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Informal and Precarious Work: The Precariat and China

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非正式和不稳定的工作：不稳定型无产者和中国

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Abstract
Is global capitalism responsible for increasing precarious work around the globe, or is the rise of informal and precarious work a newly emerging trend in the West but a long-standing reality for the rest of the world? This article enters debates about precarious and informal work using the case of China, and in doing so, challenges our West/Rest binary. It shows how informal work in China is not a new phenomenon, but rather was the norm during China's early industrialization, from 1898 to 1949. Even during the Maoist period, full-time standard employment under the *danwei* system was a privilege reserved for "urban" workers, in part made possible by a reliance on the rural population as a source of flexible labor. During the contemporary post-Mao period, not only has informal work flourished, so have other new forms of precarious work. However, while scholars of Chinese labor and labor politics have carefully documented the rise of precarious work and its impact on labor politics, informal precarious workers have remained largely invisible and are absent in most analyses. Expanding our framework in a way that includes rather than eliminates these workers from our analysis has significant ramifications for how we understand this historical moment. It suggests that there is increasing fragmentation of the working class, which calls into question the idea that China's economic rise has created a new widespread industrial working class which can be expected to develop a unified class consciousness and challenge capital as it did in the West.

Keywords
informal work, precarious work, China, labor politics, neoliberalism

摘要
全球化的资本主义是否应对全球日益增长的不稳定工作负责?与日俱增的非正式和不稳定工作是否在西方世界是一个新兴的现象，然而在世界其他地方却是一个长存已久的事实？本文通过中国的案例介绍了关于不稳定和非正式工作的讨论，此做法也挑战了“我们西方”与“剩余世界”的二分法。它展示了中国的非正式工作并非一种新现象，而是在中国早期工业化阶段（从1898年到1949年）的范式。甚至在毛时期，在单位制系统下的全职的标准式雇佣制是为城市工人保存的特权，部分原因是由于他们依靠农村人

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口作为灵活劳动力的来源。在后毛泽东时期的当代，不仅非正式工作蓬勃发展，还产生了其他新形式的不稳定工作。虽然中国劳动和劳动政治学者已经详细论述了不稳定工人的兴起及其对劳工政治的影响，但是大量的非正式工人不为人们所知，在大多数的文献研究中也缺乏对此的论述。在分析当中，以包括而非剔除这些工人的方式去扩展研究框架对我们如何理解这个历史时刻意义深远。本文表明了工人阶级的日趋碎片化，挑战了这样一种想法，即：崛起的中国经济能产生具有统一阶级意识并能像西方工人阶级那样挑战资本的新的广泛的工人阶级。

关键词
非正规工作、不稳定工作、中国、劳动政治、新自由主义

This article uses the case of China to engage in debates about precarious work: whether or not it is new, how it shapes class politics, and its relationship with informal work. Some scholars argue that the spread of global neoliberal capitalism has led to the rise of precarious work (Kalleberg, 2009; Standing, 2011); others argue that it has always been the norm in the Global South (Breman, 2013) and has also been the norm for most women and migrants in the Global North (Vosko, 2009; Munck, 2013). Some go so far as to suggest that in Europe and elsewhere in the West, if one were to adopt a historical perspective on capitalism, the rise of Fordism coupled with the "standard employment relationship" represents a relatively short period of Western industrial capitalism, making precarious work the historical norm everywhere (Neilson and Rositter, 2008; Mosoetsa, Stillerman, and Tilly, 2016).

Bringing China into the discussion about precarious work forces us out of the West-versus-Rest and Global North/South binaries to nuance our understanding of informal and precarious work. In this article I argue that informal work is a type of precarious work but it should not be subsumed under this category. This is not to deny the importance of long-standing debates surrounding the concept of informal work, only to suggest that they are complicated by the rise of precarious work. I also argue that while global capitalism is important to understanding the rise of precarious work in China, the story is more complex. I show how precarious work can be understood in the context of global capitalism, but at the same time, informal precarious work is situational and locally determined, varying across time (and place). As such, we must recognize that informal work represents specific sources of vulnerabilities and spaces for resistance.

Finally, this article interrogates the implications of increasing informal and precarious work in terms of labor politics in China. Scholars of contemporary Chinese labor studies and labor politics have restricted their gaze to modern industrial workers, and by doing so have excluded large segments of the working class from their analysis. This article expands the analysis by showing how China's working class is fragmented, including at least three important segments: 1) a large segment of informal workers, 2) a smaller segment of formal but precarious workers, and 3) an even smaller group of labor aristocracy, comprising those who are formally

employed in stable jobs. An important implication of China's fragmented working class is that it calls into question the idea that China's economic rise has created a new widespread industrial working class which can be expected to develop a unified class consciousness and challenge capital as it did in the West (Chan and Pun, 2009). However, today just as in the past, it is possible for these different segments of the working class to unite at specific historical junctures and effect social change.

In the next section, I will provide a brief historical overview of the concepts of informal and precarious work along with some of the relevant emerging conceptual and theoretical debates.[1] This is followed by a review of how these concepts have been translated in the context of China. Finally, I present an analysis of the configurations of China's working class and the construction industry across three distinct periods in modern history: the early modern period, the Maoist period, and the post-Maoist period. This review traces changes over time in an effort to shed light on how global neoliberal capitalism is (or isn't) changing the relationship between workers and capital in China and what it means in terms of working-class politics and worker resistance.

