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The continuity of social times in China.

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#### Abstract

Our article presents the result of a common two-year research project about social times in China. It uses French sociology theory and a case-study approach. A shoe and a steel factory including semi-structured interviews with workers (n:25) are the basis of our analysis. Our results show the importance of the discontinuity of social times in Chinese manufacturing industries. They indicate specific configurations of rules in those industries associating subsistence time, continuity time and a projected future.

#### Keywords

Social times, industries, China, time configurations, work, social rules

The purpose of this paper is to explore work and social times in China. As the main producer of goods in the globalised economy, China could be seen as the ‘workshop of the world’ on which almost all other industrialised countries rely<sup>1</sup>. For example, a Chinese company alone accounts for the production of 50% of all refrigerators sold in the European Union in 2017<sup>2</sup>. That international division of labour and globalisation have wide implications not only for trade, but also for employment and for the work organisation in the companies. Industrial countries are today shifting from stable employment relations to new workplaces with discontinuities that affect the lives of workers. But, focusing on social times, we would like to show that those discontinuities include all workplaces, even those of manufacturing industries in China despite stable employment relations in most sectors. The question of internal migration of labour shows emblematically that discontinuity of space, time and

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<sup>1</sup> Gao, Yuning. *China as the Workshop of the World: An Analysis at the National and Industrial Level of China in the International Division of Labor*. London; New York: Routledge, 2011.

<sup>2</sup> Source: internal documents. We visited the company and the production line in 2018.

workplace. According to the State Bureau of Statistics in 2019<sup>3</sup> there are 288 million migrant workers in China representing more than one third of today's total working population. The discontinuity of time and space is also regarding the family of these workers and consequently we may add that around half of the Chinese population is currently experiencing these issues. Our article wants here to shift the attention from the migration issue to the overall figure of social times, defined as time spent on diverse activities including paid work, domestic work, family care, leisure, free time, etc. We take the example of two factories in the shoe industry and in the heavy industry. Extensive case studies, with interviews of workers are the main source of that analysis. We try to answer several questions about the issue of discontinuity of social times. How discontinuity is expressed in the context of Chinese manufacturing industries? How, as consequence, continuity of work activities can be ensured? What role is devoted to the domestic sphere in this context? Is there a Chinese way of dealing with these issues? Does the future of industrialisation open up new models of social times or is it driving us back to the past of poor working conditions, less protected working lives and fragmented social times? The article is structured into three parts. The first part relates literature and our theoretical framework. The second part describes our case studies and research methods. The final part presents our results based on factory visits and interview analysis focusing on working time, the role of women, the enlarged family and children. The continuity of the work process as well as the articulation of social times is apprehended by practices and representations of time.

### 1. Labour and Gender studies, two distinct research fields

Academic research in China has not much focused on how working conditions and working time impact on the family and workers' individual life. Research about social times from the perspective of sociology is very limited. In addition, in the past, working life and work-life balance has been considered as a 'woman's issue'. Only a few studies in Chinese language discuss the topics of working lives in labour sociology. From the perspective of human relations management, literature can be found since the late 1990: some introduce the concept of work-life balance and some attempted to explore the life of workers, based on

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<sup>3</sup> State Bureau of Statistics, 2019, Statistics Bureau releases 2018 migrant worker monitoring survey report, [http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2019-04/29/content\\_5387627.htm](http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2019-04/29/content_5387627.htm)

the empirical research on different occupational groups, for instance, teachers and nurses. In general, the topic of working lives is divided into two separated academic fields, one is labour studies, influenced by American theory and the other is family and gender studies. Our article will connect both by exploring the time aspects in each of those fields. That approach seems necessary in order to show how the division and articulation of social times ensure the continuity of the production process. Therefore, we use a theoretical framework of French sociology of work and social times.

### 1.1 Work and time in China

In the past four decades of economic reform and opening up, labour relations in China have been transformed, with the adoption of capitalist labour practices by firms of all ownership types. A widely spread motto inaugurated that ideological shift over shop floors of the companies: 'time is money, efficiency is life'. This famous slogan inspired by Franklin (1748) in his advice to a young tradesman<sup>4</sup>, first appeared in the 1980s amid the foreign manufacturing plants of Shenzhen, across the border from Hong Kong (Gallagher, 2004). The push for "efficiency" then draws the attention to working conditions, including long working hours, arrears of wages, poor social security of the workers, and especially to the Chinese migrant workers. Following the spectacular development of the economy, the problems of working conditions and disputes between employers and employees have become more significant, promoting the increase of research in labour studies. On the one hand, some scholars who have been engaged in trade union and labour policy studies began to study Chinese labour issues from the perspective of sociology. On the other hand, overseas Chinese studies have absorbed basic framework from American labour sociology. The issue of how economic restructuring affected China's workers has attracted the attention of many researchers since the Chinese economic system reform. For example, "*Communist Neo-Traditionalism: Work and Authority in Chinese Industry*" (Walder, 1986) described in detail authority, politics and the social structure of workplaces in the period of planned economy. Since 2000, Burawoy's (1979, 1985) explorations have become central in China's labour sociology research community. Following Bravermann, Burawoy's view of the labour process

