour agency companies. There was a square in front of the two-story house where migrant workers gathered every morning before walking together to the construction site. There were four two-story dormitory buildings that housed migrant workers (see Picture 1.2). Between 2015 and 2018, these buildings had served as dormitories for a garment factory. The 9th Iron Company renovated these buildings into migrant workers' dormitories after the garment factory moved out of Baiyun village. Because migrant workers hung out their laundry to dry, various types of clothes hung from every window, obscuring the dormitories' outer walls. When dust rose from the gravel roads, migrant workers' dormitory buildings appeared grey; however, when no vehicles were passing by, the drying washing brightened the buildings, making them seem colourful. Each dormitory room had four bunk beds and could accommodate up to eight workers. Except during the Lunar New Year festival season, migrant workers' dormitories were mostly full. I could always smell instant noodles, detergent, and cigarettes as I walked past the windows of the migrant workers' dormitories. Five migrant workers had been accompanied by their wives to the 9th Iron construction site; these women worked as auxiliary workers or labourers in the 9th Iron company's steel frame factory or cement factory. In order to accommodate the married couples, five little double beds had been provided, which the women made more private by hanging curtains and clothing to separate their beds from those of other couples. The 9th Iron would deduct the rent of migrant workers' dormitories from the final settlement of the company's payment to subcontractors. A small group of migrant workers also lived in rented apartments in the nearby village. A three-bedroom apartment with a living room could accommodate up to fifteen migrant workers.

Picture 1.2 Two of the migrant workers' dormitories

Across the road, was the 9th Iron compound that was constructed in 2018. The first thing a visitor would notice at the entrance of the compound would be a marble flag-raising platform with three flag poles holding the national flag, the party flag, and the flag of the 9th Iron company. There were bulletin boards flanking the flag-raising platform, featuring photographs of the 9th Iron model employees who were praised for making contributions to the 9th Iron. During the socialist era, outstanding workers were called labourer heroes (see Chapter 9). Standing in front of the bulletin boards, one could see the coexistence of the different organising principles from the socialist period and contemporary ideas about private sector work. "Always maintain the high faith of loyalty to the CCP; always maintain the high faith of loyalty to the people; always maintain the high faith of loyalty to the nation" was the inscription on one of the posters. "Leading in innovation, excellence in branding, and establishing a modern, world-class enterprise in market competition" was the inscription on another poster.

The square of the 9th Iron was a cement-paved area located at the rear of the platform. The 9th Iron employees assembled here each morning prior to entering the construction site. At the back of the square were three two-story office buildings, each of which contained spacious office rooms. Picture 1.3 shows the evening view of one of the office buildings of the 9th Iron. To the rear of the office buildings were the bathrooms and canteen for 9th Iron workers. Each day, the canteen provided three meals. The aroma of spring onions, garlic, and Sichuan chilies wafted through the office buildings from the canteen as lunchtime approached. A few young construction workers, who had just returned from the job site and taken a short break in the communal office, would occasionally peer through the windows of the office buildings attempting to catch a glimpse of Aunt Wang, the cook, from the office buildings and wagering on the dishes she was cooking that day. Although the dinner bell was only a few minutes away from ringing, young staff still looked forward to this activity and did it nearly every day. Picture 1.4 shows Aunt Wang and other canteen staffs preparing dumplings for workers before the lunar new year.

Picture 1.3 the 9th Iron’s office building and the basketball ground

Picture 1.4 the 9th Iron’s canteen kitchen

Two bathrooms for men and two for women were shared by all 9th Iron workers. These rooms' exterior walls appeared to be brand new and spotless. However, when I entered the restrooms and shut the doors, I could see the graffiti that employees had written with blue ballpoint pens or black marker pens on the cubicle doors. One of these graffitis wrote, "Dig deep, deep dig, dig deeper and deeper (*Ganshen, shengan, yueganyueshen*)." This was a tunnel workers' joke. The joke compared tunnel digging to sexual penetration. Initially, only male workers knew the joke; over time, female employees also became aware of it and started joking about it. Construction work has long been regarded as male-dominated work. Nature was portrayed as feminine in this joke, and man's transformation of nature was associated with masculinity. In the 9th Iron's gendered labour hierarchy, leadership positions were exclusively held by males, in both physical and office work. Despite the fact that female workers were not very fond of the joke's sexual connotation at the beginning, later they gradually accepted it and used it to joke about the repetitive and seemingly endless daily work in the Ganshen Project.

Another graffiti ran, "I want money! (*Woxiangyaoqian*)" Someone responded beneath this graffiti with another graffiti, "Who doesn't?" Additionally, an individual crossed out the word "money (*qian*)" with a line and wrote "I want to be thin and pretty (*shouhemei*)" using a different coloured pen. The stark contrast between the clean exterior wall and the inner graffiti arose from the fact that leaders and local government officials could only see the exterior of the bathrooms during their inspections; thus, it was important to maintain a spotless exterior wall. However, because leaders and officials used a separate, elaborately decorated lavatory next to the staff members' bathroom, they could not see these graffiti. Therefore, these graffitis were preserved.[4] Such stark contrasts between external compliance and jokey subversion among workers were routine occurrences in their daily lives.

The dormitory accommodation for state workers and temporary workers were the same. There were three single beds in each dormitory room. Staff members were not permitted to keep cooking equipment in their dorms. Nevertheless, female workers hid small rice cookers beneath their beds to cook food for themselves and their roommates, because commensality and sociability were worth the risk of contravening regulations. Picture 1.5 shows, Shi and Sun making dinner in their dormitory which they invited me to join. Shi and Sun were cooking a type of savoury pancake, a

[4] The presence of graffitis indicated that the 9th Iron Company's efforts in controlling workers were not consistently successful (see Chapter 5).

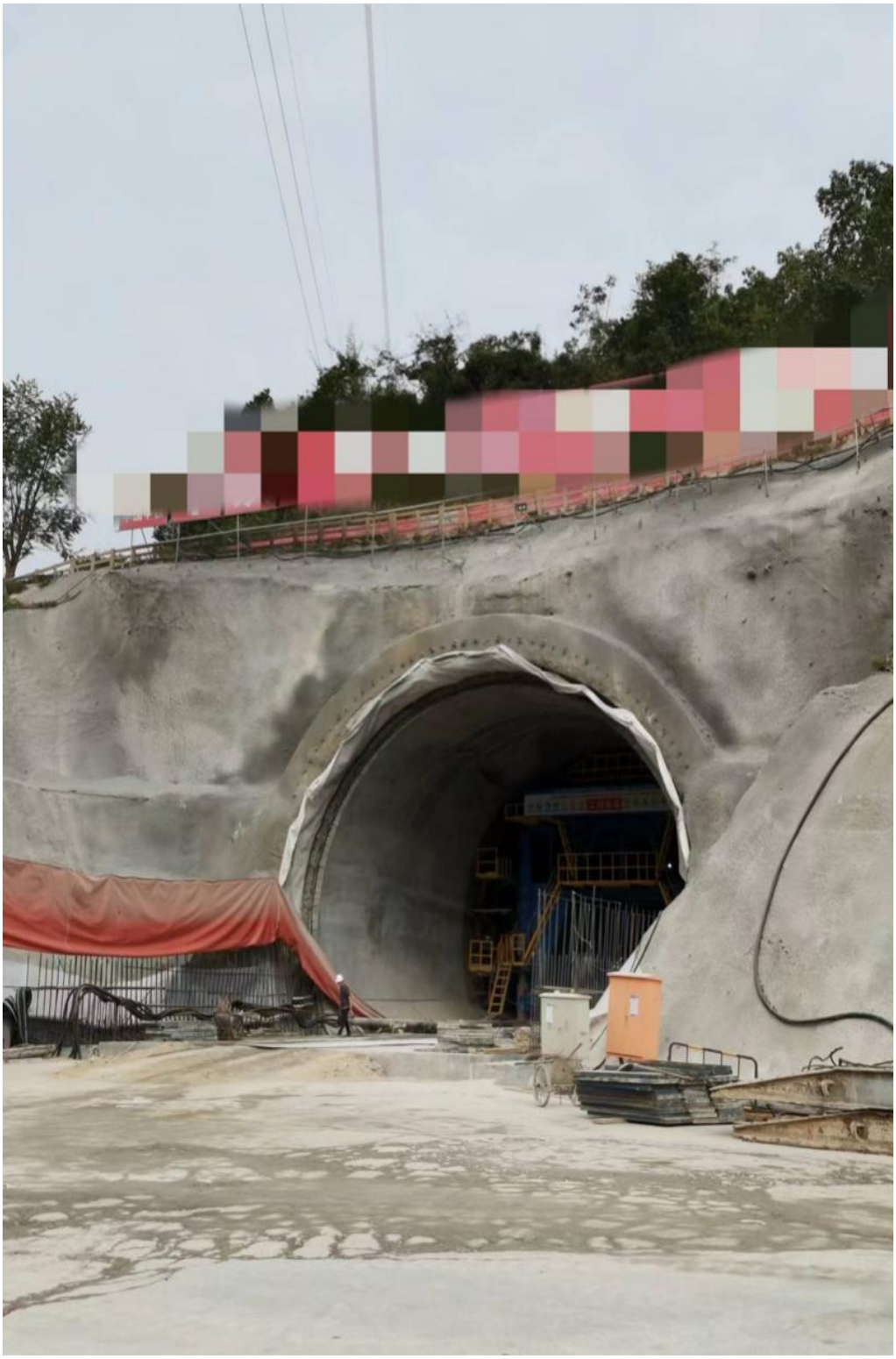
traditional food in rural regions of Anhui Province. Both women came from rural areas and went to the same vocational colleges. Both were temporary employees of the 9th Iron. They were giggling because people crowded into this dormitory waiting for a share of food were also gossiping about the affairs of their coworkers.

Picture 1.5 in the 9th Iron workers' dormitory

While the 9th Iron workers' dormitory rooms were identical, there was a major difference between the leaders' and workers' residences. The workers' dormitories comprised two two-story buildings, but the managers' dormitories were in a detached two-story building. Every manager had an individual dormitory room, a private bathroom, a shower with a 24-hour supply of hot water, a double bed, a desk, and a chair. Married couples who were both 9th Iron workers were eligible to apply for a couple's room. There was a double bed in each couple's room, but no bathroom or shower.

The tunnel's entrance was 10 minutes walk from the dormitories. The entrance to the tunnel was located halfway up the sloping incline and had been reinforced with cement. At the top of the entrance, there were several red-painted iron boards bearing the words "9th Iron" (*jiutie*). Picture 1.6 shows migrant workers and 9th Iron workers awaiting the excavation of the tunnel's entrance. Picture 1.7 displays the tunnel entrance after excavation. The excavation of the entrance was merely the first step in the construction of a railway tunnel:  tunnels are constructed from both ends simultaneously and therefore, there was another similar 9th Iron construction site on the other side of the mountain. After two teams met in the middle, the reinforcement of the walls, renovation, and laying of railway tracks would be completed.

Picture 1.6 the entrance of the tunnel cavern (this picture was taken before excavation)



Picture 1.7 the entrance of the tunnel (this picture was taken after excavation)

Daytime workers worked from 7a.m. to 7p.m.; nighttime workers worked from 7p.m. to 6a.m. Daytime workers typically woke up at 6a.m. and went into canteens for breakfast immediately after waking up. Most night shift workers ate breakfast in the restaurant before going to bed, but some went to bed directly after returning from the construction site. Breakfast at the 9th Iron and the migrant workers' restaurant was the same: eggs, porridge, and pickles. The 9th Iron kitchen, where

Aunt Wang worked, prepared the food for both the migrant workers' restaurant and the 9th Iron restaurant. Because the migrant workers' restaurant did not have a kitchen, two temporary kitchen workers would deliver prepared meals to the migrant workers' restaurant three times per day. The difference between the two restaurants' breakfasts was that the eggs at the 9th Iron's restaurant were not numbered, thus workers could eat as many as they wanted, whereas the eggs in the migrant workers' restaurant were counted; one egg per individual.[5] In the morning, the kitchen was filled with steam. Workers formed a long queue to pick up their food. This long queue always ran from the kitchen window, through the canteen, and all the way to the square.

During the day, everyone received a one-hour lunch break at noon. When the site was not busy, technicians and mechanics could return to the office for a cup of tea and a cigarette, but migrant labourers could only rest at the construction site. In the tunnel, the ground was always wet because rain frequently got inside the cave. The 9th Iron installed a pumping system to remove water, but workers still stood in shallow puddles most of the time. During the rainy season, workers' rubber boots and sneakers were always covered with mud. Workers complained that work during the rainy season was considerably harder than on other days.

The tunnel was lit up by yellow light bulbs, but blasting frequently filled the air with dust which prevented people from seeing distant objects. Foremen used walkie-talkies to communicate with each other and with on-site managers in the command room outside the tunnel. On occasion, workers retreated from the tunnel and waited for blasters to blast rocks. Because of the noise of machines, workers rarely spoke to one another in the tunnel. They waved their hands to indicate when they had finished their work or when they wanted someone to come. Nonetheless, when drillers stopped working and the noises paused, workers shouted “one, two, one” slogans to coordinate their movements in order to complete the assembly of the steel frame or cut away a piece of rock that had not been blown away in the blast.

Workers were occasionally allowed to exit the tunnel for 20 minutes rest with the permission of foremen and onsite managers. There was a shelter outside the tunnel where both migrant workers and the 9th Iron workers could sit and relax. Despite this, workers rarely sat inside. They were more

[5] During the winter, I had difficulty getting up at 6 a.m., so by the time I arrived at the 9th Iron restaurant, it was generally 6.20 a.m. and all of the breakfast eggs had been eaten or taken. Aunt Wang always kept five or six eggs in the kitchen and covered these eggs with a bowl in case young people like me woke up late and had no eggs for breakfast.

likely to smoke together for a short period of time while standing or sitting on the ground. During the break, a few workers took their smartphones from the shelter's drawers and played. Others smoked while chatting. Sometimes, the 9th Iron workers could return to the compound for their longer breaks with the permission of the 9th Iron managers, whereas migrant workers were not allowed to do so. In addition to the shelter, there was a command centre adjacent to it where on-site managers sat and where there were two computers with monitoring systems. Using the monitoring system, the 9th Iron managers could track the number of vehicles entering and exiting the tunnel, know the oxygen level in the tunnel, and receive alerts when accidents occurred.

Day shift workers returned to their dormitories at 7 p.m., took turns showering, and then had dinner in the canteen. Both daytime and nighttime staff members crowded into the canteen for dinner. While the day shift workers retired to their dorms for the night, the night shift workers headed to the tunnel after dinner. The night shift lasted from 7 p.m. until 7 a.m. the next day. Therefore, regular shifts, eating together, and gatherings punctuated the lives of day and night workers, whereas inspections by leaders and local government officials gave additional rhythms throughout the year, which I will illustrate in Chapter 5.

# 3. Fieldwork in the 9th Iron

I will introduce my gatekeeper before introducing my three distinct identities at the field site. Then, I will explain my research methods, my reflections on these methods, and I will address the ethical concerns of my research.

In January 2019, I encountered Li Shanfeng, the CEO of 9th Iron and a friend of my father. I explained that I planned to conduct research and serve as a long-term intern on the 9th Iron's construction site. Li agreed and arranged an internship for me in a recently started 9th Iron Railway project, i.e., the Ganshen Project. As a result, my identity in the 9th Iron was threefold: first, as I informed my interlocutors, I was a PhD student who wanted to study railway construction workers. Second, in my daily work, I was an unpaid, temporary intern who collaborated with other employees but did not have an official employment contract. Third, the project supervisors and my co-workers knew that I was a friend of a company manager, although they did not know which one.

I was honest about my connection with the CEO. I viewed this relationship as a positive circumstance that reassured people in the 9th Iron that I was an insider. During the socialist era, it was common for workers to use personal relationships to gain access to limited living resources and employment opportunities. After the reforms of 1998 and 2000, the use of personal connections to advance one's career in the public sector remained widespread. In the winter of 2018, I visited one of the 9th Iron's construction locations and talked to 46-year-old state worker Jiang Guifang. Jiang said, "Having social networks is crucial for working in state-owned companies. You ivory tower-raised PhD candidates can't embrace or comprehend the culture of social relationships and connections (*guanxi*)."Jiang's assumption about me prompted me to reflect.

As a state-owned enterprise, the 9th Iron possessed similar characteristics to the Chinese government. People valued their relationships with leaders in both the 9th Iron and the government. The majority of 9th Iron workers had tried at least once in their career lives to build relationships with managers (e.g., to obtain an interview, transfer, or promotion, etc.) by sending gifts or being introduced by a middleman in order to obtain job or promotion opportunities. In short, the 9th Iron workers, whether they were state employees or temporary workers, accepted the behaviour of using social relationships to obtain access to opportunities. A complete outsider unfamiliar with this culture could make 9th Iron employees feel uneasy and terrified. Consequently, by being honest about my connection to the 9th Iron managers, I showed my comprehension of *guanxi*, making it easier for people to accept me and view me as a member of them.

By taking the identity of an intern, I was able to participate in the 9th Iron workers' daily activities and gain access to their workplace. As with the other interns, I had to follow the project administrators' instructions and complete tasks in collaboration with the other employees. My intern identity drew the 9th Iron employees closer to me and made the project manager more at ease when talking with me. In fact, the project supervisors and workers were all terrified when I first arrived at the project site and announced that I would be conducting research. I was at first unaware of how much stress my identity as a researcher caused them. Three months later, the 35-year-old project director Li Jianhua, told me, "Ziyu, you scared us. We mistook you for an anti-corruption investigator conducting an investigation into corruption problems." Until then, I had not realised

that they had mistaken me for a member of China Railway Group's investigation team that had come to uncover the compound managers' corruption problems[6].

The workers shared a similar misunderstanding. When I was singing karaoke with the 9th Iron young workers, temporary worker Hao said, “Initially, we did not trust you. We believed you were going to investigate some secrets at our compound. But when we saw you cleaning the office early in the morning, we began to trust you.” I lived in a female dormitory with other temporary workers. It allowed me to engage in conversations with workers and gain insight into various aspects of their lives. I overheard female employees discussing their husbands or girlfriends (the number of female 9th Iron employees ranged from thirty to forty). Likewise, their partners were 9th Iron workers. I was also invited to the social gatherings of the male staff members. Throughout this process, I gained a deeper understanding of workers' educational experiences (see Chapter 8), accomplishments (see Chapter 9), family relationships (see Chapter 6), future expectations (see Chapter 8 and 9), and daily interactions (see Chapter 7). I conducted over fifty semi-structured interviews in addition to participant observation. In addition, I conducted informal interviews with a variety of workers during their free time. I also collected extended life histories from around thirty former state workers to determine how precarity affected their lives (see Chapter 9).

I recorded my data in a variety of ways. I used voice recordings and typed my notes in my phone's diary. I rarely used a pen and paper in the field. One reason was the working conditions at the fieldwork location. I was unable to use a pen and paper most of the time, particularly when speaking with workers on construction sites, in factories, and in offices. When background noise prevented me from recording conversations, it was more convenient to take notes on my smartphone. The second reason was that the anti-corruption investigation team frequently carried pens, notebooks, and forms to document the compound's circumstances. I did not want my interlocutors to link me with them. Using the phone, on the other hand, reduced the distance between my interlocutors and me because, when I spoke with employees during their spare time, they frequently checked their text messages or glanced at short films on their phones while talking with me. Taking notes on the phone made them feel more at ease during our conversations.

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[6] Although I had not anticipated Li's misunderstandings, I was able to figure out why he had them. China Railway Group dispatched three separate investigation teams between 2019 and 2020 to investigate corruption at the compound level. In recent years, Chairman Xi Jinping has launched several anti-corruption campaigns against state-owned company executives. In this context, anti-corruption propaganda and the investigation of corruption at the grassroots level became widespread.

In addition, I have reflected on my research methods from two aspects. First, according to Alison Leitch (1996), labour studies should incorporate the study of embodied labour experiences. I used my participation in work to sense and experience what precarious employment was like. Participating in labour enabled me to observe and imagine the world through the eyes of my interlocutors, even though I was aware that, as a researcher, I would never be able to see the world completely through their eyes. Second, the difficulty with doing anthropological research in China is that scholars must rely on government officials or, in some cases, state-owned directors to carry out fieldwork. As interlocutors may believe that the researcher is the leader's eyes and ears, it is challenging for researchers to gain the trust of people. Nonetheless, I discovered during my fieldwork that my friendships with leaders occasionally brought interlocutors closer to me. Interlocutors were reluctant to discuss the leader or gatekeeper, but they were willing to share information about their own lives that was unrelated to the leader or gatekeeper. As soon as they realised I could understand the importance of social relationships (*guanxi*), they became more at ease when discussing their personal lives.

Nonetheless, the methodological question was whether my participation as an intern altered how my interlocutors perceived me, i.e., whether they perceived me as a colleague or as a researcher. My solution was that I ensured that all of my interviewees were aware that our conversations and interviews could be used as research material, and I made sure they understood the purpose of this study by explaining it in conversations. I followed the Ethical Guide for Good Research Practice of the Association of Social Anthropologists of the UK and Commonwealth (ASA, 2011). Before starting my questions, I asked for the verbal consent of workers and recorded their verbal consents with a recorder.

In addition to participant observation, I conducted semi-structured and structured interviews, which served as a reminder of my position as a researcher to my interlocutors. In fact, my interlocutors never forgot that I was a researcher. Cheng, a 9th Iron agency worker and my friend (see Preface), asked me, half-jokingly and half-seriously, at the end of my fieldwork, "How can you understand us? You have received an education in the western world, which has westernised your mind. You are no longer as Chinese as we are!" His remarks astonished me. Over time, I believed that my identity as a native anthropologist would help me comprehend the lives of my interlocutors. In my PhD research proposal, I mentioned speaking Mandarin and growing up in China as advantages that

would help me conduct fieldwork. At that moment, I realised that I was probably not as ‘native’ as I thought. The situation echoed what Kirin Narayan argues: emphasising the dichotomy of outsider and insider would be less beneficial to the study of anthropology than recognising anthropologists' shifting identifications during fieldwork (Narayan, 1993).

Nevertheless, growing up in China did help me detect when my interlocutors were using socialist propaganda phrases. This ability was particularly useful when I was conducting life history research. Ann Marie Leshkowich notices that after the Vietnam War, the communist government required many southern Vietnamese to compose personal history statements to establish their class identity (Leshkowich, 2000, 2008). Yvette Kopjin (1997) and Mila Rosenthal (2003) observe that people's standardised personal history statements shared similarities with the communist party’s propaganda and had a significant impact on how Vietnamese responded to anthropologists' questions: they frequently repeated the same or similar information. Rosenthal pointed out that these narratives about the past disclosed more about people's shared group identity during the socialist era than the particularity of the narrator (Rosenthal, 2003). Kopjin argues that anthropologists should not expect interlocutors to ruminate on their life experiences in a "revealing or self-confessional manner" (Kopjin, 1997: 155). Lisa Rofel also notices that speaking about one’s past sufferings (i.e., *suku*, literally speaking bitterness), a form of the CCP’s political campaign that had encouraged the public proclamation of one's past sufferings during the socialist period, continued to influence how people spoke about their past in the 1980s following reform and opening (Rofel, 1989, 1999). People frequently used socialist-era political terms during my interviews, particularly when discussing the past (see Chapter 6 and 9). I have also observed that people used words from propaganda to express meanings that deviated from these words' original meanings (see Chapter 9). In addition, workers used propaganda terms that emerged between the Deng Xiaoping and Xi Jinping eras in a variety of ways. When my interlocutors used such words in conversations or interviews, I paid close attention because, in many cases, analysing how people use these words in different contexts and expressions can be productive.

In total, I stayed at the 9th Iron's compound and construction sites for around 10 months. Also, I stayed at the headquarters offices of the 9th Iron for around 2 months. I thoroughly considered the matter of anonymity and confidentiality, reassuring my interlocutors regarding the matter of confidentiality and told them that I had protected my data safely and avoided information leaking. This thesis uses pseudonyms to refer to my interlocutors and deliberately omits precise details about

the exact location of the railway project. I acknowledge that, despite the use of pseudonyms, it is still feasible for others to discover the true names of my interlocutors by gathering other information. To avoid such incidents, I have deliberately concealed any details that could potentially disclose the identities of my interlocutors. The majority of my photographs were taken by myself, while others were taken with the assistance of my interlocutors. In addition, some of the photos were sourced from the 9th Iron company's archives, the company's official media (including the official company website, WeChat, Weibo, and other social media platforms), and the 9th Iron's new reports. All materials were used with the interlocutors' and the 9th Iron company's consent. Furthermore, in the used photos, I used the Photoshop technique to obscure the faces of my interlocutors, licence plate numbers, and any other details that could potentially disclose the identities of the people involved. There is a slight possibility that individuals from the state authorities might read my dissertation. However, I have taken efforts to ensure that there is no content in my dissertation that could be used by individuals or organisations to cause harm to my interlocutors. Besides, I also followed the ethics of fieldwork in the course of the pilot fieldwork that I conducted in 2018, obtaining consent from my interlocutors and observing the principle of anonymity.

# 4.Theoretical framework

In this thesis I discuss how different types of precarity coexist in and influence the Chinese working class's lives, especially their ethical lives. First, I investigate how various forms of precarity intersect and influence one another. Unlike previous research on precarity as insecure employment (Standing, 2011), I contend that in the contemporary capitalist world, industrial workers confront the intersection of multiple types of precarity. I propose that industrial workers in China are subject to four categories of precarity: labour precarity, structural precarity, social precarity, and affective precarity (I explain these terms in greater detail below). Based on my fieldwork at the state-owned enterprise 9th Iron, I demonstrate how these four levels of precarity coexisted in the lives of 9th Iron workers, aggravated the difficulties they faced, and exacerbated social disparities. Second, I explore the ethics of precarity, which refers to the ethical dilemmas that arise in the context of precarity and the ethical solutions that people use in their daily lives to address these dilemmas. It is important to note that numerous anthropological works have discussed how people in precarious situations attempted to live an ethical existence; in Chapter 3, I will elaborate on this point, explain

how my dissertation has been built on existing literature on ordinary ethics, and clarify how my thesis has contributed to the debate regarding both precarity and ethics. This section here aims to present my key concepts concerning precarity and introduce the three moral frameworks that coexisted in the 9th Iron. Now, I outline four types of precarity that intersect with one another:

*Labour Precarity*

David Harvey argued in the 1990s that there was a growing trend towards greater flexibility in labour processes, labour markets, products, and consumption patterns in capitalist societies (Harvey, 1990). Pierre Bourdieu similarly argued that temporary work had become common in Europe (Bourdieu, 1999). Political movements in Europe at the turn of the 21st century have prompted academic discussions about the prevalence of precarious employment in the labour market. These political movements began in 2001 in Italy with the EuroMayDay movement, which mobilised around the 'precariato' identity. Following the 2007–2008 financial crisis, the anti-precarity march grew and influenced other political movements, such as Occupy Wall Street and anti-austerity demonstrations (Kasmir, 2018). Guy Standing, inspired by these anti-precarity movements, contends that members of what he calls 'the precariat' suffered from a lack of a work-based identity and the loss of industrial citizenship that workers had enjoyed during the social democratic era (Standing, 2011). Standing equates precarity with unstable employment and views this labour condition as a byproduct of neoliberalism (Standing, 2011). Jan Breman criticises Standing's definition of the precariat, arguing that Standing's analysis is predominately based on cases from developed economies and therefore disregards the situation in the global south (Breman, 2013). Breman (2013) highlights that insecure and hazardous working conditions have existed for a long time, particularly in the global south, which has been the periphery of the capitalist economy. Ben Scully (2016) also disagrees that precarity is a neoliberal phenomenon, suggesting that the narrative depicting a golden era of secure employment in contrast to the present is Eurocentric in nature. As Sharryn Kasmir shows, even in the United States, the epicentre of Fordism, a hegemonic regime of industrial labour was never completely established (Kasmir, 2014, 2018). Kasmir's ethnography suggests that General Motors began systematically weakening the bargaining power of automobile workers as early as the 1970s, indicating that precarity did not abruptly emerge with the rise of neoliberalism (Kasmir, 2014, 2022).

China has a distinct labour history. In contrast to Fordism and Keynesianism, the country experienced a lengthy period of socialism from 1949 to 1979, which provided industrial workers with lifelong employment and an insufficient but cradle-to-grave welfare system. The country began its market reform in the 1980s under the leadership of the CCP and began to reduce its state sector in the 1990s (see Chapter 4). Since the reform, only a tiny percentage of staff have maintained permanent employment[7], whereas a large proportion of workers have endured insecure and informal employment. In contrast to the socialist ideology that used to promote the proletarians as the owners of the state and the main force of socialist modernisation, industrial workers nowadays are in a marginalised position in society, which has made workers feel that they have been betrayed and abandoned by the state and society (see Chapter 4 and 9). I demonstrate that Chinese industrial workers have severely suffered from labour precarity.

*Structural Precarity*

By using the term "structural precarity", I mean that the Chinese working class experienced precarity caused by China's particular economic and political configurations, apart from the labour precarity that they encountered at workplaces. My argument here draws on insights from Judith Butler's differentiation between precariousness and precarity (Butler, 2004: 30). Unlike Standing (2011), who associates precarity with a particular labour condition, Butler redefines precarity to refer to the experiences of marginalised and disenfranchised groups who are vulnerable to economic uncertainty, trauma, war, and forced displacement (Butler, 2004, 2009, 2010). Butler critically differentiates precariousness as an ontological condition from precarity as unequally distributed historical occurrences. Humans rely on social relations and therefore always live in interdependence; therefore, every human being is exposed to the other and faces the inevitable "vulnerability of being given over to the touch of the other, even if there is no other there, and no support for our lives, signifies a primary helplessness and need, one to which any society must attend" (Butler, 2004: 30). Precariousness is thus an ontological condition that every human being faces. In contrast, precarity is something that is unevenly distributed among people because of factors such as war, occupation, forced emigration, climate crisis, etc. Butler defines precarious life as "lives who do not qualify as recognisable, readable, grievable" (Butler, 2009: xiii). Social values are attributed to some lives and denied to others, which leads to some people's misconception that

[7] According to the 9th Iron's statistics for 1999, the number of workers who had not been affected by layoffs was one tenth of the original total workforce.

their lives are more “grievable” and valuable than the others (Butler, 2004). In short, Butler (2004, 2009, 2010) reveals that social and political arrangements produce forms of inequalities, which means some people have to face more precarity than others, and therefore any discussion of precarity should consider multiple factors, including economic and political configurations, rather than being limited to an analysis of capital versus labour.

Recent anthropological research on labour politics has also inspired my proposal of structural precarity (Cross, 2010; Kasmir and Carbonella, 2014; Lazar, 2017; Carrier, 2022). Sharryn Kasmir and August Carbonella point out that workers are subject to “the politics of dispossessions,” which means “the multiple ways in which capital and the state episodically undermine the power of working classes” (Kasmir and Carbonella, 2014: 15). This understanding rejects the claim that precarity is something novel; rather, it sees it as something that occurs due to the combined influences of the state and capital, and that has repeatedly occurred to proletariats throughout history. Exploration of structural precarity entails investigating the various forms of precarity that power, or what Eric Wolf (1990, 1999) calls "structural power," has engendered in particular ethnographic settings. Wolf refers to structural power as "power that deploys and allocates social labour" (Wolf, 1990: 587). According to Wolf, the concept of structural power is an expanded version of the discussion of the social relations of production. Structural power illustrates how power influences the social field of action by making "certain types of behaviour possible while making others less possible or impossible" (Wolf, 1990). Charlotte Bruckermann also argues that in the study of labour in countries that went through socialist periods, the unique relationship between labourers and the socialist state must be considered (Bruckermann, 2022).

In fact, the Chinese government has played a significant role in the emergence of precarity (see Chapter 4, 8, and 9). For instance, rural to urban migrants are often termed the ‘floating population’ (*liudongrenkou*) and treated as second-class citizens, excluding them from access to urban social services (Zhang, 2001; Goodkind and West, 2002; Liang and Ma, 2004). This distinction has long been formalised in state policies and propaganda via the household registration system (*hukou*). In China, a person must obtain a hukou of his or her places of residence in order to get access to local services, including education, medicine, housing, social benefits, social insurance, and pensions (Wu and Treiman, 2004; Lu and Wu, 2020). However, it is very difficult for rural-to-urban migrants to obtain a hukou in the cities where they work and live. Migrants remain registered in their home villages, with no formal registration in urban areas (van der Meulen, 2021). In the post-reform era,

the rural versus urban household registration system continues to influence the lives of rural-to-urban migrants. Rural-to-urban migrants have been classified as second-class citizens in cities, excluding them from all urban social services (Chan, 2010, Chan and O'Brien, 2019; see also Chapter 6 and 8). Since the market reform, the division of rural and urban citizens has guaranteed a steady supply of cheap labour. One's rural identity is frequently linked to one's low ability (*disuzhi*), which becomes one of the reasons why companies offer migrants low wages and informal contracts (Yan, 2003; Sun, 2009; see Chapter 8).

In the 9th Iron (and many other Chinese state-owned enterprises), a significant number of young temporary staff members are the children of the first generation of migrant workers. Since the 1990s or 2000s, their parents have been working in cities and saving money to support their children's college education in the expectation that their children can become urban citizens and escape rurality. Nonetheless, as precarious employment has expanded and competition has intensified in China's labour market, my interlocutors have discovered that they are unable to find long-term employment in cities (see Chapter 8). According to research (Feng, 2019; Kaland, 2021; Zhou, 2022), structural precarity continues to affect young workers even after they have signed employment contracts. Even after temporary employees signed employment contracts with the company, Feng Xiaojun (2019) argues, their precarious situation has not changed. Feng argues that temporary employees' lack of citizenship in China has trapped them in a protracted period of precarity (Feng, 2019). In the following chapters, I will demonstrate that in China, precarity for the older generation of workers can refer to the sharp contrast between the secure employment they had in the past and the insecure employment they endure today (see Chapter 9), whereas for other labour and age groups, precarity is a cross-generational experience that has influenced both the first generation of rural-to-urban migrant workers and their children. I demonstrate that structural precarity, intersecting with labour precarity, has caused significant damage to workers' livelihoods.

*Social Precarity*

The proposition of social precarity pays attention to social relationships and social interactions in the context of labour precarity. I show that labour precarity has challenged pre-existing moral frameworks and forced people to reflect on and alter their ways of interacting with others. Anne Allison uses the term "social precarity" to characterise the destruction of social connections in Japanese society following the bursting of the bubble economy in 1991 (Allison, 2012: 341).

Allison argues that “a sense of displacement and dispossession -- belonging to nowhere” has replaced the progressive vision of the future that had been established since the post-war economic revival (ibid.:344). In the postwar period, rapid economic development sparked the aspirations of the Japanese for a “good life” characterised by lifelong employment and a middle-class lifestyle. Since the late 1980s, the shift in social and economic equilibrium has thwarted this hope for a good life. Many young people have become "café refugees" as a result of the precarious nature of their employment. These "café refugees" are young, working, poor people who live in cybercafés and attempt to rekindle their hope for the future by reestablishing social connections (ibid.: 346). Noelle J. Molé also observes that precarity contributes to the tension of social relationships in the workplace in Italy (Molé, 2010, 2013). The two-tiered labour regime (i.e., permanent and temporary) encourages the rise of a neoliberal ideology that sees employment as "naturally unstable" where only a very small group of employees can earn long-term contracts (Molé, 2010:40). Constantly, employees feel that they might be harassed by co-workers or supervisors. Temporary employees are concerned that "mobbing" (i.e., workplace harassment such as deliberately marginalising an employee) is causing coworkers to leave the company (ibid.,41). Molé contends that workplace persecution and feelings of being persecuted contribute to the emergence of a subject "beset by acute anxiety and nagging hypervigilance" (ibid., 38). In contrast to Allison and Molé, who view social precarity as people's avoidance of social connectedness or hostility towards others (Allison, 2012; Molé, 2010, 2013), I view social precarity as a form of precarity that people frequently encounter in their everyday interactions. I demonstrate how precarity affects how people construct their social relationships and how people make ethical practices possible (see Chapter 7).

*Affective Precarity*

My argument of affective precarity focuses on the various categories of emotions experienced by precarious individuals. Ian Skoggard argues that the study of affect should "accommodate the power of feelings, sentimentality, intimacies, and emotion in the public realm" because affect is "something deeply interior" that also has "outward manifestations" (Skoggard, 2015: 110–112). My study of affective precarity does not limit itself to the description of individual subjective experiences relating to other categories of precarity. I examine the daily interactions, social relationships, and political and economic conditions that contribute to the emergence of affect and comprehend it in the context of history. Informed by Kathleen Stewart's depiction of "ordinary

affects" as "public feelings that begin and end in broad circulation" as well as what "intimate lives are made of" (Stewart, 2020: 2), I view the study of affective precarity as the examination of everyday feelings and the structure of feelings in relation to different forms of precarity. Although the study of affective precarity includes people's subjective perceptions of precarity, affective precarity is distinct from what Butler calls precariousness (Butler, 2009, 2010), which I described above in the subsection on structural precarity. Butler views precariousness as an ontological condition that every human experiences, whereas the study of affective precarity examines how other categories of precarity affect people's emotions and how these emotions affect people's reactions and perceptions of other types of precarity. I examine the role played by the structures of feelings in people's daily interactions across several chapters. Thus in Chapter 6, I focus on the affective dimension of employees' lives, specifically their intimate relationships. In Chapter 9, I focus on the sentiments of nostalgia that the older generation of workers felt, whereas in Chapter 8, I focus on the intense desire for a decent life that young workers typically had.

Judith Butler first pays attention to the subjective aspect of precarious experiences (Butler, 2004). She argues that precarious individuals exist within "a collapsed temporal horizon" that makes it difficult for them to have hope (Butler, 2004: 201). Barbara Biglia and Jordi Bonet Mart (2014) also provide their definition of "life precarity," which, in their view, extends beyond employment conditions. They write, "Life precarity is characterised by a flexible network of social groups and (im)material, continuously shifting, contingent realities" (Biglia and Bonet-Marti, 2012: 1488–1489). They suggest that precarity is a lack of security and "a feeling of permanently living in a "state of flux"—an unstable environment with no options for planning even the very near future" (ibid., 1489). However, individuals who live in precarious circumstances may have plans for the future, which may help them cope with the precarious circumstances they currently face. Imagination, according to Flavia Cangià (Cangià, 2018), can help build a sense of continuity during periods of transition and combat feelings of insecurity. She notes that imagining "alternatives (what else I can do)" or "possible futures (what would it be)" can help individuals temporarily "move away from the here-and-now of the current situation" (Cangià, 2018:14).

Tommaso Trevisani detects a similar situation in a state-owned steel mill in Kazakhstan (Trevisani, 2021). To prevent the closure of the factory, employees agreed to use older machines with extreme caution, and they planned to use their knowledge to repair the machine if it ever broke down. Employees believed that with careful planning, they could prevent the state from closing the factory

or laying off employees (Trevisani, 2021). As I demonstrate in Chapter 8, most young workers I talked to had plans and aspirations for the future, although unlike the collective plan in Trevisani's case (2021), my interlocutors' plans for their future were more about themselves and their families. Despite fierce competition for contracts, workers viewed obtaining a state job and establishing themselves in cities as their life's goal. This desire also reveals a prevalent moral viewpoint since market reform: that providing parents with good material conditions and increasing their consumption levels is an expression of the filial piety promoted by Confucian morality. Nonetheless, the lengthy period of waiting for a permanent contract caused employees to become frustrated, paranoid, anxious, and obsessed with acquiring more skill certificates.

*Three Moral Frameworks*

As mentioned above, my second theoretical structuring device is the ethics of precarity, which I will particularly elaborate on in Chapter 3. Here, I outline the three moral frameworks that coexisted in the 9th Iron, as they are crucial to the understanding of the following chapters and how workers dealt with conflicts between these frameworks and problems resulting from conflicting moral ideals and practices. In subsequent chapters, I will show how various forms of precarity challenge pre-existing moral frameworks, causing individuals to reflect on their ethical lives.

There were three kinds of major moral frameworks in the 9th Iron: Confucianism, socialism, and neoliberalism. Confucianism’s explicit feature is valuing personal relationships and emphasising the order of seniority and mutual care between artisans and their apprentices. The socialist moral framework’s primary characteristics include valuing collective labour, workers' solidarity, and socialist egalitarianism. During the socialist era, workers had expected the work unit, as the state's agency, to care for all aspects of its employees' lives, from the cradle to the grave. The third is the neoliberal moral framework. Individualism is characterised by an emphasis on individual efforts and the belief that the development of one's abilities can lead to success in market competition. The pre-socialist feudal era, associated with the rise of Confucianism, the socialist era, and the post-market reform neoliberal era correspond to the development of these three moral frameworks. However, these three moral frameworks coexisted in the 9th Iron rather than simply replacing one another. I now briefly introduce the complex histories and entanglements of these moral frameworks, which I elaborate on in Chapter 4.

During the socialist era, Confucianism was viewed as a remnant of feudalism and was ruthlessly destroyed by the CCP. However, after the CCP initiated a liberal economic reform, the Confucian moral framework reappeared in Chinese society. Researchers have discovered that in various regions of China, individuals rebuilt shrines to honour their ancestors or wrote family trees in accordance with Confucian traditions in order to assuage the trauma they had endured during socialist collectivisation movements (Jing, 1998, 1999; Bell, 2010). In addition, Arthur Kleinman (2011) notices that Chinese descendants in the United States traced their family clans and recalled the distress that their families had suffered during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). The restoration of Confucian morality was also evident in the 9th Iron, for example, in the relationship between masters and apprentices (see Chapter 7). According to the masters' understanding of Confucian morality, which established the moral responsibilities between masters and apprentices, masters should endeavour to develop close personal relationships with their apprentices. However, these efforts to build master and apprentice relationships were challenged by labour precarity: apprentices only had short contracts and often migrated from one construction site to another, and therefore the trustworthy and stable mutual reciprocal relationship that masters wanted to establish was very difficult to build in reality. Consequently, some masters felt betrayed; their apprentices moved to new workplaces and grew distant from them. This circumstance resulted in social precarity, which posed a threat to workers' trust and prevented them from developing close bonds with others.

In addition, after reform and opening, the neoliberal moral framework that promoted individual success and advancement became influential. The importance of demonstrating ability to obtain and keep a secure job led people to view the improvement of personal ability (*suzhi*) as their primary life goal and to pursue individual success (Kipnis, 2006, 2007, 2019). Young workers in the 9th Iron aspired to demonstrate their suzhi by passing exams for technician certifications (see Chapter 8). However, there was a group of older-generation employees in the 9th Iron who believed that collective accomplishment was more significant than individual accomplishment. They felt nostalgic for the working experiences during the socialist period, when workers had worked collectively and shared a common identity (i.e., belonged to the same work unit). They believed that contributing to one's work unit and to the state was a crucial indicator of an individual's ethical existence (see Chapter 9). Workers' nostalgia for socialist-era romances also demonstrated this sentimental attachment to socialist morality. The older generation of employees believed that love during the socialist era had been pure and noble because the couple had shared the same objective:

to contribute to the socialist revolution. Young workers, on the other hand, confronted a crisis in their attempts to achieve love and marriage as a result of the problems caused by labour precarity and structural precarity (see Chapter 6).

Neoliberal morality emphasises the importance of individual success and views wealth as the most significant indicator of masculinity. For example, in Chapter 6, young male temporary workers lacked sufficient money and urban family backgrounds, and therefore, despite their desperate attempts, they were unable to locate a girlfriend or enter into a marriage. Although the purpose of this thesis is not to make a broad argument about ethics and precarity in China, the situation in 9th Iron is a microcosm of industrial workers who live in the context of significant social changes and state-led market reforms.

# 5. Structure of the thesis

The thesis consists of eight chapters. In this introductory chapter, I have briefly outlined my research question, objectives, methods, and theoretical frameworks and introduced my fieldwork site. Next, I introduce the spaces and rhymes of work and life in the Ganshen Raiway Project in an independent section, which will also introduce the key themes to my readers. In the following literature review chapter, I expand on my theoretical framework as outlined above by examining anthropological literature on the topic of precarity and ethics and also explain my second theoretical device, the ethics of precarity. Additionally, I include a discussion of "suspension" (*xuanfu*) by contemporary Chinese scholars (Driessen, 2021; Fengjiang, 2021; van der Meulen, 2021; Xiang, 2021a, 2021b; Xiang, Narotzky, and Lan, 2022 ; Zhan, 2021; Bao, 2022; Richaud, 2022). I suggest that the phenomenon of suspension that they observe can be summed up as a particular life status in which people desire to earn money in order to have a better life in the future but find themselves trapped in a combination of precarious situations.

In Chapter 4, I discuss the relationship between the state and labour in Chinese history, as well as changes in Chinese moralities throughout the country's various historical periods. This chapter will examine not only the historical development of Confucian, socialist, and neoliberal moral frameworks but also the role the CCP has played in the emergence of labour precarity. I focus specifically on the rural-urban development gap, rural-to-urban migration, and state-owned enterprise reforms in the late 1990s. These issues are major contributors to the structural precarity

that I addressed above. This discussion of China's labour history provides context for the subsequent ethnographic chapters. I also introduce the current labour hierarchy in the 9th Iron and illustrate the precarity caused by formal and informal labour divisions.

There are then five ethnographic chapters. In Chapter 5, I expand on the labour and structural precarity that workers experienced by describing the labour process in the 9th Iron and the labouring experiences of employees. I also examine the interdependence and moral relationships between migrant labourers and small subcontractors and detail how workers experienced nature and the state in their daily lives. I show how migrant workers used their explanation of nature to regain control over the labour process and how nature and the state were important components of employees' embodied experience of labour.

In Chapter 6, I discuss workers' experiences of affective precarity from the perspective of their intimate lives. This chapter compares the older generation of 9th Iron workers with the newer generation of 9th Iron workers' understandings of love and marriage. I discuss how structural precarity and labour precarity influenced people's perceptions of love and of what constituted an ethical romantic relationship. Finally, I illustrate how precarity challenged workers' marriages and intimate relationships.

In Chapter 7, I examine how social precarity posed a challenge to Confucian and socialist morality, as well as how it affected people's ordinary ethical interactions. Using the relationships between masters and apprentices in the 9th Iron as an illustration, I discuss how precarity challenged both Confucian and socialist moral frameworks and increased the difficulty of master-apprentice interactions. I continue by discussing how people constructed ethical interactions, illustrate this by how workers carefully selected their words in daily conversations in order to navigate the ethical dilemmas they encountered when forming social relationships (*guanxi*). I focus on the worker's differentiation of relationships (*guanxi*), human emotions (*renqing*), and interactional affection (*jiaoqi*), thereby revealing how people developed ethical relationships in the context of precarity.

Chapter 8 and 9 contrast how the younger generation of workers perceives success with how the older generation perceives achievement, as well as the ethical dilemmas that resulted from the shifting ideas of achievement. I illustrate how precarity influenced how individuals perceived their past and future. In Chapter 8, I pay attention to young workers who sought to get permanent

employment not only because of their desire to be successful individuals but also because of their desire to make their parents feel proud. Yan Yunxiang argues that contemporary Chinese view individual success and freedom as ethical because of the influence of neoliberalism (Yan, 2012). However, I show that young staff members also desired to contribute to their families (family as a form of collective) through their individual success. From this perspective, the influence of Confucian ethics has not ended. People want the freedom to build meaningful family and social relationships alongside work (Millar, 2014; Santos et al., 2021; see also Chapter 3).

In Chapter 9, I focus on the life stories of older-generation employees. I discovered that many state employees laid off during the 1998 reform returned to the 9th Iron around 2010 as temporary workers. In addition to losing their secure employment, they felt uneasy because the nature of their work on construction sites had drastically changed. In the socialist period, they had taken pride in contributing to the work unit and the state. But, since the reform, various subcontractors and employment agencies have been in charge of managing temporary employees. According to a former state worker named Kang Xinhua, "We used to be a steel plate, but now we are a pile of loose sand." These former state employees missed the sense of collective accomplishment and the honour of the work unit collective that they once had experienced at work during the socialist era. This sense of collective accomplishment gave them the impression that they were valuable to others.

To summarise, my dissertation has two main contributions. First, I demonstrate that, in addition to labour precarity, there are numerous other forms of precarity. These forms of precarity, structural or affective, of social relationships or intimate relationships, intergenerational or intragenerational, intersect and impact the lives of individuals. Second, I link the topic of precarity to ethics and illustrate the ethical lives of industrial workers in the context of precarity. I demonstrate how precarity in China challenges the coexisting Confucian, socialist, and neoliberal moral frameworks. I illustrate how people, by referencing these various moral frameworks, attempt to discover and piece together ethical solutions, which I refer to as the ethics of precarity.

# Chapter 2 The Spaces and Rhythms of Work and Life on the Ganshen Railway Project

## 1. Introduction

In this chapter, I draw on my field notes for an ethnographic evocation of a typical working day and the living arrangements of the workers. The aim of this section is to provide the reader with an understanding of the experience of living and working on the 9th Iron. This chapter also includes the themes of workers' daily conversations, the distinctions between different types of workers, and workers' own perspectives on these labour distinctions. As I demonstrate, the labour categories were reinforced by the spatial organisation of the 9th Iron. This section frames the rest of my dissertation and introduces key themes that I explore more deeply in the subsequent chapters. This section starts with introducing workers' labouring experiences in the 9th Iron, then introduces workers' residences and social activities.

## 2. Working in the 9th Iron

I introduce my observations of workers on the construction site and in the office. In addition, the 9th Iron constructed a small cement factory and a steel frame factory adjacent to the entrance to the tunnel, both of which employed a small number of people. Picture 2.1 shows the outside of the tunnel.

Picture 2.1 outside the cavern

## 2.1 In the tunnel

On June 7th, it was already scorching outside in the early morning. The forecast indicated a high of 40 degrees by lunchtime. At 6.30 a.m., accompanied by a whistle, 9th Iron workers assembled in the square. Everyone had an assigned position and was placed in 10 rows, with the manager in the front. Workers looked at each other and whispered to the next person in the queue because the leaders had not arrived. Someone burped, and Dong, a male temporary worker, said, "Someone ate eggs and garlic!" People laughed. This laughing was stopped by the project party secretary, Wang Jinchuan.

On each railway construction project, there would be a party member appointed by the higher level of the CCP, known as the project party secretary. The party secretary had the same status as the project director. The main function of the party secretary was to supervise the political awareness of the staff members, but he was also involved in the management of the project. Having secretaries at

the local level was a tradition that had been generated during the revolutionary period of the CCP. During the civil war, the CCP set up a political commissar in each corps of the People's Liberation Army to manage the soldiers together with the corps commander.

Wang shouted, “Laugh and laugh! You know nothing but laughing!” Wang also criticised two workers for wearing ripped jeans. Then, the project director, Li, delivered a speech on work progress and encouraged everyone to work faster. Following that, people returned to the office, where the technicians and mechanics got their tools and helmets and headed to the construction site, while the accountant and other office workers remained in the office. On the other side of the road, migrant workers gathered in front of their dormitories. Yang Guofu, an on-site manager for the 9th Iron, allocated work to each group and then called out the workers' names, making a note in his notepad for each one. The foremen would give these tasks to each of the workers on the job site. This illustrated the 9th Iron’s management approach. The 9th Iron workers were under the management of the 9th Iron on-site managers and team leaders, whereas migrant workers were under the management of foremen. Foremen were hired by subcontractors, but when working on the sites, foremen took orders from the 9th Iron on-site managers.

Workers on the building site were divided into various teams based on their duties. The 9th Iron workers made up half of the skilled workers, while the other half were migrant workers. The wages of skilled workers who were migrant workers were calculated depending on the number of shifts they had worked in total (see Chapter 4, 5, and Appendix 1). Temporary employees of the 9th Iron, on the other hand, received a fixed monthly salary. As Appendix 1 shows, the average wage of temporary 9th Iron workers was lower than that of skilled migrant workers. The 9th Iron temporary workers, on the other hand, considered their own positions as more promising than those of skilled migrant workers. Fanjie, a temporary worker, said, "I know that I earn less than skilled migrant workers. We could become permanent workers one day, which is far better than migrant workers who do not have the opportunity.” Such nuanced distinctions between different types of workers were normal in the everyday work and life in the 9th Iron. Picture 2.2 shows drillers standing on the platform, digging holes in the walls of the cavern.

Picture 2.2 drillers working in the tunnel

All the unskilled labourers were migrant workers. The team of blasters (skilled workers) was responsible for filling the explosion site with explosives and detonating them from outside the tunnel entrance. Rui Long, a blaster who was a migrant worker working for a subcontractor, said, "We are the most skilled workers in the tunnel and perform the most dangerous task. Anything might happen in the tunnel." Working in the tunnel, according to Rui Long, was very dangerous because non-detonated rocks could fall to the ground after the explosion, injuring people. A little rock falling from a great height was enough to kill a person. Nonetheless, there were no injuries or fatalities on blasters during my fieldwork. Instead, these accidents injured four unskilled labourers. Unskilled labourers, in the opinion of skilled workers and managers, were illiterate people who relied primarily on their strength. According to Riyu, a 9th Iron on-site supervisor, there were many distinctions among workers on the construction sites, such as skilled and unskilled workers, 9th Iron workers or migrant workers, 9th Iron permanent workers, and different kinds of 9th Iron temporary workers. Riyu said, “Usually, after the explosion, unskilled labourers are the first to enter the tunnel because they have to move the rocks that fell from the explosion. As a result, they often experience

accidents. They tidy up the area before other groups of workers begin their work. We have trucks to assist, but lots of tasks still require manpower.”

China Railway Group Limited advertises to the public that it has adopted the most advanced tunnel boring machine technology (dungouji) and tries to present the public with the impression that China's railway technology is the most advanced in the world. Nevertheless, in reality, many high-speed railway projects still rely on manpower. However, the unskilled day labourers who have contributed the most to the manpower are often in the lowest position on the construction sites and are often belittled by other workers as well as by the managers. Picture 2.3 shows four day labourers who were holding the steel frame.

Picture 2.3 labourers holding a steel frame

Rarely did unskilled day labourers have time to relax. Their wages were calculated daily, but compared to skilled migrant workers, they were subject to stricter oversight by the foreman and onsite manager. During the brief period of rest, unskilled labourers crouched near the tunnel entrance, smoking cigarettes they had purchased from the nearby village for a few dollars.

Occasionally, one of them would spew a mouthful of phlegm on the ground and then trample it with their feet. Every time I attempted to talk with unskilled labourers, I could sense foremen staring at me. Riyu, the on-site manager, once asked me to leave. He did not criticise me, but he considered my interaction with the labourer unnecessary. He said, "They could not understand what you were saying. So what's the point? If you are truly interested in construction work, allow me to find some skilled workers for you." Riyu's remark is a vivid example of the contempt with which unskilled migrant workers were treated.

Unskilled day labourers frequently mistook me for a 9th Iron worker. Unskilled day labourers viewed 9th Iron young employees as educated individuals with a promising future. Fuhua, a 40-year-old unskilled labourer, said, "I won't be able to work in two years. I'll return to the countryside to look for another means to make a living. This job takes strength, but I don't feel as strong as I did a few years ago. Old people cannot do it anymore." Despite what he said, I noticed a large number of fifty-year-old labourers at work. In the summer, sweat often obscured the features of the labourers to the point where I could not recognise them. According to former 9th Iron state employee Luo Qiga's recollection, however, the 9th Iron had employed unskilled labourers in the past. Before the reform of the 1990s, a portion of 9th Iron unskilled labourers were state workers and received a wage that was calculated based on the length of service (googling, a wage calculation where the more years worked, the higher the wage). In addition, a significant percentage of the labourers were farmers recruited from nearby collective farms. Luo said, "Becoming a labourer in railway construction was a job that farmers wanted because they could eat enough[8]". Luo was implicitly contrasting the working conditions of a contemporary labourer with the prevalent existence of hunger in the countryside during socialist times (see Chapter 6).

Other skilled workers, such as drillers and concrete workers, confronted different challenges. Most of the time, drillers stood on a three-armed rock drilling machine. When I first saw a three-armed rock drill truck, I mistakenly assumed that this giant machine, which required a qualified driver and mechanic, was a modern machine that did not require manpower. Zhang Zhuan told me, "This machine requires three teams of drillers to stand at the end of each machine arm and dig the stone wall using hand-held wind drills. Most of the time, manual labour is required." Driller Kaifeng was a 20-year-old 9th Iron worker who had received his certification recently. He stated, "Once we

[8] This was because famine was a common problem in the countryside at that time, but once they were working on the railway sites, farmers were allowed to eat at the workers' canteen.

begin working, we'll be covered in dirt and dust." Picture 2.4 shows three workers who were standing in the mud, covered with mud.

Picture 2.4 workers standing in the mud

Indeed, during the drilling procedure, an enormous amount of dust entered the air. Despite wearing masks, dust entered the hair, nostrils, and eyebrows of the drillers. Once I invited Kaifeng to film himself working, he agreed. After receiving the video, I discovered that I could not see anything because of the dust. In another group, concrete workers had to hold concrete spray guns in order to spray concrete to the top of the tunnel, so they were frequently covered in cement. Once, I noticed a man wearing protective gear come out of the tunnel. He immediately removed the concrete-covered suits and rushed to the toilet. Zhang told me that it would be impossible to go to the toilet or consume water after putting on protective suits, and therefore the first thing that concrete workers would do after they came out of the tunnel would be to dash to the toilet.

## 2.2 In the office

Skilled workers of the 9th Iron spent most of their time in the tunnel. Unlike migrant workers who could only take breaks on the construction sites, the 9th Iron workers had a shared office for breaks. This office was the largest in the compound's office block but also the dirtiest, as employees

brought dirt and dust with them when they returned to rest, slumping or sitting in one of the multiple aisles of sofas. Some workers studied for their certification examinations in this office at night (see Chapter 8), and therefore, the light in this office never turned off.

All the other offices were filled with office employees during the day. There were accountants, material purchasers, and administrators among the office staff. Picture 2.5 shows one of the office buildings of the 9th Iron compound during the daytime. The slogan displayed on the second floor of the office building said, "Inspire positive energy, build the railway dream together, adhere to high standards, and strive to be the vanguard." The first line meant that through the CCP's education programmes, the 9th Iron intended to teach its personnel to develop a positive spirit. Building the Railway Dream was intended to be aligned with Xi Jinping's calling for "building the Chinese Dream" of modernity and national rejuvenation. Striving to be the vanguard meant achieving first place in production competitions among the 9th Iron's many projects.

Picture 2.5 one of the office buildings of the 9th Iron

Two-thirds of office workers were female temporary employees without contracts. However, there were no women on the management committees, which consisted of eleven managers with permanent contracts. The vast majority of managers and workers implicitly assumed that women who had not given birth would leave their jobs before the age of thirty and return home to give birth (Aunt Wang's daughter was one of only two women in the entire 9th Iron company who did not intend to marry and have children). In the context of labour precarity, the 9th Iron would persuade pregnant female temporary workers to quit their jobs or dismiss them outright (see Chapter 6). Women who had already given birth, on the other hand, were expected to raise their children in their hometowns. The 9th Iron temporary workers, who were largely from rural backgrounds, were unable to bring their children to study in the cities where they worked because the household registration system made it difficult for children from rural backgrounds to attend urban schools. Besides, women were often expected to take primary responsibility for caring for children in China. Owing to the pressures of labour precarity and the patriarchal social structure, female temporary workers with children had the highest turnover among the 9th Iron workers. When their families' financial situation was bad, they left their children in the care of their parents in their hometowns and went to the construction sites where their husbands worked to find temporary employment to supplement their families' income. These women would return to their home towns to care for their children when the families' financial situation improved or their parents fell ill. As a result, project managers preferred to promote males over women because the potential cost of promoting a woman would be substantially higher than that of promoting a man.

The 9th Iron managers had their individual offices, with luxury leather sofas, wood desks, and leather armchairs. When managers were not present, female office employees sometimes went to other offices to talk with their roommates. Leaders occasionally discovered female employees slacking off. Leaders would criticise them in front of other employees, but the criticism was not as severe as the criticism male workers (including skilled workers and office workers) would face if they were caught. This did not mean that women received better treatment. According to project director Li, “There is no need to be harsh with women because they do not have the opportunity to get promotion. If I discover a woman slacking off on the job for three times, I warn her husband that if it happens again, I will dismiss them both.” In other words, if a female employee did something that was intolerable in the eyes of managers, managers could achieve their goal of controlling married female employees by putting pressure on their husbands. Managers' tolerance of

female workers showed that women were belittled in the male-dominated environment of the construction site.

In short, in the 9th Iron, there were distinct rhythms, spaces, and labour experiences that varied based on factors such as gender, age, type of contract, and so on. However, just as Li's remark about women's work suggested, the aforementioned factors were often intertwined with one another, resulting workers' different experiences of precarity. I elaborate on this in subsequent chapters.

# 3. Living in the 9th Iron

## 3.1 Living collectively in the 9th Iron workers' dormitories

The dormitory buildings of the 9th Iron had long corridors. Unlike the migrant workers' dormitories described in the previous chapter, neither the outer walls nor the corridors of the 9th Iron workers' dormitories had any clothes hanging out; the 9th Iron's regulation prohibited its employees from hanging clothes in the corridors. During inspections, the corridors of the 9th Iron dormitories were visible to the local government officials and the 9th Iron leaders. Due to the negative effect that clothing hanging had on the organisation's image, the 9th Iron banned this practice.

The dormitories' walls were constructed from thin sheets of aluminium and steel. Consequently, there were continuous creaking sounds whenever an individual climbed the stairs or walked in the corridors. Temporary worker Chen Xiaoyi had mastered a unique skill: he could discern the approach of leaders simply by listening to the sounds of footsteps and doors opening and closing. Chen demonstrated to me the sounds of various leaders walking through stomping his feet on the ground: Li's sound was "dun dun ... dun dun" and Wang's sound was "dun dun dun ... dun dun." On occasion, leaders and managers of the 9th Iron conducted random inspections of staff dormitories to discover employees' violations of regulations. Thus, when Chen heard the leaders' footsteps, he was able to rapidly organise his room and conceal electric appliances that were prohibited by the regulations of the 9th Iron, including fast-heating electric blankets and fan heaters.

Additionally, young couples were frequently the target of flirtatious comments and jealousy from single male employees due to the thin walls. In March 2020, Wang Kaiyi, a 26-year-old

female accountant without a contract, married Mu Yuandao, a 25-year-old male agency worker. Director Li permitted the young couple to transfer from their single dormitory rooms to a couple's dormitory room with a double bed following their wedding. Throughout the month of March, every time Mu walked into the office of skilled workers, it elicited a burst of whistles from male workers, interspersed with a few jokes, such as "Mu, it sounds like you had a good night." "Are you still able to make it to the construction site?" Svetlana Boym wrote that residents in Soviet communal apartments accepted and tolerated the noise and crowding as a normal part of life, and any display of individualism or unusual behaviour was discouraged in the buildings (Boym, 1994). Similarly, in the 9th Iron dormitories, although the steel and aluminium sheets provided little noise insulation, workers accepted this living environment and found in it the possibility of discovering pleasure.

