
A CULTURE OF VIOLENCE: THE LABOR SUBCONTRACTING SYSTEM AND COLLECTIVE ACTION BY CONSTRUCTION WORKERS IN POST-SOCIALIST CHINA

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The glamorous skylines of Shanghai and Beijing today seem to crystallize Chinese dreams of modernity and global status.¹ These modern cityscapes, however, are underpinned by a construction industry steeped in a culture of violence. This culture arises from the political economy of the industry and the politics of labor resistance among migrant construction workers.

The rapid development of the industry has enabled a highly exploitative labor subcontracting system to emerge.² This labor system includes two processes: the rapid commodification of labor through non-industrial social relations organized by a *quasi*-labor market in the rural villages; and the expropriation of labor during the production process of the construction sector in urban areas. These two processes shape a labor subcontracting system that is specific to reform-era China, resulting in

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¹ See Lisa Rofel, *Other Modernities: Gender Yearnings in China after Socialism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); Yan Hairong, *New Masters, New Servants: Migration, Development, and Women Workers in China* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008).

² See Lei Guang's significant study on the home renovation industry in the late 1990s and early 2000s, which is one of the few studies related to construction workers. Lei Guang, "The Market as Social Convention: Rural Migrants and the Making of China's Home Renovation Market", *Critical Asian Studies*, Vol. 37, No. 3 (2005), pp. 391-411. See also Shen Yuan, *Shichang, jieji yu shehui* (Market, Class and Society) (Beijing: Zhongguo Shehui Kexue Wenxian Chubanshe, 2007), pp. 216-69.

a never-ending process of wage arrears and the struggle of construction workers to pursue delayed wages in various ways, often involving violent collective actions.

Practically no other industry has experienced a boom comparable to construction.³ The Chinese construction industry has been consuming half of the world's concrete and a third of its steel and employing more than 40 million people, most of them rural workers coming from all over the country. About 30 per cent of all migrant workers from the countryside work in the industry.⁴ In order to build Beijing and Shanghai into China's global cities and speed up the process of urbanization, since the Tenth Five Year Plan (2001–05) China has invested about 376 billion yuan in construction each year. Construction is now the fourth largest industry in the country. At the turn of the 21st century, this industry accounted for 6.6 per cent of China's GDP; by the end of 2007, its total income had risen by 25.9 per cent to 5.1 trillion yuan, and gross profits had risen 42.2 per cent to 156 billion yuan.⁵ The total output value reached 2.27 trillion yuan in the first half of 2008, showing a further 24.4 per cent increase on the previous year.

We conducted research at four construction sites on the outskirts of Beijing, interviewing more than 200 workers at these sites. Because we conducted this research in the year of the Olympics,⁶ our research team retreated from the intense media attention on the center of the capital to focus on a suburban town to the northwest of Beijing, where huge construction projects owned by well-known property developers were being undertaken. In January 2009 we followed some of the workers back to their rural village in Tang County, Hebei, where, among a population of 6,000, more than 1,500 of the working adults were construction workers. In the village, we began to understand the daily practices of the labor subcontracting system and its relationship to the culture of violence among the migrant construction workers.

Despite the enormous gross profits and output value of the construction industry, construction workers are poorly protected as regards physical and financial risks, compared to most other workers.⁷ The working lives of construction workers are also deeply affected by quarrels, individual and collective fighting, attempts

³ In China, the construction industry is defined as the sector that creates buildings and other structures. See Sunsheng Han and George Ofori, "Construction Industry in China's Regional Economy, 1990–1998", *Construction Management and Economics*, Vol. 19 (2001), pp. 189–205.

⁴ See the report on "Construction Workers Alienated", *China Daily*, 9 July 2007.

⁵ See *Zhongguo jianzhu nianjian, 2008* (Statistics of China's Construction 2008) (Beijing: Guojia Tongji Chubanshe, 2009).

⁶ The four research sites in Beijing were identified in November 2007. Ethnographic study began in December 2007 and was conducted throughout 2008 and 2009. A study in a Hebei rural village was conducted in January 2009. The research team is composed of eight postgraduate students of the Sociology Department of Peking University.

⁷ Their work intensity, work hours and payment methods are exploitative, but the rates of pay for construction workers are not as bad as those for workers in the manufacturing or service sectors.

to damage buildings, bodily abuse and even suicidal behaviors. At the construction site, we observed a variety of violent actions taken by construction workers which were no doubt caused by the political economy of the construction industry.

The Past and the Present

“No urban youth are willing to work on the construction site. Don’t look at me right now. After work and after bathing, I’ll look completely different and have a new face”, said a 20-year-old Hebei man, covered with dust and dirt, who felt ashamed of being a construction worker. These feelings reflect a notorious image of chronic wage arrears, heavy casualties and labor conflicts over unpaid wages in the industry.

