

The Depoliticization of Production: Changing Labor Relations in China's Electronics Industry

Guowei Liang
gliang4@jh.edu

PhD candidate, Johns Hopkins University, Department of Sociology

Abstract

This paper examines how the relocation of electronics factories from coastal to inland China has reshaped labor relations through the lens of the depoliticization of production. It argues that manufacturing capital's increasing reliance on labor brokers for recruitment and management, combined with workers' high turnover rates, has depoliticized the production. In this context, workers are more inclined to exercise the "exit option," leaving jobs when dissatisfied rather than engaging in collective resistance. This shift minimizes direct confrontations between workers and capital, undermining traditional forms of labor solidarity and collective action.

However, depoliticization does not eliminate power dynamics; instead, it displaces them, creating new forms of contestation in the labor market. The reliance on labor brokers has heightened the involvement of local governments in labor recruitment processes. At the same time, dissatisfied workers often use their exit option or turn to alternative forms of resistance, such as legal action or even violent confrontations with labor brokers. This demonstrates how the depoliticization of production, while reducing overt workplace conflicts, has reconfigured labor relations and shifted contestation to new arenas.

Introduction

In recent years, many electronics factories in China have relocated from coastal regions to inland provinces, areas traditionally known as labor-exporting regions with an abundant and cheaper labor supply. However, these factories often encounter a puzzling phenomenon: labor shortages that are even more severe than those in coastal regions. To address this issue, local governments have become deeply involved in labor recruitment, often collaborating with labor brokers to meet the demands of these relocated factories. This raises important questions about how changing labor recruitment strategies are reshaping power relations within factories and how these changes relate to the dynamics

of labor resistance. This paper seeks to explore how these evolving recruitment practices affect the dynamics of power between workers, capital, and the state in China's electronics industry.

This study draws on two key theoretical frameworks. Wang Hui's (2006) concept of "the depoliticization of politics" provides a critical lens to understand how political issues are reframed as economic, technical, or managerial problems in contemporary China. According to Wang, this process sidelines traditional political discourse, as social conflicts are no longer addressed through political means but are instead reinterpreted as issues of efficiency, technology, or market logic. By doing so, the underlying power relations and structural inequalities are obscured rather than resolved. Wang argues that this "depoliticization of politics" does not eliminate politics altogether but instead reinforces power relations in a more concealed form. The consequences of this process include the intensification of social inequality, the shrinking of the public sphere, and the concealing of power structures.

Michael Burawoy's (1985) concept of the "politics of production" provides a complementary theoretical framework to examine the micro-level power relations within the workplace. In his study of various labor regimes, Burawoy explores how production processes are shaped not only by economic forces but also by political and ideological struggles within the workplace. The "politics of production" refers to the ways in which power is negotiated and contested between workers and management in the production process, often mediated by consent and/or coercion. Burawoy highlights that the political apparatuses of production are the "institutions that regulate and shape struggles in the workplace (Burawoy's 1985:87)." These include state policies, labor laws, and other mechanisms that mediate the relationship between workers and employers, influencing the balance of power and the nature of workplace conflicts.

The factory regime represents the overall political form of production, combining both the political effects of the labor process and the political apparatuses of production. It reflects the interaction between the technical organization of work and the broader political and institutional structures that govern labor relations.

Building on these concepts, Burawoy's (1985) theory of the politics of production provides a useful lens for analyzing labor regimes in China's electronics industry. Burawoy identifies four conditions for market despotism: (1) competition among firms; (2) the separation of conception from execution; (3) workers' dependence on employers due to a lack of alternative livelihoods; and (4) the absence of direct state regulation of production.

My research finds that while the first two conditions—competition among firms and the separation of conception from execution—are largely met in Chinese factories, the third and fourth conditions are not fully realized. The third condition, workers' dependence on employers, is mitigated in China by the unique socio-economic context of rural land ownership. Most migrant workers retain access to rural land, which provides them with a safety net and an alternative livelihood. This access allows workers to pursue rural petty accumulation, such as saving money to build houses or start small businesses in their home villages, reducing their complete dependence on factory employment.

By combining Wang Hui's critique of the depoliticization of politics with Burawoy's politics of production, we can better analyze the reshaping of labor relations in contemporary China, particularly in industries such as electronics manufacturing. This paper argues that the increasing use of labor brokers in workers' recruitment has significantly transformed labor relations within the workplace. On the one hand, outsourcing labor recruitment has made workers more likely to exercise the "exit option" when dissatisfied with factory conditions, thereby depoliticizing previous political issues. On

the other hand, Burawoy's insights remind us that even under these conditions, labor relations remain deeply political, as power and consent are continuously negotiated on the shop floor.