Akin to the findings of Boym (1994), conduct indicating individualism was criticised in the 9th Iron dormitories. For example, residents could criticise germ phobic behaviours to the same extent that they would criticise a lack of sanitation. Thus, a technician would be reprimanded for bringing mud into the corridors if he did not take off his footwear prior to ascending the stairs. The 9th Iron managers assessed the sanitation of each dormitory every two weeks. Dirty corridors would result in low scores for the entire floor of dormitories. Young employees who got poor hygiene scores were subjected to managers' reprimands during staff meetings. So the collective could be punished for individual transgressions. However, other female staff members unanimously opposed temporary worker Sun Li’s suggestion that her roommates mop the floor every day. This was because an excessively clean floor in Sun's dormitory could make the other dormitories appear dirty in the eyes of managers during fortnightly cleanliness inspections. This reflected people's moral expectations under the collectivist way of living in the 9th Iron: any behaviour that might undermine the collective interest would be condemned by other people.

Some rooms in the male dormitory had been designated for young male temporary workers, while others were occupied by a combination of young temporary workers and middle-aged state employees. While writing my fieldwork notes in my bed (three-bed staff dormitories, such as the one I slept in, lacked desks), the sounds of mobile games and laughter emanating from the single male dormitories nearby frequently disrupted my thoughts. Playing mobile games was a common entertainment activity for young workers. My roommate Chen Ping, who was an accountant with no contract, dealt with the noise in a simple and straightforward manner: she clenched her fists and punched the steel sheet wall twice, and the room next door fell silent. Chen

Ping's interaction with the male colleagues who lived next door mirrored the complex relationship dynamics between young male and young female employees in the 9th Iron's highly gendered spaces. Male workers made concessions and tolerated women's demands to a certain extent, despite the fact that women were at the bottom of the labour hierarchy.

I have depicted the collective lifestyle in the 9th Iron compound. This collective lifestyle regulated the personal lives of workers, whereas workers also used many methods to bypass the company's regulations. This collective lifestyle was a direct extension of the lifestyle within urban work units during the socialist era. The moral expectations of the socialist style, in which the collective good was paramount, were perpetuated while individualism was suppressed in the space of the 9th Iron workers' dormitories.

## 3.2 Experiencing social and affective precarity in the 9th Iron workers' dormitories

In what ways did labour precarity impact the dormitory lives of employees and their interpersonal dynamics with their roommates? Here I introduce how social precarity appeared and was experienced in the 9th Iron dormitory, which will be further elaborated in Chapters 7.

Some of the 9th Iron's dormitories were occupied by a mix of temporary and state workers, which meant that the labour hierarchy of temporary and permanent workers extended from the workplace to the living environment. Nevertheless, this situation did not simply give rise to antagonistic or superior/inferior social dynamics; rather, it produced a multitude of intricate consequences. Some young workers were willing to live with state workers and even took the initiative to apply to director Li in order to live with state workers because living with other temporary workers made them feel under constant peer competition pressure. For example, Wang Hean. Wang lived with Zhao Keran and Qian Junmao. They were all apprentices, undergoing training to become blasters. On the completion of their apprenticeship, only one would be offered an agency contract, while the other two must leave. The result was competition among Wang, Zhao, and Qian. Wang told me, "I felt like I was in a pressure cooker every time I came back to my room, as soon as I opened the door. All the time, I felt this pressure. We did not get along well. But after moving to my new room, I feel much better. Although Yang and Li (two state workers) snored loudly, I felt relaxed because

there was no competition between us." Wang was not the only one who applied to change for a dormitory room because of the pressure of competition (see more about social precarity caused by the fierce competition among 9th Iron temporary workers in Chapter 8).

Although living with state workers was appealing to temporary workers like Wang, there were some temporary workers who did not like to live with state workers. For example, Fang Di, an agency worker as well as a machine operator, said, "Living in the same room with Zhang Yaocai (a state worker who worked under the same departmental manager as Fang) was difficult. He always lectures me and acts like he knows everything. He argues against everything I say. Everything! But I cannot offend him because he has a good relationship with my manager, and I don't want him to snitch on me to get me out of my job." Both examples above illustrate how precarity extended from the office space to the dormitory space, thus affecting people's social relationships and producing social precarity.

In addition to the tensions in the dormitory, the high staff turnovers brought about by labour precarity made it necessary for workers to constantly adapt to new roommates. When I was chatting with Zhang Zhuan and my roommate Shi Lele in the dormitory after supper, Zhang said, "When the assembly bell rang this morning, I got up from my bed and noticed Lai lying on his side with his face to the wall, so I pushed him hard and said, 'Lai, you are still sleeping!' Then an unfamiliar face slowly turned around, and I realised that Lai had left the day before yesterday and that this was the new employee whom the manager had transferred from another construction site to work the night shift."

In the 9th Iron, staff members had to keep adapting to changes because it was common to see a familiar colleague leave while a new one arrived. Chen Ping consoled me after noticing my sadness at Shi Lele's sudden departure, saying, "Sooner or later, you will adapt to the situation of people leaving. Some people get fired. Some end their contracts here and move to another city. Some return home because they're unable to adjust to life here. This is the way things are. There are always people leaving and people arriving." Chen then expressed her opinion: "I think that my parents gave me the wrong name. Ping in Chinese means safety and security, but it also has the same pronunciation as the word for 'weeds'. I am also a piece of floating weed because I have always been migrating from one place to another, from one city to another. Temporary workers are like weeds floating in the sea. Weeds are blown wherever the wind blows. Weeds have no roots."

The sense of loneliness that Chen Ping described was a result of temporary workers' constant migration from one place to another. Workers often found themselves in the midst of an ever-changing social environment (see more about affective precarity in Chapter 6 and 8). But workers also had ways to combat this loneliness. Male workers sometimes went together to have barbecues in the Baiyun village and drink. However, the 9th Iron forbade entry-level workers who worked on construction sites from drinking (managers were not regulated by this rule). Temporary worker Chen Xiaoyi said,

> "It depends on how good you are at covering up in front of managers and leaders. For day shift workers, as long as we could turn up at 6.30 a.m. in the square the next morning and behave all right while working, we would be fine. However, as entry-level workers, we must be very careful when leaving the compound for drinking. We usually sneak out through the path on the mountain so that we could bypass the compound's front gate without being spotted by managers."

The method of combating loneliness employed by the female employees, on the other hand, was to keep rice cookers and other cooking utensils in the dormitories, even though the use of these appliances in the dormitories was not permitted. Sun Li insisted, "Always eating canteen food hurts my stomach. Eating food I've cooked can comfort my stomach." When a female employee cooked in her dormitories, she usually invited her colleagues over to eat. Only at the moment of sharing the food were male workers allowed by the female employees to enter the female dormitory. In order not to let the leaders find out, the female employees would close the curtains on the side of the dormitory near the office building and open the windows on the side near the mountain so that the smell of food would dissipate from the house, thus not leaving the odour of cooking in the room. There was a certain possibility that drinking and cooking in the dormitory would leave a bad impression on the leaders; however, most workers believed that they were careful enough to avoid being caught. Chen Ping told me, "I suspect that the leaders probably knew we were doing this, but they chose to turn a blind eye. There were workers who were fired for getting drunk, but I have not heard of any workers who have been fired for cooking. If we get caught, we would be reprimanded by the leaders, but sometimes we get reprimanded by the leaders even when we have done nothing wrong, so we are used to it." She said this while making a face at me.

These ethnographic moments show that workers' social relationships were influenced by the increase in labour precarity. In some circumstances, there was increased friction between them, and workers felt lonely. In other circumstances, workers found ways to build connections with others.

## 3.3 Creating a sense of home: living in the migrant workers' dormitories

The migrant workers' dormitory on the other side of the road was exempt from these rules and regulations, in contrast to the 9th Iron dormitory's stringent rules and regulations. When I walked into the dormitory, I was greeted by helmets, charging pads, reflective vests, and pants hanging on the heads of the double beds, while on the floor there were pairs of flip-flops, green or yellow shoes, and fake Adidas sneakers. Migrant workers were paid more than the 9th Iron's temporary workers, but the condition of their accommodation was worse than that of the 9th Iron dormitories. Every room was extremely crowded as most migrant workers tried to figure out how to fit more things into their limited space. Migrant workers on the bottom bunk of a double bed tried to cram more things under the bed, which was about thirty centimetres high. Under the bunk bed, there were plastic pots and hangers of all sizes, clothes and shoes in nylon bags, instant noodles, beer, suitcases, and hot water bottles. Migrant workers in the upper bunks tried to hang more things from the beds; they attached clothes lines to the ends of the double beds and hung clips on the clotheslines in order to hang more things. But sometimes there were exceptions, such as Fan Wengui, a 30 year-old migrant worker, whose bed consisted only of a quilt and a pillow. When I asked Fan why he had so few things, he said, “I’m not going to work here next year. I want to have fewer things, so it will be easier to move.” In Chapter 1, I mentioned that core migrant workers tended to have one to two familiar contractors, and the employment relationships between them were relatively stable. In contrast, Fan Wengui was not employed by a subcontractor with whom he was familiar, and therefore, he did not want to decorate the place where he would only stay for a couple of months.

Nonetheless, many migrant workers attempted to create a sense of home in their dormitories, although they would only live here temporarily. As I explained in Chapter 1, migrant workers used bed curtains to separate their beds from those of other couples in the couples' rooms. In her observations of communal apartments in the Soviet Union, Boym (1994) notices that residents used partitions to separate their own spaces from those of others. People could still hear voices coming from other people's homes because these partitions were very thin. Residents, however, continued to

use partitions to divide their living spaces from those of their neighbours. Boym argues that it was not so much the presence of the partition that created the space of intimacy as it was the presence of the partition that made the imagining of intimacy possible (Boym, 1994). Bed curtains served the same purpose here.

Female migrant workers, on the other hand, frequently changed their bed curtains and other decorative items in the migrant workers' dormitories. Xing Yunyun, for example, was a migrant worker who arrived here with her husband. During the peak season at the site, the foreman would assign Xing to pick up sand, and she could make between 100 and 200 RMB per day. She was not required at the construction site during the rainy season or when the construction progress was slow. She did handcrafts in her dormitory on days when she was not working. She told me that she sewed her own bed curtains, sheets, duvet covers, pillow cases, quilts, and pillows; thus, her bed was prettier than the others. When I went to speak with her, she was unwinding the yarn from an old jumper and ready to crochet a blanket with it. She explained, "Knitting is not just for saving money. Things made by hand are soft and warm to use. I feel at home when I use things I knit myself." While machine-made household goods were perceived as cold and stiff, handmade decorations were perceived as having a softness and warmth that allowed Xing to imagine herself at home. In the setting of labour precarity, a soft and handmade blanket could be a worker’s shield against the sense of uneasiness caused by frequent relocations.

Although the living environment was crowded, I heard relatively few workers complaining about the living conditions during my interviews. This was because living in the migrant worker dormitories was perceived to be better than living in the village. Fan Wengui said, "Conditions here are worse than in the 9th Iron. But living here is much better than living in the village. Some bosses let their workers live in the village to save money. In the houses, there are always rats and cockroaches." On the outside walls of the migrant workers' dormitories, there were posters similar to those in the 9th Iron dormitories, with slogans such as "Be hygienic, pay attention to cleanliness" and "Safe production, safe accommodation." These posters were put up by the 9th Iron, although the 9th Iron leaders did not come here to inspect hygiene.

Playing cards and drinking were two of the commonest social activities in migrant worker dorms. Migrant workers sometimes played cards or went to the nearby village to buy stuff, but their activities were limited to their dwelling area and the nearby village. Picture 2.6 shows a popular

restaurant that migrant workers and the 9th Iron workers' frequently visited (the 9th Iron's managers never went there). Picture 2.7 shows that workers who had completed their day shifts were watching television in front of a store in Baiyun village. Drinking was permitted during non-peak seasons, and small subcontractors occasionally purchased drinks for their employees. Subcontractor Tong Dawei sometimes bought drinks and cigarettes for his employees and drank with them. Unlike the 9th Iron compound that was under the constant surveillance of the 9th Iron company, people in the migrant workers dormitories had comparatively more room for freedom. Apart from Tong Dawei and Yangli, the other subcontractors did not live near the construction sites. Foremen who also lived in the dormitories were responsible for managing workers.

Picture 2.6 a restaurant in Baiyu village

Picture 2.7 a popular store in Baiyun village

I once went to visit Brother Wang's room. Brother Wang was a foreman with a team of six migrant workers. He shared a room with seven other workers. Two night-shift migrant workers had already gone to work when we arrived. A day shift worker was snoring loudly in the top bunk. I asked Wang, “Will our conversations wake him up?” Wang responded, “No. As the saying goes, when a man gets off work, he sleeps like a dead pig.” The other migrant workers laughed. Zhang Zhuan, who was a 9th Iron temporary worker, also joined us and brought some bottles of beer. Wang took more bottles of beer from beneath his bed. Young Ding, a migrant worker in his 20s, complained that his subcontractor (a big subcontractor with the surname Zhou) never came to the construction sites and instead sent his mean-spirited brother-in-law to oversee workers. According to Ding, Boss Zhou once drove a Mercedes-Benz to the building site. Then Ding mimicked the walk of Boss Zhou, who had a large belly, with his body leaning back and his hands gripping his belt. As he was mimicking, Ding said, “Look, do I look like that Zhou Bapi?” All of them, including Brother Wang, chuckled. Despite being a foreman, Wang was disappointed with Zhou’s management. Wang said, “Zhou never notices my hard work and only listens to his brother-in-law.” Wang felt that his value was not seen by Zhou. I asked, “Why do you still work here?” Wang responded, “for the sake of my wife and children. All men have to earn money to support their families. Nobody wants to suffer in here otherwise.” The other migrant workers nodded their heads in agreement. As I will argue later, the Confucian moral expectation of men to take responsibility for providing for their families was an important reason why male workers were motivated to endure poor working conditions year after year.

With the permission of foremen, migrant workers had some opportunities to use metaphors, irony, and cynicism to express their opinions. Wang used the metaphor of a dead pig to express how hard the workers work, with which other migrant workers agreed. The metaphor aroused migrant workers' shared moral sentiments and made them laugh. Zhou Bapi was a fictional character who exploited farmers in the anti-feudalism propaganda opera The White Hair Girl, produced by the CCP in the 1950s. Ding compared the large subcontractor Boss Zhou to the feudal landlord Zhou Bapi, employing ironic language to show workers' feelings of being exploited. This sense of being exploited was intensified by the indifference of large subcontractors and labour service companies to the hardships of migrant workers in the subcontracting system. This caused migrant workers to believe that their labour was devalued and disrespected, hence fostering their sense of injustice.

Ngai Pun and Chris Smith argue that dormitories, as a way of organising the lives of workers, exposed their every word and action to the monitoring of their employers (Smith and Pun, 2006). The existence of dormitories resulted in a despotic style of management, which Smith and Pun named the “dormitory labour regime" (Smith and Pun, 2006: 1456). Smith and Pun argue that dormitories in China’s construction sites resembled what Foucault called the panopticon. Michel Foucault (1977) uses the panopticon to depict the form of discipline that places people under constant watch. He argues that while prisoners in the panopticon were always visible to others, they could never become subjects of communication (Foucault, 1977). However, as I show in this section, while the company's intention of building the 9th Iron dormitories and migrant worker dormitories might have been to facilitate control over labour, the dormitory spaces did not turn out to be a panopticon. The 9th Iron workers could tell whether and when they were being watched (for example, by listening for footsteps) and adjust their behaviour accordingly. Besides, when I dined alone with the 9th Iron's managers, I assumed from their conversations that they were aware of junior employees sneaking out of the compound in the middle of the night, although I had no explicit evidence that managers were aware. In the migrant workers' dormitories, getting the foremen to the side of workers and to criticise bosses was also likely. These circumstances indicate workers had many ways to exercise their freedom in the dormitory space, leading the company’s surveillance to fail.

In this section, I have described the work and lives of workers at my field sites. Workers perceived the work on the site as hard and dangerous. The long period of migrant life left the workers feeling extremely lonely, although they were also trying to counteract this loneliness by establishing social relationships with others or by decorating the dormitory space. I have mentioned some themes that I will continue to discuss later, such as the impact of Confucian and socialist morality on workers, the social and affective precarity that people faced in their daily lives, and how these uncertainties intersected with labour precarity. The aforementioned phenomena in this section have demonstrated the complex nature of labour processes and labour control, where social, affective, and labour precarity characterised daily life and work for many people in the 9th Iron.

# Chapter 3 Literature Review: Precarity and The Ethics of Precarity

## 1. Introduction

The term "precarity" was originally employed to describe the unstable employment conditions that emerged alongside the rise of neoliberalism in the 1990s (Bourdieu, 1999; Standing, 2011; Ridout and Schneider, 2012; Castel, 2017; Springveld, 2017). Nevertheless, scholars argue that precarious employment conditions were present in capitalist society prior to the emergence of neoliberalism. Therefore, labour precarity has been a long-standing phenomenon rather than a recent occurrence (Doogan, 2011, 2015; Neilson and Rossiter, 2008; Breman, 2013; Munck, 2013; Scully, 2016; Han, 2018; Hann and Parry, 2018; Kasmir, 2018).

In recent years, scholars have broadened their use of the term "precarity" to refer to life circumstances characterised by a significant degree of unpredictability (Ross, 2008, 2009; Weston, 2012; Stewart, 2012; Allison, 2012, 2014; Tsings, 2015; Thorkelson, 2016; Means, 2017). Recent studies have demonstrated that precarity can manifest itself in various ways and that individuals may encounter distinct forms of precarity (Molé, 2010; Berlant, 2011; Muehlebach, 2011; Allison, 2012; Muehlebach and Shoshan, 2012; Banki, 2013; Kasmir and Carbonella, 2014; Dwyer & Lassus, 2015; Lorey, 2015). Nevertheless, Kathleen M. Millar (2017) contends that broadening the application of the term "precarity" would render it a vague concept and obscure the variations in labour conditions across different geographical areas. I draw on the strengths of both perspectives and suggest that the working class faces not one but the intersection of multiple kinds of precarity. The various forms of precarity increase the working class's sense of deprivation.

Unlike previous research (Berlant, 2011; Allison, 2012, 2014; Muehlebach and Shoshan, 2012; Banki, 2013; Dwyer & Lassus, 2015; Lorey, 2015), I pay attention to the relationship between different forms of precarity. I provide a model that analyses the intersection of labour precarity with structural, social, and affective precarity. Structural precarity refers to the specific economic and political structures that contribute to insecurity. Social precarity refers to the impact of precarity on

social connections. Affective precarity refers to the various feelings and affects that people living in precarious conditions endure. The use of this fourfold model can help with the analysis of the intersection between labour precarity and people's subjective experiences of precarity. In addition, I propose the ethics of precarity, which examines the ethical dilemmas and solutions in the context of precarity. Sections 2 and 3 of this chapter examine previous studies on precarity, while Section 4 offers an analysis of research on ordinary ethics and ethnographies that have motivated me to offer a novel synthesis of the study on precarity and ethics.

In Section 2 below, I present the theoretical discussions regarding the concept of labour precarity (Neilson and Rossiter, 2008; Standing, 2011; Seymour, 2012; Breman, 2013; Munck, 2013; Millar, 2017; Han, 2018; Kasmir, 2018; Hann and Parry, 2018). I also introduce scholars who examined the matter of precarious employment prior to the emergence of the term precarity (Marx, 1968, 2010; De Oliveira, 1972; Hart, 1973). Labour precarity has been a longstanding feature of capitalist societies. I also introduce recent studies that indicate that labour precarity has been used as a technique of labour control by companies, thereby diminishing the resistance capacity of workers (Cross, 2010; Kesküla, 2012; Kasmir, 2014; Sanchez, 2018; Rudnyckyj, 2018; Lazar and Sanchez, 2019; Parry, 2020).

Section 3 demonstrates that in addition to the study conducted on the topic of labour precarity, there is also a body of literature that focuses on individuals' subjective experiences of precarity (Molé, 2010; Allison, 2012, 2014, 2015; Muehlebach, 2011; Cangià, 2018; Trevisani, 2021). These writings indicate that precarity may appear in various forms (Molé, 2010; Allison, 2012, 2013, 2015; Muehlebach, 2011; Cangià, 2018; Trevisani, 2021). In addition, China scholars put forward the notion of suspension (*xuanfu*) to explain a unique form of precarity in China (Xiang, 2021; Ou, 2021; Driessen, 2019, 2021; Fengjiang, 2021; Sier, 2021; van der Meulen, 2021; Zhan, 2021). Scholars who have written about suspension have primarily focused on people's subjective experiences of precarity (Xiang, 2021; Ou, 2021; Driessen, 2021; Fengjiang, 2021; Sier, 2021; van der Meulen, 2021; Zhan, 2021).

In Section 4, I demonstrate how individuals pursue their moral ideals in precarious lives. Previous ethnographies have demonstrated the impact of precarity on the existing moral frameworks (Matos, 2010, 2019; Millar, 2014; Rajković, 2018; Santos et al., 2021). However, these ethnographies do not prioritise the topic of ethics in their discussions (Matos, 2010, 2019; Millar, 2014; Rajković,

2018; Santos et al., 2021). By contrast, I show the relationships between precarity and ethics in this thesis. I propose the concept of the ethics of precarity to understand the instances in which labour precarity undermines preexisting moral frameworks and how individuals navigate their way through daily ethical dilemmas. At the end of this chapter, I explain how the discussion of ordinary ethics has inspired my proposal of the ethics of precarity (Zigon, 2007; Lambek, 2010, 2015; Laidlaw, 2002, 2013; Das, 2012; Fassin, 2012).

# 2. Theoretical debates on labour precarity

This section begins by presenting Guy Standing's (2011) argument on labour precarity and next examines the criticisms of Standing that were made by researchers from three different perspectives (Neilson and Rossiter, 2005, 2008; Waite, 2009; Seymour, 2012, 2022 ; Breman, 2013; Breman, 2013; Scully, 2016; Strauss and McGrath, 2017; Kasmir, 2018; Kofti, 2016, 2018; Hann and Parry, 2018; Han, 2018; Kasmir, 2018). My ethnography demonstrates that these criticisms of Standing are accurate. Before the term precarity gained popularity in academic circles, researchers had already noticed insecure employment in capitalist societies (Marx, 1968, 2010; De Oliveira, 1972; Hart, 1973). These scholars had used different terminologies to describe and analyse the insecurity that workers had faced (Marx, 1968, 2010; De Oliveira, 1972; Hart, 1973). In the final part of this section, I illustrate that recent ethnographies in different regions have demonstrated how companies use labour precarity as a means of exerting control over workers (Cross, 2010; Kesküla, 2012; Kasmir, 2014; Sanchez, 2018; Rudnyckyj, 2018; Lazar and Sanchez, 2019; Parry, 2020).

## 2.1 the concept of precarity and debates

David Harvey argues that there have been some institutional changes in the capitalist system since the 1970s (Harvey, 1987). According to Harvey (1987), the foundation of capitalism has always been expansion and various forms of accumulation. Harvey contends that the Fordism of the industrial era required capital fixed to a particular region and rigorous labour control. In the 1970s, however, capital became more mobile, which meant that when businesses in one region became unprofitable, companies relocated to regions with more profitable markets and cheaper labour costs. Harvey refers to this new type of capital accumulation as "flexible accumulation," which is characterised by the "startling flexibility" of "labour processes, labour markets, products, and

consumption patterns.” (Harvey, 1987: 252). This change in labour relations led workers to have less secure contracts (Harvey, 1987).

Noticing the increase in insecure employment in France, Pierre Bourdieu uses the term "precarité" to describe temporary employment (Bourdieu, 1999). In 1997, Bourdieu argued that since the 1990s, precarity has escalated in all industries, encompassing both the public and private sectors. Bourdieu argues that the proliferation of flexible work arrangements has resulted in widespread precarity across developed countries. Bourdieu contends that precarity not only reconstructs the economy but also politics and weakens workers’ acts of resistance (Bourdieu, 1999).

At the start of the 21st century, many political movements emerged with the goal of anti-precarity (See Chapter 1). Inspired by these movements, Guy Standing argues that the rise of insecure and short-term employment in Europe has led to the emergence of a new social class, which he refers to as “the precariats” (Standing, 2011). Standing argues that the precariats are the “only transformative class” in today's world (Standing, 2011:116) describing the precariats as highly heterogeneous, encompassing people such as internet café hackers, artists, elderly people, call centre women, self-employed IT workers, and illegal migrants (Standing, 2011). Standing sees precarity as a recent labour condition that has arisen in parallel with the rise of the neoliberal economy since the 1990s (Standing, 2011).

Standing's argument sparked considerable debate in academia. Scholars have criticised Standing from three different perspectives. First, Standing (2011) sees different types of people as the victims of precarity, despite the fact that these people have different occupations and incomes (Neilson and Rossiter, 2008; Waite, 2009; Seymour, 2012; Breman, 2013;). Second, Standing (2011) sees precarity as a novel labour condition that has only appeared with the rise of neoliberalism. However, researchers argue that precarity has long existed in the global south (Neilson and Rossiter, 2008; Scully, 2016; Hann and Parry, 2018; Han, 2018; Kasmir, 2018) as well as the global north (Munck, 2013; Kasmir, 2014; Millar, 2017). Third, Standing sees the precariats as the opposite class of those who still have secure employment, and it is unlikelythe two classes will cooperate because they share few similarities (Standing, 2011). However, researchers point out that it is incorrect to see long-term employees and precarious workers as two antithetical classes, especially considering that people who are temporarily employed and people who earn stable salaries might live in the same household and are family members (Breman, 2013; Kofti, 2018).

Now I elaborate on these three different types of critiques in detail. Critiques reveal that Standing's argument on labour precarity is flawed. First, as Louise Waite criticises Standing's concept of the precariats for lumping all kinds of workers together including unskilled labourers who earn low salaries and self-employed professionals who have significantly higher incomes (Waite, 2009). Brett Neilson and Ned Rossiter (2008) also argue that the experiences of precarity could be significantly different across geographic locations and social statuses. Neilson and Rossiter argue that Standing's (2011) argument fails to account for the diverse forms of precarity and instead simplifies them into fixed and uniform subject positions (Neilson and Rossiter, 2008). Richard Seymour contends that the widespread acceptance of precariats as a cultural meme within dissident, leftist culture does not imply that the precariats have grown into a single social class, and therefore, considering the precariats as a united class is merely a wishful belief of Standing (Seymour, 2012; also see Kevin Doogan, 2010, 2015). Similarly, Ronaldo Munck argues that the precariats did not change the relations of production in capitalism, and thus it could not be considered a social class (Munck, 2013). Strauss and McGrath argue that Standing's (2011) idea of grouping individuals who are working in precarious conditions under the same category (i.e., the precariats) overlooks the significant presence of unfree labourers and forced labourers within contemporary capitalism. The experiences of unfree labourers differ greatly from those of self-employed workers (Strauss and McGrath, 2017).

Second, as Scully argues, Standing portrays precarity as a new phenomenon driven by neoliberalism and consequently obscures the distinct and far longer history of precarious employment experienced by southern workers (Scully, 2016). Munck argues that insecure and dangerous working conditions have long existed, particularly in the global south (Munck, 2013). In contrast with major developed economies, in the peripheral zones of the world economy, for example, India, the formalisation of employment has never been established (Munck, 2013). In addition, the International Labour Organisation's report on Global Employment (2013) reveals that the majority of precarious employment occurs in developing countries, whereas Standing (2011) mostly focuses on examples from developed economies in his book. In contrast, I understand the precarity that Chinese workers endure in relation to the distinctive labour history in China (see Chapter 4).

Third, Standing's (2011) classification of workers into two antithetical classes, one comprising steady salary earners and the other consisting of insecure workers, precludes the formation of any potential alliances between these two groups (Breman, 2013). Breman (2013) contends that the precariats is a “bogus concept” because long-term workers and temporary workers may have more similarities than what Standing (2011) claims, such as common ethnicity, caste, race, creed, and so on. Ethnographies also suggest that precarious workers and workers who have regular incomes might live in the same household (Kofti, 2016; Sanchez, 2012; Kesküla, 2018). Dimitra Kofti notices that in post-socialist Bulgaria, formal workers with contracts and informal workers without contracts frequently operated on the same conveyor belt and belonged to the same household (Kofti, 2016). Often, the husband had a contract, but the wife did not. Because formal and informal workers were family members, they often prioritised family interests at moments of labour disputes, which resulted in the failure of collective bargaining (Kofti, 2016).

Andrew Sanchez notices that in a company town in India, temporary employees were hired from the families of permanent workers. Throughout four generations, the company had provided an assurance of permanent employment to the offspring of its workers, and employees had the privilege of nominating a family member to join the company's workforce. However, following the company restructuring in the late 1990s, employees were no longer permitted to do so. Their offspring, who still aspired to work for the company, were compelled to take on temporary jobs without any insurance (Sanchez, 2012). In a rust belt company town in America, Lois Weis observes that, due to deindustrialisation, the steel industry significantly downsized its workforce and scaled down its hiring plans. Within the families that chose to stay in the town, it was typical for fathers to secure steady employment in the steel factory, while their highly educated children were compelled to take on jobs with lower salaries with temporary contracts (Weis, 2013).

In post-socialist Kazakhstan, Eeva Kesküla (2018) finds that the offspring of miners were working alongside their parents but receiving significantly lower pay. During the Soviet era, miners had enjoyed lifelong employment, and it had been easy for them to secure mining industry jobs for their family members. Nevertheless, following economic liberalisation, the majority of youth were only able to find temporary jobs. Kesküla contends that after the reform, the old generation of the working class could no longer reproduce itself (Kesküla, 2018). These ethnographies indicate that rather than viewing formal workers and informal workers as two antithetical classes, it is more useful to focus on the impacts of labour precarity and the complicated relationships between stably

employed workers and precarious workers in their work and lives. In the 9th Iron, it was common, comparable to the situations mentioned above, for the husband to have permanent or fixed-term agency contracts, while the wife had just oral arrangements with the compound management committee. While state workers in non-managerial positions were still allowed to recommend their children to work at the 9th Iron, they found great difficulties getting permanent or long-term positions for their children.

In summary, I agree with the three types of criticisms against Standing's (2011) argument, and my ethnography substantiates them. The various types of contracts that temporary workers had had an impact on their wages, social insurance, and career prospects. Likewise, their educational background, gender, and their relationship to managers all had different impacts on their working conditions. Workers experienced varying degrees of labour precarity as a result of these factors (see Chapter 4 and 5). Therefore, it is incorrect to assume that temporary workers constitute a unified class, as Standing (2011) argues. Furthermore, the distinctive political and economic context of China, along with its labour history, significantly shaped the precarity faced by Chinese workers.

While short-term contracts emerged following China's market reform, the institutional elements that gave rise to labour and structural precarity frequently originated from the socialist era (see Chapter 4, 5, and 9). For example, the household registration system, which prevented rural youth from accessing the urban social security system, had been established under socialism. Also, the inequalities between rural and urban areas had already emerged during the communist era (see Chapters 4, 5 and 6). Hence, attributing the emergence of precarity solely to neoliberalism fails to adequately account for the situation in China. Moreover, the complex relationships between permanent workers and temporary workers cannot be adequately understood by merely categorising them as two opposing groups; as mentioned above, state workers and temporary workers might be family members. Many state workers were also the masters of the temporary apprentices (see Chapter 7). Masters wanted to use Confucian morality to guide master-apprentice interactions and to develop long-term connections with their apprentices, despite the fact that this was difficult to achieve given the background of labour precarity. A considerable number of temporary workers also shared dormitories with state employees, so they interacted on a daily basis in work and life (see Chapter 2).

## 2.2 Precarity as a longstanding labour condition

In this section, I contend that prior to the widespread adoption of the term "precarity" in literature, scholars had already examined the phenomenon of unstable employment in capitalist societies using different theories such as “the reserve army of labour” (Marx, [1867]1930), “marginal mass” (De Oliveira, 1972), and “informal economy” (Hart, 1973). Although these writers did not use the phrase "precarity", they all focused on the experiences of individuals who had insecure and difficult lives (Marx, [1867]1930; De Oliveira, 1972; Hart, 1973).

Karl Marx defines people who were insecurely employed as “the reserve army of labour” in 19th-century capitalist society (Marx, [1867]1930: 589). He says that this “reserve army of labour” includes workers who were “not yet brought into or who are episodically pushed out of the wage relationship, and whose presence depresses wages and functions to discipline restive working classes” (ibid., 590). This group of people joined the labour force when market demand grew and the need for labour increased, but they were not required when the need for labour decreased, and therefore were in a state of limbo between employment and non-employment. Marx argues ([1867]1930) that the reserve army of labour was necessary for capitalism because capitalists could reduce or expand the size of the labour force in order to maintain profits. Marx sheds light on the lives of people who lived with no salary or a low wage and who constantly faced the fear of losing their livelihood. The concept of the reserve army of labour demonstrates a form of dispossession that placed the exploited in precarious situations and lessened their ability to exercise agency over their own futures. In current studies of precarity, the concept of the reserve army of labour continues to be vital. For example, Raúl Delgado Wise contends that precarious labour arrangements have become increasingly prevalent and have produced “a gigantic global reserve army of labour” (Wise, 2015: 25). According to Carl-Ulrik Schierup and Martin Bak Jørgensen, in order to maximise productivity and depress wages, precarity has been used as a means of “maintaining the reserve army of labour in labour” (Schierup and Jørgensen, 2017: 4).

In the 1960s, Francisco De Oliveira observed that in Latin America, there was a group of internal migrants living in makeshift shelters near major cities (De Oliveira, 1972). De Oliveira contends that, in contrast to the dominant segment of society, namely people who were employed full-time in

factories, people living in the slums sustained their livelihood through small-scale enterprises, temporary work, theft, or the rental of self-constructed dwellings, among other means. De Oliveira argues that these individuals who had insecure sources of income constituted the "marginal mass," a group that was excluded from mainstream capitalist society and depended on economic activities within the "marginal sector" for their survival (De Oliveira, 1972: 182). Nonetheless, De Oliveira believes that economic activities in the “marginal sector” also contributed to the broader economic system. Microenterprise, for instance, had the potential to facilitate the distribution of industrial commodities (De Oliveira, 1972).

In the 1970s, another term appeared, which was the concept of “informal economy” proposed by Keith Hart (Hart, 1973). Hart notes that in 1970s western Africa, there were many migrants influenced by rising prices, inadequate wages, and an increasing surplus in the urban labour market. Contrary to wages that were recorded in official statistics, the income that people earned from self-employment and various precarious jobs was not recorded in official data, despite being a significant source of income for migrants. For instance, workers with day shifts at one factory left early to work afternoon shifts at another factory. Employees would persuade the timekeeper to ignore their early absences in order to do this. In addition, migrants sold homemade beer or stolen goods to increase their resiliency against the risk of unemployment because, when they lost their factory positions, these small businesses assisted them in overcoming financial hardships (Hart, 1973).

Studies on the informal economy pay attention to the lives of people who lived outside of the formal capitalist system (Munck, 2013). Broadly speaking, scholars held two opposing viewpoints on the informal economy after Hart (1973) proposed the concept (de Soto, 1988; Portes et al., 1989; Sassen, 1993). On the one hand, Saskia Sassen (1993), for example, views the informal sector positively and believes it is the most entrepreneurial sector in capitalism. On the other hand, other researchers claim that the label "informal" homogenised poor people and obscured significant differences among them. According to Manuel Rosaldo, the label of informal results in the stigmatisation of workers who lacked basic labour protection (Rosaldo, 2021). In his subsequent writings, Hart argues that the definition of "the informal" implies a middle-class ideal and that employers may exploit the term to reduce the wages of temporary employees (Hart, 2005, 2009).

The aforementioned authors use their own theories to analyse the experiences of individuals who lived precarious lives (Marx, [1867]1930; De Oliveira, 1972; Hart, 1973). Standing (2011) intends to examine the same phenomenon. This section has demonstrated that precarity has been an enduring condition inside capitalist society rather than something that has just occurred, as Standing claims (2011). Therefore, the examination of precarity must be positioned within the framework of the prior endeavours of researchers (Marx, [1867]1930; De Oliveira, 1972; Hart, 1973).

## 2.3 Precarity as a labour control technique

Recently, scholars point out that labour precarity has become a method of labour control used by certain companies (Sanchez, 2012; Kesküla, 2012; Kalb, 2014; Rek-Woźniak and Woźniak, 2017; Rudnyckyj, 2018; Parry, 2022). In the context of labour precarity, such companies often hired workers through different short-term contracts, which led to the establishment of a labour hierarchy within the organisation.

Andrew Sanchez (2012) discovers that an Indian firm divided its workers into different categories, including apprentices, trainees, temporary workers, contract workers, and permanent workers. The company also recruited a large number of apprentices and extended the duration of apprenticeships. Ambitious young people who wanted permanent employment would have to begin their careers as trainees without any basic labour protections. Due to the stringent labour hierarchy, young people often waited for years before being able to sign a formal contract with the company. Sanchez contends that labour precarity restricted young individuals to the bottom of the company's labour hierarchy, transforming young precarious workers into the "efficient motors of flexible accumulation" (Sanchez, 2012).

Daromir Rudnyckyj argues that the Indonesian steel plant he studied established a dual labour system consisting of a substantial informal labour sector and a tiny group of permanent staff members (Rudnyckyj, 2018). Temporary workers had to work long hours in order to find permanent employment. Managers routinely cautioned workers about the possibility of job loss. Employees were required to attend training sessions, during which they were instructed to see potential dismissals as tests given to them by Allah. The company's executives said that virtuous people should not be afraid of such tests. Rudnyckyj’s ethnography illustrates how the corporation used labour precarity in combination with religion to develop an obedient workforce (Rudnyckyj, 2018).

Labour precarity rose in post-socialist nations alongside the market liberalisation in these countries. Magdalena Rek-Woźniak and Wojciech Woźniak contend that neoliberal elites in Poland during the market reform attributed the economic collapse to socialism's legacies, namely inefficiency (Rek-Woźniak and Woźniak, 2017). Unemployment, according to the elites, was a necessary sacrifice for the establishment of a competitive labour market. Massive worker layoffs were justified as a necessary step towards economic liberation. Reform leaders argued that to fulfil the needs of the labour market, workers should rely on their own ability or get themselves retrained to fit the new demands of the labour market (Rek-Woźniak and Woźniak, 2017). Don Kalb (2014) argues that with the market liberation in Poland, a new labour hierarchy emerged on the shop floor. The number of overseers doubled, the pay gap between managers and line workers significantly increased (Kalb, 2014; also see Kesküla (2012) and Chapter 9) and workers experienced severe stress as a result of labour precarity (Kalb, 2014).

As demonstrated above, many companies in different geographical locations nowadays keep a small number of permanent employees who are paid more and have more security in order to incentivise temporary workers to work harder in the hopes of being hired on as permanent workers in the future (Sanchez, 2012; Kesküla, 2012; Kalb, 2014; Lazar, 2017; Rudnyckyj, 2018; Parry, 2022). To maintain staff obedience in the face of labour precarity, such companies develop labour hierarchies that consist of different types of workers. The labour hierarchy in the 9th Iron was similar to the cases above, but as I will demonstrate in Chapters 4 and 5, the labour control techniques in the 9th Iron also included unique elements inherited from the Maoist era.

# 3. Different forms of precarity in everyday lives

The term "precarity" has no longer only been used to refer to unstable work situations. Scholars have extended its application to include a variety of life circumstances (see Chapter 1; Allison, 2012; Molé, 2012; Biglia and Mart, 2012; Skoggard, 2015; Cangià, 2018; Trevisani, 2021). Two distinct viewpoints among researchers exist on the generalisation of the term "precarity." Scholars contend that the study of precarity needs to be broader than the discussion about labour precarity, encompassing other types of vulnerability in individuals' lives (Banki, 2013; Ettlinger, 2007; Hundle, 2012; Tsing, 2015; Han, 2018). Conversely, other researchers contend that precarity should

not be synonymous with vulnerability or instability, given the term's analytical purchase is rooted in the examination of labour conditions (Neilson and Rossiter, 2008; Millar, 2017; Alberti, Bessa, and Umney, 2018). Considering the aforementioned theoretical debates, I argue that we should take into consideration individuals' subjective experiences of precarity while not overlooking the analysis of specific labour conditions. I propose a fourfold model that prioritises examining the ways in which different types of precarity intersect. Moreover, I examine ethical practices in the context of precarity, particularly the ways in which individuals resolve ethical dilemmas in their daily lives.

This section begins with elucidating the different viewpoints of researchers regarding the broadening of the application of the term "precarity." Next, I present a description of Butler's (2004, 2009, 2010) theory. I contend that precarity appears in several forms, and these different forms frequently coexist. I go into detail about suspension (*xuanfu*), a specific type of precarity that has received academic attention in China, at the end of this section. Researchers on xuanfu have written about people's subjective experiences of precarity, but the connection between precarious employment and people's subjective experiences of precarity has received less attention (Driessen, 2021; Fengjiang, 2021; Ou, 2021; Sier, 2021; van der Meulen, 2021; Xiang, 2021; Zhan, 2021; Richaud, 2020, 2021, 2022; Bao, 2022; Yang, Round and Bao, 2022). In contrast, the connection between labour precarity and other forms of precarity is the primary focus of my research.

## 3.1 precarity: life experiences, or a labour condition?

In recent years, scholars have broadened the application of the term "precarity" to cover all types of life experiences that involve insecurity (Tsing, 2015; Han, 2018; Strümpell, 2018). For instance, Tsing provides a broad definition of precarity, defining it as "life without the promise of stability(Tsing, 2015: 2). Tsing considers precarity an "earth-wide condition," as all human beings face the vulnerability of the ecological system (Tsing, 2015: 20). She asserts that all humans encounter precarity to some extent (Tsing, 2015).

Clara Han (2018) contends that anthropologists ought to avoid concentrating on the creation of overarching concepts or excessively broad theories. Han contends that the concept of precarity tried to supplant previous conceptions such as the "reserve army of labour" (Marx, [1867]1930) or the "informal economy" (Hart, 1973), which fundamentally regard people as a group to be managed. Anthropology, instead, should focus on examining the "texture of vulnerability" and exploring the

many manifestations of vulnerability and politics that have already emerged at the field site (Han, 2018). Han intends to broaden the scope of application of the concept of precarity so that it is not limited to the descriptions of labour conditions alone. Christian Strümpell similarly contends that multiple kinds of precarity may accumulate in people's lives. Consequently, it is mistaken to prioritise the precarity of work and employment while disregarding other forms of precarity, such as the precarity of housing (Strümpell, 2018).

Conversely, other scholars contend that the examination of precarity should not overlook the significance of scrutinising employment conditions (Millar, 2017; Alberti, Bessa, and Umney, 2018). Kathleen M. Millar argues against conflating precarity with vulnerability or insecurity (Millar, 2017). According to Millar (2017), the analytical capacity for precarity originates from the examination of specific labour conditions. Following Karl Marx (1968), Millar argues (2017) that labour precarity is not an exception to capitalism but a necessary condition for the creation of capital. When workers sell their labour in the market for a living, they inevitably face the possibility of unemployment, and thus, labour precarity is an inherent condition of labouring (Millar, 2017). Similar to Millar (2017), Brett Neilson and Ned Rossiter argue against separating precarity and the analysis of labour. They contend that although there has been a growing debate on precarity within academia, the phrase has gradually lost its capacity to inspire political movements (Neilson and Rossiter, 2008). Similarly, Gabriella Alberti, Loulia Bessa, and Charles Umney (2018) contend that the term precarity loses its political effectiveness due to its overuse and generalisation. Alberti, Bessa, and Umney claim that the all-encompassing notion of precarity "removes the potential agency of workers from class struggle by rendering them disempowered victims of the vagaries of capital" (Alberti, Bessa, and Umney, 2018: 448).

This thesis analyses the political-economic structure and labour system, but it also takes into account the ways in which these institutional factors influence ethical practices, subjective experiences, and perceptions. Just as Judith Butler's (2004, 2009, 2010) separation between precariousness and precarity suggests (see Chapter 1), we should comprehend the emergence of precarity within multiple kinds of inequalities and analyse the complex consequences that precarity causes for different social groups.

## 3.2 suspension: a particular form of precarity in China

In this section, I discuss a particular form of precarity in China that has been discussed under the term “suspension” (*xuanfu*) (Driessen, 2021; Fengjiang, 2021; Ou, 2021; Sier, 2021; van der Meulen, 2021; Xiang, 2021; Zhan, 2021; Bao, 2022; Richaud, 2022). Xuanfu literally translates to hanging and floating. Initially, Xiang Biao uses the term to describe the lives of rural-to-urban migrants9 in China (Xiang, 2020). According to Xiang, suspension indicates a state of being in which "people move frequently, conduct intensive labour, and pause routine life—in order to benefit fast and then quickly escape. Suspended people are dissatisfied with their current circumstances, but they cannot (or do not intend to) change the status quo.” The social phenomenon of suspension reflects the current living situation of the Chinese working class, which is full of insecurity and anxiety. This living situation is precisely caused by the intersection of four types of precarity. The concept of suspension has inspired other researchers to pay attention to Chinese people's subjective experiences of precarity (Zhan, 2021; Bao, 2022; Richaud, 2022). Later, researchers use the term suspension to refer to different social groups’ experiences of insecurity, ranging from resettled former farmers (Zhan, 2021) to hostesses in nightclubs (Fengjiang, 2021).

Xiang contends that the government’s inability to provide social security and effectively execute policies is a contributing factor to the widespread phenomenon of suspension (Xiang, 2020). The central state in China seeks to attain both political dominance and economic growth. The local states' goals fluctuate between the goals of control, economic growth, and welfare. There are frequently clashes between the policies of the central government and local governments. Given the circumstances, individuals have to develop different plans for their future. For instance, according to Tzu-Chi Ou's (2021) research, houses on the outskirts of Beijing were subjected to a constant cycle of demolition, reconstruction, and demolition. This phenomenon occurred due to the shifting policies of the Beijing government about rural-to-urban migrants, which alternated between eviction, acceptance, and eviction in order to align with different political or economic goals. Consequently, migrants were compelled to relocate periodically. Landlords were required to demolish properties and subsequently rebuild them. Local officials had to sometimes turn a blind eye and, at other times, enforce evictions (Ou, 2021). Migrants often faced the challenge of navigating through contradicting and inconsistent regulations made by different levels of

9 Rural-to-urban migrants are also called the floating population in literature (Zhang, 2001).

government, which compelled them to constantly alter their plans for the future. Migrants were constantly worried about the possibility of being homeless.

Moreover, the phenomenon of suspension is associated with problems of social security and welfare. The central government has attempted to develop a basic social security system since the 2000s, which includes the basic pension insurance scheme and medical insurance. However, the system has never been well-established. Currently, the provision of welfare remains insufficient for meeting people's fundamental needs for healthcare, education, and housing. Most people choose to work overtime and save in order to provide a safety net for themselves and their families (Xiang, 2017).

Xiang (2021) points out that migrant labourers were frequently in a situation of earning fast and quickly escaping. One of Xiang's interlocutors, a female transnational migrant worker, described her life in the country where she worked as "living in prison" (Xiang, 2021:233). Miriam Driessen notices that Chinese engineers and workers working in Africa tolerated high-intensity work and a life devoid of social activities in order to save money (Driessen, 2021). People postponed their needs for leisure and sociality in order to save enough money to marry and have children (Driessen, 2021). Lisa Rofel describes Chinese garment workers' perception of present and future relationships in this way: "affective engagement with a possible future in which one could have another mode of being is what pulls migrant workers through the present." (Rofel, 2019:154). People in suspension often held dreams about their lives in the far future. The desire to realise their dreams motivated workers to put up with the existing unsafe and precarious jobs.

Nevertheless, according to ethnographic studies conducted in China, only a small group of people realised their dreams, and the majority had their dreams dashed (Driessen, 2021; Fengjiang, 2021; Sier, 2021; van der Meulen, 2021; Zhan, 2021). Willy Sier examines the challenging circumstances faced by highly educated young people who migrated from rural to urban areas (Sier, 2021). The explosive expansion of higher education and the surge in temporary employment increased the inequalities faced by graduates coming from rural backgrounds. Highly educated migrant young people wanted to enhance their social standing by becoming white-collar workers, such as sales workers. However, graduates soon found that their income was less than that of the first generation of migrant workers (i.e., their parents) and their less educated peers who conducted manual labour. These highly educated migrants expressed concerns about their failure to integrate into any social

groups. When returning to their village during New Year festivals, highly educated migrants discovered that they earned less than their peers who engaged in manual labour in cities, which caused them embarrassment. Additionally, when staying in cities, they experienced feelings of isolation and exclusion from their colleagues who came from urban backgrounds and had better social capital. Similar to the experiences of young temporary workers in the 9th Iron, there was a stark contrast between the precarity that workers from rural backgrounds experienced and their desire to change their lives through education (see Chapter 8). Workers were anxious and unsettled because they believed they were competing with their colleagues and needed to constantly enhance their talent (suzhi) in order to secure employment.

Researchers who study suspension in China outline a distinct form of precarity (Driessen, 2021; Fengjiang, 2021; Ou, 2021; Sier, 2021; van der Meulen, 2021; Xiang, 2021; Zhan, 2021; Bao, 2022; Richaud, 2022). The distinctive characteristic of this kind of precarity is that individuals who are experiencing suspension typically dream of the far future and think that in order to fulfil their ambitions, they must put their other needs—like relaxing and interacting with others—on hold and work incredibly hard. Zhan Yang argues that people in suspension "continue to orient their lives towards an elusive future rather than striving to transform the here and now" (Zhan, 2021: 347). I have observed a comparable situation among temporary employees in the 9th Iron (see Chapter 6 and 8). However, despite the fact that scholars studying suspension have discussed individuals' subjective experiences of insecurity, their focus has been limited to a certain form of precarity. Furthermore, these works lack sufficient focus on the intersection between precarious employment and people's subjective experiences of precarity. By contrast, I demonstrate several kinds of precarious experiences and uncover the connection between labour precarity and other forms of precarity.

# 4. Everyday ethics of precarity

The ethics of precarity refers to the everyday ethics that people encounter in precarious situations. In this section, I review literature that considers how the intersection of various types of precarity gives rise to ethical dilemmas that people face on a daily basis, as well as the diverse ways in which people engage in ethical reflection and practices (Matos, 2010, 2019; Das, 2012; Millar, 2014; Rajković, 2018; Santos et al., 2021). I begin by elucidating Foucault's notion of "problematization"

and Zigon's concept of "moral breakdown," as these two concepts inspire me to be attentive to moral dilemmas in people's lives. Subsequently, I examine two cases that exemplify how labour precarity weakened existing moral frameworks and gave rise to moral dilemmas in different geographical regions (Matos, 2010, 2019; Santos et al., 2021). These two cases do not specifically address the relationship between precarity and ethics. However, their ethnographies inspire me to investigate the impacts of precarity on people's ethical lives and the consequences that occur when precarity disrupts established moral frameworks. I argue that precarity increases the frictions between different moral frameworks, which leads to moments during which people must step back and contemplate preexisting moral frameworks. Next, I examine the 'ordinary ethics' approach, which explores how individuals resolve ethical dilemmas in their everyday lives (Lambek, 2010; Laidlaw, 2002, 2014; Das, 2012; Fassin, 2012). The literature shows that precarity might cause experiences of demoralisation (Rajković, 2018), but some people still endeavour to lead ethical lives (Muehlebach, 2011; Millar, 2014; Zhang, 2020; Yang, 2021; Fengjiang, 2021). Although some of these articles do not prioritise ethics in their discussion, they have inspired me to examine the influences of precarity on ethics (Muehlebach, 2011; Millar, 2014; Rajković, 2018; Zhang, 2020; Zhou, 2022).

## 4.1 problematization: when precarity increases ethical dilemmas and challenges pre-existing moral frameworks

This section illustrates that precarity may undermine existing moral frameworks and give rise to moral dilemmas in everyday life. I contend that precarity accentuates the tensions among diverse moral frameworks or undermines established moral frameworks, leading to situations where the ethical subject is compelled to contemplate pre-existing moral principles (see Chapter 7).

These moments of ethical reflection bear a resemblance to what Foucault refers to as "problematization" (Foucault, 1986, 2003, 2019). Foucault defines problematization as "the transformation of a group of obstacles and difficulties into problems to which diverse solutions will attempt to produce a response" (Foucault, 1986: 112-114). Foucault argues that people can address problematization through a range of practices, encompassing both discursive and non-discursive practices as well as practices of the self (Stone, 2011, 2012). Practices of the self entail ethical introspection and the pursuit of knowledge, leading to a continuous process of self-constitution

(Taylor, 2014). "Problematization" refers to the moments in people's lives when they take a minute to pause, ponder, and provide solutions to ethical dilemmas (Foucault, 1986: 116).

Jarrett Zigon contends that it is important to distinguish morality from ethics (Zigon, 2020). Zigon argues that morality is “a kind of habitus or an unreflective and unreflexive disposition of everyday social life” (Zigon, 2020: 17). On the other hand, ethics refers to the deliberate actions taken to work on the self, resulting in the resolution of ethical dilemmas. Zigon proposes the term "moral breakdown" to refer to moments where individuals or collectives are compelled to deviate from their habitual and unrelfective everyday routines in order to respond to moral dilemmas (Zigon, 2007). An important lesson we may get from Foucault's concept of "problematization" (1986) and Zigon's notion of "moral breakdown" (2007, 2020) is the necessity of closely observing the ethical practices and deliberations that people undertake when confronted with ethical dilemmas, which occur frequently during times of precarity.

Nevertheless, I disagree with Zigon's proposition (Zigon, 2007, 2009, 2020) to separate moral conceptions from ethical tactics. As James Faubion says, the routinised, homeostatic moral aspect and the reflective, dynamic moral dimension do not contradict one another but instead reinforce each other (Faubion, 2001, 2010, 2011). Distinguishing morality from ethics can be exceedingly challenging in reality. Individuals experiencing precarity may encounter moments of problematization in their everyday lives. Individuals often encounter moral dilemmas that require their observation, contemplation, and innovation in order to surmount a given quandary. These ethical reflections and actions are not dramatic acts or grand slogans, but, as Lambek says, "tacit" acts that "happen without calling undue attention" to themselves (Lambek, 2010: 2). Hans Steinmüller differentiates between morality, which refers to moral conventions and frameworks, and ethics, which involves stepping back and reflecting on moral frameworks—the reflection of morality (Steinmüller, 2012, 2013). I do not intend to follow him (2012, 2013) and further discuss the differences between ethics and morality here. In reality, morality and ethics are challenging to distinguish (Lambek, 2010; Fassin, 2012). Instead, I will focus on how precarity influences people's ethical language and practices. I will demonstrate how people reintroduce morality back into their everyday labour, intimacy, and social lives by using deliberate moral language and engaging in reflective ethical actions when precarity has increased moral conflicts and tensions in their lives.

As my ethnography shows, workers' everyday ethical actions and speeches existed in their quotidian lives (see Chapter 7). Also, workers utilised pre-existing moral concepts and beliefs to respond to diverse interacting situations. When confronted with moral dilemmas, workers strategically drew on elements from different coexisting moral frameworks and pieced them together in order to create ethical solutions, during which an ethics of precarity emerged.

Now, I examine two ethnographies that have inspired me to investigate the influence of precarity on morality. These two ethnographies demonstrate how precarity challenges moral frameworks and causes the subsequent ethical dilemmas in individuals' lives (Matos, 2010, 2019; Santos et al., 2021).

Patricia Matos examines precarity in relation to Portugal's history (Matos, 2010, 2019). In Portugal, the development strategy promoted under the dictatorship of Estado Novo (1926-1974) created a dual society, with a minority of state workers on low wages and a majority of impoverished farmers. During this time, the developmental discourse portrayed the nation of Portugal as a naturally rural and impoverished nation, alongside a vision of the future modernisation of Portugal. The working class during this time held a progressive vision of the future, and they believed that steady employment and education could bring their next generation upward social mobility. A moral framework developed among the Portuguese working class, which included tolerating the current suffering, sacrificing oneself, and deferring the hope for a better life to the next generation[10] (see Chapter 8). Following the end of the dictatorship, the new constitution of the Portuguese Republic was influenced by socialism, and various stable job opportunities emerged in the 1970s and 1980s under strong state intervention. With the increase in stable employment, the working class generally held a positive attitude about the future. The moral framework that had emerged during the Estate Novo period was passed on and continued by the generation of state workers in the 1970s and 1980s. During this period, workers believed that their children would have a great future. However, subsequent liberal reforms rendered such intergenerational expectations illusory. After entering the European Economic Community in 1986, the Portuguese state implemented liberation reforms that aligned its economy with global capitalism. With the development of flexible capitalism and recent

[10] A similar moral framework existed in the Soviet Union. Devoting one's life to the building of communism was considered honourable and respectable, as it was believed by many that the sacrifice at the moment could lead to improved lives for future generations of Soviet people (Bartov, 1989; Putinaitė, 2008).

austerity schemes, temporary labour use has become prevalent, whereas social welfare has decreased. This leads to a huge gap between reality and young people's aspirations.

Although Matos focuses her analysis on the intergenerational impact of precaritisation (Matos, 2010, 2019), I find that her work can be read in this way: labour precarity has also challenged the preexisting moral framework. In Portugal, people find that enduring the suffering of the present can no longer guarantee them a bright future. In the past, workers held the belief that, through hard work, they could secure a wage sufficient to support their families. By providing a good life for families, the worker became a moral person (Matos, 2010,2019). However, nowadays, Portuguese young people who have completed their high education cannot secure stable employment (Matos, 2010, 2019). Not only do young workers encounter challenges in supporting their families and undertaking the responsibility of nurturing future generations, but they also occasionally require assistance from their parents. This transformation renders pre-existing moral frameworks inadequate for assessing the lives of the young generation. People must reconsider what constitutes ethics. As one of Matos's interlocutors notes, people cannot rely on moral concepts from the past when contemplating the lives of young people, given that unemployment has now become pervasive. Matos' (2010, 2019) research indicates that an increase in labour precarity can potentially result in the disintegration of an existing moral framework. Similarly, I observed that precarity in the 9th Iron could result in the moral frameworks of Confucianism and socialism being called into question, forcing workers to reconsider their moral values (see Chapter 7).

Goncalo Santos et al., on the other hand, examine instances in which labour precarity made it difficult for individuals in China to adhere to the moral requirements of Confucian philosophy (Santos et al., 2021). In contrast to the industrial workers I focus on, Santos et al. (2021) studied IT workers and found that IT workers worked overtime every day. IT workers believed that rejecting their managers' request to work more shifts would put their employment at risk. Working overtime, according to Santos et al. (2021), became a strategy for avoiding unemployment in the context of labour precarity. Hua, an IT developer, had worked in Shenzhen for nearly 10 years before deciding to return to his hometown because he could not afford flats in Shenzhen and did not have time for his family. Hua said, "I left Shenzhen simply because I couldn't develop a sense of family stability (*anjia*) or professional stability (*liye*)" (Santos et al., 2021:141). Santos et al. notice that despite having a higher wage than his colleagues (Hua's economic situation was significantly superior to that of most of my interlocutors), Hua could not find a sense of security in Shenzhen. Santos et al.

(2021) argue that in the Chinese value system, the idea of work as individual achievement cannot be separated from the idea of work as a pursuit of meaningful social relationships including family and social responsibility. Santos et al. argue in contrast with the ideology of "personal freedom", which advocates the elimination of strains, what Hua pursued was "social freedom", which involved acknowledging the interdependency of human beings and embracing social responsibilities (Santos et al., 2021: 143).

While Santos et al. (2021) focuses on workers' understanding of freedom, I note the ethical dilemmas that workers encountered under labour precarity. In Hua's situation, he was faced with the decision of prioritising either familial stability (*anjia*) or professional stability (*anjia*), both of which held equal significance in accordance with Confucian morality (Santos et al., 2021). Confucius emphasised the importance of children staying close to their parents during their parents' lifetimes (Confucius, 1956). Although the high rate of migration in contemporary society makes the Confucian standard impossible to meet, individual responsibility for family care remains an important aspect of Chinese people's moral lives (see Chapter 8). In the context of labour precarity, Hua encountered an ethical dilemma: if he chose not to work overtime, he would lose his job and could not provide for his family; however, if he chose to work overtime, he would not be able to fulfil his moral obligations to his parents (Santos et al., 2021). As I will demonstrate in Chapter 5 and 7, labour precarity increased ethical dilemmas, causing my interlocutors to struggle with fulfilling different moral responsibilities in everyday life.

## 4.2 ordinary ethics approach and ethical practices in the face of precarity

In Chapter 5 to 9, I will demonstrate that people constantly look for ways to resolve ethical dilemmas in their day-to-day lives. The ordinary ethics approach enlightens my analysis of workers' ethical lives (Lambek, 2010; Laidlaw, 2002, 2013, 2017; Das, 2012; Fassin, 2012). Different ethnographies indicate that while people may experience the agony of demoralisation when faced with precarity (Rajković, 2018), they may also endeavour to bring ethics back into their lives (Muehlebach, 2011; Millar, 2014; Zhang, 2020; Yang, 2021; Fengjiang, 2021).

In contrast with Kant's model, which emphasises rational reasoning while ignoring practical aspects of ethics, authors of ordinary ethics uphold an action-centred approach (Lambek, 2010; Laidlaw, 2002, 2013, 2014; Das, 2012; Fassin, 2012) that I find helpful. According to Michael Lambek, the

Aristotelian model of ethics is based on the distinction of human activities including "making (creation, poiesis), doing (action, praxis), and thinking (contemplation, theora)" (Lambek, 2010: 14). The practices-centred approach of ethics also influenced Michel Foucault, as in his late work he concentrates on practices of self-fashioning and the care of the self, which he names "technologies of the self" (Foucault et al., 1988; Foucault, 2005). This approach to ethics also influences Hannah Arendt, as she calls attention to "the act of everyday care" (Arendt, [1958]1998). Inspired by the above authors, Lambek further argues that because of consciousness, socialisation and sociality, and the use of language by human beings, "we are fundamentally ethical" (Lambek, 2010: i). Therefore, it is useful for anthropologists to explore "whether and how ordinary ethical sensibilities are coarsened or heightened with respect to broad social forces" such as social inequalities (Lambek, 2010: 3).

The approach of ordinary ethics is different from a Durkheimian approach that focuses on the morality of social facts and therefore leaves little room for freedom, action, and creativity. It also differs from the Boasian relativist approach, which is concerned with specific cultural values established by a homogeneous community, leaving little possibility for internal cultural conflicts. As Lambek argues (2010), focusing on the opposition between relativist and antirelativist, or particularism to universalism, is not beneficial. In contrast, anthropologists shall "examine the juxtaposition of practices and the exercise of judging among incommensurable goods in 'the art of living.'" (Lambek, 2010: 23).

Veena Das adds to Lambek's (2010) approach by introducing the concept of habits into the study of ethics (Das, 2012). Veena Das calls for attention to the cultivation of everyday moral sensibility in "habitual acts" to see "how forms of life grow particular dispositions" (Das, 2012: 136-145). Inspired by the experiences of Iranian women who lived through wars, she argues that ethics and morality in ordinary life "are more like threads woven into the weave of life rather than notions that stand out and call attention to themselves" through dramatic events (ibid., 134). Anthropology research shall pay attention to small ethical acts that allow life to be "knitted together, pair by pair" (Das, 2012:139).

The practice-centred approach to ethics inevitably speaks to matters of freedom. According to James Laidlaw (2002, 2013), structural agency can limit our understanding of human action, whereas freedom can enrich it. He quotes Foucault (Laidlaw, 2002: 324): "Ethics is the conscious

(réfléchie) practice of freedom……the considered form that freedom takes when it is informed by reflection" (Foucault, [1984]2000:284). Laidlaw comments that it is the "exercising of freedom" instead of achieving it that Foucault is looking for (Laidlaw, 2002:327). But a practices-centred approach of ethics does not imply that ethical choices are generated out of thin air. Freedom is the ability to reflect on and fashion oneself in a particular social-historical context. Therefore, the exercise of ethical freedom and practices of self-fashioning involves matters of "ideals, values, models, practices, relationships and institutions" in different social contexts, and cultural conditions, which anthropologists should attune to (Laidlaw, 2002). I follow Lambek (2010), Das (2012), and Laidlaw (2002) by demonstrating how labour precarity affects the ethical judgement, deliberations, and practices of my interlocutors.