Informal Work

The term "informal work" was coined by Hart (1973) in his study on Ghanaian self-employment. Since then research on the informal economy, the informal sector, and informal employment, most of it focused on regions in the Global South, has flourished. Theoretical debates continue, but there is relative consensus on how to conceptualize and define informal work. A general description includes: casual rather than regular jobs, sometimes hiring piece rate, terrible working conditions, long work hours, and low pay.[2] Scholars generally agree that informal work is different from formal work in that it is not governed by a written contract, protected by collective representation, or covered by social welfare (Chen, 2012; Hussmanns, 2004). By 2003, the International Labor Organization (ILO), working in concert with activists and labor scholars, established a general definition of informal work: informal employment encompasses all self-employment and waged-employment which is not recognized, regulated, or protected by legal and/or regulatory frameworks, as well as non-remunerative work occurring in an income-producing enterprise (Chen, 2007). This definition recognizes that informal work exists in both the formal and/or informal sectors of the economy, and can take the form of self-employment, waged work, or unpaid work.

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[1] Extensive coverage of the intellectual development of these concepts and the resulting debates have been provided elsewhere. See Siegmann and Schiphorst, 2016; Mosoetsa, Stillerman, and Tilly, 2016.

[2] Informal work also includes self-employment, some of which has been described as disguised waged employment. That is, self-employment can be the result of employers' efforts to keep an arms-length distance from workers through strategies such as outsourcing, subcontracting, and middlemen.

Generally, the informal sector has been conceptualized as a relatively small, and often shrinking, counterpart to the formal sector of the economy (Harris and Todaro, 1970). In this tradition, the informal economy has been theorized as a residue left over from the previous primitive form of capitalism; as a cheaper substitute to the formal economy for businesses; as a complement to the formal economy offering desirable alternatives for workers; and as an alternative to the formal economy for businesses and owners strangled by regulations (Williams and Round, 2008: 369–71). Each approach is associated with a perspective on how the state, through regulation, influences the size and scope of the informal economy and labor market. However, empirical data have shown that in most countries the informal economy has been growing rather than shrinking (ILO, 2002; Schneider and Enste, 2000), throwing into question our dominant theoretical framework.

Some scholars have shifted from anchoring our understanding of the informal economy in regulation and the state, to linking it to the market and capital-labor relations. As such, it is argued that growth of informal work and the informal economy should be attributed to late contemporary capitalism, often characterized as global neoliberalism or global capitalism. In this increasingly deregulated global economy, capital uses labor practices such as outsourcing and subcontracting to lower labor costs, facilitating flexibility through informality (Castells and Portes, 1989; Sassen, 1997; Williams, 2010). Finally, there have also been calls to recognize the interrelationship between the market and the state, and how it shapes informality. For example, Breman (2013) argues that the informal economy is an integral component of the economy, conceptualizing it as "a regime to cheapen the cost of labour in order to raise the profit of capital" (Breman, 2013). At the same time, he also argues that this labor regime exists, or comes about, because of the state's inability or unwillingness to regulate capital (22).

While the theorizing and understanding of the informal economy and informal work has led to a great deal of insight, debates continue. Scholars argue over the nature of the informal economy, how it should be defined, what explains its persistence and growth, and whether it poses a problem or represents potential solutions for economic development. These ongoing points of contention, along with the rise of precarious work in the West, have led to new debates. Specifically, one emerging issue that scholars struggle with is how to syncretize the concepts of informal and precarious work. The next section looks at the development of the concept of precarious work and the precariat and explores different ways scholars have approached this issue.

Emerging Precarity and Ensuing Debates

Despite rising popularity of the term "precarious work," and calls to have it replace the term "informal work," it has proven no less difficult to define and just as contentious when trying to identify origins, solutions, and characteristics. The concept of precarious work emerges out of a broader discussion of precarity in

Europe in the 1980s, which refers to the increasing precariousness of living and working without a safety net (Kalleberg and Hewison, 2013; Munck, 2013).

There are at least three distinct emerging definitions of precarity as applied to workers (Mosoetsa, Stillerman, and Tilly, 2016).[3] The first has been developed by Standing (2011), who uses the term "precariat" to describe a social category based on seven different forms of labor (in)security, which is key to his definition of precarious work. He claims the "precariat" is a class-in-the-making defined by: 1) distinctive relations of production based on unstable labor, 2) distinctive relations of distribution because precarious workers lack access to social insurance and assistance, and 3) distinctive relations to the state, lacking full rights of citizenship (Standing, 2014: 969). A second, commonly cited definition of precarious work suggests that it is uncertain, unstable, and insecure work which pushes risk onto workers who tend to have limited access to social welfare benefits and entitlements (Kalleberg and Hewison, 2013). A third and very different approach expands the definition beyond the workplace, arguing that precarious work represents more than just the flip side of the standard employment relationship (SER) characterized by low incomes, few benefits, and short job tenure. It often includes a lack of control over working conditions and a lack of social protections (usually through regulation) and extends to include precarity outside of the workplace, tied to poverty and/or insecure social inclusion (Rodgers, 1989; Vosko, 2009). In sum, the quest to define and identify precarious work has been no less fraught with contention than earlier discussions of informal work.

