"The People's Commune is Good": Precarious Labor, Migrant Masculinity, and Post-Socialist Nostalgia in Contemporary China

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“The people’s commune is good”: precarious labor, migrant masculinity, and post-socialist nostalgia in contemporary China

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ABSTRACT

Post-socialist China is characterized by the loss of social and economic safety nets for workers, particularly the most marginalized. Scholars and others have assumed that informal laborers lack the associational power needed to mitigate the precarity of their lives. Drawing on ethnographic data collected between 2004 and 2016 in Chongqing, this article examines the ways in which precariously employed rural migrant men create their own safety nets by drawing on their past experiences of agricultural collectivization in the socialist era to form cooperative associations. It further explores how these men leverage cultural resources from the socialist period to retain male privileges. China’s decades of de-ideologized reforms and waves of informalization of work have not completely deprived migrant workers of the moral and symbolic resources which they use to make claims. Migrant informal laborers’ capacity for collective resistance in post-socialist times is deeply entwined with their gendered experience of work in rural, pre-reform China.

KEYWORDS

China; precarious labor; migrant workers; gender; post-socialist nostalgia

Introduction

China’s meteoric economic growth in the last few decades largely has been fueled by the cheap labor of over 286 million rural migrant workers. Many scholars have focused on two narrow segments of this massive migrant labor force – full-time factory workers and women who work in the service sector. Although this scholarship sheds valuable light on China’s labor migration, it means that migrant laborers with non-standard employment have been under-examined or ignored. Scholars have used the terms “informal laborers,” “precarious laborers,” and “informal or precarious laborers” to refer to people who work at jobs that are casual, part-time, seasonal, unstable, or carry no contracts. In China, this includes migrant laborers who work in the urban informal economy.
as construction workers, street peddlers, and day laborers. Researchers have debated the definitions of, and the similarities and differences between, informality and precarity.\(^5\) I follow Ching Kwan Lee’s definitions of informality and precarity:

The formal-informal divide is defined by the presence or absence of legal recognition by the state, whereas precarity pertains to stability of employment, working conditions, terms of service, pay rates, etc., and is relative and cannot be compared across nations.\(^6\)\(^6\)

In today’s China, informal and precarious employment has become a predominant feature of labor conditions.\(^7\) The majority of Chinese migrant laborers are informally and/or precariously employed.\(^8\) For instance, Investigative Tracking Reports on the Peasant Workers 2016 found that 64.9 percent of China’s 281 million migrant workers lacked contracts, which amounts to over 182 million people.\(^9\) Philip C. C. Huang contends that only “one-sixth or so of all peasant workers enjoy the two crucial benefits of health insurance and retirement pay.”\(^10\) Since the 2000s, research on informally and precariously employed migrant laborers has shown that these workers encounter a unique set of challenges.\(^11\) For example, Alexisia T. Chan and Kevin J. O’Brien have argued that Chinese urban authorities deflect migrant workers’ demands for benefits by setting up impossible eligibility requirements or requiring paperwork that workers struggle to obtain, such as written evidence of employment. Under these conditions, there is little possibility for informal and low-skilled workers to gain access to benefits because they lack formal employment contracts.\(^12\) Recently, as academic interest in the global rise of precarity and a precariat has emerged,\(^13\) a growing number of China scholars have finally started to direct attention to Chinese informal and precarious labor.\(^14\)

Not surprisingly, previous research on Chinese migrant laborers’ collective actions and empowerment has focused on contract-based workers, especially those in export-oriented manufacturing factories.\(^15\) For example, Pun Ngai and Chris Chan have suggested that dormitory types of living space in factories cultivate “collective actions organized not only on bases of locality, ethnicity, gender, and peer alliance in a single workplace, but also on attempts to nurture workers’ solidarity in a broader sense of labor oppositional force” that can even foster cross-factory strikes.\(^16\) In recent years, some researchers have documented how the better-educated and technologically savvy second-generation of migrants in Chinese factories are becoming increasingly involved in formal institutions – such as trade unions and non-governmental organizations – that have workers empowerment as a goal, suggesting a more robust associational

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\(^7\)Huang 2009, 2011a, 2011b, 2013a, 2013b, 2017a, 2017b; Lee 2016, 2017; Swider 2017. Scholars have varied estimates about the size of China’s informal economy; see Swider 2017, 27.

\(^8\)Huang 2017a, 3; Lee 2016, 320; Swider 2017, 32.

\(^9\)Also see Lee 2016, 320.

\(^10\)Huang 2017a, 3.


\(^12\)Chan and O’Brien 2019.