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<sup>4</sup> Franklin, Benjamin. "Advice to a Young Tradesman," 1748.  
<http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Franklin/01-03-02-0130>.

was first used by overseas scholars in the late 1990s, and later drove the attention of domestic scholars. Among the researches, Lee (1999), Chan (2003), Zhang (2014), Zhao (2011) and others focused on the situation in manufacturing sectors, such as the footwear, the textile industry, the automobile and the home appliances industries. Research was also done in construction, catering and service industries (Shen, 2007; He, 2009; Su 2014), trying to identify a labour process “with Chinese characteristics” and showing that, after entering China, the Western management model changed and adapted to the local context. For instance, because of the strong support for economic development within the bureaucracy, local governments tend to be biased towards capital forces. That unconditional support for development, regardless of the types of ownership or industry, leads to a reinforced position of capital in the country. Furthermore, migrant workers coming from the countryside represent a large part of the workers. The role of the official union is limited and there are almost no other worker organisations; therefore, labour control is very harsh at the enterprise level. At the political level, Chinese trade unions are considered to be one of the functional constituencies that are integrated into party/state institutions, and are given the dual function of implementing national policies and safeguarding the interests of workers, but the implementation of national policies dominates (Chan, 1993). Despite the deepening of reform, China’s unique official trade union (All China Federation of Trade Unions, ACFTU) is still embedded in China’s political system framework, and maintained a strict top-down organisational structure (Friedman, 2011).

Scholars generally agree that factory regimes in contemporary China have been largely reshaped. In addition, Chinese cultural traditions and gender factors are also taken into account. For instance, Chan and Zhu (2003) suggested that the difference between factory regimes in Western countries and China is that Chinese managers and owners sometimes employ an obfuscating rhetorical patina of Confucian values to overlay their rigid control over workers. Also, gender issues have got some attention. Lee’s article (1999) and Pun Ngai’s book “Made in China: Women Factory in a Global Workplace” (2005) described the female migrant worker’s working conditions in the foreign-invested factories in South China. Compared with male workers, the female workers experienced worse working conditions. A large part of the explanation is that of the obligation to support their families before getting married. He (2009) and Su (2011)’s research in the service sector (restaurant and domestic

work), noticed that the labour regime not only impacts female migrant workers, but also shapes their interrelations.

China's labour law from 1994 stipulates that labourers shall work for no more than eight hours a day and no more than 44 hours a week on average. In March 1995, the State Council decided to implement a 2-day weekend and reduced working time to 40 hours a week. There is also a provision for overtime: the employing unit may extend working hours due to the requirements of its production or business after consultation with the trade union and labourers, but overtime shall generally not exceed one hour per day. If such an extension is called for due to special reasons, the extended hours shall not exceed three hours per day under the condition that the health of labourers is guaranteed. However, the total overtime for one month shall not exceed 36 hours. Although there is no official data, several reports and research articles showed that the overtime work is common in China's factories, especially for migrant workers. For instance, Zeng (2006) found that 53.8% work longer than 40 hours a week. The recent debate about the 72-hour week in the high-tech industry (called anti-996) shows the difficulties to respect the labour law. Company regulations often prevail. '996' refers to work from 9 A.M. to 9 P.M. six days a week. It became common among the big technology companies since 2010. In March 2019, a group of developers started a project called 996.icu, a reference to a comment by a programmer that such a work schedule could bring employees to an intensive care unit (ICU). This initiative resulted in a nationwide debate about the working culture in China.

Recently, the issue of working time and overtime in the context of digitalisation, has been raised by scholars. Based on the data of China Labour –force Dynamics Survey (2012), Zhuang (2018) found that managers use different strategies to encourage overtime work. For unskilled workers, the so-called “scientific management methods” are adopted in factories and as a consequence overtime is often combined with standard working time. For high-skilled workers and technicians, the idea of self-management is put forward, including overtime work. In recent years, “flexible” working time became widespread in internet companies, with 12-hour days for employees. For some scholars, that system mixes work and life at the workplace and finally extends working time (Liang, 2018), while other scholars consider that this system emphasises the subjective and multiple needs of workers, the

relief of the workload and improves the quality of work quality, and the work-life balance. Finally, we also note that time issues are regarded by scholars in the context of “compressed modernity” (Chang Kyung Sup and Song Min-Young, 2010; Rouleau-Berger 2017). That vision implies that economic and social changes occur in an extremely condensed manner leading to a highly complex and fluid social system. We retain from that latter framework the idea of complexity and the need to overcome preformatted categories in order to extract from our empirical findings original ways to analyse social times in China.