To contextualize these dynamics, Lu Zhang's analysis of labor regimes in China's inland provinces notices that factories in low value-added positions within global production networks, tend to combine scientific management with flexible production practices, resulting in high turnover rates and significant worker resistance. Workers frequently engage in job-hopping and strikes to demand better pay and working conditions, often leveraging tight labor markets and local social networks to assert their demands.

Dong's study of "Foxconn Moms" sheds light on how gender is related to the high turnover rate in China's inland factories. Focusing on female workers in Foxconn's Zhengzhou factory, Dong highlights the dual pressures of work and family responsibilities faced by these women. Many of these "Foxconn Moms" struggle to balance the demanding work environment with caregiving roles at home, a challenge exacerbated by inadequate social support systems. Dong's analysis underscores the broader implications of gendered labor practices and the need for more inclusive policies to address the unique challenges faced by female workers in China's manufacturing sector.

Building on these conceptual tools, this paper aims to contribute to the understanding of how labor relations are being reshaped in China's inland electronics industry. It explores how the depoliticization of production and the politics of labor recruitment intersect to influence power relations within factories, shedding light on the lived experiences of workers and the broader implications for labor relations in a globalized economy.

Method

The analysis in this paper draws upon government and industrial statistics, newspaper reports, in-depth interviews with migrant workers and the author's ethnographic research while working as an assembly line worker at Swiftech in Riverbend County, a recently established electronics manufacturing hub in Jiangxi province, in China's central region.

In the winter of 2022, I conducted interviews with local government officials, peasants, and migrant workers in Riverbend County. In the summer of 2023, to further explore the labor regime and recruitment dynamics, I conducted participatory observation as an assembly line worker in a large electronics factory in Riverbend County.

Labor Process in Swiftech¹

Swiftech was established in the early 2000s, initially providing parts and subcontract services for Foxconn. However, by around 2010, Swiftech had developed into a publicly listed company and began supplying directly to Apple. From a mere 2.5 billion RMB in 2011, the company's revenue surged to 214 billion RMB by 2022.

In 2020, Swiftech acquired an iPhone production facility from another renowned global electronics subcontractor. This move not only positioned Swiftech as the second-largest iPhone assembler after Foxconn but also strengthened Apple's ties with Chinese suppliers. By 2022, Swiftech's revenue was largely dependent on Apple, with over 70% coming from the tech giant.

The following section will illustrate the organization of production in workshop of Swiftech based on my participatory observation in the factory. After I signed up to work in Swiftech in

¹ The information on Swiftech is based on news reports from international business sources such as Nikkei Asia (2020, 2023), Financial Times (2023), and The Wall Street Journal (2023). To maintain anonymity, specific article titles and links are not disclosed here.

Riverbend County as part of my participant observation, the labor broking company offered free transportation for me and other workers recruited in the Pearl River Delta region.

Upon arriving at the factory, my co-workers and I were met by a recruiter who presented an agreement outlining our hourly wages and asked us to sign it. This agreement stipulated an hourly wage of 20 yuan for the first two months and 19 yuan for the third month. However, three months later, I discovered that newly recruited workers were receiving a starting wage of 24 yuan per hour, much higher than mine, which would be reduced to 19 Yuan if I was still working at Riverbend Swiftech plant. The agreement I signed was not a labor contract but rather an agreement for additional subsidies from the recruiting company. The following day, during a half-day training session, I was asked to formally sign the labor contract with Swiftech. The contract does not have any detail about wages. The onboarding process was very straight forward, the supervisor merely used a machine to verify the magnetic strip on my ID card and then required a chest X-ray exam to screen for infectious diseases such as tuberculosis.

The half-day training session actually did not mention any skills or anything related to our job, rather it primarily focused on signing electronic labor contracts using a mobile phone app. As many workers were unfamiliar with this process, the trainers spent a significant amount of time instructing them. In addition to a brief video introduction to Swiftech and its wage structure, the training session also emphasized the proper procedure for resigning. This emphasis suggests that the factory is aware of its high turnover rate.

The organization of work at Swiftech exemplifies the characteristics of modern assembly line work as described by many scholars, including deskilling, workplace hierarchy, alienation and atomization (Lee, 1995, 2007; Dong, 2022). As a late entrant to the industry, Swiftech has faced the

challenge of increasing productivity while reducing production costs, but the high turnover rate, alienation of assembly work, and strict workplace discipline have resulted in low levels of loyalty and commitment among workers.

