

# The Impact of Globalisation: Marginalisation of Hong Kong Labour

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The 20th Century witnessed the fastest globalisation of the world economy in the history of capitalism, most nations in the world are now linked in a combined world system but with polarised and unequal development and power. The increasing power and authority of the transnational capital with the help of state and super-state institution like WTO, IMF and World Bank is a main feature of this stage in the globalisation process. In the turn of the century, the proposed admission of China to the WTO marked the end of the long resistance of socialist China against joining the world capitalist system. In the 21st century, the speed of globalisation will accelerate and will incorporate most of the nations around the world. However, the impact of globalisation to most of the labour in the world is not an adequate and stable livelihood, but a life full of poverty and uncertainty.

Being one of the 'Four Little Dragons', Hong Kong has always been quoted as the most successful example of market capitalism and a model of the export-oriented industrialisation of the Third World.<sup>1</sup> Since the 1960s, the Hong Kong government has adopted a 'laissez-faire/positive non-intervention' economic policy, which is currently recommended by the World Bank and IMF to other Third World countries.

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<sup>1</sup> Academics from both neoclassical and Marxist traditions quoted Hong Kong as the ideal case of competitive capitalism. Friedmann (1990) praises Hong Kong as the most successful case of the invisible hand of the market. Harris (1986) claims the success of the NICs represent 'the end of Third World(ism)' and Hong Kong is given as one of the examples.

After the open door policy and economic reforms of China in 1979, Hong Kong's economy has been integrating with southern China to form a 'regional political economy' in which Hong Kong performs the role of a 'secondary world city'. Most of the production lines of the manufacturing industry of Hong Kong have already been moved into southern China. These factories in southern China employ millions of migrant workers from other parts of China. Hong Kong is also an ideal case for showing the marginalisation of workers caused by the changing international division of labour and the formation of regional political economy. Hong Kong workers face the threat of economic restructuring, the rise of unemployment, and the importation of migrant workers. This experience is not unique to workers in Hong Kong, but is shared by millions of workers in the NICs. The marginalisation of Hong Kong's labour is a direct result of the globalisation and regionalisation process.

The incorporation of China in the the WTO will accelerate this globalisation and regionalisation process, thus have an adverse impact on Hong Kong workers. However, labour is not just a production factor or an abstract figure, it is a real actor, which will shape against structure upon them. Hong Kong labour, like labour around world, will be more ready to fight against the oppression and exploitation upon them. The fate of Hong Kong's labour will depend on their future action and movement as well as the formation a solidaric internationalist labour movement in the Asian region.

## **Marginalisation of Hong Kong Labour**

### *Restructuring of the Economy*

Deindustrialisation in Hong Kong became significant and rapid after the early 1980s. Employment in the manufacturing sector as a percentage of total employment decreased from 41.3 per cent in 1981 to 18.9 per cent in 1996. In 1986 the number of workers employed in manufacturing industry was 946,653. It was the largest industry in Hong Kong in terms of workers employed. Owing to the continuous outflow of production

capital, manufacturing industries lost some 178,000 jobs from 1981 to 1991. This de-industrialisation process accelerated in the early 1990s, and manufacturing industry lost another 570,000 jobs from 1986 to 1996. In 1996, only 574,867 workers remained in the manufacturing industry.

**Table 6.3: Working Population by Industry, Hong Kong, 1981, 1986, 1991, 1996**

Industry	1981	1986	1991	1996
Manufacturing	990,365	946,653	768,121	574,867
	41.2%	35.8%	28.3%	18.9%
Construction	185,999	164,268	187,851	245,440
	7.7%	6.2%	6.9%	8.1%
Wholesale, retail and import/export trades, restaurants and hotels	461,489	589,918	611,386	757,239
	19.2%	22.3%	22.5%	24.9%
Transport, storage and communication	181,368	210,367	265,686	330,974
	7.5%	8.0%	9.8%	10.9%
Financing, insurance, real estate and business services	115,870	169,967	287,168	408,686
	4.8%	6.4%	10.6%	13.4%
Community, social and personal services	375,703	486,167	539,123	680,048
	15.6%	18.4%	19.9%	22.3%
Others	93,273	75,933	55,768	46,444
	3.9%	2.9%	2.1%	1.5%
Total	2,404,067	2,643,273	2,715,103	3,043,698

Sources: Hong Kong 1991 Population Census Main Reports, Table 5.14, p.95 and Hong Kong 1996 Population By-Census Main Reports, Table 5.13, p.82.