## 1.2 Theoretical approach

Chinese literature mainly considers working conditions and family or social life as two different domains that do not connect. Our ambition would be therefore to put those fields together by exploring social times linked to specific situations of work and workplaces. Discontinuity of social times may be defined and framed as follows. “The discontinuity of social times is also one of the main characteristics of temporalities experienced in advanced industrial societies. The old forms of fluidity and continuity between the various social times are followed, in modern environments, by a strong spatial and temporal compartmentalisation between the different spheres of activity. These various spheres of activity, those related for example to work and leisure, transport and family life, education and leisure, are now rooted in multiple spaces and have particular operating modalities that ensure that they are unique in terms of the geometry of their hours, rhythms and duration,” (Mercure 1995: 38)<sup>5</sup>. We are using this problem definition and a succession of different approaches inspired by French sociology on working-time and social times. The first approach derives from labour sociology and notably from Pierre Naville. For Naville (1972), working time becomes the tightest issue in social life, because it divides our societies into working time and non-working time, making this border the issue of social struggles that everyone tries to take advantage of. Continuing along this path, we consider working time to be a major feature of the social order, because it also defines the way in which both men and women have access to the professional and domestic spheres. In other words, it is a means of defining the social order that it divides, separating the sexes by specific

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<sup>5</sup> All French sources are translated by us.

temporalities: these temporalities constitute rhythms of access and modes of engagement of men and women, in the public and private sectors. William Grossin developed that approach in focusing on coercive working time frames on all social times. It is a time that is locked and entrenched: “temporal frameworks reserve an absurd situation for the individual. They deprive him of part of his free time to sell him the other part” (Grossin, 1996, p. 28). For the analysis, Grossin proposes the notion of “the personal time equation”. “The basic temporal equation is defined as a configuration of traits common to individuals who participate in the same culture” (Grossin, 1996, p. 128). Then these equations vary from one person to another. These personal equations can be damaged by economic crises, unemployment, overwork and the loss of balance between personal and professional time. The second approach we use concerns the articulation of social times. The dissociation between lived and measured time raises the problem of their synchronisation and harmonisation (Mercure, 1995). Despite persisting conflicts, new balances between free time and other times are found by individuals and analysed according to generations and social categories (Pronovost, 1996). The differentiation of temporalities according to the sphere of activity (work, family, etc.) accompanies the mutation of social times centred on a dominant time (the time of production) towards more negotiated times (Dubar, 2004). Approaches to “reconciling” social times shift the focus to the work-life balance, the difficulty of managing both at the same time (Tremblay, 2008). The issue of continuity/discontinuity of social times is a common concern of these approaches: the articulation of dissimilar times and the analysis of new balances. In accordance with gender and labour theory, domestic activities are considered as “work” to the same extent as wage labour (Maruani, 2013). Our approach considers further that social times are originated in social rules and set up by social regulations (Reynaud, 1988) including political regulations (De Terssac et alii, 2004). Those rules may be analysed by research and fieldwork about practices and representations of time. The aim of the analysis is to apprehend time configurations, defined each as a specific set of social rules. Those time configurations may be subject to discussion beyond the localised situations we looked into.



## 2. A methodology based on case studies: a shoe and a steel factory

Our paper is based on a joint research programme (BNU-CERTOP) that has been conducted in China during two years. Field work has been done in several regions of China, based on visits and semi-directive interviews (recorded, transcribed and translated). Our contribution here is limited to two case studies with 25 interviews. The first case is a shoe factory in Fujian (South-east of China) with mainly female workers and the second case, a steel factory in Sichuan (South-west of China) with mainly male workers<sup>6</sup>.

### 2.1 A shoe factory in Fujian

In the 1980s, there was a rise of large-scale shoemaking companies in the Fujian region. Due to its favourable location, factories were mainly settled by Taiwanese. Then, in the 1990s, the shoe-making industry in Fujian developed rapidly. After 2000, numerous small businesses also appeared. But, as the costs of labour and land were increasing, large shoe-making factories moved out. Nevertheless, the cost of starting a small shoe factory was still low and there was a large female labour force available in the rural areas of Fujian. After 2010, the “living room factory” became the main mode of the shoe-making industry.