The articles that I discuss below (Muehlebach, 2011; Millar, 2014; Rajković; Zhang, 2020; Yang, 2021; Fengjiang, 2021) illuminate the ethical lives of those experiencing precarity. On the one hand, Ivan Rajković (2018) argues that precarity might elicit experiences of moral decline. On the other hand, I find that some ethnographies demonstrate the range of ethical actions people take when faced with precarity. Nevertheless, these authors fail to make the connection between precarity and ethics explicit to readers (Muehlebach, 2011; Millar, 2014; Zhang, 2020; Yang, 2021; Fengjiang, 2021). Instead, I propose the concept of the ethics of precarity to examine people's ethical lives in the context of precarity.

Rajković argues that precarity could lead to experiences of demoralisation (Rajković, 2018). Inspired by Laidlaw's (2002) separation of structural agency and reflective freedom, Ivan Rajković (2018) argues there are two types of ethical situations that people in precarity may face. On the one hand, there are experiences of lack of agency. They may resist changes because of dispossession (Scott, 1977), but they still have ethical pursuits in life (Stewart, 1998). On the other hand, precarity can be experienced as a lack of freedom, a moral stuckedness, because people are constrained by the "dominant technologies of security" (Rajković, 2018). In Rajković's (2018) ethnography, permanent workers in a state-owned plant in post-socialist Serbia were concerned that the factory might close down at some point in the future, but they were unable to leave since they could not find other employment. Therefore, they were stuck in the factory. The lack of freedom led to the experience of demoralisation. Workers were unsatisfied with their incapability and unfreedom at the present, but they still dreamed about a life of freedom that might be achieved one day, or they had nostalgia about the freedom they had enjoyed in the past. Rajković finds that workers' ethical

pursuit was not something to be achieved in the near future, nor with social relationships nearby. This vision of the future entailed ethical pursuit, but it was fragile and could hardly be achieved by their daily actions.

While Rajković (2018) focuses on the experiences of unfreedom and demoralisation in precarious lives, other authors pay attention to the efforts that people made in order to live ethically (Muehlebach, 2011; Millar, 2014; Zhang, 2020; Yang, 2021; Fengjiang, 2021). Kathleen M. Millar (2014) finds that Brazilian waste workers chose to become self-employed waste workers despite the availability of alternative full-time employment opportunities. This was due to the fact that the waste recycling business provided workers with the opportunity to manage their schedules flexibly and fulfil their moral obligation to care for their families. Amidst the backdrop of drug trafficking, violence, and pervasive crime concerns in Brazil, there was a prevailing belief that parents, particularly mothers, should accompany their adolescent children in order to protect them from accidents and prevent them from engaging in criminal activities. Consequently, mothers in low-income families chose to work as garbage workers in order to fulfil their moral obligation (Millar, 2014). While Millar (2014) focuses on the dynamics of freedom and unfreedom that labour precarity might lead to, I suggest we can read this phenomenon in this way: Workers desired full-time employment because they believed that performing wage labour signified one's moral uprightness as a valuable member of society. However, wage labour also hindered workers from fulfilling their moral obligation of providing care to their children. The ethical dilemma presented in Millar's (2014) case study illustrates the impact of precarity on people's moral lives.

Zhang Xia shows a type of ethical practice that people make with reference to preexisting moral frameworks (Zhang, 2020). Zhang finds that illegal porters in the streets and markets of southwest China formed porters' cooperatives, which was inspired by the Maoist model of labour cooperatives (specifically, the people's communes in the rural region from 1958 to 1976) and the Maoist spirit of mutual assistance among all people. Although the porters' cooperatives were illegal, porters could seek support from other members of the cooperatives when they were in need. Zhang’s (2020) case suggests that when faced with precarity, people might find inspiration from the moral principles established in the past, a phenomenon that I also observed among the older generation workers of the 9th Iron (see Chapter 6 and 9).

Andrea Muehlebach finds that unemployed people in Italy engaged in volunteer work as a way to restore their connections with society (Muehlebach, 2011). Muehlebach contends that in the Fordist era, wage labour had served as a crucial way for workers to gain social recognition and a sense of community solidarity. However, following the 1990s, wage labour declined. These unemployed workers changed from a state of being valuable members of society to a state where they seemed to be marginalised by society. Through participation in voluntary activities, these individuals had the opportunity to redefine their role as valuable contributors to society and others, therefore restoring their sense of self-worth and esteem (Muehlebach, 2011). Muehlebach's ethnography demonstrates the endeavours individuals undertook to become good members of society. These efforts were intrinsically ethical. By making these efforts, people sought the virtues of "self-constituting and self-responsible" and "to that extent free" (Rajković, 2018:148–9). Muehlebach (2011) inspires me to zero in on the ethical endeavours people undertook in response to precarity (see Chapter 7, 8, and 9).

Sometimes, precarity requires people to reconsider their understanding of morality or postpone their moral judgements in order to serve a different moral imperative. Wei Yang (2021) shows how Chinese female transnational migrant workers in Singapore formed temporary couples with male migrant workers, despite the fact that both of them were married and had families in China. The temporary couples shared apartments that the men rented and for which they paid the expenses. Women formed these relationships with the purpose of saving and remitting more money to their family members in China. Temporary couples acknowledged that their relationships might be perceived as morally questionable by outsiders. However, these relationships allowed women to accumulate more savings in the face of precarious livelihoods while providing temporary relief from loneliness for men. However, these relationships also caused women to rethink and redefine what was moral and what was not. Women understood that their actions might appear immoral in the eyes of others, but they decided to stop thinking about their problems in order to fulfil the more important moral responsibilities in their eyes: to save as much money as possible in order to pay for their children's education (Yang, 2021).

This process of postponing moral reflections was unquestionably labourious and caused internal suffering; therefore, Jiazhi Fengjiang, in her study of another setting in China (2021), defines the behaviour of individuals with precarious lives who have to postpone moral reflection as ethical labour. Fengjiang studies hostesses in Chinese nightclubs who chose to temporarily engage in an

occupation that was despised by society in order to provide a dignified future for their families. Fengjiang notices that these waitresses made "the conscious effort of deferring one's ethical judgement and reflections in order to avoid irreconcilable ethical conflicts between one's present activities and long-term goals" (Fengjiang, 2021: 307). However, this type of ethical labour also caused women to use alcohol to numb themselves, and their excessive drinking made it impossible for them to find jobs other than nightclub waitresses. My ethnography focuses on industrial workers whose lives were vastly distinct from those of the workers in these two cases; however, they similarly struggled to establish moral relationships in their lives. As I show, workers referred strategically to the moral discourses of Confucian ethics and socialist ideology in their daily interactions with co-workers (see Chapter 7) thus revealing the diverse forms of ethical labour that people perform.

# 5. Conclusion

This chapter provides both an overview of the ongoing theoretical discussions around the topic of precarity and a selective review of scholarly work on ethics that has inspired me to propose the ethics of precarity. I contend that precarious employment is not a recent occurrence that began with the rise of neoliberalism, and the examination of precarity must be contextualised within the framework of previous scholarly efforts (Marx, [1867]1930; De Oliveira, 1972; Hart, 1973; Harvey, 1987; Bourdieu, 1999). Recent research has demonstrated that labour precarity has been utilised by companies as a means of labour control to accumulate capital (Sanchez, 2012; Kesküla, 2012; Kalb, 2014; Rek-Woźniak and Woźniak, 2017; Rudnyckyj, 2018; Parry, 2020). Additionally, other scholars have broadened the scope of the term "precarity" to encompass various forms of insecurity in people's lives (Tsing, 2015; Han, 2018; Strümpell, 2018). However, these studies have given little consideration to the connection between labour precarity and other types of precarity. By contrast, I analyse how various types of insecurity overlap in the lives of the people I am studying. In addition, I also focus on the connection between precarity and ethics, a subject that has received little scholarly attention. My thesis synthesises the topics of precarity and ethics and elucidates the connections between precarity and ethics.

# Chapter 4 China’s Labour History and Labour Hierarchy on the Ganshen Railway Project

## 1. Introduction

This chapter introduces first, China’s labour history and then the current labour hierarchy in the 9th Iron. The first part of this chapter (Sections 2–4) provides a sociological and historical context for state-labour relations and the changes in moralities in China throughout its various historical phases, from the pre-imperial period to contemporary late-socialist society. I argue that China’s labour history and political and economic structure create a unique structural precarity. This structural precarity intersects with the labour precarity caused by the labour hierarchy in the 9th Iron, causing workers of different categories to endure varying degrees of precarity. I concentrate on relationships between the state, capital, and labour in pre-socialist, socialist, and late-socialist China. Current labour relations are moulded and influenced by local and national cosmological, moral, and political histories. My interlocutors’ (state employees, temporary workers, and migrant labourers) life trajectories are intertwined with the Chinese state’s history. Workers do not enter the workplace as people with no history; they wear the marks and memories of their own past, as well as those of the working class's longer past. Histories shape workers’ experiences and perceptions of precarity.

It is also essential to understand that the historical periods that I introduce in this chapter are neither clear-cut nor neatly sequential. Thus, traditional (primarily Confucian ethics in my ethnography) morality, socialist morality, and the individualist morality of the market reform era frequently co-exist in people's lives, exerting varying influences on different groups of workers. Similarly, at my field site, different labour management and relationship practices and innovations co-exist. Moral frameworks and labour practices together influence various types of precarity and how they are experienced.

In Section 2, I give a brief history of the pre-imperial and imperial eras in China, during which the creation and developments of Confucian philosophy took place. Then in Section 3, I discuss the development of socialist morality as well as the socialist framework for state-worker interaction before elucidating the relationship between the state and workers in the late socialist era, as well as the various institutional factors that have contributed to the current precarious conditions experienced by contemporary workers.

In the second part of this chapter (Section 5), I will present different kinds of contracts the 9th Iron workers had with the 9th Iron. As I shall demonstrate, the categorisation of workers into permanent and temporary positions has established a labour hierarchy inside the 9th Iron with varying degrees of precarity among different workers.

# 2. From pre-imperial (1600 BC-221 BC) society to imperial China (221 BC-1911): artisans (*gongjiang*), guilds (*hanghui*), Confucian morality, and heavenly fate (*tianming*)

China's pre-imperial society lasted from 1600BC to 221BC, and included the Shang Dynasty (1600BC-1046BC), Zhou (1046BC-770BC), and the Spring and Autumn and Warring States period (*chunqiuzhanguo*) (770 BC-221BC). During the pre-imperial era, the term *gongjiang* encompassed not only artisans engaged in the production of utensils but also builders of palaces and cities, as well as ditches and canals.

In the Zhou Dynasty, China had already established handicraft workshops and artisan tribes, including groups of rope makers, fence makers, carpenters, blacksmiths, and flag makers, among others. Artisan groups of this period began to reach an agreement on some basic professional codes. For example, it was believed that the artisan should have moral integrity to produce high-quality work and should follow natural laws and rules in production[11] (Zhang, 2021; Tang, 2021). During the Spring and Autumn and Warring States period (770 BC-221 BC), various small and large slave states ruled by aristocrats emerged throughout China. Each vassal state wanted to build a strong

[11] The concept of relating natural forces to the quality of a building project is still present and I address workers' perceptions of nature in Chapter 5.

military force and therefore, the number of artisans was regarded as an important criterion of national strength. At this time, artisans had a considerable degree of autonomy in the face of state power, and artisan organisations could even participate in politics and promote their political ideas to the rulers of vassal states. With the development of artisan organisations, at the same time as Confucius (1956), a person of great influence, Mozi, was born. Mozi's philosophy, Mohism, was based on the philosophical thoughts formed by artisan organisations. He believed that the professional ethics of artisans in their work can also be applied to governance, and the moral concepts of artisans could become criteria for the morality of national rulers. Mozi said, "Just as a wheel has a ruler and a carpenter has a ruler, artisans measure the squareness of the world and determine which is in line and which is not." (Chen, 2016: 103). Mozi used architecture and construction as a cosmological metaphor and argued that rules were essential to state-crafting.

Here it is necessary to mention the Chinese concept of heavenly fate (*tianming*). Both Mozi and Confucius believed in heavenly fate but understood it differently. Mozi believed that the will of the heavenly god (*tianzhi*) had the ability to reward good deeds and punish evil deeds. Following the will of the heavenly god, one should follow the ethical code of righteousness and kindness, from which even rulers should not be an exception (Wang, 2024). Confucius (1956) believed that everyone should obey the order of hierarchy, which was a manifestation of complying with heavenly fate. As rulers, they should follow the ethical norms of rulership and treat the people with benevolence (*ren*). When rulers behaved unethically, it was a violation of heavenly fate, and rulers would eventually lose the care of heavenly fate (Yang, 2023). Although Mohism and Confucianism had different understandings of heavenly fate, their similarity was that when rulers' moral character was lacking, people had the right to question rulers' political legitimacy. Therefore, Zhang Wenjie proposes that the heavenly fate mentioned by ancient people was actually a manifestation of people's will (Zhang, 2023). In the pre-imperial society period of China, concepts of the will of the heavenly god (*tianzhi*) and heavenly fate (*tianming*) constituted a certain degree of constraint on the moral conduct and power of rulers, and they also gave craftsman organisations considerable autonomy.

The establishment of the Qin Dynasty started the era of Imperial China. Qin's emperor abolished the teachings of all philosophical schools, which severely decreased the influence of Mohism in society. In the Han dynasty, a Confucian intellectual, named Dong Zhongshu proposed "a sage within and a monarch facing outward" (*neishengwaiwang*), which meant ruling the people with

benevolence (*ren*) and laws (*fa*). Since then, this kind of rule had persisted across all dynasties, with Confucian ethics being regarded as the only moral code and Confucianism as the orthodox political ideology of Chinese society. Because Mohism was eradicated in the Qin Dynasty, most artisan organisations began to follow Confucian philosophy. This led to the emergence of rules such as "inheritance within the family but not outside the family" and "passing down to males but not females" (Ding, 2012).

However, the previous family-centred production style was no longer able to meet the new demands due to the industry's rapid growth, which required a larger workforce of experienced artisans. Therefore, artisan families recruited apprentices of different surnames through the method of recognising a master (*baishi*). At the time of worship, the apprentice would kowtow three times to the master and offer him a cup of tea, which was known as the master worship tea (*baishicha*). The master's acceptance of the tea would signify his acknowledgment of the master-apprentice relationship (Wu, 2021). After *baishi*, the master-apprentice connection was established, and it was expected that the relationship would last a lifetime. The apprentice should regard the master as his father, and the master should regard his apprentice as his son (female masters and apprentices rarely existed). The Confucian moral principle of respecting teachers (*shidao*) was considered crucial for directing the behaviour of mentors and apprentices during this process. The ethical principle of giving a mentor the same respect as a biological father became widespread among artisans. Confucian ethics became one of the most important moral philosophies influencing manual workers. To this day, Confucianism still has a significant impact on many 9th Iron workers' understanding of master-apprentice relationships (see Chapter 7).

The development of industry and commerce led to the emergence of guilds during the Tang and Song dynasties (618-1279 CE), which grew in strength during the Ming and Qing dynasties (1368-1912 CE). Each guild was often led by a famous artisan family or a large workshop, and recruited individual artisans (Wu, 2021). Throughout the imperial period, rulers influenced by Confucianism considered agriculture to be key to the country's economy and therefore tended to look down upon those who sold manual labour in the market. However, the guild system allowed artisans to form a technological monopoly, which gave artisans greater autonomy in the face of state power and imperial landlords. The existence of guilds further strengthened cooperation among workers, established codes of conduct for artisans, restricted disorderly competition, and prevented the disclosure of technological secrets. These guilds either cooperated with or struggled against the

government, giving artisans the power to resist the government and protect their rights. Additionally, the Confucian idea of heavenly fate was inherited during the imperial period, continuing to influence artisans' understanding of monarchical power.

The guild system continued to develop in nineteenth-century China under the rule of the late Qing Dynasty. According to Gail Hershatter, the guild in the construction industry was named the "cradles of building craftsmen" (Hershatter, 1993: 47). Skilled artisans in the construction field had a respectable social status and were viewed as experts in their trade (Hershatter, 1993). As Lynda Shaffer said, the guild system provided artisans "a solid front to the potentially hostile world" (Shaffer, 1978: 381). Moreover, Shaffer argued that in imperial China, the relationships between masters and apprentices were less tense than the relationships between workers and managers in modern society (Shaffer, 1978).

In short, from pre-imperial society to imperial China, artisans, including building artisans, were respectable members of society. As Ngai Pun et al. argue, "construction workers in pre-Republic China had their own associational power to protect their labour rights, unlike those of today's China" (Pun et al., 2010: 94). In addition, during imperial dynasties, craftsmen based their master-apprentice relationships on Confucian ethics. The guild system and apprenticeship system increased cooperation among craftsmen and decreased the likelihood of disputes among producers. Emperors, on the other hand, were constrained by the concept of heavenly fate. The relationship between the state and artisans in pre-imperial society and imperial China was organised around the cosmology of heavenly fate.

# 3. From the late Qing Dynasty (1840-1912) to the PRC (1949-Now): wage labourers, socialist workers, socialist ethics, and the socialist moral contract

In the late nineteenth century, the number of European companies in China increased, and these companies were permitted to employ people as wage labourers which harmed the artisan guild system. Some masters became modern entrepreneurs and hired junior staff on a contract basis. Confucian moral rules grew less effective at regulating master-apprentice relationships, and junior workers lost their guild membership (Pun et al., 2010). At the same time, the Tangyu Railway,

China's first railway, was completed in 1879, increasing demand for railway construction workers across the country. Political figures in the late Qing Dynasty saw the advantages of modern technology and initiated the movement to learn foreign technologies. The Qing government created locomotive-building factories and mechanical factories, which recruited a number of craftsmen. The Qing government also established the Military Engineering Schools. These schools invited European engineers to teach modern technologies. A number of Chinese apprentice railway workers and engineers learned ideas of democracy and liberation during their education. This group of people was the backbone of workers' strike movements in the 1920s, such as the 20,000 railway workers' strike in 1923. Some workers became the earliest members of the CCP.

After the foundation of the PRC in 1949, the CCP started putting socialist reforms into place for factories and railroad enterprises. All businesses and factories were nationalised and became the people's collective property. Workers who were wage labourers in capitalist factories became socialist workers. The nation's locomotive industries and railroad firms were all nationalised by 1957. Additionally, the state converted several People's Liberation Army divisions into state-owned railway construction firms, transforming former engineer soldiers into veteran railway workers. The state also started the communalisation of guilds of artisans, replacing their independent trade associations with socialist communes that were strictly governed by the state.

Socialist workers were encouraged to participate in factory management in a socialist democratic manner in addition to participating in production tasks. The propaganda slogan at the time was ‘Workers are the masters of factories!” In the 9th Iron, a workers’ democratic management committee and a workers' production committee were established. Workers elected to the democratic committee were required to participate in frequent discussions of factory matters. In comparison to the period before socialist reform, the gap between management and labour shrank. In terms of income, social standing, and political influence, there were fewer inequalities between cadres and labourers. Cadres that were appointed by the state had to take part in production practices, and workers in management. A “shift-labour-shift-management” system was implemented, requiring cadres to undertake labour shifts on a regular basis and workers to attend management meetings frequently. According to Wang Hua's study of Shanghai textile mills between 1956 and 1965, state-owned factories had a rule that “workshop-level cadres must work as ordinary workers every other day; factory-level cadres must go down to work at the first line of production every week.” (Wang, 2012: 29).

The socialist reform in the workplace resulted in two changes. First, a socialist master-apprentice relationship replaced the Confucian master-apprentice relationship. People freely formed master-apprenticeships during the era of Imperial China; therefore, masters and apprentices became acquainted prior to the formal confirmation of the master-apprentice relationship. In socialist times, the workers' democratic management committee made the decision to allocate apprentices' masters. The work unit asked senior workers to teach the juniors, even though they were initially unfamiliar with each other. As I argued above, during imperial China, there was a hierarchical relationship between the master and apprentice, and the apprentices were expected to respect and be obedient to their masters. However, in the socialist master-apprentice relationship, masters and workers were only expected to be colleagues. Moral ideas of egalitarianism replaced previous Confucian-influenced master-apprentice moral principles. The members of the masses, labourers and cadres, were comrades on an equal footing. Second, the position of masters and apprentices reserved during political movements as rich masters were labelled as class enemies, dehumanised, and brutally attacked by members of the workers' committees. Junior workers were urged by the committee to articulate their outrage about earlier abuses they suffered at the hands of their old masters during political movements. These political mobilisation movements altered the factory's previous labour-management and social relations.

Nevertheless, Wang (2012) argues that the socialist reform was only a formality and did not result in actual democratic politics. The introduction of public ownership following the socialist reform meant that the state owned the means of production on behalf of the people. As a result, the old labour-management relationship gave way to the state-worker relationship. The socialist system incorporated each individual member's interests into the interests of the state. The interests of the state, the interests of the company, and the interests of the individual worker were substantially overlapping in this sense. Individual workers found it challenging to convey their personal desires due to the overlap of interests. Workers were scared of voicing their demands when their interests clashed with the interests of the firm and the state (Wang, 2012: 41). I agree with Wang that the socialist democratic ideal was not fully achieved in reality. According to former 9th Iron state workers' memories, active members of class struggle movements became influential figures in the work units, while other people were gradually sidelined. Nonetheless, they saw the socialist concept of egalitarianism in a positive light because the material conditions of cadres and workers were

similar at the time (see Chapter 9). According to Liu Tianmen, a male former state worker, "during the socialist period, everyone was equally poor".

In terms of workers' lives, Chinese state-owned enterprises became production units as well as social and political organisations responsible for their employees' life needs (Cai, 2015:7). Through work units, the state provided workers with food rations, clothing rations, and a low but stable wage income. In addition, the state was responsible for all aspects of social welfare, such as schooling, health care, and pensions. Thus, as Cai Fuhong (2015) points out, the workplace welfare system was a form of collectivism characterised by state paternalism. Under this state-paternalistic structure, the basic unit of state care was not the individual worker but the "family," including the worker's spouse and children. Under the paternalistic welfare mechanism, the family-based form of employment that allowed a worker's child or sibling to take over the worker's job position constituted an important form of labour reproduction in the socialist period (see Chapter 9). Chen Yingjie (2010) also points out that during the socialist period, urban residents who were not 'workers' were mostly 'workers' families (spouses or children)'. Workers' families also received basic resources from workers' work units, such as food and clothing distribution, meat and oil subsidies at festivals, and the possibility of getting a job or being recommended by the work unit to join the military service. Through work units, the state extended the allocation of subsistence resources to all urban families, thus achieving strict control over the whole urban society[12]. Because of the benefits that workers' families could receive, marrying a railway worker was an extremely good thing in the eyes of young people during the socialist period (See Chapter 6). In fact, not only railway workers but also all types of construction workers were considered good potential spouses because construction employment was considered skilled and respected work during the socialist era, and construction workers were frequently propagandised as labour heroes contributing to the socialist country (Pun, 2010: 94-95).

Cai Yongshun (2005) and Lee (2007) argue that there was a moral agreement between the socialist state and its workers. This agreement referred to low-wage, permanent jobs, and state-provided benefits in exchange for labour peace and the support of workers for the CCP. Labour relations in state-owned enterprises in socialist China were characterised as "organised dependence" of workers

[12] Andrew G. Walder, however, argues that this direct distribution of resources for subsistence in cities had a negative effect on other economic sectors, including the agricultural sector (Walder, 1986). For example, During the Great Leap Forward-induced famine, more people perished of starvation in the countryside than in the cities (Zhou, 2012).

on firms (Cai, 2005: 1-2). Comparably, in the Soviet Union, there were agreements made between urban middle class (including technocrats and skilled workers) and the socialist state (Dunham, 1976; Millar, 1985). Both Vera Dunham (1976) and James R. Millar (1985) demonstrate that the Soviet regime was not totalitarian. Despite the communist ideology of egalitarianism, Stalin and later Brezhnev made compromises and agreements with the urban middle class, permitting them to acquire material wealth (Dunham, 1976; Millar, 1985). The similarity between the cases of the Soviet Union and China was that the socialist state reached agreements with specific social groups, rather than all the people as propagated in socialist ideology. Nevertheless, these agreements maintained the peace of society. In the case of China, when the moral contract between the CCP and workers was fulfilled, labour resistance was unlikely to happen. Nevertheless, this moral contact excluded rural people because the social welfare that the rural commune provided to its members was extremely limited, and the rural population suffered from hunger and acute poverty (Zhou, 2012; see Chapter 6).

In short, workers lost their freedom to freely express their personal interests and form self-organised associations throughout the socialist era. On the other hand, in contrast to the time before socialism, there was less inequality in terms of pay income, welfare benefits, political status, and social standing between cadres and workers, as well as between workers. A form of socialist morality that upheld equality for all comrades appeared. Workers were viewed as the vanguard of socialist society. In comparison to other social classes, workers had higher political status, social standing, and economic security than farmers and petty traders, making them more attractive as potential spouses (see Chapter 6). Workers and their families were dependent on the state as a result of the welfare system based on work units. By 1980, there were 4.82 million employees in state-owned construction companies (Pun, 2010: 96).

# 4. Market reform era: redundant state workers, rural-to-urban migrant workers, and the new state-labour relations in late socialist China

With the death of Mao Zedong on September 26, 1976, the Cultural Revolution came to an end, and Deng Xiaoping assumed the role of de facto leader of the CCP. Deng and other leaders sought new

approaches to modernisation as they abandoned the Maoist model of modernisation. According to Ngai Pun and Lu Huilin (2010), Chinese neoliberal economists in the 1980s criticised the planned economy for its lack of incentives in production and its tendency to make workers lazy. In contrast, the market was seen by the CCP as a "liberating force" that could release people from the constraints of the state-assigned job system, and the market as a means for motivating people to create more wealth. Deng and other leaders favoured this neoliberal development model, believing that the market's competition mechanism would increase Chinese productivity (Pun and Lu, 2010: 131). Consequently, the CCP intervened to introduce the market system into China, implementing a series of reforms to build a "socialist market economy" (ibid., 134).

In 1982, the state dissolved people's communes while contracting agricultural land use rights to individual households, initiating rural reform. This measure increased agricultural output and the income of villagers. However, due to the low prices of rural products, farmers' income from agriculture became insufficient to meet the rising cost of living. With the easing of state restrictions on rural-to-urban migration, more and more rural people migrated to cities to find jobs, constituting a group known as 'the floating population'. From 1984, the state began to encourage the development of private companies, while urging local authorities to attract foreign capital to build factories in China. After the mid-1990s, the state restructured the public sector and initiated market reform of state-owned enterprises which consequently laid off many lifelong state workers and recruited new employees through various forms of informal work arrangements. This socialist market economy resembled a neoliberal market economy, as it was characterised by a large labour force that suffered from precarity.

These reforms resulted in the growth of the Chinese economy as well as the development of individualism and consumer society, both promoted by the Party's ideology. Individual demands for consumption goods were portrayed in CCP propaganda as the driver of economic growth and thus beneficial to national development (Yu, 2020). An ethics that praised individual economic achievement became the prevailing moral principle in Chinese society (Yan, 2009; see Chapter 8). Nevertheless, these developments also widened the gap between rural and urban areas, with city-centred consumption becoming the new ideal, reinforcing the divide between country and city. The remainder of this section will discuss the marketisation of state-owned enterprises and rural-to-urban migration since the 1980s before analysing state-labour relations in late socialist China.

## 4.1 market reform of state-owned enterprises and massive laying off of state workers

This section provides the background to my ethnography in Chapter 6 and 9 on people in the 9th Iron who lived through and experienced the socialist era, economic reform, and the late 1990s SOE reform. As I will introduce in Chapter 9, a group of my interlocutors were born between the 1950s and mid-1970s and had the experience of working in both the socialist period and the reform era. Many of them were state workers in the 1980s and 1990s but were sent home during the reform, then returned to the company in the 2010s as temporary workers.

Even though the reform and open policies were published in 1978, state-owned enterprise reforms did not occur until much later. In the 1980s, state-owned enterprises were allowed to sell outputs at market prices and kept a share of the profits once they had fulfilled production targets negotiated with their superiors in the bureaucracy. Cadres were also given some more power to hire and fire workers. Nonetheless, the production and administration methods, as well as the ownership of factories and businesses, remained socialist in nature. Very few employees were dismissed, and the majority of state-owned staff members were permanent state workers. By 1989, labour turnover in SOEs remained very low, and only 0.5% of state workers were either fired, quit, or were on contacts that were not renewed (Naughton, 1995: 212). Several studies documented that the SOEs were productive and profitable during the 1980s (Groves et al., 1994; Jefferson et al.,1996; Li, 1997).

However, by the early 1990s, state-owned enterprises had become unprofitable and were draining local government budgets. Chairman Deng Xiaoping decided to speed up the market reform of state-owned enterprises. In 1992, the state-allocated job system was criticised in the press of the CCP and in 1995 the People's Congress passed the Company Law. Following the Fourteenth Party Congress in 1995, experimental reforms happened in some state-owned enterprises in the manufacturing industry. These SOEs began to close down some of their production lines. However, the biggest reform did not come until 1998, resulting in the biggest wave of layoffs since 1949. "Grasp the Large, Let Go of the Small" became the CCP's rallying cry in describing the changes being proposed in 1998. This slogan was later written into legislation in 1999 by the Fourth Plenum of the 15th Central Committee of the CCP. As part of 'Let Go of the Small', small state-owned

businesses were slated for closure or sale. Employees of small companies found themselves unemployed overnight. As part of Grasp the Large, large state-owned enterprises such as the 9th Iron were turned into profit-maximising monopoly enterprises run by the Chinese State.

Hsieh and Song (2015) notes that after 1998, the state encouraged the corporatisation of large state-owned enterprises, which meant transforming these companies into limited liability corporations and making their managers accountable for the bottom line. Such corporatisation established a capitalist company structure for state-owned enterprises. However, as the sole shareholder of state-owned firms, the Chinese government still had the last word on who would serve as top executives. The CCP's Central Organisation Department would appoint the top executives of state-owned industrial giants. Following that, these top-level executives within the parent firm would nominate members of the management teams of sub-companies. As the official custodian of state-owned firms, the State-Owned Assets Supervision and Administration Commission (SASAC) was founded in 2003. Nonetheless, the CCP's Organisation Department retained final authority over personnel matters, bringing state-owned firms under the jurisdiction of the CCP.

These elements contribute to the peculiar nature of today's state-owned firms. On the one hand, every state-owned enterprise competes in the market and is under pressure to make a profit. State-owned enterprises, on the other hand, including their subsidiary companies, still need the state's assistance from time to time. Firms that failed to make a profit and lacked government support went bankrupt or underwent massive layoffs. According to statistics published by the Chinese government, between 1998 and the late 2000s, the workforce of state-owned enterprises was reduced through various methods such as bankruptcies, sales and auctions, mergers, and acquisitions. More than 63 million jobs were lost in SOEs between 1993 and 2002, with another 10 million lost by the end of 2005. According to official Chinese data, more than thirty million SOE workers were laid off between 1998 and 2003, marking a 40% reduction in the SOE workforce. (Hurst 2009).

However, supporting policies, particularly welfare policies, lagged behind reform policies. Reform ended the prior welfare provider (i.e., the work unit) but did not create a replacement. Moreover, there were few employment opportunities on the market when widespread layoffs occurred. Dismissed workers (*xiaganggongren*) did not have unemployment insurance or low-income benefits. Work units were supposed to give compensation to their laid-off workers after these

workers filed unemployment claims with local governments. A popular layoff measure was to give workers lump sum compensation, which was called “buying workers out” (*maiduan*) (Cai, 2005: 9). However, as a lot of state-owned enterprises faced fiscal shortages in the late 1990s, and many state-owned enterprises even went bankrupt, they did not have the money to give adequate compensation to workers.

Moreover, measures that were designed to encourage reemployment caused new problems for dismissed workers. For example, to get re-employment help, laid-off workers had to register at a Re-employment Service Centre (Cai, 2005: 13). Registration at the Reemployment Service Centres meant that workers had to terminate labour relations with their former work units. Once registered as unemployed, workers could not claim any kind of assistance from their work units. Most workers were placed on temporary suspension of work during the early stages of the dismissal process, which was known as "being sent back home" (*huijia*) or "off position" (*xiagang*), but their labour relationships with the work unit were not completely terminated. As a result, workers who were sent back home were hesitant to register as unemployed, which would totally end their relationship with their work units. Instead, many preferred to wait and see what would happen next, hoping to get their jobs back one day (You, 2020).

The state also promoted two career paths for laid-off workers: one was to become self-employed, and the other was to work for private companies. For example, the state offered tax breaks to encourage dismissed workers to start their own businesses. However, only a limited number of dismissed workers had sufficient money and business opportunities to become successful self-employed businessmen or businesswomen. Other re-employment policies were initiated by the central state in the early 2000s, but the effectiveness of these measures differed greatly among regions, owing mostly to local economic development and local authorities’ finances.

After that, many dismissed workers entered the private sector and joined the significant influx of migrant workers in the early 2000s, prior to the establishment of a labour law system and welfare system, becoming part of a precariously-employed and low-paid labour force. Others were unable to find jobs. Dismissed workers lost their worker identity, leading some to become addicted to alcohol, which in turn led to the breakdown of families (Zhou, 2016). The high unemployment rates in the 1990s also led to an increase in social crime, with some unemployed workers becoming members of criminal organisations (Xie, 2022). The local government's disregard for the plight of

unemployed workers had also greatly reduced workers' trust in the government (Xie, 2022). Workers' economic difficulties also left them feeling betrayed by the state (Cai, 2005: 26). Besides, following the closure of many work units, workers discovered that their communal facilities and residential buildings had been neglected, and even basic heating and water supply facilities had been left unmanaged (Lee, 2007). Because their homes were assigned by the work unit, people did not have property certificates, which meant that workers could not prove ownership of their homes in the real estate market.

Furthermore, layoffs had an impact not only on individual workers but also on their families. Workers' families were also taken care of under the previous work unit structure. Many employees' families worked in the work units' subsidiary organisations, such as canteens and factories, and their children attended subsidiary schools. As a result of the reform, many dismissed workers' families suffered challenges, such as their spouses becoming unemployed and their children dropping out of school. According to the study of laid-off workers and their offspring, the sudden decrease in the father's income following layoff affected the children's career trajectory, making it more difficult for the offspring to attain upward social mobility and to earn high salaries in their adulthood (Kong, Osberg and Zhou, 2019).

Moreover, layoff was a continual process in terms of the change of a worker's status from an employee to a laid-off worker. The reform in the 9th Iron went through a process of several steps, including closing down affiliated organisations, progressively sending groups of employees back home, urging workers to wait for notifications, encouraging workers to accept compensation programmes, and finally dismissing them. Workers at other state-owned enterprises went through a phrase of "sometimes on, sometimes off" at the time (You, 2020). Workers who were sent home were sometimes called back to work a couple of shifts. Factories that declared bankruptcy occasionally reopened during good business seasons and asked staff members to return to work temporarily. These had prolonged influences on workers and their families (see Chapter 6). According to You Yuxuan's (2020) study of workers laid off from a state-owned dyeing and printing firm, the growth in mutual hostility and distrust throughout the "sometimes on, sometimes off" phase scarred the workers' memories. Whereas during the socialist period, obedience and discipline were considered moral, the reform phase saw an increase in petty theft in the factories, giving workers the impression that the morality of factory workers had declined in general (You, 2020).

This section has illustrated that the role of the state is central to the precarious experience of Chinese workers. Similarly, research in other post-socialist countries find that after the breakdown of the social contract between workers and the socialist regime in the neoliberal reforms, various types of moral economies emerged, causing confusion among people and leaving people with "a sense of betrayal by the authorities" (Alexander, 2018: 214). People felt a strong sense of disorientation in the face of reform-induced social changes and unpredictability.

Similarly, in post-Soviet Russia, Caroline Humphrey (2018) found that the experience of dispossession was distinctive because of political-economic configurations there that substantially differed from those found in Western Europe. In post-socialist Russia, the disbanding of farm collectives and state-owned enterprises created dispossessed people, who were not only deprived of their houses, jobs, and benefits but also dispossessed by the state. Many people were worried that "their papers (official documents) are no longer in order" (Humphrey, 2018: 26). Laid-off workers who lacked official redundancy papers from their previous farm collectives could not obtain new employment, resident permission, or passports. Therefore, the experience of dispossession caused by the collapse of one's work collective included the loss of all entitlements and one's citizenship, which caused greater distress than job loss (Humphrey, 2018: 26–29).

Similar structural precarity was experienced by dismissed workers in China. In socialist China, individuals had a series of connected documents known as 'the document' (*dangan*). Dang'an included a person's birth certificate (*chushengzhengming*), household registration status (hukou), education records (*xueweizhengming*), work records (*gongzuozhengming*), marriage certificate (*jiehunzheng*), residential certificate (*juzhuzheng*), and travel documents (*tongxingzheng*) among other documents[13]. In contrast to the previous dichotomous definition of unemployment and employment, laid-off workers experienced a state of limbo following the reform. Although they were no longer employed by their former work divisions, the government did not classify them as unemployed. The documents of laid-off state employees (*dangan*) were retained by their former work units. This limbo status led to economic hardship and marital strife for these workers (see Chapter 6). This liminal state encountered by laid-off workers reminded me of the insightful research on indeterminacy conducted by Catherine Alexander and Andrew Sanchez (2018). They notice that the dichotomous classification of value and waste casts into the shadows those objects

[13] The majority of these documents are still required in China nowadays.

that do not fall into either category, thereby diminishing their visibility. As previously discussed, being fired by a state-owned enterprise (*xiagang*) placed employees in a perpetual state of uncertainty and limbo, resulting in the loss of rights in a number of areas beyond the loss of employment but allowing workers to maintain their hopes of being reintegrated into their former work units.

In short, the "Grasp the Large, Let Go of the Small" reform and the dismissal of state workers broke the previous socialist social contract between the state and labour and challenged the socialist moral framework. The relationship between the state and workers also changed.

## 4.2 Migration and urbanisation: farmer-workers and their children

As I showed at the outset of this section, the disparity between the city and the countryside widened as a result of market reforms. After 1978, the state reduced its control over the migration of people[14]. A significant number of farmers went to the cities to find jobs. By 2022, the number of migrant workers had reached 295.6 million[15] and was more than 20 percent of the total population of China (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2023). The degree of urbanisation in China surged from 19.39 percent to 65.22 percent between 1980 and 2022 (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 1980-2023). In order to maintain control over migration, the state maintained the household registration system (*hukou*) that had been established since the socialist period. This created a unique class of workers in China: the farmer-workers (*nongmingong*) (Pun, 1999; Pun and Huilin, 2010; Wang and He, 2019; Lu and Wu, 2020).

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[14] Several waves of state-controlled domestic migration occurred during the socialist era. During the period of the great leap forward, some rural individuals were taken out of their rural collectives to work in urban factories. After the failure of the Great Leap Forward movement, these individuals were sent back to rural collective farms. In addition, between 1962 and 1979, more than 18 million urban junior high, high school, and university students (known as the educated youth, *zhiqing*) were sent to work on rural collective farms (Bramall, 2008: 148). This surge of massive urban-to-rural migration was known as the "up to the mountains and down to the countryside movement" (*shangshanxiaxiangyundong*). The purpose of this movement was to re-educate urban youth about rural life and work. After 1978, the state permitted educated youth to return to cities. The majority of educated youth returned to their hometowns, causing a wave of rural-to-urban migration in the late 1970s and early 1980s. This migration wave was known as "the return of educated youth" (*zhiqinghuicheng*).

[15] This data did not include migrant workers who recently obtained urban household registrations (*chengshihukou*) after many years of hard work. It also did not include migrant labourers who recently returned to their rural hometown as well. This number would be greater if it included all rural-born individuals who had migration work experience.

However, the disparity between rural and urban areas in China is not new. The origins of rural poverty can be traced back to the socialist era. The socialist regime created a "scissors difference," which meant that the government deliberately set industrial product prices above value and agricultural product prices below value in order to extract a surplus for industrialisation (Sah and Stiglitz, 1984). During the socialist period, the scissors difference in the prices of agricultural and industrial goods was calculated to be between 600 billion and 800 billion RMB [16] in total (the Development Research Centre of the State Council, 1986). This disparity led to unbalanced interest change patterns between rural and urban areas, which severely hindered the growth of the rural economy and resulted in the impoverishment of rural regions (Zhang, Gao, and Lu, 2020).

According to Pun and Lu's (2010) definition, the first generation of migrant labourers were those born in the late 1960s and early 1970s during the socialist era and who were the first to migrate to southern China cities in the 1980s and 1990s. The second generation of migrant labourers included those born in the late 1970s and 1980s and who entered the labour market in the late 1990s and early 2000s. This category encompassed the children of first-generation migrant workers. This group grew up in either urban or rural communities but was registered as having rural status (*nongcunhukou*) under the household registration system. The first and second generations had distinct upbringings and sometimes divergent perspectives on work and life (Pun and Lu, 2010).

The second generation of migrant labourers was typically more educated than the first (Fan, 2004), preferred urban lifestyles (Davis, 2000), was more influenced by individualistic moral values (Yan, 2008), and valued individual liberty (Jacka, 2014; Gaetano and Jacka, 2004). These migrant labourers also had different expectations for the future than the first generation (Pun and Lu, 2010) and were more likely to participate in strikes (Chan et al., 2009). Nevertheless, Tang, Hao, and Feng (2020) found that not all second-generation labourers embraced urban values. Focusing on the consumption patterns of workers, they found that while some adopted urban lifestyle identities, others primarily retained rural customs, beliefs, and habits, which were shared by the elder generation of migrant workers. The second generation of migrant labourers consisted of diverse individuals (Tang, Hao, and Feng, 2020). Similarly, I will demonstrate in the following chapters how a variety of moral principles—not just individualistic moral principles—have impacts on

[16] Between 70 billion and 90 billion British Pound Sterling.

young temporary 9th Iron workers, who are often members of the second generation of farm workers.

To understand the situation of migrant workers in China, one must be familiar with the household registration system (hukou). In the 1950s, the government used this system to maintain strict control over every household. A person's site of hukou registration determined their eligibility for social welfare benefits, education, healthcare, and employment opportunities. One of the most significant consequences of the hukou system was to exacerbate the disparity between urban and rural residents. Compared to those with rural hukou, those with urban hukou had greater access to social welfare benefits, education, healthcare, and employment opportunities. The underfunding of rural public services further reinforced this inequality. In addition, Cheng et al. found that the hukou system resulted in wage discrimination against rural household registrants. Workers from rural households earned 3.9 times less than their urban counterparts for the same position (Cheng et al., 2020).

Pun and Lu argue that under the household registration system, farmer-workers are unable to complete their transition from farmers to workers, allowing the capitalist system to extract surplus value from them. Employers use the rural status of farmer-workers as an excuse to pay them low salaries (Pun and Lu, 2010). Additionally, the household registration system affects the education of migrant workers and their children. Migrant workers' children should attend the elementary and junior high schools of their birthplaces, according to state regulations, which makes it difficult for farmer-workers' children to receive education in cities. In the 2010s, the state enacted policies permitting certain urban institutions to enrol the children of migrant labourers. However, students were still required to take their senior high school and college entrance exams at home (Ling, 2017). Therefore, despite the new rule, numerous rural children and adolescents are still unable to attend school in the metropolitan area where their parents work. Many second-generation migrant workers had the experience of attending rural boarding schools and spending their childhoods apart from their parents, who often happened to be first-generation migrant workers (see Chapter 8).

Moreover, farmer-workers' children are disadvantaged in the workplace. The state-owned enterprise reform did not result in the establishment of a western-style modern management structure and a competition system, as intended by the reformers. As mentioned previously, the state appoints the top leaders of SOEs, and the top leaders have the authority to designate and dismiss the various

levels of leadership under them. Zhang Yi notices that in the hierarchy of SOEs, top leaders have absolute authority over their subordinates and tend to appoint their own relatives, family members, and close acquaintances. This results in the prevalent existence of social networks based on kinship and marriage relationships in state-owned enterprises (Zhang, 2002:11). Therefore, the families of SOEs' leaders often have substantial influence in these companies. By contrast, young rural-to-urban migrants of the second generation, who possess less social capital, have difficulty integrating into such networks and consequently cannot secure permanent employment (Zhang, 2002; Li, 2015).

One group of my interlocutors was 9th Iron temporary workers, who were born in rural areas between the late 1980s and early 2000s. Their parents were the first generation of migrant labourers. Although most temporary workers in the 9th Iron were born after Pun and Lu's interlocutors (Pun and Lu, 2010), I consider them to be part of the second generation of migrant workers. These people were born and registered as members of rural households. In the absence of their parents, most spent their childhood and adolescence in the countryside and were raised by their grandparents. They attended high school and vocational institutions and had a higher level of education than their parents. After graduation, they found jobs in cities, but today they still face life problems caused by their rural household status (*nongcunhukou*) (see Chapter 6 and 8). A second category of my interlocutors consists of migrant workers employed by private subcontractors. This group was formed of people from the first and second generations. In contrast to the temporary workers of the 9th Iron, who had a higher level of education, this group had a lower level of education. Around 80% of this group of interlocutors did not complete high school, and 30% of this cohort did not complete middle school.

To summarise, the structural precarity that farmer workers face is a result of the household registration system and the rural and urban social-economic gaps. On the one hand, the state restricts farmer-workers to their rural status and severely limits their access to urban medical, educational, and other resources. In contrast, the state relies on the cheap labour supplied by farmer-workers to implement its development plan. Such a political and economic configuration renders farmer-workers in a state of indeterminacy; they belong to neither the metropolis nor the countryside. As Pun and Lu point out, the household registration system prevents Chinese farmer-workers from achieving the complete "transformation from peasants to workers" and "establishing free and equal contractual relations with capital" (Pun and Lu, 2010: 134–135). Pun and Lu argue

that subsumption occurs in Marx's sense when the worker enters the sphere of production and surplus value is extracted from their work. However, in China, before farmer-workers enter the sphere of production, they undergo a process of subsumption under the administration system. Pun and Lu term this phenomenon "double subsumption," in which the administrative subsumption lowers the labour price of farmer-workers as farmer-workers' reproduction costs are shifted to "unpaid farm work the migrants and their families do at home" (ibid., 34–140). Under structural precarity, today's farmer workers face double exploitation.

## 4.3 the state-labour relationship in late socialist China

The reforms have altered the state-labour relationship in two ways. First, nowadays workers encounter the state differently compared to the socialist past. Currently, workers who engage in collective strikes or petitions are subject to intervention by the local government, whereas state workers had fewer frictions with local authorities in the socialist past. Nowadays, work units are no longer the providers of welfare but continue to be the providers of socialist ideology (see Chapter 5). Through work units, the central state intervenes in the moral lives of workers. The CCP's moral education and anti-corruption campaigns continue to be mandatory for all types of employees in the 9th Iron. Workers hold different attitudes towards socialist ideology. As I illustrate in Chapter 5, young temporary employees are not interested in ideological education. Participation in production mobilisation meetings and party education meetings is only seen as something that staff members have to do in order to keep their jobs. During the socialist era, displaying political awareness (*zhengzhijuewu*) could enhance one's social status (Walder, 1986). However, young workers in the 9th Iron now view displaying political awareness as a means of avoiding dismissal. Political actions such as applying for party membership are no longer understood as workers' engagement with state power (as they were during socialist times; see also Hershatter's "campaign time" (2002)), but rather as workers' resistance to precarity—it is essentially a performance of being a submissive employee in exchange for job security or opportunities. Nonetheless, for another group of workers, as I will explore in Chapter 9, socialist ideological slogans are actually meaningful, as they are nostalgic for their work experiences under the socialist regime.

Second, the source of the state's legitimacy has changed. According to Ching Kwan Lee, a new form of authoritarianism is "institutionalised and constructed in the image of a law-based

government" in late socialist China (Lee, 2007:18). Lee proposes a model of "decentralised legal authoritarianism—the twin strategy of decentralised accumulation and legalistic legitimation of authoritarian rule" (ibid., 10). On the one hand, to encourage economic growth, the central government advocates decentralisation. It transfers some economic policymaking authority to the local state. On the other hand, in terms of authoritarianism, the central state also seeks legitimacy through legalisation; many new laws were published after 1978 to regulate every aspect of citizens' lives. Lee agrees with Zheng (1999) and Randall (2002) that instead of limiting the state's authority (the rule of law), legalisation in China is viewed as a means of expanding the state's control over society. Legal contracts have replaced socialist social contracts and become the source of the state's legitimacy in governing. The central government enacts protections for workers who have signed contracts with companies (for example, the Labour Law of 1995 and the Labour Contract Law of 2007). At the same time, local governments are the main bodies to promote labour law enforcement and provide public goods. Nevertheless, local governments in many places fail to do their jobs.

Since 1978, local governments have begun to introduce foreign capital to boost regional economies. This engagement with global capital reinforces the economic inequality across different geographic regions in China. While cities on the coastline quickly become economically developed places, inland cities become China's rust belts. Uneven regional growth leads to uneven revenues for different local governments. Governments in the rust region cannot provide adequate public goods but the governments of coastal cities often surrender to the power of capital and have less interest in implementing the country's labour laws. Jaesok Kim argues that local governments became the brokers of foreign capital (Kim, 2013). Many scholars find that workers have lost their trust in the local government and feel that local officials stand for the interests of big companies instead of ordinary people (*laobaixing*) (Shen, 2007; Chan, 2010, 2014; Chan and Pun, 2009; Tong and Lei, 2014; Zhuang and Chen, 2015).

According to Lee's interlocutors (2007), state workers in the rust belt of China felt betrayed by the state because the state abandoned the previous social contract, and the new labour regime did not provide them with a safety net. This betrayal was felt most acutely by employees whose factories were sold to private hands when their family had contributed to the CCP's revolutionary venture with their labour, but these contributions were transformed into (typically very small) monetary value. They could no longer assert ownership over it, whereas previously they had believed that the workers collectively owned these factories. When workers petitioned the central government (in

forms such as writing letters or sitting in front of the government's gate), the central state responded selectively to labour demands in the form of special grants.

Lee argues that the central government aims to direct workers' resentment towards the local government's inaction in relieving workers' plight and to maintain the legitimacy of the central government in regulating labour tensions. Besides, to reduce the resistance of dismissed workers, the Chinese government has used a carrot-and-stick approach. The "carrot" indicates that the central state occasionally makes special allowances to accommodate workers' demands and has issued new rules to guide labour unrest. The "stick" indicates detaining uprising leaders as necessary. Nevertheless, these new governing practices of the authoritarian state have also influenced workers' resistance practices. The publication of labour laws by the central state between 1985 and 2010 has resulted in an explosion in the public domain of legal rights discourse. Workers have learned to use legal weapons and language in their resistance (Lee, 2007).

This legal authoritarianism has affected rural-to-urban migrant workers as well. The central state has not removed the household registration system from its legalisation, which makes both the welfare systems in their native villages and in the city inaccessible to migrant workers. The central government introduced the system of temporary residence certification in 2010. Migrant workers can apply for temporary residence certificates from local governments after they have worked in the city continuously for over twelve months (State Council of the PRC, 2010). However, these certifications are only temporary, and local governments have the right to revoke the certifications and force migrants to leave the cities (Morris, 2021).

In short, although the central state passed legislation to regulate the labour market, the implementation of labour laws has been extremely difficult because most local states prioritise economic growth (the primary measure of government performance in the reform era) while ignoring the development of social welfare and delaying legal reform. The contradictions between the central and local states, as well as between different regional states, have resulted in the complexity of state-labour relations in late socialist China. Moreover, the change from socialist social contract to legal-based authoritarianism has inflicted distress on laid-off state workers as well as farmer-worker migrants. Both groups of workers lack basic welfare support and find it difficult to protect their work rights. This unease in the state-labour relationship is important for understanding the labour precarity that Chinese workers experience in late socialist China.

Furthermore, alongside economic liberty and the emergence of consumer society, an individualistic ethics emphasising the pursuit of personal economic success has developed in Chinese society (Yan, 2003, 2009, 2020; Hansen, 2013; Hansen and Svarverud, 2010; Zhang, Kleinman, and Tu et al., 2010) and influenced the working-class youth's perception of morality, which I will illustrate in Chapter 8. Given the tense state-labour relationship, dismissed state workers, temporary workers, and migrant workers found it challenging to assert their rights. In Chapter 5, I will demonstrate that direct, violent labour conflicts were infrequent in the 9th Iron. Instead, workers mostly participated in a more subtle, non-involvement politics of resistance or used their religious beliefs to seek compensation and express their discontent.

# 5. Labour hierarchy in the post-reform 9th Iron

This section describes the current labour hierarchy within the 9th Iron workplace. After providing an overview of various worker classifications and their respective employment conditions, I discuss the consequences of formal and informal labour division.

## 5.1 Different types of contracts and workers

Appendix 1 presents a graph of the work positions of the 9th Iron workers (including agency workers, interns, appendices, and informal guanxi workers who obtained employment through personal relationships and lacked written contracts): technicians, mechanists, skilled labourers, and a limited number of accountants and administrative personnel. Drivers and canteen staff only have verbal contracts.

State employees are permanently employed, following a personnel structure inherited from the socialist era. With his or her files (*dangan*) stored in the 9th Iron, a person who possesses a permanent contract (*bianzhi*) officially becomes a work unit person (*danweiren*). Along with insurance coverage for medical, accident, and elderly care, state employees also receive housing funds and discounts when purchasing urban apartments that China Railway Group Limited invested in. They possess *chengshihukou*, which is permanent urban household registration. A considerable proportion of the 9th Iron personnel comprises former military officers and soldiers. The government appointed them to the 9th Iron following their discharge from the People's Army.

Technicians and skilled workers who began their careers in the 9th Iron during the socialist era comprise a second group of state employees. Another group of state workers are members of the immediate families of the leaders of the 9th Iron. A minority of state employees are former temporary workers who were progressively elevated to the position of state workers. The performance salary for state employees is determined by the monthly tunnelling work completed at the compound, expressed in miles. Consequently, performance salaries for state employees on the same project are equivalent. Additionally, state workers' bonuses are calculated according to years of service under the work-age wage system (*gonglinggongzi*), which calculates their bonuses based on the years that they have worked. In 2020, the total wages of state workers ranged from 8000 RMB to 10,000 RMB, constituting the highest-earning group of staff members.

Labour agency companies sign two-year fixed-term contracts with agency workers; as a result, the agency companies pay the employees' salaries, social security, and insurance costs. Although agency workers are required to renew their contracts every two years with no assurance of renewal, their contractual conditions are the most favourable of all temporary workers. Agency workers' labour rights are nonetheless safeguarded by law throughout the duration of the contract due to the fact that they had written agreements. Agency employees receive the same basic wage and performance wage as state employees; however, agency workers do not have bonuses, housing funds, or discounts. Prior to obtaining employment with an agency company, candidates are required to complete two probationary periods, which consist of an internship and an apprenticeship.

The apprenticeship is the initial phase. Apprentices are vocational college students in their second or third year. The 9th Iron does not sign work contracts with apprentices but collaborates with colleges. Every year, colleges send students to serve as apprentices on the construction sites of the 9th Iron. The management committee of the compound pays the apprentices' salaries. In 2020, apprentices’ monthly pay of 1800 RMB was less than the minimal living standard (1900 RMB per person) under Shenzhen's minimum living security system. Citizens of Shenzhen who have made less than 1900 RMB a month are eligible for allowances from the Shenzhen government, which will amount to several hundred RMB. However, apprentices are not eligible to claim allowances because they are not Shenzhen citizens, as their house registration status is not in Shenzhen. Apprenticeships can span anything from one to eighteen months. Students have the opportunity to

sign an internship contract with labour agency companies upon the completion of their apprenticeship.

An internship is the second step. The interns are recent college graduates. Interns are paid 2000 RMB each month via agency firms. Interns have insurance and sign internship contracts with labour agency firms. After completing the two-year internship, interns can apply to the labour agency companies for an agency contract. Agency workers, interns, and apprentices have a temporary urban household registration status, in contrast to state employees, whose household registration status is permanently urban. Agency workers and interns have their household registration status sponsored by labour agencies; therefore, if their contracts with the agencies are terminated, their urban household registration status will expire. The house registration status of apprentices is registered under the colleges' names. Apprentices' urban household registration status will expire when they graduate from the colleges. They will be required to transfer their urban registration status back to their rural hometown when it expires.

The circumstances of workers who rely on personal relationships to work in the 9th Iron and do not have informal contracts are complicated. A significant proportion of them are spouses or wives of 9th Iron's state workers or agency workers. In the 9th Iron, this type of informal guanxi labourers got their jobs on the basis of their personal connections; however, the way they are treated by the management is not superior to that of other labourers. This is because the people who introduced them to their position do not hold managerial positions at the 9th Iron. As an illustration, in 2018, Shi Mingling accompanied her husband to the 9th Iron construction site, where she subsequently obtained a position as a receptionist. Her spouse was an agency worker who was not a member of the compound's management committee. The management committee of the compound paid the fixed monthly salaries of this group of employees, which amounted to 3000 RMB. Household registration for this group of employees is at their location of birth. Another type of informal guanxi worker also exists; they are acquaintances and relatives of the 9th Iron leaders or Shenzhen municipal government officials. Managers treat this type of temporary worker significantly better than other workers. As I observed, the management committee of the compound paid their salaries in cash, with the secrecy of the exact sum from the rest of the staff. Although a few of them never appeared at the 9th iron compound, the likelihood of their termination was small.

Migrant workers have rural household registration status. They have a comparatively lower level of education than the temporary workers of the 9th Iron. Certain core migrant workers (see Chapter 1) maintain closer associations with the subcontractors, and some of them belong to the subcontractors' relatives. A proportion of them hold the position of foreman. The subcontractors are unfamiliar to marginal migrant labourers and day labourers. The majority of core and marginal workers are skilled workers, with some possessing vocational certifications. Subcontractors pay the cost of insurance for a limited number of core workers. Some workers use their own wages to pay for medical insurance and senior care insurance. Core workers earn the highest wages of the three categories of migrant labourers, at 300 RMB per day shift and 400 RMB per night shift. The day shift minimum wage for marginal workers is 200 RMB, while the night shift minimum wage is 300 RMB. Day labourers in the tunnel, concrete, and steel frame factories earn the least (ranging from 100 RMB to 200 RMB) and perform auxiliary duties such as lifting and cleaning. Day labourers are all unskilled workers.

## 5.2 The distinction between permanent and temporary workers as a labour control technique

The divide between permanent and temporary workers was deliberately minimised in public by managers and workers in the 9th Iron. As an instance, during a staff meeting, Li, the project director, occupied the centre of the conference room, waved his hands, and stated, "No matter your professional background as an engineer or migrant labourer, everyone is important." Managers frequently used the term "skilled worker" (*jishugongren*) to refer to all staff members, irrespective of the specifics of their work or the contracts they had. Employees also used the term to refer to themselves or their fellow workers. The unified designation of workers reflects a common occurrence in socialist nations, where the state endeavours to establish a collective consciousness of a unified labouring class (Pittaway, 2012). Initially, I was unaware of the fact that people were deliberately using the universal designation of "skilled worker." It was not until I had private conversations with employees that I realised people in the 9th Iron were, in fact, acutely aware of the differences between permanent and temporary staff.

I talked to a technician on an agency contract, Chen Xue. Chen was born in a village in the most impoverished part of Sichuan province. His parents were the first generation of migrant workers and worked in several garment factories in Shanghai before recently moving back home. Chen had

worked at the 9th Iron for over 5 years, but only on an agency contract for 2 years. He was a trainee for one year and then an intern for two years before finally becoming an agency worker.

> ZL: I saw a technician come to our office today to sign his contract. Can you tell me anything about contracts that you know?
> Chen: Yes, he was signing an agency contract. He is not a trainee anymore. He can't be laid off easily.
> ZL: Will technicians on agency contracts be laid off?
> Chen: Well, we can be if the economy is bad or the company is running poorly. If that is the case, we may be asked to leave and stay at home to wait for further notice from the superior. We're not like informal workers. They may be asked to leave the compound at any time without notice.
> ZL: Is there any difference in salaries?
> Chen: We can earn bonus salaries when the project earns money. But informal workers can't.
> ZL: How about agency contracts and permanent jobs? Is there no difference?
> Chen: The company promised us the same work and the same pay when recruiting, which meant if you worked as much as a state worker, you would be paid the same. But actually, our salaries are lower than state workers' salaries because state workers have many extra bonuses that we cannot get. Moreover, if you want to get promoted, you will have to get a permanent contract first. Without a permanent contract, after ten or twenty years, you will still be a junior and earn a basic salary. There is no room for self-improvement.
> ZL: Do you have to have a permanent contract to be a manager?
> Chen: Yes, it is in the company's rules. Usually, getting a permanent contract first and then waiting a year before getting a promotion.
> ZL: Are there any factors that might be important for getting a permanent contract?
> Chen: Becoming a member of the CCP (*dangyuan*) can be helpful in getting longer contracts. But it is difficult to become a *dangyuan* at work. It can take years to become one. but managers are all communist members. There are no voluntary rules about it, but it is rare to see any permanent worker who is not a party member.

Despite the lack of explicit company regulations, party membership was still viewed as an important factor in the accessibility of permanent positions, which suggested conventions that had

been generated during the socialist period continued to influence 9th Iron workers. I then talked with two permanent workers about their opinions. On-site manager Yang Zhiye had been in the army since he was sixteen years old. After retiring from the military, he was assigned to the compound and worked as a state worker. This was a common practice for people to get a job in the era before the great reform of the state sector in 1998. In the 2000s, it became difficult for veterans to get a state job, but this allocation approach was still open to soldiers. Since the 2010s, this method of obtaining a state position has been limited to people with resources. According to him, “It is better to be a permanent worker. Young people who want to self-improve must get permanent jobs.” Accountant Li Jie, who was in her late 40s, came from a railway family, and her parents were the first generation of state railway workers. She graduated from a state railway college, was assigned to the railway company, and automatically got a permanent contract. Two years after her graduation, the state-allocating job system began to collapse. In the 2000s, the railway college that she went to was closed as well. She had a permanent contract and worked for the 9th Iron for over 20 years. According to her, “We say there is no difference in public. But if you work years after years in the company and do not have a permanent contract, it is a failure."

Permanent employees used to look down on agency workers for a very long time. In 2009, the People’s Congress passed the Labour Law, which requires that agency workers should have the same salaries as permanent workers if they do the same work. This is called "same work, same salary.” Although Labour Law suggests the same salary for the same work, it has never removed the term agency worker (*laowupaiqiangong*) from legislation. Journalist Jianqun Wang argues that without the eradication of identity differences, it is hard to guarantee the rights of agency workers (Wang, 2012). By 2020, in the 9th Iron, the average salary of state workers was still significantly higher than that of agency workers. Besides, because of the shortage of permanent contracts, employees had to wait for years to get one. Agency workers were not allowed to become members of the management board in the compound, which excluded them from the decision-making of the construction work. For instance, Liang Jinpeng, an experienced material technician, had worked for the City Company for over ten years. As he said, he watched the birth and growth of this company. Nevertheless, he only got a permanent post last year, and before that, he had always been on an agency contract.