\(^16\)Chan and Pun 2009, 287.
power than first-generation migrants\textsuperscript{17}, even though other researchers have contested this argument on various grounds.\textsuperscript{18} Compared to this large volume of literature on the manufacturing sector; however, little research has been devoted to understanding the associational power of informal and precarious workers. Scholars tend to think that the absence of legislative recognition of informal laborers as “workers” (\textit{gongren}) under current Chinese labor laws and the precarious nature of informal work have weakened informal laborers’ ability to form collective, organized actions,\textsuperscript{19} although there have been reports of Chinese informal workers’ self-organized cooperative production teams as well as public collective protests and strikes.\textsuperscript{20} The few existing studies that examine informal laborers’ associational power attribute it to marketplace and workplace conditions such as shortages of skilled workers, laborers’ place-based networks, or labor activists’ leadership skills.\textsuperscript{21}

In this article, I examine two questions: why and how do informal laborers manage to take action, and to what extent does their associational power mitigate certain risks of precarity? As Ching Kwan Lee has argued, to understand workers’ capacity to make claims, it is critical to understand the symbolic leverage of these workers or “the repertoire of moral and material claims made possible by a socially and legally recognized classification status.”\textsuperscript{22} In pre-reform China, marginalized urban informal laborers “were at the forefront of working-class rebellion” because they could use the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)’s pro-worker ideology as a leverage to make political claims.\textsuperscript{23} But after forty years of de-ideologized economic reforms and a transformation of the CCP into a party that no longer offers political recognition and legal protection to informal laborers, what kind of moral and symbolic resources can these migrant laborers draw on for collective action and empowerment? Answering this question is important not only because informal and precarious laborers represent a large and growing segment of China’s working class, but also because this group of laborers impose “a unique challenge to the state because it is less easily incorporated, co-opted, and controlled by institutions such as trade unions and nongovernmental organizations”; thus, they have the potential “to be more disruptive and unpredictable” than full-time registered workers.\textsuperscript{24}

Examining Chinese informal laborers’ associational power is also important because, despite scholars’ agreement on the world-wide rise of precarious work, most existing research has only investigated the Global North, leaving the developing world understudied. As Ben Scully points out, the Global North and Global South have different histories and trajectories of labor precarity, and as a consequence have developed different anti-precarity labor politics.\textsuperscript{25} He thus calls for studies that examine Southern workers’ experiences of precarity and their links to older labor politics in the histories of Southern countries. China offers a valuable opportunity to study how precarity is socially induced

\textsuperscript{18} For an overview of this discussion, please refer to Franceschini, Siu, and Chan 2016. They argue that younger migrant workers are not necessarily more aware of their legal rights than were the first waves of migrant workers in the 1980s and 1990s. For more discussion on this issue, please see Lee 2019.
\textsuperscript{19} Fan and Xue 2017, 63; Swider 2017, 35.
\textsuperscript{20} Fan 2016; Fan and Xue 2017; Lee 2019; Swider 2017, 35; Zhang and Fan 2020.
\textsuperscript{21} Fan and Xue 2017; Lee 2013; Leung 2013; Pun and Lu 2010; Wang et al. 2015.
\textsuperscript{22} Lee 2017, 158.
\textsuperscript{23} Lee 2017, 158.
\textsuperscript{24} Lee 2017, 156.
\textsuperscript{25} Scully 2016.
and individually experienced in the Global South, and how the country’s unique labor history offers informal workers resources for collective action in the face of growing economic precarity.

Drawing on ethnographic data collected between 2004 and 2016 in Chongqing, a municipality in southwest China, I investigate self-organized, semi-formalized cooperative labor groups formed by precariously employed rural migrant men who work in the transportation industry as porters. Local residents in Chongqing refer to them as bang-bang (shoulder-pole porters, henceforth porters). I examine how these porters create their own economic safety net by deploying certain communal patterns of social organization borrowed from China’s socialist period (1949–1979) to form cooperative labor groups. I further examine how certain social institutions that have worked to maintain male privileges in recent Chinese history serve as forms of valuable cultural repertoire from which marginalized rural migrant men draw on to empower themselves in an extremely hostile working environment. This unique form of social organization enables these porters to reclaim and assert glorified images of masculine peasants that were widely extolled in the past but have largely disappeared in the post-Mao-era. This strategy, however, ironically reinforces the view among urban residents of rural migrants as adherents to outdated social values and intensifies divisions among porters, further aggravating social segregation.

My research highlights the ways in which these laborers’ capacity to form associational collectives is deeply entwined with their gender identities and the legacy of the Maoist era (1949–1979) in post-socialist China. The porter associations I have studied and observed are local and small-scale, and they barely extend beyond family, kinship, fictive brotherhood, and locality-based relationships. However, these men actively and creatively draw inspiration from their past experiences of agricultural collectivization in the socialist era and arguably from pre-revolution marginalized working men’s experience of association formation. This suggests that China’s de-ideologized social and economic reforms have not completely deprived workers of the moral and symbolic resources, such as the glorified images of masculine peasants recognized and promoted by the state in the socialist past, upon which they make contemporary claims, even if liberal economic reform policies since 1979 have stripped away legislative and ideological recognition of informal laborers such as these porters as workers. By delving into the social and ideological resources that underlie informal workers’ associational power, I call for greater scholarly attention to informal workers’ capacity for collective actions that are articulated not only through marketplace and workplace bargaining but also through their gendered experiences of work in rural, pre-reform China.26

Research methods

This article draws on ethnographic data collected over the course of ten years of fieldwork in Chongqing, between 2004 and 2016. During this time, I studied porters, their families, communities, and clients, the urban management system, and the local labor market. I conducted participant observation and rounds of interviews with a total of 124

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26 Also see Lu, Zheng, and Wang 2017 for a discussion of the links between rural and urban activism in China.
porters, 112 male and 12 female, a discrepancy which reflects the male dominance of this occupation. My fieldwork mostly took place in three hardware and electrical supply wholesale markets, one daily utensil wholesale market, and two agricultural product markets in Chongqing’s Jiulongpo district. Each of these marketplaces typically has as few as forty and as many as over 100 porters on any given day. I also observed and interviewed porters who worked at major transportation hubs and commercial zones such as Chaotianmen Pier, Caiyuanba Railway Station, the People’s Liberation Monument (Jiefangbei), and the central business district (CBD), at each of which hundreds of porters gather. Most of the porters in this study are Han Chinese; five of them were either Miao or Tujia. The majority came from nearby villages in Chongqing municipality; eight were from Guizhou, Sichuan, and Yunnan provinces.