In 19th-century China, construction craftsmen were recruited from renowned “cradles of building craftsmen” in Hebei, Jiangsu and Shandong to help build urban centers.⁸ Such craftsmen were considered to be masters (*shifu* 师父) or skilled labor, and enjoyed relatively high social status compared to farmers or small businessmen. New laborers came to learn from masters through apprenticeship.⁹ The construction craftsmen were organized through a guild system which provided professional protection and a monopoly over the industry. As the historian Lynda Shaffer put it,

The fundamental goal of the guild was to present a solid front to a potentially hostile world ... In order to ensure that their own numbers expanded no more rapidly than the local market, they placed strict limits on the number of apprentices that could be accepted.¹⁰

The original and dominant relationship between master and journeyman was that of teacher and student, so conflicts between employer and employee were not as sharp as those seen in the modern factory or labor subcontracting system.¹¹ Hence, construction workers in pre-PRC China had their own associational power to protect their labor rights, unlike those of today’s China.

In the middle of the 19th century, Western construction companies arrived in China and began to recruit rural workers through a labor subcontracting system to be wage laborers in construction projects. After 1880, Chinese companies also initiated such a system.¹² These actions undermined the guild system. Some masters became entrepreneurs, and stopped working as carpenters or masons. Only their employees,

⁸ See the report on *Xin Zhongguo jianzhu ye wushi nian* (The Fifty Years of New China’s Construction Industry), published by a study group formed by the Construction Ministry (Beijing: Zhongguo Sanxia Chubanshe, 2000), p. 3.

⁹ See Gail Hershatter, *The Workers of Tianjin, 1900-1949* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1986), pp. 52-53.

¹⁰ See Lynda Shaffer, “Mao Ze-dong and the October 1922 Changsha Construction Workers’ Strike”, *Modern China*, Vol. 4, No. 4 (1978), p. 381.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 383.

¹² See Youjie Lu and Paul W. Fox, “The Construction Industry in China: Its Image, Employment Prospects and Skill Requirements”, Working Paper, International Labor Organization, Geneva, October 2001, p. 13.

the journeymen, still performed manual labor.¹³ The journeymen soon found that they were proletarians, lacking the support of their guilds. This is the historical root of Mao's leadership of the 4,000 construction workers who went on strike and founded the Changsha Construction Workers' Union in 1922.¹⁴

In the early days of the PRC, the CCP government relied on construction workers to rebuild ruined cities and war-torn communities in both urban and rural areas. A shortage of construction workers led the State Council to utilize labor from the People's Liberation Army, and in 1952 eight army divisions were turned into state-owned construction enterprises.¹⁵ Labor subcontracting persisted.

In 1958, the labor subcontracting system was ended. Construction work was organized under state-owned or collective enterprises. Workers in urban or rural collectives generally received less protection and fewer benefits than SOE workers, but their food was provided and they enjoyed modest but regular payments and reasonable working hours. During this period, construction jobs were viewed as skilled and respected work, and construction workers were often propagandized as "model workers" contributing to the rebuilding of the socialist country. Being pulled from a rural collective to work in the construction industry was a positive experience. A 60-year-old construction master from the village in Tang County, Hebei Province, told us,

We had to pay the production brigade [that is, their village] 1 yuan every day we left to work for a construction team in the 1970s and 1980s. At that time, there were few subcontractors, and also few cases of cheating. We all got paid after we finished the work. The work team usually provided us with work uniforms, hard hats, work boots and other daily necessities. Nowadays, the subcontractors are different. They all cheat people. We were fine in our time and we were seldom cheated.

By 1980, the number of employees in state-owned construction enterprises was 4.82 million, while the workforce in urban construction collectives numbered 1.66 million and those in rural collectives 3.34 million. Fewer than 10,000 employees worked at privately owned construction enterprises.¹⁶

State, Capital and Labor: The Emergence of the Labor Subcontracting System

The Deng-era reforms brought an end to socialist labor practices in the construction industry. In 1978, Deng Xiaoping pointed out that construction could be a profit-making industry. The reform objectives set for the construction industry included restructuring the industry's administrative system, opening construction markets, allowing autonomy

¹³ See also Gail Hershatler's discussion of the use of the apprenticeship system in Tianjin in the early 20th century, in *The Workers of Tianjin*, pp. 101-04.

¹⁴ See Lynda Shaffer, "Mao Ze-dong and the October 1922 Changsha Construction Workers' Strike", pp. 387-95.

¹⁵ This force from the People's Liberation Army was to become the most significant pillar in the construction industry in the reform period.

¹⁶ See *Xin Zhongguo jianzhu ye wushi nian*, p. 6.

in state-owned enterprises, establishing a competitive bidding system and improving project managerial skills.¹⁷ In 1980, a World Bank project, Lubuge Hydropower in Yunnan Province, challenged socialist practices in the construction sector by adopting international competitive bidding for its work. The practice of bidding and the subcontracts system in the construction industry re-emerged.¹⁸

In 1984, the State Council issued a document stating: “The state-owned construction and installation enterprises shall reduce the number of fixed workers gradually. In future they shall not, in principle, recruit any fixed workers except skilled operatives necessary to keep the enterprise technically operational.”¹⁹ Another significant 1984 regulation, the “Separation of Management from Field Operations”, stated that general contractors or contracting companies should not directly employ their blue-collar workforce.²⁰ Rather, they should employ labor subcontractors who were to be responsible for recruiting the workforce. These regulations accelerated change in the management of the construction industry and the composition of its workforce, leading to today’s problems. Driven by state initiatives, construction enterprises were further marketized and field operations were delinked from direct management via the labor subcontracting system.