Another set of related debates centers on the question of what has caused the precipitous rise of precarious work. Is it a single global force or multiple forces that drive precaritization? Is it the result of a new phase of global capitalism (Arnold and Bongiovi, 2012) or a specific stage of capitalist development in the North (Munck, 2013)? Many scholars point to global capitalism and neoliberalism, arguing that the power of corporations exceeds the power of labor unions and the nation-state, which can no longer regulate them (Arnold and Bongiovi, 2012; Standing, 2011). Global capitalism has led to the disintegration of the Fordist model in the Global North, followed by the rise of global capitalism and the spread of precarity to the Global South (Standing, 2011). Others, in an attempt to "globalize" the concept of precarious work, have suggested that precarious work has always existed but what makes it different today is how it is quickly replacing the standard employment relationship and how it is expanding on a global scale (Kalleberg and Hewison, 2013). Kalleberg and Hewison (2013) also argue that, "It

[3] Mosoetsa, Stillerman, and Tilly (2016) have identified these three different definitions of precarity in use by labor scholars, which is helpful but also somewhat problematic. Specifically, they suggest one of these definitions defines precarity as work that is "uncertain, unpredictable and risky" and that this definition is shared by Arne Kalleberg, Jan Breman, and Marcel van der Linden (Mosoetsa, Stillerman, and Tilly, 2016: 7). This is an interesting but uncomfortable grouping of scholars because their conceptualizations of precarious work, beyond a narrow definition, are quite different, and on many dimensions and aspects of precarity they stand on opposite sides of heated debates.

is important to recognize that precarious work is not determined only by the nature of work or by global processes. Instead, it is shaped in relation to other economic, cultural, historical, and social factors" (274).[4] However, both of these explanations have been criticized by scholars who suggest that precarious work predates the rise of global capitalism and neoliberalism. In this alternative framework, precarious work has been dominant in the Global South and the rise of global capitalism has pulled the North in this direction. Neilson and Rossiter (2008: 54) note, "the discourse of precarity does not translate on a global scale as a descriptor of contemporary labour" because it is an analytical and political concept linked essentially to the decline of Fordism. Similarly, Munck (2013) argues that in the Global South precarity is distinctive as it has been shaped by colonialism, and in some places, the developmental state.

These debates leave us with a number of questions, including how to reconcile the usage of these two concepts, informal work and precarious work. What analytical leverage, if any, do we gain from using the concept of precarious work? On the one hand, there have been several strong calls to replace the concept of informal work with precarious work. Most notable is Standing (2014), who argues that "we should drop the formal–informal vocabulary and the contrived dualism altogether" (979). He suggests there are no significant differences between informal and precarious workers. A similar perspective comes from Kalleberg and Hewison (2013), who point out that the term "precarious work" has become popular in academia because it acts as a dragnet capturing the varied categories of nonstandard work, which are not new, but are used in new ways by employers to cheapen labor and reduce the organizing capacity of workers. However, more importantly, they argue that the concept of precarious work *replaces* the contentious non-standard/standard and informal/formal work binaries because it better captures the complexities of the increasing variation of work arrangements (273).

Some have suggested that the concepts of precarious and informal work are interchangeable. Mosoetsa et al. (2016) identify the concept of "informal" as the strongest potential rival of "precarious," but also recognize that both are analytically useful. Others have tried to reconcile the differences, arguing that there is a convergence of these two concepts under global capitalism as labor markets everywhere are governed by neoliberal dictates (Siegmann and Schiphorst, 2016). However, they find limitations to bridging the two related discourses, identifying three ways precarity "goes beyond" informality: first, it focuses on workers' dignity; second, it moves beyond just the workplace to consider social location; and third, it represents very different interactions with the state and market.

In this article, I argue that we should not replace the concept of informal work with precarious work, nor should we combined the concepts or use them

[4] However, they seem to indirectly impose a Global North framework as most of their article outlines shifts in the Global North and the rise of the global production chains that increase international competition and force workers and states to compete internationally, making work more precarious.

interchangeably. Informal work is a type of precarious work, but *not* all precarious work is informal. As such, there are some distinct attributes of informal work that should be recognized. For example, Standing (2014) points out that many precarious workers, like informal workers, are without labor protections, are paid low or volatile wages, and are without benefits or access to social welfare. However, an important difference is that formal precarious workers are recognized as workers, and therefore they can use this recognition to struggle for labor protections, enforcement of existing laws, and/or the right to organize (as workers). In many cases, informal precarious workers are not recognized or are invisible, thus their struggles focus on gaining visibility, recognition, and legal standing (Agarwala, 2016; Swider, 2015). Another difference is that informal workers not only lack recognition, protection, and redistribution (access to welfare) under the law, they also lack recognition, representation, and redistribution offered through unions. Finally, it is important to look at how formal and informal work are mutually constitutive; to understand one, we must understand the other. Informal workers are not just a product of global capitalism. A focus on this macro force, which is external to nations, presents us with a unilinear naturalizing conceptualization of the process of precaritization. Alternatively, I argue we should conceptualize precarity as the result of multiple forces across place and time, including colonialism, slavery, dispossession, and globalization. This highlights the important fact that precarity is relative and cannot simply be compared across nations. It requires us to disentangle the historical trajectories of informal and precarious work within a national context, which can then be examined comparatively. In China, informal work has a long history; while it has exploded as the country urbanizes, it is not new. In contrast, new forms of precarious work have developed as an important component of China's development strategy in the post-Maoist era.[5]

Informal Work in China

In China, as elsewhere, there has been debate over how to define, identify, and count informal workers.[6] One problem is that the categories used for statistics do not easily align with working definitions. Other problems include the changing categories and types of work, the hidden nature of many kinds of informal work, and the lack of recognition. On one end of the spectrum are official definitions, which underestimate the number of informal workers and exclude all or most informal workers from national statistics, and at the other end of the spectrum are scholarly definitions, which in an attempt to bring informal workers back

[5] Lee and Kofman suggest that precarity in the Global South is an "integral part of the development strategies of states and international financial institutions rather than the natural corporate response to global market competition" (2012: 388). However, it might be that this is specific to strong development states.