In the eyes of state workers, still being an agency worker after working for the company for several years was a failure. But for temporary workers who were in worse situations than agency workers,

such as informal guanxi workers, becoming an agency worker was a desirable thing. A 22-year-old informal guanxi worker, Qin Hongbo, came to the compound through the introduction of a remote relative. He did not manage to get a written contract.

> "What is the difference? If anything happens, we are the first to get sacked. That's the difference. Besides, if I work extra hours at night, there is no pay for me. But the other two types have. I need to work on vacations and weekends, but there is no pay for me as well. In the end, when the project is finished or it no longer needs me, my job is gone."

Jonathan Parry (2020) notes how in India, the hierarchy of labour disciplined workers through managing their expectations. On Parry's (2020) field site, apart from formal workers, there were technician-cum-operational trainees, senior trainees, plant attendants, and other types of contract workers. As there was no better job in the local area, people would like to work on informal contracts and wait for years to get a formal position. Nepotism and bribery were widespread in the company, which led to mistrust between workers and their colleagues. Parry contends that the working class was segmented by the labour hierarchy. Workers' capacity to coordinate collective resistance and contest the labour hierarchy was diminished as a result of their reliance on the promotion channel and the expectation of eventually attaining stable employment (Parry, 2020). Similarly, the labour hierarchy in the 9th Iron resulted in a career ladder of contracts. Informal *guanxi* workers wanted to become agency workers. Because once they became agency workers, they could sign a formal contract for two years and would not be randomly dismissed without notice. Agency workers wanted to become state workers because of their permanent employment status, higher salaries, and opportunities for promotion. Besides, the labour hierarchy produced identities based on different types of contracts. Although labour hierarchy was not publicly discussed in the 9th Iron, workers of all categories had clear knowledge of the existence of a labour hierarchy. People perceived themselves in relation to other labour groups. For example, agency workers considered themselves relatively secure and stable compared with informal *guanxi* workers but relatively insecure and unstable compared to state workers. Their jobs were secured during the term of fixed contracts. Nevertheless, this type of security was subject to the changes that might happen in the two-year renewal of agency contracts. As I will demonstrate in Chapter 8, agency employees believed that if they did not improve their qualities (*suzhi*), they would eventually fall behind their peers (*luohou*) and lose their jobs.

# 6. Conclusion: studying precarity at local, national, and global scales

This chapter has linked the precarious experiences of Chinese workers to Chinese national history. The specificity of national history is essential to understanding individuals whose lives have been confronted with significant obstacles caused by social changes.

I have proposed the innovative concept of structural precarity and presented how it was created by China's labour history and political-economic structure. Furthermore, I have demonstrated the process by which labour precarity was created, and I have shown how precarity was differently experienced by workers who had different lengths and types of contracts.

Although precarity can be observed throughout the world, every nation's development path and history are distinct. Both the expansion of capitalism and the precarisation process are profoundly rooted in the local livelihood models and projects of their respective locations. According to Bear, Ho, Tsing, and Yanagisako (2015), local forms of kinship, social class, and generational lineage have shaped structural relations within capitalism. Precaritisation, likewise, emerges based on particular social and historical experiences, and therefore, the study of precarity must take national and local history into account. The historical process of precaritisation is intertwined with the feelings and experiences that people have on a personal level, as the remaining chapters of this thesis will illustrate.

# Chapter 5 Labour Experiences on the Ganshen Railway Project: the Dynamics of Control and Agency in a Context of Precarity

## 1. Introduction

This chapter explores the extent to which the 9th Iron company controls the labour process, and how and where workers' agency appears. I discuss workers' labour experiences, taking into account the combined effects of structural precarity, labour precarity, and the workers' own moral perceptions.

The chapter is divided into three main parts. The first part describes the diverse skills and types of workers required for tunnel blasting and construction, demonstrating the high degree of cooperation among different types of workers. Second, I discuss the labour experiences of migrant workers. In China, rural-to-urban migrant workers encounter significant labour precarity within the subcontracting system of the construction industry. They have the lowest position in the subcontracting hierarchy and typically lack formal agreements with their employers. Since 1995, the state has passed several pieces of legislation requiring construction companies to sign contracts with rural-to-urban labourers (*nongmingong*) (Xu, 2013). However, when hiring rural-to-urban migrant workers, subcontractors primarily depend on mutual trust and moral obligations created through their pre-existing connections (*guanxi*) rather than formal contracts. Subcontractors and workers usually come from the same rural community and occasionally have common relatives.

Shen Yuan and Zhou Xiao contend that there are hierarchical power dynamics (*guanxibaquan*) between subcontractors and workers (Shen, 2006; Zhou, 2007). The relationship between subcontractor and worker bears a resemblance to the patron-client relationship extensively examined in anthropology literature (Wolf, 1966, 2013; Galt, 1974; Stein, 1984). I agree with Shen (2006) and Zhou (2007) that social relationships are embedded in the production process, and personal relationships between subcontractors and migrant workers can be turned by employers into the technique of labour control.

However, Shen (2006) and Zhou (2007) fail to take into account the aspect of morality and the workers' own perception of their relationships with subcontractors, which I explore here. Thus, in the Ganshen Railway project, I observed that workers' ethical beliefs regarding what constituted a "proper worker" impeded them from requesting written agreements which they perceived as breaching their established bond of trust with their employers. Workers occasionally encountered moral dilemmas, as they were worried that such a request might create the perception among colleagues and superiors that their top priority was immediate gains rather than fostering long-term collaboration. Without written agreements, however, workers were trapped in a state of labour precarity because they lacked legal protections and unemployment benefits. This situation was partly mitigated by migrant workers depending on a system of mutual trust with familiar subcontractors to find employment. This experience of migrant workers illustrated the connections between moral calculation and labour precarity.

Third, I demonstrate that both the state and the 9th Iron Company employed various strategies to supervise the labour of workers and exert control over their daily lives. Nevertheless, workers might employ various methods to circumvent surveillance from both the state and the company. I illustrate how political and ideological traditions were integrated (or embedded) in the lived experiences of workers, and note that the Maoist legacy exerted an influence on contemporary methods of labour control. For instance, workers at the 9th Iron company were still obligated to participate in the CCP’s ideology education classes. The aim of these classes was to educate qualified workers for the purpose of building Socialism with Chinese Characteristics. The combination of Maoist traditions with capitalist management practices illustrated that structural precarity produced by China’s particular political, economic, and historical configuration intersected with the newly emerging phenomenon of labour precarity, trapping workers in a prolonged state of insecurity.

I also describe strategies employed by workers to avoid oversight from both the state and the company. Alison Leitch contends that labour process research has focused primarily on labour or capital's control over the labour process while ignoring people's experiences of work (Leitch, 1996). Consistent with Leitch's (1996) perspective, many researchers focus on the work as well as the lived experiences of workers (Wardell, 1999; Pun, 2005; Ong, 2010; Cross, 2011). I adopt this approach and develop it by arguing that, under the context of precarity, not only was workers' employment experience precarious, but labour management might also be fragile at times and the state’s control

might not be quite as authoritarian as first appeared. Employees used various strategies to avoid scrutiny from their employers and the state. Sometimes, managers might choose to overlook workers' actions that deviated from company regulations or even contradicted socialist ideology.

I classify workers' methods of avoiding scrutiny into two categories. First, I found that young temporary workers and migrant workers lacked genuine belief in the ideology that was imparted to them. Young workers only participated in educational lessons due to their belief that such engagement might enhance their prospects of obtaining a permanent job in the future. Only a limited group of migrant workers, primarily foremen, were periodically commanded to participate in the company's staff meetings, solely in response to the request of 9th Iron; the CCP's educational sessions and staff meetings thus often failed to accomplish their objectives. Second, I noticed that migrant workers could employ their explanation of nature to ask for labour protections and compensation. Experienced migrant workers were frequently those with the authority to explain the mountain’s supernatural force during tunnel building, and therefore they obtained some control of the labour process from their authorities in explaining the nature and the supernatural. I also discovered a nuanced way of labour control, as the 9th Iron’s grass-root managers respected migrant workers' views, even if these beliefs appeared to be antithetical to the socialist atheistic philosophy.

# 2. Production process and labour experiences in the 9th Iron

In this section, I elucidate the process of production on construction sites. Through a description of workers' daily labour experiences, I illustrate that the building of the railway was accomplished by the day-to-day cooperation among different types of workers. I also show the labour precarity that migrant workers faced and explore how their moral judgement of being proper workers intertwined with the phenomenon of labour precarity.

## 2.1 production process in the tunnel and on the ground

This section illustrates the production process of the railway project, describing the working procedures of tunnel workers and explaining the work of those who worked on the surface to assist with construction work. I disclose the ways in which various kinds of workers collaborated at work. Because women were not permitted to enter the cavern, I learned about the production process and

labour experiences in the tunnel from the words of male migrant workers and 9th Iron workers. Migrant workers and 9th Iron workers also gave me vivid descriptions of the cavern's inner environment. Male workers of the 9th Iron helped take photos for me as well. My understanding of the production process and labour experiences on the ground, including in the steel frame factory and cement plant, was based on my personal observations and conversations with workers on the ground.

There were four steps in the tunnel building process: drilling and blasting (excavation of the cavern), initial support (initial reinforcement of the cavern), downward excavation of the cavern (forming a bottom arch and stabilising the tunnel bottom), and secondary lining (secondary reinforcement of the cavern). In order to accelerate the production process, these steps were carried out simultaneously.

On the drilling and blasting team, scaffolders first set up scaffolds in the cavern for use by technicians, drillers, and blast workers. Technicians read maps, took measurements, and marked the locations of the holes in the rock. Picture 5.1 shows two technicians who were temporary workers of the 9th Iron measuring the cavern. Drillers used rock drills to cut holes in the rock face based on the marked points. The holes ranged in length from 3 to 4 metres, and more than 40 holes had to be drilled on the rock face. Blasters buried the explosives and fuses, then lit the fuses, which produced the explosion. Mechanics used fan machines to extract smoke. Larger pieces of rock were removed by excavators and slag carriers, while smaller bits were shovelled onto trolleys by slag handlers and transferred out of the cavern by hand. Water sometimes gushed after the rock was removed, requiring plumbers to quickly extract the water from the cavern. After blasting, technicians used equipment to evaluate the cavern's safety levels. Drillers were exposed to a lot of dust and noise at work, they told me that when the water flooded out of the rock, workers would be soaked and forced to endure the cold. Furthermore, drillers told me that they suffered from wrist pain as a result of holding drills for long periods of time. Picture 5.2 shows that drillers were cutting holes in the rock face while standing on a three-armed rock drilling jumbo. A technician was waiting on the ground for drillers to complete their work so he could measure for the next step. Picture 5.3 shows that drillers were standing on the operating platform while drilling holes into the rock face. The man on the far right was my friend, technician Zhang Zhuan.

Picture 5.1 technicians in the cavern

Picture 5.2 drillers in the cavern

Picture 5.3 drillers in the cavern

After media reports of a large number of Hunan drillers dying from pneumoconiosis (Shen et al., 2009), state-owned companies, such as the 9th Iron, began to provide skilled workers, such as drillers and blasters, with free protective gear and masks. However, auxiliary workers, often slag handlers, lacked masks. Apart from the slag handlers, everyone else I mentioned in the previous paragraph was either a temporary employee of the 9th Iron or a migrant worker employed by a regular subcontractor. Slag handlers, on the other hand, were day labourers who typically received their day wages at the end of their shift. Slag handlers had complained to 9th Iron managers that the dust in the cavern was making it difficult for them to breathe because the dust blocked their noses and throats. However, the managers of the 9th Iron never addressed handlers' concerns.

On the initial support team, concrete sprayers in safety gear shot a coating of concrete to strengthen the rock face. On both sides of the cavern, technicians measured and marked the positions of the steel anchors on the rock wall. Picture 5.4 shows two 9th Iron technicians examining a machine; both were temporary workers. A second group of drillers completed the drilling of holes while the grouting workers attached the grouting pipes, filled the holes with concrete, and quickly placed the steel anchors. Auxiliary workers smoothed and squared the rock face. Before placing the anchors, technicians performed an on-site pressure test on the anchors and the steel frame. After the anchors were installed, technicians marked the sites for the steel arches. Then, the auxiliary workers

installed steel arch frames that the 9th Iron's steel factory had built, and the electric welder welded the bottom of the frames (see picture 5.5). Concrete workers sprayed another layer of concrete on the steel bar frames. Kong Fushang, a migrant worker and a concrete sprayer, told me that his job was difficult. Sprayers had to immediately spray cement on the surface of the rock, then took a short break until the steel arch frames were installed, at which point sprayers shot another coating of concrete on the surface of the arch frames. Sprayers were not allowed to leave the cavern or remove their drenched protection gear during the break since they might be needed to spray specific spots again at any time. During most of the break, sprayers waited for other groups of workers in silence and wet gear. Picture 5.6 shows that two concrete sprayers wearing protective gear were on the break. When groundwater seeped up to the surface, the cavern's ground was muddy.

Picture 5.4 Technicians who were testing

Picture 5.5 Electric welders working

Picture 5.6 Concrete workers in breaks

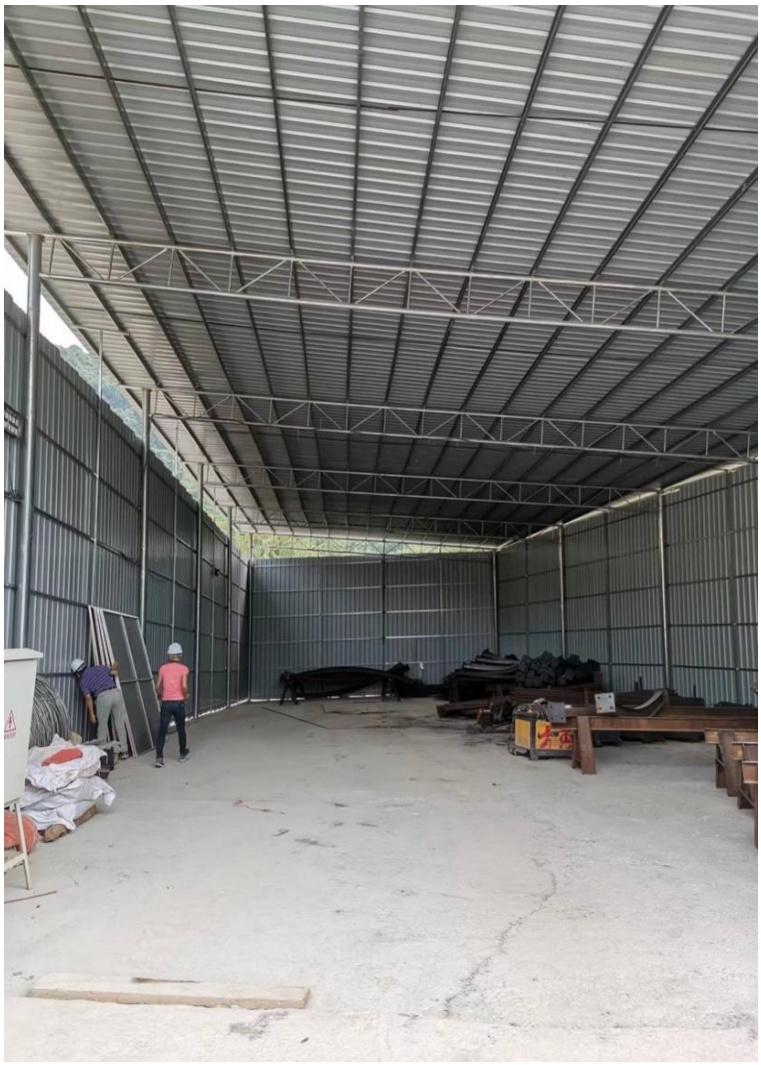
In the team in charge of the cavern’s bottom excavation, technicians measured and marked the depth of the excavation. Excavator operators completed one layer of excavation. The slag truck transported the mound of soil, and the slag handlers manually cleaned the excavated surface. Excavators dug again after technicians had measured the excavation for the following layer, and so on in a cycle. When the excavation was finished, mechanics used grouting equipment to smooth the tunnel's bottom with concrete. The technicians then marked the steel frame spacing. Auxiliary workers installed the steel arch along the tunnel's bottom.

On the secondary lining team, technicians measured, cut, and marked the placement of the flashing between the first layer of tunnel and the second layer of tunnel. The auxiliary workers laid the flashing, and the welders welded it. The technicians performed pressure-bearing capability tests on the flashing. Carpenters installed layers of timber formwork between the steel frames and the flashing. Steel frame workers laid the frames, and welders joined them together. The mechanics controlled the raising and rotation of the working platform. Picture 5.7 shows that a middle-aged machinist of the 9th Iron was repairing the work platform at the outside of the tunnel. Standing on the working platform, grouting workers poured concrete into the steel bar frames through small holes. Technicians tested the cement's strength and thickness using basic instruments. As picture 5.8 shows, a grouting worker from the 9th Iron was pouring concrete via a hole while a technician was using his hand to examine the solidity of the concrete. I once saw 9th Iron technicians evaluating the quality of concrete. They poured some concrete on the ground and judged the quality of the concrete by observing the shape and speed with which the concrete solidified with their naked eyes. I was shocked at these technicians' special skills, but technician Zhang Zhuan told me that this was a very common way to examine the concrete on construction sites because the method was "quick, accurate, and easy to do.” After the concrete was set, electricians put the cables in place.

Picture 5.7 a machinist working

Picture 5.8 a grouting worker and a technician working

Outside the tunnel were the 9th Iron's steel and concrete processing factories. Steel frames were manufactured in the steel processing plant and then shipped to the cavern. Picture 5.9 shows a state worker and his apprentice checking on some steel frames that they were going to transfer to the construction sites. Steel frame production work was highly gendered. Only male workers dug holes in steel frames[17] and welded bars, which was considered skilled work by workers and managers. Picture 5.10 shows male workers welding steel frames together, both migrant workers and the 9th Iron workers. Women, on the other hand, were seen as incapable of performing skilled work and were thus only allowed to descale steel bars that had been prepared by male workers.



Picture 5.9 a state worker and his apprentice in the steel frame factory

[17] these steel frames would be used in the tunnel.

Picture 5.10 male workers in the steel frame factory

In the concrete processing plant, water, cement, sand, and stones were shovelled onto conveyor belts by labourers. Mechanics were in charge of the concrete mixers. Following manufacture, technicians examined the quality of the concrete before truck drivers delivered it to the cavern. Truck drivers, technicians, and mechanics were mostly the 9th Iron workers. As shown in picture 5.11, there were concrete trucks parked outside the concrete factory, ready for the next task.

Picture 5.11 concrete trucks outside the concrete factory

There were female porters in these two factories who carried raw materials, but were not permitted to enter the cavern. Because female porters could only work on the surface, their daily wage was half that of male porters. Furthermore, female porters often did not wear appropriate working clothes because women thought that they only worked here occasionally to assist their husbands, and hence it was not worthwhile to spend extra money on purchasing work clothes. Li Juan was a 30-year-old female migrant worker. The first time I met her, she was carrying two sacks of sand on her left shoulder with a carrying pole. I noticed she was dressed in an old pair of sandals and an old yellow T-shirt. I later learned from talks that Li came here with her husband, a driller. Her mother-in-law in the village was taking care of her two children. Li told me that she was only required on days when there was a labour shortage on the construction sites. As a result, she chose not to buy the trainers that most male employees wore. Li's example again illustrated that female employees were at the bottom of the labour hierarchy on the construction site.

## 2.2 Migrant workers' experiences: state intervention, relationship-based employment, and the morality of being a proper worker

In this section, I explore the labour experiences of migrant workers. I contend that the moral convictions and identities of migrant workers were closely linked to a form of employment practice that is centred around personal relationships (*guanxi*). Relationship-based employment was crucial —and sometimes indispensable—for managers and subcontractors as well as migrant workers. However, migrant workers' moral perceptions about being proper workers also trapped them in the situation of labour precarity because they were hesitant to ask for paper contracts. The state's legislation aimed at protecting the rights of migrant workers contradicted relationship-based employment practices, leading to difficulties in successfully enforcing the regulations.

### 2.2.1 Layers of subcontracting : the contradictions between law and relationship-based employment practices

In the construction industry in China, there is a phenomenon referred to as "layers of subcontracting" (*cengcengfenbao*) (An and Watanabe, 2010). The 9th Iron Company delegated the responsibility of managing and recruiting migrant workers to labour agency companies (see Appendix 2). The work was further subcontracted by labour agency firms to both large and small subcontractors. Some subcontractors would subcontract the work to smaller subcontractors. Subcontractors hired foremen who had direct oversight of migrant labourers. Two to five small groups led by foremen made up a production team. Every production team was assigned two on-site managers from the 9th Iron to oversee the team's operations.

As Appendix 3 shows, there are hierarchical relationships between the high and low levels in the pyramid of subcontracting. The China National Railway Group has the highest position in the subcontracting hierarchy and supplies the capital for the railway's construction. The second layer is the 9th Iron, which is responsible for the provision and management of railway construction. The 9th Iron also owns machines and equipment needed for production. The third, fourth, and fifth tiers consist of labour agency companies and subcontractors. The executives of labour agency firms usually have personal ties with government officials and leaders of the 9th Iron. These organisations have the qualifications required to offer labour agency services. Subcontractors usually do not have

qualifications but possess personal relationships with foremen and migrant workers. Migrant workers occupy the lowest position in the hierarchy. Therefore, personal relationships are crucial for ensuring the supply of migrant workers at construction sites.

Pun highlights that within the subcontracting system, the burden of all market risks is transferred to the lowest level of the hierarchy, i.e., migrant workers (see Appendix 3). When large corporations at the top of the hierarchy have financial challenges, they are unable to pay smaller enterprises for their construction or labour services, resulting in unpaid wages for workers (Pun and Lu, 2010). Since the 1990s, incidents involving migrant workers trying to claim unpaid wages have gradually become a hot topic for national concern (Chan, 2010).

To ensure that migrant workers' wages are paid, the central state passed legislation (The Labour Law of 1994) requiring all employers to sign paper labour contracts with workers (Zou, 2009). In 2007, the Tenth National People's Congress established further legislation to protect workers' rights, including the Labour Contract Law, Employment Promotion Law, and the Labour Mediation and Arbitration Law (Xie, 2015). These laws have established the legal framework that aims to provide security for an increasingly precarious labour force in China (Zou, 2009).

Moreover, the central state also initiated a movement called standardisation (*biaozhunhuayundong*) in order to protect construction workers' labour rights. According to the National Railway Bureau and China National Railway Group, the purpose of the standardisation movement was to modernise the management of railway construction projects, reduce subcontracting, and protect the work and safety rights of migrant workers. In 2009, China National Railway Group produced regulations intended to standardise the management of the contracting system in railway construction. These regulations forbade the construction company from hiring small and unqualified subcontractors. Besides, labour agency companies were forbidden to re-subcontract their work to any subcontractors (China National Railway Group, 2009). The purpose of these regulations was to regulate the labour service market, eliminate the phenomenon of layers of subcontracting in the construction industry, and therefore protect workers' rights. The National Railway Bureau published regulations in 2021 regarding the salary payments of railway construction workers. These regulations require the contractor company (i.e., the railway construction company, in this case the City Company and the Tunnel Construction Management Committee) to sign contracts with

migrant workers directly and to be responsible for the management and salary payments of the migrant workers they employ (National Railway Bureau, 2021).

However, the phenomenon of layers of subcontracting persisted after the publication of these policies. I found that in the 9th Iron it was difficult to implement the state's policies regarding labour use. The completion of construction work was dependent on interpersonal relationships (*guanxi*) to manage fluctuating labour requirements caused by weather or topological demands. Weather conditions, geographical conditions, and other factors might impact the progress of building work. Adverse weather conditions frequently hindered construction work, resulting in a decrease in labour needs. Conversely, certain locations required an additional workforce, such as the demand for extra plumbers in areas with underground rivers. Consequently, the need for workers on building sites often fluctuated. Subcontractors were responsible for assigning labour to various construction sites based on the specific demands of each site. Subcontractors tended to know more about the workers than labour agencies and were therefore better able to perform this job. Second, workers depended on their relationships with subcontractors to find employment opportunities. Consequently, the state policies that prohibited the use of subcontractors were not in alignment with relationship-based employment practices. I will now elucidate the necessity of guanxi-based employment practices from the standpoint of 9th Iron managers and office employees, as well as from the perspective of migrant workers.

From the perspective of the 9th Iron managers, using subcontractors was necessary. This was because subcontractors who came from rural backgrounds knew workers' capacities and situations far better than urban labour agencies. Furthermore, in times of labour shortages, these subcontractors may use their personal relationships with workers to urge workers to leave the countryside and work on the construction site. Here is an example:

Female workers in the 9th Iron's office building became very busy after the Lunar New Year as they were required to call subcontractors and urge them to bring migrant workers back to the construction site. Project Director Li said, "The construction work must begin as soon as possible after the Lunar New Year. However, the first month following the lunar new year is typically the month of spring labour scarcity (*yonggonghuang*), which means that migrant workers remain in rural areas during this month and building sites in cities face a labour shortage." According to Li, if workers do not return to work, the project would not only lose money on a daily basis but would

also face significant pressure from the 9th Iron headquarters and the Shenzhen government. Li was concerned about losing money since he wanted to maximise the project's interests, and he viewed all expenses incurred during vacations as costs. However, the problems caused by not being able to resume construction activity were not solely financial. The 9th Iron leaders and Shenzhen government officials saw the Ganshen railway project as a gift from the company or the local government to the Central Committee of the CCP in celebration of the Party's 100th anniversary. The 9th Iron leaders considered Ganshen Railway a significant achievement for both the firm and themselves, something they could brag about in front of members of the CCP's Central Committee and to get themselves promoted. Officials from the Shenzhen government considered the railway project an important achievement that they could include in annual reports and use to gain praise from the central government.

The need to bring migrant workers back to work was urgent, but I discovered that female office staff did not contact labour agency companies, which were the 9th Iron's direct contractors. Instead, female office workers dialled subcontractors one by one, asking them to call the migrant workers back to work at the site. I asked my administrator friend, Shi Huahua, why we needed to call subcontractors. Shi answered, “To find migrant workers, you must contact subcontractors. They are the only ones who have the ability to urge migrant workers to return. Labour agency firms know very little about migrant workers." Later that day, I noticed subcontractor Zhang Hao seated outside the gate to the 9th Iron. He was waiting for Project Director Li. Zhang said that he needed to persuade Li to allow him additional time to find new workers. He was talking to me while frequently checking his WeChat account, which he used to communicate with workers. According to Zhang, being a small subcontractor (*xiaobaogongtou*) was difficult. He must seek collaboration from a large labour agency company with labour use qualifications, as the scale of his team did not meet the national criteria regarding subcontracting. Zhang hired workers under the name and qualification of a labour service company after he paid a sum of money to the company. While Zhang's business practice was illegal, similar conduct was common on most construction sites.

Workers relied on their personal relationships to find reliable employers. My friend, a temporary technician named Cheng, paid a visit to the migrant dormitories after the Lunar New Year to examine the gas supply. I saw this as an opportunity to speak with migrant workers and chose to go with Cheng. Few migrant workers had returned from their holidays, so some migrant worker dormitories were empty. Fang Zhenghao, a migrant worker, was resting in his bed, playing with his

phone. In a dormitory room of eight people, I noticed that there were only signs of occupancy on three or four beds, as opposed to the usual situation of full occupancy. During my conversation with Fang, I found that he was reluctant to come to the site so early. According to Fang, he did not return home until December 27th because he spent four days travelling. So he decided to spend more time at home, help his wife sow peppers, and return to Shenzhen at the end of January. However, on January 6th, Fang's subcontractor, Zhang Hao, called and asked him to come to the work site. Fang said,

> "I refused Zhang. After a couple of days, Zhang's wife visited my house. She said that Zhang said that conditions at the construction site would be improved this year. The food and accommodations would be better than last year. She also said that Zhang would purchase a train ticket for me. Zhang's wife's natal family and my wife's natal family were neighbours, so it was difficult for me and my wife to say no."

I asked Fang why he did not look for a new boss. Fang said,

> "I don't work for strangers. An agency company deceived me the year before last year. They initially said that they could give me a basic monthly salary of 3,000 RMB. At the end of the first month that I worked there, I learned that the agency would charge a referral fee of 2,000 RMB from the 3000 RMB. I worked there for six months and wanted to leave early, but they refused to pay me my final salary. It's better for you to work with someone you know."

In short, the laws of the standardisation movement prohibited the 9th Iron from using subcontractors. Nevertheless, relationships (*guanxi*) between subcontractors and migrant workers remained significant in the recruitment and management of migrant workers. It was difficult to enact policies that disregarded the mediating function that subcontractors played between migrant workers from rural backgrounds and urban companies. However, the decision of migrant workers to work for familiar subcontractors was not purely driven by workers' economic concern about reducing the risk of wage arrears. The decisions of migrant workers were also influenced by their moral calculations, as I illustrate in the following section.

2.2.2 migrant workers' moral perceptions about being a proper worker

The state's legislation is aimed at mandating that employers enter into written agreements with their employees, safeguarding the fundamental rights of migrant workers. Nevertheless, this objective was not achieved. In 2013, just 17.4% of migrant workers had entered into contractual agreements with their employers, even though the labour contract law had been implemented in 2007 (Pun, 2016). Similarly, only a limited number of migrant workers signed paper contracts with their subcontractors at my fieldwork site. I discovered that the decision of workers to hold back from requesting formal contracts was closely related to their moral calculation.

During our meal at the migrant workers' canteen, I had a conversation with Fang Zhenghao, a driller in his forties who came from the rural regions of Sichuan province. Because of his reputation as a trustworthy person, Fang was well-liked by his co-workers.When I asked Fang the reason why he did not sign a contract with his boss, he told me,

"Having oral agreements was common on construction sites. I came from the same village as my subcontractor. I don't worry that he won't pay me at the Lunar New Year. As long as he goes home, he will have to pay me. Otherwise, there will be no one in the village who wants to go out to work for him next year. His reputation will be bad. If I ask him for a contract, our relationship will not be close any more. If I ask my friend for a contract, I'll lose face (*mianzi*). People in my village may say I am too clever (*taicongming*) to be trusted."

In China, cultivating good personal relationships (*guanxi*) necessitates individuals upholding the reciprocal moral obligation inherent in their daily interactions with others (Jacobs, 1979; Yang 1994; Yan, 1996). Face (*mianzi*), which refers to the acknowledgment of an individual's social status and roles by others, is crucial for fostering positive interpersonal connections (Lockett, 1988; Buckley et al., 2010; Qi, 2011). Losing face (*diumianzi*) means the loss of one's dignity and prestige. Fang did not want to ask his subcontractor, who was also his friend, to sign a written contract because doing so implied that Fang did not trust his friend, which would cause Fang to lose face in front of other people.

Fang received small monthly payments from his subcontractor each month, which was known as a subsistence allowance (*shenghuofei*). The rest of his wage would be paid before he returned home for the Lunar New Year vacation. Fang earned 300 RMB per shift. Fang's foreman kept track of the shifts that Fang worked and calculated his total wage once a year. I asked Fang whether he had experienced wage arrears. Fang said,

> "Late payments often happen. Of course, it is an unpleasant thing. But it is not always Zhang Hao's (Fang's subcontractor) problem. Sometimes, he did not receive the money from the 9th Iron. Only if our team completes the assigned building task will Zhang receive the payment. It will be the same situation if I work for other subcontractors. If you want your salary to get paid fast, you can work as a day labourer (*rigong*). But no-one wants to be a day labourer. Day labourers do not have skills like proper workers do. They fail to appear after agreeing to work, and sometimes they steal. No bosses trust them."

Following Karl Marx's lead, Michael Burawoy argues that "the simultaneous obscuring and securing of surplus labour" is the distinctive nature of the capitalist mode of production (Burawoy, 1982: 73). Despotism and hegemony are two forms of labour control. Despotic management curtails workers' personal freedom to control the workforce. Conversely, in hegemonic management, workers are encouraged to willingly consent to the company's control. Burawoy contends that corporations employ a variety of methods to obtain workers' consent. For example, in his ethnography, the corporation adopts a piece-rate compensation structure that determines the wages of workers based on the amount of work they accomplish rather than the number of hours they spend. The wage system incentivises people to increase their productivity in order to earn more money. The system also fosters a competitive environment among workers, encouraging them to increase their working pace in order to outperform their colleagues and receive higher wages (Burawoy, 2012).

Shen Yuan and Zhou Xiao develop the concept of "relation-based hegemony" (*guanxibaquan*) to explain the labour process in China. Shen and Zhou refer to Burawoy's consent model as "institution-based hegemony," in which the source of hegemony is found in institutional configurations at the workplace. Antecedent social relationships (guanxi) between employees and managers are the source of hegemony in relation-based hegemony (Shen, 2006: 34–35; Zhou, 2007: 11–14). Employees and supervisors are typically from the same village communities and have

known each other for a long time before entering into job relationships. These long standing relationships establish moral obligations between the employer and the employee, fostering trust between the employer and the employee. But when these relationships are introduced into the workplace, they also facilitate labour control. Workers are willing to work without signing formal contracts because they trust their employers, making it harder for workers to ask for salaries when the company deliberately delays payment. Zhou contends that, in addition to manufacturing workers' consent to subcontractor management, relation-based hegemony prevents workers from expressing frustration. Employees opt to remain silent about unjust workplace issues in order to maintain their social relationships with managers and avoid disrupting the harmonies of social relationships (Zhou, 2007: 57–63).

While Shen and Zhou see how surplus labour is obscured and secured in relation-based hegemony through personal loyalty between workers and employers, they neglect workers' moral demands. Fang's remarks suggest that working was about more than just making money or obtaining control over one's labour process; it was also about employees' views of identity and morality: what did a proper worker look like? According to Fang, the difference between day labourers and proper workers was that the former could not earn the trust of their employers. To become a proper worker, one must keep face (*mianzi*), i.e., keep one's credibility, which means that one is committed to long-term labour and will not steal from employers. Besides, in traditional Chinese morality, being clever (*congming*) is good, while being excessively clever (*taicongming*) is bad. Being very clever gives the appearance that one is obsessed with gaining material interest and cannot be trusted (Wu, 2014, 2020). Making contracts with a friend who lives in the same village gives the impression to other villagers that the worker is overly clever, which might compromise the worker's moral integrity.

In short, for Fang, it was his moral calculation to work in a trustworthy environment and to be perceived as a moral person by his employers as well as other villagers. Nonetheless, workers' distinction between proper workers and day labourers compelled the former to accept late payments while stigmatising and marginalising the latter as an immoral group. Fang weighed up different moral and economic options and chose one. It is worth noting that Fang was not the only one who thought this way. Indeed, many migrant workers I spoke with said that they preferred long-term work relationships with familiar subcontractors, even without signing paper contracts. Peng Gang, who was Fang's roommate, said, "We are proper workers who are reliable and have plans for the future. Day labourers, on the contrary, work one day and play the next. They are untrustworthy." As

the above cases illustrate, migrant workers' moral perceptions about being proper workers prevented them from leaving the relationship between them and their bosses.

In this section, I illustrated how social relationships and morality are ingrained in the reproduction of labour precarity. As I will explain in Chapter 7, the idea of prioritising *guanxi* over other things is deeply ingrained in Confucian morality. In the next section, I analyse the 9th Iron's techniques for controlling labour and discuss how workers circumvent the company's controlling attempts.

# 3. Labour control in the 9th Iron and workers' agency

In this section, I show how the labour control techniques used by the 9th Iron revealed the lasting impact of communist practices dating back to the Maoist era. As I said in previous chapters, labour precarity must be understood in relation to labour history and specific political and economic configurations that resulted in precarity, i.e., structural precarity. Here, I investigate the relationship between Maoist heritage and recent labour precarity in the 9th Iron. My ethnography demonstrates how socialist ideology persisted in up-to-date labour control practices and how workers escaped from the oversights of the state and company. I describe migrant workers' and the 9th Iron temporary workers' strategies of regaining power in two ways: political non-involvement and the worship of nature. I also demonstrate that the company's labour control was essentially vulnerable, as managers in the compound occasionally turned blind eyes to workers' behaviours that contradicted the CCP's atheism ideology.

## 3.1 Maoist legacy in contemporary management practices and workers' political noninvolvement

In the 9th Iron, traditions that had been created in the Maoist period continued to influence the company's management practices. These practices encompassed the wage system inherited from the People's Commune (1958–1976) and from the socialist factories, as well as the production mobilisation meetings and ideological education system that had developed during the Great Leap Forward (1958–1961). In this section, I explain these communist-style management practices and suggest that they aggravated the labour precarity faced by migrant workers. Nevertheless, these management techniques did not always turn out to be effective, as migrant workers and young

temporary workers were increasingly indifferent to socialist propaganda. In contrast, the 9th Iron former state workers continued to feel nostalgia for socialist ideology, which I will discuss in Chapter 9.

Eeva Kesküla argues that in post-socialist countries, companies often combine the socialist system of wage payment with the capitalist system of market competition, thereby transforming the system into the new instrument of capitalist dominance over workers (Kesküla, 2012). According to her study of the Estonian mining industry, the piece-rate wage system had long been used in managing socialist mines before the disintegration of the Soviet Union. After economic liberation, the piece-rate wage system was maintained and combined with new capitalist management techniques, causing workers to prioritise individual workload completion over the collective interests of all staff. This system atomised workers and eroded their solidarity (Kesküla, 2012).

In the 9th Iron's management practices, socialist methods for calculating wages were evident. Combined with the subcontracting system's capitalist characteristics, these wage calculation methods increased the company's control over the labour process. In contrast to the piece-rate wage system in Estonia (Kesküla, 2012), a time-based wage system called the work point system (*gongfenzhidu*) was used in the calculation of migrant workers' wages. The work point system was a continuation of the system used in the People's Commune System (1958-1984) (Qi, 2011).

As previous members of the People's Commune, Chinese farmers had experienced twenty-five years of life in the system. This experience made it easy for rural-to-urban migrant workers to accept a wage system that calculated work points based on the number of days worked and provided a single payment at the end of the year. The People's Commune's work point system included two procedures: assessment and recording. In the assessment part, work points were evaluated based on commune members' age, gender, and physical fitness. The total point value was ten. Female or older male members typically received seven. After the initial assessment, commune members worked collectively in the farm according to the arrangement of the commune work team leader. The commune work team accountant recorded the attendance and calculated the work points that members earned per day. For example, a young, fit male who worked a whole day would earn ten points. The Commune gave its members fixed amount of staple food in different seasons. After the grain was harvested, grain was all turned in to the state to be converted into cash. Following that, the commune work team made a year-end settlement and distributed cash to its members based

on the annual work points earned by each member. A payment was only made to a commune member once a year (Zhang, 2005; Qi, 2011).

Comparably, migrant workers at the Ganshen Railway Project were only paid once by their subcontractors before the lunar new year (Each month, migrant workers receive several hundreds of RMB from their bosses, which is called “subsistence money” (*shenghuofei*). The subsistence money would be deducted from migrant workers’ annual payment of salaries.). The work team leader of the 9th Iron assigned work to each foreman, who then assigned specific tasks to each migrant worker. Foremen, like the commune work team accountant, kept track of each worker's attendance and performance. A twelve-hour shift was worth one work point. Foremen would record 0.5 points for workers if the shift was interrupted by factors such as workers' sudden sickness or a pause in construction work. Migrant workers accepted the work point system since the system inherited from the people's commune was familiar to them. Using Burawoy's concept of “consent” (Burawoy, 2012: 5), the work point system gained workers' consent to hand over control of the labour process to the company.

However, as previously mentioned, the subcontracting system has become dominant in China's construction industry following market reform and state-owned enterprise reform. The annual payment of wages legitimises subcontractors' delayed payment of migrant workers' wages. My interlocutors recounted on multiple occasions how their subcontractors used different excuses to postpone their yearly salary payment. Old Zhang, a 59-year-old scaffolding worker, complained to me about being deceived by a subcontractor a few years ago. The subcontractor vanished on Lunar New Year's Eve and did not pay the migrant workers. The work-point system, which had acted as a method of distribution throughout the socialist period, persisted after market reform, making migrant workers the ultimate victims of the new subcontracting phenomenon.

Another wage system that influenced the 9th Iron workers’ was the work-age system (*gongling*). During the socialist period, workers' wages were calculated based on their years of service. The longer the year of employment, the higher the wage. The purpose of the work-age system had been to narrow the income gap between experienced workers and cadres, i.e., to ensure that the average wage of shop floor production workers and the average wage of cadres would not differ too much by giving higher wages to shop floor workers who had worked many years. However, after the market reform, the work-age wage system resulted in a wider income gap between permanent and

temporary workers. This was because, after the reform, work-age wages were changed into a form of bonus available only to state workers. State workers received, in addition to their monthly wages, a monthly bonus calculated on the basis of their length of service. Temporary workers, an ever-expanding group, could not enjoy this benefit. Since most of the ordinary workers of the 9th Iron had been dismissed during the reform of the state enterprises (see Chapter 4), the number of state workers in the Ganshen Railway project was very small, creating a situation in which a small number of workers enjoyed high wages that would increase from year to year while the vast majority of the workers were left in a situation of labour precarity. The encounter between the socialist-era work-age system and the new labour relationships in the market economy increased the labour precarity faced by the 9th Iron's temporary workers.

Apart from the wage system, the 9th Iron had other management practices with socialist characteristics. These management practices regulated workers' work and lives. For example, the monthly and fortnightly production mobilisation movement meeting (*shengchandongyuandahui*), which was a Maoist-style tradition from The Great Leap Forward.

The meeting of the production mobilisation movement was held in the conference room of the 9th Iron Compound. Picture 5.12 was a staged photograph of leaders who were composing speech drafts for use in a subsequent production mobilisation meeting. The leaders specifically commanded me to take the photo before workers entered the room because leaders believed that workers would bring dust into the meeting room.

Picture 5.12 a staged photo of the 9th Iron’s managers

The foreman and some migrant workers of different subcontractors were summoned to the conference room at 8 p.m. Most people arrived from the construction site without having had time to change their clothes or shoes, bringing dust and soil into the conference room. In the centre of the room, there was an oval-shaped table with 12 chairs surrounding it. Workers and foremen stood while the 9th Iron leaders were sitting around the table. The room was packed. In the front of the room, there was a digital screen displaying a line of words: "The Second Season Production Mobilisation Conference." Director Li declared,

> "We must accelerate production. Before the summer, the second season's production goal must be met. Workers on the Third and Fourth Work Teams slack off at work and lack a positive work attitude (i.e., being motivated at work; in Chinese, *gongzuotaidubuduanzhen*). If the foremen of these two teams cannot find ways to motivate their workers, I will terminate the contracts with your subcontractors."

Then, Secretary Wang said,

> "Workers are not motivated because they do not realise the urgency of current construction work. Every foreman is responsible for ensuring that workers are motivated to work. The entire project must work tirelessly for 100 days before the rainy season arrives. We're in a production competition with other projects managed by the 9th Iron. Our project must win first place in this match."

Director Li then requested each work team to conduct self-critique education (*ziwopiping*). Nevertheless, only two foremen spoke up and engaged in self-critique. They said that their team would work faster. Following that, the entire room fell silent. Nobody got up. Director Li slapped the table hard a few times and announced, "dismiss!" The meeting lasted three hours, and it was now around midnight. I saw four staff members walking out of the meeting room and into the nearby village. One worker passed cigarettes to other workers. "What did the meeting say?" the man passing cigarettes asked. "I don't know," said another worker. "I fell asleep." "Are you sleeping while standing? You're quite impressive (*lihai*)!" The third worker said. The fourth employee added, "Nothing was said. It makes no difference whether you understand it or not. Let's go have a drink, brothers!" Such indifference was common among migrant workers and foremen attending 9th Iron meetings.

The organisation of production mobilisation campaigns was a legacy of the Great Leap Forward. Moreover, in 1945, Mao Zedong announced self-criticism as one of the Party's "Three Great Practices" in ideology education. Mao compared the mind to a room that must be cleaned on a routine basis. Throughout the Maoist era, conducting self-critiques at political meetings had always been considered good behaviour for active political engagement and a symbol of a positive mind (*sixiangzhengque*). Li Zhiyu argues that mobilisation is an important concept in the CCP's politics (Li, 2019). Mobilisation means the use of an ideological mechanism by the CCP to "encourage, or coerce, members of society to participate in certain political, economic, or social objectives, in order to achieve large-scale centralisation and deployment of resources and manpower" (Li, 2019:135). During the Great Leap Forward and the People's Commune, mass mobilisation was a pivotal ideological weapon for the CCP to accomplish its political goals. According to Stephan Feuchtwang, during the Great Leap Forward, villagers felt genuine shame for their "lack of enthusiasm" in doing their work, when their work team failed to meet the production goal of a production mobilisation movement" (Feuchtwang, 2012: 225).

But in the Ganshen Railway Project, migrant workers obviously lacked interest in the mobilisation movement. They also did not feel embarrassed by their lack of enthusiasm, as the villagers had felt during the Great Leap Forward (Feuchtwang, 2012). The lack of interest among migrant workers was not due to their unfamiliarity with socialist political language. Many of the core migrant workers and foremen were born in the 1960s and had grown up during the People's Commune era (see Chapter 4). This lack of interest was because, under the subcontracting system, the 9th Iron was not the direct employer and manager of migrant workers. Although foremen continued to play a similar role to the commune work team accountant in current migrant work teams, they (along with core migrant workers) were unlikely to feel obliged to actively participate in the 9th Iron's mobilisation movements.

The 9th Iron workers were more influenced by socialist management practices than foremen and migrant workers who only attended meetings occasionally. All 9th Iron employees, regardless of contract type, were required to write meeting records of the production mobilisation meetings that they attended. Aside from meetings, young 9th Iron employees were also required to attend ideological education programmes. These programmes focused on the Xi Jinping Thought on

Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era[18]. Once, the compound committee required all 9th Iron workers pause their work and watch a livestream of Xi Jinping's speech. People crowded in the square of the 9th Iron Compound, and projection equipment was used to telecast Xi's speech. While 9th Iron leaders on the front lines sat still, young temporary workers on the back lines buried their heads in their phones and played games. Agency workers were the only type of temporary workers who were allowed to join the CCP. Leaders often encouraged agency workers to write an application for Party membership during these education programmes. As Picture 5.13 shows, three young temporary workers of the 9th Iron were receiving education from the party. The man in the red T-shirt was the Party secretary; the one on the left in the white shirt was the trade union president; and the man on the right in the white shirt was a leader of the 9th Iron. The party secretary encouraged three workers to sit alongside the leader in order to show equality between employees and leaders in the 9th Iron. Xi Jinping's words "remaining true to our original aspiration and keeping our mission firmly in mind" and "building the Chinese dream together" were displayed on the left wall. A picture of Xi Jinping was hung on the right side of the book shelf, in the centre of the wall.

[18] Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era has served as the guiding ideology of the CCP since Xi Jinping was elected General Secretary of the CPC Central Committee at the First Plenary Session of the 18th Central Committee of the CPC in 2012. In 2017, the 19th National Congress of the CCP approved a resolution to amend the Constitution of the CCP. This amendment included the incorporation of Xi Jinping's Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era into the Party Constitution. Since then, Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era has been designated as the third guiding ideology of the CCP, following Mao Zedong Thought and Deng Xiaoping Theory.

Picture 5.13 a staged photo of the Party's education course

9th Iron workers were also requested to write diaries to record their participation in the production mobilisation movement and political education programmes. The tradition of keeping a diary to record one's political thoughts and performance stemmed from a famous national labour hero in the 1950s, Lei Feng, who had kept a diary of his virtuous behaviour in helping others (see Chapter 9). When the 9th Iron leaders came to inspect the compound, they randomly selected some workers' diaries to read. Blank diaries with the 9th Iron company logo printed on the cover pages would be distributed to new employees on their first day of work. I noticed that young temporary workers appeared not to be interested in these activities, although they filled out these diaries and notes as the company required. Technician Zhang Zhuan, a 9th Iron agency worker, found these activities tedious. He complained, "If I work for a privately-held company, after I return from the construction site, I will be able to rest. Here, I am working extra hours in the office to write these things, but don't get overtime payment." He convinced me to write some diaries for him. I agreed on the condition that he would tell me more about things happening inside the cavern.

Young 9th Iron temporary workers were frequently exhausted after their shifts and thus did not keep diaries on a regular basis. They only wrote diaries together at night before the leader's inspection. In fact, young temporary workers found it amusing to write diaries together in the late-night office. People frequently ended up writing the same thing and having to rewrite their diaries because everyone copied diary examples from the internet. In this case, they played guessing games to determine who needed to rewrite their diaries and who did not. The winner (the one who did not have to rewrite) was in charge of ordering takeaways for those who had to rewrite and sneaking food into the office[19].

Alexei Yurchak argues that between the late 1960s and the mid-1980s, official ideology representations in the Soviet Union were "immutable and omnipresent," which led to "the hegemony of representation" in people's daily lives (Yurchak, 1997a: 162). People never wholly believed or disbelieved the official ideology. People participated in routine official activities but were also aware of ideological falsities. Young people lacked interest in participating in the public sphere, despite their attendance at public events such as official parades. There was a "seemingly more meaningful parallel event" taking place during communist party-organised parades commemorating revolution victory days (ibid., 163–165). Young people brought bottles of alcohol, gathered with their friends on the street, and joined in the parades. Participating in official parades was also a legitimate excuse for young workers to miss work. Yurchak labels this phenomenon "personal non-involvement in the official sphere" (ibid., 163).

During these "parallel events," people participated in state-mandated mass rallies while simultaneously using these events as opportunities to meet with friends (Yurchak, 1997a, 1997b). These public and private behaviours coexisted in the same space, seemingly contradictory but actually highlighting the inconsistencies between ideological expectations and social actions, thus creating a form of irony. Similar to Yurchak's (1997) observation of people's lack of engagement during Soviet political gatherings, in the 9th Iron, workers found the drinking activities held after production mobilisation meetings more enjoyable and significant than the meetings themselves. Production mobilisation meetings provided excellent opportunities for migrant workers who worked for different subcontractors to socialise with other workers and strengthened worker groups'

[19] The 9th Iron workers were strictly prohibited from bringing food into the workplace.

unity. As I said in Chapter 4, it was difficult for people to engage in overt opposition. However, through this political non-involvement, people shared unspoken secrets, which brought employees on different contracts closer together. Therefore, the value of irony lies in creating a space for sociality.

Recently, there has been increasing attention to the various forms of irony that people display in their everyday lives (Steinmüller and Brandtstädter, 2016) and on the internet (Wang, 2019) towards the authoritarian state. In the setting of post-socialist Serbia, Ivan Rajković (2018) notices irony emerging in workers' deliberate performance of hard work in front of state officials. He studied a nearly bankrupt state-owned auto parts factory in Serbia and found that workers were engaged in repetitive tasks, such as replacing labels on old machines, which did not benefit the factory but made the workers appear busy during state leader inspections. Even though their jobs were secure amid widespread unemployment, these workers felt a sense of immorality because the social value system expected individuals to create market value through their labour, but their work did not achieve this. For Rajković, "mock labor"—everyday ritualised performances of productivity for the state—implies "an ongoing activity of mocking oneself," a self-mockery, because security was gained at the expense of freedom of choice (ibid., 62). Engaging in mock labour thus leads to demoralisation, where people cannot align with their moral projects, such as productivity and creativity (Rajković, 2018).

While Rajković saw irony as potentially leading to immoral experiences, Hans Steinmüller (2016) considers irony to be ethical. Steinmüller sees irony as a conscious reflection on the discrepancies between public and official discourses and private interpretations. He finds that Chinese people are aware of the irony in their lives and creatively engage in activities that generate irony, suggesting a form of political rejection of the authoritarian state. Thus, he regards irony as a form of moral reflection and a significant part of Chinese people's moral lives (Steinmüller, 2016). He also differentiates between irony and cynicism. Irony allows for interpretation and ongoing communication, whereas cynicism closes off interpretation and implies radical criticism, denial, or resignation.

The attitudes of 9th Iron young temporary and migrant workers towards official ideological practices show a form of irony. For example, writing diaries was seen as an inevitable participation in official ideology by young temporary workers, who managed to turn the writing activities into a

fun game with co-workers.Workers' political non-involvement, in an ironic style, did help them circumvent the control of the state and company and let them enjoy moments of sociality. Finally, as an anthropology PhD researcher, I ended up participating in the game of writing diaries and thus in ideological practices, but not because of coercion from anyone or because of any political interests, but because of a reciprocal agreement with my interlocutor. My participation in the game, in a way suggests that workers began to consider me as an insider. Because during a group's daily social interaction, irony often requires a degree of insider knowledge to understand, and therefore drawing the unspoken lines between insiders and outsiders. As Michael Herzfeld says, irony "opens up the spaces of cultural intimacy without actually naming them," revealing aspects that outsiders find embarrassing but insiders view as amusing and enjoyable (Herzfeld, 2016: 178). workers' political non-involvement, in an ironic style, did help them circumvent the control of the state and company and let them enjoy moments of sociality.

In short, I have shown how management practices with socialist characteristics in the 9th Iron exacerbated the labour precarity that migrant workers and the 9th Iron temporary workers experienced. I have also shown that the 9th Iron temporary workers' political non-involvement suggested their agency in the face of labour precarity and labour discipline. In the next section, I will show the rebellious spirit of migrant workers who used their interpretation of nature and the supernatural to gain control over the labour process.

## 3.2 Natural force and workers' control over labour process

In 2018, I visited a subway tunnel site in Shanghai for my pilot fieldwork. The tunnel had mostly been built when I arrived. Workers were doing the last decoration of the tunnel's side wall. I was told by my guide, a 23-year-old technician named Young Chen, that I had arrived at just the right time. "If you had arrived a week earlier I would not have been allowed to let you come to the building site. Women are not allowed to come to the tunnel until it is excavated through." He told me while we were walking on the concrete ground of the tunnel. As I continued to see the same sights throughout the tunnel, I got dizzy, as if the tunnel would never end. I stopped and started asking Chen questions to hide my embarrassment that I didn't feel as comfortable in the tunnel as tunnel workers did. "Why are women not allowed to come to the tunnel?" "Because it will cause the tunnel to collapse. The mountain will be furious because women have entered it, and it will take its revenge. But, now that the mountain has been excavated through, it can no longer take the lives

of the workers." I was fascinated by his way of seeing the mountain as a living being, but he quickly said, "It is what migrant workers told me when I asked them this question for the first time. I do not believe this." Despite his claim that he did not accept the story, Chen admitted that experienced migrant workers were better than educated technicians at predicting risks.

"Some experienced tunnel workers can foresee when rocks may fall. They have a sense of the cavern after decades of working in tunnels. In that regard, I must admit that they outperform me. Once, when I was walking into the tunnel, a migrant worker shouted at me, so I stopped. Then a rock landed right in front of my face. It was only a little rock, but it had the potential to cause serious harm to me. Since then, I have called the worker uncle (*shu*). Thus, I respect their ban on women, although I do not personally agree with it. Working in the tunnel is dangerous. Everyone wants safety."

I came across the taboo about women again at my fieldwork site in Shenzhen. I was sitting in the front seat of Party Secretary Wang's car, and he drove me to the empty ground in front of the entrance of the cavern. While we were sitting in the car and talking, a foreman approached the car and knocked on the window. "Secretary, workers saw a woman through the car window. They said that they would not work if the car was still here." I thought that as the top leader of the project, Secretary Wang would ignore a foreman's advice. However, Wang appeared to be embarrassed for being reminded by the foreman and quickly drove his car away. He explained, "Let's go somewhere else. Women are not allowed inside the tunnel. Workers are upset if my automobile stays near the entrance." I asked Wang, "Do you believe what they say?". Wang said, "No, I don't. I am a Party member (*dangyuan*)! But sometimes we must respect nature (*jingweiziran*, literally, keep a respectful heart to nature). When you work longer in the construction industry, you will know what I mean."

It appeared to me that tunnel workers, especially experienced migrant workers, had the authority to explain the mountain and the tunnel. A tragic accident that occurred half a year later confirmed my perception. As a rock fell from the tunnel's roof, a slag handler (unskilled day labourer) was killed and a technician (the 9th Iron's temporary worker) was injured. Three days after the accident, three migrant workers and two foremen convened at the reception office of the 9th Iron Compound in the evening. It was unusual for employees to visit the office building, especially at night. They told administrator Shi Huahua that they must speak with Project Director Li. Shi invited them to sit on

chairs while they waited. After handing cigarettes to them, I asked about the accident. A 40-year-old worker said, “It was tragic. After being knocked down, Old Zhou was still alive in the tunnel. He passed away when we carried him out of the tunnel.” There was silence after his remark. “The mountain eats,” a foreman in his 60s added, breaking the silence.

“As long as we continue to drill holes in the mountain, the mountain will continue to consume humans. It will continue until the tunnel is excavated through. The mountain took Zhou’s life. That's why he could not escape the tunnel alive,” the foreman said.

Later, I learned that the foreman was Uncle Duan, who previously worked as a driller and then a blaster for several tunnel projects for 15 years before becoming a foreman. Duan claimed that he could predict which rock would fall based on fractures, sounds, and his intuition. Nonetheless, he refused to elaborate because he believed women should not know more than necessary. “Workers see the deceased's ghost. The problem must be solved.” according to Uncle Duan.

Migrant workers reached an arrangement after speaking with Director Li. Two mirrors would be hung at the gates of the migrant workers' dormitories and the Compound, respectively, to prevent the ghost from entering the workers' living area. To comfort the angry mountain, a ritual would be performed at the tunnel's entrance. A live pig and two live chickens would be butchered and sacrificed to the mountain (*shan*). After that, the meat would be sent to the workers' canteens for cooking into a dish. Thereafter, the tunnel's explosion work could resume. Although I was prohibited from attending the ceremony, my male technician friends told me that a large number of workers went. In the subsequent days, construction work returned to normal.

Stephan Feuchtwang finds that in many regions of China, in addition to the widespread tradition of ancestor worship, people also worshipped different local gods or goddesses (Feuchtwang, 2003). The shared characteristic among these folk beliefs is their selected incorporation of elements from Buddhism, imperial cults, and Daoism. Feuchtwang used the term "popular religion" to describe these folk beliefs and argues that religion in China includes a diverse range of beliefs rather than a single idea (Feuchtwang, 2003). The mountain worship that I discovered in the Ganshen Railway project was a variation of the popular religion. The workers engaged in the ritual of sacrifice to the mountain prior to restarting the construction work. This ritual bore resemblance to the sacrificial rituals observed in many rural places during the Beginning of Spring (*lichun*), which served as a

means of telling the universe (tian) and the earth (di) that a new year of agricultural labour was about to commence.

The ghost (*gui*), mentioned by Duan, was another element in Chinese popular religion. Usually, the dead who were not worshipped by their descendants became orphaned souls (*guhun*) or ghosts (*gui*) (Jing, 1999; Feuchtwang, 2003). Besides, people who experienced unfair treatment during their lifetime would also become angry ghosts (*ligui*). The angry ghost would manifest itself to the acquaintances it had in its lifetime, recounting its suffering and persisting until justice was done. In this context, migrant workers' assertions regarding the sighting of ghosts served as a form of criticism against the company and the precarious working conditions endured by the workers[20].

According to the migrant workers I talked with, the mountain was akin to a living being that could eat and experience emotions. When the mountain became enraged, it was necessary to sacrifice cattle in order to prevent it from devouring humans. But, once the tunnel was excavated, the mountain was conquered by human agency and lost its strength. Michael T. Taussig finds that local people in Colombia occasionally referred to men who had abandoned their lands to work for large plantations as those who had "signed contracts with the devil" (Taussig, 2010). In Bolivia, miners performed rituals for a devil, whom they believed was the owner of the mine. Taussig (2010) contends that beliefs about the devil and evil occurred within a historical setting characterised by the transition from traditional modes of production to the capitalist mode of production. The devil symbolised the capitalist process of alienation, and people's fear of the devil could be seen as their reaction to the destructive approach used in capitalism's production. The opinions of my interlocutors, seeing the mountain as a potentially malevolent being that needed to be appeased, closely resembled what Taussig (2010) discovered in South America.

My interlocutors' beliefs of the mountain was also comparable to Alison Leitch's observation of Italian marble craftsmen, who perceived mountains to be in a perpetual state of growth and decay (Leitch, 1996). Leitch notices that workers considered themselves in a battle with "the animate natural enemy, the mountain" (ibid., 244). In this metaphorical combat, quarry workers tried to protect themselves from injury and death by transforming the mountain with their local knowledge. Instead of viewing their workplace as an alienating place, workers developed a sense of affiliation

[20] Aihwa Ong also sheds light on how workers used their beliefs about spirits to resist alienation in capitalist factories, but in a very different context from my case (Ong, 1987).

with the mountain which grew from everyday experiences of work and was central to workers' identity. In their experience of labour, workers conceived of themselves as "empowered, masculine subjects with substantial job control" (Leitch, 1996: 252).

Ken Kamoche and Kevin Maguire argue that English tunnel workers referred to their mountain knowledge as "pit sense" (Kamoche and Maguire, 2011:725). "Pit sense" was practice-based knowledge that was acquired from the daily embodied experience of working in the dark and damp environment. "Pit sense" was tied to tunnel workers' identities and helped workers assess and manage risks in their working environment. This tacit knowledge was in contrast to the codified knowledge that bureaucratised health and safety criteria entail. Managers turned a blind eye to this tacit knowledge as long as "pit sense" aided employees in completing and occasionally exceeding their workload.

In my case, migrant workers' knowledge was not only about nature (i.e., their ability to notice unusual cracks and sounds) but also about the supernatural (i.e., the mountain and the spirit of the deceased person). But what caused technician Young Chen, who had his beliefs in technology and science, to respect migrant workers' practice-based knowledge? And what caused the 9th Iron managers, who were CCP's members, to acknowledge and accept the existence of migrant workers' tacit knowledge about nature and the supernatural? Perhaps it is helpful to consider Judith Butler's distinction between precariousness and precarity here, which I have introduced in Chapter 1 (Butler, 2004, 2009). The unpredictability of the natural environment could be perceived by managers, technicians, and migrant workers alike. This common human perception of the unpredictability of nature resembles what Butler (2004) calls precariousness. On the basis of this shared perception of unpredictability, managers accepted migrant workers' local knowledge regarding the management of natural dangers. Knowledge of mountains enabled migrant workers to gain some control over their labour processes, articulate the value of their work, and attain some degree of job security. This local knowledge was crucial for migrant workers to resist what Butler (2004) calls precarity, which in my fieldwork site was created by the subcontracting system.

Besides, rituals were essentially empowering for workers. As June Nash insightfully comments, in the rituals and celebrations of supernatural forces, Bolivian tin miners were able to "transcend the definition of themselves as meaningless cogs in an industrial enterprise." (Nash, 1979:121). Similarly, in my case, migrant workers' demands for the performance of the sacrifice ritual

following a workplace accident could be interpreted as their yearning for recognition of their legitimate rights to work and to work safely. Migrant workers' defence of their taboos also aimed to declare the legitimacy of their local knowledge.

I end this section with an observation on how workers and the 9th Iron company tried to claim ownership of the product of labour. When I was about to leave the 9th Iron's construction site, the Ganshen Tunnel had finally been finally dug through (see picture 5.14). Migrant worker Fang Zhenghao took a photograph when the two construction teams were about to converge. When the two teams met, the tunnel was dug through and therefore the mountain was no longer a threat to workers' lives. It was an important time for all workers, including migrant workers and the 9th Iron Workers.