To address this issue, the factory has implemented strategies to elicit worker effort. This section identifies three methods that the factory used to elicit workers effort. The speed of the production line is often set beyond the physical limits of workers. This forces workers to work at their maximum pace. My job at Swiftech is called “radial magnet with DC shield magnetization”, which involves inserting small metal pieces into clips. The metal pieces are held in a metal box with a latch. Each box contains four metal pieces of different sizes, ranging from one centimeter long and three to four millimeters wide to five millimeters long. I need to place each type of metal piece into the corresponding clip. The metal pieces are glued together in pairs by robots, and if they are not glued properly, they are considered defective and must be discarded. Essentially, my job was like putting beans into a bean pod. It only takes two minutes to learn how to do it, but it takes some time to become proficient and avoid making mistakes. I had to wear finger covers, which can be painful after a long period of time.

When I began working on the assembly line, I did not receive any formal training or detailed instructions. Instead, I observed another worker perform the task for a minute or two before being expected to start working. The work itself is quite simple, but the speed of the assembly line made it very challenging for me at first. Both the metal boxes and the clips were constantly fed to me on the line, and production was often rushed, with new materials continuously arriving.

My observations revealed that the line leasers have a lot of control on the intensity of work on the assembly line. To reduce the workload for workers, they can assign more people to the same task,

thereby lowering the intensity. However, this requires hiring additional workers. On the assembly line where I worked, the team leader frequently adjusted the number of workers assigned to specific tasks. When workers were unable to keep up with the speed of the conveyor belt, and the materials were piling up, the leader would send workers from other tasks to help. If there was no pileup on the assembly line, the leader would reduce the number of workers assigned to that task.

One morning, at the start of my shift, the team leader reassigned me to a different workstation because the worker previously assigned there had just quit. This left my original task with only two workers instead of three. By the afternoon, the reduced workforce at my original task caused a pileup of materials because the workers could not keep up with the conveyor belt's pace. As a result, the team leader reassigned me back to my original position. This example indicates that the presence of a pileup is used by management to measure whether the assembly line is operating at the limits of the workers' capacity. It also indicates that if the factory were able to hire more workers, the pace of work could be reduced, making the tasks less physically demanding for individual workers.

In fact, the condition of the robotic arms and other automated equipment on the assembly line often plays a more significant role in determining production speed. In the workshop where I worked, a large number of robotic arms and other automated devices were used. Whether these machines were functioning properly or experiencing malfunctions greatly impacted the production speed. This also caused the flow of materials on the assembly line to be inconsistent. When the machine is not operating properly, there would be a shortage of materials, whereas at other times, there would be an oversupply.

During a shortage of materials, workers could take a brief break, look around, or stretch. However, once the machines resumed normal operation, materials would flood the line, leaving me

feeling overwhelmed. If the manager notices the pileup of materials, they would yell at me to speed up, questioning why I was so slow.

The pressure to put in effort on the assembly line does not only come from the speed of the production line itself but also from peer pressure. At first, I struggled to understand the logic of the assembly line. I was solely focused on completing my own task and did not consider the impact of my work on the people upstream and downstream from me. Eventually, an experienced worker downstream told me to pay attention to the flow of materials and adjusting my work accordingly. At that time, I realized that working on an assembly line requires more than just completing my own task, it also involves coordinating with others to maintain the overall flow of production.

For instance, when there is an excess of materials, I need to take the initiative to place the surplus on my own worktable to prevent the person downstream from being overwhelmed. This not only avoids upsetting my coworkers but also prevents the supervisor from getting angry at me for allowing materials to pile up.

Therefore, I often voluntarily push myself to work as quickly as possible. On one hand, I want to minimize the amount of material passed down to my coworkers to avoid upsetting those downstream. On the other hand, I often find myself engaging in the game of “making out” (Burawoy 1982), trying to outperform my coworkers or at least avoid falling too far behind in the competition on the assembly line.

This dynamic indicates that the pressure on the assembly line is not just determined by the machine and managers but also by interactions among workers. Workers must constantly balance their own performance with the expectations and needs of their coworkers.

In modern factories, managers face the challenge of motivating workers without using physical force. My participatory observation while working on the assembly line revealed that managers often use two different methods to shame workers. The first targets personality traits, labeling workers as irresponsible, lazy, or unwilling to put in effort. The second focuses on personal abilities, with assembly line leaders frequently questioning why seemingly simple tasks cannot be completed.

A team leader warns that poor performance leading to a low team rating would “make me lose face in front of the boss.” The rationale behind this warning is that if workers perform poorly, it reflects negatively on the team leader in higher management’s eyes, thus prompting the team leader to shame the workers.

The blunt and forceful communication style of supervisors may be perceived as the only method to enhance overall productivity. Through the degradation of dignity, instilling fear, and driving a sense of urgency, workers are pushed to meet deadlines. When Liu Xia was teaching me how to identify products that failed quality control, I asked about her learning process, to which she responded, “Being scolded often, you gradually learn.”

Workers also place great importance on dignity. Privately, employees may degrade their superiors. They despise individuals who exude arrogance and speak abrasively. In private conversations, workers may criticize leaders, for example, one worker expressing disdain for a supervisor who he described as “constantly shouting like a fool all day.”