During my fieldwork, I also interacted with members of four self-organized, semi-formalized porter cooperative labor groups. I visited members at their workplaces and in their rented houses, which allowed me to closely observe them in different social circumstances. I conducted in-depth, one-on-one interviews and focus-group interviews with group members. My questions focused on their motivation and inspiration for self-organizing, relationships with other porters, and experiences of migration and work.

**Bangbang and the people’s commune in Chongqing**

Visitors to Chongqing easily notice porters, carrying large cargoes of goods on bamboo poles slung over their shoulders, trudging up and down the city’s many hilly streets. There is no official data available on how many such porters work in urban Chongqing. In the past, estimates ranged from 200,000 to about half a million, although their numbers have declined significantly in recent years. According to Chris Buckley (2016), the number of porters active in Chongqing has dropped from 300,000 in the 1990s to no more than 10,000 today. During my fieldwork, I observe that the total number is indeed shrinking fast, but the magnitude of this decline varies and depends on the location and the type of clients porters serve. The porter population is declining the most in newly developed or newly renovated urban areas, where elevators, paved roads, and supermarket shopping carts have made porters redundant. On the piers and docks along the Yangtze and Jialin Rivers, the number of porters has also dropped dramatically. But sizable groups of porters are still found in urban neighborhoods that have not undergone radical renovation. One such group told me that they had lost about one-third of their co-workers over the last ten years, but also had new members join them every year.

The age of these porters varies, from their early twenties to early seventies, but most are married men with at least one child. Their daily earnings also vary a great deal,
ranging from zero on an extremely bad day to more than US$20 on an extremely lucky day. As piece rate workers who lack long-term, stable, contract-based employment, these porters only get paid if they can find clients to serve and after they have completed their deliveries. They are both informal and precarious laborers because they are not legally recognized by the state as “workers” (gongren) and lack stable employment.

Contrary to assumptions by some scholars that the men and women who take on work such as this are precarized to become informal workers, many of those I observed and interviewed were not forced to enter this occupation because of a lack of alternatives but deliberately chose it after previously working in factories, in mines, or on construction sites, often for years. They value the fact that porter work allows them to have a certain control over their labor. For example, they have some flexibility in picking their clients, workloads, and work schedules, rather than having to endure strict bodily control and discipline as in factories or mines, or on construction sites. While appreciating the freedom their work gives them, they also are well aware of the risks it carries – unstable incomes, no job security, and little workplace protection. In addition, as migrant workers who earn their living by delivering goods, they understand that they are in a constant struggle with urban administration officials and police on the streets to gain and maintain access to urban space. They are vulnerable in the face of precarious employment conditions, urban regulations, and systematic violence. Most live in poverty and belong to the lowest rung of urban society. They are often subject to ridicule and discrimination by legal urban residents (those who hold Chongqing residency rights) because of their migrant status as well as because urban dwellers view them as inadequate men doing skill-less service jobs that provide no employment security. For Chongqing men, being called a bangbang is one of the worst insults. Male construction workers that I interviewed insisted that they were superior to porters because they had specific skills. Even some porters described themselves as “low status” (jian) because they tend to be obedient to clients. Verbal and physical violence against porters is ubiquitous in Chongqing.

The Chongqing municipal government has made several attempts to register porters in order to regulate them but these have not been successful. For example, in the early 2000s, the city’s Jiulongpo district government pushed porters to register with the Social Security Comprehensive Management Office of the sub-district offices or at the markets where they worked. Those who registered were rewarded with a uniform and allowed to work within certain urban areas. However, these licensed porters were required to pay a registration fee which varied between RMB twenty yuan (US$3) and as much as RMB 200 (approximately US$33), along with a monthly fee. Many porters were upset at these high costs and understandably refused to participate in these programs.

Because of the precarious nature of this work and insufficient governmental regulation, local residents often stereotype porters as unorganized loners who roam around the city, looking for work. In fact, only a small proportion of the porters I observed fit this stereotype. These “wild porters” (ye bangbang) are usually inexperienced newcomers.