A-factory in a city of Fujian region was one of them. It was founded in 2010 by a migrant worker who had worked in the shoe production during 12 years. The A-factory is a four-store building: the basement is the warehouse of the company. The first floor is the production workshop. The second floor and above is the residence of the employer. The yard in front of the door is built with a large shed as a parking lot for employees. The building next to it is also a factory. Opposite, there is a kindergarten. There is only one production line in that factory. At present, there are 45 employees including a team leader, a quality controller, 37 employees and 5 as outsourced employees. The workers in the factory are mainly women from nearby. They enter the factory either according to acquaintance introduction or by application to a post. The main task in this factory is to produce shoe uppers. In general, winter boots are produced in the summer and summer sandals are produced in the winter. The factory uses a piece-rate wage system. Depending on the different parts of the shoe and the use of handcraft or machines (sewing workers) each type of piece is rated differently.

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<sup>6</sup> We thank the students of the BNU department of sociology for their participation in the project. We are also grateful to companies and workers for their help with access and interviews.

There is no canteen, but workers can choose to eat with the employer. Those who don't eat at the factory can get a benefit as meal subsidy. Normally, with the first month after the Chinese New Year, the factory begins its financial year. The employer retains the workers' the first month wage in order to keep them during the year. At the end of the year, that month's wage will be given back to the workers. When the factory has a new order, the team leader will indicate on the blackboard the model number, the total amount of the order, and the number that each employee finishes every day. The employee should complete the corresponding production every day before leaving work or finish it at home, if possible. Accordingly, when an employee accomplishes production in advance, she can go home early. In general, when there is no immediate deadline, the worker can choose to stay at home or to come to the factory. The context of the city is characterised by traditional family relations rooted in a lasting rural way of life, different from our second case study. As 'male breadwinners' husbands or fathers are the main resource of income of the family, while wives are in charge of housework, child care and support for parents. But the development of the shoe factories in the city created the opportunity for women to access paid work.

Our second case is a steel factory, located in Sichuan province. B-factory has a special railway, which is connected with the national railway line. It is mainly engaged in ferroalloy production. Ferroalloy is an indispensable raw material for iron and steel industry, mechanical casting industry and national defence industry. Its capacity of ferroalloy production is one of the largest in Sichuan province. B-factory's products are mainly sold to domestic large steel enterprises. In recent years, it has been expanding its export business, and now more than 50% of its products are sold to more than 20 countries and regions such as Japan and the United States. Starting in 1964, B-factory underwent the shareholding system reform in 1988, and was listed in 1993. It has undergone large-scale restructuring. The last restructuring from 2012 until today was due to severe market conditions and policy background: overcapacity in the steel industry, continuous decline in steel prices, national efforts to remove production capacity and enhancing environmental protection. That restructuring reduced staff at the core. By the end of 2016, the total number of registered employees of the company has decreased from 2800 in 2012 to 1100 at the end of 2016, a drop of around 60%. Since the establishment of the factory, the enterprise has implemented

a three-shift system. All employees of one position are divided into four groups. The 24-hour workday is divided into three eight-hour blocks. Day shift: 8 am – 4 pm, intermediate shift: 4 pm – 12 pm; night shift: 12 pm – 8 am. Each group work on the day shift, intermediate shift, night shift and rest in turn, and it is a four-day cycle. Under this system, workers work eight hours a day and take one day off every four days. But there is a tendency to implement more 12-hour shifts: day shift 8 am – 8 pm; night shift 8 pm – 8 am the next day. Each group works on the day shift, then on a night shift and rest in turn, three days for a cycle. Under this system, employees work 12 hours a day and take one day off every three days. The average working hours of the workers are 8 hours per day for each month (including weekends). 12-hour shifts lengthen working hours, increases labour intensity, but allows workers to earn relatively higher wages. B-factory favour this system in order to reduce the number of workers. However, the reform does not include all functions, because the current workload has basically reached their physical limits. The implementation of the 12-hour shift was incremental: mobilise and persuade the workers first, then appease them with the repeated lobbying by group leaders and workshop directors. There was a lot of resistance from the workers in the beginning. Later, through mobilisation and the lure of relatively high wages, most workers agreed. The company mainly employs male workers, but also women. It is not uncommon that husbands and wives work together in that same company.

Both case studies, the shoe and the steel factory included interviews with the workers (n: 25, Tab.1, Appendix). Each interview lasted between 45 and 90 minutes. It was recorded, transcribed and translated into English. In addition, we have collected biographical elements of the workers. The questions grid of questions included different blocks of themes: background and content of work, description of daily and weekly times (professional and private), the difficulty of managing times of everyday life, the adopted solutions for those problems, the long-term management of activities, free additions and suggestions. This joint Chinese-French project was based on common fieldwork and a research seminar including Chinese students at BNU. All steps of the project have been discussed together and exploratory interviews have been used to adjust the grid of themes and questions.