In line with other industrialised countries, the service sector in Hong Kong has generated more jobs since the 1980s. For instance, wholesale, retail and import/export trades, restaurants and hotels increased from 16.2 per cent of the working population in 1971 to 24.9 per cent in 1996. Employment in financing, insurance, real estate and

business services increased from 2.7 per cent in 1971 to 13.4 per cent in 1996. Nevertheless, the relocation of capital is not exclusively in manufacturing industry, some of the labour process in the service industry have also been relocated to other countries. For example the relocation of reception of calls to Mainland China by various pagers company, and the relocation of document processing to China by different banks, all signify the future trend of relocation of service industry, mainly the labour-intensive process, to China.

There was also a simultaneous change in the internal employment structure of manufacturing industries. From 1981 to 1991 the number of operatives fell 43 per cent while non-production staff increased by 11 per cent.<sup>2</sup> Manual workers in manufacturing industries have been adversely affected by the trends of deindustrialisation and white-collarisation.

### *Displaced Manufacturing Workers*

Many manual workers have been forced to leave manufacturing industries for other industries. Owing to their poor education, most of them could merely shift to low-paid, unskilled and precarious jobs in service industries. More and more manual workers, especially women, middle-aged and elderly workers, are facing the impact of economic restructuring. These displaced workers, who had earlier worked in manufacturing industries, encounter difficulties in securing jobs because their skills hold little market value.

While displaced manufacturing workers find themselves trapped in low-paid jobs in the service industry, those who remain in manufacturing industries often experience under-employment and receive lower incomes. Manufacturing workers experience a slower increase in wages and a deterioration of living standards. The real wage index of craftsmen and operatives in manufacturing industry decreased from 101.1 in 1993 to 96.9

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<sup>2</sup> Census and Statistics Department, 'Structural Changes in Manufacturing Industries 1981-1991' in *Hong Kong Monthly Digest of Statistics*, September 1993, p.119.

in 1997.<sup>3</sup>

Comparatively speaking, production workers in manufacturing industries who can retain their jobs in the same industry, or who can find low-paid jobs in service industries are fortunate, although they have much lower incomes. Many laid-off workers are so unfortunate that they can never re-enter the labour market to procure other employment.

### **The Rise of Structural Unemployment**

During the late 1980s and the first half of the 1990s, the unemployment rate of Hong Kong stayed below 2 per cent, which was extremely low when compared with the current situation in western industrialised countries. However, the scenario has deteriorated since 1995. In 1995 the official unemployment rate was over 3 per cent for the first time since 1985. Nevertheless, after the financial crisis in Asia in October 1997 the unemployment rate experienced such a quick and tremendous surge that in early 1999 it reached its historically high level of 6.3 per cent.

### **The Widening Gap between the Rich and the Poor**

Due to the rise in unemployment and the underemployment of marginal workers as well as stagnant wages, poverty and inequality in Hong Kong have worsened tremendously. The number of cases under the Comprehensive Social Security Assistance (CSSA) Scheme, the only government-financed income support scheme in Hong Kong, rose sharply from 66,675 in 1990-1991 to 189,527 in January 1998. Among the different types of cases, unemployment cases had the highest rate of increase. In 1994-1995, there were merely 5,302 unemployed CSSA cases, which increased to 14,964 in 1996-1997 and then sharply increased to some 23,700 in July 1998. These figures demonstrate that a growing number of unemployed households are living below the minimum poverty line.