31This popular rhetoric of freedom among rural migrants is part of a discourse that produces self-responsible subjects, a technique of neoliberal governance. Also, this idea of freedom associates informal laborers with the stereotypical image of unruly social outcasts and further marginalizes these migrant workers.
or men who become temporary porters while looking for a different job. Another small number of porters who have money and/or personal connections register with the city administration offices and work in specifically designated locations where the supply of clients is abundant and employment is relatively stable, such as Caiyuanba Railway Station or Chaotianmen Pier. The majority of the city’s porters, however, normally work in groups within a specific territory around schools, hospitals, bus stations, shopping malls, and food markets. These territorial enclaves are not formally or strictly divided but established by convention or verbal agreement between different informal porter groups who work in the same area. Organization is casual and need-based; members of the same group are not bound by formal contracts or membership but are often connected through kinship, friendship, brotherhood, or place of origin. In Chongqing, these informal groups are called “loose porters” (san bangbang).

However, in major markets, commercial zones, and transport hubs – where city administrators are present, dozens of unregistered porters gather, and competition for clients is fierce – semi-formalized porters’ cooperative labor groups exist. The two cooperative labor groups I worked closely with, which local businessmen, residents, and porters themselves referred to as “Brother Yang’s group” and “Brother Qin’s group,” consisted of multiple married couples in their thirties and forties. Brother Yang’s team included twelve people (six married couples) who worked in a major local agricultural product market. The group included three sisters and their husbands (with Brother Yang, the team leader, being one of the husbands), a cousin of the sisters and her husband, a cousin of one of the husbands and his wife, and a sworn brother of Brother Yang and his wife. The sworn brother came from Chongqing’s Tongliang district and the rest were from Hechuan district. Brother Qin’s group consisted of ten people (five married couples) working in a large hardware and electrical supply wholesale market. Members of this team included two sisters and their husbands (one of whom was Brother Qin), a male relative of Brother Qin and his wife, and two sworn brothers of Brother Qin and their wives. The relative and his wife were originally from Chongqing’s Qijiang district, and the others were from the city’s Tongnan district.

The members of both teams claimed specific territory as their domains, where they delivered goods for business owners, shoppers, and residents. The members pooled their resources, such as business information and social network connections, and shared the workload. They also rented a multi-bedroom apartment and lived together. In both cases, each couple had their own bedroom but shared the kitchen, bathroom, and living room. Everyone’s daily earnings were collected by a designated group member and distributed equally to the couples once this reached a certain amount: RMB 300 (approximately US$45) for Brother Yang’s group and RMB 100 (approximately US$15) for Brother Qin’s group. Partially because of this organizational scheme, members called their associations “primary communism” (yuanshi gongchan zhuyi) or

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32Sworn brotherhood is a type of Chinese fictive kinship in which a boy or man has sworn to treat another as his brother. These relationships are common among male porters in Chongqing. These men often enter this relationship to emphasize or prolong a close friendship that has already developed among them, for economic reasons, or as a means of gaining social advantages. In many cases, male porters develop such a fictive brotherhood relationship by working together for a long time and building mutual trust. In other cases, a shared native place or shared last name also contribute to the development of sworn brotherhood relationships. In contemporary Chongqing, sworn brothers often refer to each other as “brother” (ge, gan gege, xiongdi, or xiongdihuo).
“the people’s commune” (*renmin gongshe*), reflecting the socialist principle of egalitarianism as a shared value in each group’s operation. The group members summarized the benefits of their associations as “eat better, live better, and work better,” suggesting a sense of empowerment. A few of them even cited Mao Zedong’s famous 1958 remark, “The people’s commune is good.”

A lack of official statistics makes it difficult to determine exactly how common such porters’ cooperative labor groups are in Chongqing. My observation is that male-only cooperative labor groups are not uncommon among porters who work in highly competitive businesses zones, while mixed-gender teams are much less common, partially because there are significantly fewer women porters in Chongqing. For example, in 2004, Brother Qin estimated that each of the six major business zones in the city’s Chaonjiaping area had on average between forty and over 100 porters on any given workday and that each business zone had at least one male-only cooperative labor group. His group was the only mixed-gender group in this area, however. Like Brother Qin’s group, the male-only groups were relatively small and membership was based on kin, shared locality, and brotherhood relationships. Similar to the husband-wife groups, the members of the male-only groups claimed their territories, pooled their resources, shared the workload, lived in shared rented accommodations and in most cases, equally distributed their earnings. However, these groups’ living arrangements were vulnerable to changes because of Chongqing’s rapid urbanization and demolition projects as well as a shift in family dynamics. According to Brother Qin, in 2007 the temporary housing that had accommodated many porters who worked in the market was torn down due to a massive housing redevelopment project in the area. Even though his group was lucky to settle in a rented apartment, many male-only groups had a hard time finding affordable places to live because many landlords would not rent their renovated apartments or permanent homes to groups of migrant male workers. Meanwhile, the wives of some members of the male-only groups started to move to and work in the city, following their husbands. These members eventually moved out of shared rented accommodation and went to live with their families. Although these men managed to continue working together as a cooperative, they no longer lived together.

Informal workers’ self-organized mutual aid associations like porters’ cooperative labor groups are also found among other occupations both in and outside of Chongqing. For instance, Lulu Fan has described how female informal garment workers in Jiaxing in Zhejiang Province form cooperative production teams to evade the constraints of factory discipline and to collectively bargain around piece rates with factory owners or subcontractors. Ching Kwan Lee has suggested that in recent years, on-call micro-enterprises or worker cooperatives have emerged in the informal sectors of various occupations and in different places of China, including:

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33As of 2015, four of the six couples in Brother Yang’s group had bought their own houses in urban Chongqing. They have since moved out of the shared house but continue to work with the other two couples as a team. They only collect everyone’s daily earnings for equal distribution if they have a major task that demands multiple days of group work.