Workers’ Grievances and Resistance at Swiftech

The strong presence of Taylorism and strict control on the shop floor doesn’t mean that workers are satisfied or that there is no resistance. Hirschman’s (1970) theory of “Exit, Voice, and Loyalty,”

which explains how individuals respond to dissatisfaction within organizations, is particularly relevant when analyzing the dynamics at Swiftech. Here, collective actions are rare, but grievances are widespread. Workers primarily use the exit option to express their dissatisfaction.

One illustrative case of worker resistance by “exit” occurred on my first day at the factory. Although the official start time was 1:30 PM for the afternoon shift, workers were expected to arrive by 1:20 PM to clean the assembly line. A colleague, who arrived at the factory the same day as me, was slightly late and was reprimanded by the assembly line leader. The leader shouted, “Where have you been? Everyone else is cleaning the machine.” The worker retorted, pointing out that he was only a little late and it was still before the official start time. The line leader, whose nickname is “Little Fatty”, argued back, stating, “The factory rules require you to be prepared and clean before starting production. If you don’t want to do it, just leave.”² Although no profanity was used, the exchange was heated. The worker later expressed his frustration to me, criticizing the leader’s attitude and vowing to confront him before quitting. True to his word, he did not return the next day. Such incidents are common at Swiftech, where many workers choose to “vote with their feet” by resigning after conflicts with supervisors.

Another striking example shared by a dormitory roommate involved an altercation near the end of the previous year. An employee in the same shop floor of my roommate, after a heated argument with a supervisor, swallowed a nearby set of headphones in a dramatic act of protest, requiring hospitalization for a stomach pump. These instances underscore the pervasive nature of individual resistance at Swiftech, where collective protest is absent, but personal grievances lead to frequent disputes.

² Fieldnote, June 7th, 2023

The dynamics of exit at Swiftech are further complicated by management strategies and the involvement of labor brokers. Factory management is well aware of the high turnover rates and, paradoxically, leverages this feature as a tool for labor control. Managers may deliberately provoke workers who were considered slow, non-compliant, or challenging to manage. By pressuring these employees to resign, managers aim to cultivate a more docile workforce. As one frontline manager candidly admitted, “Some people are obviously hard to manage. You have to be tough with them and make them leave early; otherwise, they affect others³.” (20230806)

Additionally, labor brokers play a significant role in this dynamic. They may bribe line leaders to create unfavorable conditions for certain workers. When these workers resign before fulfilling their contract terms, brokers can withhold promised bonuses. A labor broker explained, “If you want to make more money, you have to find ways to get rid of or fire some people. For instance, build a good relationship with the line leader and let them quarrel with some workers occasionally.⁴”

This interplay illustrates how workers, management, and labor brokers each utilize the resignation—or exit—of workers to maximize their own interests. Workers seek to escape unsatisfactory conditions, albeit at a financial loss due to forfeited wages or bonuses. Management uses high turnover strategically to remove dissenting voices and streamline control, while labor brokers exploit the system to reduce their payout obligations.

The reliance on exit over voice has significant implications for both workers and the factory’s operations. While individual resignations may provide immediate relief for disgruntled employees, they do not address the underlying issues within the labor regime. Moreover, high turnover rates introduce challenges for the factory, including disruptions in production continuity and increased

³ Interview, Yuan Haoyu, August 6th, 2023

⁴ Interview, Boss Bai, December 27th, 2022

costs associated with recruiting and training new workers. Although the de-skilling of production processes allows for rapid onboarding of new employees, excessive turnover remains a concern. This is evidenced by the factory's efforts to manage attrition; informational posters outlining resignation procedures suggest an acceptance of some mobility, yet banners in training rooms promoting competitions to reduce turnover indicate a desire to stabilize the workforce.

Segregated Flexibility

At Swiftech Riverbend plant, the workforce is divided into two main categories: local workers and migrant/hourly workers, also known as “*xiaoshi gong*.” Local workers, who have a Riverbend local *hukou*, only qualify for regular employment and are not eligible for “*xiaoshi gong*”, sign formal contracts with the company, and receive full social insurance benefits mandated by the state. In contrast, non-local workers can apply for positions as “*xiaoshi gong*.” These workers are referred to as “*xiaoshi gong*” because their wages are calculated based on the number of hours worked each day, whereas regular employees receive a monthly salary. Although “*xiaoshi gong*” literally means hourly labor, it doesn't necessarily mean that these workers do not sign contracts with the company. In fact, most “*xiaoshi gong*” do sign contracts, but they are paid an extra premium bonus from the labor agency. Therefore, “*xiaoshi gong*” usually earn higher wages compared to regular workers.