[6] In Chinese, informal work is often called *fei zhenggui jiuye* 非正规就业.

into the fold, have sometimes conflated informal and precarious workers and overestimated the count. The true size of the informal labor market falls somewhere between these estimates.

There has been a striking shift in the Chinese Communist Party's official definition of who is a worker. The first formally adopted labor law (Labor Law of 1933) of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) explicitly included informal and precarious workers, including categories like part-time and temporary workers, contracted workers, seasonal workers, artisans, and domestic labor (Huang, 2013). In contrast, the Labor Law of 1995 (and later the Labor Law of 2008) redefined labor relations as occurring between employing units that have legal status and workers, implicitly excluding informal work and removing it from our purview.[7] As a result, official statistics published in the *China Labor Statistical Yearbook* only report on formal employees across different types of enterprises.

Despite this handicap, scholars have worked to recognize, define, and count informal workers. Some have adopted a common definition of informal workers that includes all workers who have no employment security, who receive few or no welfare benefits, and who are working in jobs that are not regulated or protected by legal or regulatory frameworks (Cooke, 2006; Zhou, 2012).[8] This definition is problematic because it conflates informal work with precarious work, including many types of nonstandard but formal employment arrangements, most of which offer unstable work with lower rates of pay, few benefits, and often denigrated working conditions. Informal work shares many of these characteristics but generally there is no formal employment contract and no recognition as workers, and therefore it is excluded from state and union protections. In this sense, informal work is distinct in that it is often hidden, unrecognized, and therefore, not regulated or protected by laws and regulations. There are a number of scholars who have adopted this basic definition but their statistical counts vary slightly.

Huang (2013) includes workers who are in unincorporated private businesses, unregistered workers, and the self-employed, but he does not account for workers who are hired informally without contracts to work in state-owned enterprises (SOEs), urban collectives, or joint ventures.[9] Others have included workers in the

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[7] See Huang (2013) for an excellent discussion of how the legal definition of labor has changed over time, and as a result, excludes informal and much of the emerging precarious work.

[8] It is important to note that as with research on informal work in other countries, there is a lack of consensus on the definition of informal work in China. See Zhou (2012) for a list of relevant literature. He also notes that the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences stresses the importance of the labor contract in distinguishing between formal and informal work.

[9] As is the case elsewhere, informal workers can be found working in both formal organizations and in informal organizations (Cooke, 2006). This is captured by Wu and Cai's (2006) analysis of data from a 2002 nationwide survey covering 66 cities, which found that even among those who are in state-owned enterprises, about 45 percent are hired informally. They estimate that 22 percent of employment in SOEs and collectives is informal, and in the private sector, informal employment is the rule rather than the exception.

private sector without a labor contract, the self-employed, and blue collar workers employed in a formal enterprise but without a contract (Cai, Du, and Wang, 2009) and there has been an effort to include not only the self-employed but also those working in household enterprises and micro-enterprises.[10] Park and Cai (2011) define informal workers as "missing workers" or unregistered workers, counted by calculating the difference between laborers who have registered with the official state administrative entities and the actual number counted in the decennial population census.

Despite these varied statistical definitions of informal work, most scholars agree that the majority of urban work is informal. Estimates of the size of the informal workforce in 2004 range from 116 to 155 million (Zhou, 2012; Wu and Cai, 2006; Hu and Zhao, 2006).[11] On the high end, estimates place it around 60 percent of urban employment (Huang, 2013; Zhou, 2012) in 2009. On the other end of the spectrum estimates suggest informal work represented about a third of urban employment by 2005 (Peng, 2009). Somewhere in the middle are estimates that include the self-employed and suggest informal employment is about half of urban employment (Park and Cai, 2011).[12]

Debates over the exact definition and size of China's informal economy continue but the general narrative is that informal employment did not exist (or barely existed) under Mao and has since exploded starting with "reform and opening up" policies in 1978. Hence, the rise of precarious and informal work in China is often attributed to global capitalism (Hu and Zhao, 2006; Park and Cai, 2011). In an effort to disentangle the different trajectories of informal and precarious work, I extend our timeline and look at how the structure of employment has changed across three periods: the early modern period, the Maoist period, and the reform period. Specifically, I look at the prevalence of informal work and employment and alternative forms of employment. This extended historical perspective captures how informal employment in China has a long history and is not just the product of China's entrance into the global economy. At the same time, it shows how entry into the global market has increased informal work and led to new forms of precarious work, fragmenting the working class and reshaping working-class politics.

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[10] This is important given that the rise of informal work is not just in big cities. For example, in Yangzhou, a medium-sized city in the east, around 360,000 workers, or half of the total workforce, was in informal employment. Most of this was in construction, light manufacturing, and services (Jiao, 2008).

[11] Zhou (2012) cites a 2006 World Bank report that estimated the range of informal workers to be between 116 and 155 million workers. Hu and Zhao (2006) also estimate the total to be around 155 million workers, and Wu and Cai (2006) estimate it to be around 107 million workers excluding individual business owners, or 120 million including the self-employed.

[12] In part, some of the difference in these estimates is because they use data from different years. However, almost all estimates of the size of the informal economy in China fall somewhere between 30–60 percent of total employment.