The first signifier of the marginalisation of Hong Kong labour is the deteriorating

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<sup>3</sup> Census and Statistics Department (1999) *Hong Kong Annual Digest of Statistics 1998*. Table 2.12 p.26.

absolute and relative poverty. According to the data of the by-census 1996, the Gini Coefficient reached its recorded highest level of 0.518 (Hong Kong Census and Statistics Department 1997). In 1971 the Gini Coefficient of Hong Kong was only 0.43. In the 1980s the economic restructuring process induced a growing discrepancy in income, thus the Gini Coefficient was increasing and reached 0.451 in 1981 and then 0.476 in 1991. In the early 1990s the process of economic restructuring accelerated, with a concomitant widening of the gap between the rich and the poor.

From 1981 to 1996, households with the lowest income have shown no sign of improvement in share of income, whereas there is a sign of decrease in the actual income of the low-income households. The twenty per cent of the households with the lowest income, the first quintile, earned only 4.6 per cent of total household incomes in 1981. The figure increased slightly to 5.0 per cent in 1986. However, in the period from 1986 to 1991, the ratio fell back to 4.3 per cent. During the period 1991 to 1996, the ratio even sharply decreased to 3.7 per cent. We can see that the income gap had widened in the 1980s and the situation of low-income households has worsened significantly in the 1990s.

Table 1: Decile distribution of household income of domestic households, 1981-1996

Decile group	1981	1986	1991	1996
1 <sup>st</sup> (lowest)	1.4	1.6	1.3	1.1
2 <sup>nd</sup>	3.2	3.4	3.0	2.6
3 <sup>rd</sup>	4.4	4.4	4.0	3.6
4 <sup>th</sup>	5.4	5.4	5.0	4.6
5 <sup>th</sup>	6.5	6.4	6.1	5.7
6 <sup>th</sup>	7.8	7.6	7.4	7.0
7 <sup>th</sup>	9.4	9.1	9.0	8.5
8 <sup>th</sup>	11.5	11.4	11.4	10.6
9 <sup>th</sup>	15.2	15.2	15.5	14.5
10 <sup>th</sup> (highest)	35.2	35.5	37.3	41.8
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Gini Coefficient	0.451	0.453	0.476	0.518

Source: Census and Statistical Department, Hong Kong Monthly Digest of

Statistics, December 1996 & Census and Statistical Department, Hong Kong 1991 Population Census Main Report.

*The Impact of the Asian Financial Crisis*

In the late 1990s, the bubble economy of Hong Kong burst after the Asian financial crisis. As lots of employees faced unemployment and wage cutting, the income inequality has been tremendously worsening. In 1990, the average income of the first quintile income households was \$3,450 and in 1997, the average real income of this group slightly increased to \$3,668. However, after the Asian financial crisis, the average income of this lowest quintile group decreased to \$2,645 for the first nine months of 1999. In other words, from 1990 to 1999 the real income of the poorest one-fifth households in Hong Kong has decreased 23.3 per cent.

On the contrary, income of the wealthiest strata in Hong Kong has recorded significant increase. In 1990, the average income of the fifth quintile group was \$28,850; whereas in 1997, the average real income of this group increased to \$36,397. After the Asian financial crisis, their income still have recorded real growth and increased to \$37,115. The real income of the wealthiest one-fifth households of Hong Kong has increased 26.1% from 1990 to 1999. These figures clearly demonstrate that the impacts of the Asian financial crisis were mainly on the low income, unskilled employees. The impacts of the Asian financial crisis on the professional and administrative employees are limited. It also signifies that the process of economic restructuring in the early 1990s has worsened the income inequality in Hong Kong. Worse still, the economic downturn in the late 1990s has further reduced the income of the working class; disparity between the rich and the poor is thus increasing.

Officials of the Hong Kong government deny the existence of poverty problem in Hong Kong and argue that income inequality exists in every capitalist economy. However, the government's claim that poverty is not a problem does not stand up to serious scrutiny, when the situation of absolute poverty is considered in Hong Kong. According to various poverty researches in the 1990s, about one in ten people in Hong Kong are

living in absolute poverty (Liu, Yue and Lee 1996; MacPherson 1994; MacPherson and Chan 1996; Wong and Chua 1996). More than 600,000 of them were living in subsistence level with minimal expenditure. Owing to their low income and lack of resources, they have been socially excluded from social as well as economic participation of the mainstream society.