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	白班14.5元/时,夜班15.5元/时,伙食补贴10元/天	男女16-46岁 入职就发饭卡	30号发薪,主板,有坐有站	不用 体检	两班倒
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	代招正式工(底薪1900元+加班费+全勤+工龄奖等),伙食补贴300元/月	男16-45岁 女16-42岁	22号发薪,线路板,有坐有站	体检	两班倒

(Photo: Recruiting ads at Riverbend County, showing local *hukou* holders are not eligible for temporary jobs at Swiftech)

However, unlike typical dual labor systems where core workers have privileged status, both groups at Swiftech face unique disadvantages. Local workers, often married and in their 30s or 40s, accept lower wages in exchange for stability, proximity to home, and social insurance benefits. Meanwhile, migrant workers receive higher compensation but face shorter employment durations. Traditionally, the *hukou* system in China has been viewed as favoring local residents' interests at the expense of migrant workers. Although urbanization has led to some relaxation of the *hukou* system, Swiftech's Segregated flexibility still heavily relies on it. When I inquired about jobs at a labor recruitment shop in Riverbend County, the first question often asked was, "Where is your *hukou* registration?" This highlights the continuing significance of the *hukou* system in contemporary China.

The minimum wage in Riverbend County at the time I was working there was 1610 RMB per month. For regular employees, wages are based on this minimum wage. At Swiftech, they work ten hours a day and also overtime on Saturdays for an additional ten hours. According to labor law, the extra two hours each day are paid at 1.5 times the regular rate, and Saturday overtime is paid at double the rate. Additionally, regular workers receive bonuses for full attendance and other allowance. Altogether, a regular worker's monthly salary could range from 4000 to 4500 RMB.

In comparison, the “*xiaoshi gong*” are paid a fixed hourly rate. When I joined the factory, this rate was 22 RMB per hour, amounting to 5280 RMB per month, which was evidently higher than the salary of regular workers. Moreover, the hourly rate for “*xiaoshi gong*” can fluctuate over time. During peak production periods, typically in September and October when the factory faces labor shortages, the company offers higher hourly rates to attract workers. For example, after working for some time, as factory orders increased, the hourly rate rose to 24 RMB, then to 26 RMB, and at its peak, reached 28 RMB.

Within the workplace, the segregated labor regime is also apparent. For example, on my neighboring work positions on the assembly line, three of the six workers were temporary workers, while the other three were local workers.

The experience of local workers:

To illustrate how the segregated labor regime operates, I will first share the stories of three local workers. In contrast to the stereotypical image of factory workers from decades past, Liu Xia arrives at the Swiftech plant each morning in her white BYD sedan, accompanied by her husband who also works in the same workshop. She occasionally brings plums from her parents' farm to share with her co-workers. Liu Xia is in her early 30s and have a 5 years old son. She and her husband began

working at Swiftech a month ago. Previously, Liu Xia and her husband were in a comfortable financial position and didn't need to work in a factory. They used to run a small hotel in Guangzhou with her husband's parents, and the business was doing well. However, they had to sell their hotel business to help her husband's younger brother pay for an extremely high bride price and housing expenses. In Riverbend County, heavily influenced by Confucian culture, it's customary for men to pay a substantial bride price, which far exceeds that in most other regions of China. Additionally, the groom's family is expected to purchase and furnish a new home in the city, leading to significant financial burdens. Consequently, Liu Xia and her husband moved to Swiftech for work, which also allowed them to take care of their family.

For Liu Xia, working at Swiftech is not a long-term plan but a temporary response to sudden changes in their life. With their business experience and some savings, she and her husband view this job as a transitional phase. Swiftech offers low entry barriers and proximity to home, allowing them to reduce living costs. However, despite the short distance to home, Liu Xiao has little time to care for her five-year-old son, who is mostly looked after by his grandparents. Liu Xiao mentioned, "Working here, I finish late, returning home around eight or nine in the evening, leaving little time to spend with my child. If I'm on the night shift, I don't see him at all⁵." This illustrates that even though the relocation of manufacturing to inland provinces like Riverbend County facilitates the balancing between labor reproduction and production, extended working hours do not fully resolve this conflict. This is why many local residents choose not to work at Swiftech. Many local workers prefer factories with more relaxed labor discipline, such as smaller factories around Swiftech. Although these jobs offer lower wages, they have earlier finished times and less demanding work, allowing workers to

⁵ Fieldnote June 14th, 2023

return home and care for their families. In contrast, Swiftech's long working hours and strict discipline, especially the two-shift system, make it impossible for night shift workers to meet family needs. Therefore, Liu Xiao told me she plans to work here only for the rest of the year and plans to return to Guangdong with her husband to either start a business again or find a better factory job.