The Early Modern Period

The rise of industrial workers in China occurred during the modern period of Chinese labor history, which is marked by the Treaty of Shimonoseki in 1895 and ends with the rise of Mao in 1949 (Shaffer, 1981). In some ways this period of Chinese history looks very similar to what we see today. There was a small percentage of permanent workers, with the majority of both industrial and nonindustrial workers hired into precarious or informal work. Most informal workers were migrants, or "peasant workers" with ties to the land. This structure of the working class shaped working-class politics as skilled workers organized into guilds while informal workers, including the unskilled proletariat and nonindustrial workers, were organized by gangs into other labor organizations (Perry, 1993).[13]

An important debate that emerged among scholars analyzing the working class was about who should be included in the working class.[14] In 1919, China's estimated population was about 300 million, of which only 20 percent lived in the town and cities. Some scholars use a very narrow definition of the working class, thus only including formal industrial workers, estimating the working class to be about 1.5 million or 2.5 percent of the urban population (Chesneaux, 1968). In contrast, Shaffer's (1983) more expansive definition, which includes workers such as craftsmen and guild members (such as construction workers), suggests that the working class had no less than 4 million workers or 6 percent of the urban population. However, as Shaffer (1983) notes, it was probably much larger as this figure excludes the self-employed and shop owners, rickshaw pullers, dock and boat workers, miners, and those laboring in small shops. In fact, following the First World War, the vast majority of industrial and nonindustrial workers were informally employed and working in jobs characterized by horrific working conditions, long working hours, hazardous conditions, low wages, and unsuitable room and board.

> Thus most of the workers hired as free labor found themselves in just as precarious a position as the others, under constant threat of arbitrary dismissal by foreman or overseers, from which there was no appeal. Only a small minority of them, either because of superior skill or because of personal contacts, could feel relatively secure in their jobs. These were the workers known as *ch'ang-kung* ("permanent workers") or *cheng-shih-kung* ("regular workers"), or, in the mines, li-kung, as against *lin-shih-kung* ("temporary workers").

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[13] Class fragmentation has led to debates about the role of skilled and unskilled workers in the creation of unions and labor politics more generally. Perry argues that artisans and their guilds mediated place-based divisions among workers and "communal rituals" created a proclivity toward unions, developed a class consciousness, and led to participation in labor politics (1993: 47, 61). In contrast, unskilled and informal workers, organized by gangs through bonds of patronage, were much more authoritarian, generally engaging in more "defensive" protests (61).

[14] This debate about whether we should use an expansive or restrictive definition of the working class and workers is precisely the same debate we face today. Once again, we must grapple with this question as we push forward our understanding of Chinese labor politics (see Huang, 2013).

> They were better paid, and also enjoyed various benefits such as medical care and workers' compensation. (Chesneaux, 1968: 64)

These differences were reflected in the daily wage rates, which for industrial factory workers (in industries such as cotton, printing, matchmaking, and leather working) were roughly 40 cents a day, almost half of what craft workers (such as bricklayers, plumbers, glass cutters) earned, which averaged about 68 cents a day (Tawney, 1932: 149).

While there is no agreement on who should be considered part of the emerging working class, most scholars note that it was fragmented, and in many cases workers did not fit neatly into analytical categories inherited from the West. Chesneaux (1968) differentiates the modern industrial workers from traditional pre-capitalist forms of labor, but Honig (1983) argues that we must include both in our analysis if we want to understand China's labor history. Perry (1993) highlights the divisions among skilled, semiskilled, and unskilled workers, noting that fragmentation according to skill was paralleled by differences in education, occupation, origins (urban/rural), hometown, and gender.

Fragmentation of the working class is mirrored in debates about labor politics. Some scholars of Chinese labor history suggest that the development of the Chinese labor movement was quite different from what happened in the West. In the West, unions developed from clubs or guilds of highly skilled craftsmen who organized to protect the profession, while in China unions seemed to have developed from among unskilled, precarious, and informal workers (Chesneaux, 1968; Tawney, 1932).[15] Unskilled workers were mainly hired through labor contractors and formed gangs of workers, often reinforced by place-based ties. In contrast, skilled artisan workers had a long history of guilds, into which they were hired, trained, and then protected. Shaffer (1981) argues that both organizations, the gang-controlled labor organizations that consisted mainly of unskilled or semiskilled contracted workers, and the guilds made up of skilled artisan workers, played an important role in the creation of the early trade unions and the labor uprisings of this period.[16] Along similar lines, Perry (1993) shows that skilled workers organized by the guilds tended to support the Communists, semiskilled workers were organized by "conservative" unions run by the Guomindang,

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[15] Tawney refers to a report made in 1930 that breaks down unionized workers by industry showing that 23 percent of union workers were in textiles, 18 percent in transport, 14 percent in machine making, and 10 percent in food preparation (1932: 152). He also points out that, according to that report, China had 574,766 trade union members, which was higher than the corresponding number in Germany or France in the 1890s. But Tawney questions whether they were paper unions.

[16] Another important characteristics of the industrial workers and this early labor movement was that a very small percentage of the proletariat (less than one percent of the population) had seized power across a number of large cities in 1927. Some suggest that power was amassed by the concentration of modern industrial workers in key strategic locations in the urban economy.

and unskilled workers were organized by the gangs. An important argument put forth by Perry (1993) is that these workers and their respective organizations and/or leaders often came together at various points in this period to produce massive labor strikes and shape history, albeit in most cases it was not class interests that united them in protest.[17]

The Maoist Era

The Maoist era started in October 1, 1949, with the establishment of the People's Republic of China under the leadership of Mao Zedong and continued until 1978, with Deng Xiaoping's accession to power. In this section, I challenge the idea that under Communist rule informal, temporary, and/or precarious work was eliminated or barely existed (Kalleberg and Hewison, 2013; Zhou, 2012). During this period, the majority of urban workers were connected to the economy through state-owned and collective enterprises. However, rural workers were tied to the land through the *hukou* system and agricultural communes, and served as a flexible workforce, which was called upon by the state when needed.