## **Causes of Marginalisation**

The globalisation of the world economy, the incorporation of new countries into the world system, and the accelerated migration of capital in the form of foreign direct investment by the Transnational Corporations (TNCs), have all facilitated the establishment of an integrated international production system, now called the 'Changing International Division of Labour' (CIDL). The extensive migration of capital is cited as the major reason for the marginalisation of world labour, both in the developed countries and in the Third World. Some argue that it marks the end of the era of Fordist accumulation and epitomises flexible accumulation as the hallmark of the post-Fordist era.

However, the flexibility of capitalism is not new. Although the appearance of capitalism has changed, the essence of it – flexibility and eclecticism – remains unchanged. We should understand the current transformation of capitalism as being a specific stage of its development to achieve greater liquidity, flexibility, and freedom of choice.

Both the 'miracle' economic success of Hong Kong in the 1960s and 1970s and its rapid de-industrialisation since the 1980s can be understood from the perspective of the CIDL, emphasising the role of Hong Kong in the regional political economy and the world system. The CIDL on a global scale and the resultant relocation of production in the 1950s made it possible for local export-oriented manufacturing, given its labour-intensive nature, to be competitive in international markets (Lui and Chiu 1993).



Moreover, the formation of the international subcontracting network (mainly in the garment and electronic products industries) has facilitated the incorporation of Hong Kong into the world system through the TNCs (Dicken 1986; Germidis 1980; Henderson and Cohen 1982; Lui and Chiu 1993).

With the advent of economic reforms in China in 1979, Hong Kong's economy has been gradually integrating with the economy of southern China, especially the Zhujiang Delta Region (ZJDR). Most of the manufacturing industries in Hong Kong have relocated their production to China to avail themselves of the cheap labour and rent there (Chiu et al. 1997).

The importance of Hong Kong capital in financing China's rapid industrialisation and facilitating the integration of southern China into the world system can be reflected by the major share Hong Kong capital has in the total foreign investment in China. Referring to Table 2, Hong Kong capital is the most important single investor in China. Investments from Hong Kong (and Macau)<sup>4</sup> accounted for 62.3 per cent (38,518 US\$ millions) of total implemented foreign investment in China from 1979 to 1993. (Kwan 1994).

**Table 2: Foreign Direct Investment in China by Countries, 1979-1993**  
(cumulative)

Country	US\$ million	
	Contracted	Implemented
Hong Kong/Macau	148,119	38,518
Taiwan	18,437	5,055
United States	14,660	5,237
Japan	6,934	5,203
United Kingdom	3,012	576
South Korea	2,173	550
Germany	1,458	527
Australia	1,245	338
Canada	1,815	260
France	920	602
Total <sup>a</sup>	221,697	61,869

<sup>a</sup> Total amount included FDI from other countries

<sup>4</sup> Hong Kong and Macau are lumped as a single region in the statistics of FDI in China, however, most of the FDI [has](#) come from Hong Kong.

Source: Ministry of Foreign Trade and Economic Cooperation, China. Quoted from Kwan (1994).

All of the above facts support the general thesis of the NIDL that production capital migrates from high wage to low wage countries. However, the real migration processes are much more complex than the abstract model. In the case of capital migration between Hong Kong and China, the flow is not unidirectional. Capital migrates from Hong Kong to China and vice versa. It is obvious that significant amounts of capital also flow from China to Hong Kong. In 1994, China surpassed Japan and became the second largest capital exporter country into Hong Kong. In 1994, the stock of FDI from China was HKD 96.0 million.<sup>5</sup>

Capital from China can be divided into three categories: namely investment in the service sector, 'round-tripping' investment, and hot-money investment<sup>6</sup>. It is interesting to note the importance of round-tripping investment between Hong Kong and China, which is one of the reasons for the huge amount of investment from Hong Kong to China. Round-tripping investment refers to domestic investment made under the guise of foreign investment which is aimed at taking advantage of fiscal (tax-reduction, low-tariff) and other benefits available to foreign investors (export quotas) in a given country (Kwan 1994).