By the late 1990s, the restructuring of the construction industry was almost complete.²¹ While it is arguable that this series of dramatic changes increased efficiency and productivity in the operation of construction projects, a direct result was the emergence of a multi-tier labor subcontracting system. More than 40 million workers are today part of this labor contracting system, organized through subcontractors who recruit teams of migrant workers from rural areas.²²

In the actual operation of the industry, there has been a delinking of capital from industry, and of management from labor. In the production chain, top-tier contractors control construction projects through their relationships with property developers and the local state but outsource their work to low-tier subcontractors. The top-tier contractors seek to make a profit by transferring investment risks and labor recruitment to their subcontractors. “They don’t bother to get their hands dirty.

¹⁷ See Richard E. Mayo and Gong Liu, “Reform Agenda of Chinese Construction Industry”, *Journal of Construction Engineering and Management*, Vol. 121, No. 1 (1995), pp. 80-85.

¹⁸ See also Lei Guang, “The Market as Social Convention”, pp. 391-92.

¹⁹ This was the “Tentative Provisions for Construction Industry and Capital Investment Administration System Reform”. See *Xin Zhongguo jianzhu ye wushi nian*, pp. 7-8.

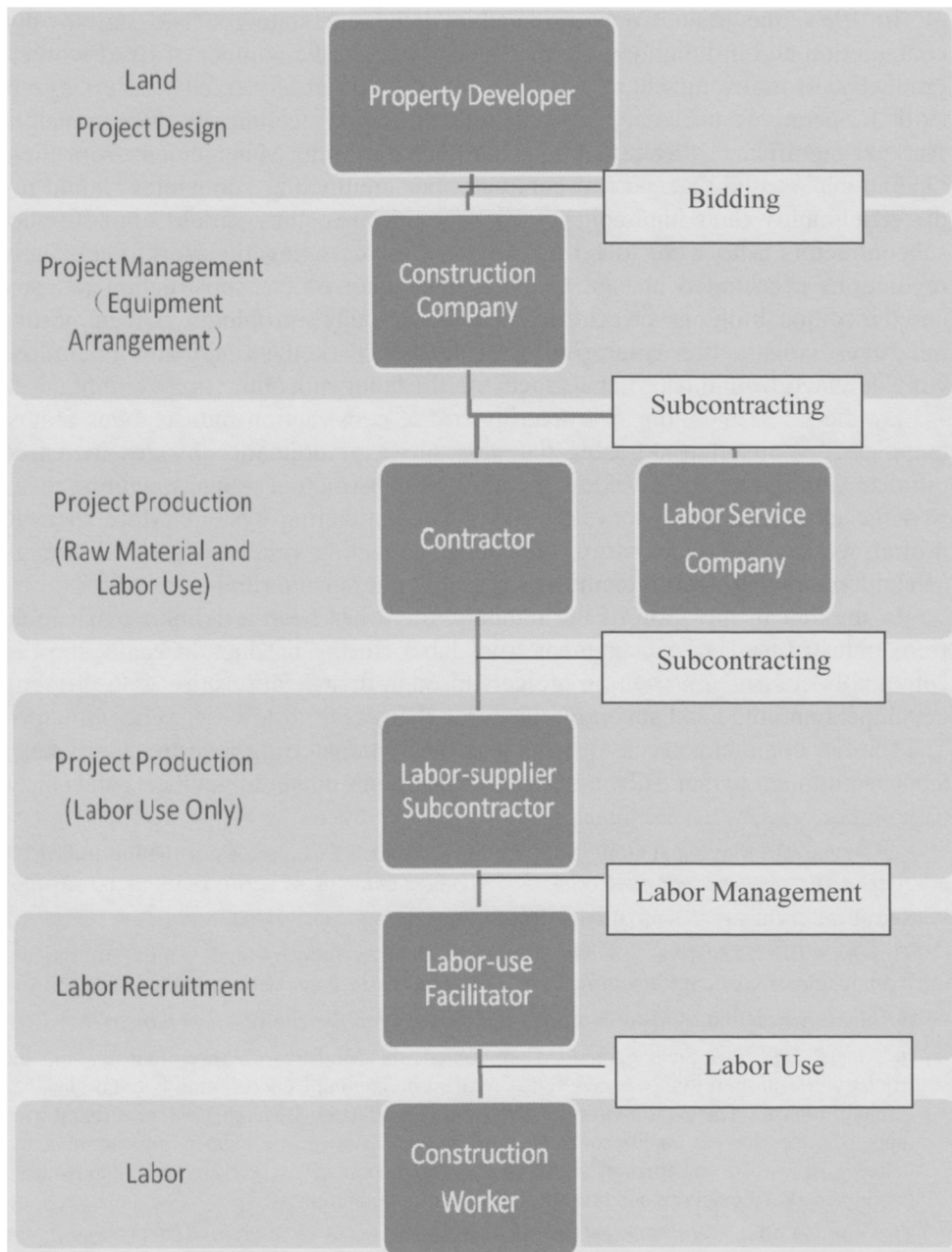
²⁰ See the Construction Ministry’s report on *Xin Zhongguo jianzhu ye wushi nian*, p. 8.