34I observed cases in which the leader of a male-only group was given a slightly larger portion of collective earnings, especially if he contracted out a major job to his group. But in many cases, the group leader and the general members equally distributed the earnings. I was told by a group leader that unequal distribution of money could create disharmony among the members and break the members’ trust in the group leader.

35Fan 2016; Fan and Xue 2017; Zhang and Fan 2020.
garment in Humen, Dongguan; electronics assembly in Shijie, Dongguan; leather in Shiling, Huadu District of Guangzhou; lighting fixtures in Gu, Zhongshan; footwear in Wenzhou, Zhejiang; and textile in Shaoxing, Zhejiang. Native-place networks also bring migrant workers from particular hometowns to corner labor market niches: workers from Hubei Province’s Jingzhou city are engaged in Humen’s garment industry; Jiangxi Province’s Ganzhou in Dongguan’s electronics assembly; and Hunan Province’s Shaoyang in Huadu’s leather industry.36

It is also worth noting that, historically, mutual aid teams, cooperative labor groups, and similar social organizations were common among unskilled or semi-skilled physical workers. For example, Pun Ngai and Lu Huilin have noted that in nineteenth-century China, construction craftsmen were organized into a guild system which provided the workers more associational power to protect their labor rights than what construction workers in today’s China have.37 David Strand has documented how unskilled laborers such as rickshaw pullers in Beijing organized in groups to assert control over certain lucrative spots in the city and to collectively defend their territories, even though their paternalistic relationship with rickshaw owners and contractors, fierce competition among themselves, and their scattered deployment throughout the city tended to limit the possibility of citywide, large-scale collective actions.38

Why have street porters created similar labor cooperatives in contemporary Chongqing? When I posed this question, three reasons were frequently mentioned by group members. First, joining a cooperative helped improve porter’s living conditions. Individual porters typically cannot afford to eat meat often and normally do not have the time to cook a good meal every day. But with the groups I observed, the members could afford higher quality and more expensive food and delegate a member to prepare meals. Furthermore, because of high housing costs in urban Chongqing, most individual porters can barely afford an apartment that includes a bathroom and kitchen. However, a group of porters are able to rent a decent apartment that includes the basic utilities they need.

Second, a group provides security in numbers: by working as a team, these porters could more efficiently keep competitors away from their territory. In my observations, members used non-violent strategies in most cases. For example, if an outsider porter appeared, they would refrain from sharing business information with him or would politely tell him that he had a very low chance of getting customers in their territory. If the outsider insisted on staying, they would allow him to work with them for a short period of time but strategically make him carry the heaviest loads, work the longest hours, and not pay him any extra money for his extra work. Normally, an outsider would stop showing up after a few such experiences. However, if these efforts failed, the group would take more extreme actions to protect their territory, which on occasion escalated to physical altercations.

Finally, a group of porters has much more workplace bargaining power than an individual does. When disputes over payments, work processes, and compensation for work-related illnesses or injuries occurred, group members could collectively bargain with clients. For example, in 2007, a member of Brother Yang’s group was injured while

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36 Lee 2019, 143.
37 Pun and Lu 2010.
38 Strand 1993.
carrying goods for a rice and grain wholesale businessman whose store was located in the group’s territory. The businessman refused to pay for any medical expenses beyond the cost of immediate treatment. Led by Brother Yang, group members confronted this businessman, threatened to stop working for him, and said they would prevent outsider porters from working in their territory if he tried to hire them. Their struggle won the sympathy of a few of their other long-time clients in this territory, who also came to the group’s defense. Eventually, the businessman agreed to pay the injured member more generous compensation of RMB 300.

Importantly, these associations also provide a sense of belonging and social status. A few group members compared their associations to state work units (danwei), the basic organizing unit in urban China during the socialist period. Work units were designed to meet all of the needs of their members. In addition to employment, they provided social status and material benefits such as subsidized housing, childcare, education, and medical care. One porter commented, “We peasants never had work units. No work unit wanted us. But with the association, we feel like we have one.” Of course, these porters knew that the danwei system had been heavily subsidized by the state, while theirs was not. Nevertheless, by referring to their social organization as a danwei, these porters expressed their desires, as precariously employed rural migrant workers, for not just a social and economic safety net but also for a social identity and the entitlements that were denied them in post-reform China.

Nostalgia and migrant masculinity in post-socialist times

When asked about the inspiration that led to the formation of the associations, many members referred to the socialist experience of collectivized agriculture production when rural households were organized to form, in turn, mutual aid groups (huzhu zu), cooperatives, and communes. Group members with whom I talked valued mutual aid groups the most because joining was voluntary and peasants were allowed to keep their own crops. Most of these porters were too young to have personally experienced mutual aid groups, but they had heard stories from their elders, and they had vivid memories of the commune period. While they recalled the Three Lean Years (1959–1961) with bitterness and resentment, they were nostalgic about the socialist past, especially how political campaigns during the Maoist period had curbed corruption, manual laborers and workers had been more respected, and everyone had been more equal. Such nostalgia about the socialist past has been prevalent among intellectuals, factory workers, peasants, and migrant workers since the 1990s. Scholars generally agree that “such sentiments … should not be seen as holdovers of Maoist ideologies”; rather, the recycled socialist discourses in post-socialist China can be better understood as a critique of or an escape from the present. According to Li Zhang, socialist language is used in critiques of China’s present because “it provides a relatively safe space for articulating alternative voices and expectations of the future that might otherwise entail greater political risk.”