A rising proportion of FDI in China is believed to be of this nature: investment capital originating in China, flowing to Hong Kong and then re-entering China as foreign investment. Round-tripping investment from and to China via Hong Kong does not involve a net flow of funds between China and Hong Kong. Therefore, the magnitude of capital outflows from Hong Kong is much smaller than the nominal figure.

All in all, the out-migration of production capital from Hong Kong to China

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<sup>5</sup> Source: Census and Statistics Department (1995) *Hong Kong Annual Digest of Statistics 1994*.

<sup>6</sup> Hot-money investment is a highly mobile investment, which grasps every opportunity to earn extremely large profits in the high-risk financial market. Due to its high-risk, the hot-money investment may lose extremely large sums of money all of a sudden.

supports the general thesis of Changing International Division of Labour that production capital migrates from high wage areas to low wage areas and that the out-migration of capital has created unemployment in the host country. However, the flow of capital is not so simplistic and uni-directional. Capital (most of it belongs to provincial governments or large state enterprises) from socialist China also utilises every opportunity flowing from the deregulation and denationalisation process in China.

The above analysis of the inflows and outflows of capital between Hong Kong and China shows that the logic of the flow of capital is guided by a single principle -- to earn as much profit as possible. The 'round-tripping investment' from China to Hong Kong; the increasing fragmentation of the production/circulation process of the TNCs; and the easy-turn direction of capital flows, all signify the essence of capitalism, that is, 'adaptation' and 'eclecticism' as suggested by Braudel (1982: 433). Capital flows from high-wage areas to low-wage ones, or from North to South, while investors will grasp every opportunity to increase their profit and flexibility. It reveals that the thesis of the NIDL illustrates only one specific phase of capitalism.

## **The Role of the State**

The case of Hong Kong is characterised by small local manufacturing establishments under a noninterventionist state policy. The Hong Kong government would not support an individual industry or enterprise; whereas the other NIC governments, like Taiwan, Singapore and South Korea, are actively involved in strategic planning, training, and research and development activities. Hong Kong finds herself lagging behind in the technological upgrading of the export-oriented industry. Therefore, the survival strategy of small enterprises is to relocate their production processes to China and other southeast Asian countries rather than to retain their production base in Hong Kong by upgrading their technology level to compete with other NICs.

Capital and labour in Hong Kong are highly unorganised and capital accumulation is extremely fluid and fast. It needs a state which is as flexible as its capital and labour. The Hong Kong government, in trying to accommodate itself to the rapid economic restructuring in Hong Kong, is in fact part of a flexible regime of regulation.

The basic role of the Hong Kong government is to allow production capital to change its products as well as its industries smoothly and quickly. Therefore, the government maintains its detachment from subsidising any one industry (Lui and Chiu 1993). Lacking long-term planning and a direction in social and economic development, the Hong Kong government helps to intensify the adverse effects of de-industrialisation. The marginalisation of labour in Hong Kong is really reinforced by the state's noninterventionism.

We can see that the increasing collusion between capital and the state has made the state act for the benefit of capital and lose its 'relative autonomy'. The mode of regulation of the state of Hong Kong has become explicit in protecting, maintaining and extending the interest of national and global capital.

According to the Sino-British Joint Declaration and the Basic Law, Hong Kong will continue its capitalist system after 1997 for fifty years under the framework of 'One Country Two Systems'. Maintaining the stability and prosperity of Hong Kong is top of the agenda for the Chinese government. Faced with the threat of the retreat of capital before and after 1997, the main strategy of Chinese officials is to maintain the confidence of the capitalists in Hong Kong. Not only have verbal assurances been given by the top leaders of China to the capitalists time and again, but the allocation of political power in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) government also favours capital.