### 3. Results

#### 3.1 The overall importance of working time

The findings first point to the overall importance of working time. In the context of expensive living conditions and a non-developed or diminishing social security system<sup>7</sup>, the need for subsidies, children's education, social benefits are important factors for long working hours. The choice between free time and more money is nearly always in favour of the latter. Money is needed not only for food and daily necessities, but for most social services reaching from health to education. Working time extends here also to non-paid family activities, like child or parental care, housework and school activities. The notion of leisure time or free time is quite absent from the discourse about the practice of those employees, but it comes up as a representation for future change or for personal fulfilment. The usual working day for female workers in the shoe factory includes domestic work and midday breaks at home. Working days are based on the piece-work system.

'I get up at 5 A.M. to cook and boil. Then, I go to sleep after cooking and get up at 6 A.M. I have breakfast and then clean the kitchen. Usually, I leave at about 6:30, and I arrive at the factory before 7 A.M. I turn on the machine in the factory. We usually get off work at about 11:20 A.M., go home, cook, wash, sleep for a while, and then come back to work. I'm back to work at about 12:40 A.M. and usually leave at 7:00 P.M. I go home to have dinner and to do housework. I generally finish cleaning after 8 P.M., watch TV, take a bath, wash clothes and usually go to bed at 10 P.M.,' (Fujian 01).

In the steel factory working conditions are based on rotating shifts of 8 and more and more of 12 hours. Working conditions often bear health-related issues. The time frame of shift work is here more rigid and gives some protection against overtime. But the tendency in recent years to embrace 12-hour shifts or to apply for a second job tend to lengthen the work duration mainly for male workers.

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<sup>7</sup> Thus we notice a still functioning retirement system. The retirement age is low compared to other industrialised countries : 60 years for men, 50 years for women, 55 years for women employees in the civil service and state-owned companies, 55 years (men) and 45 years (women) who perform work that is considered arduous.

'We work eight hours, 3 shifts of 4 groups, that is three groups are at work while one is at rest. Then it is changed into three shifts of two groups, each works for 12 hours. The crane workers got changed to 12 hours and they opposed, because it is too tiring, the labour intensity is too high,' (Sichuan 11).

'After I have an additional part-time job' (Sichuan 8).

I have a part time job, Didi driver (Uber). After getting off the work, I will be a driver. I work in shifts and do another part-time job. I only sleep for 4 hours a day,' (Sichuan 4).

The dominant position of working time produces long working days. Domestic work and multi-employment reduce the time left for other activities. But when we asked workers what 'choice' between time and money do they favour, the answer is quite clear.

'More money. We can't live without money,' (Fujian 03).

'I want to earn more money, but there is no time to spend money,' (Fujian 04).

'We should spend more time on making money,' (Fujian 10).

'Salary is too low. No pain, no gain' (Sichuan 3).

'Only when I have time, I can go around and see, and live a little longer, I believe that life is better. But if you have no money, that's still painful, so your question doesn't have a clear answer,' (Sichuan 13).

The need for the spending of living expenses shows an alliance 'against nature' between company imposed long working hours and a majority consent to working hours as a 'total' social time. The consequence is that there is almost no time left for oneself.

'If we have free time, we will eat together or play outside with our children. About one or two times a month,' (Fujian 08).

'About half an hour a week. Sometimes I will learn some online courses such as promoting oneself in 21 days' (Fujian 09).

'I have almost no free time,' (Sichuan 04)

'I don't have time, I am the only child and my mother is in poor health. I go back to take care of the elderly on Friday and come back on Sunday. I used to go hiking, but now I don't have time to climb the mountain,' (Sichuan 10).

As a conclusion, we may observe the dominant position of working time within social times. The value of that time is that of a means to ensure living conditions. This time configuration may be called 'subsistence time'<sup>8</sup>. Workers accept long working hours, because it increases wages and compensation at a given rate. The manufacturing of consent (Burawoy, 1979) to

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<sup>8</sup> We suggested that notion to describe time configurations that are exclusively dedicated to a means of subsistence (Thoemmes 2000).

the domination of working time is linked to the objective to spend more time on work in order to increase revenues. Therefore, notions of leisure time and free time are generally 'negatively' reflected on, as a missing or lagging part of social times.

### 3.2 Continuity of social times

The second result examines how the relation between time and workplaces allows this work centred system of social times to reproduce itself. The idea that the sphere of reproduction ensures the possibility of wage labour is well known in Marxist theory, but also in sociology of gender and work. Unpaid domestic work is not only the basis for manufacturing activities, but is also considered by feminist theory as a specific socio-economic system of exploiting women (Delphy 1977, Federici 2004). Furthermore, domestic activities are not only work, but also a specific mental load (Haicault, 1984). Manufacturing industries in China show here a specific way of ensuring the continuity of social times.