Similarly, porters’ “nostalgic recycling” of the socialist experiences can be understood

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40 Zhang 2002, 325.
42 Zhang 2002, 325.
as their way of expressing collective anxiety about precarious employment conditions and their struggles to confront their present predicaments.

However, what scholars have written less about is how migrant men and women are different in their nostalgic feelings. In contrast to migrant women who express little desire to go back to the countryside and are generally unwilling to maintain a native-place life style in the city, male porters’ nostalgia suggests that they continue to think of the countryside and their village experiences as the primary sources of their identities, showing a strong emotional tie to the way of life in their birthplaces. In fact, they translate the gender disparities of their home places into the principles on which these porter associations are founded. Although they use “primitive communism” and “the people’s commune” as labels for their groups to indicate egalitarianism among their members, a closer look at the internal structure of these two labor cooperatives suggests that they maintain and even reinforce male privileges that arguably compensate for the weakening or loss of masculine pride for these marginalized migrant men.

First, leadership was male-dominated. Take Brother Qin’s group as an example. The group’s forty-five-year-old leader, Brother Qin, had been the first of this group to work in Chongqing and was known for his wide connections with small business owners in the wholesale market. Lao Chen, Brother Qin’s brother-in-law, was the only member who had graduated from senior high school. He was responsible for keeping the group’s account book. Xiao Hu, Brother Qin’s sworn brother, was entrusted with collecting daily earnings and distributing these to the members. These three men were also in charge of other major issues in the association, such as business connections, bargaining with customers, and daily work assignments. The women members had no leadership roles.

Second, while women members worked as many hours as their husbands and did the same tasks, they also had to do most of the housework. They returned to the apartment first, where they took turns washing clothes, cleaning rooms, and boiling drinking water. Meanwhile the men went off to the food market after finishing work. Later, while the women prepared dinner, the men sat at the dining table, where they smoked, drank, chatted, played cards, and calculated the daily earnings. Occasionally, they would help their wives in the kitchen by making a fire or polishing a knife. When the food was served, men and women ate at different tables. The women sat around a lower and smaller table next to the men’s bigger and higher-quality table. When the men needed more rice, they simply asked their wives to refill their bowls. After dinner, the wives cleaned the plates and boiled bathwater for the men. Other household duties, such as laundry and childcare, were also mostly done by women members.

Lastly, the women were often assigned work that was deemed to be more “appropriate” for them. This was in part because women porters often attracted inquisitive looks

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43Zhang 2002, 326.
44Jacka (2005) suggests that migrant women think of their parents’ homes and villages where they lived before marriage with nostalgia, but they do not have the same emotional ties to their husbands’ birthplaces, where they lived after getting married.
45Sometimes, both men and women went shopping together, but the men paid because they controlled the money.
46As individual men, they did take up housework occasionally, especially when their wives were occupied with paid work. For example, Sister Liu, Lao Chen’s wife, was subcontracted to make rice dumplings at a supermarket for a month in 2007. While she was occupied with this work, Lao Chen replaced her as a cook and worked with the other women in the kitchen.
and occasional jokes on the streets because this was considered a man’s job. In 2007, the male members of Brother Yang’s group sent all the female members to work inside a warehouse, and later, a food market. The women members told me that this arrangement was intended to make sure that women could work without being in the public eye, and they generally agreed that it was for their own good. However, because warehouse and food market work paid less than street work, women’s overall earnings were much lower than those of male members. Meanwhile, working in a warehouse and food market did not give women the chance to expand their social networks.

In arguing that these porter cooperative labor groups maintained male privileges, I do not mean to suggest that women members were passive victims of patriarchal oppression. In fact, the women members I talked to were quite aware of these inequalities, but they believed that, working in a male-dominated occupation, these arrangements were the compromises that they had to make in exchange for the benefits, including living in the city, earning income for their households, and being protected from sexual harassment. Although most of them believed that men had more labor power than women and thus deserved a higher status in the group, not every woman member agreed. For example, San Mei, a female member of Brother Qin’s group, believed that women had better body flexibility and could be more efficient than men at moving goods that required agility. Moreover, while some of the women members believed that men knew more about “external affairs” (waimiande shi) – meaning dealing with clients, making business connections, and negotiating payments – others insisted this was only because men were better-educated. Sister Liu told me, “If I didn’t drop out of school for the sake of my younger brother’s tuition, I could be the accountant for our group. I was very good at math in school.” San Mei also protested against only being assigned warehouse work. She found a waitress job at a local restaurant where she was highly appreciated by the owner. Although she eventually gave up this job for the sake of the association, she had confidence in her ability to survive in the world “out there.” Finally, women told me that they did not care about the men monopolizing leadership positions because, in the words of one, “men manage the group, and we manage them,” suggesting that women’s lack of group leadership did not mean a lack of power in marital relations.