²¹ In August 1995, the State Planning Commission, the Ministry of Power Industry and the Ministry of Transport jointly issued “The Circular on Granting Concession to Foreign Financed Capital Projects”. The Construction Law was put into effect on 1 March 1998, covering a wide range of issues such as qualifications for entry into the construction industry, procurement and delivery of works, construction supervision, construction safety, construction quality, legal liability, market regulations and procedures in construction projects.

²² The number of peasant-workers in the industry is listed in a 2004 ACFTU report, “A Survey on the Situation of Construction Peasant-Workers”. See <http://finance.sina.com.cn/g/20041111/17381148918.shtml>.

They transfer all the risks to us. They make us face the workers at times of wage arrears when the money doesn't arrive from above", said Lao Feng, a third-tier subcontractor who, like many others, complained about the top-tier contractors.

Diagram 1: The Subcontracting System



We may take a construction project in a Beijing migrant community as an example. The subcontracting system began with a well-known property developer who was responsible for land reclamation and the design of a villa project. Responsibility for the construction was shifted down the chain through a bidding process to a state-owned construction company, which only took charge of the project management and equipment arrangement for its contractors. In turn, this company relied on three “big contractors” (*dabao* 大包) who came from Jiangsu, Hebei and Guangdong; these were responsible for providing raw materials and labor for the project. Two of them set up a labor service company to help recruit rural laborers, but in reality they relied on labor-supplier subcontractors (*xiaobao* 小包 or *qingbao* 清包) to recruit the labor, manage the daily division of work and pay out wages on completion of the project. In return, these labor-supplier subcontractors further depended on labor-use facilitators (*daigong* 带工), usually relatives or co-villagers, to look for workers in their own or surrounding villages. Thus, for this building project, one thousand workers were organized into a number of small subcontracting teams that worked on the construction site. The number of workers in each subcontracting team ranged from a dozen to a hundred.

Most contractors and subcontractors do not have capital to spare, and most of them also operate without access to a credit facility. About half of the construction projects lack adequate funding at the time of budget approval, and triangular debts in the construction industry account for a large portion of China’s total triangular debt.²³ Inasmuch as the developers at the top of the pyramid do not make the bulk of their payments to the contractors until the project is completed, the labor subcontractors in turn often face a shortage of available funds even at an early stage of building. The workers have had to become accustomed to a system in which they themselves do not receive their salary until the project is completed and the contractors and subcontractors have been paid.

The construction projects that we studied in Beijing made very low profits for the subcontractors, who often did not have sufficient funds to tide them over until their final payment. In one instance, the work was the construction of 108 villas of 300–500 square meters. Lao Feng, an experienced subcontractor, provided us with detailed information: to build a block of villas estimated to sell for about 10 million yuan, the bidding price was only 760,000 yuan (including the costs of raw materials, labor and administration) for the first-tier contractors, who further out-sourced the construction work to a second tier of contractors, who further subcontracted the work to labor-supplier subcontractors. The standard unit price set for labor costs was 80,000 yuan per villa, which meant that the third-tier and fourth-tier labor-supplier subcontractors had only this lump sum from which to pay the workers whom they recruited and still to make a profit. Lao Feng explained, “We almost lost money in

²³ The China Construction Bank is the major bank providing credit to large-scale construction projects, but only a small proportion of large enterprises have access to its services. Debt is said to be “triangular” when it involves a chain of debtors. See Youjie Lu and Paul W. Fox, “The Construction Industry in China”, pp. 13-15.

building the villas.²⁴ Sometimes we run into debts but we still have to keep ourselves in the production chain, otherwise we will be left out.” What Lao Feng hoped for was the opportunity to contract the interior renovation jobs after the villas had been sold. As he explained, “When the rich buy a 10-million villa, they use an additional 1 million for renovation. I am waiting to try my luck to get that work.”

Taking on a money-losing project with a view to compensating for the initial loss by getting an inside track on the new homeowner’s interior renovations was the business logic of the low-tier subcontractors. Coming from places like Hebei, Anhui, Sichuan and Shandong, most of the contractors and subcontractors had little bargaining power with the construction companies, which were mainly from big cities like Beijing and Guangzhou and were often transformed state-owned enterprises well connected with the city government. The contractors and labor subcontractors often faced serious arrears even in the modest payments owed to them at the early stages of construction, and they were in a weak position when facing the locally influential developers and construction companies. As in almost every other industrial sector in China, the local state thus teams up with capital (whether private or state-owned) to shift risk and to exploit migrant workers from other parts of the country, and wage arrears have consequently become a chronic phenomenon. Over-speculation, insufficient project funding and the absence of state oversight of the industry are also factors. More than anything else, however, the labor subcontracting system, which delinks capital from industry and management from labor, creates a power imbalance in the production chain, to the advantage of the top-tier contractors.