#### 3.2.1 The role of women

The role of women in manufacturing industries doesn't belong here exclusively to the domestic sphere. And home is not only a sphere of reproduction of the workforce, but also a sphere of production. The first element pointing to the relation between time and space shows that women ensure continuity of home and workplace activities. Like other countries, China also has a traditional view on professional and household activities, but sharing tasks is possible.

'I perform almost all household tasks, such as buy vegetables/cook dinner/wash the dishes/wash the clothes/clean the floor,' (Fujian 11).

'90% is done by my wife. She is on early retirement and stay at home. Before that whoever is free will do it. It was not necessary to allocate time,' (Sichuan 07).

'Usually, my husband and I manage housework together,' (Fujian 04).

'My wife and I do the housework when we are free. She washes and I cook. I do more housework', (Sichuan 01).

These remarks could be issued in other industrialised countries. Primary assignation of women to household tasks, but also the share of domestic work within the couple. But in our case studies other features tend to increase women's role for continuity between production and reproduction activities goes beyond what is known in other industrialised societies. The first and most important situation is that of the absence of the husband at home. If he is one of the mainly male internal 'migrant' workers, that means he is working in another region of China. Distinguished from other countries, in China, a large number of 'peasant workers' (nong min gong) moves within the country<sup>9</sup>. The Chinese term refers to those who hold a rural household registration (hukou) and contracted land in rural areas, but who work in non-agricultural industries in urban areas and make their living on wages. The hukou system operates as an internal passport linking citizenship rights and welfare benefits to one's local place of birth. During the planning economic period, despite the unequal distribution of resources across rural and urban settings, the system was fairly effective in discouraging people from migrating without state approval. The reforms made it easier for peasants to migrate and survive in the cities. Despite these changes, the hukou system continues to shape access to welfare. For example, access to schools is still limited to the 'Hokou' location. Therefore children cannot move with parents to other provinces, even if migration itself is getting easier. For that reason husbands usually move alone to accomplish migrant work. Only once a month the family will come together in the home town. The rest of the time the spouse will be in charge of family matters and she will also pursue frequently professional activities. As a compensation the enlarged family will be mobilised for domestic activities.

'I do the housework by myself because my husband is not at home, he has gone to another province to work, there are only my children and me at home,' (Fujian 02).

'I've been in charge of things at home, because my husband makes money in other cities,'(Fujian, 05).

'I'm in charge. It's usually me who's going to fix the broken appliances. My child's father is rarely at home' (Fujian 08).

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<sup>9</sup> As stated above, and according to official data, the total number of national migrant workers reached 288 million in 2018.

The second situation that tends to increase the role of women would be due to difficult working conditions of manufacturing industries causing health issues (shift work, toxic products, etc.) or extensive working time. In this situation the life partner is ensuring continuity of the home sphere, that are in our case study, mostly women.

‘I have been working my whole life. My husband loved me very much. He was a driver and if he was free, he looked-after children at home and cooked dinner. I also worked in the factory. I was happy that I had not to care about my family. But he died in a car accident. Then I worked to raise my children,’ (Fujian 10).

I do it all. Because my husband is a smelter and he suffers from large labour intensity (Sichuan 02).

I rarely do housework, as long as my wife is at home, I will do nothing. However, I usually do my additional part-time job and I’m not at home (Sichuan 04)

I almost don’t do housework, I am too tired because of my work, so I don’t want to do it and I often fall asleep after I have finished my meal (Sichuan 10)

As a conclusion, we observe the important role of women for the continuity of the production process and of social times. This is due to a traditional conception of social roles, but, moreover, linked to the industrialisation of China and its specific rules. There is no free movement of workers inside China between regions (Hukou-system). It is very difficult for a migrant worker to take his or her family to the place of work in another region: he or she departs alone and only temporarily returns to the home town. This major figure of work in China puts the responsibility for the continuity of social times concerning home and children into women’s hands, especially as most of the migrant workers are men. Another common feature is that of difficult working conditions regarding women and men. Health-related issues, fatigue and long working hours tend to reduce the part available of male workers for domestic activities.

### 3.2.2 The enlarged family

The second element pointing to the continuity of social times, that should also at least partially regarded in the context of the Hukou-system, is to use the enlarged family for housekeeping. The life partner and sometimes the children participate like in other developed countries in domestic tasks. But our case studies also show an extensive use of the enlarged family, mainly parents, father/mother-in-law, sometimes sisters and uncles in order to perform cleaning, cooking, care for children, repairing and purchase activities. The



importance of the family is highlighted by using non-core members for basic household activities.