During the Maoist era only 20 percent of the population lived in urban areas while the vast majority, the remaining 80 percent, resided in villages and remained bound to the soil under a system akin to serfdom. This bifurcation of society along rural/urban lines was created and maintained by what is known as the hukou system. The household (hukou) registration system assigned people an agricultural or nonagricultural status at birth. Those who are born in rural areas and/or assigned an agricultural status were organized into production teams, brigades, and communes. The rural population was excluded from entitlements such as housing, health care, education, and pension benefits (Cai, Park, and Zhao, 2008) and faced economic disparity as a result of the consistent allocation of more and better resources to urban areas (Cheng and Selden, 1994). Urban residents had access to higher-quality schools, health care, jobs, and food. They also had access to better infrastructure such as public transportation, roads, sports and entertainment facilities, airports, water and sewage systems, and electricity. In sum, during the Maoist era people were born into their "class" under a hukou policy that firmly tied people and citizenship rights to place (Naughton, 2007).

Equally important was the power of the hukou system to keep people tied to the land and limit their mobility, even under life-threatening circumstances. By 1958, new regulations required that migration be preapproved by local governments at both place of origin and destination. This eliminated most long-term and permanent migration, restricting movement to less than three-month stays, most of which was usually for temporary work. The hukou system and related policies were effective in limiting mobility and relocation even in the face of famine and

[17] The main issues during this time under which workers united were nationalism and inflation.

starvation that spread across the rural areas between 1959 and 1961 as a result of the Great Leap Forward (Thaxton, 1997).

In contrast, urban citizens were assigned to the relatively egalitarian work units (*danwei*) created by state-owned and collectively owned enterprises. The danwei was not just an economic unit but also a political and social institution that intertwined workers with their employers (Walder, 1988). The state assigned workers to a danwei unit, which provided a job, career path, a subsistence wage, and a wide range of social benefits including housing, education, child care, and health care. These industrial and government workers were organized along industrial and geographical lines into the party-controlled trade union, the All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU). Even among rural temporary workers, alternative labor organizations such as the guilds and the hometown-related gangs were virtually eliminated. During this period, while there was still a great deal of labor strife, the CCP worked to shape the ACFTU into a "transmission belt," operating as a one-way link between the party and urban workers (Pringle and Clark, 2011).

The eighty percent of the population engaging in agricultural work through the communes also worked as temporary or draft labor. In this sense, even during this Maoist period, rural workers formed the basis of a flexible, sometimes informal, workforce that was mobilized as needed. The construction industry provides insight into this process, showing how a relatively small group of core privileged (urban) workers was supported by a large group of temporary and informal labor. Employment in the construction industry grew rapidly between 1950 and 1958, from 400,000 to over 3 million, and then declined slight after 1961 due to a curtailment of spending on construction.[18] During this period, the industry workforce was made up of permanent urban workers, temporary rural workers, and draft labor. In 1953, temporary employment represented about 44 percent of the construction industry's total employment (Chao, 1968). These temporary laborers were recruited from the local and surrounding rural labor force and hired in a pay-as-you-work fashion. Not included in these statistics is the industry's heavy reliance upon draft labor. Draft labor was primarily made up of "work brigades" from surrounding communities, but also included military labor, prison labor, and student "volunteers." Taken together, it has been estimated that in 1958 there were over 3.5 million man-days of corveé (draft) labor used in construction (Chao, 1968). Peasants working under this draft/corveé labor system were provided with food and shelter but compensated poorly, if at all (Chao, 1968; Zhao, 1974).

In sum, social institutions such as the ACFTU, the danwei, rural communes, corveé labor, and the hukou system all played an important role in bifurcating the labor force into a smaller privileged urban industrial workforce and a larger rural population that served as a flexible, temporary, and draft labor pool. They also

[18] These 3 million workers do not include temporary or draft labor, which was an important segment of the labor force.

replaced earlier labor organizations that had emerged in the previous period such as the guilds, the hometown-based gangs, and the industrial-based unions. As we will see in the next section, the historical legacies of institutions from both of these periods have shaped the rise of informal labor, which is quite different from the rise of precarious labor that has become concentrated in export-oriented manufacturing linked to China's entry into the global economy.

The Post-Maoist Period: Reform and Labor Politics

The post-Maoist period is usually described as beginning in 1978 with the economic opening initiated by Deng Xiaoping and continuing until today. Changes occurring during this period capture how the historical legacies of socialism, which created a bifurcated rural–urban workforce, and China's entry into the global economy, have led to the explosion of informal work and the development of new forms of precarious work.

During this period, the working class has expanded dramatically and become fragmented as a result of a number of economic reforms. Early reforms targeting the rural areas created "surplus" labor and released peasants from the land (although they still remained connected to it).[19] They migrated to the cities to work in industry and services, cutting the proportion of agricultural workers in half between 1980 and 2009. The number of migrants mushroomed from a few thousand in the late 1970s to over 200 million three decades later (Meng, 2010). The second stage of reform focused on urban workers, restructuring state-owned enterprises through massive worker lay-offs. Between 1995 and 2001, employment in SOEs dropped from 113 million to 67 million (Giles, Park, and Cai, 2006), pushing many workers into the informal sector (Solinger, 2002).