The Expropriation of Labor in the Production Process

Accompanying China’s rapid urban and industrial development and the further expansion of the construction industry in the 1990s was a tremendous demand for cheap labor. The provision of this labor through the subcontracting system has been a joint creation of capitalist firms and the CCP-led state. The state changed management–labor relations in the industry, ordering the construction industry to rely upon subcontracting and turning state-owned enterprises into profit-making corporations. The local state, sometimes in defiance of laws passed by the central state, also favors first-tier contractors over lower-tier contractors in disputes. Firms are all too happy to manipulate and profit from this arrangement.

In the late 1990s the labor subcontracting system matured, leaving the rural workforce entirely without state or social protection. They had no health cover, no insurance to cover accidents and no injury payments. By the end of the 1990s, subcontractors recruited rural workers as casual laborers, and did not even provide their workers with a legal contract as required by the Labor Law of 1995.²⁵ Up to the present,

²⁴ Villas are more complicated to construct than a high-rise building, so the subcontractors have to set aside more labor days for the completion of the work.

²⁵ The 1995 Labor Law was supposed to lay a foundation for workers’ legal and contractual rights and a system for resolving labor disputes. In the 2000s, the Beijing leadership began to channel labor disputes into arbitration committees and the court system through bureaucratic

none of the construction workers whom we interviewed had received regular monthly payments, and none had signed a labor contract. Despite the fact that the new Labor Contract Law was in force as of January 2008, neither the contractors nor subcontractors observed it, and most workers were unaware of the new legal obligations placed on their contractors. When we asked workers, the usual answer was: “What’s a labor contract? No, we don’t have it. I never heard of it.”

All the workers whom we interviewed in Beijing and Hebei from December 2007 to January 2009 had been promised a daily pay rate ranging from 50 yuan to 120 yuan, depending on the type of job and the skills required.²⁶ However, they were often ultimately paid at a substantially lower rate, and were even at risk of never receiving any payments. Without contracts, they have very limited grounds for pursuing their employers through the courts.

Instead of payouts of a weekly or monthly wage, construction workers are usually paid an irregular *shenghuo fei* (生活费 living allowance) arranged by their subcontractors, until the completion of the project or the end of the year. The allowance ranges from a hundred to a few hundred yuan per month (about 10 to 20 per cent of their promised monthly income), depending on the subcontractor—barely enough to cover food and other daily expenses. Of the subcontractors whom we interviewed, Mr Song was the most sympathetic to his workers:

If the workers followed you, but they had no money to spend, or if a worker caught the flu and had no money to buy medicines, you had to give them one or two hundred yuan. For the whole of 2007, the company never gave me money up front, but if the workers didn’t have living allowances, then I needed to go and ask for money.

Many subcontractors had to use their own money to provide a living allowance to their workers. Some of the workers received no living allowance at all, because their subcontractor claimed to have no money. Significant extraction of labor value in the production process was made possible when wages were replaced by living allowances and when the subcontractors justified this practice by saying that there were no funds for salaries coming from their contractor.

We visited a 50-year-old Hubei worker in his dormitory at a construction site in January 2008. He showed us a notepad with all the details of his daily work, saying,

We’re not even workers. Workers sell their labor to the boss and in return they get their wage ... As construction workers, we are different. I have been

and legal procedures. The Labor Contract Law, which went into effect on 1 January 2008, is considered the most significant change in the Chinese labor law in the reform period.

²⁶ Women are paid 5 to 10 yuan less each day than their male counterparts on the same job. Pay rates reached a peak in 2007 and 2008, due to the shortage of labor evident from the early to the mid-2000s. In 2006, the daily pay rates for cement pourers and carpenters were 30 yuan and 50 yuan respectively; they soared to 50 yuan and 100 yuan in 2008.

working 286 days for the boss and I still can't get my pay. I'm waiting for my working money (*gongqian* 工钱),²⁷ just as I'm always waiting for my luck.

Because of the promise of a relatively high wage compared to jobs in manufacturing or service industries, many migrant workers are willing to work in the construction sector despite the problem of wage arrears.²⁸ In addition, male construction workers who have reached the age of 50 have few other job options.

The Commodification of Labor Through Non-Industrial Social Relations

Rapidly changing social relations in rural areas have further complicated the problems and conflicts arising from the labor subcontracting system, which originally operated through kin and ethnic networks. At the village research site in Hebei, most households derived income from construction work. It was not a particularly poor village, with annual family incomes in the range of 15,000 to 20,000 yuan. We visited more than 30 families with one or more members working on construction sites in Beijing. Most of these families had both father and son working in the sector. These families were keen to show us the "debt papers" (*baitiao* 白条) that they had collected in the past years, each telling a story of unpaid toil. One case was more than five years old. Hai, a 45-year-old man who had worked continuously for ten years in the construction industry, showed us a piece of worn paper on which was written, "XXX owes Hai three thousand yuan only". The debtor's signature made this piece of paper the only evidence of a debt owed to the worker.

