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This case study focuses on the experiences of women working for the same company, but in different factories: one in Hong Kong and the other in Shenzhen, located in China’s fast-growing Guangdong province. The study explores the very different shop floor relationship regimes in the two factories, drawing on both feminist analytical methods and theories of production. Each approach can be reconstructed in light of the other and in view of the specific labor market circumstances that shape power relationships at these two work sites.

GENDER AND PRODUCTION POLITICS

Feminist theory argues that gender is socially constructed and is a constituent dimension of power relations, including workplace relations. Much recent feminist analysis relies on investigations of particular settings to draw out an understanding of how gender is constructed. This empirical approach “begs for theories that can explain commonalities and differences.”[379] Theories of production politics, particularly those in the Marxist tradition, attempt to explain power relationships in the workplace and can be reconstructed to encompass gender.

The two plants chosen for this study offer examples of distinct factory regimes, which might initially be classified as despotic (Shenzhen) and hegemonic (Hong Kong) according to Michael Burawoy’s theory of production politics as described in *Manufacturing Consent* (1979) and *Production Politics* (1985). A despotic regime is marked by rigid rules and punitive enforcement; workers are dependent on wages, and wages are linked to performance. In a hegemonic regime, state-provided welfare and regulation free workers from wage dependence and management objectives are achieved with worker consent.

The two factory sites studied, however, reveal deviations from Burawoy’s theory of production politics, stemming from the characteristics of production workers at each site. The workers in Hong Kong, mainly middle-aged working mothers, lack alternatives to wage labor and receive few benefits or protections from the state, conditions that should give rise to a despotic regime. Yet they work in a congenial atmosphere that accommodates their need to fulfill obligations at home. At the Shenzhen site, the young, single women workers can return to agrarian life in their home villages as an alternative to wage labor. This circumstance should foster a hegemonic regime, but the workers are still subjected to despotic control and punishment that imposes the discipline required for industrial work. “Managers do not see the need for despotism in Hong

Kong because the manufacturing jobs are declining and women workers desperately want to cling to their factory employment. In Shenzhen, despotism is possible because the state allows it and there is an ample supply of cheap labor. Despotism is also necessary because workers have not acquired the discipline of industrial work.” [380]

Burawoy’s theory of production politics also needs to be supplemented with an understanding of gender. “Matron workers” in Hong Kong and “maiden workers” in Shenzhen represent different cultural ideas about women and constitute different labor markets. Yet in each case gender is mutually constructed by management and workers, and is considered an important part of the way that “shop-floor power relations are conceived, legitimized, naturalized and criticized.”[380]

LOCALISTIC DESPOTISM AND FAMILIAL HEGEMONY

Rather than “institutional reflections of capitalism’s historical tendencies,” [382] factory regimes are negotiated orders that simultaneously embody both management domination and the collective resistance of workers. The two patterns of production politics defined here - “localistic despotism” in Shenzhen and “familial hegemony” in Hong Kong - were composed of management strategies for control and workers’ subjective responses to economic realities.

The Shenzhen factory was very regimented. Fines were imposed for absence (even for documented illness or leaves with permission). Meals were furnished, but took place on a strict schedule. Overtime was mandatory, with little advance notice. Compared to rural labor under a hot sun, workers preferred factory work but resented the control of their time and their inability to plan free time. The most resented penalties were the fines for absenteeism.

Local networks, based on home villages, counties, or the distinction between northern and southern China offered introductions to employers, places to stay, loans, and other assistance in emergencies. These networks also operated inside the workplace, from influencing hiring and promotion decisions to extending petty favors such as longer bathroom breaks, getting water, playful gestures, teaching new skills, or helping with work backlogs. In some cases, local networks, through the agency of male or elder kin, enforced factory discipline on maiden workers, for example, exposing and defeating one woman’s strategy to get leave to visit home, and preventing another from quitting to take a higher paying job. Despotic control was thus both tempered and reinforced by local networks.

Despite its harshness, the work experience had different, more liberatory meanings for the young women workers than for their male kin or supervisors. Working meant a chance to escape from arranged marriages, to date freely, to widen their prospects for marriage, to take classes during periods of low overtime, or to save money for education or for starting a small business once they were married and settled into adult life.

In Hong Kong, the atmosphere of “familial hegemony” meant that control was covert and was exercised by winning the consent of the women production workers. Women shared meals informally, were allowed to be late or to take off a few hours on occasion to attend to family business, and, under the direction of their female line leaders, often swapped components of their

jobs to balance workloads. Family life dominated conversations and family references were common in the nicknames workers had for each other and for managers.

Both management and workers used *si-lai*, a Cantonese expression for a domineering matron, to describe women working in the Hong Kong plant. For managers it meant that women considered work secondary to family responsibilities and were concerned that their femininity and reputations not be jeopardized. Allowing women to fulfill their duties at home and to adopt a familiar and domineering demeanor at work cajoled them into good performance. Women themselves identified with *si-lai*. Although they accepted the role of men as principle breadwinners, they knew that if they had time for further training they could move into management. Foremen were pitied for their personal stake in a declining industry. Family roles gave women leverage with which to resist certain management demands.

THE STATE, LABOR MARKETS, AND MANAGERIAL AUTONOMY

Differences in state intervention and regulation do not explain regime differences between the Shenzhen and Hong Kong factories. In neither case does the state constrain management autonomy. Although some reforms were instituted after labor unrest in 1967, Hong Kong's minimalist state offers little in the way of welfare supports or restriction on the power of employers that would free workers from the need to work. Unions are weak and collective bargaining is rare. In Shenzhen, management autonomy was maintained by close clientalist relationships with state agencies through the medium of gifts and entertainments.

In the Asian context, community resources, whether based in local networks or families, are more important than the state in defining labor markets and determining work conditions. In Shenzhen, localistic networks were used to manage the recruitment of young women from the enormous floating population of migrant workers that resulted from agrarian economic reform. Despotic control was seen as a necessary form of discipline because of their youth, peasant mannerisms, lack of industrial experience, and mobility from company to company in search of better jobs. In Hong Kong, the labor market was tight, workers had long tenures with one company, and were dependent on families for support. These conditions encouraged a familial environment based on workers' consent. Because the communal institutions of localistic networks, kin and families, "mediate the supply of women's labor for factory work and provide the means for maintaining women workers' livelihoods, management and workers share an interest in incorporating these institutions into shop-floor practices, thus producing two different factory regimes." [394]