Despite the high turnover rate among factory workers, some local workers, like Wang Chunmei, choose to stay long-term. Chunmei, a woman in her forties, has been working at the factory for two years and has become well-integrated into the workplace. She is considered a veteran worker, and although the wages for these local workers are not very high, her longer tenure allows her more autonomy in her work. This is evident in her interactions with the assistant line leader, characterized by a playful friendship:

“Why are you going to the bathroom when we're so busy?” the line leader (His nickname is “Little Fatty” the same guy who had a quarrel with my coworker) asks.

“What the hell, I have my period. What am I supposed to do?” Chunmei replies.

“You're proud of having your period?” Little Fatty teases.

“Of course I am proud. You don't have one,” she retorts⁶.

After this brief conversation, Little Fatty left the assembly line to attend to other matters, leading Chunmei to comment, “Damn, the job arrived, and he just left.”⁷

This interaction highlights the dynamics of gender and authority within the factory setting. Chunmei's ability to assert her needs while engaging in light-hearted banter reflects her comfort and agency in navigating the workplace hierarchy. Her pride in discussing her menstrual cycle challenges

⁶ Fieldnote June 8th, 2023

⁷ Ibid.

traditional notions of femininity, allowing her to maintain a sense of autonomy even within a structured environment.

Chunmei's experiences illustrate how those long-term women workers negotiate their identities and relationships with the factory regime. Her husband works in Zhejiang, a coastal province in eastern China, where the wages are higher than Riverbend County. They have two children, both of whom are in middle school and eat at school, so Chunmei does not need to provide much daily care for them. Chunmei explains her decision to work at the factory by saying, "I just want to supervise my children to study well."⁸

Although many local workers at Swiftech are female, there are also some male workers. For example, my roommate Huang Jian is a local. Previously, he worked as a chef in Nanjing, the capital of coastal Province Jiangsu. Despite the higher salary associated with his culinary job, Huang found it challenging to meet potential romantic partners in that environment. Consequently, he decided to leave his position last year and sought employment in a factory, hoping to find a suitable partner among the female workers.

Huang's statement, "I came here to find a partner; how much I earn doesn't matter"⁹, underscores the influence of masculinity on his labor choices. His decision reflects a broader societal expectation that men should seek not only financial stability but also marriage and continue the family line. In the factory, he did indeed start dating a female worker, but the relationship ultimately ended.

As a local, Huang's communication skills helped him advance quickly; within six months, he was promoted to a supervisory role. However, his rise in rank did not come without challenges. He often found himself in conflicts with upper management. Given his plan for romantic partner did not

⁸ Fieldnote June 16th, 2023

⁹ Fieldnote June 6th, 2023

succeed, he already planned to resign. This lack of attachment to his current job allowed him to act more freely in confrontations, as he felt he had little to lose. Eventually, after a particularly heated exchange with management, he decided to resign and return to Nanjing to continue his career as a chef, where he could earn around 10,000 yuan a month, significantly more than the 4,000 to 6,000 yuan he made at the factory. Huang Jian's experience illustrates how masculinity shapes labor decisions and workplace dynamics. His pursuit of romantic relationships influenced his choice to work in a factory.

In summary, Segregated flexibility describes a labor regime that categorizes workers into separate groups based on their *hukou* status. This system enforces strict labor discipline and efficiency measures characteristic of Taylorism, but applies these principles differently across various worker segments. For local workers, Segregated flexibility is evident in the strategic management of their labor reproduction needs, which aims to lower labor costs. However, this labor regime fails to address the inherent contradictions between production demands and labor reproduction. In response, workers actively reshape their identities in pursuit of greater autonomy.

The experience of non-local workers

In the following section, I will first share the stories of two non-local workers, both of them were my roommates when I was working in Swiftech. Zhao Xuefeng's experience further illustrates how electronics factories differentiate between local and non-local workers. Last year, he worked at Lens Technology in Hunan, another Apple supplier specializing in glass components for electronic device lenses, and Hunan is another inland province similar to Jiangxi. While working there, Zhao was a “*xiaoshi gong*”, therefore enjoyed higher wages compare to permanent worker, but after the orders

were completed in 3 months, he was transferred to a new position. However, he left this new role because the work attire obstructed one of his eyes, and made him very uncomfortable.

This year, Lens Technology changed its policy, allowing only local workers to be permanent employees (Same policy as of Swiftech), which discouraged Zhao from returning since permanent positions offered lower wages compared to hourly work. After leaving Lens, he worked briefly in a Pinduoduo warehouse (Pinduoduo is a Chinese online retailer, shares a parent company with Temu), but he found the job too exhausting and the warehouse was too hot in the summer, leading him to quit. He then moved to work at Swiftech.