Every time we ran into cases of debt, we enquired into the debt and the reasons for non-payment. A typical story was:

"This debt paper is just waste paper. It's useless now to ask for money. The subcontractor claimed he had no money. He was a shark", a worker said.

"Do you mean that the subcontractor intentionally kept your money or that he couldn't pay you because the money didn't come through?" We asked.

"Who knows? We didn't know who the boss was. We haven't even seen the boss."

The boss whom the workers mentioned was not the labor-supplier subcontractor but the second- or third-level contractor who out-sourced the work. The subcontractor, however, was the only one responsible for wage payment, because he recruited the workers, even though he was not the boss in a legal sense.²⁹

²⁷ In the construction industry, workers used *gongqian* to describe their wages, but workers in the manufacturing and service sectors usually used *gongzi* (salary), a more formal concept.

²⁸ The situation is like that for coal miners, who are at risk of serious injury or fatality because of frequent explosions in the mining industry, but who work there principally because of the relatively high rate of pay.

²⁹ Strictly speaking, according to the Company Law and the Construction Law, the labor-supplier subcontractors do not have corporate status, and hence do not have the legal status to employ workers.

In this village, most of the labor supplier subcontractors recruited from their own or surrounding villages. After the Chinese New Year holiday, subcontractors used their networks in the village to recruit a group of workers, the exact number depending on the size of the construction project, and promised a daily rate of 70 yuan for skilled workers and 50 yuan for unskilled workers. All the workers knew that their wages would be paid after the completion of the project or at the end of the year; this practice had already become common among the workers in the village. As long as they could be sure to receive their wages by the time they returned home to help with the harvest or to celebrate Chinese New Year, they consented to the delayed payment, though not altogether willingly. In the village, non-industrial social relationships are manipulated to serve the purpose of labor expropriation and to disguise the relationship between wage-labor and capital. As a consequence, the “real” boss has become something of a myth in the construction industry.

The construction workers’ hope that they will be paid eventually relies on kin connections and villager networks. A saying popular among the workers, especially from the older generation, is: “A monk may run away but a temple stays”, implying that the subcontractor also has relatives in the village and it would be difficult to avoid his responsibilities. However, this belief became increasingly shaky when wage arrears and debts became routine in the late 1990s. The non-commodified social relationships were gradually destroyed through the labor subcontracting system.³⁰ When the problem of wage arrears became serious, conflicts between subcontractors and villagers occurred more frequently and their relationship worsened.

A number of workers emphasized that every year they looked for a new small subcontractor, always hoping he would be better than the previous one but, when jobs were badly needed, the workers, especially middle-aged ones, had little choice. Even if the subcontractor had a poor record in wage payments, there was still hope that he would be able to pay at the end of the Lunar Year.

By the time we visited the village in Hebei, there were serious worries among the workers that the subcontractors would run off without paying the wages owed. Many villagers complained that, as more people were hired as construction workers, the social relationships within the rural community became more tense. Complaints often came from both sides of the employer/employee divide. One subcontractor, for example, complained that one of his workers had just left the construction team without saying a word: “This is not a normal industry. You don’t have a long-term relationship with anybody. People just leave the construction site whenever they like.” The complaints of subcontractors about their workers were as frequent as the complaints that workers made about their subcontractors. Trust was very much in decline, seriously damaging the entire social fabric of the village.

³⁰ This finding contradicts Shen Yuan’s recent study of construction workers, which argues that non-industrial social relations are the pillar of the labor subcontracting system and are able to keep the system intact. Shen Yuan, *Shichang, jieji yu shehui*, pp. 216-69.

A Culture of Violence

With declining trust in the subcontracting system, conflicts arise on the construction sites as well as in the villages. The lack of trust has also eroded the self-esteem and social status of the construction workers. Few of the workers whom we interviewed were proud of working in the construction industry, though a few young men felt that they had more freedom on their construction site than in a factory. Suffering the consequences of an unreasonable labor subcontracting system, the workers have learned that their labor rights are poorly protected. They do not usually take action until the bottom line of their consent—receiving wages at the end of the Lunar Year—is broken. When actions are taken, however, they are often of a violent nature, with fighting, bodily injuries, suicidal behavior or attempts to damage buildings.

In January 2008 we visited Lan, a woman worker, in her dormitory on a construction site. She said:

Young people don't understand hardship and tiredness. Our work requires working day and night. We wake up at four or five when the stars and the moon are still glittering and we work until dark comes. We only have very short breaks for meals. Even my pigs are fed better than me and yet I have to pay nine yuan a day for pig food.

The construction workers often talk about the hardship of their working life. Work hours in this industry are often irregular. A 13- or 14-hour work day is the norm, though the hours can be shorter in the winter. They refer to their jobs as bitter (*ku* 苦), dirty (*zang* 脏) and exhausting (*lei* 累).