'My husband was hospitalised last month, and my father-in-law helped me a little more,' (Fujian 4).

'I get up 7:10 in the morning because my mother-in-law makes breakfast,' (Fujian 7).

'My father cleans the house and my mother wash the dishes. I buy the food, cook every day and wash the clothes,' (Fujian 09).

'My mother helps us to take care of my child when she was in here, and we go to work (Sichuan 04)

'We can arrange that or let him eating at my sister's family. Otherwise, he has to solve the issue himself', Sichuan 04).

Family solidarities play an important role for the articulation of social times regarding household, children and school-related activities. The enlarged family ensures that part of the continuity of social times.

### 3.2.2 Piece work and production at home

The third element of the connection/disconnection between workplace and household activities points to the wage system. In shoe factories the piece work wage system connects the payment to the number of pieces made by the worker. Time and wages are disconnected. Working time as given variable does not matter for the employee: the more she produces, the more she earns. As we have observed, the need for higher wages results in the search of long working hours. But piece work permits within the rigid time frame of industrial production, some space to deal with other activities.

'It is very flexible, we can decide operating hours by ourselves,' (Fujian 01).

'Working in the shoe factory is actually very free. It doesn't result in conflicts of time. If you want to pick up a child or have something to do, you can leave work early. I usually leave work at 11:30 A.M. to pick up children, go home to cook,' (Fujian 08).

The worker can organise the schedule on its own with an important autonomy and the 'choice' to go to the factory or not. This allows to deal consecutively with family and professional situations. But that choice is framed by the continuity of work. Production

activities may be performed at home when machines are available or not necessary to produce shoes.

‘Sometimes I work at home because some of the handiwork can be taken away. I do not have to, but I can take it home. It is very convenient to take it home and finish it quickly (Fujian 01). Sometimes I take my work home every night, even if I am on a vacation (Fujian 02). If your child is too young, you can work at home. If you have a needle car, you use your own, and if you don’t, you use the one of the factories’, (Fujian 08)

Furthermore, the production work of shoes at home extends the workplace to the private sphere. Then continuity shifts from spaces to individuals. Production work implies sometimes the help from family members.

‘This job permits to take care of the child. You can make money and you can integrate the family into these activities. So I am having a good time working here,’ (Fujian 07)  
‘If I have no time to handle something, I will call my son to help me here. If my friends come to see me, they also come to this factory,’ (Fujian 09).  
‘I refused changing the workplace. My little son always said, you could find another job. But I like this job and I will take home some shoes and ask him to help me,’ (Fujian 10).

Family members, often children, participate in the production process at home. Continuity of social times is provided by the piece work systems in two ways: by allowing to organise working time related to child care and by integrating relatives including children into the production process. Of course, our case studies cannot give evidence about the quantitative nature of child work at home. Child work has been a big problem in manufacturing industries, especially in small shoe factories<sup>10</sup>. One of the workers told us that she started working at a very young age in the factory, leaving the primary school. Now at the age of 37 she has 20 years of working experience with a nearly ten-year break due to maternity.

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<sup>10</sup> Child labour is not a minor phenomenon in China. According to Tang, Can, Liqiu Zhao, and Zhong Zhao (2018) 7.74% of children aged from 10 to 15 were working in 2010 (6.75 h per day on average, and spent 6.42 h less per day on study than other children). About 90% of child labourers were still in school. Tang, Can, Liqiu Zhao, and Zhong Zhao. “Child Labor in China.” *China Economic Review* 51 (2018): 149–66. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chieco.2016.05.006>.

'In the beginning, there was a factory, and I worked there for eight years. I stopped to do this, because of the child labour issue (children under 16). Then I went to H. and worked in here for another two years. After these, I worked in J. one year, before I got married and pregnant. I got married at the age of 22. After the age of 30, I started to do work again. At that time, the economic condition of my family was not good, and I needed to go to work' (Fujian 4).

We tried to ask when female shoe workers started their working life. Most of them started before the legal working age of 16. Even, if the state has taken initiatives to limit children work in factories, there may be the assumption that some children are occasionally working at home to help their mothers with the production of shoes.