The rising number of peasant migrant workers, along with the growing ranks of laid-off state-owned-enterprise workers, make up China's new, large, precarious, and urban informal workforce. The state has played an important role in shaping this labor market. In the case of migrant workers, the hukou system continues to act as an institutional barrier, creating second-class citizens and funneling them into precarious and informal work. In the case of laid-off workers, reemployment programs developed by local governments include urban informal employment, such as community service jobs for laid-off women (Cooke, 2006).

Disentangling informal precarious work from other types of precarious work illuminates the different historical developments of each while also capturing how changes in the law have blurred the distinctions between informal and formal precarious work. Two common forms of precarious work emerging in the post-Maoist era are short fixed-term contracts and dispatch work. Workers in both types are

[19] These reforms include, but are not limited to, the adoption of the household contract responsibility (HCR) system and the issuance of "self-supplied food grain" hukous and urban certificates of temporary residency.

recognized by the state, have a written contract, and thus are protected under the labor laws and granted benefits, albeit limited. At the same time, their short-term contracts create job and income instability and diminish their power, which makes it difficult for them to pressure employers to follow the laws. This means they tend to earn less and work longer hours than workers who are in full-time, stable, open-ended contracts such as (some) workers in state-owned enterprises still toiling under the "iron rice bowl."

China's export-oriented manufacturing sector has paved the way for hiring fix-term contract workers. For the last three decades it has recruited primarily young women migrants through social networks and state institutions and hired most of them as fixed-term contract workers (Chan and Pun, 2009; Lee, 1998; Pun, 2005). These workers are not informal, in the sense that they have written contracts and limited benefits and are protected by labor law. On the other hand, their access to work is unstable, and they toil for low wages, work long hours, and face difficult working conditions, making them the centerpiece of China's rising precarious workers.

Another important form of precarious work is dispatch and temporary labor, which is increasingly used not only in factories, but also in the service industry and domestic work. According to national statistics, over a fifth of China 300 million urban workers in 2010 held temporary or dispatch jobs (Liu, 2014). These temporary workers are the crux of the labor-force dualism that has developed in the automobile industry, for example, shaping both how workers are regulated in the plants and the resulting labor protests and politics (Zhang, 2014). Temporary and dispatched workers are different from the short-term contract workers in manufacturing discussed above. These workers not only have short-term contracts which diminish their power, their legal employer is an employment agency rather than the company where they work, making it more difficult for them to hold their de facto employer accountable. These complex employment arrangements blur the lines between informal and formal workers and raise questions about the changing relationship between the law and work.

In contrast to these precarious workers, a large number of migrants and laid-off workers have also entered the urban informal economy (Cai, Du, and Wang, 2003; Huang, 2009).[20] Informal work, while often precarious, is considered informal because these workers are without a formal labor contract. As a result, they are not recognized as workers, they are not protected by existing labor laws or covered by any kind of social welfare, nor are they part of an independent labor union.[21] Informal work is common in the construction industry (Guang, 2005;

[20] A survey of laid-off workers by the ACFTU found that 80–90 percent who have been subsequently employed were in informal employment. It is important to note that, in part, they are concentrated in this work because local governments intentionally developed community service jobs for laid-off women in urban informal employment (Cooke, 2006).

[21] Labor contracts have unique institutional importance in China. They were introduced in 1986 and from that point forward, anyone who was hired was given an employment contract. There are

Swider, 2015), the service industry (Hanser, 2006; Otis, 2012), community and domestic service (Cooke, 2006), home-based manufacturing (Hu, 2009; Shen, 2006), and in self-employment (Huang, 2009). There are also new sectors and jobs that are becoming informalized such as sanitation work, the taxi industry, and the delivery service industry, whose workers are modern day porters.[22] In large manufacturing, informal work often takes the form of student internship programs, which are a contemporary form of apprenticeships that are extremely exploitative. They are used to recruit informal precarious workers in the automobile industry (Zhang, 2014), electronics (Pun and Chan, 2013), and the auto parts industry (Chan and Hui, 2014).[23] Regardless of the recruitment mechanism, the employment relationship is not regulated by law, and as a result informal workers work longer hours, earn less, face more instability in terms of income and job tenure, and are more likely to work in difficult and sometimes dangerous conditions (Hu and Zhao, 2006; Huang, 2009; Meng and Zhang, 2001; Zhang and Fang, 2011).

While the lines between informal precarious work and other types of precarious work are becoming blurred, when we disentangle the two it becomes evident that most labor scholars have restricted their gaze to modern industrial workers and the precaritization of industrial work. For example, studies of Chinese labor politics have documented the struggles of workers in state-owned enterprises who face precaritization through the threat of restructuring (Cai, 2002; Chen, 2003; Hurst and O'Brien, 2002). When they protest, they participate in "protests of desperation," drawing from socialist ideological discourse and taking to the streets to protest, although generally staying within the boundaries of acceptable protest behavior (Hung, 2013; Lee, 2007). Other scholars have studied the rise of new forms of precarious work involving workers on short-term fixed contracts and temporary and dispatch workers in the auto industry (Zhang, 2014), technology companies (Chan, Pun, and Selden, 2013), and manufacturing more generally (Friedman, 2014; Lee, 2007). However, there are few studies of China's urban informal (precarious) workers, especially those that document their protests and organizing or analyze their role in China's labor politics.

This omission of informal workers from studies of Chinese workers and labor politics is problematic because they represent a large and growing segment of China's working class. One could argue that informal workers are not participating in protest given the barriers—they do not have clearly defined employers, they

three types of contracts: fixed-term contracts; non-fixed-term, otherwise known as open-ended contracts; and project-based contracts. By 1995, almost all formal workers had contracts (Knight and Song, 2005) and were protected by the new Labor Law of 1995, which covered workers with legal status, (re)defining what constituted a worker.