The cardinal concern of the workers is the risk of industrial injury and death. However, a superstitious fear of mentioning the words injury (*shang* 伤) and death (*si* 死) means that they avoid discussing with their subcontractors the issue of compensation should the worst occur. One sudden death is illustrative. In March 2009, Pan, a 57-year-old worker from Hubei, had been working continuously on the site for three months without a day off and without pay. According to his two brothers who worked with him on the same site, he felt extremely ill when he returned from work to his dormitory one evening. The next day, Pan still could not get up to work, but had no money to go to hospital. When his two brothers came to see him at 11:30am, he was trembling and his face was grey. He died at 1:30 p.m., shortly after reaching the hospital. He had only 1.5 yuan in his pocket.

Pan's daughter came from Hubei to ask for compensation, but the subcontractor who had recruited her father obviously had no money to do this. Accompanied by her two uncles and a nephew who worked in Beijing, she approached the labor-service company which had subcontracted the work. The company at first denied any labor relationship with her father, and then claimed that he had died of "natural death", implying that this was not the result of an on-the-job ailment. The manager of the labor-service company finally told them, "Out of humane concern, we are willing to give you 20,000 yuan for the cost of a funeral". While the daughter hesitated about taking the money, an angry quarrel broke out between her nephew and the manager. The manager soon called in a dozen hired hands, who beat the nephew and threw

them all out of the office. “Those men hit my head and twisted my neck. See my bruise, here.” Infuriated, the nephew swore to take revenge, while the two uncles still hoped that the company could give them the money and their three-month wages so that the family could return home to arrange the burial as soon as possible.

Workers live on hope and despair. On a freezing winter’s evening in 2008, we met Lan and her co-workers again in their dormitory on the construction site. The cold wind blew in through cracks in the walls. The below-zero temperature prevented them from sleeping in their exposed, unheated wooden hut. Work had been finished for a few days, but the workers’ wages had not arrived, leaving them with an anxious wait before they could return to their hometowns. Lan and her co-workers were from a village in Hebei, and they were arguing with their subcontractor, who was trying to convince them to be more patient and to go on waiting for their payment. The argument was so loud that it attracted workers from other dormitories. Afterwards, Lan complained:

A group of Henan workers took action to fight for their wages yesterday. Why do we still have to wait? Wait for what? The Henan workers threatened to damage the villas that they built, and surrounded the office of the contractor on the construction site and didn’t allow the office staff to leave. The staff then called the police and two police cars came. The manager of the company finally showed up and promised to pay the workers three days later ... But how about us? We haven’t managed to *nao* (闹 make a noise and create a disturbance)! How could we get our wages!

Arguments and fighting were frequent on the construction site. The tense relationship between subcontractors and workers would often trigger violent acts growing out of verbal disagreements. A number of times, we observed severe fighting, either of groups of workers and their subcontractor, or of subcontractor and workers against their contractor. In December 2008, a subcontractor called up 20 of his workers to surround his contractor’s office and demand payment. The contractor called upon his own hired hands, and a gang fight erupted in which number of workers suffered injuries.

Lan’s group had been told by their subcontractor that they would receive their wages on 26 December. Some of her co-workers had already bought train tickets, hoping to return home immediately after receiving their three months’ payment. On 29 December the subcontractor said that the company still had not paid him, and workers would have to wait until 3 January. That day also came, but the workers still did not see their money. Anxiety and anger mounted.

On the evening of 4 January we visited Lan again. She anxiously asked for our help:

You are educated people. You know how to ask for our wages. Please let us know how to get our wages. We’ve toiled extremely hard for three months, and now we have no money to go back home. How can we support our family and our children?

One of her co-workers, Ting, jumped into our conversation and said,

We have to *nao*. We have to show our muscle. When we were working, they [the quality controllers sent by the contractor] came to monitor and fuss about our job. Every day we were watched. But now that our work has finished, we are dumped. We are nobody. We have to *nao* to ask for our wages!

Both in the city and in the village, *nao*, creating a disturbance, was the word used most frequently when the workers talked about demanding their delayed wages. Despite the delays, some of the workers felt that *nao* was not an appropriate strategy, since it often involved breaking up relationships and disturbing social harmony. Driven by their experiences on the building site and by desperation, however, most of the workers found no other appropriate weapon to defend their basic labor rights.

The long wait for wages created despair and anger. Lan and her co-workers asked their subcontractor to provide a written guarantee that their wages would be paid in full within three days. It was often the case that when the boss finally had the money to pay the workers, the original pay rate would be cut by 20 to 30 per cent. One Sichuan worker explained, “We were told we would have 70 yuan a day. Now they say they can only give us 50 yuan. Take it or leave it, it’s up to you. Take it, and you can go home. If not, you can wait.” Eventually he had to accept. The workers’ bargaining power was minimal, once all their work was completed and they were eager to return home. Staying on the construction site without work was like a punishment. They still had to pay for their meals and other daily expenses. Waiting in the city thus means a double loss: workers cannot return home in time to help with the harvest, and have to pay for daily living costs.