Picture 5.14 the cavern before converging

Fang uploaded a picture (picture 5.15) on his WeChat[21] and commented, "Finally..." Zhang Zhuan, a 9th Iron technician, commented on Fang's moment, "I saw the light from the other side!". Picture 5.15 was taken at 1 a.m. at midnight. According to Fang, workers were full of joy, worked hard, and hoped to meet the workers on the other side soon. However, when the two construction teams finally met in the morning, the celebration quickly became a management-led activity. Workers were commanded to wave flags and pose for photos, although most of them were unwilling to participate in the celebration organised by managers. 9th Iron managers were standing in the middle of the photo with big smiles on their faces. As picture 5.15 shows, 'workers vanguard team', 'party members vanguard team', and 'party members hero team' were slogans shown on three flags at the front. This case illustrates the ongoing conflicts between workers and the company over the authority to control the labour process, which persisted on construction sites on a daily basis. Although the 9th Iron employed various labour control methods, my ethnography indicates that these techniques were not always successful. Migrant workers, through their interpretation of nature, empowered themselves despite the challenges posed by precarity.

Picture 5.15 the cavern after converging

[21] WeChat is a Chinese social media platform where users can post updates about their lives, similar to Facebook posts.

# 4. Conclusion

This chapter has illustrated the dynamics between the 9th Iron's control over labour and workers' agency. During my fieldwork, there were no large-scale labour conflicts (for example, massive strikes), but I found daily, tension-filled interactions between workers and company managers. This interaction was an important part of workers' (including the 9th Iron workers and migrant workers) embodied labour experiences.

The chapter offers three innovations: To begin with, I have demonstrated moral calculations in the context of labour precarity when migrant workers' moral beliefs about the importance of being a 'proper worker' and maintaining personal relationships of trust outweigh the state's attempt to regularise their position through legal contracts. Furthermore, I have demonstrated the intersection between labour precarity and structural precarity. Many historical configurations that developed in the Maoist period continued to exist in the post-reform era and were used by the company as a means of labour control.

I have shown a certain degree of negotiation and mutual tolerance between managers/state and various types of workers in China's state-owned enterprises. There were consistent discrepancies between official discourses and workers' actions in the 9th Iron, which constitutes various forms of ironies. Despite the managers at the 9th Iron believing that migrant workers' beliefs about the mountain were superstitious, they generally tolerated these beliefs and migrant workers' worship of the mountain. Donald Filtzer notices that contrary to the prevailing perception regarding the stringent labour discipline during the Stalin era, many workers and apprentices managed to flee from industrial and construction enterprises, as well as from the Labour Reserve schools (Filtzer, 2002). Labour turnover was particularly high in the late Stalin era, despite the fact that leaving a job without authorisation might result in severe consequences. This was because while legislation during the late Stalin era was oppressive, local law enforcement officers, local militias, and company managers often turned a blind eye to people who escaped from factories and returned to their homes. Occasionally, local officials provided assistance in protecting those who left their jobs, as both officials and job quitters came from the same communities and had shared social connections (Filtzer, 2002). Similar to the vulnerability of repression that Filtzer (2002) observed during the late Stalin period, I also noticed that the management of the 9th Iron was sometimes in a

precarious position. This phenomenon may indicate that, in the context of labour precarity, corporations' efforts to control labour may not be as effective as they desire, leaving room for workers' resistance and agency.

# Chapter 6
# Precarity of Love: Affective Precarity in People's Intimate Lives

Spring is as green,
In vain she's lean.
Her kerchief soaked with tears and red with stains unclean.
Peach blossoms fall
Near deserted hall.
Our oath is still there. Lo!
No words to her can go.
No, no, no!
— Lu You (A.D. 1155)

Lu You, a well-known poet of the Song Dynasty, wrote this love poem following his divorce. The woman in the poem was his ex-wife, Tang Wan. Lu You's mother believed that Lu You and Tang Wan's daily closeness and devotion had affected Lu's performance in the imperial examinations. Lu's mother forced the couple to divorce after one year of marriage, because Tang Wan was infertile. During the socialist period, Lu and Tang's love story was used as an example for anti-feudal education because it reveals the persecution of young people's marriage autonomy. In 1950, the Communist regime published marriage laws to promote marriage autonomy. Socialist propaganda declared that marriages and love should be free in the country under CCP leadership, unlike the arranged marriages of imperial China. I will explain below how this notion of socialist love and marriage influenced the older generation of 9th Iron employees who lived through socialist period, as well as how the understandings of marriage and love have been reshaped and developed in late socialist China in the context of the market economy and growing precarity.

# 1. Introduction

This chapter will explore how workers in the 9th Iron experience precarity through the lens of their marriages and love. I examine the social construction of the concepts of romantic love and marriage and show how, as the history of the poem above demonstrates, they change significantly over time. Many academics have noted that modern love discourses are deeply related to the rise of capitalism and globalisation (Macfarlane, 1986; Illouz, 1997; Evans, 2003; Padilla et al., 2007; Shah, 2011; Pan, 2014; Davis, 2014; Donner and Santos, 2016; Zhang, 2022). Anthony Giddens argues that the broader social transformations of modernity contribute to the rise of the idea of "pure relationships," a type of relationship in which personal fulfilment and emotional intimacy are regarded as the essence of modern love (Giddens, 2013: 94-6). Nayan Shah points out that the manipulation of affection and the regulation of population have been central to the development of capitalism (Shah, 2011). According to Henrike Donner and Gonçalo Santos (2016), individual marriage decisions and the concept of romantic love are institutionalised in modern society. Moreover, they suggest that the development of modern selves and subjectivities have become crucial to understanding intimate relationships as a result of the global spread of capitalist ideologies. They use the phrase "intimate modernity" to capture this significant transformation (Donner and Santos, 2016:1139). Lisa Rofel emphasises the crucial role of desires, such as ambitions and yearnings, in the formation of neoliberal subjectivities in Chinese contexts (Rofel, 1999, 2007). However, the concept of neoliberal subjectivities needs to be understood through its ethnographic particularity in different societies. Here, I will look at how recent changes in Chinese society—such as the reform of state-owned businesses, the widespread lay-offs of state employees, and the recent shortage of urban housing—interact with love discourses. I will demonstrate how both structural and labour precarity caused by these changes contribute to the precarious experience of intimate relationships and people's desires for, as well as frustrations with, romantic love in China. By exploring the ideas and practices of romantic love and intimacy, I will show the affective precarity that Chinese industrial workers experience in their intimate lives, which I term "the precarity of love". Besides, I acknowledge the existence of many other kinds of love besides romantic love. Romantic love is the subject that I concentrate on because it was one of the most frequently discussed topics among workers during their free time in Ganshen Railway Project.

Besides, studies in the anthropology of love and intimacy have revealed that love is interconnected with political subjectivity, self-formation, inequality, kinship buildings, and nationalist ideologies (Mody, 2013, 2022; Das, 2006; Härkönen, 2018). Similarly, this chapter will also show how ideas and practices of romantic love are intertwined with broader political structures and social discourses. However, different from the aforementioned work (Mody, 2013, 2022; Das, 2006; Härkönen 2018), my focus is on examining how labour experiences and relationships have impacted workers across various generations in their perceptions, pursuit, maintenance, or loss of love. I will explore how various forms of precarity intersect with love practices and ideas and the diverse ethical interpretations people attribute to romantic love. By recognising love as both a structural and emotional phenomenon, I will demonstrate how people from different historical periods have perceived romantic love as either a threat to or a stabiliser of marriage. In Lu and Tang's story, the older family members viewed the young people's romantic love as a threat to family stability—love kept Lu from initiating a divorce with Tang, even though she might be infertile. In such situations, it was necessary for Lu's mother to step in.

Marriages in imperial China were intended for family reproduction and were also viewed as a collaboration between two family clans. Therefore, although romantic love did exist, it was discouraged, because the need for reproduction and extending the patrilineal line was considered more important than individual desires. In the early twentieth century, the democratic revolutionaries began to encourage the pursuit of romantic love as a form of resistance against feudal oppression. The pursuit of romantic love had a liberating connotation in the early 20th century China. Following the founding of the PRC in 1949, ideas of free love and marriage became inextricably linked with political discourses and movements, as seen in socialist China's films and books.  Maoist policies aimed to encourage marriages founded on choice and affection (Bruckermann, 2016). The concept of romantic love was suppressed during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), but it resurfaced following the economic liberation since the 1980s. Yan Yunxiang emphasises that the pursuit of conjugal love by young people is a sign of the increase in individualism in China following the economic reform (Yan, 2003). Besides, the expressions of love has been increasingly connected with expensive gifts under the influence of consumerism since the 1990s (Yan, 2003). Yan (2003) focuses on how the growth of the neoliberal economy has led to changes in young Chinese individuals' perspectives on love and marriage. This chapter, in contrast, will show how various perspectives on marriage and romantic love coexist and clash against each other in late socialist China. More significantly, it will show how the intersection of different forms

of precarity has influenced the moral values that the 9th Iron workers attached to romantic love and marriage.

In the 9th Iron company, workers born in different periods held different viewpoints on love and intimate relationships that were shaped by economic expectations and possibilities. Young workers born in the 1980s and 1990s frequently struggled with the financial strain of owning a home for marriage (*hunfang*). In the socialist era, houses were public assets that work units distributed to their workers; today, in China, houses are expensive but necessary commodities that unmarried young men must purchase in order to marry. Young 9th Iron temporary workers from rural backgrounds, as well as young migrant workers, found it difficult to buy urban residences and find spouses. In such circumstances, it appeared increasingly difficult for young workers to find romantic love, despite their desired to do so. Young workers claimed that the harsh realities of society defeated their love, describing romantic love as brittle, vulnerable, and frequently unattainable in contrast to pragmatic, calculated, and stable marriage. However, young workers' viewpoints on love and marriage were not shared among the older generation of workers born between the 1950s and the 1970s. In spite of the Cultural Revolution's suppression of romantic expression, the older generation of state workers insisted that romantic love was a vital component of socialist marriages. They recounted their memories of socialist-era romances, which they believed had been purer than the fragile capitalist love that emerged after economic reforms.

I will begin by discussing the older generation of state workers' perceptions of romantic love and their nostalgia for socialist type of intimate connections. Then I will show how the dismantling of the state employment system after 1998 harmed unemployed former state employees' intimate relationships. Following that, I will examine structural precarity caused by rural and urban gap and household registration system changed how young workers, including married migrant couples and unmarried male workers, perceived and experienced romantic love.

## 2. Socialist romance and marriage: "pure love" based on the shared values of both spouses

This section will introduce a type of romantic love from the socialist era for which the older generation of 9th Iron State workers felt nostalgic. This group of workers saw socialist romance as pure and believed that romantic relationships during the socialist era had been more stable than recent ones since both partners had contributed to the cause of socialism and had shared the same moral values. Workers who had experienced the socialist era contended that, in contrast to socialist love, which had been moral and pure, recent capitalist love became commodified and twisted as a result of people's desire for expensive gifts and women's financial dependence on their male partners. After introducing a 9th Iron workers' communal residence that had been built in the socialist period, I will introduce stories about love and intimacy that the older generation of state workers told me.

The overall number of state employees had significantly increased as socialist modernisation began following the founding of the PRC (Ching, 2012). During the socialist period, the 9th Iron built its own residential neighbourhoods in various locations across the country to address the housing shortage among its staff members. Single-gender dormitories were set up to house unmarried young workers. Equal opportunities to obtain an apartment were available to married workers in the 9th Iron's residences, which were called the 9th Iron Workers' and Families' Homes (*yuangongjiashudayuan*). During the socialist period, family members of 9th Iron railway workers, rather than railway workers themselves, lived in the Homes all year around. The 9th Iron railway workers were required to move from one railway project to another in accordance with the state's orders; thus, they lived in compounds near construction sites and returned to their Homes on vacation. A large proportion of the 9th Iron railway workers' family members worked in geographically fixed sectors affiliated with the 9th Iron, such as the 9th Iron's locomotive component processing factories, the 9th Iron's schools, hospitals, and so on. These family members did not always accompany railway workers when they relocated. Instead, railway workers' families, primarily women and children, resided in the Workers' and Families' Homes near the 9th Iron's affiliated organisations that they worked in. In the years after the SOE reform, some workers purchased the titles to these apartments from 9th Iron, even though many of them had been living in these apartments since the socialist period. Workers who could not afford to buy the titles to the flats they had lived in, on the other hand, moved out of the neighbourhood.

After the SOE reform, many of these Homes were torn down, whereas some remained. I visited one of the 9th Iron Workers' and Families' Homes in Shanghai during my pilot field trip in 2018. The

Home had around twenty small, four-story buildings. The majority of the windows appeared to be thin from the outside, and the outside of the walls was painted a yellow colour (see Picture 6.1). In the socialist period, the residential section had a fence with a silver signboard reading the 9th Iron Workers' and Families' Home at the entry gate. After the SOE reform (see Chapter 4), this sign was taken down in 2002. In the socialist period, four-story buildings were typical residences for workers who had children. Each floor had several two-room apartments and a shared toilet at the end of the corridor. It was common for families with four or five children to live in a two-room apartment. On the original community plaza, the flagpole had rusted away because it had been neglected for a long time. The first-floor residents had turned the flowerbeds downstairs into vegetable plots, and some of the people who lived on the top floor had built their own lofts in the roof. In 2018, the majority of people living in this area were retired 9th Iron workers. However, as the first generation of 9th Iron workers passed away and their children left, in recent years, the Home has seen an increase in empty flats and flats sold to non-9th Iron people.

Picture 6.1 One of the buildings in the Home

In one of the apartments in the Home, I visited Wang Hongxing, a 71-year-old retired female worker who had worked in one of the 9th Iron's locomotive component processing factories during the socialist period. Her husband, Shi Yiming, a former 9th Iron railway worker, had passed away in 2014. During our chats, Wang described how she and her husband fell in love in the early 1970s. Wang was known at the factory for her dedication and willingness to take on tasks that others did not. One day, her leader called her to the office and told her that all 9th Iron workers were planning a procession and that she should meet with the representative of railway workers. Wang said,

> "When I stepped into my leader's office, I saw a dark-skinned man, Shi Yiming. He did not look at me but said to my leader, 'So this is the famous Iron Woman in your factory.' 'Yes,' I said, looking at him in the eyes, 'that's me. I can work faster than men.' He laughed. We married about half a month later. Later, I realised that there was no parade. That was a set-up date that my leader arranged for me and Shi."

Wang also introduced me to her neighbour, a 90-year-old woman named Lan, who was the former daughter-in-law of a feudal landowning family and had divorced her first husband in 1951, claiming dissatisfaction with the marriage her parents had planned for her when she was 16 years old. After the divorce, she married a People's Army officer. Her husband was released from the army and began to work for the 9th Iron in 1961. In the 1970s, she and her husband relocated to the neighbourhood. During the Maoist period, a series of Marriage Laws were enacted that banned polygamy and child marriages, resulting in a wave of divorces in the early 1950s. Additionally, arranging marriages without the mutual consent of both parties was legally prohibited (Bruckermann, 2016). Meeting one's future spouse through supervisors at work or co-workers became popular, as illustrated in the story of Wang and Shi.

Wang's daughter married a businessman in 2009 and has become a full-time housewife. Wang Hongxing was dissatisfied with her daughter, saying,

> "My daughter stopped working after she got married. This irritated me. In our day, both men and women were required to work. Lan's generation was the same. I told my daughter that when women do not work, they are disconnected from society. Their marriages will soon suffer because stay-at-home wives no longer share similar social experiences as their spouses. Love and marriage were pure and simple (*chunjie*) in our day because husbands and wives often shared a lot of similarities: the same goals, the same work experiences, the same interests, and, sometimes, the same work units."

Wang believed that participation in socialist work was a crucial part of women's lives. She said that if both spouses participated in socialist labour, their marriage would be more stable and their love would be purer.

In 2019, I made friends with a female 9th Iron state worker, Lu Ping, who was born in the 1970s. Her parents were state railway workers as well. Lu's father was a technician who began to work for the 9th Iron after he had retired from the People's Army in the 1950s. Before Lu was born, her parents lived in a one-room apartment with her two brothers. Lu's father asked to move to a bigger residence from the work unit after Lu's mother fell pregnant. So, following Lu's birth, the family

relocated. The early years of Lu's life were spent in a two-bedroom flat, with Lu and her mother sharing one room with her father and two brothers living in another room. Lu remembered,

> "As a child, I once woke up in the middle of the night to find my mother's bed empty. A short while later, my mother returned from my father's and my brothers' room. There was a curtain separating my father's bed from the bunk beds of my two brothers. I didn't know why when I was younger; it wasn't until I was older that I realised why a curtain was installed."

Lu grinned, gave me a wink, and continued to say,

> “Now I think the flat I lived in was very small. However, I do not recall my mother complaining much. Nowadays, young couples must own a house in order to marry, but love was simple back then because everyone lived in similar conditions and was content with what they had. My mother was raised in the countryside. She married my father after being introduced to him by a relative. In the 1950s, being married to a railroad employee was an excellent thing. The work unit arranged collective weddings every year for its young workers. My mother was arranged by the work unit to cook in the canteen after the marriage and had a city job, unlike her sisters, who were still in the countryside and frequently had trouble finding adequate food.”

My conversations with Lu and Wang show that they saw romantic love during the socialist period as pure and simple and that marriages during the socialist period had been less likely to have problems. Moreover, Wang believed that her daughter's dependence on her husband for economic security would cause problems in their relationships. Wang's idea reflected the influence of socialist views of romantic love and gender egalitarianism. These views also appeared in socialist cinema and literature during the socialist period.

Zhou Peiqin (2014) analyses films and novels produced in mainland China between 1949 and 2013. Zhou argues that during the socialist era, love was portrayed as the affection arising between two socialists who actively participated in socialist revolution and production, and marriage was portrayed as the result of this socialist-style of love (Zhou, 2014). Male and female characters in

1950s and early 1960s films were presented as heroes or heroines who sacrificed their individual and familial interests for the greater good. According to Zhou (2014), love must fit the political narrative of the primacy of national interests at this time period. In the famous novel *The Song of Youth*, for example, the female protagonist's experiences of falling in love with three different men in succession alluded to the woman's gradual transformation from a petty-bourgeois intellectual to a proletarian revolutionary solider who realised the perfect unity of revolutionary and love ideals (Zhou, 2014). *The Song of Youth* was turned into a film in 1959 (see Picture 6.2). Similarly, Wang, Lan, and Lu's parents' experiences exemplify socialist romantic love and marriage. In contrast to recent capitalist love, which I will discuss later in this chapter, the older generation of 9th Iron workers understood both spouses' dedication to the cause of constructing socialism as the base of socialist romances.

Picture 6.2 The film poster of *The Song of Youth* shows the heroine in the upper right corner with the short haircut that was trendy among socialist female workers at the time. The short haircut represented one's complete break with feudalism.

Chairman Mao stated in 1942 that love between different classes did not exist and that the concept that love can overcome class differences was a product of capitalist cultural poison. The local women's federations encouraged women to initiate divorce proceedings from their bourgeois or feudal landlord husbands after marriage legislation went into effect in 1950, which led to the first increase in divorce rates since 1949 (Li, 2011) (echoing Lan's experiences). Finding a marriage partner on their own or via the introduction of work unit leaders or coworkers was seen as a sign of women's pursuit of marital freedom in the new socialist society. Men and women who belonged to the masses (i.e., the unity of farmers, workers, soldiers, and all the proletariats) could fall in love since they shared the same political aspirations. Marriage was established with the consent and sanction of their work units, and, following marriage, both couples would actively engage in collective labour. Each individual's labour and political identities came before their family and gender identities. Female workers were known as 'the Iron Woman' (*tieniangzi*) because they were acknowledged for beating hardships at work. The phrase Iron Woman was also mentioned in Shi and Wang's first conversations, which shows the influence of gender egalitarianism during the socialist period.

Li Zeng (2009) analyses socialist nostalgia from a feminist perspective. Li notices that in the 1990s, popular culture shifted from critique of the ultra-left line's negation of humanity to the promotion of consumerism, which has encouraged a capitalist view that sees the exchange of commercial gifts as the expression of romantic love. In contrast to the tendency in official discourse during the socialist period to try to weaken gender differences, in the post-socialist period, gender hierarchy has reappeared. Li argues that consumer culture, which has been surging since the 1990s, encourages the reduction of the female body into a fetishised object, which leads to the older generation of women's nostalgia for the gender egalitarianism of the socialist period (Li, 2009). Furthermore, the breakdown of the free senior and childcare systems following the collapse of work units has increased the costs of social reproduction for many families. As Zhang Charlie Yi explores, the high social reproduction costs force many career women to return to their families (Zhang, 2022).

According to Wang's recollection, the socialist concept of love had depended on the shared labour, political, and moral qualities of both parties. Women had not been required to return to their families following marriage, enabling both men and women to develop their social values, which she believed could strengthen the stability of marriage and affection. These days, young people's

love and marriages, in her opinion, were fragile due to the absence of this socialist view of love. Wang's view resonated with many female former state employees I spoke to who were born between the 1940s and 1960s, as they expressed a strong sense of nostalgia for the purity of men and women's relationships during the socialist era. The older generation of 9th Iron workers criticised women's financial dependence on men and their solicitation of extravagant presents, believing that money made love less pure.

However, Lu's recollections of her parents suggested that marriage during the socialist era had not been always in accordance with ideological propaganda. People had also married for practical reasons, contrary to ideological propaganda that had portrayed marriages as the result of a couple's shared commitment to socialism. For example, Cai argues that the social benefits that work units had provided during the socialist era had frequently extended to the worker's spouse and children, reflecting a form of paternalistic state care (Cai, 2015). In accordance with what Cai refers to as 'state paternalism' (ibid.), work units had played a significant role in the marriage of Lu's parents, arranging group weddings and couple's accommodation, and so forth. People had also married out of consideration for their own personal interests, such as the advantages of urban housing and urban household registration (*hukou*; see Chapter 4). During the socialist era, state workers had been frequently regarded as having outstanding marriage prospects. Workers on the railway had enjoyed privileges in virtually every aspect of life, including access to free apartments, cinemas, schools, hospitals, kindergartens, elderly care centres, and so on. The term 'iron rice bowls' (*tiefanwan*) had referred to permanent employment in which the worker always had enjoyed access to rice, which in turn had indicated security and a good life. In addition, by marrying state workers, rural women had been able to change their household registration status from rural to urban. Similarly, Mila Rosenthal (2003) argues that female state employees' residence status had impacts on their marriages in socialist Vietnam. The fact that female state workers' urban residence permits were transferable to their spouses made them particularly marriageable (Rosenthal, 2003: 65–66).

However, even though the distribution of free apartments was common, there were severe housing shortages in urban areas in socialist countries such as Russia (Boym, 1994) and Kazakhstan (Alexander, 2018), which had also been true for the 9th Iron employees. The communal lifestyle in the work units was accompanied by the reality that the majority of working-class families had lived in tiny apartments. The housing shortage had necessitated the cohabitation of multiple family members in one room, substantially reducing the space for couples' intimate lives. This suggested

that socialist marriage might not be as romantic as the elder workers remembered. Female state employees' nostalgia for socialist romances was closely tied to their active participation in production and political movements in the socialist era, during which they had felt valued by the state and society. How have marriages and romantic relationships changed alongside the gradual disintegration of the socialist work unit system since the mid-1990s?

# 3. Love during the reform era: from romantic love to the disappointment of reality

This section will examine how SOE reform increased the affective precarity that workers experienced in their relationships with love, intimacy, and marriage, in addition to the unemployment they faced. I will introduce a love story between two 9th state workers who had met in 1990, when their salaries had been secure and the future had seemed to be predictable. I will then show how the SOE reform and subsequent unemployment harmed the couple's relationship. The couple's story was typical of many unemployed worker couples whose livelihoods were adversely impacted by labour precarity. The conclusion of this section will clarify how I distinguish between the precarity of love and the precariousness of love.

## 3.1 Falling in love

Lu Ping and her husband Wang Bei met in 1990. Lu was studying at the high school that was exclusively open to the 9th Iron workers' children. Wang Bei was studying at the vocational college of the 9th Iron. The college was for educating young people who would get permanent employment in the 9th Iron after graduation. Both lived in the 9th Iron Homes.

One morning, Lu was on her way to get her mom's hot water bottle refilled. In 1990, hot water was provided by the boiler room and every family needed to go to the boiler room to fill their water bottles in the morning. Lu walked into a handsome young man, Wang and nearly smashed her water bottle. After that, Sister Lu had a nightmare every night for a week. "I always dreamt of him smashing my water bottles! I finally got mad and confronted him, and said, 'why do you keep smashing my water bottle in my dream?!' He apologised with a smile, and we began to talk after

that. After marriage, I finally got to know that he had been deliberately waiting for me every morning to get my hot bottle so he could see me." Lu told me this with a smile on her face.

Lu and Wang got married in 1994. The 9th Iron allocated a one-room apartment for the couple. Wang graduated soon after his marriage to Lu. He became first a trainee technician and then a machine operator at the railway building sites. Lu found an accountancy job through the help of her father, a state worker. Lu and Wang had the benefit of free train tickets. As Lu recalled, Wang often jumped on a train to Lu's city at weekends and visited her with a bouquet of flowers. Nevertheless, this romantic sweetness did not last very long.

Lu's natal family was the first to experience change. Shortly after her father was diagnosed with terminal cancer, Lu's mother lost her job at the communal canteen during the first round of 9th Iron layoffs. Initially, Lu and Wang were able to send money to assist Lu's parents with their financial difficulties. In 2001, rumours began to circulate among 9th Iron workers. They speculated that the company would again dismiss workers. Wang, who had a permanent contract, did not anticipate that he would be laid off because, during the 9th Iron's previous rounds of layoffs, no formal employees had been dismissed. However, in the summer of 2001, Wang received a phone call from his manager telling him to rest for a few days. Wang was aware that this was not a good sign, but he hoped his manager would ask him to return to work after a couple of months. After a week, his manager visited Wang and persuaded him to accept the paid-off arrangements. 'Paid-off' meant that the state would calculate workers' dismissal compensation based on the number of years they worked (*maiduan*; see Chapter 4). Wang accepted the money after realising that he had no hope of negotiating with the company. In the following years, Wang never obtained a stable job. He worked as a temporary labourer at various construction sites. The couple's financial situation deteriorated.

The 9th Iron decided to demolish its one-room residence buildings in 2002. Wang and Lu, along with their six-year-old son, were evicted from their home. The family relocated into the flat of Lu's parents. Lu described her reaction to this eviction experience, "It was not until they put a demolition notice on the door of our apartment that I realised that houses were something people had to buy with their own money. We were evicted because we lacked property rights to the flat the 9th Iron allocated us." According to James Lee and Zhu Yapeng (2006), the gradual liberalisation of the housing market since the mid-1990s was accelerated by the reform of state-owned enterprises since

the late 1990s. The former collectively owned apartments of work units were either demolished or converted into private property (Lee and Zhu, 2006). As Lu complained to me, workers believed that free housing was part of their labour rights until the reform made housing a commodity that they were neither entitled to nor could afford[22].

## 3.2. Loss of masculinity, collapse of work units, and the marriage crisis of unemployed workers

Lu and Wang's romances happened in the early 1990s, when the public expression of romantic love was just beginning to be encouraged in popular culture. The reduction of political activities in the decade immediately after the Cultural Revolution allowed people to have more time and space for personal activities. The relationship between Lu and Wang, which had romantic overtones in Lu's narrative, such as sending flowers, illustrated the phenomenon of that time. Love in the early reform era also happened in the special housing configuration of the 9th Iron collective residences. Although the Reform and Opening up began in 1979, it was not until the second half of the 1990s that reform began to affect state-owned enterprises (see Chapter 4). In the 1980s and early 1990s, the lifestyle of collective living did not change much in the 9th Iron workers' residences. Not only work but also people's lives were organised collectively, with the possibility of meeting and establishing social relationships in canteens, water refilling areas, communal bathrooms, squares, etc.[23]

However, with the late-1990s state-owned enterprise reforms, Lu and Wang's lives underwent a dramatic change. Aside from financial difficulties, Wang was frustrated by his long-term unemployment. According to Lu, Wang lost both his job and his masculinity at the same moment; this in turn caused his body to go through a change. Lu complained to me that after losing his job, Wang drank alcohol every day and became impotent for two years, which at one time made Lu desperately want a divorce. One winter evening, Lu and I sat on the bed in Lu's dormitory. While knitting Wang's scarf, Lu told me about her and Wang's previous marriage crisis. Her roommate, a young female worker who had recently engaged was listening to us as well. Lu said,

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[22] Researchers have discussed the privatisation of communal residence and space in late socialist China (Pow, 2007; Pow and Kong, 2007), as well as in post-socialist countries (Häussermann, 1996; Marcuse, 1996; Struyk, 1996; Sailer-Fliege, 1999; Paul, 2009; Arpagian and Aitken, 2018).

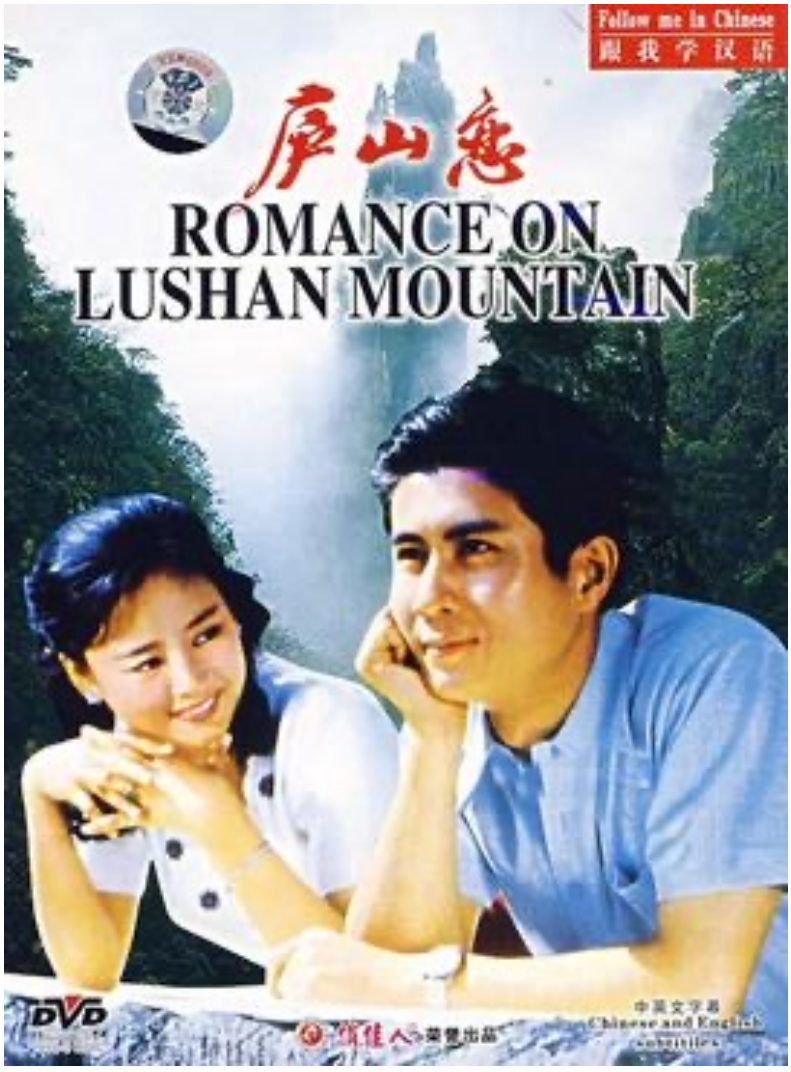
[23] This form of residence has been maintained in the present compound of the 9th Iron (see Chapter 2).

> “Once I walked up to the door of Wang's former leader's home and was very tempted to knock and go in, asking if he could cheer Wang up and get him to stop drinking," Lu explained, “But I went to the door and stood there. Wang was no longer a member of the work unit, I thought. The leader would not care about us. I walked home, noticing that our former canteen and communal restrooms were being demolished. I also noticed that young women were dressed in new outfits that Wang could never afford to buy for me. He is not man enough (*bugounanren*)! I became really upset as I walked and when I got home, I couldn't control myself and told Wang, ‘divorce!' At that moment, I felt that the love between us had disappeared.”

The socialist ideal of the male worker had been frequently portrayed as a muscular, determined person who could surmount adversity. Wang was decoupled from this image after he lost his employment as a state worker. In contrast, Lu witnessed the emergence of female subjectivities in China. After years of dressing in blue, grey, and green and erasing gender markers on purpose, the younger generation of Chinese women began to pursue beauty following the economic reform. In the popular film *Lushan Love*, for instance, the female character wore more than 20 different outfits, establishing the record for the most outfit changes by a female character since 1949 (Wang, 2015). In the *Lushan Love* poster (see Picture 6.3), the heroine was more overtly showing her love for the hero by giving him a sweet glance, whereas in the poster of The Song of Youth, the public parade was the centre of the picture. More importantly, in Picture 6.3, both the hero and heroine were wearing digital watches, which were a popular commodity in the 1980s, showing that consumerism was influencing people’s private lives.

Zhang Charlie Yi argues that after the economic reform, gender stereotypes returned to society, with women expected to be virtuous wives and mothers and husbands expected to be the main breadwinners (Zhang, 2022). Lu's remark regarding her husband Wang highlighted the fact that the resurgence of gender stereotypes after the reform resulted in a crisis of masculinity, undermining the manhood of men who were unable to provide economic security for their wives. The marriage crisis that Lu described was one of the many examples of the marriage problems that dismissed workers faced since the SOE reform. The reform exacerbated the labour precarity experienced by

unemployed workers, while at the same time intensifying the affective precarity workers faced in their intimate relationships.




Picture 6.3 Poster for Lushan Love

The crisis of masculinity caused by significant political and economic shifts is not unique to China. In her study of post-socialist Russia, Michelle Parsons (2014) discovers that the collapse of the Soviet state did not affect men and women in the same way. Working-class men were suddenly abandoned by the state, as well as their old social networks that were built based on their work. During the socialist period, most male workers used *blat*, a practice of utilising informal social connections to help their acquaintances obtain resources within a planned economy (Ledeneva, 1998). Parsons argues that during socialist times, the use of *blat* had given males a sense of autonomy and had made them believe that they had created a space of freedom under state

surveillance (Parsons, 2014). However, in post-socialist Russia, people increasingly preferred direct monetary transactions over *blat* (Parsons, 2014). These dramatic developments gave men the impression that they were no longer needed by either the state or society. Additionally, they struggled to feel appreciated by their families. After male workers lost their employment, many women became the primary breadwinners for their families. This resulted in a crisis of masculinity, with male workers turning to alcohol to regain a sense of social belonging, leading to an increase in alcoholism and a high mortality rate among men (Parsons, 2014). Similarly, Diedrich (2004) highlights that after the mining pit in Wales shut down, unemployed former miners not only faced the loss of their working-class identity but also a decline in their masculinity. These ethnographies indicate that the rise in labour precarity can impact many aspects of workers' lives.

In addition to the loss of public housing, the capacity of work units to intervene in staff members' marital lives also diminished. Saqi Ronggui (2019) notes that Women's Federations in work units historically had played a significant role in preventing the divorce of workers. During the socialist era, when a couple filed for divorce with the local government or the local court, the grassroots government and the court would first check with the couple's work unit to ensure that the work unit's women's federation or trade union had mediated the couple's dispute. The head of the women's federation or that of the labour union would visit the couple's household to assess the situation, criticise, and educate each individual. The work unit would issue an official certificate of the breakup of the couple's relationship prior to the local government or court proceeding to the next phase of the process (Saqi, 2019). Deborah Davis (2014) notes that after the reform and opening up, the marriage law has also been modified, and divorce has been viewed as a private matter between the two spouses, requiring only their agreement. Work units can no longer intervene in the marriage and divorce of their staff members. Davis argues that these changes in the law indicate "the privatisation of the institution of marriage" (Davis, 2014: 554). The historical change has resulted in the separation of the individual from the collective work unit. In Lu's case, the dismissal caused not only the loss of her job and residence but also the loss of her work unit status and the couple's social support network, which had been developed around their work unit identities. Since Wang was no longer a member of the 9th Iron, Lu no longer had a valid reason to seek assistance from Wang's former supervisors.

To summarise, the above ethnography illustrated how labour precarity brought about the affective precarity that the 9th Iron workers experience in their intimate lives. These changes strained the

familial bonds of many former 9th Iron state employees. There were parallels between Lu's situation and numerous 9th Iron unemployed worker families that experienced marriage crises following the SOE reform. The massive layoffs in the public sector over a short period of time had a significant impact on many families, not only in terms of a precipitous decline in their income but also in terms of strains in family relationships and the shifting role that work units play in people's lives. Social changes also brought about a redefinition of men's and women's gender expectations and the decoupling of the individual from the collective, which undoubtedly influenced the institution of marriage and shaped new experiences of love (or losing love).

I use the term "precarity of love" to denote the precarity that arises in romantic relationships due to precarious employment conditions and economic insecurity. Besides, inspired by Judith Butler's (2004) distinction between precarity and precariousness (see Chapter 1), I define the precariousness of romantic love as the ontological uncertainty of love, or the inevitable uncertainty of the unknown that the lover encounters when pursuing the love of the beloved. The precariousness of romantic love is reminiscent of Zygmunt Bauman's (2013) interpretation of romantic love, as he says:

> "It is not in craving after ready-made, complete, and finished things that love finds its meaning—but in the urge to participate in the becoming of such things. Love is akin to transcendence; it is but another name for creative drive, and as such, it is fraught with risks, as all creation is never sure where it is going to end...This is what makes love feel like a caprice of fate—that eerie and mysterious future, impossible to be told in advance, to be pre-empted or staved off, to be speeded up or arrested." (Bauman, 2013: 6–7)

In other words, to love always means to expose oneself to the unpredictability of fate, which will inevitably result in precarious experiences, i.e., the precariousness of love. However, this section has looked at a particular form of "the precarity of love" that the 9th Iron unemployed workers experienced. The precarity of love was caused by the sudden increase in labour precarity and economic vulnerability that dismissed workers faced following the disintegration of the state employment system. This precarity of love, with its deep historical imprint, deserves to be analysed and reflected upon.

So, what do romantic affection, intimacy, and marriage mean for today's young workers?

# 4. Precarious love of temporary workers and migrant workers

This section will examine the ways in which migrant and temporary workers' experiences with labour and structural precarity impacted their intimate relationships and romantic experiences. Section 5.1 will demonstrate that the high cost of living in cities, as well as the household registration system, often resulted in long-term separations between married migrant couples who came from rural areas. These couples strived to maintain their feelings of love for each other. Section 5.2, on the other hand, demonstrates a different understanding of love and marriage that I discovered among unmarried young male workers (both the 9th Iron temporary workers and migrant workers). Unmarried men who were experiencing severe labour precarity were more inclined to separate love, sex, and marriage. Ethnographies in Sections 5.1 and 5.2 will demonstrate the intersection between the precarity of love, labour precarity, and structural precarity in the contemporary 9th Iron.

## 4.1 leaving or staying in cities: the conjugal love of married migrant couples

Dai Li was relaxing outside the tunnel's entrance when I first noticed him. He was born in 1985 and has worked in the drilling industry for over ten years. Dai told me that he was considering leaving his job, despite the fact that his salary (about 9000 RMB per month) was better than that of many construction workers. Dai was concerned that his long hours working with wind drills[24] might impair his health and cause him to develop pneumoconiosis. The disease usually affects drillers, causing coughing, bloody coughing, and difficulty breathing. Dai said that, despite the fact that wearing masks had lately became compulsory (see Chapter 2), workers still questioned how far the protective gadgets provided by the company could protect them.

But apart from the health concerns, Dai was struggled to make his marriage work. Dai's wife and he had not seen each other for almost two years. After falling in love with Dai, his wife left her village of Jiaocheng and travelled to Shenzhen to accompany him. She quickly returned to Jiaocheng, though, because she was pregnant. She moved back and forth between Shenzhen and Jiaocheng several times over the years, but she was unable to stay for an extended period of time in either

[24] Wind drills are hand-held electric machines that dig holes in rocks, commonly used on construction sites.

place. In Shenzhen, she could be with her husband but not see her children; in Jiaocheng, she could care for her children but not see her husband. During the 2017 Spring Festival, Dai's wife and Dai had a dispute because she was tired of travelling back and forth and wanted Dai to work in a town close to Jiaocheng. Dai refused because he would earn significantly less in Jiaocheng. Dai's denial led his wife to suspect that he had affairs in Shenzhen. She angrily returned to her mother's house. Since then, Dai's relationship with his wife has deteriorated. Dai was still trying to reconcile with his wife at the time of my interview. He planned to visit her during his next vacation. Dai, like other married male workers from the countryside, struggled to decide whether to stay in Shenzhen or leave. If they went back to their hometown, they would have more time to spend with their spouses, but their income would be much lower. If they stayed in cities, they risked being estranged from their wives.

A similar situation was faced by another couple, Hou Xuanting and Mao Juncai. They had to make a rapid decision when Hou became pregnant. Hou and Mao were both born in the 1990s, were both from rural families, had attended the same vocational college, and joined the 9th Iron following graduation. Mao was offered a two-year agency contract (see Chapter 4). Although Hou worked as the Project Director's secretary, she was not given a contract. The compound assigned the couple a dormitory room. Hou discovered she was pregnant after working here for over a year. When Hou became pregnant, she was fired with no compensation, except for what she had earned up to the end of the previous month. Hou was unable to file a legal complaint against the compound because she lacked insurance and a formal contract. Furthermore, according to the rules, Hou could not stay in the staff dormitory any longer. Hou and Mao planned to rent a room in the nearby village and relocate together. However, the two quickly learned that Mao's wage alone (7,000 RMB) was barely sufficient to cover their living expenses plus the rent. Furthermore, maternity examinations, as well as delivery and postnatal care, were also prohibitively expensive in Shenzhen City. Because Hou's household registration was not in Shenzhen, she was ineligible for medical insurance and subsidies given to Shenzhen residents.

The couple finally decided that Hou would return to Mao's rural home alone, where Mao's mother would care for Hou until the baby was born and had become a toddler. This meant that Mao and Hou would be apart for an extended period of time. Hou told me, “Mao loves me. He is allowing me to return to the countryside so that I can be cared for. But the cost is that our relationship may be jeopardised. We will never be able to live in the same location again, at least not until the child is

three. With such a long period of time and such a big distance between us, I am concerned that our relationship might suffer. But I know that if I stay, he will struggle to make ends meet. I don't want to put more stress on his shoulders. I wrote in my diary, ‘We’re saying goodbye now so we can be happier when we meet again.’ ”

My discussion with Hou piqued my interest. Hou thought that the only reason they parted was because of their love for one another. The separation was intended to pave the way for a brighter, more loving, and happier future for both of them. Hou saw the motivation of her departure as conjugal love.

Xiang Biao argues that the rural-to-urban migration surge that has emerged in China since the late 1990s is distinct from the migration that occurred between the 1980s and mid-1990s (Xiang, 2021a, 2021b). The difference lay in the fact that, between the 1980s and the mid-1990s, the majority of rural residents migrated to the cities in search of employment due to a rural labour surplus (Xiang, 2021a, 2021b). The agricultural incomes of the majority of families were insufficient to meet basic needs. The majority of people migrated to cities with the goal of obtaining money to alleviate extreme poverty. In the late 1990s, the total collapse of socialist social welfare (i.e., the end of the labour unit system in the cities and the de-collectivisation in the rural areas) led to an increase in social reproduction costs. Since the 2000s, migrant workers have discovered that although their salaries have increased, they still struggle to cover the rising costs of raising children and providing for the elderly.

Additionally, marriage practices in the countryside have been altering since the late 1990s. Between the 1980s and mid-1990s, Migrant labourers used to spend their earnings on repairing old houses so they could marry in them. However, possessing an urban apartment in a high-rise building has now become a basic necessity for rural men to marry. These social changes have caused a shift in the motivations for migration, from initially satisfying subsistence needs to now providing a higher standard of living and greater purchasing power for their children, elderly parents, or prospective wives since the late 1990s. Xiang coins the term "reproduction-driven migration" to describe the phenomenon in which people migrate domestically or internationally in order to rapidly accumulate savings to buy apartments, get married, pay for children's education, and the medical care of the elderly. Xiang argues that the current type of migration has been driven by activities that intend to

“sustain and enhance life on a daily and generational basis, and constitute part of what Marx and Engels termed ‘social reproduction’” (Xiang, 2021a:34-35).

I argue with Xiang’s argument (2021) on the changing patterns of migration, as my ethnography also shows that the high cost of raising families has influenced workers’ intimate lives. However, Xiang's analysis lacks the affective dimension, as he fails to recognise that conjugal love can be one of the primary motivations for migration. Xiang attributes the motivations for migration to social reproduction, whereas migrants might attribute their motivations to love. They used the language of love to describe their various efforts to improve their lives and relationships, and nothing else. In June Hee Kwon's study of the northeastern Chinese village of Yanbian near North Korea, where the men of most families migrated to South Korea to earn remittances, he discovers that affection played a significant role in maintaining the cycle of migration (Kwon, 2015). In contrast to the rural-to-urban migrant couples I mentioned previously, Kwon focuses on the wives and mothers who remained at home for years and years, awaiting the return of their husbands and sons. Women conveyed their love and longing for migrants, thereby strengthening the bond between the migrant and his or her remaining family members (Kwon, 2015).

Labour precarity has thus brought about changes in people's practices and understandings of conjugal love. Precarious employment stopped them from getting urban household registration, which excluded working-class families like Dai’s and Hou’s from the public care resources in the cities where they worked. As most families were unable to afford private medical and social care in the cities, they were forced to return or remain in their home villages, placing their relationships with their loved ones at risk. In the cases of Dai, Hou, and many other workers I spoke to, people made efforts to maintain their relationships, preserving their love for their spouses. Most of the time, workers attempted to minimise the harm that long separations from their spouses could do to their relationships. For instance, women employed as temporary workers frequently move between their home towns and construction sites where their spouses work (see Chapter 2). To put it another way, my interlocutors attempted to resist the precarity of love.

## 4.2 “Love and marriage are two different things”: unmarried male workers’ opinions on romantic love, sex, and marriage

In the preceding section, I highlighted how married workers were pulled between living in cities and returning to the countryside because of the conjugal love that they held for their spouses. However, in the face of tremendous economic uncertainty and labour precarity, unmarried male workers had a different perspective on love and marriage from such conjugal love. Unmarried male workers became frustrated by their failed attempts to find romantic love. In response to the precarity of love, they segregated romantic love, sex, and their pursuits of potential marital partners.

After dinner, Lian Yonghao, a 30-year-old technician on a two-year agency contract, told me about his experiences with blind dates and searching for a wife.

> "Because I couldn't afford to buy a flat in my twenties, women assumed I was too poor for them. I finally got an apartment in Hefei last year. I still have a mortgage to pay for the next 20 years, but owning a flat shows that my qualities (*tiaojian*) have improved since ten years ago. I went on around 100 blind dates in the last six months. Going on so many blind dates may seem insane to you, but I think it's a good thing since it indicates I now have the bravery to date."

*Tiaojian* used to mean a person's good qualities in all aspects, including family background, appearances, literacy, and personalities. Matchmakers (*meipo*) set up a man and a woman with similar levels of qualities (*tiaojian*) to date. But in recent years this word was mostly used to refer to a person's financial capability and family background. Lian was born in a rural family in Anhui Province and grew up in a 'village-in-the-city'[25] in Shanghai, where his parents worked as migrant workers between 1995 and 2016. At the age of 20, he graduated from a technician college and began working in the 9th Iron since 2010. For several years, he was a no-contract trainee and then an intern before signing a two-year agency contract with the 9th Iron. Lian told me,

> "This year I realised that marriage and love are two different things. It's impossible to find romantic love in firewood, rice, oil, and salt (*chaimiyousan*). What I seek in a future bride is good qualities (*tianjian*). I am looking for a woman with a college degree. It is also crucial that my parents like her."

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[25] See Zhang Li's vivid depiction of life in villages-in-the-cities in China (Zhang, 2001).

Lian used “firewood, rice, oil, and salt” to refer to their day-to-day lives. As mentioned above, the first generation of migrants preferred to build marriage houses in their native village. The customary practice was to restore their old family houses or to construct a two-story house near their brothers' houses. In recent years, second generation migrants preferred to buy urban apartments that would enable them to seek a wife. Workers of the 9th Iron told me that most migrants were no longer satisfied with purchasing a flat in a town. A three-bedroom urban flat in the provincial capital of their native province was the most common idea for a proper house to live in after getting married. Usually, the groom or the groom's family was supposed to pay for the marital house before the wedding. The bride and her family might agree to contribute to the mortgage on the marriage house, but the groom's family must pay off the initial payment.

It was almost impossible for an entry-level male worker to attain this goal when he had no family support. According to a survey done by the Shenzhen government in 2021, technicians of state companies earned an average level wage of 7000 RMB per month (£781). A three-bedroom flat in Hefei's suburbs costs over 2,000,000 Yuan (£223,189), and a three-bedroom flat in Shenzhen costs around 9,000,000 Yuan (£1,004,352). Because of the substantial gap between wages and housing prices, many workers sarcastically referred to themselves as “house slaves” (*fangnu*). For male migrants, saving for a marriage home often took up their 20s and early 30s. According to a traditional Chinese proverb, establishing a family and establishing a business are of equal significance for men. Before he turns 30 and achieves maturity, a man must accomplish these two duties (see Chapter 3). Marriage is a rite of passage into maturity, transforming a boy into a man. Consequently, purchasing a home is strongly associated with masculinity. In contrast, someone who cannot afford a home will experience a lack of masculinity and a sense of defeat (as the case below will demonstrate). The burden of buying a marriage house increased young male migrants’ difficulties in establishing and maintaining stable romantic relationships in cities. They faced the precarity of love.

Cheng Tianru, a 27-year-old junior technician (on an agency contract) from an Anhui village, had just broken up with his girlfriend after two years’ relationship. His girlfriend came from the same village as Cheng and worked in the town nearby their home village. He said,

> "Working on the railway means that you must move around the country. We could not meet often because of the distance. She wanted me to find a local job in the town next to our village, but I could not earn much if I listened to her. It would be impossible for me to save up the money to buy a marriage house in 5 years if I went back to my hometown. Without a flat, her parents will never let her marry me."

Cheng believed that it would be much better if he let his girlfriend leave now, as he did not want to make her wait any longer. Cheng said,

> "She is still young (23 years old), but if we stay together for another two years, she will be 25 years old, which will make her less appealing to men in our hometown. I don't want to waste her time. It's selfish if I stay with her but can't afford to marry her."

Although Cheng acted as if he did not care about his ex-girlfriend anymore, he went through quite a long period of depression when he got the news that she had married a local government official half a year after the breakup. He invited colleagues to drink with him, including Aunt Wang (see Chapter 1). Cheng was crying while Wang tried to comfort him. As she was holding Cheng in her arms and saying, "You must not worry! Aunt Wang can find someone better than her for you." Cheng responded,

> "Aunt, what I can't get over is that she married someone who is a civil servant. The man she married has a proper flat in the city that his parents bought for him. However, I need another 5 to 10 years of hard work to buy one. Sons of resourceful parents (*guanerdai*) can easily become civil servants. Sons of wealthy parents (*fuerdai*) can easily set up a business. They have the choice of staying close to their wives and children. However, sons of rural people (*nongerdai*) like us, who have little connection and little money, must migrate from place to place to earn a living."

Later, Cheng told me,

> "I believe that it's one thing for two people to fall in love, but quite another for them to get married. I know that my ex-girlfriend loved me, but when it came to the decision of

> marriage, she had to consider her parents' feelings. She loved her parents and did not want to break their hearts. Love cannot win over the harsh realities of our society (xianshi)."

Yan Yunxiang contrasts villagers' attitudes towards conjugal love in Xiajia Village in the 1970s and 1990s (Yan, 2003). He argues that after reform and opening up, rural China experienced a romantic revolution that resulted from an increase in young people's autonomy. People exhibited their love in a variety of ways in 1990, and young people became more outspoken and frank about their love lives. Premarital sex between engaged couples became more common[26]. Young people preferred to make their own marriage decisions, even if it meant confronting parental authority. Furthermore, Yan observes that the discourse of the ideal marriage took a materialistic turn around 1990 (Yan, 2003). Young women believed that the ideal man came from a wealthy family and could earn a living through non-agricultural activities. Young men prioritised the appearance of women. It was thought that having a beautiful body, being able to dress up, and having gentle and considerate personality traits were vital (Yan, 2003).

This materialistic feature in ideal-spouse discourse has continued to develop since the 2000s. Zhang Charlie Yi investigated a dating show called 'If You Are the One', which debuted on television around the year 2010 (Zhang, 2022). Zhang discovers that this show portrayed love as a limited resource in modern society that could only be won through competition. If You Are the One placed a greater emphasis on personal wealth and the image of the global elite as significant objects to display. The programme staff gave female visitors a brief video that the male guest shot before he took the stage. In their videos, most male guests chose to show off their excellent careers, luxurious automobiles, watches, and inner wishes for a life companion. Before making selections, female guests would question the male guest on his salary, education, family, and housing situation. Female visitors who believed the male guest did not match their expectations would turn off the light board in front of them. Survivors of the selection would have the opportunity to date women they desired (Zhang, 2022). As Picture 6.4 shows, a female visitor stated on If You Are the One that she would rather cry in a BMW than laugh on a bike. This statement made her a popular topic on the internet that year.

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[26] Yan remarked that this practice differed from western dating culture in that engaged couples were expected to wed. Moreover, villagers tended to believe that sexual activity between engaged couples strengthened the bond between two individuals and two families, thereby making the engagement more stable and unlikely to fail (Yan, 2003).

Picture 6.4 a dating show called 'If You Are the One'

Both Yan (2003) and Zhang (2022) identify a materialistic change in Chinese spouse selection criteria and discourses since the 1990s, which has significantly influenced people's love experiences and intimate relationships. This materialistic change reflects a recent capitalist understanding of love, in which the opportunity to pursue love is closely related to one's financial autonomy. This shift also presents masculinity as the characteristic of a successful man striving for personal success, and femininity as the characteristic of a beautiful, gentle wife and mother. However, in both Yan's (2003) and Zhang's (2022) studies, young people's pursuits of love were aimed at marriage. People tried to discover love that could lead to marriage. In 1990, in Xiajia Village, marriages were arranged for young people by their families soon after they fell in love (Yan, 2003). Although men and women did not instantly engage in Zhang's dating programme, both female and male visitors' dating selections were aimed at marriage (Zhang, 2022).

Nonetheless, in 2020 and 2021, I observed a shift in young male staff members' perspectives on love and marriage. The capitalist understanding of romantic love and gender stereotypes mentioned above persist. However, the 1990s' and 2000s' generation males had romantic love desires but attempted to separate the concept of love from marriage. Many times, I heard male workers talk

about their division of love and marriage—romantic love was fragile and could not overcome financial difficulties and obstacles from parents, whereas marriage, as a 28-year-old migrant worker named Tao Jinhua put it, was like a business partnership between a man and a woman, and interests had to be carefully considered. The young, unmarried male workers who I talked with tended to think of marriage and love as two completely separate things and refused to see romantic love as an essential factor in a successful marriage.

When selecting a wife, male workers no longer put female appearances at the top of their list of concerns. Instead, many male workers underlined their parents' acceptance of their potential marriages. Zhao Dawei, a 26-year-old male technician on a labour agency contract, told me,

> "After my father died, my mother worked as a construction labourer to pay my tuition fees. In order to repay my mother's efforts of care and fulfil my filial piety duty, I will ask my mother to live with me and my future wife. So I expect my wife to get along well with my mother."

Xie Le, a 20-year-old cement worker who worked as a migrant worker for a private subcontractor, told me, "If my future wife and I cannot agree on how to care for my parents, we will not be able to marry." The underlying issue reflected in these responses is that current rural China's elderly care system is woefully inadequate. When rural people age, they can no longer make an income and can hardly receive local government support. So they have to rely totally on their children and children-in-law to care for them. Because of the scarcity of care for older people, workers must assess the relationship between their future spouses and their parents before marrying.

Nonetheless, the consideration of parents' approval of their marital spouses did not contradict people's growing liberal attitude towards premarital sex. Similar to the separation between love and marriage, love and sex were not always considered two connected things in young unmarried male workers' views. Workers often had one to two love relationships (during which sexual activities happened) before deciding to get engaged, and this was true for both young male and female workers. Nonetheless, living together prior to marriage (tongju) was still unusual. In the 9th Iron compound, only engaged couples were permitted to live together, and the compound committee would assign the couple a dormitory room. This contrasted with the socialist era, when couples had only been allowed to live together after marriage. Nonetheless, unless they were engaged, 9th Iron

workers were not permitted to bring their girlfriends or boyfriends to their dormitories. Workers who violated the guidelines were fined by the compound committee and required to attend an education session on the 9th Iron's dormitory rules. Therefore, workers and their girlfriends or boyfriends sometimes spent the night at a motel in a nearby village. The 9th Iron still performed a socialist-style function in regulating employees' personal lives to some extent.

Surfing the internet and conversing with chatroom hostesses[27] (nvzhubo) was a way for male workers to feel less lonely. In China, short video platforms and diverse live broadcast platforms have grown quickly since 2018. In their spare time, workers watched their preferred chatroom hostesses on their mobile phones. The live broadcasts often lasted all night, and the audience sent presents to the hostesses in order to talk with them online. These presents range in value from a few RMBs to several thousand RMBs. An unmarried male temporary technician allegedly spent all of his savings and maxed out his credit card limitations to buy gifts for a chatroom hostess he never met, and he was sacked by the 9th Iron for this reason. This former worker became an object of ridicule among coworkers. Workers said that he "spent his wife money" (his savings for buying a marriage house) to please a stranger's wife (implying that the chatroom hostess would eventually marry someone wealthy rather than a temporary worker)".

Nonetheless, I only observed the tendency of unmarried young men to oppose romantic love to marriage, not among female workers. Most female workers still wanted to find a married partner who would provide them with romantic love as well as meet their material demands. Female acceptance of premarital sex increased, compared to the situation in Fang's 2010 research on manufacturing female workers (Fang, 2012). In the 9th Iron, it was common for a woman to have a sexual relationship with her boyfriend. Nonetheless, women were still concerned that their boyfriends would not propose to them. Bad men were a popular topic of after-dinner chats in female dormitories. Those who did not propose to their girlfriends after a couple of years of dating were seen to be just as horrible as those who lied. According to Yuan Lili, a 23-year-old female temporary technician, "bad men waste our precious youth." "Didn't the man's youth pass the same way?" I inquired. All of the females objected swiftly to my stupid question. "Because female youth is more valuable than male youth," answered Xixi, a 24-year-old female temporary accountant. Xixi

[27] Chatroom hostesses chat with their online audience, occasionally dancing or singing. Because of the rigorous cyber monitoring, the content on the legal platforms cannot be explicit, so hostesses often provide emotional comfort to the audience instead. Nevertheless, performance on illegal platforms can be exotic.

said, "People believe that a single woman in her 30s will end up marrying someone who is not a good match." Female workers of the 9th Iron admitted that, while men cared less about whether or not their wives were virgins these days, it was still damaging to female interests if women spent their time in relationships that did not lead to marriage. In short, while young employees' attitudes towards marriage and love might differ based on their gender, marriage continued to be the ideal life for both men and women. Unlike young women, who still sought romantic love in marriages, young male migrants differentiated love from marriage and emphasised the pragmatic side of marriage.

# 5. Conclusion

This chapter presents a novel approach to literature on precarity by demonstrating how both labour precarity and structural precarity influence individuals' viewpoints, experiences, understandings, and moral evaluations of romantic love and intimate relationships. Alfred Gell argues that "the type and distribution of social knowledge in these societies" shaped the manifestation of love in different societies (Gell, 2011:2). Gell (2011) posits that in Umeda, where individuals were familiar with their future spouses from a young age, romantic love occurred only outside of marriage, in the form of secret affairs. These affairs were viewed as a threat to society because they could lead to sorcery attacks. In contrast, romantic love has been structurally essential to modern societies because love makes people in modern society believe that they should choose a particular partner rather than hesitate among other potential choices. For Gell, love is a knowledge system whose implications differ across societies. Gell's (2011) article inspires us to ask: What does romantic love mean to people in different historical periods and societies, and how does it contribute to the stability or instability of social and family structures? Reflecting on the evolving concepts and practices of love from imperial China to socialist and now late-socialist China, we can observe shifts in various knowledge systems. These systems do not replace one another but intersect, invoking conflicting ideas and practices of love. As my interviews with different generations of 9th Iron workers suggest, diverse understandings and practices of love coexist, with people continually contemplating their views on love and making judgements about what kind of romantic affection is moral and what is not. During the imperial period, people saw romantic love as a threat to the stability of families. In contrast, people viewed love as a stabilising force for socialist marriage and

society. But now, in the market era, love encounters precarity, evoking different opinions on the importance and characteristics of romantic love.

The chapter has shown that the older generation of state workers experienced nostalgia for the socialist conception of romantic love, which had been fostered via the shared commitment to socialist work and shared values between both spouses. However, the emergence of consumerism since the 1990s has altered the manner in which individuals express affection. The degree of men's economic security has a significant impact on their ability to pursue romantic relationships. Love discourses and notions have shifted towards materialism. The older generation of the 9th Iron state workers contended that in recent years, capitalism has commodified love, rendering it less "pure" compared to socialist romances. Besides, in late socialist China, due to the disintegration of the socialist welfare system that had been provided by the socialist work unit, some women gave up waged work and instead focused on domestic care responsibilities. The older generation of workers believed that women's return to their families would adversely affect their intimate relationships, as they would no longer have common interests and experiences with their spouses. Thus, the older worker generation had a strong sense of nostalgia for socialist love and intimate relationships, which they perceived as being more stable and pure.

I have shown that labour precarity and structural precarity have amplified the affective precarity that people face in their intimate lives. I used the term "precarity of love" to delineate the vulnerability and insecurity that emerge in intimate relationships as a result of unstable employment circumstances and economic uncertainty. The intersection of different types of precarity has significantly transformed people's experiences and expectations about love, intimacy, and marriage.

The group of former state employees of the 9th Iron experienced a surge in conflicts in their intimate relationships because of the significant layoffs following the SOE reform. Unemployed male workers encountered a decline in their sense of masculinity, leading to difficulties in their relationships with their spouses. During the socialist era, work units and the women's federation had played a crucial role in avoiding divorces. However, with the decline of the state's intervention in private life since the reform, workers no longer had access to support from these organisations. For temporary workers and rural-to-urban migrant workers, migration meant prolonged separations from loved ones, hence posing challenges to their intimate relationships. I noticed that married migrant couples made efforts to maintain their conjugal love for each other. Nevertheless,

unmarried young male workers held a different view of love and marriage, which was different from the married migrant couples as well as from the older generation of 9th Iron workers.

Young male temporary workers and young male migrant workers made up the majority of the workforce in the Ganshen Project. For unmarried males in these two groups, prioritising savings for a wedding and a new home was an essential component of their everyday existence. Due to their temporary job positions and disadvantaged family backgrounds, they had challenges competing with their urban male counterparts. Under the significant pressure of buying a house and saving for a wedding, unmarried male temporary workers started to differentiate between love, marriage, and sex. They perceived love as romantic yet fragile and unreliable, while regarding marriage as practical yet steady and necessary. Young male workers differentiated the fragile love that they experienced in reality from a pragmatic marriage in the future that they were saving up for, as well as the temporary emotional and sexual comfort they pursued through online or offline means. Unmarried male workers carefully used these differentiations to conceal the everyday intersection of precarity they faced and construct ethical solutions to the crisis of love and intimacy.