The male members were enthusiastic when telling me about their experiences as honorable rural men before communes had been dissolved and noted they, as men, had earned more daily work points (gongfen) in their production teams (shengchan dui) than had women.47 They boasted of their labor power in delivering manure and collecting firewood, the crops they had cultivated and harvested, the hogs they had raised, and in particular, the big houses they had constructed. They also proudly recalled how they had built irrigation systems and reservoirs, focusing on the fraternal bonding and mutual aid that participating in such projects helped cultivate. Brother Yang sighed and said, “I feel sorry that my sons don’t have such experience. Young men today are spoiled; they don’t even know how to use a plow.” Brother Dong vividly recalled how he had defeated a rival who had connections with cadres and been elected head of his production team. He told me, “Urban people look down upon us porters, saying that we do this job simply

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47The production team was the basic farm production and accounting unit in the commune system between 1958 and 1984.
because we are not capable of anything else. I bet few of them can be as good a production team head as I was!” Indeed, in my observations it was common for porters to respond to urban residents’ discrimination against them by referring to the socialist discourses that they were familiar with or their past experiences in the countryside, even though the porters have diverging opinions about the socialist past and Mao Zedong’s leadership. For example, on various occasions, I have seen porters responding to urban residents’ disparaging comments about their work by citing the Mao-era socialist slogan, “Labor is glorious” (Laodong guangrong). As one porter poignantly said, “Without our hard labor, the urban residents wouldn’t even have any fresh vegetables and fruits to eat! Labor is glorious!”

These non-elite rural migrant men’s nostalgic feelings about the socialist past should be understood in a broader historical context of gendered power relations. Kam Louie argues that the construction of Chinese masculinity in history, or the wen (literary attainment) – wu (martial valor) dyad, is intimately associated with changing social values regarding mental and physical labor.48 Since the 1930s, the CCP has promoted the value of physical labor. During the socialist era, workers, peasants, and soldiers (especially men) were portrayed in governmental propaganda as heroes, although in practice peasants remained materially disadvantaged. State-sponsored art and literature featured male revolutionary heroes who exhibited exaggerated physical strength and courage, rejected bourgeois lifestyles, and expressed their devotion to communist ideals. Even the state-sponsored feminist movement was highly masculinized and involved women’s adoration of militarized physical labor-based masculinity.49 In the countryside, even when women were mobilized to participate in work that was coded as male, gender biases remained. In rural Shaanxi, when women replaced men as farm-workers, any technological work or skill-training opportunities were given to men, not women. In other words, gender disparity persisted even in ostensibly egalitarian social institutions, honoring rural men as more valuable and important.50

Since the economic reform period began in 1978, an individual’s social position no longer has depended on their class status (chushen) or performance in political campaigns. Instead, it largely has depended on personal income and wealth. Masculinity has become increasingly associated with men’s wealth and social status. Men with high incomes enjoy high social status and are often linked to a globalized entrepreneurial model of masculinity, whereas people in low-paying, labor-intensive occupations are often debased and their work undervalued.51 Previously glorified images of masculine and powerful peasant men have largely disappeared, especially in urban settings.52 Men who engage in manual labor, such as porters, elicit social prejudice and discrimination. However, in the countryside, agricultural collectivization, exogamous marriage practices, and patrilocality have largely maintained male social privileges.53 Thus, when a married rural adult migrant male in the city thinks back on his village life, especially of the pre-reform period, he is more likely than his wife to remember it

48Louie 2002.
49Yang 1999.
50Hershatter 2011.
52Lin 2013; Zhang 2016.
with pleasurable nostalgia. Against this backdrop, it is not surprising that certain aspects of village life and labor organization are preserved in these urban porter associations.

These porter cooperative labor groups also resemble the brotherhood associations organized by non-elite Chinese working men in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in China and Southeast Asia. One such type was kongṣi, a shareholding organization whose members “agreed to divide capital and labor responsibilities, each member having a share (hun), and to divide profits among themselves.” Such associations developed among men who were working in extremely hostile environments in Southeast Asia, far away from their families, lineages, and villages, a situation that is analogous to that of today’s porters. When institutional support became scarce or even absent, alternative organizations such as a kongṣi “helped these men organize profit-making ventures on an alien frontier.”

Chongqing has a long history of marginalized men organizing and joining alternative social organizations. During the war against Japan (1937–1945), at a time of chaos and hardship, many rural migrant men in Chongqing were impoverished and unable to achieve the conventional Confucian ideal of masculinity defined by marriage, kinship, and offspring. Secret societies such as robed brothers (paoge) provided “an alternative to the models of kinship and society defined by Confucian ideology and promoted by the Chinese state.” By connecting themselves to a glorious tradition of sworn brotherhood and values of righteousness and justice, marginalized laboring men redeem their masculinity as honorable and valuable men. Such brotherhood associations still exist in Chongqing, suggesting a rich cultural resource that these male migrant laborers leverage to cope with the challenges of precarious work and living.