Capitalists continue to complain about Hong Kong's increasing social welfare budget and mounting labour legislation. Their reason is that these would destroy the corner stones of the success of Hong Kong: minimal government intervention and low tax rates. Any increasing expenditure on social welfare and new labour legislation, to

them, was a conspiracy of the British to destroy the financial tradition of Hong Kong, leaving the mess for the HKSAR government to handle (Wong 1997).

Some Chinese officials seem to accept the arguments of the capitalists and publicly assert that the rapid increase in the social welfare budget will bring disaster to Hong Kong. In the various advisory bodies on Hong Kong affairs within the Chinese government, most of the appointed representatives are from commercial and business backgrounds. Only a few of them possess a grassroots or labour background. Thus, the attitude of Chinese officials reinforces the imbalance of power between capital and labour in Hong Kong. The Chinese state acts exactly as a super-state to protect the rights of capitalists and to entice them to continue their investment in Hong Kong and Mainland China.

The continuation of the imported labour scheme in the early 1990s, and the cancellation of collective bargaining rights legislation by the Provisional Legislative Council in 1997, are evident examples of the increasing authority of capital over labour policies and legislation in Hong Kong. The widening imbalance of bargaining power between capital and labour is one of the main reasons behind the continuous marginalisation of workers in Hong Kong.

The formation of a regional political economy -- Hong Kong in China -- illustrates the existence of a political structure which controls the social and political environment of capital accumulation and induces the marginalisation of workers in the region concerned. The marginalisation of workers in Hong Kong is a direct impact of the policies of the state and super-state on workers, so we should understand the marginalisation crisis of workers against this background. The marginalisation process is basically a product of class formation, which is conditioned by the economic, political, immigration and other related policies of the state.

## **Impact of WTO: rising of M&A activities**

Although the migration of production capital from the developed countries to the NICs received much attention, the majority of FDI are migrate from developed countries to developed countries, the flow of this FDI are conducting in the increasing Merge-and-Acquisition activities of the transnational corporations, mainly in banking and insurance, chemical and pharmacy, telecommunication and media. These industries are under keen competition in the global market. Moreover, the set up of the WTO try to help the transnational capital to enter those 'green field' countries, whose industry are nationalised or under 'import-substitution' policy. It is not just the market that the transnational capital are interested, but also the control and merge with capital in the NICs and ex-Socialist countries.

Hutchinson, a Hong Kong based transnational company, sold their UK mobile phone company 'Orange' to Mannesmann (MMN), a German based transnational company. And the merge induce another company VOD acquire MMN is a typical case of the rising M&A activities: some transnational corporations merge, push other corporations in the industries to follow and merge with other corporations.

Such M&A activities in reality is not a real migration of production capital, or migration of production process. The real significance is the increasing monopoly of these transnational capital. Increasing of capital's monopoly is not a good news to both labour. The bargaining power of labour are decreasing when facing the oppression and exploitation of the monopolised capital. Hutchinson has a recorded profit of 100 billion HKD, however, the thirty thousand employees of it will still have no pay rise in the coming year. This vivid example shows that in the M&A activities, capital will be the winners and labour will be the losers °

Furthermore, the impact of the merging activities will not be limited to manual labour. Owing to the duplication of the departments, which performs the control and management functions, many transnational corporations will make middle rank technical

and management staff, and even high rank administrative staff redundant after the merge. The joining of China in the WTO will accelerate the M&A activities between transnational capital in China, Hong Kong and other developed countries. Therefore, we may expect these M&A activities will have a negative effect to both working class as well as middle class in Hong Kong. The power of capital will be increased as a result of the 'constructed' picture of a keen competitive environment around the world, the marginalisation of labour will be increase in scope and in depth, more employees will face the threat of redundant, and more employedd will be employed as part-time, temporary, contracted or sub-contracted workers.

Under the globalising world, especially after the set up and the functioning of the super-state institution like WTO, World Bank and IMF, capital does not have their own nationality, but labour still remained divided, not only in their nationality, but also divided in their political affiliation, industry, skilled, gender and race. In order to tackle the increasing authority and power of the transnational capital, it is an critical moment for the labour movement to rethink and reformulate their strategy along the a new internationalism direction.

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