This chapter has demonstrated the impact of the intersection of precarity on the intimate lives of industrial workers by examining the lives of different worker groups with varying contract types and generations. In contrast, the following chapter will explore how labour precarity influences workplace relationships and interactions, which has resulted in the social precarity experienced by workers.

# Chapter 7
# Precarity of Guanxi: Navigating Social Precarity at the Workplace

One evening, I overheard a male temporary worker, Zhang Zhuan, tell a friend on the phone, "*Guanxi* is the most important thing in China. There is no way to achieve anything without *guanxi*." After hanging up, Zhang told me that his former colleague, Liu Haoran, wanted to be transferred to another railway project. To do so, Liu needed Wang Meng, who was a friend of the company's human resources department manager, to act as a middleman and introduce Liu to the manager. On another occasion, a state worker named Haijun told me, Before the reform, people in the project compound usually had good *guanxi*. Workers were close to one another. But now, people have become estranged from one another." In Zhang's and Haijun's words, they used the term *guanxi* differently. Zhang emphasised the pragmatic function of *guanxi*: *guanxi* were necessary to achieve a certain purpose. Whereas Haijun emphasised the emotional and moral meaning of *guanxi*: *guanxi* were purposes in themselves, because maintaining harmonious *guanxi* with coworkers was seen by Haijun as a good, positive, and ethical thing. Unlike the present, Haijun felt uncomfortable with the indifference between people in the compound.

## 1. Introduction

This chapter will examine the social precarity experienced by 9th Iron workers in their interactions with co-workers. I will demonstrate how labour precarity has rendered earlier moral frameworks of labour partnerships vulnerable or impractical, hence exacerbating disputes in interpersonal relationships in the 9th Iron. My ethnographic examples focus mostly on master-apprentice relationships between 9th Iron state workers and 9th Iron temporary trainees; however, other types of labour relationships are also explored. I will show how people strive to live ethical lives and interact ethically with each other in the context of precarity.

In the socialist era, the state tried to supplant the Confucian master-apprentice morality with a morality centred on socialist comradeship. According to Richard Madsen (2022), the state's

endeavour in rural China was not entirely successful, as Confucianism and Maoism coexisted throughout the socialist era. In the 9th Iron, both socialist and Confucian master-apprentice structures were still discernible and continued to influence the moral reasoning and practices of workers. However, labour precarity rendered both relationship types vulnerable. The socialist and Confucian norms of moral interaction between masters and apprentices were disrupted due to the presence of various temporary contracts, frequent employee turnovers, and alterations in performance evaluation methods.

In order to explore and understand how these relationships played out and were understood by workers, I focus on how the concept of *guanxi* guided and explained everyday interactions in the 9th Iron. Although conventionally understood as an instrumental mode of connection, I show here that in fact, *guanxi* is a complex relationship with moral, functional, and emotional components. While many authors analyse *guanxi* as personal networks of instrumental particular ties (Jacobs, 1979; Chiao, 1982; Walder, 1986, 1989; Hwang, 1987; Yang, 1994; Smart, 1993; Bian, 2008, 2019; Szeto et al., 2006; Qi, 2013), Liang Shuming ([1949]2021) and Fei Xiaotong (Fei, [1947] 2013) see *guanxi* as an extension of kinship relationships and point out that people apply different moral principles to different *guanxi*. They thus underscore the morality of *guanxi*. Recent research has also highlighted the significance of affection in the establishment and maintenance of *guanxi*. According to Andrew Kipnis, *guanxi* is a unifying complex in which material obligations and emotions (*ganging*) are both important (Kipnis, 1997). Different from Kipnis (1997), Yan Yunxiang distinguishes *guanxi* from “human feelings” (*renqing*) (Yan, 1996: 122). According to Yan, human feelings (*renqing*) contain moral norms and guidance for social interactions and emotion responses, whereas *guanxi* refers to general social relationships (Yan, 1996, 2009). Wu Di further distinguishes *guanxi* from “interactional affection(*jiaoqing*)” (Wu, 2014: 73). Wu argues that *jiaoqing* is cultivated through the exchange of emotions and routine social interaction, while *guanxi* is more likely to be instrumental.

However, these studies pay less attention to the everyday moments in which people change the ways they understand, describe, and cultivate their social relationships. I will explore how people describe and classify their social interactions in different situations, as well as how they tailor and change their descriptions of what their relationships are according to the situations they face. I find that in order to achieve various ethical goals, individuals carefully choose between the terms "*guanxi*," "*renqing*," "*jiaoqing*," and "*ganging*" to describe their social relationships. My

ethnography will show how people use different expressions and refer to different moral frameworks to describe and develop their social relationships in the context of labour precarity. In doing so, my interlocutors emphasise one or another aspect of guanxi. These various expressions about relationships frequently indicate interlocutors' ethical deliberations, reflecting the ethics of precarity in people's daily interactions. Thus, I contend that the ethics of precarity is a situational mode of ethics, in the sense used by anthropologists who have discussed what they call "ordinary ethics"(Lambek, 2010; Laidlaw, 2002, 2013, 2017; Das, 2012; Fassin, 2012; see Chapter 3). The 9th Iron workers made ethical choices in complex situations, and their choices were influenced by multiple factors, including different moral principles, dynamics in social interactions, their social groups and life experiences, and so on.

This situational characteristic of ethics might be prevalent in societies where conflicting moral frameworks exist (Horty, 2003; Hare, 1981; Pearce and Littlejohn, 1997). However, my study is distinctive because it addresses the exact characteristics of moral frameworks in China, the diverse strategies employed by 9th Iron workers to navigate their ethical dilemmas, and the convergence of multiple forms of vulnerability experienced by Chinese industrial workers. In the Chinese moral landscape, interactions between Confucian values, socialist morality, and neoliberal ideology frequently produce contradictions (Yan, 2003, 2011, 2020). Moreover, as a result of the incongruities between different moral frameworks, the Chinese frequently find themselves in morally complex situations that require them to resort to multiple solutions, which results in what Kleinman calls a "divided inner self" (Kleinman, 2011: 270). These factors also contribute to the situational nature of Chinese ethical sensibilities.

In the 9th Iron, the ethics of precarity were generated as a response to the everyday labour and social precarity faced by workers. On the topic of precarity and ethics, researchers have explored the moral economy of flexible production (Kofti, 2016) and of unemployment (McKowen, 2022), poor people's moral striving for a good life (Gregory and Altman, 2018), public moral concerns about bullies in precarious working environments (Matos, 2019), and precarious workers' moral judgement and class awareness (Trappmann et al., 2021), but they have paid less attention to everyday situations of ethical dilemmas, which my study will supplement (see Chapter 3).

Furthermore, to examine how such situational fluidity of ethics plays out, this chapter specifically examines the ethical aspects of workers' daily dialogues. Michael Lambek argues that ethics is an inherent part of both speech and action (Lambek, 2010:1). Language is a crucial component of ethics (Rumsey, 2010) and hence merits thorough examination. Building on Jack Sidnell's investigation into everyday conversations (Sidnell, 2010) and Das' focus on ordinary ethical language (Das, 2010, 2012), I will thus investigate the ethical dimension of my interlocutors' conversations to uncover how ethics play out situationally.

First, I will present the three components of *guanxi*, namely instrumentality (*li*), morality (*de*), and emotion (*qing*), and elucidate how they manifest in the everyday lives of workers. Subsequently, I will demonstrate how conflicts arising from divergent moral frameworks and labour precarity made master-apprentice relationships, one of the dominant relationships in the 9th Iron, increasingly precarious. Finally, I will demonstrate how the ethics of precarity were manifested in daily workplace conversations and interactive practices in the 9th Iron.

## 2. The three components of *guanxi*

9th Iron workers' social activities were important occasions not only for my interlocutors to build and maintain their *guanxi* but also for me to observe the three components of *guanxi*: instrumentality (*li*), morality (*de*), and emotion (*qing*). I will identify three components of *guanxi* in 9th Iron workers' relationships with their colleagues and demonstrate how the gendered labour hierarchy in 9th Iron influences workers' relationships in leisure activities. I will start with an ethnographic example of a dinner where people socialised.

One day after work, a middle-level 9th Iron manager, Lin, invited me to dinner with other colleagues. There were both state employees and temporary employees present. We took our seats at a round table. "Comrade, you have always worked hard, so eat well and drink well today," Lin said and then he left the room. For a brief moment, everyone fell silent. I noticed a few people discussing where the leader was going to eat next. Some people thought he would invite a government official to dinner, while others believed a subcontractor would invite him. People ate and talked as the dishes were brought up one by one, and the atmosphere gradually became more lively. One of the state workers, Peng Dongshan, stood up and raised his glass, saying, "I and Xiang

Lei (another state worker) are both old comrades who fought hard together. For many years, we had reciprocal affection (*jiaoqing*). We used to work together on the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau to build the railway. There was a scarcity of water on the plateau, so everyone took turns using a basin of washing water." Liu Zhi, a young male agency worker, said, "You are friends with a basin of water, so you have to drink a glass of wine to make it worthwhile." So Peng and Xiang raised their glasses in toast.

"Men always start talking about emotions (*ganging*) when they drink," a female state worker, Jiang Guifang, said to me. I noticed her mocking tone. She muttered that Xiang and Peng had not spoken in a long time, that Xiang had recently joined our company, allegedly as a result of a top leader's arrangement, and that Peng was only doing this to prove to everyone that he and Xiang were on good terms. As the atmosphere improved, people turned on the karaoke and began to sing. Despite her reservations about the toast, Jiang soon joined the crowd and began joking with Peng and Xiang. Lin Li, the female temporary worker who was always sitting on the other side of me, did not sing or drink. I asked why she had come if she were not interested in drinking and singing. She answered that if she did not attend, others would see her as not respectful to the leaders and colleagues (*bugeimianzi*, literally not giving face to the other person).

*Guanxi* is a key sociocultural concept for understanding Chinese society (King, 1991). People often feel they are locked in the web of guanxi (*guanxiwang*). Researchers who foreground the instrumentality (*li*) of *guanxi* see *guanxi* as a personal network of instrumental particular ties (Jacobs, 1979; Chiao, 1982; Walder, 1986; Hwang, 1987; Yang, 1994; Smart, 1993; Bian, 2001, 2009; Szeto et al., 2006; Qi, 2013). Mayfair Yang develops the term guanxi-ology (*guanxixue*) to describe the sophisticated tactics and etiquette of *guanxi* in China (Yang, 1994). She notes, "*Guanxi* is based implicitly (rather than explicitly) on mutual interest and benefit. Once guanxi is established between two people, each can ask a favour of the other with the expectation that the debt incurred will be repaid sometime in the future" (Yang, 1994: 2). These scholars also discuss guanxi as a Chinese form of social capital (Smart, 1993; Szeto et al., 2006; Qi, 2013). Bian Yanjie introduces the phrase "*guanxi* capital" to refer to the social resources that individuals utilise from their guanxi networks in order to accomplish pragmatic goals (Bian, 2019: 17).

The instrumental aspect of *guanxi* is comparable to blat (favour) in Russia. During the Soviet era, Russians used personal networks and informal relationships (blat) to obtain products and services

(Ledeneva, 1998). Blat, like *guanxi*, both existed in the communist era and contributed to the growth of the informal sector (Yang, 1994; Ledeneva, 2008). Blat and *guanxi* were used to meet people's needs that the command economy could not meet and hence helped the communist system function (Yang, 1994; Ledeneva, 2008). Following the economic liberation reforms in Russia and China, both *guanxi* and *blat* are prone to monetarisation, as sorting out difficulties via *blat* or *guanxi* now usually comes at a price (Wank, 1999; Hsu, 2005; Karhunen et al., 2018).

However, another theoretical approach focuses on the moral aspect of *guanxi* (Liang, [1949]; Fei, [1947] 2013; King, 1991). Liang Shuming contends that every Chinese person is born into a web of ethical relationships with their parents and other family members. Within the family, the person has sentiments (*qing*) and obligations (*yi*) towards other members. Familial sentiments and obligations can be extended outside the family, to one's clan relatives as well as to people who become close from everyday interaction (Liang, [1949]2021). Fei Xiaotong also regards guanxi as an extension of kinship relationships; moral principles in the family can also guide moral practices in other social relationships (Fei, [1947] 2013), which I will discuss further in Section 3.

Recently, anthropologists have further developed the second theoretical approach by incorporating the factor of human affection into their study of *guanxi*. This venture provides opportunities to study the moral practices carried out during the building and maintenance of *guanxi*. Andrew Kipnis argues there is a dialectical relation between *ganqing* (feelings) and *guanxi* because "*guanxi* involves human feelings and *ganqing* involves material obligation. In *guanxi*, feeling and instrumentality are a totality." (Kipnis, 1997:23-24). Yan Yunxiang (1996) differentiates *renqing*, literally human feelings, from guanxi and highlights *renqing* as an emotional and ethical complex. In his ethnographic site, Xiajia Village, people exchanged gifts not only to reinforce their *guanxi* but also to increase their emotional attachments to each other. As Yan says, "the spiritual substances embedded in gifts are both morally and emotionally charged." (Yan, 1993: 145). Wu Di observes that people have become increasingly aware of the instrumentality of *guanxi* (Wu, 2014, 2018, 2020a, 2020b). He further argues that people' awareness of *guanxi'*s instrumentality "forces them to emphasise, nurture, cherish, and also protect the "interactional affection" (*jiaoqing*), even if this sometimes means sacrificing personal gains." (Wu, 2014: 83-84). Wu therefore insists on separating interactional affection (*jiaoqing*) from social networking (*guanxi*): *guanxi* is built based on shared attributes, such as kinship, locality, surname, and so on, whereas interactional affection (*jiaoqing*) is

built and maintained through the sharing of common emotions and everyday interactions (Wu, 2014, 2018).

I see *guanxi* as a unifying complex of instrumentality, morality, and emotions. As conversations at the dinner above show, *guanxi* could have an instrumental aspect for my interlocutors. Zhang Zhuan said that there was a widespread belief among my interlocutors that getting anything done without *guanxi* and gifts was impossible (see Chapter 1). Manager Lin must maintain his *guanxi* on a daily basis after work hours to ensure the normal operation of the railway project's production. *Guanxi* is seen as immutable and thus irrelevant to morality, whether good or bad, but rather as necessary instrumental behaviour.

But apart from the instrumental side, *guanxi* has an emotional side as well. Peng and Xiang's *guanxi* were built based on their shared experience of workplace hardship. The long-term experience of working and living together made them have interactional affection (*jiaoqing*). Besides, despite Jiang's reservations about Peng's sincerity in expressing his emotions (*ganging*), Jiang participated in the leisure activities of singing and joking. That meant she took part in the activities that Peng and Xiang did to grow interactional affection (*jiaoqing*) along with them. Workers in a project compound had chances to get to know each other well before the railway construction work was done, and they were sent to different jobs. Apart from work, there were also leisure activities like the above one in which both the 9th Iron temporary and state workers participated and shared the emotion of pleasure[28].

*Guanxi* also indicates Confucian moral responsibilities. In *guanxi* social interaction, 'face' (*mianzi*) is an important dimension. Giving *mianzi* to someone implies acknowledging the social existence of the receiver. It is also the moral obligation of the giver to give, that is, to participate in the social activities organised by the receiver. Refuse to giving other members of the same community is morally wrong. People who do not engage in social activities are accused of not understanding human emotions (*renqing*).

[28] Yet, as I mentioned in Chapter 5, migrant workers usually do not spend their spare time with the 9th Iron workers.

Nonetheless, these social activities were affected by the highly gendered labour hierarchy, which included staff members with varying contracts. It was difficult to imagine temporary workers, especially female temporary workers, becoming influential members of these activities. Shorter labour contracts made temporary workers highly mobile, making it more difficult for them to maintain interactional affection (*jiaoqing*) with other workers. I will further illustrate this point with the example of master-apprentice relationships in Section 3. While it was possible for temporary workers and state workers to participate in leisure activities together, it is hard for female temporary workers to fully engage in these activities. Most female state workers in the 9th Iron were the 9th Iron managers' wives and knew other state workers for many years, so they did not feel themselves to be the complete outsiders of these activities. Male state workers were often the organisers and the centre of these parties. Male temporary workers, albeit rarely the planners of these parties, often felt more confident when drinking and socialising with male state workers than female temporary workers were. To a degree, these parties reconfirmed the gendered labour hierarchy in the 9th Iron, which illustrated how labour precarity influenced workers' social relationships.

The preceding example highlighted how Confucian *guanxi* practices occurred in everyday life, as well as how 9th Iron's hierarchical labour relationships intersected with interpersonal relationships between staff members. In fact, it is difficult to separate *guanxi's* instrumental, emotional, and moral components. The inconsistency between Jiang's words and actions did not suggest that she was a hypocrite. Instead, this inconsistency demonstrates that it was difficult for interlocutors to make a clear distinction between the three components of *guanxi*. As a result, rather than focusing on distinguishing these elements, I pay closer attention to various real-life situations in which people used different expressions to describe their *guanxi* and employed various strategies to maintain their *guanxi*. It was in these situations that ethical practices and inventions occurred. The following sections will discuss how workers built and maintained *guanxi* at moments when they faced fissures among different moral frameworks and challenges proposed by labour precarity.

# 3. The inconsistencies between various moral frameworks and the problems of precarity

This section will use the ethnographic examples of the master-apprentice relationship to illustrate the clashes between different moral frameworks that workers faced in everyday life. It will also illustrate the influence of labour precarity on people's ethical practices in *guanxi*. In the 9th Iron, each trainee would be assigned to a master (mostly an experienced state worker with permanent contracts) before they arrived at the project compound. Masters would teach trainees technical knowledge, and they would work together. After the end of a project, the professional partnerships between masters and apprentices would end. But master-apprentice *guanxi* was more than professional or instrumental. On the one hand, traditional and socialist morality continued to influence how people perceive master-apprentice *guanxi*. On the other hand, the rise of individualism and labour precarity challenged these perceptions and sometimes rendered Confucian or socialist moral practices impossible.

## 3.1 the clashes between Confucian morality, socialist morality, and individualism

This part will demonstrate the conflicts between Confucian morality, socialist morality, and individualism in the 9th Iron by analysing worker conversations and the relationships between a state worker master and two trainee apprentices.

Master Yang Xingpei was an on-site manager who was born in the 1970s. Xing Hainuo was Yang's apprentice. After a morning gathering meeting in 2019, Lao Li, a middle-aged state worker, praised Xing in front of Yang: "I saw Xing washing your clothes yesterday. Your apprentice is filial (*xiaoshun*)". Yang quickly denied this, "Nonsense! The leader may hear us." But the smile on Yang's face suggested he felt happy for the care that Xing provided. While Xing was praised by other workers for his filial piety towards Master Yang, Qi Fan, Yang's former apprentice, was criticised by Yang for ungratefulness. When they were working on a project in Yunan in 2015, Qi and Master Yang had been very close. Master Yang was then assigned to the Shenzhen project department in 2018, while Qi was assigned to the headquarters. When Master Yang asked Qi to contact the company's leader for information, Qi never responded to Yang. When talking about Qi,

Yang said in an angry tone, “What is the point of talking about master-apprentice emotions (*ganging*)? I had helped him a lot in Yunan, and I only asked him for a small favour, but he did not want to help me. I have no *guanxi* with him at all!" Lao Li said, “Young people have their own individual ideas (*gerenxiangfa*).” These discussions brought up contradictory perspectives regarding master and apprentice relationships, which I will elaborate on later.

Charles Stafford argues that kinship and friendship in China "are seen to be hard work, the product of everyday interaction" (Stafford, 2000: 53). *Yang*, literally "to raise or to care for," means the mutual care between parents and children (ibid., 42). The recipient of *yang* (i.e., the children) must return *yang* to their parents later in their lives. However, this cycle of *yang* can be extended to other family members or non-kin members when normal descent is not available (for example, a cycle of yang exists between an older sister and her young brothers when their parents are away). Other family members may cut off sons who do not provide their parents with *yang*. Stafford writes, “*Yang* may produce kinship where there is no natural tie of descent, and the absence of *yang* may end kinship where a natural descent tie exists.” (ibid., 43). Besides, the cycle of mutual support between neighbours, colleagues, and classmates is called “come and go” (*laiwang*) (ibid., 45–54). *Laiwang* activities include attending the ceremonies of each other’s families, occasionally helping each other out, giving a banquet when people of the same village build a new house, and so on. *Laiwang* is the way of building processual relatedness between people who are not (or not closely) related in kinship. People share sentiments, experiences, and moral responsibility through participating in *laiwang* activities (Stafford, 2000).

While I concur with Stafford’s (2000) viewpoint, my ethnography indicated the presence of both *yang* and *laiwang* in master and apprentice interactions that adhered to Confucian moral principles. In Confucian morality, the master-apprentice relationship is compared to the relationship between father and son (Bian, 2019). The four-character idiom master-apprentice-father-son (*shitufuzi*) suggests the metaphor of father and son in the Confucian master-apprentice relationship. The master has the responsibility of educating and raising (*jiaoyang*) his apprentices. Apprentices have the responsibility of providing care during their masters’ old age (*yanglao*) or sick days (*yangbing*). Moreover, apprentices are expected to keep in contact with their former masters as part of the come-and-go (*laiwang*) (Stafford, 2000). Apprentices who keep *laiwang* are good people who value emotions (*zhongganqing*). Apprentices who cut off contacts with their former masters are criticised

by other workers for not having a sense of human emotions (*meirenqingwei*) in private conversations.

The relationship between Yang and Xing showed that Confucian morality influenced the master-apprentice relationship in the 9th Iron. *Yang* and *laiwang* are two important moral practices in the Confucian master-apprentice relationship. In Imperial China, the technology of architecture and engineering was passed on from masters to apprentices. People such as carpenters and bricklayers who took on teenage apprentices were known as craftsmen (*gongjiang*) (see Chapter 4). Apprentices lived and worked with masters (Zhang, 2012; Li, 2022). The ethics of care (*yang*) passed on from one generation to another. In the case above, Xing was praised for his practices of care (*yang*) and Qin was criticised for not performing come-and-go (*laiwang*).

Secondly, Yang was aware of the potential clashes between Confucian and socialist morality. Yang dismissed Lao Li's praise quickly and ended their conversation so as not to attract the attention of the leaders who had not yet left the conference room after the morning meeting. I will illustrate these clashes with more examples in section 3.2. During the socialist era, the CCP had implemented a set of universal moral rules in urban workplaces and collective farms, fostering a sense of comradeship and equality among people (Vogel, 1965; Madsen, 1984). During the Cultural Revolution, Mao Zedong had initiated a political movement known as 'Attack on the Four Old Things', which aimed to eradicate old ideas, old culture, old habits, and old traditions (Dabphet, 2018). The Confucian morality of the master-apprentice relationship had been one of the Four Olds that should be eradicated[29]. After the reform and opening, Chinese people sought to rebuild Confucian morality to cure the social trauma caused by the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution (Jing, 1998). Although the SOE reform brought significant changes to the 9th Iron, the company maintained the socialist way of organising employees' work and lives in some aspects (see Chapter 2 and 4). Socialist moral rules still influenced people's mentalities. For example, in the eyes of the 9th Iron workers, it was inappropriate to discuss one's preference for the Confucian master-apprentice relationship in front of leaders.

[29] The Festival Cannes- awarded realist movie Farewell My Concubine depicts the influence of 'Attack Four Old Things' on the master-apprentice relationship, in which apprentices had been encouraged to criticise the feudal behaviours of their masters during the Culture Revolution.

Finally, the example demonstrated the tensions between Confucian morality and individualism. Li Yuqin (2022) contends that the western-style contract system that the state implemented in the management of state-owned enterprises after the 1990s reform has instilled the contract spirit in their employees. This contract spirit encourages employees to see themselves as autonomous individuals, with mutual obligations limited to the terms of contracts. Therefore, a new type of master-apprentice relationship based on contract has replaced previous types (Li, 2022). As the contract expires, the apprentice is no longer required to maintain contact with his master. Yan Yunxiang (2003, 2020) also argues that since the reform and opening, there has been an increase in individualism in China. People prioritise their individual needs and goals for the first time in Chinese social history. This emergence of individualism has threatened Confucian morality (Yan, 2003, 2020).

Qi refused to help Yang and chose to follow the company headquarters' regulations, i.e., not leak information to employees on the projects. Qi's conduct exemplifies the impact of capitalist individualism on young employees, which demands people not allow nepotism to impair their professional judgement. Nevertheless, as the case shows, Confucian and socialist morality still influenced masters' and trainees' *guanxi* practices. Therefore, not one type of *guanxi* replaced the others, but the coexistence of different types. But Yang, who was prone to Confucian morality, considered Qi's behaviour to be immoral. Hence, rather than a new mode of relationship emerging, Confucian moral expectations and individualism, as well as socialist morality, collided in workers' *guanxi* practices and perceptions.

## 3.2 the problems of precarity

After introducing the conflicts between different moral frameworks in the 9th Iron, this section moves on to the influence of precarity on people's ethical lives. I will illustrate how labour precarity challenged pre-existing moral frameworks and produced a form of social precarity at the workplace.

### 3.2.1 from labour precarity and structural precarity to social precarity

"Don't always think about yourself. Everyone in the compound is on an equal footing. We should have solidarity and work together." During a late-night meeting, director Li extolled the virtues of

unity and cooperation. “Look at the workers at the Ganjiu Project (a 9th Iron Project in charge of constructing another railway section). They have more solidarity than us, so they work faster!” Following the meeting, I asked trainee Yin Guangyu what he thought of Li's speech. Yin, a 19-year-old vocational college student, has been working in the compound since 2018. “Well, Li says that everyone is equal,” he paused. “However, we all know that there are significant differences between leaders and workers. Formal workers and temporary workers are also clearly different.” “Do you mean the leader's words can't be trusted?” I asked. “Sometimes I feel no one can be trusted,” Yin responded in a sarcastic tone.

Trainees in the 9th Iron faced both labour precarity resulting from their temporary employment and structural precarity stemming from the household registration system. They were under informal contracts that might be cancelled at any time. Trainees were usually second- or third-year students at vocational colleges (see Appendix 1 and Chapter 4). Every year, vocational colleges would sign a collective contract with the company, which would dispatch these students to the compound. However, there was no contract between the individual trainee and the company or the compound. Therefore, the compound had the liberty to dismiss trainees without notice. Among all types of workers, trainees earned the lowest salary of 1800 RMB per month. Trainees did not have extra-hour allowances, night shift bonuses, weather subsidies, or performance salaries. Moreover, the household registrations (hukou) of trainees were in the city where their college was located. In many of my trainee interlocutors’ cases, their household registrations were in Shaanxi province, not Shenzhen. Shaanxi, as depicted on Map 4, is located in the central region of China, while Shenzhen is situated along the southern coast. Trainees were excluded from the social insurance scheme of Shenzhen, which limited their access to unemployment insurance, medical resources, housing provident funds, and low-income benefits in Shenzhen city. In 2022, the standard for determining low income in Shenzhen was whether one’s monthly income was lower than 2,048 yuan. Trainees’ salary level was lower than this standard. However, trainees were not able to apply for low-income insurance because their household registration was not in Shenzhen. The labour and structural precarity faced by trainees distinguished them from their masters, who all had permanent contracts. Besides, trainees and managers had huge wage disparities. Due to structural and labour precarity, trainees found it difficult to believe the socialist propaganda of equality that managers advocated.

Map 4 Shenzhen and Shaanxi

Nonetheless, precarity not only affected the relationship between trainees and managers but also bred distrust among trainees. This was due to the intense competition among trainees for formal contracts. Trainees usually held two types of opinions about their situation. Some people thought traineeships were a temporary stage of their career in the 9th Iron, which they needed to endure in order to have a secure future. For example, Xing Hefeng, who had just celebrated his 18-year-old birthday, had worked for the company for six months. Technically, Xing's job placement should have ended three months previously, but because his master Yang thought Xing worked well, Director Li allowed Xing to continue to work here. Xing was born in a village in northern Anhui Province. His parents migrated to Ningbo City to work for a relative in a small home appliance business. Xing wanted to work in the compound for a longer period because he believed that the longer he worked, the higher the chance that he would get a formal contract when he graduated. Nevertheless, some apprentices were still undecided about staying with the company and chose to leave after a couple of months. There were rumours in the company that people resigned after they had been upgraded to interns. This created antagonism between the former and latter groups of trainees because the former was concerned that the latter would still quit after their jobs were formalised, thereby wasting other people's chances of getting formal contracts. According to Xing, "Why didn't they (the latter group) leave earlier? Some people are just greedy."

The labour and structural precarity that trainees faced increased antagonism between colleagues, which made social relationships in the compound vulnerable to rumours, mistrust, and suspicion. Anne Allison (2012) describes the phenomenon of social precarity in Japan, which echoed what I observed in the compound (see Chapter 1). Allison notices that not only were more workers in insecure employment, but also more workers reported a feeling of disconnectedness from local communities and Japanese society. One faced social precarity when he or she experienced a lack of meaningful social relationships. Neither had the ability to build meaningful relationships (Allison, 2012). It could be seen from Yin and Xing's remarks that, after the employment reform, social precarity increased in the compound.

This part has shown how the intersection of labour and structural precarity affected young workers' perceptions of *guanxi*, breeding a form of social precarity. Unlike young workers, who typically rejected socialist propaganda, some older state workers' experiences of social precarity and mistrust

of others stemmed from conflicts between their socialist moral view and the changes brought about by precarity, which I will illustrate in the next section.

### 3.2.2 the impossibility of preexisting moral frameworks

Master Liu Jingfu was a state worker in his late 50s. He took over his father's job in the 9th Iron in 1982, when the work unit had just recovered from the Culture Revolution and jobs were inheritable from fathers to sons. He said, "Young people come and go. I do not even have time to get to know them. Young people do not have their hearts in the work unit (xinbuzaidanwei). I find it difficult to give my heart to them (jiaoxin)". Moreover, in Liu's opinion, young trainees were too concerned with the final result (i.e., the report of their traineeship performance) rather than learning actual things from work.

Since the 2010s, the method of establishing contracts with vocational colleges has stabilised the supply of low-cost trainee workers for the 9th Iron. Furthermore, in 2016, the 9th Iron introduced a set of assessment principles to evaluate trainee performance at work. Following the completion of the traineeship, masters must report on their apprentices' performance in accordance with these principles. These reports would be submitted via an online system that was accessible from the company's headquarters. Therefore, a utilitarian factor was introduced into the master-apprentice relationship. Trainees relied on their masters' recommendations in their reports to stay in the compound or to get a formal contract. Both apprentices and masters felt they must be very careful when dealing with their *guanxi*. Apprentices worried that their masters might speak negatively about them to the leaders (Liufeng, 2020)[30], in contrast to the master-apprentice relationship in the socialist period. Xu Xueqing (2022) argues that for the most part of the socialist period, although the state had attempted to change Confucian master-apprentice morality, it had kept the labour tradition of apprentices in its factories to facilitate production. The state had assigned apprentices to factories (*fenpei*). Apprentices and masters had earned different salaries according to their different rankings, but they had been equal in terms of their contracts. College-graduated trainees also had

[30] I do not mean to imply that people in the socialist period did not rely on *guanxi*, but to emphasis the difference. In the socialist period, young people who were"waiting for assignment" relied on *guanxi* to get assigned to a work unit after they graduated from college (Bian,1994), but once they were assigned, they would have permanent contracts (*bianzhi*).

have permanent contracts (Xu, 2022). After the reform, the state no longer assigned trainees to jobs[31].

Nonetheless, the short duration of trainee contracts resulted in a high turnover of young staff members. As the duration of trainees' contracts was short, masters found it hard to have enough time to become close with their apprentices. Establishing interactional affection (*jiaoqing*) requires everyday interaction over a long period of time (Wu, 2014). The precaritisation of labour deprived masters and apprentices of the chance to form *jiaoqing*.

Moreover, masters and apprentices had very different perceptions of their workplaces. Some masters were older state workers with socialist moral beliefs (see Chapter 9). They believed that a moral person should feel a sense of belonging to his or her workplace (*danwei*). Liu, for example, believed that a good person should devote his heart to the work unit, implying a socialist moral attitude. Throughout the socialist era, propaganda had claimed that workers owned the factory. This belief had not been a meaningless repetition but had been widely accepted by state employees even after the reform of state-owned enterprises (Lee, 2007). This ideology had implied a moral obligation: one should love one's factory or work unit as much as one's home (*aijiaaidanwei*). In the newspapers published by the 9th Iron Company in 2020, I discovered propaganda with a similar moral undertone. On July 1st, 2020, the 9th Iron's newspaper quoted an interview with a middle-aged state worker as well as a middle-level manager who said, "The work unit is my home" (*danweishiwojia*). Nonetheless, it was difficult for young trainees on a precarious contract to feel the same way as state workers.

In short, labour precarity and structural precarity led to new changes in the compound, which also challenged state workers' belief in socialist morality. State workers who had started to work for the 9th Iron since the socialist period found it difficult to apply their socialist moral expectations to master-apprentice relationships after the SOE reform.

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[31] Prior to the late 1990s, the system and custom of job inheritance (*jieban*) had strongly influenced the employment of trainees and new workers. A substantial proportion of workers had been the children of state workers, which was very similar to the situation that Jonathan Parry observed in India (2020). Therefore, to some extent, the termination of job allocation and job inheritance following the SOE reform increased the likelihood of rural youngsters finding urban jobs. However, contracts for these jobs have become increasingly precarious in recent years.

### 3.3 section summary

This section illustrated that to live an ethical life, workers needed to negotiate between multiple moral frameworks. Workers' efforts to sew together different moral frameworks were a manifestation of the ethics of precarity. Yan (2009) argues that there is a multi-moral system in China. In the era of Maoist socialism, the state promoted a set of universalistic values of socialist morality. Workers in the same work unit were equal comrades, but once someone was tagged as the class enemy, moral values were no longer applied to the person. After the reform and opening, economic liberation encourages the development of individualism and the rise of a new ethics based on individual rights and citizen duties (Yan, 2009, 2012). Confucian, socialist, and individualist morality co-exist in the contemporary Chinese moral landscape and often clash with each other, which results in the public impression of a moral crisis (Yan, 2021). The clashes between different moral frameworks result in an inner self that is divided and is constantly making efforts to reconcile these moral frameworks (Kleinman, 2011). Stephan Feuchtwang suggests that moral ideals in imperial China and political vocabulary in Maoist China both become resources for moral judgements in contemporary China. As he observes, "people exercise a repertoire of quite different discourses for moral judgements and actions." (Feuchtwang, 2012: 239).

This section also depicted the impact of labour precarity on interpersonal relationships at the workplace. Temporary employment led to high staff mobility and worker mistrust, resulting in the phenomenon of social precarity. I will show in the next section how people used moral language and traditions of moral practice dating back to different periods of history to come up with solutions to the dilemmas of dealing with social relations in light of everyday social situations.

# 4. The ethics of precarity as a form of situational ethics: how people interact ethically

This section will explore how people manage to interact ethically through the practice of situational ethics in the context of precarity. By saying situational, I propose, on the one hand, that individuals become ethical subjects through their interactions with others in everyday situations. On the other hand, in order to be ethical, people constantly adapt their behaviour according to different

situations. Precarity has intensified the clashes between different moral frameworks, which requires people to adjust their ethical practices according to the different social situations that they face. In line with research on ordinary ethics (Lambek, 2010; Laidlaw, 2002, 2014; Das, 2012; Fassin, 2012), I specifically focus on the ethical dimension of everyday dialogues. I will demonstrate how individuals integrate the ethics of precarity into their lives and how people build ethical relationships by analysing their conversations. The examples below may appear to be life's trivial things or everyday conversations, but it is through the trifles, the tiny shifts in people's tones and words, the careful selection of what to say and what not to say, and the modification of one's description of *guanxi* to different situations that everyday ethics emerge in practices.

## 4.1 situational ethics: the significance of social interaction situations

Jarrett Zigon (2010) argues, in Foucault's theory of ethics, that "the self is created by means of ethical work" and therefore "there is no original self that must be set free or revealed." In other words, an ethical subject does not preexist but is created through one's conscious work on the self. Therefore, "we have to create ourselves as a work of art" (Foucault, 2000: 262, as cited in Zigon (2010: 44)). This introspective view of ethics has influenced Wu Di (2014). Wu suggests that Foucault's perspective on virtues aligns with the Confucian notion of becoming a moral person (*zuoren*). A moral person is formed through daily actions (Feuchtwang and Steinmüller, 2017). But what Foucault lacks and Confucianism has is the role of social interaction in the formation of the ethical subject (Wu, 2018). I agree that in Confucian morality, maintaining harmonious social relationships (*guanxi*) is an important aspect of ethical work. But, more importantly, continuous self-reflection on one's behaviour in various social interaction situations is an essential component of ethical work.

Confucian ethics requires the introspection of social interaction. In the Confucian classic *The Analects*, the student of Confucius, Zeng, says,

> "I daily examine my personal conduct on three points: first, whether, in carrying out the duties entrusted to me by others, I have not failed in conscientiousness; second, whether, in intercourse with friends, I have not failed in sincerity and trustworthiness; and third, whether I have not failed to practise what I profess in my teaching." (Confucius, 1956).

This process is referred to as *zixing*, and it is necessary for the development of one's moral character. A person's ability to make moral judgements is developed through *zixing*. All three dimensions of *zixing* that Zeng mentions require the examination of one's conduct in social interactions. In a nutshell, *zixing* is about a person who consciously examines his or her actions in various social interaction situations. As mentioned in the previous section, Confucian morality continues to influence a group of workers in the 9th Iron. Nonetheless, people must contend with clashes between different moral frameworks as well as the challenges of precarity. In such cases, I noticed situational ethics appearing in people's *guanxi* activities and conversations. I will discuss ethical practices in three distinct situations below.

4.1.1 particularistic morality in private conversations

This part will begin with an example of a master attempting to use Confucian morality to guide his apprentices in building *guanxi* in the compound. In doing so, he sought to lessen the negative effects of social precarity on young people while circumventing the 9th Iron's surveillance. I will emphasise the significance of social interaction scenarios for ethical conduct.

As usual, Yang Xingpei and Xing Hainuo and a couple of us young people gathered outside the kitchen after dinner to chat. Yang gave Xing a book. The book's title was Thick Black Theory (*houheixue*). Cheng Tianru joked, with a big smile on his face, "Master Yang, you have a biased heart (*pianxin le*). You only give it to Xing, the rest of us don't get a copy". Yang responded, with a smile as well,

> "of course, I'm biased, Xing is my apprentice (the stress fell on my, in Chinese *wode*) and you are not. Moreover, you are clever, so you don't need to learn it. Xing is naive. He does not know how to distinguish between real (the stress fell on real, in Chinese *zhen*) interactional affection (*jiaoqing*) and fake (the stress fell on fake, in Chinese *Jia*) social relationships (*guanxi*). I need to teach (the stress fell on teach, in Chinese *jiao*) him how to be a moral person and deal with the human world (four-character idiom, *weirenchushi*). If I do not teach him how to calculate (*jisuan*), he may be calculated (*suanji*) by others."

Yang turned his face to Xing and continued to say,

> "There are (the stress fell on are, in Chinese *you*) genuine emotions (*zhenganqing*) in the compound. For example, between masters and apprentices (*shitu*). You need to distinguish between genuine (the stress falls on genuine, in Chinese *zhen*) human emotions and friends only for wining and dining together (*jiuroupengyou*). The latter group are not reliable (*kaobuzhu*)."

I explain *Houheixue* (Thick Black Theory) before moving on to the analysis of the above conversation. The book was written by Li Zongwu (Li, 2009) in 1917 and was banned by the state between 1949 and 1990. It became popular in the 1990s and is still one of the best-sellers nowadays. Mayfair Yang comments that the book of *Houheixue* "satirically exposes the artful and cynical techniques people employed to negotiate their way into and up the ranks of officialdom" (Yang, 1994: 109). She finds that the tactics of guanxi-ology (*guanxixue*) that she encountered in the fieldwork were very similar to the tactics that *Houheixue* describes (Yang, 1994). In short, *Houheixue* not only provides guidance for people to build *guanxi* but also teaches them the tactics of calculation (*jisuan* and *suanji*) in social intercourse.

*Suanji* is widely considered immoral by Chinese people (Wu, 2014). *Jisuan* and *suanji* both mean calculations. In the former case, the object being calculated is things, and in the latter case, the object being calculated is other people. Wu notices that his interlocutors resent the behaviour of *suanji* because it "takes people as a means to achieve personal ends" (Wu, 2014: 174). Also, the book's name, *Houheixue*, cynically suggests that what it writes is immoral (Yang, 1994). Thick means a thick skin (i.e., being cheeky), and black means a black heart. One needs to have both to learn the tactics of *suanji* and to master the art of *guanxi*.

However, teaching one's apprentice how to calculate (*jisuan* and *suanji*) can be ethical. Fei Xiaotong ([1947]2013) points out that in traditional morality, the way that a Chinese person draws boundaries between the self and others is flexible. *Zijiaoren* (my own people) does not always mean one's nuclear family. The scope of *zijiaren* can be expanded or contracted according to the particular time and place. Confucian moral principles apply to people who are *zijiaren*, while a different set of rules is applied to people who are not (Fei, [1947]2013).

From Yang's perspective, teaching apprentices that immorality existed in the world was a master's moral duty, and it was an act of care. As the idiom says, "One should never intend to do harm to others but should always guard against the harm others might do to him." (*Hairenzhixinbukeyoufangrenzhixinbukewu*). Yang followed Confucian moral rules and regarded Xing as one of his own people (*zijiaren*) and thus had the moral responsibility to keep Xing from being the target of out-group people's calculations.

A Confucian classic, *On Teachers*, says that teachers are those who can propagate the doctrine, impart professional knowledge, and resolve doubts (*chuandaoshouyejiehuo*). Propagating the doctrine includes teaching the student how to become a moral person in the world. To become a moral person, one needs to learn how to deal with *guanxi* with other people and how to maintain human emotions (*renqing*). The work unit designated Yang as Xing's master, so their relationship was professional. Nonetheless, Yan expected himself to meet the behavioural requirements of Confucian ethics for a teacher. *Suanji* harm may human genuine interactional affection (Wu, 2014). Nevertheless, it was through the preaching of *suanji* and *jisuan* that master-apprentice *guanxi* became emotion-loaded ties.

This phenomenon echoes other authors' analyses of moralities in China (Fei, [1947] 2013; Yan, 2019). Fei Xiaotong argues that Chinese society is based on "the differential mode of association" (*chaxugeju*) (Fei, [1947] 2013: 60). Fei compares Chinese kinship to the concentric circles formed when a stone is thrown into a lake. "Everyone stands at the centre of the circles produced by his or her own social influence. Everyone's circles are interrelated. One touches different circles at different times and places" (ibid.: 62–63). Therefore, Chinese moral practices are significantly influenced by *guanxi*. As he writes, "the degree to which Chinese ethics and laws expand and contract depends on a particular context and how one fits into that context.....Who is the important figure, and what kind of relationship is appropriate with that figure?" (Fei, 2013: 78–79). This feature of morality is later named by Yan Yunxiang as "particularistic morality" (Yan, 2019: 19). Under particularistic morality, moral duties and rights are "defined and fulfilled differently in accordance with one's position in a given relationship" (Yan, 2019).

Master Yang's approach to helping young people described above exemplified the particularistic Confucian morality held by a group of 9th Iron workers. Fei and Yan observe that people adjust

their moral judgements in accordance with their *guanxi* (Fei, [1947] 2013; Yan, 2019), which was also true in the 9th Iron. Nevertheless, Fei ([1947] 2013) and Yan (2019) pay less attention to the impact of specific scenarios of social interaction on people's moral practices. In fact, because this particularistic morality requires the correct conduct in different *guanxi*, it also demands that people adjust their behaviour in varied social interaction situations in order to be ethical. The above conversation happened in a relatively private space (outside the kitchen), not in the public spaces of the compound (squares, meeting rooms, offices, and so on) (see Chapter 2). None of the present people were leaders. In the context of casual conversation, Yang could express his understanding of *guanxi* and show his preference for Xing without provoking significant opposition from others. While in a different situation, Yang must exercise strict self-censorship to achieve his ethical objectives. I will give a further analysis of the conversation between Yang and Cheng in Section 4.2.

### 4.1.2 ethical self-censorship in the public domain

In the context of precarity and strict state censorship, emphasising emotions (*ganging*) might have negative consequences. As a result, workers presented their *guanxi* in different ways in order to circumvent state censorship. The case below will demonstrate how ethics was enabled by avoiding speaking about emotions (*ganqing*) in the situation of labour precarity.

Yang won the award for the annual model employee of the 9th Iron. Project director Li asked me to write a news report to promote the good behaviour of Yang which would be published in the internal digital newspaper and on the official website of the 9th Iron. I wrote, “As a leader, Yang has a sense of human emotions (*yourenqingwei*). As a master, Yang has emotional rapport with apprentices (*ganqinghao*).” Yang read what I had written and asked me to change the report, as he felt it was inappropriate. Yang suggested I write, "Yang is a good worker. He teaches apprentices well, and apprentices learn well (*haohaojiaohaohaoxue*).” Initially, I thought Yang’s reaction was just his strategy of modesty to survive in officialdom. Then I realised this needed to be understood together with the context of labour precarity as well as the 9th Iron’s surveillance of workers.

There is a moral undertone in the CCP's anti-corruption propaganda, in which *guanxi* is often portrayed as immoral (see Chapter 1). Using *guanxi* in institutional settings is condemned as

backward and corrupt. Human emotion (*renqing*) is also under the state's scrutiny. In the state's propaganda, the moral requirements for grass-root cadres are rigorous. Grass-root leaders are expected to have the virtues of integrity and impartiality. Therefore, when they deal with local issues, grass-root cadres should not be affected by their human emotions (*bujinrenqing*) in order to be fair and selfless (*tiemianwusi*, literally, have an iron face and no self). Instead of being enacted and enforced through legislation, these moral requirements are inculcated by means of propaganda and promoted through waves of anti-corruption movements (Dai, 2013; Quah, 2015). The moral demand for senior leaders is different. As Feuchtwang argues, Chinese people demand moral leadership from those in authority (Feuchtwang, 2012). In imperial China, the one at the top of the political hierarchy was expected to be a sage (*shengren*) who was a son of heaven (see Chapter 4). In contemporary China, moral leadership belongs to the Party's political strongman who takes care of the needs of ordinary people (*laobaixing*) (ibid.) -- a charismatic senior leader with humanity (Feuchtwang, 2012). Therefore, Yang felt it was inappropriate for him to be described as "a leader with a sense of human emotions (*renqingwei*)", as he was the lowest level of leader in the compound.

In addition, emphasising the closeness between Yang and his apprentices in an official report could give leaders the false impression that Yang had a personal group (as in an informal social organisation). Industry and construction workers are prohibited from forming informal social organisations, particularly informal labour organisations, on the grounds that local governments consider them a threat to social stability (Chan and Pun, 2009; Chan, 2010; Xu, 2013).

When Master Yang was the subject of a news story, he engaged in stringent self-censorship. The tradition of self-censorship dated back to the Maoist period, when workers had been required to report their political performance. Self-censorship had been typically done in order to avoid political persecution. Yang's self-censorship was ethical in this instance, as he attempted to maintain his moral ideal of a Confucian master-apprentice relationship without attracting the attention of the state. If emotions between masters and apprentices were highlighted in an official report, it was possible that leaders would dismiss Yang's trainees to prevent the formation of an informal social organisation. It could impede Yang's ability to grow genuine interactional affection (*jiaoqing*) with his apprentices. Yang chose the words teaching (*jiao*) and learning (*xue*) to make the relationship appear professional and devoid of emotion. In this context, playing down the emotional aspect of

*guanxi* was a good deed because it helped to preserve the genuine interactional affection (*jiaoqing*) between masters and apprentices and avoided causing problems in the context of state surveillance and precarity.

4.1.3 from emotion (*ganging*) to relationship (*guanxi*)

Ding Xiangsheng, 19 years old, was an apprentice who was learning how to make concrete with his master's team. Ding and his co-workers got along well, especially Tan Youjie, an agency contract technician in the construction department. Once, the concrete Ding's team produced was unable to meet the testing standards because the sand provided by the supplier was of poor quality. The project compound, however, was unable to change the supplier because the supplier was a relative of the leader of the 9th Iron's headquarters. This made Ding very depressed, and he expressed his depression to the other workers. These words quickly reached the leaders' ears. Director Li was unhappy about this and believed that everyone should uphold the project department's collective honour by not talking about bad things and allowing bad news to spread. From the leaders' perspective, Ding was unsuitable for the work of the project. He was advised to leave the site as soon as possible.

Tan and the other employees wanted to take time off to see Ding off. They went to Li's office to ask for his permission. Li said, "You guys have a good emotional connection (*ganqing*) with Ding." Tan quickly responded, "Me and him only have collegial relationships (*tongshiguanxi*). We don't have much interaction (*jiaoji*). But when someone from our compound leaves, a few colleagues should see him off. It is good for the project's public face." Li agreed.

In this case, if Tan admitted to having emotions (*ganqing*) for Ding, Li might not have approved his departure or might have regarded Tan and Ding as the same type of people who did not obey orders. Tan, on the other hand, used the word "colleague relationship (*tongshiguanxi*)" to portray his relationship with Ding, which downplayed the emotional element of their guanxi and created a distance between Ding and himself in front of the leaders. Tan also employed a logic of values that Li found more acceptable in order to persuade Li; it was motivated by a desire to preserve the face (*mianzi*) of the compound collectives (i.e., the collective interest of the compound). Tan maintained his *guanxi* with Ding and his *guanxi* with Li in this manner. In short, Tan's careful choice of words

between *guanxi* and *ganqing* allowed him to fulfil his moral obligation to Ding (seeing a friend off) without contradicting the values of collective honour that leaders advocated.

### 4.1.4 discussion

Influenced by research in moral psychology, Wu Di contends that ethics is not only introspective but also extrospective—that people not only do self-fashioning but also adjust their behaviour according to the expectations of other members of their social groups (Wu, 2014). He argues that interactional affection is a productive entry point for studying the extrospective dimension of ethics. As he writes, "morality is negotiated and formed via everyday interpersonal emotional interaction." (Wu, 2014: 172). He considers the learning of human emotion as an important aspect of a Chinese person's moral formation.

I agree with Wu (2014) that ethics should be observed in everyday interactions. Nevertheless, in Wu's (2014) analysis of ethnography, he sometimes jumps too fast to conclude that people's behaviours are largely influenced by their social roles and life experiences. In Wu's perspective, the Chinese daily cultivation of the moral self is mostly about responding to social expectations. Therefore, Wu faces difficulties in explaining the moments when people make individualistic choices. For example, in his analysis of individualism among young people, he considers "this inclination to be subject to personal choice as a result of social-economic status", implying that people with wealth "could afford to be 'individualistic'" (ibid., 158). To do so, Wu ignores the tensions of ethics in everyday life—that is, the dynamics of ethics can be shifted in different directions in every exchange of words and gestures in different social interaction situations (Wu, 2014).

For instance, Section 4.1.3 illustrates how an individual can frame *guanxi* in various ways depending on the social situations in order to maintain the harmony of his social relationships. Instead of discussing interactional affection (*jiaoqing*) or emotions (*ganqing*), Tan mentioned the collective face (*mianzi*) and thus avoided the conflicts between different moral values. Through his careful word selection in the specific social interaction context, Tan conducted ethical work. Similarly, in the case of Section 4.1.2, it was ethical to downplay the emotional side of *guanxi* in a

public report since, in this situation, official surveillance placed every social relationship under scrutiny.

Moreover, in Section 4.1.1, Yang made efforts to distinguish *guanxi* from *jiaoqing*. Yang emphasised the different levels of honesty in each type of social relationship by using the adjective "real" in front of *jiaoqing* and the adjective "fake" in front of *guanxi*. Yang categorised the master-apprentice relationship as jiaoqing, allowing Xing and himself to cultivate sincere human emotions in this relationship. Mary Douglas suggests that ideas about potential pollution are used to maintain social order (Douglas, 2003). Through the differentiation between real *jiaoqing* and fake *guanxi*, Yang tried to avoid the instrumental side of *guanxi* polluting the moral aspect of *guanxi*, which consequently defended his perception of Confucian moral orders. Wu says that because *guanxi* has become increasingly associated with instrumental transactions, people tend to use *jiaoqing* to describe the close friendships in their lives (Wu, 2014). I complement his argument and contend that the labour people perform to expand and contract the meaning of these vocabularies in their daily conversations is intrinsically ethical.

The ethical labour performed by my interlocutors in the aforementioned circumstances could not be adequately accounted for by social roles or personal experiences alone. Instead, these examples illustrate that with the delicate use of words, phrases, and tones, a person is able to negotiate between different moralities in a given social interaction circumstance. It is instructive to examine the situations in which individuals use the phrases interactional affection (*jiaoqing*), human emotions (*renqing*), and emotions (*ganqing*), as well as social relationships (*guanxi*). My interlocutors sometimes emphasised the genuineness of their feelings (*ganqing*) and, at other times, kept a low profile about their interactional affection (*jiaoqing*). These varying modes of expression enabled them to adapt to multiple situations and incorporate ethics into their lives. As the preceding examples have demonstrated, careful choices of words are often the result of one's ethical deliberation. This section has demonstrated that the ethics of precarity are necessarily situational. I have shown how social interactions become ethical through the daily efforts of individuals. In the next section, a comprehensive examination of the ethical aspect of my interlocutors' daily conversations will be provided to better illustrate why the ethics of precarity is situational.

## 4.2 situational ethics: the importance of ethical language

This section argues that language is an essential component of situational ethics. This attention to language can aid researchers in uncovering the ethical strivings of individuals in precarious situations. This section will analyse cases from Section 4.1 in greater detail. It indicates that language is more than a means of communication; language frequently reflects the ethical commitments of individuals. Ethical language is present in the quotidian details of everyday conversations.

Jarrett Zigon (2007) argues that ethical work necessitates some degree of freedom of choice. This freedom of choice implies that within a given society, all individuals face “a limited range of possibilities” (Zigon, 2007: 43). These options enable the individual to reflect on himself and conduct ethical work on himself. Furthermore, ethical work requires the subject to act upon complicated situations in reality (Laidlaw, 2002; Lambek, 2010; Das, 2011; see Chapter 3). Ethics requires the subject’s judgement of "the right balance to fit the immediate circumstances" (Lambek, 2010: 19). Therefore, freedom is not a precondition or a result; the subject continuously exercises freedom. During the exercise process, one draws ethical resources from the situation in which he stays (Laidlaw, 2002, 2013). For the study of the ethics of precarity, it is worthwhile to investigate how precarity limits these possibilities of choice and how people exercise their freedom in different situations.

Precarity challenges conventional ethical practices and usually requires new ethical innovations. Jiazhi Fengjiang coined the term "ethical labour" to refer to the ethical work that people perform in the status of suspension (Fengjiang, 2021: 307; see Chapter 3). Fengjiang's concept of ethical labour is useful in studying how people make efforts to bring what they believe ought to be into reality, but she fails to pay attention to how people in precarity deal with the moral conflicts in everyday social interactions (Fengjiang, 2021). This deficiency can be remedied by Veena Das's (2012) investigation of Indian households with unstable incomes.

In Delhi, India, rich people paid attention to how they speak in front of their poorer relatives in order to maintain the dignity of their low-income interlocutors—in local words, “to not hurt the ‘heart’ of the other person” (Das, 2012: 136). When people saw that their relatives were in need,

they put money in their pockets. People would rather say the money was lent to their relatives than given to them, even though they never expect the money to be returned. Das argues that ethics are often revealed in people's careful choice of words in a given situation. Words and gestures are more than narratives; they express one's relationship with others—"how one is with others" (ibid.). Therefore, ethics "is preserved not only in publicly performed actions of greetings and gift exchanges but also in the minutest shifts in words and tones (ibid., 137) (italics added)". Das's (2012) focus on ethical language may shed light on the study of people who live in precarious situations and who must negotiate with various moralities.

Returning to the example of Section 4.1.1, it is interesting to note how Cheng acknowledged the presence of several moral frameworks while also avoiding embarrassing Yang. Cheng and the other workers who were present in the conversation understood that biased attitudes towards other comrades violated socialist moral principles. Therefore, Cheng made a joke about Yang's behaviour. Nevertheless, Cheng did not mean to hurt Yang. On the contrary, Cheng's way of speaking suggests his acknowledgement of Yang's behaviour. By highlighting how Yang treated Xing differently, Cheng reminded Xing that Yang was a good teacher who did put his heart (*xin*) into guiding Xing, even to the level of a biased heart (*pianxin*). Cheng altered the affective meaning of the sentence with a laugh (a gesture) and the modal particle "*le*," transforming his remarks into a praise of Yang's moral behaviour and decreasing the likelihood that other audience members would believe Cheng was making a moral allegation about Yang's behaviour.

Furthermore, in this example, it is intriguing to notice how Yang employed different stresses in his speech to express his ethical commitments. Yang emphasised that Xing was "my" student, and he must "teach" him. By employing these two stresses, Yang declared his moral responsibility as a teacher to Xing and justified his particularistic moral view to his audiences. By stressing "real" and "false," Yang emphasised the distinction between two types of social relationships: trustworthy interactional affection and unreliable social networking. These two stresses aided Yang in realising his moral distinctions between social relationships. Finally, Yang said, "There are genuine emotions (*zhenganqing*) in the compound." He put emphasis on the word "are" (*you*). As I explain in Section 3.2, precarity exposed social relationships at the 9th Iron workplace to suspicion and calculation. Yang intended to keep the young apprentice, Xing, from becoming very frustrated with the social environment, believing it was his moral responsibility to help the young man see the bright side of

life and instil some positive sentiments in Xing. Yang's ethical intention was realised through the stress of "are" in addition to the content of his speech.

As examples in sections 4.1.2. and 4.1.3 show, my interlocutors' vocabulary choices were frequently influenced by their ethical concerns. The expressions that Master Yang used in Section 4.1.2 were partly to protect his apprentices. Similarly, Tan's choice of words reflected his concern for his co-workers and his desire for amicable interactions between them and the leader. Jack Sidnell promotes studying ethics "through a careful analysis of vocabulary" (Sidnell, 2010: 123). Drawing on Goffman's theory of social interaction, Sidnell analyses the ethical dimension of excuses and justifications in people's daily conversations. Sidnell writes, "Participation in social interaction is a delicate and complex balancing act," and ethics often reveals itself in "the details of social interaction" (Sidnell, 2010: 124).

Similar to Das's (2012) and Sidnell's (2010) findings, my examples also demonstrated that ethics needed not always reside in dramatic statements or actions. In contrast, the language used in regular discussions might indicate people's ethical sensitivities. Conversations about little matters might also reflect the ethical labour individuals perform to weave their lives together. Through the use of both words and actions, my interlocutors made efforts to reconcile the frequent moral contradictions that they faced in the context of precarity.

# 5. Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated how individuals morally establish connections with others in the midst of social and labour precarity, as evidenced by my examination of *guanxi* practices and conversations. The chapter has demonstrated how the instrumental, moral, and emotional dimensions of *guanxi* were evident in the daily experiences of the 9th Iron workers.

Different from previous studies on *guanxi* (Fei, 2013; Yan, 1993; Yang, 1994, 2002; Wu, 2014, 2018, 2020a, 2020b), I explore the moments when people use different expressions to convey their *guanxi*, as these expressions often reveal the ethical thoughtfulness of the individuals involved in the conversation. Another analytical innovation lies in my analysis of the conflicts that workers encountered when navigating the moral frameworks of Confucianism, socialism, and individualism,

as well as the challenges caused by labour precarity. I have shown that labour precarity and structural precarity bred mistrust between masters and apprentices, as well as among apprentices. Workers strived to overcome social precarity by engaging in ethical interactions and attempting to reconcile different moral values. Third, I have demonstrated that the ethics of precarity is situational ethics, which requires individuals to adapt their behaviours and speeches to various social interaction settings. I notice that employees' ethical objectives were attained through the careful selection of words in their daily conversations. Therefore, the study of language in ordinary dialogues, even "the minutest shifts in words and tones" (Das, 2012:137), is important in the study of ethics in precarious lives.

This chapter has made a contribution to the existing literature in the fields of ethics and precarity, as it has specifically examined the ethical labour individuals make to sustain social connections with others under the influences of labour, structural, and social precarity. Although *guanxi* is a uniquely Chinese sociocultural phenomenon, the situational aspect of ethics may also be observed in other nations when precarity leads to significant changes in society and morality. This warrants further investigation. While this chapter has focused on the interaction between the older and younger generations of workers, the next two chapters will examine their distinct perspectives on success.

# Chapter 8
# Suzhi: The Precarity Faced By Young Temporary Workers

A blackout on a spring night brought the machine roaring at the construction site to a halt. Young people were talking outside the tunnel, and I was attempting not to be the focus of their conversation. Scaffolder Xue Maoshi, a junior high school graduate, asked, "Are post-doctorates better educated than doctorates?" A 9th Iron temporary worker who was a mechanic with a vocational college diploma responded, "Of course! It is better. A person's *suzhi* (literally 'human quality') is determined by their level of education. The higher education, the better *suzhi*." Another temporary worker, Du Maoxuan, a technician with a vocational college diploma, argued against him: "No, one's *suzhi* is determined by one's ability to solve practical problems for the company. A high *suzhi* person (*gaosuzhirencai*) can demonstrate his or her worth to the company's development." Jing Nan, a technician, countered, "You are all wrong! You are a high *suzhi* person if leaders appreciate your skill. You do not have *suzhi* if leaders do not recognise you, no matter how good you are."

## 1. Introduction

This chapter will examine the precarity that young temporary workers at the 9th Iron experienced as a result of the ideology of human qualities (*suzhi*). *Suzhi* refers to an inherent human quality or character that is evaluated by level or amount, and these levels indicate and reinforce class distinction. Andrew Kipnis (2006) and Stig Thøgersen (2017) note that *suzhi* is used to justify social and political inequalities and inequities against rural people. Typically, an individual with an urban upbringing and higher education would be regarded as having a high *suzhi* (*gaosuzhi*), while someone from a rural background with a lower degree of education would be perceived as having a lower *suzhi* (*disuzhi*).

Many scholars point out that *suzhi* discourses have produced a peculiar subjectivity that facilitates the accumulation of capitalism (Yan, 2003, 2006, 2008; Anagnost, 2004; Fong, 2004, 2007; Jacka, 2009; Sun, 2009; Woronov, 2009; Brownell, 2009). This argument is supported by my observation of young temporary workers' lives in the 9th Iron. Nevertheless, *suzhi* is not a novel concept; it has ancient roots but has also been recast in each period to support different regimes and broader ideologies (see Chapter 4). There are also various ethical framings and evaluations of what *suzhi* is, as well as numerous ways in which *suzhi* discourses are appropriated and utilised, as illustrated by the conversation in the vignette. In the 9th Iron, *suzhi* played a crucial role in career progression, although it had different interpretations. The degree of one's education was a significant indicator of an individual's *suzhi*. However, the capacity to demonstrate one's value to the 9th Iron and maintain positive relationships with managers were also crucial indicators of *suzhi*.