[22] Taxi drivers are independent contractors with local governments, but increasingly this is becoming "privatized" as ride-sharing apps replace the state as contractor.

[23] Student interns are classified as informal workers because they are not recognized as workers, and therefore they have no legal protections, rights, or standing as workers.

change jobs frequently, and they lack economic or structural power (Jhabvala, 2013; Roberts, 2002). Or one could argue that informal worker protests mostly take the form of individualized acts of everyday resistance, not collective action (Scott, 2008). However, we know that informal workers are protesting and organizing around the world, sometimes representing vibrancy in otherwise beleaguered labor movements (Agarwala, 2013; Mather, 2012; Milkman, 2011), and there is evidence that this is also happening in China. For example, in 2012 there were over 200,000 labor cases that dealt with wage arrears, over 80 percent of which involved construction workers (Swider, 2015). Also, according to the China Labor Bulletin (CLB), which attempts to keep track of labor protests in China, the number of protests in the construction industry represented the fastest growth in protests in 2015. Analysis of large mass incidents (protests involving more than 500 people) shows that by 2009 the most frequent type of large-scale protest was "disturbances/riots," a category in which informal worker protests tend to be classified (Tong and Lei, 2010).[24] There have also been increasing strikes by newly informalized workers such as those in sanitation (He, 2016) and taxi drivers (Chi, 2015; Lu and Li, 2016), and new types of informal workers, like delivery service workers (China Labor Bulletin, 2016).[25] Finally, just as in the early modern era, these informal workers do not organize in the same ways as industrial workers or as skilled and semiskilled workers, requiring labor scholars to look beyond typical organizations and protests.

In sum, identifying the differences between precarious and informal work and placing them in their historical context illuminates the invisibility of informal workers in current scholarship. We have a plethora of studies on the working conditions, organizing, and protests of industrial workers defending against the dismantling of the "iron rice bowl" in state-owned enterprises. We have a rich body of literature on newly emerging precarious workers who are located in all types of enterprises, toiling under short fixed-term contracts, or as dispatch or temporary workers. However, we are missing the other half of China's new working class, those who are laboring in the urban informal economy as street vendors, construction workers, workers in retail, restaurant, and service sector jobs, and domestic work; as such, we are only telling half the story about global capitalism, labor politics, and social change in China.

Conclusion: Informal and Precarious Work and Class Politics

Informal work is a type of precarious work that warrants analytical distinction. Moreover, the causes of informal and precarious work, along with their historical

[24] There is a category of labor disputes, but it only covers industrial workers.

[25] Delivery service workers and companies are also facing competition from the "sharing economy." Specifically, a Shanghai-based company called Dada created a mobile app connecting delivery workers with short-distance delivery jobs. It works in the same way that Uber does: it hires freelance drivers who use their own cars to pick up and drop off goods around the city.

trajectories, vary across place and time. Recognizing the heterogeneity of precarious and informal work, along with their different historical trajectories, is crucial to making informal workers visible and understanding how and why these workers participate in protest and shape politics. In short, if we wish to understand working-class politics, we must include informal and precarious workers in our framework.

Perhaps the most dangerous effect of eliminating the concept of informal work or subsuming it under the concept of precarious work is the discursive violence inflicted by continuing to make these workers invisible and making their struggles for recognition more difficult. This is grave injustice considering that informal workers represent the largest sector of the worldwide labor market (Agarwala, 2009). In "developed" countries, informal employment represents between 20–40 percent of all employment. On the other side of the scale are countries in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia where informal employment approaches 90 percent of total employment (Chen, 2009). As these statistics suggest, despite the variance across regions, the informal economy and informal work are significant characteristics of economies across the globe. This presents us with the contradictory task of simultaneously expanding our definitions and frameworks to include informal and precarious workers (Agarwala, 2016) while also recognizing their heterogeneity (Breman and van der Linden, 2014).

China provides a case not easily subsumed under our analytical categories, forcing us think beyond the binaries. It is a country that does not fit neatly with the West or the Rest. China's emerging working class is not simply the result of global capitalism nor is it just the result of state institutions and regulations. The state has played a role in shaping the long-standing, although interrupted, history of urban informal employment that has reemerged as the main mode of employment. At the same time, China's entry into the global economy does help explain the disappearing socialist welfare pact, which is quickly being replaced by a rise in precarious employment.

As scholars of Chinese labor limit their gaze to the precaritization of industrial workers, informal workers remain invisible and excluded from our analysis of labor politics. If history is a guide, it may be prudent to move beyond only including "modern" industrial factory workers in our definition of the working class, whether it be the shrinking workforce in state-owned enterprises or the growing ranks of peasant-workers in export-oriented manufacturing. We should expand our definitions and analysis and incorporate workers laboring in home-based manufacturing and those working in construction, mining, retail, domestic work, transportation, and urban services. Today China's working class is fragmented and includes a large informal urban workforce, increasing precariousness among manufacturing and industrial workers, and a shrinking labor aristocracy still protected under the socialist compact. This fragmentation calls into question the claim by many scholars that China's economic rise has created a new widespread industrial working class that can be expected to challenge capital as it did in the West. Given

these conditions, it may be unrealistic to expect China's working class to unite within one kind of organization, such as unions. Instead, we can imagine different workers and their organizations coming together to change history, albeit possibly not under the umbrella of class consciousness. As Perry (1993) points out, although different segments of the working class may have different interests and organize in different ways, there are historical junctures in which they may come together to change history.

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