Lan’s co-workers insisted that they should take action to back up their wage request. Ting feared simply waiting: “What do we do if 6 January comes and the boss still has no money to pay us? We can’t wait any more!” A heated discussion followed, until a consensus was reached: to visit the offices of the Construction Ministry the next day and ask the officials for help. While some of the workers prepared a petition letter, others collected information about their contractor and evidence of their labor relationship, while still others tried to find out the Ministry’s address. The workers went without sleep that night to prepare for the visit to the Ministry office, a place completely strange to them and located in the central part of Beijing. Three workers, including Ting, were chosen as representatives to see the official (*jianguan* 见官). It is traditional that, when the weak need help, they request a meeting with officials in the government office.

The workers travelled for three hours by bus to reach the Ministry building. They arrived at noon, hungry and cold, to be told by office staff that they were in the wrong place. Because they did not have a labor contract, they had to go to the Labor Bureau for help. It took a further hour to reach the Labor Bureau, where they were told to go to the District Labor Bureau, since they could not bypass bureaucratic levels—they were required to ask for administrative help at the lowest level. In the late afternoon, the workers finally got to the district office, which was crowded with workers from other construction sites, all caught in the same impasse of wage arrears. Ting said,

Some workers were squatting quietly in the corridor waiting to see the officials. Some, however, were very agitated and shouted that, if they still couldn't get their wages, they would climb up to the top of the building and jump off.

Workers from other groups applauded the suggestion and screamed loudly that only by attempting suicide would the boss listen to them and repay them on the spot. "No boss has a conscience" or "all bosses have the worst conscience" were the most frequent utterances.

Self-destructive acts or violent protests are often threatened when construction workers find no way out. In the same month of 2009, at another construction site that we visited, a worker climbed onto a bulldozer, threatening to commit suicide if his pay continued to be withheld. The construction company called the police, who ordered the worker to climb down but also asked the company to pay the delayed wage to him. We also heard of a threat to commit suicide that ended in death when the worker accidentally fell. Other workers have been known to take up axes and sledgehammers, surround the villas that they had built and damage the buildings. In June 2008, a group of construction workers surrounded and wrecked a sales office as it prepared to welcome customers in the morning. The workers yelled, "The company cares about customers, but not us!" This drew the attention of the property developer, who put pressure on the construction company to resolve the wage arrears. Blocking roads to attract the attention of top officials in the central government is also a popular method of resistance. Only by creating disturbances to city life have the city's builders been able to secure their wages.

Ting and his co-workers, though, were still at a point of seeking redress by appealing to the authorities. He and his co-workers waited for an hour and a half to get in the door of the legal aid department of the District Labor Bureau. The first question put to them was whether they had a labor contract. They were told that the Labor Department could not help them if they did not, as they did not have a legal employer. The officer, though polite, told Ting and his co-workers to go back to their dormitory, but promised to phone the contracting company the next day to try to resolve the situation.

The staff of both the Construction Ministry and the District Labor Bureau know that most workers in this industry are not automatically given a labor contract. Ting asked, "If a labor contract was that important, why doesn't the government enforce it seriously? Why do none of us have a contract?" He felt very angry at being sent from department to department.

When three of the workers returned to their construction site in the late evening, they could not calm down and repeatedly declared that if their money did not come, they had no other choice but to fight: "It's not a normal industry! We workers have worked for no wage! ... If they don't give us our money, I'll lay down my life to fight them. How can they dare not to give us our money?" That evening, however, Ting had not yet reached the point of pushing for actual violence. Instead, he started to mobilize the other workers to make a banner for a demonstration, that read: "Give back my money stained with my blood and sweat!" Such demonstrations are often the last step before physical conflict. These conflicts were not isolated cases;

most of the workers whom we interviewed had participated in collective actions in one way or the other.

Conclusion

Construction is not a “normal” industry, for either subcontractors or workers. There is no boss, no employer directly responsible for employment practices. The capital–labor relationship has been entirely disguised: workers literally do not know the identity of the developers and the construction companies who are ultimately responsible for the non-payment of the wages owed to them. This mis-recognition has been made possible through the labor subcontracting system; an invisible hand, the market, operating several steps removed from the workforce, enables a rigged losing hand to be dealt out to a transient army of labor.

The exceptional practices involved in the rapidly changing construction industry induce angry, largely impotent collective actions by construction workers. The political economy of the industry shapes a specific labor subcontracting system that embodies two processes: the rapid commodification of labor in the rural villages and the expropriation of labor in the production process of the construction sector in the urban areas. Rural non-industrial social relationships have been manipulated to serve the process of labor expropriation, which in turn has destroyed social trust and intensified the labor conflicts at the construction site.

Today the construction workers are the “invisible” subjects of the city that they have built. They were present when what is now prime land in the city was still wasteland, having no economic value to society. They disappear once the buildings have been constructed with their toil, and the value of the land has increased. The workers are absent in the space that they have created and too frequently are not paid the wages that they have worked for.

In short, the labor subcontracting system is a core problem of the construction industry, generating a culture of violence that gets acted out in both destructive and self-destructive forms. At times of anger and despair, the workers enact the logic of *nao*, which shapes collective actions among China’s construction workers and informs their class consciousness.