This chapter will first demonstrate how the 9th Iron company employed *suzhi* discourses as a method of labour governance, producing a form of labour precarity that were acutely experienced by temporary workers. I will also illustrate how young employees, driven by economic as well as ethical reasons, sought to develop their *suzhi*. Before joining the 9th Iron, the majority of the young temporary workers had come from rural backgrounds, received their primary and secondary schooling in rural schools, and had attended vocational colleges in cities. This group of my interlocutors was between 20 and 35 years old, and they worked hard with the hope that their positions would eventually be made permanent. However, I found that it was the aspiration of job stability that trapped young workers in their precarious present, showing a peculiar dialectic of stability and instability in the 9th Iron. The 9th Iron promoted the belief that one's efforts at self-improvement could lead to contracts being made permanent. Thus, temporary workers were subjected to the pressure of improving themselves—in the sense of enhancing their *suzhi*. Temporary workers who did not improve their *suzhi* were considered to be unpromising or slacking. The compound committee had the authority to send unpromising workers back home, which could result in their termination and the loss of their temporary urban registration status. Temporary workers based their hopes for permanent positions and urban household registration on raising their *suzhi*, despite the fact that this goal appeared to be difficult to achieve.

Additionally, this chapter will demonstrate a form of affective precarity that *suzhi* discourses have sparked. *Suzhi* can be enhanced through practice and effort (Kipnis, 2006). I will show that the

concept of self-improvement or self-cultivation was intrinsic to the concept of *suzhi* and was also appropriated by the 9th Iron company to ensure that staff members were always seeking to improve their knowledge, as evidenced by exam certificates. The 9th Iron used *suzhi* discourses to promote a culture of fierce competition among employees. Managers doubted the *suzhi* of temporary workers, who appeared to be unpromising in their eyes. For example, director Li often criticised workers who fell asleep in staff meetings for having low *suzhi* (*disuzhi*). Equal pay, reasonable working hours, and formal contracts were not regarded as workers' rights but as something that only a small group of workers deserved. Temporary workers often suffered from affective precarity, characterised by feelings of insecurity and stress. The demands made by managers for staff to improve their *suzhi* made this affective precarity worse.

Inspired by Judith Butler's (2004, 2009) distinction between precariousness and precarity, I differentiate between the precariousness of the future and the precarity of the future that Chinese industrial workers face. The precariousness of the future refers to the vulnerability that humans face ontologically in front of the unpredictability of the future. Martin Heidegger (1996) argues that at the ontological level, human beings are thrown into the world. Such thrownness illustrates human beings' relationship with the future: the future one faces is always unpredictable, and one may change it or be changed by what happens in the future. In contrast, the precarity of the future refers to the disadvantages faced by Chinese industrial workers in terms of their difficulties in gaining the agency to predict, change, and control their future lives. This precarity of the future is produced by the intersection of labour precarity and structural precarity. In the case of the 9th Iron temporary workers, the uncertainty of the future caused them great anxiety about themselves, as they constantly worried about their intellectual, physical, and moral qualities (*suzhi*). They experienced a particular form of precarity with regard to their futures.

Lastly, this chapter will illustrate how diverse *suzhi* framings and evaluations arose, coexisted, and were sometimes in conflict with one another in the 9th Iron. Three moral systems—Confucianism, socialism, and neoliberalism—had an impact on workers' various interpretations of *suzhi*. The Confucian emphasis on *suzhi* as a person who adheres to Confucian ethics coexists with the socialist interpretation of *suzhi* as a socialist worker who contributes to the work units. *Suzhi* has nevertheless been embraced by the neoliberal emphasis on individual achievement, as shown by having a respectable job and having money. Yan Yunxiang refers to contemporary China's growing

drive for individual success as "the ethics of the striving individual," which arise as a result of neoliberal economic reform (Yan, 2012: 263). However, I demonstrate that neoliberal subjectivity could not adequately explain the motivations of workers seeking to improve their *suzhi*. Workers of the 9th Iron understood *suzhi* enhancement based on a variety of ethical deliberations.

The chapter starts by providing an introduction to the impact of *suzhi* discourses on temporary workers. It will subsequently examine how the 9th Iron company employed *suzhi* discourses to create an environment of labour precarity that fostered intense competition among workers. The *suzhi* ideology facilitated the accumulation of capital in late socialist China, but *suzhi* also retained socialist features. Although people might have varying interpretations of *suzhi*, the 9th Iron company and its managers' understanding of *suzhi* held the greatest influence as it would determine an employee's career prospects. After that, I will introduce the affective precarity and the precarity of the future that young workers experienced. Workers had anxiety regarding their futures and felt a lack of agency in shaping their own futures. In the end, I will show how workers' ethical considerations drove their efforts to enhance their *suzhi* in the context of the intersection of different forms of precarity.

## 2. Becoming a person with a high *suzhi*

This section examines how temporary workers encountered *suzhi* discourses during their adolescence and during their time at work. Through the story of Zhang Mohui, a young agency worker, I explore my interlocutors' pre-workplace experiences to investigate how *suzhi* ideology shaped a neoliberal subjectivity that emphasised competition and self-determination.

I was in my office on my lunch break, writing my fieldwork notes. Zhang Mohui approached me from behind and attempted to peer at my computer screen. I turned around.

> He said, blushing, "Please don't mind. Everything you wrote is in English. I'm unable to read English. In fact, I came to ask if you could teach me English."
> "Sure," I answered.
> Zhang replied, "You're a high *suzhi* person. I cannot compete with you. When did you begin studying English?"

I said, "When I was in primary school."

Zhang said, “That is different. Children in cities, like you, begin learning English at a young age. Until we got to high school, rural students like myself did not know the ABCD alphabet. I attended high school in a township close to our village. But the English teachers there weren’t very good."

"Why is learning English important to you?" I inquired.

He said, “Poor English means not having the *suzhi* for a global job. I am ineligible for many attractive job chances."

According to Zhang, the 9th Iron provided opportunities for its employees to work overseas in Africa or Southeast Asia, where the pay would be significantly greater than in Shenzhen. Expatriates could also be promoted to permanent contracts in three years, rather than the usual five. Zhang was not eligible for this opportunity because he did not pass the National English Test Band 4 examination.

Zhang’s words indicated that he regarded being able to read and speak English as a sign of high quality (*gaosuzhi*). He also believed that urban children had more opportunities to strengthen their *suzhi* than rural youth, who lacked educational opportunities and the *suzhi* to work globally. *Suzhi* discourses are usually linked to prejudice against rural people, migrant labourers from rural areas to cities, and residents of less developed provinces. When rural cadres in the countryside try to defend their dominant position, they often claim to be of higher quality (*suzhi*) than the villagers (Thøgersen, 2017). Additionally, T.E. Woronov (2009) observes that people from impoverished and rural backgrounds are less likely to engage in activities classified as high *suzhi*, compared to those who were born into wealthy and urban families. For example, students from poor families cannot afford to go on high *suzhi* extracurricular activities such as travelling, learning English, playing piano, and so on. Thus, Woronov argues that *suzhi* is differentiated along class lines (Woronov, 2009).

Zhang grew up in a very poor village in the mountainous area of Shanxi province. His parents were first-generation migrant workers who had been employed as day labourers at various construction sites in Beijing since the late 2000s. Zhang was the family's oldest child, with a younger brother. Zhang left his village at the age of 13 to attend a boarding school in a small town nearby in order to

receive a junior middle school education[32]. Zhang saved money by bringing steamed buns from home every weekend and eating them as a staple food on weekdays.

Zhang's experience astonished me. Growing up in the city, I was aware that students would bring food to schools in the 1990s, but I had no idea that people from impoverished areas would continue to do so in the 2010s. During his three years of senior middle school education, Zhang awoke at 5.30 a.m. every morning and went running with other students on the school's playground. The school required students to run in order to improve their physical quality (*shentisuzhi*). They then had lessons and studied until 11.30 p.m., when the dormitory's lights went out. Zhang's grades in town school were good, so he chose to continue studying while other students from the same village dropped out and began working (*dagong*).

The CCP state's birth policy in the 1980s treated every aspect of the human being, including the body, mind, manners, and morality, as an object to be transformed. By limiting the number of children per family, the one-child policy in cities and the two-child policy in rural areas assumed that each family would be able to focus its resources on raising one or two children. The phrase "fewer and better children" (*shaoshengyousheng*) was well-known at the time. The state pushed childbearing reduction and postponement as a successful strategy for raising high *suzhi* youth and producing children with sound physical conditions. As it sought to raise the general standard of the Chinese race and so create a powerful nation that was unthreatened by western armies, the birth policy bore significant social Darwinist and nationalist undertones (Kipnis, 2006).

The population policy encouraged the alteration of schooling practices. Parents believed that long study hours were a prerequisite for children becoming people of high *suzhi*. In the meantime, physical qualities (*shentisuzhi*) were emphasised across all levels of instruction in schools in an effort to develop decent students with good physiques. Urban parents started to view the single child as their family's only hope for social mobility, according to Vanessa Fong (2004). Rural families also became more concerned about their children's futures. In rural high schools, passing the National Higher Education Entrance Examination (*gaokao*)[33] was seen as a significant way (*chulu*) to change the fate of students and their families. A popular idiom illustrated the fierce

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[32] For ethnographies of life at boarding schools in China, see Hansen (2015)

[33] Gaokao is a university entrance exam for Chinese high school students.

competition of *gaokao* and people's anxiety over it: 'Thousands of troops and horses cross the single-log bridge' (*qianjunwanma guodumuqiao*). Andrew Kipnis argues that students from rural areas aspired to succeed in *gaokao* in order to shed the stigma of being peasants and elevate their status to that of high *suzhi* (Kipnis, 2001). Xiang Xin (2018) also points to the meanings that rural high school students attached to education (*dushu*), which was seen as "the means to a future of comfort and dignity, a family responsibility and collective investment, and a path towards individual freedom and actualisation" (Xiang, 2018: 81).

After taking the test (*gaokao*), Zhang enrolled in vocational college because, he said "it was a more practical (*shiji*) choice". He used the phrase "practical" to indicate that this education was career-focused and short-term, making it simpler for him to obtain employment once he graduated. In vocational college, Zhang excelled. The college assigned him to the 9th Iron as a trainee technician in his second year[34]. He was given the opportunity by the 9th Iron to become an intern after two years as a trainee. Before being elevated to a fixed-term agency contract, he worked as an intern for another two years. Zhang appreciated his college education because he believed it improved his vocational quality (*zhiyesuzhi*). He was also appreciative of his parents for pushing him to retake the national exam after he failed it the first time. Zhang thought his career path was constrained by his lack of *suzhi* in other areas, such as his level of English, even if he acknowledged that his vocational quality (*zhiyesuzhi*) assisted him in getting the agency contract.

Zhang placed his hope of getting a permanent contract on improving his *suzhi* in other aspects. From Zhang's perspective, the ability to learn from practice could also be considered a part of the employee's overall quality (*zonghesuzhi*). Zhang had confidence in himself in this regard because of his long work experience. According to him, "These days, the 9th Iron recruits more and more graduates with master's degrees from top universities. They have bright futures. But I am better than them at solving real problems in practice (*shijiwenti*)". Nevertheless, this confidence did not ease Zhang anxiety over getting a permanent contract.

[34] As I discussed in Chapter 7, vocational colleges sign cooperation contracts with the 9th Iron, but there is no formal labour contract between trainee students and the 9th Iron company. In these student-company placement agreements, private-owned vocational colleges serve as informal labour agents and collect fees from both parties.

In order to get a permanent job, Zhang needed to be nominated by the project director Li, after which Zhang could file an application to the 9th Iron. At that time, there was one vacancy for the position of on-site team leader. Zhang was asked to temporarily take on the position by project director Li while maintaining his original salary. Li promised that once Zhang got his permanent contract (*bianzhi*) Zhang's managerial role would be official. Therefore, Zhang put a lot of effort into his temporary managerial work. He worked the night shift that state workers with permanent contracts were reluctant to accept. Zhang's diligence was widely witnessed in the compound. As technician Liang commented, "We all know that Zhang is one of a handful of people who are willing to work extremely hard." Additionally, Zhang was pretty certain that he had built a good *guanxi* with Director Li during the previous two years since he had consistently stood with Li throughout conflicts inside the department.

Unfortunately, after Zhang submitted his application, he was told that his first two years of working as an intern could not be counted as his work experience. Nonetheless, rumours spread in the compound that another agency worker, a relative of the 9th Iron boss, had signed a permanent contract that year. Because the quota for permanent contracts was fixed each year, people living in the compound suspected that the quota earned by the leader's relative was actually supposed to be Zhang's. Frustrated, Zhang told me that he had to wait. "Two years means this project will be finished, and I will be assigned to another project. I am not sure whether the project director of the next project will see my *suzhi* or not. I studied hard in order to escape the countryside and change my fate. But, after I started working, I knew that it would always be tough for children from rural families to stand on their own two feet in cities."

While education has been associated with great aspirations in China over the past four decades, the increase in unemployment among young university graduates has denied these hopes. In 1999, the central government decided to expand enrolment in higher education (Ngok, 2008). Between 1999 and 2005, the number of university and vocational college graduates increased by three times in total (Li et al., 2014). The Chinese labour market struggled to keep up with the influx of graduates. Researchers found that the expansion of higher education in China beginning in 1999 significantly increased the unemployment rate among young vocational college graduates (Li et al., 2014). Moreover, when China's economy slowed down, youth unemployment grew from 9.78 percent in 2010 to 11.93 percent in 2020 (World Bank, 2022).

Under the pressure of unemployment, young people have to accept more insecure contracts. The hope that rural youth and their families have placed in education makes a sharp contrast with the reality of increasing labour precarity in the workplace, which leads to a painful experience of frustration among youth (Sier, 2021). The increase in precaritisation in employment makes jobs in state-owned enterprises appear to be a preferable option compared to jobs in the private sector, although newcomers must accept temporary contracts for the first five to ten years. According to Director Li, "our company is the destination for young people who do not have good family backgrounds. (Li meant people who did not come from wealthy or politically influential households when he said this.) If they have good family backgrounds, they will choose to do anything else: work for the government or have their own business." Li echoed Cheng's words in Chapter 6.

College education provided many 9th Iron temporary employees, like Zhang, with the opportunity to acquire urban jobs but not the bright career prospects that they desired. More importantly, it could not provide them with the opportunity to escape rurality because most agency workers' household registration status was only temporarily registered with the agency companies, which meant that if they were fired, their household registration status would become rural again (see Chapter 4).

To sum up, as Zhang's case showed, *suzhi* discourses affected young migrants at almost every stage of their lives. Similar to Zhang, most young agency workers in the 9th Iron went to vocational college. On the one hand, they believed their vocational quality (*zhiyesuzhi*) improved, which helped them get urban jobs. On the other hand, they found they still needed to wait for years before getting permanent contracts they desired. Besides, as newcomers to the company have higher and higher education qualifications, temporary workers were anxious about the possibility of being left behind by their peers. In the context of precaritisation of employment in the 9th Iron, this anxiety resulted in employees' fever for getting more and more qualifications. Besides, they also worried about being targeted by the management board as people unwilling to improve their overall *suzhi*. I will elaborate on these points in the following section.

# 3. Neoliberal, yet socialist suzhi : the company's technique for controlling labour

This section will illustrate how the ideology of *suzhi* was used as a labour control technique in the company and how it produced experiences of fear and distress. I will demonstrate how *suzhi* ideology not only facilitated the company's labour control by stimulating rivalry among employees but also helped the company maximise its profits. Nonetheless, recent *suzhi* discourses preserved certain characteristics inherited from the socialist period.

The word "quality (*suzhi*)" could be seen almost everywhere in the company's documents. The passage below was taken from a document called 'the *Suzhi* Improvement Programme for the Company's Employees', which I copied while working in the administration department at the headquarters of the 9th Iron. It said,

> "Implementing an assessment and incentive system to encourage employees to learn on their own. First, the winners and losers system shall be implemented. Distinguish the capable workers from the mediocre workers so that the concept of competition is implemented at all times in the enterprise employment system. Second, improve the assessment mechanism, encourage employees to study technology, business, obtain more skill certificates, fully utilise personal initiative, transform pressure into motivation, and continuously improve *suzhi* for their own job security, competition, and higher welfare benefits, in order to effectively promote workers to improve their *suzhi* consciously."

The *Suzhi* Improvement Programme ran every season in the company's headquarters. Training programmes in the 9th Iron were typically held over three days, from Friday to Sunday, from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. Both junior managers and general staff were included in this type of training. Participants were nominated for training by project departments across the country, and only exemplary employees who were hardworking in the eyes of project managers and party secretaries would be given the opportunity to be nominated. Both state workers and agency workers were eligible for participation whereas informal *guanxi* workers, trainees, interns, and migrant workers were excluded from the training programmes. During these programmes, the company's CEO delivered a

speech. In addition, the 9th Iron usually invited a lecturer from local vocational colleges and an employee quality trainer (*yuangongsuzhipeixunshi*) to give lectures. The training aimed to improve employees' knowledge, technical skills, and moral integrity. Each training session had a different goal, such as improving communication skills or increasing work efficiency. The training was mostly delivered through lectures with PowerPoint presentations, although sometimes the employee quality trainer might organise group discussions. The director of the compound must submit a summary report after the end of the programme. To emphasise the success of this training, managers usually included in this report how many people in the project department had received different kinds of certificates that year. This created a competition for staff *suzhi* (*yuangongsuzhi*) between the different project compounds. Director Li frequently reminded employees that they needed to attend more certificate examinations. The pressure created by *suzhi* discourses thus cascaded down from the headquarters to the project compound.

Some young employees saw the chance to attend *suzhi* training as a good thing. Young Yang was a 27-year-old agency worker who recently completed his internship. In his opinion, being recommended to attend the training programme was a proof of his personal progress. Nevertheless, agency workers who had been with the company for a longer period of time were much less eager to attend such training because some of them had previously attended but found that these training programmes did help them get a permanent contract. State workers used the training time to socialise with others. During a break in a training course, I saw state workers passing cigarettes to other state workers they knew, patting each other on the back, and greeting each other. State employees had much less pressure to perform well in these training programmes. Rather, most state workers considered these training programmes opportunities to build connections with colleagues and mid-level managers.

Sun Wanning (2009) describes how *suzhi* discourses were utilised for disciplining female workers. Managers referred to rural-to-urban migrants with limited urban job experience as low *suzhi* people, despite the fact that managers wanted to use people who were new to the cities since they were more obedient than experienced ones. Sun contends that the market mechanism has appropriated the term *suzhi* and has transformed it into a method of maintaining a docile work force (Sun, 2009). Yan Hairong (2003) finds that in the city of Tianjing, a domestic services company insisted that rural migrant maids had low *suzhi*, therefore justifying their low wage. In contrast to middle-class family employers who had high *suzhi*, migrant maids who had low *suzhi* should accept the

regulation and education of both urban service companies and the Women's Federation in maids' home villages (Yan, 2003; see Chapter 1). Sun (2009) and Yan (2003) note that the usage of *suzhi* discourses in the workplace has been frequently used to legitimise the hierarchical relationship between management and labour. Both authors concentrate on the precarious situations of unskilled employees (Yan, 2003; Sun, 2009), whereas I concentrate on skilled workers with vocational college educations. Although temporary workers in the 9th Iron were more educated than Sun's (2009) and Yan's (2003) interlocutors, *suzhi* discourses still had a significant impact on them. The company continuously reminded temporary workers that they needed to continue to enhance their *suzhi* in order to survive the competition, implying that temporary workers lacked the *suzhi* required for permanent employment.

I showed how the 9th Iron employed *suzhi* discourses as a management technique. As the quotation from the company's file suggests, *suzhi* discourses were primarily used to remind employees of the existence of competition. Temporary workers who did not improve their *suzhi* would become losers in the competition and lose their jobs. Moreover, the prevalent existence of *suzhi* discourses in the company encouraged the development of a certification fever among employees. I will start with my conversation with Liang Dalei to introduce this phenomenon.

Liang Dalei was a 33 year-old machinist who came from a rural area of Sichuan Province. He started as a trainee twelve years ago and then got an agency contract after a few years of apprenticeship. In February 2020, Liang secured himself a permanent contract. Liang organised a celebration party at a restaurant in Baiyun village (see Picture 2.6) and invited his colleagues and me. The majority of these colleagues worked as technicians and surveyors under agency contracts. Four of them had informal guanxi contracts: a female administrative assistant, two female technicians, and a male trainee. We sat at a round table in the restaurant's corner, next to its kitchen. After a few drinks, temporary workers began to praise Liang and ask him how to get permanent contracts faster. Liang told us that he believed that suzhi was the key to getting longer-term contracts and continued to talk about his understanding of suzhi, which included obtaining more qualifications. According to him,

> "You need to pass exams that the company think important as much as possible, as quickly as possible. The best ones are the national Construction Engineer Certificate (*jianzaoshi*)

and the national Building Engineer Certificate (*jianzhushi*). If you have any knowledge of accounting, you should take the National Accountancy exam. But most people can't pass these exams, so they choose any relevant exams to attend, or exams with similar names to the above three. Some people can't pass those exams as well, so they go for short courses at universities. These are the easiest ones. As long as you attend the courses and pay for them, you will receive a construction engineer's certificate, a building engineer's certificate, a certificate of accounting, a welder's certification, a machinist's certification, a tunnel signal light worker's certification, a plumber's certification, a driller's certification, an electrician certificate, and so on. There are all kinds of certifications that you could possibly imagine."

ZL: "are these all useful?"

Liang: "It depends on what you mean by 'useful'. Employees' certifications are important when the company needs to earn a new project from government. For people like me, getting more certificates can prove ourselves to the company. It is a sign of improving one's quality (*suzhi*). For example, if you have the National Construction Engineer Certificate, the company will try everything to keep you not leaving. You will be one step to heaven (yibudengtian). The exam is extremely difficult to pass[35]. Nevertheless, people keep trying and enrolling themselves into exams even after several failures."[36]

Temporary workers in the 9th Iron almost all sought opportunities to attend all types of relevant exams and get certificates, which ranged from accounting, construction, engineering, designing, security, and fire prevention. There was a proliferation of certification fevers. Liang was attending different types of qualification exams each year since 2018. He was preparing for his exams while trying to balance other aspects of his life. During the daytime, he dealt with raw material suppliers at work. In the evenings, he spent time networking with people in the company. At night, he studied for exams. I was surprised at his diligence, as he seemed to live a lifestyle with little sleep. This lifestyle could be discerned in many other temporary workers as well. Jinmei, a 30-year-old female temporary worker who worked at the 9th Iron's headquarters office, was preparing for the

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[35] In fact, I discovered later that, according to the 9th Iron's administrative records, just seven candidates had passed the National Construction Engineer Certificate Examination since 2008. They were all compound leaders or senior managers.

[36] I recorded Liang's speech on my phone with his permission.

examination of a Certified Public Accountant when I first met her. There was a pile of company files on one side of her desk and another pile of examination books on the other side. During the lunch break, Jinmei buried her head between two piles and wrote mock test papers before continuing to work in the afternoon.

The more qualifications the 9th Iron workers had, the more likely it was that the company would be granted opportunities to undertake major railway projects from the provincial governments. Having more qualified staff could give 9th Iron a competitive advantage over other state-owned construction enterprises. But managers never discussed how employees taking the exam would benefit the company. Instead, getting certification was reframed in the discourse of *suzhi* by managers. For example, director Li often said, "Getting certification is a sign of improving one's *suzhi*." Although getting certification was reframed by the management, the support that the company provided for workers was very limited. Most of the time, training and examination fees were self-funded by temporary workers, which put pressure on young workers who were new to the job and had less financial capacity. Temporary workers were also unable to request paid leave. When their exam schedule conflicted with their shifts, employees had to switch shifts with their coworkers.

As Liang observed, temporary workers were concerned about being labelled as someone who lacked *suzhi* for competition. Managers had a decisive say in whether a person had *suzhi*. When a temporary employee was identified as having low *suzhi*, he or she faced the risk of losing his or her job. Although agency workers had fixed-term contracts that made their situation better than that of other temporary workers, the compound and the company had the authority to place agency workers on unpaid leave if managers believed an employee was lacking in *suzhi* or making mistakes at work. Employees on unpaid leave would lose not just their wages but also their right to live on the company compound. They would be told to return home and wait for further instructions. Temporary workers could not seek assistance from the trade union since, in the 9th Iron, the trade union was part of the management board and always represented the company rather than workers. The unpaid leave decisions helped the company avoid legal proceedings that might have been triggered by directly firing agency workers. Such labour arrangements also sometimes helped the company maximise its profit. If the company had a temporary shortage of staff, managers could call employees on unpaid leave to come back and work during the busy season while not giving clear

instructions about their employment status. Unless the worker managed to find a manager who was willing to support him or her, it was nearly impossible for agency workers who were placed on unpaid leave to renew their contracts after their two-year contracts expired.

In the 1990s, the majority of state workers had been placed on unpaid leave, and most of them had been fired within a year or two (see Chapters 4 and 9). After the SOE reform, 9th Iron company's state workers who survived the reform were no longer at risk of being placed on unpaid leave. In contrast, temporary workers were still at risk of being forced to take unpaid leave by their bosses. Employees' low *suzhi* was a frequent reason for leaders to do so.

Guo Tian was a 21-year-old agency worker who graduated from a vocational college. Unlike his peers, who were obsessed with obtaining certifications, Guo had no desire to take any exams. He also defied the leader's orders on occasion. When director Li ordered him to prepare a report to the government regarding tunnel progress, Guo refused to exaggerate the progress as Li demanded. Guo thought that numbers should not be tampered with. Guo's refusal caused a major fight between him and director Li during the morning meeting. Both yelled angrily, leaving everyone there in awkward silence. Li said, "This is a report that we use to impress government officials. We will not use it to guide the actual work or to assess the construction budget. This report is intended to make us (i.e., the company) appear very capable in the eyes of officials, which will help our company secure government investment and bids in the future. Guo Jing, you never consider the company's collective interests. You do not have the *suzhi* to be a qualified employee." Guo replied, "I do not think so. What I lack is the *suzhi* to lick the boots of leaders (*paimapi*)." The following day, director Li decided to put an end to this farce. He chose to place Guo on unpaid leave in order to "send Guo back home and let him perform self-criticism." Guo agreed to return home first and wait to see what happened next. Guo came from a family with few connections to leaders. Guo's mother sold groceries in the village after her divorce from Guo's father. It would be unlikely that Guo would get his job back.

During the revolutionary era, the CCP characterised criticism and self-criticism as techniques of political movements. Mao Zedong stated during the Yan'an Rectification Movement[37] (1942–1945) that "criticism is criticising others, and self-criticism is criticising oneself. Criticism and self-

[37] The Yan'an Rectification Movement was a political mass movement where Mao solidified his leadership in the CCP and developed Maoism ideology.

criticism are inextricably linked and cannot be separated." (Wang, 2014: 45). Criticism and self-criticism were vital components of socialist political movements. Self-criticism was intended to improve one's mental and moral quality. Li viewed unpaid leave as a chance for workers to conduct self-criticism, as he used terminology from the socialist past. But Li also used *suzhi*, a term that first surfaced in the 1980s, to complain about Guo as a low-*suzhi* employee.

Scholars point out that *suzhi* discourses have facilitated the development of neoliberal subjectivity (Yan, 2003, 2008; Anagnost, 2004; Fong, 2004, 2007; Jacka, 2009; Sun, 2009; Woronov, 2009; Kipnis, 2006; Brownell, 2009). This type of subjectivity encourages rural people to believe that working in the cities can improve their *suzhi* in all aspects and can make them better people. Nevertheless, the real purpose of *suzhi* ideology is to produce a huge obedient and cheap labour force for the development of capitalism (Yan, 2003, 2008; Anagnost, 2004; Sun, 2009; Woronov, 2009). Anagnost sees how the ideology of *suzhi* affects the middle class, one-child families that heavily invest in children's education for quality (*suzhijiaoyu*), as well as rural migrants who want to improve their *suzhi* to escape rurality. Anagnost argues *suzhi* is an ideological formation that has formative power that "enables the transfer of economic value from one body to another" (Anagnost, 2004:191). Under the ideology of *suzhi*, a valuable body is one that has added value through educational investment rather than a body from which surplus value has been extracted. He argues that "*suzhi* not only codes that difference but channels it towards capital accumulation." Anagnost, 2004:191). Besides, according to Yan Hairong, *suzhi* assesses diverse human subjectivities in terms of their potential for development and characterises a person in terms of his or her economic value in the market (Yan, 2003). Economic development becomes the only "indisputable truth' (*yingdaoli*) in China, preceding anything else (Yan, 2003: 496). The authorities and elites use low *suzhi* to control the industrial labour force. *Suzhi* is also critical of current poverty-reduction efforts. The local government aims to instil in rural people a desire for self-development, urging them to improve their *suzhi*. Local government officials believe that the improvement of people's *suzhi* can lead to regional economic growth. Yan accuses these poverty limitation programmes of serving the interests of the Chinese neoliberal regime, which regards "human subjectivity as the most important agent for market growth and development" (Yan, 2003: 511).

To some extent, my observations at the 9th Iron supported the above argument. Similar to Yan's (2003, 2008) and Anagnost's (2004) study, *suzhi* was frequently employed by managers in negative

assertions to point out and emphasise a worker's lack of *suzhi*. This use was also mirrored in the 9th Iron's persistent focus on the need for workers to be conscious of their own shortcomings as well as serious rivalry. The emphasis on employees' *suzhi* encouraged temporary employees to pursue certificates. Temporary workers were keen to pursue their ambitions of establishing themselves in cities by obtaining additional certificates. However, this certification fever among employees benefitted the 9th Iron company in the long run: without having to pay for certification exams, the company would obtain more certified staff, allowing the company to win the government's permission to undertake major construction projects. All of this would be advantageous to the 9th Iron's profitability.

Nonetheless, I discovered that the word *suzhi* could be appropriated in a variety of ways. In the instance of Guo and Li, for example, Guo's tight commitment to the scientific measurement data showed a type of instrumental rationality that Max Weber's theory thought vital to capitalist development (Weber, 2019). However, Guo's actions, in Li's opinion, demonstrated his low *suzhi* because Guo did not attempt to protect the communal interests of the work unit. In other words, the *suzhi* that Li acknowledged included not only employees' improved ability to compete in the market but also employees' prioritisation of their work units' collective interests. The latter, rather than exhibiting the influences of neoliberal market reform, was a representation of the value orientation of prioritising group interests above individual ones, which was hegemonic in the socialist era.

Moreover, in the 9th Iron's employee *suzhi* training programmes, many procedural and ceremonial terms had distinct socialist rather than neoliberal characteristics. During one meeting of the training programme, the leader asked me to take the photograph of Picture 8.1. The photo below depicts a scene of 9th Iron young employees (mostly agency workers) participating in their first employee *suzhi* training. Employees were instructed to raise their right hands and recite a loyalty oath to the 9th Iron. This ceremony closely resembled the initiation rite of the Communist Party of China. To become a member of the Communist Party, one must swear to never go against the CCP in front of other Party members.

Picture 8.1 Suzhi Training Programme

In Picture 8.2, the 9th Iron Workers were completing certification exams. Despite the fact that the exam was not administered by the 9th Iron and that workers, not the corporation, paid the examination fees, all staff members were required to wear 9th Iron uniforms. The 9th Iron arranged for buses to transport workers from construction sites to the examination site on the morning of the exam. The examination took place in an old Shenzhen commercial building. The examination room was swelteringly hot in the summer, with a red banner announcing the 2020 examination for tunnel machinists. With permission from the examination organiser, secretary Wang requested me to enter the room and photograph employees. "Wearing the 9th Iron uniform is meant to remind employees that they are part of the 9th Iron company," explained secretary Wang. Despite his claims, I observed that the majority of exam attendants were temporary workers. During the examination, there were few state employees, and they appeared much less stressed than temporary workers. After the exam, secretary Wang asked me to write a new report titled "Implementing Xi Jinping's ideas, the 9th Iron Workers actively improve their *suzhi* to contribute to the great Chinese dream". Then, secretary Wang and director Li edited this new report before submitting it to the official news website of the 9th Iron. This level of emphasis on ideological propaganda was profoundly socialist in character.

Picture 8.2 skilled workers in exams

Besides, in the education material of the employee *suzhi* training programmes, the morality of employees was important. The PowerPoint slide that I show below (Picture 8.3) was used in a training meeting. It highlighted that one should love the work unit as much as home is loved. It also stated that one should respect one's occupation. Both statements had significant socialist undertones. The former was often used in socialist propaganda when people's lives had been organised and reliant on their work units (see Chapter 4). The latter stemmed from the socialist belief that all jobs should be equal and respectful. In the late socialist era, the 9th Iron re-appropriated the socialist morality of adoring one's work unit and occupation as an essential component of employees' *suzhi*.

Picture 8.3 Suzhi training programme slides

In fact, *suzhi* has its origins in the socialist period. Andrew Kipnis (2006) notes that *suzhi* possessed characteristics traceable to the socialist past. *Suzhi* discourses emerged in the 1980s alongside the state-enforced birth policy described in the preceding section. The birth-control movement was promoted under the guise of increasing "human population quality (*renkousuzhi*)" (Kipnis, 2006: 301). The discourse of improving population quality linked birth control policy with nationalism and patriotism, making a woman's body an object of state control. Linking individual existence with the growth of society and the nation had blatant socialist overtones. Socialist administrations frequently emphasised the contribution of the individual to the larger collective of state and society (Lampland, 1995; Hann, 2002; King and Vullnetari, 2016). Socialist countries also often mobilised people to participate in the blueprint for national modernisation (Scott, 2020).

At the end of the 1980s, *suzhi* education, which sought to improve the quality of people, began to develop. In 1985, the CCP Central Committee stated that raising the *suzhi* of the nation's citizens was the fundamental objective of the education system reform. *Suzhi* discourses were utilised as a bridge between individual and national futures, which assisted the state in establishing its

governance. During the CCP's nineteenth central committee meeting in 2021, the CCP Central Committee reaffirmed that improving the overall character of the population was a crucial aspect of promoting the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation. *Suzhi'*s ideology linked nationalistic aspirations with personal aspirations of physical, mental, and moral superiority. In short, as this section has illustrated, *suzhi* has a significant socialist legacy that cannot be explained by neoliberalism alone.

In the 9th Iron, there were many different interpretations of *suzhi* made by different groups of people. However, among all the interpretations, the company's and managers' interpretations of *suzhi* were the most influential, and their interpretation of *suzhi* influenced whether or not a temporary employee could continue to work for the company. The company's *suzhi* ideology instilled hope in employees that they could attain job security by enhancing their *suzhi*. With hopes for the future, young employees undertook more exams to demonstrate their *suzhi*. *Suzhi* ideology created a regime of labour precarity where temporary employees constantly experienced competition with their coworkers and faced uncertainty about their future prospects. In the following section, I will expand on how the labour precarity caused by *suzhi* discourses produced a form of affective precarity and the precarity of the future.

## 4. *suzhi* anxiety and the precarity of the future

In this section, I underline that the term *suzhi* is more than just a controlling instrument of the late socialist regime. People also take the initiative to connect their aspirations for upward mobility with other activities they believe will help them improve their *suzhi*. The young people at the 9th Iron had a strong desire for *suzhi* and believed that by learning English and completing various types of examinations, they could improve their *suzhi*. *Suzhi* was seen as a ticket to the bright, secure future that temporary employees imagine. At the same time, workers were concerned that they did not have enough *suzhi*, not only because firm managers had authority in judging employees' *suzhi* but also because dominating *suzhi* discourses emphasised competition, which instilled in the 9th Iron employees' fear about losing the competition. Overwhelming senses of discomfort was common. The emotion was contagious, and one often unwittingly succumbed to it, suggesting a form of affective precarity.

When Liang Dalei first described his experience of affective precarity to me, we were walking along a section of railway track outside the Ganshen tunnel. It was midnight on a summer day, and the weather had cooled down from earlier. Liang paused and stared up at the stars. While looking at the sky, he said,

> "I work and study intensely every day except when I sleep. I sometimes feel like I'm stuck in a broken lift. I do not know what will happen next! I wish I could go up to a higher floor, but I am unable to do so. I cannot go down. I cannot even get out of the lift. In fact, I cannot go anywhere! I am trapped. Although I am not in danger of losing my life, I am aware that time is passing and my oxygen level is falling. I am quite worried. But it is not only me who is worried; I have seen that everyone around me is worried as well. I sometimes wonder if the Chinese are born with anxiety genes. Because our country experienced constant famines and warfare in history, Chinese people have been concerned about our survival since we were in the womb."

Liang believed that his feelings of anxiety were not unique to him but were typical of Chinese society. The feeling of confinement resonates with the affective precarity that individuals encounter in the situation that Xiang Biao terms suspension (Biao, 2021; see Chapter 1 and 3). In Liang's narration, he connected personal feelings, social emotions, and national history, attempting to explain his predicament. Liang attempted to minimise his concern about employment uncertainty by enhancing his *suzhi*, much as the Chinese state was keen to improve the *suzhi* of its population in order to accomplish economic growth and recover from the trauma caused by all the sufferings the country had experienced in the twentieth century.

Similar affective precarity could also be found elsewhere. Tine M. Gammeltoft (2013) discovers that Vietnamese pregnant women's fear about having a malformed baby was paralleled by the Vietnamese state's anxiety over the quality of the nation's future population. She insightfully identifies connections "between personal emotions and state sentiments" (Gammeltoft, 2013: 165). In Vietnamese official propaganda, a large proportion of the disabled were seen as a threat to the country's development. As a result, prenatal screening was made available as a benefit to the public to minimise the birth rate of malformed children. Gammeltoft incorporates Martin Heidegger's distinction between "private feelings" and "mood" into her analysis of the pervasive anxiety about

childbirth (Gammeltoft, 2013). Gammeltoft argues moods were "public phenomena" that determined "how things came to matter for us," and humans were "embedded and enmeshed" in moods (Gammeltoft, 2013:165–166). Collective memories of chemical weapons were passed down through women's word of mouth, together with post-war government propaganda, resulting in a social emotion (i.e., a mood) of fear and anxiety about childbirth in Vietnamese society.

While Gammeltoft's (2013) research is fascinating, I see room for alternative analytical viewpoints. Martin Heidegger writes, "A mood assails us. It emerges from Being-in-the-World rather than the 'outside' or the 'inside' "(Heidegger, 1996:176). Heidegger claims that moods disclose the ontological condition of human beings, i.e., the "thrownness" (Heidegger, 1996). Moods demonstrate that humans are thrown into this world and thus are invariably exposed to the unpredictability and possibility of the future. In other words, as humans, we all suffer from the "thrownness" of our existence.

Nonetheless, the future's unpredictability may be viewed and experienced differently in different social and cultural contexts. Vietnamese women, for example, had intense fears about future motherhood, whereas women in European and North American cultures were more likely to view their pregnancy and prenatal examinations as positive experiences (Mitchell, 2001; Gammeltoft, 2013). While humans all face the uncertainty of the future, our emotions and perceptions of that uncertainty are influenced by historical and sociological factors. Inspired by Judith Butler's distinction between precariousness and precarity that I introduced in Chapter 1 (Butler, 2004, 2009), I argue that thrownness reveals the precariousness of the future, whereas the precarity of the future is experienced unevenly and unequally across different societies and socioeconomic groupings. The precarity of the future triggered widespread anxiety among temporary workers in the 9th Iron and led to staff members' various claims about *suzhi*. Temporary workers experienced this type of anxiety the most, as they felt the passage of time and had to wait for what might happen next: being reprimanded by the leader for low *suzhi*, or being surpassed by high *suzhi* peers, or being ridiculed for being low *suzhi* because of one's rural origin, or losing one's job for not improving one's *suzhi*, and so on. Nevertheless, temporary workers of the 9th Iron also made efforts in various ways to improve their *suzhi* in the hope of keeping their precarious futures within the control of human agency. These efforts, as I will demonstrate in the next section, entailed diverse ethical contemplations.

# 5. Pursuing suzhi for ethical motives : to make one's family and oneself proud

This section examines the motivations underlying workers' endeavours to enhance their *suzhi*. Workers strived to improve their *suzhi*, not solely for the sake of securing permanent contracts or monetary incentives. Sometimes, workers' ethical considerations motivated them to improve their *suzhi*. These ethical deliberations might exhibit characteristics of the neoliberal idea of self-realisation and personal success while also reflecting elements of Confucian emphasis on enhancing the living conditions of one's parents and taking on the duty of caring for the elderly. These diverse ethical considerations demonstrate that the ethics of precarity are not determined by a singular moral framework but rather by various coexisting moral frameworks that can be traced back to different historical periods. Young 9th Iron workers' desire to improve their personal *suzhi* suggested that they understood *suzhi* in relation to individual success and the honour of the family collective. In contrast, the socialist view of collective achievement, which I will illustrate in Chapter 9, had a significant impact on the older generation of workers who had lived through the socialist era.

Once I saw Jinmei, the young accountant I mentioned above, studying till midnight in her dormitory. Because there was no desk in the dormitory and the main light was turned off after 11 p.m., Jin sat on her bed and read her books with a small lamp. I walked up to her, and even at close range, I found it difficult to read the words on her books in the dim light. I asked what motivated her to work so hard. She responded, “I have a positive life attitude. Improving *suzhi* is not only about how much I earn in the end but also about having a positive life attitude. I think a person should look upward while she is alive.” In Jinmei’s eyes, studying and improving her *suzhi* was not only driven by material interests that qualifications may bring to her but also by her desires to realise the ethical meaning of existence.

Yan Yunxiang notices that since the reform and opening, the drive for success, which is characterised as “the urge to succeed and the accompanying anxiety” (Yan, 2012: 264), has significantly affected Chinese perceptions and practices of becoming a moral person. The state promotes the accumulation of personal wealth, which not only aids in the growth of the national

economy but also puts enormous pressure on individuals to succeed. The polarisation of Chinese society since the late 1990s has intensified people's desire to climb up the social hierarchy and become *renshangren* (a person above others who has all privileges) (Yan, 2012). These changes have affected people's ethical reflections and judgements. Fashioning oneself into a diligent person who endeavours to be successful is widely perceived as an ethical thing to do. Yan calls this change in the Chinese moral landscape "the ethics of the striving individual" (Yan, 2012: 277). Yan argues that the rise of "the ethics of the striving individual" illustrates the development of individualism and neoliberal subjectivity in China. Young people are now inclined to understand success as the pursuit of individual rights and freedom rather than the contribution to the glory of family and ancestors (Yan, 2012). Jinmei's response resembled the ethics of the striving individual that Yan (2012) describes.

However, young people I met in the 9th Iron made efforts to improve their *suzhi* not only for achieving individual success but also for meeting the expectations of their family members and fulfilling the moral obligation of performing filial piety. For example, technician Cheng Tianru felt great pressure to achieve success. This pressure needed to be understood together with Cheng's mother's expectations of him. Cheng's mother, a migrant worker, travelled to Shenzhen to see her son. Two other colleagues and I, who were close to Cheng, met with Cheng's mother. Although staff members' parents were allowed to come into the compound for a short visit, Cheng's mother refused to do so. She worried that she would meet project leaders. She told me, "My poor image (i.e., as a migrant worker) will affect Cheng's image in the work unit (*zaidanwei*). But please do not let Cheng know. If my son knew, he would feel bad for not being able to show me around." Later, when Cheng joined us for dinner, Cheng's mother proudly mentioned the gold necklace that Cheng had purchased for her when they had gone shopping in town at the last lunar new year and claimed that the other villagers envied her for having such a good son. She was concerned about her son's difficulties in finding a girlfriend and urged him to find someone to marry in the next year, but she also hoped that her son could concentrate on work and do well at the work unit. In front of his mother, Cheng did not mention the distinction between permanent employment and temporary workers. Instead, he highlighted the fact that 'we' (he and his colleagues) all worked for the company whose name began with the word "the state" (in Chinese, *guozikaitou*, i.e., owned by the state).

Cheng mentioned to me in private that the gold necklace had cost most of his annual bonus, leaving him with little savings after a year of hard work. To save some money this year, Cheng was trying to sell second-hand shoes online in his spare time after work. He chose not to tell his mother about his spare-time adventure because she would accuse him of ignoring his proper occupation (*buwuzhengye*). Nonetheless, he appeared to be pleased with his gift choice because "after all, my mother is happy," he said. In Shaun Kingsley Malarney's (2018) study of Vietnamese families, he notices how people understand money in relation to the filial duty that Confucian morality requires. He writes, "Families valorised wealth creation because it created circumstances conducive to family advancement..... Money provided a visible expression of the proper execution of one's filial obligations. Money and the wealth it represented were highly prized" (Malarney, 2018: 274-5). Malarney shows how people in an East Asian cultural setting can construct their monetary success in ethical terms. Similarly, Cheng understood his desire for success in connection with the Confucian moral principle of filial piety (Malarney, 2018).

But Cheng's mother felt joy for reasons other than the gift her son had given her. She was proud of her son since working for the state represented Cheng's accomplishment in escaping rurality. Kipnis notices that parents in Zouping County, Shandong Province, wanted their children to become work-unit members (*danweiren*). Parents believed there was a significant difference between people in work units and regular people (*laobaixing*) (Kipnis, 2019). The former had high *suzhi*, while the latter were at the bottom of the social ladder. Having a child with high *suzhi* and establishing himself in cities was a sign of parental accomplishment that could be presented in front of other villagers as well as ancestors in most rural areas. In Cheng's case, a state job signified a person's high *suzhi*. In other words, Cheng's mother saw her son's high *suzhi* as having high symbolic value. Out of motherly love, she would not let her son's high *suzhi* status be harmed by her rurality. Cheng, on the other hand, carefully presented his status to his mother while attempting to conceal the precarity that he faced in life from her. In this situation, each party must conceal a portion of reality from the other while carefully preserving the symbolic value of *suzhi* for the sake of good.

Employees in the 9th Iron thus pursued *suzhi*, not simply for the purpose of becoming ethical individuals capable of acquiring personal prosperity. They also strived to develop their *suzhi* in order to make their family members and themselves proud. In the view of my interlocutors and their parents, becoming a high *suzhi* person constituted the fulfilment of one's filial piety, an important

moral principle in Confucian morality. In short, both individual success (as a personal attainment) and collective success (as a contribution to one's family) were important to young employees in the 9th Iron. They attempted to fulfil their moral commitments to their families while pursuing their personal agenda.

# 6. Conclusion

Michel Foucault argues that in an enterprise society, homo œconomicus is "an entrepreneur of himself" who is "his own capital, his own producer, and his own source of income" (Foucault, 2008: 226). Nikolas Rose takes this idea further by characterising the neoliberal subject as an individual who is empowered, self-reliant, unafraid of challenges and competitions, and who is always accountable for his or her actions in the market economy (Rose, 1999, 2001, 2009). In the Chinese context, Lisa Rofel also points out that neoliberalism has created "desiring subjects" in China who are always eager to satisfy their material desires and improve social status (Rofel, 1999). The ideal neoliberal subject has the ethics of the striving individual that Yan Yunxiang defines (Yan, 2012). *Suzhi* discourse encourages individuals to cultivate the skills necessary to compete in the market. *Suzhi* discourse also fosters the hope that one can achieve upward mobility by enhancing his or her suzhi.

*Suzhi* discourses have influenced every life stage of people born in the 1980s and 1990s, such as Zhang (see Section 2 of this chapter). Prior to their birth, their mothers had been influenced by state-led family planning programmes that had instilled in them a wish to deliver high-*suzhi* children. *Suzhi* education during workers' adolescence attempted to nurture them into students who excelled in physical, moral, and intellectual aspects. *Suzhi* discourses continued to influence the 9th Iron workers, as the company constantly required them to improve their *suzhi*.

However, the desire to improve one's qualities in every way and the need for constant self-improvement are not wholly novel. During the socialist era, enhancing one's overall quality was seen as beneficial for the larger collective (i.e., the work unit and the socialist nation). The 9th Iron company's staff training programmes still included some socialist traits. Furthermore, managers of the older generation, such as director Li, understood *suzhi* in a socialist manner; a high *suzhi* person should have the moral consciousness to never harm the interests of the work unit. Young workers

seemed to have difficulty comprehending in the same way as the older generation, especially when they did not have the job security that managers and government employees enjoyed. These conflicts suggested that different ideas about *suzhi* might be inimical, as these ideas referred to different moral frameworks. For example, Guo's case showed the conflicts between the socialist moral idea of protecting the collective of work units and the recent moral idea that appreciated individuals' independent judgement and individual freedom.

Additionally, Confucian culture also emphasises the value and moral significance of individual striving (Du, 2016). In Confucian culture, individual accomplishment is viewed as a part of the overall success of the family and clan. A 29-year-old agency employee named Bo Penghai once stated in a WeChat update that "life is like sailing against the current; either you keep forging ahead or you keep falling behind." This motto was written by Liang Qichao, a famous Confucian scholar of the late Qing dynasty. Bo regarded this sentence as his life motto, suggesting that he was still influenced by Confucianism. Many of the young workers shared Bo's values. Du Gang (2016) argues that the development of one's moral and intellectual qualities is considered to be a lifelong endeavour in the Confucian classics. Confucianism thinks that improving one's all-around skills is a necessary step on the path to enlightenment (i.e., becoming a sage), as well as a contribution to one's family and clan (Du, 2016). In Section 6, I demonstrated how Cheng, as well as many other young employees, did not regard their efforts to advance *suzhi* and make money as personal things. By carefully preserving their high *suzhi* image in their parents' eyes, young workers enacted their moral duty to practise filial piety.

To summarise, this chapter illustrated a labour regime that was based on *suzhi* discourses, which were imposed on young temporary workers. I have illustrated how diverse *suzhi* interpretations emerged, coexisted, and were sometimes combined to influence young temporary workers in the 9th Iron. These different *suzhi* interpretations were also in contention with one another from time to time.

This chapter offered three new conceptual developments. In contrast to prior studies that primarily examine *suzhi* ideology within educational institutions (Kipnis, 2011; Woronov, 2009) or workplaces (Yan, 2003; Sun, 2009), my chapter investigated the enduring impact of *suzhi* discourses on young workers throughout their schooling and subsequent precarious employment. Furthermore, I demonstrated how people's aspirations of pursuing ethical lives fostered a strong

desire towards seeking secure employment under significant labour precarity. Temporary workers' desires for permanent employment caught them in precarious employment, indicating a paradoxical interplay between stability and instability. Yet, because of their ethical considerations, which drew inspiration from both Confucian principles of filial piety towards the elderly and the neoliberal concept of individual achievement, workers improved their *suzhi* in order to climb the career ladder. Third, I showed the precarity of the future experienced by workers, which was characterised by their lack of ability to exert control over their own futures, stemming from the dispossession that they faced. This chapter demonstrated both the intersection of many types of precarity and the ethical deliberations of workers within the context of precarity. While this chapter mostly addressed the idea of improving the *suzhi* of individuals and individual employees' career advancement, the following chapter will explore a socialist idea that prioritised the achievement of the collectives of the state and the work unit.

# Chapter 9
# Precarity of Achievement: Collective Achievement, Individual Failure, and Former State Workers

In the autumn of 2020, I was doing a group interview with three former state workers outside the 9th Iron compound. We sat in a circle on some asphalt-paved ground. While workers were discussing their experiences of unemployment, Liu Zhiguo, a 52-year-old temporary worker, reported to me, “We were the vanguard of socialist enterprise, but we’re now considered obsolete by managers.” Liu had been a state worker during the socialist period. Liu was dismissed in the state-owned enterprise reform (see Chapter 4) and then reemployed as a temporary worker in 2012 with the help of his friend, a middle-level manager in the 9th Iron. Luo Qigao, a 50-year-old temporary worker, responded to Liu in a cynical tone: “Still talking about the past! In the past, Chairman Mao used to shake hands with waste pickers[38]. Is it possible for that to happen now? No!”

## 1. Introduction

This chapter explores the different ways in which the concept of achievement appears and is understood in the context of labour precarity. The vignette above shows that the older generation of the 9th Iron workers witnessed a change in society's perceptions towards achievement. In contrast to the socialist era, where manual workers had been recognised as significant contributors to the state and society, after the SOE reform, workers were positioned at the bottom of the social

[38] Luo Qigao was telling the story of Shi Chuanxiang, a waste picker who became a national labour hero in the 1950s. Nonetheless, Luo's recollection erred here. In the late 1950s, the Chairman of the CCP was not Mao Zedong but another significant figure in the CCP, Liu Shaoqi. In 1959, President Liu Shaoqi shook hands with Shi Chuanxiang, a waste picker, and said, "You are a people's servant for picking waste, and I am a people's servant for being the President, which is just a different labour division, and both are indispensable parts of the revolutionary cause.” During the socialist era, waste pickers were state workers. They collected human and animal excrement from public toilets and city streets and transported the waste to rural collective farms for use as land fertiliser. Waste pickers can still be found in most of China’s cities, but they now belong to the lowest social stratum, are no longer hired by the state, and are therefore not likely to be visited by the leaders of the country nowadays.

hierarchy and were perceived as unsuccessful in the market economy. In the 9th Iron company, different understandings of achievement and failure coexisted. These different understandings of achievement and failure each rested on a different idea of how the self or individual related (or did not at all) to different social groups: the family and clan, the work unit, and the CCP state. In a broader sense, these different understandings of achievement and failure also corresponded to three different moral frameworks that coexisted in the 9th Iron, which included Confucian philosophy, socialist ideology, and neoliberal ideas. In the context of the intersection of labour precarity, structural precarity, social precarity, and affective precarity, workers ethically chose elements from these three different understandings of achievements and created a patchwork of the values of achievement.

Nicholas Long and Henrietta Moore define achievements as “affective and evaluative engagement with things that have been done in the world, either by oneself or by others” (Long and Moore, 2013: 3). Broad factors like historical and geographic contexts, as well as interactions with others, have an impact on people's conceptions of achievement (ibid., 4). An individual contemplates which behaviours would be deemed successful in social interactions and engages in actions that they believe will elicit praise from others. Long and Moore advocate for an approach that focuses on "the social life of achievement," which explores the concept of achievement within the context of individuals' everyday social interactions (ibid.). Moore considers achievement as an ethical concept because when individuals strive for achievements, they undergo a process of self-formation in which they establish themselves as "ethical subjects" (Moore, 2013: 19).

I adhere to the theory of Long and Moore (2013), which views practices concerning achievement as a vital part of the ethical process that occurs in everyday social interactions. However, I find that Long and Moore’s (2013) understandings of achievement assume that achievement is solely evaluated on an individual level and that the pursuit of achievement is a self-centred endeavour driven by the person’s need for social recognition. By contrast, Susan Bayly (2013) shows that Vietnamese people were influenced by a socialist view of achievement, which tended to think that individual success was only a part of the collective achievement of work communities and the state. Bayly argues that this socialist type of achievement was attained “by and on behalf of the collective” (Bayly, 2013: 158). As Bayly’s study (2013) shows, achievement could also be measured at the levels of various kinds of collectives that range from the socialist factory to the

state. Unlike Long and Moore (2013), who foreground individual achievement, my ethnography in this chapter demonstrates a change in social values from collective achievement to a focus on individual accomplishment and the effects on people who lived through this change. This change included a significant change in what was considered valuable by society and the state, and at what level. Workers noticed that things that they had been proud of during the socialist period were becoming worthless and devalued in the context of broader neoliberal discourse and labour precarity.

The material in this chapter is mainly based on the life history research that I conducted with former state workers who were born in the 1950s and 1960s, as well as semi-structured interviews with former state workers. This group of people joined the 9th Iron as permanent state workers in the 1970s and 1980s. During the SOE reform, the 9th Iron fired these workers in the late 1990s and early 2000s (see Chapter 4). This group of my interlocutors, like most of the workers who were dismissed during the state-owned enterprise reform, were manual workers, including mechanics, plumbers, electricians, drillers, steel workers, concrete workers, and so on.

Since 2010, the CCP government has been developing a national high-speed railway network. Consequently, the 9th Iron were rehiring some of its former state workers in recent years, but through different temporary and informal arrangements. After reentering the 9th Iron, these former state workers found their social status, wages, and insurance plummeting. However, these were not the only changes that occurred; the social discourse on achievement, the types of achievement that the state and company praised, as well as other people's perceptions of achievement, all underwent significant change.

This chapter contributes to the existing literature on achievement in three ways. First, the existing literature proposes that achievement is an important concept in social life (Long and Moore, 2013; Bayly, 2013). However, the literature on achievement has given less focus to the opposite aspect of success, notably failure. Catherine Alexander argues that failure is also a constant aspect of social life (Alexander, 2023). I examine changing views on success and failure within the context of precarity and demonstrate how this transformation turned industrial workers' lives upside down. Second, Long and Moore (2013) focus only on the neoliberal notion of achievement, with the individual as the unit of measurement. By contrast, I show that different understandings of achievement as well as failure coexist. I show how the idea of individual failure has only emerged

in the context of a neoliberal emphasis on achievement and failure on the level of the individual. While neoliberalism promotes people to perceive themselves as rational, reflective individuals capable of constantly improving their skills (Davies, 2016, 2017; Hopkinson and Zidaru, 2022), it is also destined to produce the opposite: individuals who fail in competition with other people. Nevertheless, the ethnographies in this chapter will demonstrate that the neoliberal perspective on success and failure is not the only interpretation. People evaluate achievement and failure based on various moral frameworks. Third, I also show a particular model of nostalgia: nostalgia for past achievements. Researchers are attuned to people's emotions relating to the potential success that they might achieve in the future (Demerath, 2009, 2013; Long and Moore, 2013; Solomon, 2013). However, the affect of nostalgia for past achievements has drawn less attention. I show how past achievements influence people's lives in the present and how people turn their nostalgia for past achievements into the strength of changing their lives here and now.

Before the main body of this chapter, I will introduce the understandings of achievement in Confucian philosophy, socialism, and neoliberalism. In Confucianism, one's contribution to one's family and clan was an important measure of achievement and failure. Wang Mingming contends that ming (fate) and competence (*nengli*) were central to Confucian understandings of success and failure (Wang, 1998). The combination of one's fate and capability defined the level of achievement that one could achieve in his or her life. Helping out clan members, worshipping clan ancestors, looking after the elderly, and adhering to Confucian moral values could help the person have a good fate (*haoming*).

However, if the individual did not follow Confucian moral standards, his or her fate would deteriorate, he or she would not have a good life, and even if he or she had money, it would disappear later. To quote Confucius's (1956) words, "In my eye, wealth and honours acquired by unrighteousness are like a floating cloud (*buyiqiefugui*, *yuworufuyun*)." Thus, a person who earned personal fortune but did not fulfil his or her duty of care to his or her family and the poorer members of his or her clan was immoral and hence not considered successful. A person who followed Confucian moral precepts in his or her daily interactions with his or her relatives and clan members, on the other hand, would not be considered a failure even if he or she remained poor his or her entire life. Instead, his or her lack of secular achievement (i.e., wealth, power, and fame) was seen as proof of his or her honesty and integrity (*laoshibenfen*). Confucius (1956), for example, once complimented his student Hui as a sage (*shengren*), because Hui was extremely poor but able

to live in peace and joy (*anpinledao*). Furthermore, in Confucianism, success and failure were frequently measured at the family and clan levels: if everyone in a family and clan obeyed the Confucian moral codes, the family and clan were successful; on the other hand, if someone in a family and clan violated the Confucian moral standards, the family and clan suffered a great failure, which was also called the misfortune of the family and clan (*jiamenbuxing*).

In socialist ideology, one's contribution to his or her work units and to the socialist state was an important measure of success and failure. A common metaphor that commended ordinary socialist workers was "being a screw in the socialist machine" (*zuoshehuizhuyisheyedeluosiding*). Although the screw was small, it was critical to the whole socialist machine; an ordinary railway worker was successful because he or she contributed to the development of socialism and the Chinese state. Success and failure were also usually judged at the level of the socialist collective (i.e., the urban work unit or the collective farm). A successful socialist collective contributed to the development of the country, and thus everyone in the collective felt the sense of collective honour and pride that came with this success; however, when a socialist collective fell behind the schedule of production, when the collective failed in the production competition between different socialist collectives, people in the collective might feel that their sense of collective honour was damaged and thus felt guilty (see Chapter 5; Feuchtwang, 2012).

In late socialist China, the Confucian sense of achievement, like Confucian morality, has recovered from its suppression during the socialist period. Meanwhile, the socialist vision of collective achievement, like socialist morality, continues to shape people's behaviours and values. In addition, a view of achievement that considers the accumulation of personal material wealth as an important indicator—the individualistic view of achievement that has been developing in the neoliberal market economy—has become another important factor influencing people's achievement perceptions and moral judgements (see Chapter 8).

This chapter will initially present the contrast between the socialist conception of achievement/ achiever and a more recent notion of achievement/achiever that has arisen following the economic reform. I will show that, similar to other contexts (Kesküla, 2019), industrial workers have experienced a decline in their social standing, changing from being respected as socialist labour heroes to becoming a marginalised social group. I will demonstrate that the structural precarity resulting from the hierarchical differentiation between knowledge labour and

manual labour has intersected with the labour precarity experienced by Chinese industrial workers. Section 4 will discuss the stark contrast between the social precarity that former 9th Iron state workers faced following SOE reform and the collective pride and workplace solidarity that they had experienced during the socialist era. At the end of this chapter, I will demonstrate how ideas about the purpose of labour changed following the reform. Additionally, I will explore the ethical dimension of workers' nostalgia for socialist accomplishments.

# 2. From socialist labour heroes (*laodongyingxiong*) to the vulnerable group (*ruoshiqunti*)

This section will introduce the shifting ideas about socialist achievers and recent ideas about successful individuals, as well as how this change has influenced the social status of industrial workers. During the socialist era, the state praised ordinary workers, and they were regarded as labour heroes and labour heroines. Nevertheless, in recent years, industrial workers have occupied the lowest position in the social status hierarchy. The state and media referred to unemployed former state workers as the most vulnerable group (*ruoshiqunti*; Li, 2005). In this section, I will start with an examination of the socialist practice of electing labour heroes and a recent election of model employees in the 9th Iron. Next, I will discuss a type of structural precarity resulting from the hierarchy between knowledge workers and manual workers, which led to a decline in the social status of manual workers not only in China but also in other countries. Next, I will explain the role of the Chinese state in promoting a neoliberal discourse that defines former state workers as losers in the market economy.

## 2.1 From socialist labour heroes to late socialist model employees

In recent years, the 9th Iron Company selected annual model employees at the end of each year (*mofangongren*). When entering the compound, people could see photos of model employees pasted on the wall of the compound. While there is a similar selection of high-performance employees in capitalist society (Taylor and Pierce, 1999), this practice of the 9th Iron actually originated from the selection of labour heroes (*laodongyingxiong*) during the socialist era.

During the socialist period, the election of labour heroes was held in the 9th Iron every year. Pasting photos or portraits of labour heroes on the walls of the work unit was also common during socialist times. Back then, industrial workers were seen as the great contributors to the socialist nation. They took up the majority of the labour heroes of the time. During the civil war and the socialist period, the CCP positioned itself as the vanguard of a workers' state, elevating workers to the status of masters of society (Weston, 2004: 70–71; Walder, 1986: 193–194, 226). During Khrushchev's period, relations between China and the Soviet Union deteriorated. In 1959, Chairman Mao Zedong accused the Soviet Union of embarking on a revisionist path (Zhou, 2012). Mao claimed that China must build socialism on its own to achieve independence and development under the threat of US imperialism and Soviet revisionist imperialism, and Chinese workers were the backbone of the construction of socialism. Timothy B. Weston accurately comments that in Maoist China, the industrial labour force was akin to a great patriotic army that fought for the Party's war of rapid industrialisation (Weston, 2004). Accordingly, it was the state's moral obligation to take care of its soldiers and veterans after they gave their sweat, blood, and lives for the national cause (Weston, 2004; see Chapter 4).