Zhao stated that his primary motivation for working is to earn money. In his hometown in Hunan, if he can't work as an hourly employee, he feels it's not worthwhile because permanent positions pay significantly less. His experience highlights the sensitivity to wages and working conditions and the emphasis on economic benefits when choosing employment. Zhao's story reflects the policy restrictions faced by local workers in factories, as well as the disparity in treatment between local and non-local workers.

Zeng Jiayao, another of my roommates, comes from Guizhou province. He previously worked at Kaixun, which shares the same parent company as Swiftech, in the coastal industrial city Suzhou. While there, he earned an hourly wage of 26 yuan and worked for four months. However, once the project was completed, the wage dropped to 18 yuan. So he left. After taking a two-week break back hometown, he worked for a month at a factory in Guangdong. He later learned that the wages at Swiftech in Riverbend County were comparatively higher, which led him to move there. He came with a group of more than ten people through an agent from Guizhou, who even reimbursed their travel expenses.

Zeng's experience reflects the situation faced by many hourly workers. Although they often receive higher wages, these jobs are typically short-term, lasting just several months. Once the high-wage work is completed, the wages are reduced. According to the labor law, factories cannot dismiss workers when there are temporarily no orders or fewer orders. Therefore, to cut costs, factories reduce wages to encourage workers to resign voluntarily. After completing high-wage jobs, workers often perceive the effort price as diminished when wages are lowered, prompting many to quit. Even if there are no better job opportunities immediately available, many choose to return home for a break or seek work elsewhere. This way, even if the wages are similar, the job content is new and less monotonous compared to their previous factory work.

For non-local workers, several key points emerge: they often enjoy higher wages and have more employment choices, allowing them not to be confined to a single workplace. Because the work in modern electronics factories typically involves repetitive and simple tasks, most workers cannot endure long-term employment in one position. Therefore, many workers prefer the more flexible employment option. However, despite receiving higher wages, this employment is precarious. When the labor market experiences an oversupply of workers, these higher-wage positions are more vulnerable to being cut.

The labor regime at Riverbend County Swiftech represents a distinctive evolution of manufacturing labor control that both builds upon and departs from existing theoretical frameworks. While Lu Zhang's typology of labor regimes in China's inland provinces provides valuable analytical tools, Swiftech's case reveals a fourth variant that I term "Segregated flexibility." This regime combines elements of Flexible Taylorism with a unique form of workforce segregation.

Segregated Flexibility in coastal region

Similarly, my interviews with workers in coastal cities also reveal that factories adopt the “segregated flexibility” regime. The key difference, however, is that these factories replace local workers with student workers. Student workers have become an important source of labor for capital to secure a stable workforce. Under the “segregated flexibility” regime, factories provide low wages for student interns and student workers, while offering higher wages during peak seasons to attract temporary migrant workers. My interviews with some student interns indicate that their wages are often half of what regular workers earn, highlighting the exploitative nature of this system.

For example, Zhang Haiyan, a college student, worked as a summer intern for over ten days at a large electronics parts plant in the coastal Guangdong province. She and her younger sister decided to take up summer jobs because they were bored during the summer and were surrounded by many labor brokers among their classmates and family relatives. So they thought it would be a good opportunity to earn some money for a new phone, as well as to experience something new. Reflecting on her experience, she described the work as “truly exploitative,” despite being counted as formal workers, they earned less than temporary workers, and the labor agency also deducted part of their wages.

Zhang Haiyan shared that she initially wanted to go to Guangdong to see the ocean, as she had never traveled far from her university before. However, the reality was far from her expectations—she never had the chance to see the ocean. The living conditions were harsh, with 14 people packed into a single dormitory room. The atmosphere was cold and distant, vastly different from her university dormitory, where students interacted and supported each other. At the factory dormitory, everyone followed different schedules due to the night shifts leading to an impersonal atmosphere among workers.

The turnover rate at the electronics parts plant was exceptionally high. Zhang Haiyan recalled an assembly leader once telling her, “Yesterday, I brought in eight new people, and by the next day, seven of them had already left.” At this large factory, thousands of workers leave and join every day. The strict factory rules, coupled with wage deductions for failing to meet quotas, created immense pressure on workers. Daily production targets were gradually increased, leading many workers to quit out of frustration. As Zhang Haiyan put it, “after a few days of working there, and you just don’t want to keep working anymore¹⁰.”

This example highlights how the “segregated flexibility” strategy exploits student workers as a low-cost yet stable labor force, while simultaneously relying on temporary migrant workers during peak production periods.

The factory’s labor regime demonstrates how capital use the divisions among workers to exert labor control. Both segments of workers face distinct forms of disadvantage. Local workers accept lower wages for proximity to home, while non-local workers receive higher wages but face employment insecurity.