But porter associations have their limitations in terms of fostering collective actions and claims-making. First of all, these associations are generally small-scale and semi-formalized; although they may be based on brotherhood and male friendship, they typically do not extend beyond family, kinship, and locality-based relationships. Thus, they do not have the same magnitude of social influence as a kongṣi or paoge association, which could range from a small-scale, mutual-aid group to federated corporations that had hundreds of members. In addition, porter associations are primarily economic and social units, whereas kongṣi and paoge associations were political entities that could resist penetration by the state. From what I observed in my fieldwork, porters’ cooperative labor groups are more effective in satisfying members’ immediate material and moral needs than providing political support for labor actions. I did not witness any large-scale, public, cross-association resistance or protests organized by these associations. Lastly, although these associations enhance their members’ material security and bargaining power with customers, they do not foster collaboration and integration across association lines. In my observations, competition for territory and clients occasionally led to violent confrontations and even gang fights, which resulted in bitter feelings, divisions, and fragmentation among porters in the city.

Local business people and residents have diverse views about these porter associations. Some view them as a survival strategy of the powerless; others thought that they prove the
ignorance and backwardness of peasants. One business owner told me, “It is sad that after years of reforms, these nonghua (country bumpkins) still live in the [socialist] past. Even worse, they try to turn back the wheel of history (kai lishi de daoche).” Such views were even shared by some “loose porters,” who viewed these associations as social spectacles that are not compatible with contemporary times. One of them told me, “You know why they are primitive (yuanshi)? They haven’t evolved [to modern humans] yet.” Another porter told me facetiously that the male association members “share their property and wives” (gong chan gong qi). These comments suggest that people view the labor cooperative members as cultural “others” or historical relics. Furthermore, because these associations do not allow any competitors or rival groups to work within their territories, those who do not have connections or resources to form their own associations despise them as gangsters (hei shehui) and suggested that the police should suppress them. Meanwhile, members of the two associations I have described felt wronged and humiliated by such negative views. They repeatedly told me that they were not gangsters or secret society organizations, and they even worried about being persecuted by the police.

Conclusion

Uncertain employment conditions, widespread discrimination against informal laborers, and the absence of legal protections are common conditions for precarious workers in China and other parts of the world today. I have argued that informal porter associations in Chongqing should be understood as non-elite rural migrant men’s creative response to the extremely discriminative environment and precarious employment conditions which they navigate on a daily basis in post-socialist China. As the state no longer provides an “iron rice bowl” and former social bonds and protections have broken down, associations such as those I have described help mitigate the precarity of work and provide a basic safety net, social support, workplace bargaining power, and sense of belonging to their members. These seemingly egalitarian labor cooperatives, however, are in fact built on gender disparities. Male porters’ nostalgic identification with a glorified image of peasant men in the socialist past resembles a long tradition of alternative fraternal organizations found in China’s history and bolster their otherwise threatened sense of masculinity as marginalized migrant men in the city.

However, these associations in post-reform Chongqing are generally devalued by urban residents and some porters as old-fashioned, backward, or even criminal. These reactions point to the lack of alternative values and ideals available to validate these migrant men. A lack of solidarity between associations and the intense competition for territory and clients often result in deeper divisions and fragmentation among porters. The net result is that these men and women migrants are relegated to the margins of society as they help build the very city that denies them citizenship and respects their masculinity.

Karl Marx argued:

The bourgeois society is the most developed and the most complex historical organization of production. The categories which express its relations, the comprehension of its structure,

57 Gong chan gong qi is a propaganda slogan that the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) used during the Republican period (1911–1949) to accuse communists of being devils who forced people to share their property and wives.
thereby also allow insights into the structure and relations of production of all the vanished social formations out of whose ruins and elements it built itself up, whose partly still unconquered remnants are carried along within it, whose mere nuances have developed explicit significance within it.\footnote{Marx 1904, 301.}

What Marx suggested is that the establishment and development of modern capitalism did not necessarily eliminate pre-capitalistic economic forms, and these “unconquered remnants” can re-invent themselves to serve new roles within capitalism. Mayfair Yang, in her research on the revival of popular religion in rural Wenzhou, contends that economic development appears to be purely capitalistic but is in fact a series of hybridizations of different economic modes. In her view, Wenzhou villagers’ exuberant expenditures on rituals may appear to be based on irrational pre-capitalistic logic but have the potential to challenge and even subvert the global capitalistic principles of productivism and endless accumulation.\footnote{Yang 2000.} The porters’ cooperative labor groups I have described also suggest that the unconquered remnants of a socialist past, especially the ideological recognition and male privilege that the socialist China state once granted peasant men, and arguably a long history of pre-revolution alternative fraternal/labor associations formed by marginalized working men, have not completely disappeared in post-1978 China. These have instead become the moral and symbolic resources that migrant laborers draw on to foster alternative social organizations to empower themselves in the face of growing economic precarity. Although this power is subject to capital’s attempts to divide, isolate, and rule, it points to the fissures, cracks, and fractures in an allegedly friction-free capitalism, suggesting that informal and precarious labor may indeed have the potential to be “disruptive and unpredictable.”\footnote{Lee 2017, 156.}

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\footnote{Marx 1904, 301.}

\footnote{Yang 2000.}

\footnote{Lee 2017, 156.}
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