A great number of railway workers won the title of labour heroes during the socialist period. In the archives of the 9th Iron, there were eleven railway workers who won national labour heroes competitions between the 1950s and 1990s. The top ranking of these workers was vice brigade leader (equal to now the 9th Iron's on-site team leader). Most were ordinary workers, including the lowest-ranking labourers.

Zhao Jinjun was born in 1961. He entered the 9th Iron to work as a state worker in the early 1980s and was dismissed in 2000. In 2015, with the help of his friend, Zhao began to work for the 9th Iron as a temporary worker without a formal contract. Zhao Jinjun's father, Lao Zhao, was a labour hero of the 9th Iron during the 1950s. When I sat with Zhao at the bottom of the stairs of the 9th Iron workers' dormitory, Zhao began to share stories about himself and his father with me. As the youngest son of the family, Zhao was favourably treated by his father, Lao Zhao who was glad that Zhao became a railway worker and often encouraged him to work hard. As Zhao said,

> "My father warned me not to dishonour the older generation of workers in our family. My father was first elected as the labour hero of his work unit in the 1950s, and then he was

> elected as the municipal and provincial labour hero in the 1960s and the 1970s. He had always been an excellent worker who was willing to do hard and laborious work. He contributed his whole life to the 9th Iron. I still carefully keep the medals that my father won in the living room. When you go to Sichuan Province, visit my home so I can show you. Those medals are part of my family memories."

Zhao's father was an example of how ordinary workers became labour heroes during the socialist era. During the socialist period, industrial workers were praised for their physical and mental superiority. The chiselled visage and powerful figure of industrial workers were cultural icons. This figure was in contrast with the figures of feudal landlords and capitalists, who were usually depicted as fat and lazy in socialist propaganda. Therefore, the strong body that workers built from everyday manual work was a symbol of their decent political identity, which made them a favourable marriage choice compared to other groups (see Chapter 6). Picture 9.1 is a 1950s poster, which depicts a strong construction worker concentrating on his work. Picture 9.2 is a portrait of Tian Guiying, China's first female train driver and a national labour hero. Besides, workers were believed to play a vital role in technological innovations, as in the instance of Wang Jikui, a National worker hero who was a train driver in the 1950s and who increased the train's speed through repeated practice. In the 1950s' propaganda, Wang Jikui's success was due to his good observation, clever mind, and fearless attitude towards setbacks.

Picture 9.1 a poster from the 1950s featuring a construction worker

Picture 9.2 the photo of the first female train driver in the PRC

After the state-owned enterprise reform, the title of labour heroes was changed to the title of model employees because the 9th Iron company leaders considered the former title outdated. During my fieldwork, the election of model employees followed a similar procedure as it did in the socialist period. Two or three employees were recommended by the party's committee of the compound to join the election of model employees at the company level, and if they won, they would join the competition with model employees of other state-owned construction companies to win the annual model employee award in the construction industry.

Nevertheless, in contrast to the ordinary workers who had taken up the majority of labour heroes during the socialist period, model employees in recent years were most likely to be managers or high-ranking engineers. Since the reform of 1998, five national model employees have been elected. One of them was the CEO of the 9th Iron, and the rest were high-ranking engineers with the title of professor.

On a winter afternoon of 2019, the management board arranged for me to take pictures of the annual model employees. This year's model employees included Wang Jing, who was a lab researcher, and the project director, Li. Recently graduated from a good university, Wang Jing spent more time at the head company than in the compound, so I barely met him. I was asked to take portrait pictures of them in the multifunctional conference room of the compound. Wang and Li wore shirts, suits, and ties. I took a picture of the project director, Li, first. He asked me to take pictures from specific angles, and when I pressed the shutter, he showed a very standard smile. When I took pictures of Wang, he was not as comfortable with the camera as Li. Under the command of Li, Wang picked up a notebook with the 9th Iron logo engraved on the cover and posed in a reading posture. Such a posture was made to make the lab researcher look more photogenic. In the words of the project director Li, "This posture will show Wang's professionalism (*zhuanyexing*)."

It is worth noting that professionalism (*zhuanyexing*) in Chinese is a new vocabulary that has emerged with the liberalisation of the market economy. In today's China, as in many other countries in the world influenced by neoliberal ideology, the concept of professionalism is associated with occupations that are commonly believed to make great contributions to capitalist economic growth, including bankers, successful entrepreneurs, business managers, scientific and engineering personnel, and lawyers who assist in maintaining the order of the market economy. In contrast to the glory status that they had during the socialist era (i.e., as the vanguards of the socialist revolution and the great builders of the socialist cause), manual labourers are now at the bottom of the hierarchy of occupations and do not require professionalism. In the 9th Iron, the company's award of model employees reinforced the hierarchy of occupations: managers and engineers were considered the representatives of advanced productivity, whereas industrial workers' names were unlikely to appear on the exhibition column of model employees in the 9th Iron compound.

The 9th Iron managers and engineers were required to present their professional image to the public. For instance, director Li asked researcher Wang to make a gesture of reading to demonstrate his educational background and assert his professionalism. This revealed how today's 9th Iron company recognised high-ranking professions—model employees who embodied the company's culture should be in ties and suits instead of having mud and sweat on their clothes. As Picture 9.3 shows, the 9th Iron model employees, the majority of whom were middle managers, sat in the front row of the conference hall at the company's headquarters, wearing red ribbons of honour diagonally across their bodies. The office staff from the company headquarters sat in the back row of the conference hall, recording the speeches of the model employees. They all wore suits and shirts, in stark contrast to Picture 8.2 (see Chapter 8), in which the 9th Iron skilled manual workers were dressed in workers' vests and jackets to take exams.

Picture 9.3 The 9th Iron's model employee meeting

Manual workers were aware of their low social status. When I talked with Da Feng, a 50-year-old 9th Iron skilled worker on an agency contract, he made a contrast between himself and me: "Manual workers earn hard money (*xinkuqian*). I am better than unskilled labourers because I have the qualifications for steel-cutting skills. However, I work long hours in a noisy place and have my clothing drenched by my sweat when you (he saw me as an office worker) can unwind in the office and have air conditioning. Some young office workers envy me because I can earn more money than them, but they don't realise that I make money by exhausting my body." Although I explained that I was an anthropology student, Da Feng persisted in placing me in the category of office people, in contrast with the manual workers that he belonged to. Da Feng believed that, in contrast with the comfortable working environment of office workers, manual workers had to earn hard money by enduring the body's suffering. David Harvey points out that people have internalised the hegemonic neoliberal ideology, and they interpret and understand the world under the influence of neoliberalism (Harvey, 2005). In the 9th Iron, the neoliberal ideology of professionalism combined with the socialist style of propaganda and practices (i.e., the model employee election) to influence people's judgements of the value of work.

## 2.2 Workers' aspiration for their children and the structural precarity they face

In this section, I will illustrate a type of structural precarity that attributed value to knowledge work and undervalued manual labour. This structural precarity influenced industrial workers' perceptions of success and shaped their aspirations for their children. Despite these aspirations, precarious employment continued to ensnare workers and their children.

While the physical and mental abilities of industrial workers had been celebrated in the socialist era, after reform, manual workers struggled to earn the respect of society. Zhao Jinjun bitterly commented on his life as "a failure from most people's view, because I could not earn much money." Despite being filled with frustration over his failure in his career, Zhao felt that he was successful in terms of his commitment to his family. In the last few years of Lao Zhao, Zhao, who stayed at home at that time, took on the full burden of caring for his father. At the same time, Zhao was also happy that his daughter went to university in 2017. Zhao said, "At least I am a good son and a successful father." Zhao also told me that he encouraged his youngest son, a high school

student, to study by saying, “Studying hard! Otherwise, you will end up working at the construction site like me.”

Zhao used his own career failure as an example to urge his son to study hard. At the same time, Zhao believed that the only way for his son to succeed was to leave construction and pursue a different career. Zhao's perspective reflected a neoliberal understanding of success that prioritised the accumulation of wealth. But in the account that Zhao gave me about his life, he took a Confucian approach to success, measuring success according to whether or not one fulfils moral commitments to family members. Moreover, Zhao embraced a socialist understanding of success in his memories of his own father, a socialist labour hero. Zhao took diverse approaches to understanding achievement in different contexts. In my interviews, other 9th Iron former state workers had similar, frequently shifting accounts of achievement. People employ three moral frameworks from different time periods to construct ethical solutions that fit social life situations. However, as Zhao's concern about his son's education demonstrated, although former state workers could explain their lives in terms of various moral value systems, they were inevitably influenced by the recent popular view of individual achievement, which created anxieties about their children's futures.

In fact, few workers’ children successfully secured permanent jobs after their graduation. Liu Zhihong, a former state worker, told me, “My son graduated from a vocational college three years ago. He studied nursing and care and entered a hospital in our hometown. However, he could only get a temporary contract, which would renew every six months. I wanted to help him get a longer-term contract, so I visited his manager with gifts. But she did not accept my gifts and refused my request. Later, I knew that there were many temporary care workers waiting to get a permanent position. Therefore, managers would consider promoting their relatives and acquaintances' children first." Liu’s words illustrated the precarity that manual workers and their children faced in late socialist China.

Additionally, the global capitalist market has also seen an increase in structural precarity as a result of the hierarchy of industrial and knowledge workers. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2006, 2020) argue that a new type of labour, which they call immaterial labour, has entered the capitalist economic mainstream. By saying ‘immaterial labour', Hardt and Negri indicate the kind of work

that uses and produces intelligence and information. Hardt and Negri believe that the development of the informational economy (i.e., industries that rely on the communication of information, such as IT, financial services, business management, and so on) has resulted in immaterial labour replacing industrial labour and becoming widespread (Hardt and Negri, 2020: 285). Their theory explains a phenomenon that can be witnessed in many countries: the information economy is viewed as a source of higher wealth and social standing (Rofel, 1992; Neilson and Rossiter, 2005; Yanagisako, 2012; Kesküla, 2019). The status of knowledge workers in the labour hierarchy system has risen, while industrial workers have fallen to the bottom of the ladder.

David Graeber (2001) argues that value is produced when labour is performed in forms that are recognised by society. In capitalist society, money is the token of value for labour, which symbolises the importance of work (Graeber, 2001). In the socialist system, an important token of value was access to political resources, which in many cases could lead to economic and cultural resources (Walder, 1986). For example, during the socialist period, the 9th Iron workers and their children, who had good political performances, could be recommended by the work unit to attend university or join the army without examinations. In contrast, nowadays, as market ideology has become more significant, the value of different occupations has been reevaluated, and the new token of value is the wage. Under the revaluation, industrial workers who earn low and unstable wages are increasingly marginalised.

Similar in post-Soviet Estonia and Kazakhstan, Eeva Kesküla observes how the hierarchy of mental and physical labour influenced Russian miners (Kesküla, 2019). Kesküla (2019) argues that miners faced the precarity caused by losing their social positions. During the socialist period, Russian miners in Estonia had been doubly valued as the dominant nation and the proletarian vanguard. But after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russian miners became ethnic outsiders and low-status manual labourers. Manual workers were seen as the ones whose morals and values did not fit into a market-oriented society (Annist, 2014; Kesküla, 2015, 2019). Similar to the cases of Zhao and Liu and the situation of many other 9th Iron Workers, Russian miners wanted their children to work in professions such as commerce, law, tourism, and information technology rather than becoming manual workers (Kesküla, 2019). Kesküla finds that most miners' children failed to work in the industries that their parents wished for because their parents lacked the social connections and money to help their children climb the career ladder. Some of the 9th Iron workers' children did

manage to work in the occupation that their parents wanted them to do, but only on precarious contracts. However, because of the widespread labour precarity in many industries in late socialist China, former state workers' children were trapped in precarious employment situations, just like their parents.

Sylvia Yanagisako (2012) criticises Hardt and Negri's (2020) division of immaterial and industrial labour as "an ideological construct that legitimates social hierarchies and wealth differentials within sectors of the working class and between nations in the global economy" (Yanagisako, 2012: 8). For example, in an Italian transnational garment company that outsourced its manufacturing chain to China, Italian managers contended that the value added by their knowledge and communication skills outweighed the value added by Chinese industrial workers (Rofel, 1992; Yanagisako, 2012; Rofel and Yanagisako, 2018). My ethnography also illustrates Yanagisako's (2012) point and shows that the hierarchy of immaterial workers and industrial workers, intersecting with labour precarity, trapped manual workers and their children in an intergenerational precarity.

## 2.3 the late socialist state's propaganda: turning labour heroes into the vulnerable group

This part will demonstrate that the changes in the state's propaganda, in conjunction with the reform of state-owned enterprises, has transformed previously labour heroes into the most vulnerable group (*ruoshiqunti*) in society. The propaganda of the late socialist Chinese state has promoted a neoliberal interpretation of individual success, although using many terminologies from the old socialist propaganda.

Between the late 1990s and 2000s, the 9th Iron workers suffered from the massive dismissal caused by the state sector reform. In the party's propaganda and public discourses of the 1990s, the dismissed state workers were placed into two categories: one group as the active participants of the market economy who had "advanced minds" (*xianjinsixiang*) and were worth the help of the state ( . The other group was people with a "backward mentality" who were stubborn and refused to participate in market competition (ibid., 244). The state claimed that instead of relying on the government for compensation and employment assistance, a decent person should embrace innovation and rely on one's own abilities to make a living.

Since the state-owned enterprise reform, the Chinese government implemented measures like small business loans and tax exemptions that aimed to encourage laid-off workers to start their own businesses (Zhai, 1999; Tan and Zhang, 2001; see Chapter 4). Cheng and Kim argue that the neoliberal state sees its subjects as "self-sufficient, self-managing, and self-advancing" (Cheng and Kim, 2014: 167). They point out that in the Korean state programmes for helping victims of human trafficking, only people who expressed the determination to self-advance and embraced neoliberal moral values would be seen as good people who were worth the state's help.

The Chinese state's propaganda and policies that I mentioned above revealed a similar neoliberal logic, yet with some remarkable socialist features. On the one hand, it advocated for people to join the market competition. On the other hand, it saw workers' failure to succeed as the result of a "stubborn old mind" (*luohousixiang*) (Zhao, 1997). "Stubborn old mind" had been the target of class struggle in Maoist China's anti-feudalism movements (Cai, 2019: 225-226). The phrase had been used to describe feudal landlords who had refused to hand over their land and property to the CCP. The phrase had also been used to criticise peasants who had practised superstitions. Since the 1990s, the phrase "stubborn old mind" has been used to describe workers who relied on government assistance and were unable to find new employment. Former state workers who failed to find employment in the market economy were called the vulnerable group (*ruoshiqunti*) in the state's media (Xinhua News, 1999). Dismissed workers were rebuked for having a planned economy mindset (*jihuajingsiwei*) and failing to adapt to changes. According to state propaganda, socialist planned economy resulted in dismissed workers' outdated mentality of "wait, rely, and ask," which meant that these people only knew to wait for the state to help (State Council of the Central Committee of the CCP, 1998). The prevalent existence of unemployment was "the dangerous factor to society (*zengjiashehuifengxian*)", and the state believed that by transforming the unemployed vulnerable group (*ruoshiqunti*) into businessmen and businesswomen, the level of "the harmony of society" would be increased (*cujinshehuihexie*) (Chen, 2006). Just as Kesküla argues, the degree to which certain groups had embraced free market ideology determined whether they would be grouped together with the elites or orientalised as the internal Other (Kesküla, 2017).

However, the 9th Iron former state workers refused to see the dismissal in the same way as the state's propaganda advocated. They believed that the dismissal had been a sacrifice that the working

class had made for the cause of Chinese national rejuvenation. When I talked to Li Yuanxiang, who was a state worker who joined the 9th Iron in 1980, he said, "When the nation needed us to sacrifice, we sacrificed! When the nation needed us, we sacrificed our youth and blood to build the railway. But in 1998, the needs of the nation changed—our country needed economic growth, and the old model of state-owned enterprises could meet this need. Therefore, in 1998, we heeded the call of the CCP (*tingcongdangdehaozhao*) and listened to the work unit's order to go back home (*xiagang).*" Li's words were agreed upon by my other interlocutors. Li referred to the socialist understanding of achievement. The socialist concept of achievement had prioritised the collective achievement of the work unit and the state and had not considered the sacrifice of an individual, as long as it had been for the collective interest of the work unit and the state, to be a failure of the sacrificed individual.

Dismissed workers believed that they were the ones who gave up their personal achievements (i.e., obeying the work unit's order to go back home) in order for the country to have achievement (i.e., economic growth), but workers' sacrifices were not cherished by the state and society nowadays. Li said, "We sacrificed ourselves for the nation, but we were treated the worst. When I went back home (*xiagang*), the 9th Iron gave me 2000 RMB for my twenty years of service (*maiduan*, see Chapter 4 and 6), which meant each year of my work was only worth 100 RMB. When I returned to my hometown, my wife was sitting in the house, and my three-year-old daughter was crying from hunger. I had no choice but to set up as a street vendor and sell geocaches. The police evicted me from the street because I didn't have a license. The officer who seized my belongings was a young man in his early twenties. I asked him, 'I served our country longer than you. I sacrificed myself for the development of this country. Why did you wave your fist at me?'". Similar to Li, many former state workers were furious because they felt their sacrifice was valued by the state or by other social groups.

This section discussed different views about what success meant in the socialist era and the post-reform 9th Iron. On the one hand, former state workers were aware of their low social position in late socialist China. Workers, on the other hand, experienced nostalgia for the socialist concept of achievers (e.g., Zhao's memories of his father) and utilised the socialist concept of achievement to understand their lives. In the following section, I will discuss the affect that former state workers

claimed they had experienced as a result of socialist collective achievement, as well as the affective precarity that workers faced after the reform.

# 3. From the affect of collective achievement to affective precarity

Former state employees experienced a shift in conceptions of achievement and those who achieved it, as well as a loss of the passion and sense of collective honour that they once had experienced during the socialist era, which was absent in their work after the reform. Workers thought that technological advancements altered previous ways of working: new technologies gradually reduced the necessity for manual labour, and hence scenes of collective labour decreased. Besides, various kinds of 9th Iron temporary workers and different teams of migrant workers hired by subcontractors made up the workforce in post-reform 9th Iron. In comparison to the united workforce of state workers and state-allocated trainees during the socialist period, the workforce composition grew more complicated after reform. Furthermore, the new method of rewarding entailed a neoliberal understanding of individual success as the company used money to incentivise people, which increased the income discrepancy between managers, state workers, and temporary workers. Former state workers, apart from feeling anger for the unfair distribution of prize money, also felt uneasy when they found that state workers, who in some cases were their old friends, earned much more than them. This section will start by presenting the recollections of former state employees regarding the affect of socialist accomplishment, followed by a discussion of the social and affective precarity that former state workers experienced recently.

According to the former 9th Iron state workers, the passion that arose from collective labour (*jitilaodong*) was very important in their memories of the days between the 1970s and the late 1990s. Kang Xinhua was born in 1961. Following the founding of the PRC, his father was trained as a railway lineman. Kang took up his father's employment in 1981 and worked as a permanent state worker until 2000. Kang's work unit was merged with other railway bureaus in 2000, resulting in the layoff of redundant employees. Kang's father had always been an ordinary worker and had never become a cadre, so he had no *guanxi* that could have gotten Kang re-employed. In 2000, the level of mechanisation increased, but the demand for railway linemen fell. Therefore, Kang had to take courses in order to retrain himself to become an electrician. Kang then moved around the

country as a temporary worker, working on various building sites. Kang's wife was hired as a vice chef by the compound in 2018. Kang accompanied his wife to the compound and negotiated an informal *guanxi* contract with the compound managers. By the time of my interview, Kang's monthly salary was roughly 3500 rmb (£415), making his day salary (116 rmb, £13.77) less than that of core migrant workers (200–300 rmb, £23–£35) (see Chapter 4 and Appendix 1). Kang's wife was likewise on a temporary contract, and her monthly wage was roughly 4000 rmb (£474). The reason that Kang chose to accept this low salary was because he hoped to one day be promoted to fixed-term agency contracts.

I chatted with Kang Xinhua on various occasions, including at the canteen, the construction site, the cement factory, and so on. At the end of my fieldwork, I invited Kang for an interview about his work experiences. Sitting at the top of a brick hill next to the compound's gate, Kang told me about his memories of collective work.

> Kang: "Ziyu, do you know the Big Human Sea Battle (*renhaidazhan*)?"
> ZL: "I don't know."
> Kang: "When there were thousands of railway workers working together, the scene was spectacular. There were huge crowds of workers, which was called the Big Human Sea Battle. In 1983, during the building of the Huangpo section of the Beijing-Guangzhou Line, when the new line was docked with the old, workers were required to complete all the work within a stipulated time. When the brigade captain gave the order, all the workers started to complete the work in an orderly manner. The captain told everyone how to do it in advance, and everyone had to follow the order when working without making a single mistake. A tiny mistake would lead to a train wreck.
>
> The scene was magnificent, the number of workers was impressive, and the cooperation between workers was unforgettable. It was a good example of how 'everyone moves on command' (*yiqiexingdongtingzhihui*). You would not slack off in such an atmosphere because the mood was contagious; everyone was dedicated, and you would feel ashamed if you underworked. It was extremely hot in the summer, and everyone was sweating heavily, but no one complained. Hundreds of metres of railway line had to be fixed before the train could come. When the rail joints were complete and the train ahead of us was coming, the

> whole brigade, hundreds of us, could not help but stand up straight, lift our chests, and silently salute the train. We had done it! This was a proof of our achievement (*womendechengji*)! Our captain even burst into tears with excitement because he was as proud of our success as we were. Nerves that had been tense for days and nights could be relaxed. In those days, we used to sing a song when we worked: 'We workers have power! (*zanmengongrenyouliliang*)' That was not wrong at all!
>
> But today, we have better machines. Building work no longer requires as many workers as it did prior to the reform; therefore, such scenes are unusual now. "

Kang used the words 'chest-up' and 'tears of pride', which were often used in socialist China, to describe the positive emotions associated with a sense of collective honour and patriotism. According to Long and Moore (2013), affective knowledge is usually a critical component of achievement perception and experience. The positive affect engendered by meeting the standards of excellence constitutes an important part of people's memories (Cassidy, 2013). Thirty years on, Kang still considered these emotional experiences to be an important part of his memory of collective labour and worthy of being described in detail to an outsider (i.e., me). Picture 9.4 is a photo that I found in the 9th Iron's public archive. The photo from 1978 shows a group of railway workers smiling at the camera. Picture 9.5 and 9.6 are propaganda posters from the 1950s depicting workers hard at work on railway building sites. These pictures echoed Kang's memories.

Picture 9.4. a group of railway workers in 1978

Picture 9.5 a 1950s poster depicting a railway construction site

Picture 9.6 a 1950s poster depicting a locomotive factory

Kang, similar to many other former state workers of the 9th Iron, felt sorry that he could no longer feel the passion of working, which illustrates how the affect generated by collective achievement caused significant influences on people. Kang believed that technological advancements have diminished the demand for manual labour, making it hard for him to experience the passion of collective working. However, He Xiangfeng, a 56-year-old temporary technician, believed that the loss of collective honour and passion for work has been caused by changing labour relations at work. He Xiangfeng told me,

> "I used to believe in collective honour. When I first came to the 9th Iron in 1990, I was proud to be a member of the place. I used to believe that when workers made concerted efforts (*qixinxieli*, literally, work with cohesive hearts), we could make the work unit better. But nowadays everyone has self-interested thoughts (*xinyan*). People work for different bosses and only work here temporarily. I used to be able to feel passionate when working with my co-workers, but now I cannot."

The term "self-interested thoughts" (*xinyan*) referred to someone who viewed others as targets of strategic plotting and calculation. This word was the opposite of concerted efforts (*qixinxieli*). Qixinxieli indicated that the interests of all members of a group were common and their ideas were unified. He saw concerted efforts as representing the virtue of socialist solidarity among workers, in contrast with the selfish mind that he considered immoral. Other former state workers, like He, have told me that, unlike the tight bonds that had existed between members of the work unit collective during the socialist era, those who worked for the 9th Iron these days were not always close to one another (see Chapter 1 and 7). The new labour relationships reduced the sense of collective accomplishment that people had used to get from socialist work.

Yang Guobing (2003) finds a type of nostalgia for socialist labour experiences among educated young people (*zhiqing*), which was similar to the nostalgia for collective achievement that I found in the 9th Iron. In the 1960s and 1970s, the state sent a group of young people—i.e., the educated youth—to the remote countryside to work on collective farms. In the late 1970s and 1980s, educated youth came back to cities. Since the 1990s, educated youth organised different kinds of nostalgia activities to remember their days in the countryside. Educated youth recalled that they had felt a sense of fulfilment and pride from their socialist labour experience despite the bad working conditions. Educated youth believed that this sense of fulfilment could no longer be felt in late socialist China because consumerism significantly changed people's lives and the accumulation of wealth became people's priority since the 1990s (Yang, 2003).

I illustrated the affect of collective accomplishment that former state workers reported to me. Former state employees claimed that they had once been able to enjoy a collective sense of honour and enthusiasm through working together during the socialist era. However, they found it unable to evoke these sentiments under their current precarious labour conditions. When my interlocutors recalled their life stories, they often used collective achievements during the socialist era as important milestones in their narratives. They perceived their life histories as part of the 9th Iron's history. I refer to the way in which workers prioritised achievement, particularly collective achievement, in their life history narratives as nostalgia for achievement. In Section 4, I will go into greater detail about nostalgia. Former state workers felt nostalgia for socialist definitions and awards of collective achievement, but they needed to adapt to the new reward systems that the 9th

Iron implemented since 2015. This new approach to reward aggravated the degree of social precarity that workers endured, which I will introduce below.

During the socialist period, the 9th Iron had organised production competitions between various railway compounds. Each year, the compound that had installed the most miles of railway won, and the completion winner would receive a copper medal of "the model of work unit" (mofandanwei). After the SOE reform, the 9th Iron company still held production competitions between different compounds regularly. The model compound would be chosen based on the quarterly profit made by the compound. This new method of awarding suggested the market economy's idea of profit maximisation. Also, the award for a model compound included a substantial amount of money, which had never happened during the socialist period. Following receipt of the award, 90% of the money would be given to project managers as praise for their good management, with the remaining 10% being given to state workers. The 9th Iron temporary workers and migrant workers were not eligible for the prize money. This new method of awarding sparked frustration among temporary workers, particularly those who had once been state workers before 1998's SOE reform.

Former state employees found out that their ex-colleagues who had not been dismissed during the SOE reform were still entitled to receive bonuses if the compound won the award. This caused subtle tensions in the relationships between state workers and former state workers. On the one hand, when former state workers applied to return to work for the 9th Iron in the early 2010s, they received oral recommendations from their former colleagues. On the other hand, former state workers felt embarrassed sometimes because of the huge disparity in wages and bonus pages between themselves and their referees (at the same time as their former colleagues and friends). In contrast to the unemployed or precariously employed former state workers, most referees who had maintained their permanent contracts during the reform were junior to middle managers in 2020.

Liu Zhihong, a former state worker and now a welder on an informal *guanxi* contract, said, “Fan Yiran (a state worker and Liu's referee) and I used to work on the same railway project between 1985 and 1989. We've been friends for decades, but now we're apart. We went out to dine together in *Baiyun* village a few times during the first few months after I arrived here. Fan was the one who always paid the bill, which made me upset. Fan had assisted me in returning to the 9th Iron. I owed him a favour, so I ought to pay the bill for every meal. But because Fan knew I earned less than him, he insisted on paying every time. Later, I avoided hanging out with Fan because I felt

embarrassed when I did not have enough money to pay." The subtle tension that Liu mentioned was prevalent in relationships between state employees and former state employees. While former state workers felt upset about the income differences between them and their old friends, state workers felt uneasy too. Huang Yongjun, a state worker and He Xiangfeng's acquaintance, said, "We used to lift a piece of steel frame together. Now I am a senior worker and a team manager, but He is a temporary worker. While acting like a proper senior, it is difficult to avoid causing He's envy. I feel uncomfortable sometimes, so I sometimes avoid seeing He directly in the eyes when we are working together." The cases of Liu and He illustrated the social tensions that 9th Iron workers encountered on a daily basis. This tension in social relationships also resulted in a sort of social precarity among workers as they struggled to maintain their friendships.

This section discussed the passion and honour for work that workers claimed they had used to feel for socialist collective achievement. However, with the increase in labour precarity and the changing ways of awarding, it became difficult for former state workers to feel a sense of collective honour. Additionally, new changes in the 9th Iron raised tensions in social relationships between workers, and a form of social precarity emerged in this situation. This situation increased workers' nostalgia for the socialist understanding of achievement, which I will illustrate in the following section.

# 4. From the server of the people to the representative of Chinese traditional virtue

This section will first present Monica Heintz's (2002) viewpoint on socialist works and then introduce the 9th Iron's former state workers' understanding of work and the purpose of work. In socialist ideology, achievement could only be realised through making contributions to the collective (i.e., the work unit and the socialist state). The socialist idea of working for the common good still influenced former state workers of the 9th Iron, and therefore they felt disappointed with their precarious work experiences following the reform. Workers who had lived through the socialist era experienced a nostalgia for the socialist definition of achievement, which had been significantly different from the state's recent portrayal of manual workers as representatives of Chinese traditional virtue. At the end, I will explain how former state workers used their socialist nostalgia to pursue a life of significance, demonstrating a form of the ethics of precarity.

Monica Heintz argues that in socialist Romania, going to work was fulfilling one's moral obligation to the state (Heintz, 2002). State socialism guaranteed everyone the right to work and made efforts to incorporate everyone into organised types of work (Heintz, 2002; Stewart, 1993). The rewards for workers were "quite undifferentiated," which reflected the socialist principle of "need-based redistribution"—"to everybody according to his or her needs" (Heintz, 2002: 109–110). Similarly, in socialist China, work units provided a system of social security and benefits for workers, which were the rewards for the labour of socialist workers (see Chapter 4 and 6). As the socialist state declared that there was no alienation at work, work was for the common good and had one clear aim: "the construction of a'socialist multilaterally developed society'" (Heintz, 2002: 103).

Similar to Heintz's (2002) observation, many former state workers believed that in the socialist era, the purpose of working had been to produce the common good, and by producing the common good, one could transform oneself. Former state workers insisted that labour in socialist times had been for the realisation and liberation of the self. In contrast to the experience of alienation, unfreedom, and precarity that workers experienced in late socialist China, labour in socialist times had been moral since it had been one's gift to society and had represented one's virtue of patriotism and selfless sacrifice.

Former state employees frequently felt nostalgic for the sense of purpose in their work that they asserted they had once experienced during the socialist era. They believed that work in socialist times had been for the greater good and had been a process of developing the moral self. Li Yuanxiang, a former state worker, said, "Nowadays, people work for the money. Money is the sole purpose. Young people often say that during socialist times, workers were lazy and work was inefficient. But during socialist times, nobody thought in this way. We went to work and then rested, never thinking too much. Life was simple. Now, everyone calculates the hours worked and worries about not getting paid enough. We constantly worry about earning less than other people, so nobody feels as happy as we used to be." Li's words illustrated that nostalgia must be understood in the context in which it appeared. By comparing the present and the socialist past, Li tried to find out why, in late socialist China, work could no longer bring the experience of joy and fulfilment. He provided a moral critique of the present life, which was troubled by materialism and pragmatic calculations.

As Kathleen Stewart argues, people's present lives shape the forms, meanings, and effects of the nostalgia that they experience (Stewart, 1988). Lisa Rofel names Chinese garment workers' nostalgia as "memory practices" that lead us to consider "how people come to reinterpret their history" (Rofel, 1999). Similarly, the nostalgia for socialist work by the 9th Iron former state employees perhaps revealed more about their present than the past. Workers' nostalgia should not be understood as an attempt to restore the past. On the contrary, as Maria Todorova and Zsuzsa Gille (2010) argue, this nostalgia for socialism is "part of a more complex healing process and an attempt to come to terms both with the communist era as well as the new inequalities of the post-communist era" (Todorova and Gille, 2010). In the case of former state workers of the 9th Iron, nostalgia for socialist work and socialist achievement not only reflected workers' desires for security and stability but also their sense of loss, as workers had lost a type of sociality that had formerly given them a sense of worth and dignity.

Workers' nostalgia for achievement pointed to the socialist period, but such socialist nostalgia has been largely underreported in the Party's media in recent years. Instead, in recent state propaganda, manual workers were praised for embodying the "traditional Chinese virtue" of "hardworking" (Renmin Website, 2022). In Michael Herzfeld's (2004) study of Greek artisans who have become increasingly marginalised in the global market, he argues that when the terms modernity and tradition appear together in media, modernity is usually associated with technological and political superiority, whereas tradition is often associated with backwardness. Herzfeld writes, "Thus, when 'tradition' appears alone as the glorious repository of national talents, we should immediately ask why the opposing category has remained unmarked." (Herzfeld, 2004: 31). Herzfeld notes that although the Greek state and the Greek public prize the Greek artisanal tradition as a cultural heritage, they also perpetuate the stereotype of artisans as obstinate and recalcitrant people. Artisans are seen as people who lack the mentality to adapt to modernity (Herzfeld, 2004).

In China, the liberalisation of the market economy has brought the replacement of the state's blueprint of modernisation—a neoliberal-influenced modernisation agenda (yet still bearing significant socialist imprints) has replaced the socialist one. What socialism left is now seen as a tradition that people can feel nostalgic for but that is no longer relevant to national development. This glorification of the "hardworking" virtue of manual workers actually suggests the low status of manual labourers—because the status of the opposing category (i.e., the knowledge workers,

including IT, business, and many other professions) as successful individuals is so obvious that it does not need to speak out. It is worth noting that this glorification of manual workers is significantly different from the praise for workers during the socialist era. In contrast to the image of the worker proletariat as the server-achiever, the concept of class has been weakened in present propaganda. Industrial workers are no longer seen as the main means for the development of China but as the embodiment of traditional virtue. Through replacing the concept of class with the notion of virtue, the state has marginalised industrial workers from its agenda of modernisation. This change has illustrated what Herzfeld (2004) argues: praise for the ethics of workers deflects public concerns over manual workers' vulnerable political status.

The CCP state's praise of the virtue of hard work does not de-stigmatise the working class. Instead, it exposes the precarious status of industrial workers in late socialist China: they have been marginalised in society and are no longer regarded as representatives of the people. Nevertheless, the nostalgia expressed by 9th Iron's former state workers for the socialist concept of achievement indicated their refusal to accept being labelled as failures in the market economy. In the midst of socialist nostalgia, former state workers, represented by Kang Xinhua, have been exploring the possibility of an ethical life.

According to former state worker Kang Xinhua, "the greatest meaning of life is to serve the people (*weirenminfuwu*). Serving the people is more than simply a phrase; it must be put into action." Serving the people was a legacy of Maoist rhetoric. Mao Zedong used it for the first time in 1944 when praising Zhang Side, a soldier. This phrase praised "pure selflessness" and "individual sacrifice" for the good of the collective (Karl, 2019: 247). In socialist ideology, serving and attaining were not mutually exclusive concepts. Instead, they were dialectical: one could only become an achiever by helping others, and serving others earned praise, which made one an achiever. Work transformed a person into a server as well as an achiever. Rebecca Karl argues that serving the people was once "lived as a concrete social practice" in Maoist China, which depicted the moral ideal of "a new collective lifeworld of socialist equality," but now this phrase can only be "communist kitsch or empty Party blandishment" (ibid., 247–250).

But I realised that Kang was not simply repeating propaganda. Since Kang started working for the 9th Iron, employees have brought him damaged bikes and other electronic goods to repair. Kang never asked for money. Some younger employees believed Kang's approach was outdated because

he could charge fees to supplement his low wages. However, after time, these comments faded. Workers befriended Kang and expressed their appreciation for his actions. Most employees were impressed by Kang's optimistic perspective on life. Kang Xinhua found that the sensation of accomplishment he used to get from collective labour became increasingly difficult to obtain. But he recovered the socialist purpose of labour: to serve the people. Kang developed a way to find meaning in his daily work and life by helping others, which allowed him to reestablish his identity as a valuable member of society.

Researchers have identified various forms of nostalgia for socialism that people in post-socialist countries experience (Rofel, 1999; Berdahl, 1999; Boym, 1995; Nadkarni and Shevchenko, 2004; Nguyen-Thu, 2014; Zhang, 2020). Nevertheless, Kang's nostalgia seemed to develop beyond the nostalgic emotion and led to his action of changing the world. Debbora Battaglia (1995) argues that nostalgia can have positive value for its practitioner. In Papua New Guinea, Battaglia finds that rural-to-urban migrants participated in yam growing and yam exhibition activities, which allowed them to restore their ties with their home islands and native identity. Battaglia contends that the nostalgia that these migrants held was "active or practical nostalgia" that promoted "self-problematization" and inspired its user to "reinvent the present" (Battaglia, 1995: 93). For Kang, as well as many other former socialist workers, their nostalgia was active because it allowed them to feel the purpose of life again and helped them gain a sense of achievement in the changing world. This nostalgia revealed people's ethical labour (Fengjiang, 2021; see Chapter 3) in finding the meaning of existence in the face of precarity, exemplifying the ethics of precarity that I proposed.

# 5. Conclusion

The chapter examined the impact of labour precarity and structural precarity on workers' perceptions of achievement and failure. Concurrent with the SOE reform in the 1990s, a new view of success emphasising the acquisition of wealth has arisen, accordingly altering people's perception of failure. Some social groups, however, still value the socialist understanding of collective achievement and honour. Former state workers experienced a decline in their social status, shifting from being perceived as masters of the nation to being included in vulnerable social groups. Workers' views on achievement and failure, which might appear inconsistent at times, demonstrated the individual's struggle to reconcile conflicting moral frameworks within the context

of labour precarity. The recent popular perspective on achievement influenced workers' understandings of achievement. Workers knew that their low income and legally unprotected employment status might make them appear to be losers in market competition. Some people, such as Zhao, tried to reevaluate the significance of their existence by dutifully carrying out their familial obligations, drawing inspiration from Confucian moral values. However, most former state workers also continued to acknowledge the socialist concept of collective achievement and the socialist understanding of the purpose of labour, and in different ways, they experienced a longing for the socialist understanding of achievement. They strived to rediscover an ethical way of living by revisiting the socialist ideology that had emphasised the value of self-sacrifice.

Charlotte Bruckermann (2023) argues that the CCP's propaganda in the socialism era had viewed failure in political movements as essential experiments towards achieving the ultimate victory. By learning from failures, people would gain experience and eventually attain success. Socialist perspectives on failure continued to have a significant influence on current public perceptions of the failure of environmental policies. For example, the implementation of recent emission reduction regulations, however unsuccessful, was considered necessary for the reform process to succeed. China was expected to eventually attain the environmental goals it set. Bruckermann's (2023) demonstrates that the socialist understanding of failure stayed relevant in late socialist China. In the same vein, this chapter demonstrated how different views on achievement, each corresponding to a different historical era, coexisted in the 9th Iron. Achievement and failure, being inherently interconnected, must be comprehended within specific national historical and moral contexts at different scales.

The key theoretical novelty of this chapter lied in the proposition that, rather than presenting a single understanding of achievement (Long and Moore, 2013), I showed that diverse perspectives on achievement and failure, shaped by different moral frameworks, can coexist and clash in everyday life, thereby impacting people's ethical practices. Instead of solely examining achievement or failure, I demonstrated how different understandings of success or failure correspond with distinct moral frameworks and how these understandings are moulded and developed in the context of labour, structural, social, and affective precarity.

# Conclusion

This dissertation explored the impact of the intersection of various forms of precarity on the lives of Chinese industrial workers, particularly their ethical lives. Through an ethnographic study of various categories of workers within a state-owned railway construction company in China, I demonstrated Chinese industrial workers are subject to four categories of precarity: labour precarity, structural precarity, social precarity, and affective precarity, all of which, together, intensified workers' sense of insecurity and experiences of dispossession. Moreover, everyday ethical dilemmas are central to these experiences, understandings, and intersections of various types of precarity. Employees use a variety of moral frameworks to understand and resolve different ethical dilemmas.

My theoretical framework thus included a fourfold model of precarity and the proposal of the ethics of precarity, which contributed to anthropology in two ways. First, aside from the extensively discussed topic of labour precarity in anthropology and other fields, I identified three additional forms of precarity. Structural precarity arises from specific economic and political configurations. Social precarity is characterised by fragile social connections. Affective precarity refers to the subjective experiences of precarity, encompassing a range of emotions and the structure of feelings that emerge within the context of labour, structure, and social precarity. Although anthropologists have recently noticed that there are multiple kinds of insecurity in people's lives, the interaction and dynamics between different forms of instability have been rarely explored. In contrast, my ethnography revealed that the aforementioned four types of precarity are not separate but rather constantly interact with one another.

Second, I proposed 'the ethics of precarity' which was a distinct contribution to the literatures on ethics and precarity by connecting these two themes and analysing the connections ethnographically. I illustrated how different forms of precarity may highlight incommensurable values and practices among different moral systems, resulting in specific ethical challenges in everyday situations. I further showed how individuals negotiate such daily moral conflicts and perform ethical labour when various forms of precarity of implicated in their lives. Finally, I emphasised that Confucian, socialist, and recent neoliberal moral concepts co-exist in the present as ethical resources for people to draw on.

Through a detailed analysis of the working and domestic lives intertwined with the 9th Iron, I investigated ethnographically how the above themes manifest. My ethnography was the first to examine the experiences of Chinese railway workers during an era when high-speed rail transport plays a crucial role in nation-state building and geopolitics. Chapter 2 immersed the reader in the daily experiences of working and living in the 9th Iron. I demonstrated that in the 9th Iron, there were distinctive rhythms, spaces, and labour experiences that differed depending on factors like gender, age, contract type, and relationships with supervisors. However, these factors were frequently connected, leading to varying levels of precarity among workers. Additionally, I demonstrated how workplace relationships influence worker's personal life, and vice versa: how personal relationships have an impact on interactions with co-workers and supervisors. This was partly due to the 9th Iron's particular space: workers resided together in dormitories, had limited privacy, and were under surveillance by both the government and the company. The chapter also demonstrated that habits and practices from the socialist era persisted in the 9th Iron's compound, while, the rise in labour precarity also significantly affected people's lives. High personnel turnover led to vulnerable relationships among workers, requiring individuals to adeptly navigate and resolve daily moral conflicts in order to maintain solidarity with their colleagues. This point was further elaborated in Chapter 7.

Chapters 4 and 5 both explored the causes of China's contemporary structural precarity: China's distinct political and economic history, combined with the new issue of labour precarity, trapped workers in a prolonged state of insecurity. Thus Chinese workers have experienced varying degrees of livelihood security and autonomy across different historical eras. During pre-Imperial China, craftsmen held esteemed social positions, and in Imperial China, craftsmen associations offered a degree of protection and security to workers. In socialist China, workers were guaranteed lifetime employment with access to free communal facilities provided by the state. However, in late socialist China, economic reform and subsequent state sector reform drastically changed the lives of industrial workers. In this context, workers at my field sites encountered a gendered labour hierarchy, which divided them into different categories based on contract length, wages, benefits, household registration statuses, and levels of security. Confucian philosophy and socialist ideology shaped past and present labour relationships and practices, as I further explored in Chapter 5.

Thus, that structural precarity, which had been rooted in the socialist period, continued to influence the 9th Iron workers in the late socialist era. In the 9th Iron, Maoist labour control techniques were combined with new capitalist management practices, which produced workers' particular experience of labour precarity. Subcontractors paid wages to migrant workers once a year, much as supplies had been distributed to members once a year during the People's Commune era. Nonetheless, in the market economy era, the annual wage payment custom frequently resulted in wage arrears for migrant workers, as some subcontractors disappeared before payday to avoid wage payment. Besides, for the 9th Iron workers, after the late 1990s SOE reform, the work-age wage system that had developed during the socialist period became a contributor to a wider income gap between permanent and temporary workers because only permanent workers could receive small, but steady, annual salary increases.

By investigating migrant workers' moral calculations I discovered that migrant workers' moral perceptions of what defined a proper worker, as well as their personal relationships with private subcontractors, sometimes reduced their willingness to ask for paper contracts. I found that migrant workers often chose to work with familiar subcontractors for moral considerations. This finding is in contrast to previous researchers who have often criticised employers for using personal relationships to control migrant workers (Shen, 2006; Zhou, 2007). Furthermore, Chapter 5 demonstrated that in the context of intersecting forms of precarity, not only were labour experiences and labour relationships precarious, but company and state control over labour could also be precarious. Managers occasionally tolerated workers' behaviours that went against the company's rules and principles. Migrant workers and foremen usually had the freedom to explain and perform rituals based on their beliefs, particularly those concerning nature and the supernatural.

The central theme of the next two chapters (6 and 7) was how labour precarity affected workers' relationships and collegial relationships and thus produced both affective precarity and social precarity. Thus, together, labour precarity and structural precarity had a significant impact on workers' intimate relationships, marriages, and their perceptions and experiences of romantic love. Many former state employees experienced marriage tensions due to being laid off during the late 1990s SOE reform. Young rural-to-urban migrant couples were separated for extended periods of time to care for their children, though they worried that the separation would destroy their conjugal love. Precarious employment statuses, low income, and disadvantaged family backgrounds impeded the ability of young, unmarried male workers to start and maintain romantic relationships. Through

this ethnography I developed the concept of "the precarity of love" to describe the precarious experiences of romantic love resulting from labour and structural precarity.

The increased vulnerability of relationships caused by labour precarity also led to a type of social precarity in the workplace. I explored this through the master-apprentice relationships between 9th Iron state workers and temporary trainees. The pattern of interaction between masters and trainees changed as the composition of trainee personnel diversified after the SOE reform. After 1998, trainees could no longer get permanent contracts, as they had enjoyed during the socialist period. Masters, who were state workers, expressed their frustration with the challenges of developing trusting and reciprocal long-term relationships with their apprentices. The competition for longer-term contracts also caused young trainees to see each other as competitors rather than colleagues.

Both chapters also demonstrated how workers drew on various moral frameworks to navigate their relationships, whether with their loved ones (Chapter 6) or their colleagues (Chapter 7). Chapter 6 illustrated how workers ascribed moral significance to romantic love. The older 9th Iron workers believed that socialist romantic love had been purer compared to capitalist love in late socialist China, as the former had not been influenced by commodity fetishism. Young male temporary and migrant workers found themselves trapped in a cage of prevailing discourses of romantic love that associated the expression of love with the gifting of luxuries, expectations of particular performance of masculinity, and labour precarity. It was challenging for them to provide financial security for their partners in accordance with the prevailing patriarchal moral ideal of manhood.

Chapter 7 further concentrated on the ethics of precarity present in people's daily cultivation of *guanxi* and social interactions. In their daily interactions, workers constantly negotiated between different moral frameworks, devising ethical solutions to the problems they faced. Chapter 7 demonstrated that in the context of labour and social precarity, people frequently resorted to different moral languages to resolve the dilemmas that they faced. Through a close analysis of conversational exchanges, I explored the discursive aspect of ethical actions, which included people's daily conversations and speeches. I focused on people's talks because, in many cases, workers deliberately chose to describe their relationships (*guanxi*) in different ways in order to avoid state surveillance and maintain harmonious relationships. Sometimes they emphasised the moral or emotional aspects of *guanxi*, while at other times they tried to make their relationships appear professional and unaffected by personal emotions.

The central theme of the next two chapters (8 and 9) was how labour precarity had affected the perceptions and experiences of success and failure for both younger and older generations of workers  in different ways. Chapter 8 showed that young temporary workers were influenced by *suzhi* ideology and driven by the desire to achieve individual success – framed as obtaining permanent contracts. In contrast, Chapter 9 revealed that older generation workers longed for the socialist idea of achievement, which had emphasised *collective* Besides, I demonstrated how labour precarity intersected with affective precarity and social precarity. honour and pride. Chapter 8 delved into a type of affective precarity where temporary workers experienced ongoing and intense worries about what lay ahead, which I called "the precarity of the future". Young employees were affected by the company's *suzhi* discourse and the fierce rivalry among temporary staff, causing them to be preoccupied with daily anxieties about securing a permanent contract in the future. Chapter 9 illustrated a type of social precarity that specifically shaped the relationships between former state employees and their friends who remained state workers after the SOE reform. During the socialist era, they had all enjoyed permanent contracts and had formed strong connections. However, during the late 1990s SOE reform, some lost their permanent contracts while others did not. This change led to significant disparities in their salaries and benefits, thereby damaging their relationships. Former state workers and state workers experienced challenges in sustaining their friendships as gaps in their economic and social statuses widened.

Both chapters also explored how workers, drawing upon various moral frameworks, including Confucian, socialist, and neoliberal moralities, interpreted their daily endeavours, aspirations, and recollections of success in distinctive ways.  Chapter 8 suggested how young people used various moral frameworks to explain their active participation in *suzhi* competitions at work. Some referred to a recent idea that had been spreading since the 1990s, which encouraged individuals to cultivate themselves into successful people with high social status and wealth, whereas others understood their desire for success in relation to Confucian morality: they wanted to fulfil the Confucian moral duty of caring for their ageing parents and bringing honour to their families. Chapter 9 showed that former state workers, a group of workers who had been laid off in the late 1990s SOE reform and recently rehired by the 9th Iron through temporary contracts, still attached moral values to the socialist understanding of achievement. Ordinary manual workers who had lived through the socialist period used to derive passion, pride, and purpose from their labour, leading to a sense of

ethical living. However, after the reform, they became marginalised in society and struggled to feel valued as members of society.

In conclusion, I have shown the complex intersections between various types of precarity experienced by Chinese industrial workers across generations, together with the everyday ethical dilemmas arising from various forms of precarity and people's ethical responses. In addition, I have provided an ethnography of the labour relationships and experiences of Chinese railway workers, a subject that has received little attention in the anthropology of infrastructure. As opposed to the Chinese state's propaganda concerning high-speed railway development, I have given readers an alternative narrative focusing on the everyday lives of railway workers.

By focusing on the precarious experiences of workers in China, this research also contributed to the scholarship on the social changes accompanying China's market transformation, as well as regional studies of late socialist countries in Asia. The Ganshen Railway, part of a broader transportation network connecting Hong Kong to Beijing, exemplified this dynamic. This network linked China's Special Economic Zone, notably Shenzhen, with the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region and less developed inland cities such as Ganzhou. The railway project's objectives—enhancing economic development in inland provinces and bolstering the central government's influence in Hong Kong—contrasted sharply with the precarious experiences faced by workers on a daily basis. This contrast highlighted the unequal consequences of infrastructure development in Asia, exposing the socio-economic disparities that arise despite the overarching goals of growth and connectivity.

Despite the significant insights offered by this study, it was not without its limitations. In recent years, China's high-speed railway initiatives have evolved into a crucial geopolitical instrument, transcending simple transportation improvements. High-speed railway projects, which are a key component of the broader Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), are purposefully designed to boost regional connectivity and promote economic integration with neighbouring countries, suggesting the CCP state's ambition to increase its global and regional influences (Williams, 2018). Scholars note that by developing high-speed rail networks across Southeast Asia, Africa, and Europe, China aims to establish new urbanisation corridors, thereby fostering a techno-social environment conducive to the expansion of Sino-centric global production networks (Apostolopoulou et al., 2023; Silver, 2023; Cheng, 2024; Smith, 2024). As I mentioned in the preface, the narratives of the CCP portray high-speed railways as symbols of China's technological advancement and national

pride. This thesis, by focusing on the aspect of labour and workers' experience of precarity, paid less attention to how people viewed the state's official discourses and how they thought about their labour in relation to the state's grand blueprint. I will share a fieldwork encounter before ending the thesis.

Just before leaving the field site, I had a conversation with my friend, technician Cheng. Cheng described an interesting experience. One day, he stood on a dirt mound by the side of the railway tracks. When he saw a train coming from a distance, he felt a surge of excitement: "I felt a special sensation; I helped build this railway with world-class technology, and we are part of promoting the country's development. We contribute to the realisation of the Chinese Dream! But this excitement didn't last long. My colleague said, 'Do you think all the materials used on the railroad meet the regulations 100%?' I immediately felt a wave of fear. I jumped down from the mound and quickly walked away." In their spare time, Cheng, as well as many other male workers I met, often got excited when talking about China's economic and technological development. Nonetheless, they also understood that in post-socialist China, one's moral status is precarious. As the above example suggests, Cheng recognised the ironies arising from the discrepancies between the grand vision of the China Dream and everyday construction practices that included constant compromises of safety and environmental standards. From this perspective, the thesis could serve as a good starting point for further studies on how people relate themselves to the state. As the above example demonstrated, industrial workers were frequently aware of the inconsistencies between broader state narratives and the complexities that they faced in their everyday labour and lives.

As I mentioned in the preface, people in the 9th Iron asked me to write their stories. I hope I can say that I have accomplished this task.

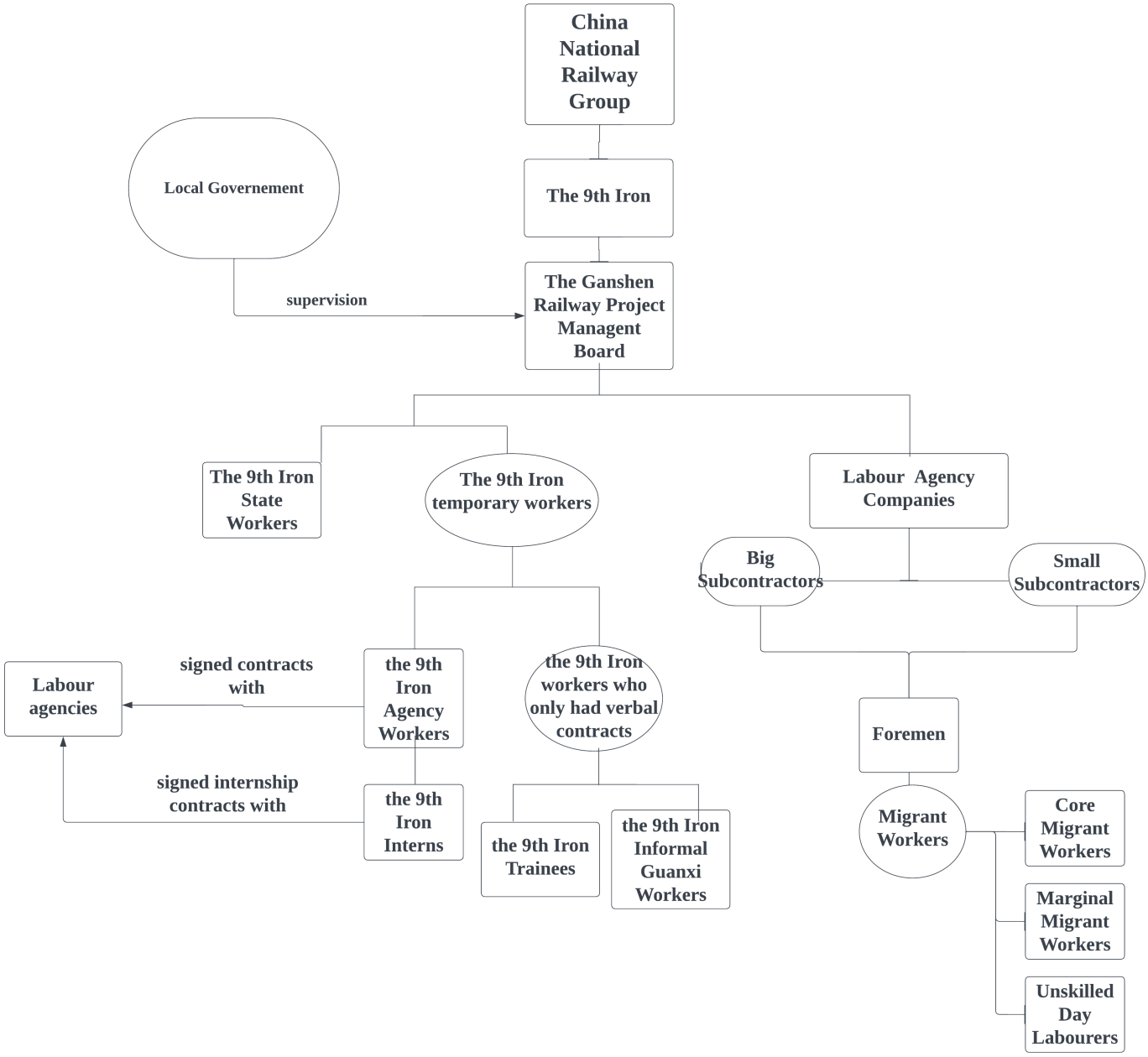
# Appendix 1 the comparison of different types of workers

| | **The 9th Iron workers** | | | | | **Rural-to-urban migrant workers** | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | **State workers** | **Agency workers** | **Interns** | **Trainees** | **Informal guanxi workers** | **Core workers** | **Marginal workers** | **Day labourers** |
| **Work roles** | Many are technicians, machinists,accountants, administrators and work together with agency workers. Some are skilled workers and work together with core migrant workers. | technicians (measurement, mapping, security, experiment, complex machines operation and monitoring, material calculation) machinists (machine operation) , skilled workers, accountants , administrators | Technicians, machinists, Skilled workers, accountants , administrators | Learning to become technicians or machinists or skilled workers | Over half are technicians, machinists, skilled workers, accountants , administrators. The rest are cooks, drivers. | Skilled workers (rock drillers, blasters, welders, plumbers, carpenters, experienced concrete workers, experienced scaffolders, experienced steel fitters); some have certifications for their skills | Skilled workers but have fewer working experiences, or do not have certifications for their skills | Nonskilled workers |
| **Contract** | Permanant contract with the 9th Iron | Two-year fixed term contract with labour agency companies | Internship contract | No contract | No contract | No contract in most cases but have close relationship subcontractors; usually work for one subcontractor for many years | no contract in most cases, do not have personal connection with subcontractors; do not have stable employers | No contract |
| **Education** | Veteran workers or college education | College education | College education | College student | College education and others | Junior high schools, primary schools | Junior high schools, primary schools | Junior high schools, primary schools |

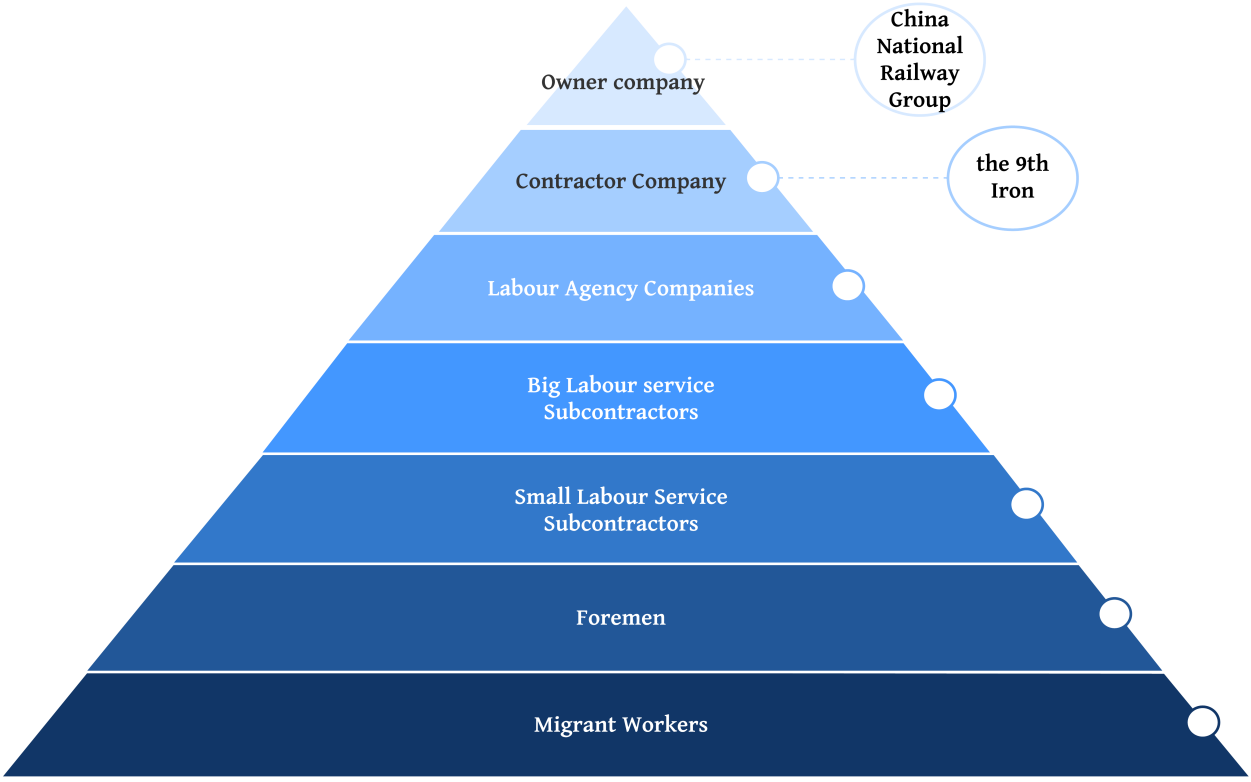
| | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Wage (In RMB)** | basic wage plus performanc e bonus plus work age bonus minus accident fines; between 8000 and 10000 per month | basic wage plus performanc e bonus minus accident fines; between 8000 and 10000 per month | 2000 per month | 1800 per month | 3000 per month, expect the chef who has 8000 rmb per month. | 300 per day shift, 400 per night shift; between 7000 and 9000 per month | 200 per day shift,300 per night shift; between 5000 and 7000 per month | 200 rmb per day shift, 250 rmb per night shift |
| | **The 9th Iron workers** | | | | | **Rural-to-urban migrant workers** | | |
| | **State workers** | **Agency workers** | **Interns** | **Trainees** | **Informal guanxi workers** | **Core workers** | **Marginal workers** | **Day labourers** |
| **Wage payment** | Salary paid by the 9th Iron each month | Salary paid by agency companies; Pay days are not fixed dates and are determined by the 9th Iron's financial situation. | Salary paid by agency companies; Pay days are not fixed dates and are determined by the 9th Irony's financial situation. | Salary paid by the tunnel project managemen t committee; Pay days are not fixed dates and are determined by the tunnel project managemen t committee's financial situation | Pay days are not fixed dates and are determined by the tunnel project managemen t committee's financial situation. | Salary paid by subcontract ors annually before the lunar new year, or paid at the end of construction project | Salary paid by subcontract ors annually before the lunar new year, or paid at the end of construction project | Salary paid by subcontract ors at the end of the day shift |
| **insurances** | The 9th Iron pay for state workers' employmen t injury, unemploym ent, medical, and endowment insurances and housing provident fund. The 9th Iron also has a specific pension programme that is solely available to state employees. | Agency companies pay for agency workers' employmen t injury, unemploym ent, medical, and endowment insurances and housing provident fund for the contract period | Agency companies pay for intern's employmen t injury, unemploym ent, medical, and endowment insurances for the contract period | No insurances | No insurances | Subcontract ors pay employmen t injury insurances for some core workers; many core workers have paid for endowment insurance and medical insurances use their own salaries | No insurances | No insurances |

| | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Household registration (hukou)** | In the work unit (I.e., the 9th Iron) Permanently urban | In labour agency companies (temporarily urban, depending on contract renewal) | In labour agency companies (temporarily urban, depending on contract renewal) | In colleges (temporarily urban until graduation) | In rural or in urban, depending on their family background | In villages, rural | In villages, rural | In villages, rural |

# Appendix 2 the structure of subcontracting and labour use in the 9th Iron



# Appendix 3 the pyramid of subcontracting in railway construction



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