Adaptive Flexibility

The labor regime of adaptive flexibility is more prevalent in small-scale, downstream factories in the supply chain, where management adjusts work discipline and schedules to accommodate workers’ needs and resistance. Unlike the rigid and high-pressure environments of large factories like Swiftech, these smaller factories often adopt more flexible work hours and less stringent rules to attract and retain workers, particularly female workers with family responsibilities.

¹⁰ Interview with Zhang Haiyuan, October 25th, 2020

Gao Wenbo shared his experience of working in a factory in Bayfront and compared it to other factories he used to work at. He explained that many workers from his hometown preferred small factories in Bayfront because of the relative freedom they offered. “In the large factory, it’s hard for many people to stick with it because it’s not flexible. Work hours are fixed, and you can’t leave during shifts. But in Bayfront, the factories are more flexible. You can even wear your own clothes to work, unlike here, where we all have to wear dust-proof uniforms¹¹”.

In inland regions like Riverbend County, adaptive flexibility is particularly important for female workers who must balance work with family responsibilities. Many female workers in Riverbend County choose to work in smaller factories rather than large ones like Swiftech, despite the lower wages, because the work schedules are more accommodating. Xiao Yanmei explained her decision to work in a smaller factory: “Swiftech is too exhausting. After work, I don’t even have the energy to cook dinner. All I want to do is lie down. So I went to a smaller factory. The pay isn’t high, but I can finish work by 5 p.m. That gives me time to cook, take care of my kids, and still have some energy left for myself.¹²”

This sentiment was echoed by other female workers in Riverbend County, who noted that the rigid schedules and intense workloads in larger factories left them with little time or energy for their families. In contrast, smaller factories in the area often allowed for more flexible hours and less demanding workloads, which made them a better fit for women balancing work and household responsibilities.

This regime of adaptive flexibility demonstrates how capital in smaller factories adjusts to workers’ demands and resistance. By offering more accommodating work environments, these

¹¹ Interview with Gao Weibo, December 11th, 2021

¹² Interview with Xiao Yanmei, January 28th, 2022

factories are able to attract workers who might otherwise leave the labor force entirely or refuse to work in more demanding environments.

Conclusion

This paper argues that the labor regimes observed in Swiftech and other factories reflect broader trends of the depoliticization of production in China's electronics industry. The increasing use of labor brokers in both the process labor recruitment and workplace management has depoliticized labor relations by reframing workplace conflicts as issues of flexibility, efficiency, and wage difference. Workers' growing flexibility, combined with the outsourcing of recruitment and management to labor brokers, has reduced direct confrontations between workers and capital, effectively sidelining traditional forms of collective labor resistance.

However, this depoliticization does not eliminate the power dynamics embedded in labor relations. Instead, it displaces and transforms them, creating new forms of political contestation in the labor market. For instance, the reliance on labor brokers has intensified the involvement of local governments in labor recruitment, as they play a critical role in mediating between capital and labor. This increased state intervention highlights how the depoliticization of production at the factory level is accompanied by a re-politicization of labor relations in the broader labor market.

Moreover, workers dissatisfied with their treatment often resort to alternative forms of resistance, including legal action or even violent attacks to labor brokers. These responses demonstrate that while the hyper-flexible labor system denies workers meaningful "voice" within factory politics, it does not fully suppress their agency. Instead, workers navigate the depoliticized system by leveraging the tools

available to them, such as legal channel or informal networks, to contest exploitation and assert their demands.

The labor regimes identified in this study—“segregated flexibility” and “adaptive flexibility”—further illustrate how depoliticization operates in practice. In the “segregated flexibility” regime, the segmentation of the workforce into local and non-local workers (or student workers in coastal regions) allows capital to manage labor costs while maintaining flexibility. Local workers receive stability and social insurance but at lower wages, while non-local workers earn higher wages but face job insecurity. Similarly, in smaller downstream factories, the “adaptive flexibility” regime accommodates workers’ needs, particularly for female workers balancing family responsibilities, by adjusting work discipline and schedules. These regimes depoliticize labor relations by framing workplace dynamics as technical or managerial issues, rather than as struggles over power and inequality.

Nevertheless, the hyper-flexible employment, while allowing workers to leave at will, denies them meaningful participation in factory politics. Employers may make concessions to limit worker “exit” and retain labor, but these adjustments do not grant workers a genuine “voice” in shaping workplace conditions. Instead, the depoliticization of production obscures the structural inequalities and power relations that underpin labor regimes, while simultaneously shifting political contestation to new arenas, such as the labor market and the legal system.

In conclusion, the depoliticization of production in China’s electronics industry has transformed labor relations by outsourcing recruitment and management to labor brokers and emphasizing workforce flexibility. However, this process has not eradicated the political nature of labor relations.

Instead, it has reconfigured power dynamics, intensifying the role of local governments and creating new sites of contestation in the labor market.

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