As a conclusion, we can observe that the coordination of social times including factory and domestic work is primarily insured by women and to smaller extent by men, the enlarged family and children. The role of women is key, as they mostly guarantee the stability of the household by performing paid work and household activities in the context of the absence of male workers linked to internal migration and working conditions. The piece-work system allows 'flexibility' in the sense, either of leaving manufacturing activities in order to perform domestic activities, or to take work back home and continuing the manufacturing activities. That 'choice' is conditioned by the overall need to get an extra-income. This time configuration may be called 'continuity time'. It may include, when a male worker is at home and in good physical condition, the share of domestic activities. The enlarged family, especially parents and parents-in-law, often participate in domestic work. Continuity time includes here productive tasks performed at home. Then work of other family members may be necessary, especially those of children. The family working unit (Burton 2014) differs here from a pure productive category by including the extended family and all ages into a mix of wage labour and household activities. We also observe a generational reproduction of the working conditions that mothers experienced from a very young age entering the factory in a number of cases, well before the legal age of work. In that sense the role of child work, at least in the past, cannot be underestimated in its role for continuity of the productive activities of the household.

### 3.3 The 'royal' child

The care of children by parents has received a large attention from Chinese scholars, but in contrast, the other side of inter-generational support, the help from adult children to their parents has been less explored. In recent years, this generational exchange relationship has undergone significant changes. 'Resurgent familialism' has been a focus of scholars (Ji , 2017). Academic discussions about children's filial piety has increased, and more and more studies have found that parents, in rural or urban areas, are providing various forms of help to their *adult children*, such as providing housing, helping with domestic work and transport of children, etc. Chinese parents pay much attention to their children, especially on their education. A survey (China Parents' Education Anxiety Index Report, 2018) showed that 68% parents worried about their children's education, nearly half of the parents agreed that they spend 40% family income for their children's education.

The transition from child work to the position of children within the family shows the ambiguity of the parental position in the manufacturing industries. Most of the parents worked at a very young age and want a better future for their children. Our third point of findings shows the importance of children for practice and representations of social times in China. Given the difficulties of everyday life, children are by far the most important topic of our interviewees. The child is given a special and the central place in the family. It is concentrating all hopes and efforts. Everything that can be done, despite poor resources, is realised. The attention of the whole enlarged family is focusing on the descendants.

'For people like us, things are all about the child,' (Sichuan 06).

Nearly all interviewees stressed the importance and difficulties linked to parental activities. Compared to those, only a few interviewees mentioned problems with their own parents. The care of children is, of course, a burden of everyday life. The absence of a general whole day's school system, the need to pay for good schools and to ensure transportation, the hope that the next generation will have a better life and perhaps later care for the parents are important reasons for this. A lot of parents feel guilty or unhappy not spending more time on activities with their children. In the representations of social times children have a

key position in China. Consecutively to the one-child-policy and its adaptations<sup>11</sup>, children are considered as 'rare', 'cherished' and the attention is focused on the children of the household. The whole social life is centred around children: school, college and university. Parents feel guilty or embarrassed, when they can't help school work, when the results are not satisfying, or when they don't have enough time to spend with them. Also, time is a key issue, because the dominant position of working time doesn't leave much room for parental investment into children's homework.

'My children are misbehaving. My son's academic performance is not good although he is always hardworking,' (Fujian 01).

'I have no way to counsel my child to do homework,' (Fujian 02).

'I didn't take good care of my children because of work. I don't have time to participate in my child's school activities. I feel embarrassed about it,' (Fujian 04).

'There are too many shoes you have to finish. It makes me stressful when I can't finish it and then the children. For example, their academic performance, physical development and so on (Fujian 09).

'Look after children, earn money for them, no free time for myself,' (Fujian 02).

Nevertheless, parents are doing a lot to put their children in their way to future. They may even change the job and move from one city to another in order to find a better school. It is also quite common to send the children to a second school in the afternoon to improve knowledge in English and Mathematics.

'Primary schools in other cities have been teaching English since the third grade of primary school, and I fear that my children will not keep up with their studies. So, I began to go to other cities intermittently, just started working in Hebei for two years, and then half a year in Hebei, half a year at home, sometimes a whole year I was in Hebei,' (Fujian 05).

'He is in year 4, primary school. English and mathematics need to be more taught after school,' (Sichuan 04).

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<sup>11</sup> Family planning (birth control) was set as a basic national policy in September 1982 and written into the constitution in December of the same year. The main content and purpose are: to promote late marriage, late childbirth, fewer births and better births, so as to control the population in a planned way. By the beginning of the 21st century, some adjustments had been made to China's family planning policy. Since the first group of only children born in the 1980s has reached the age of marriage, in many areas, especially in more economically developed areas, the family planning policy has been relaxed to some extent.

Of course, these practices of changing or adding schools are expensive. Fees do occur. From the kindergarten to the perspective of higher education by joining universities, the financial effort of the parents is getting more and more intense. Education in China is expensive.

‘We used to have a company kindergarten that can help you take care of your children. We still have one, but now its costs are basically the same as kindergartens of the outside,’ (Sichuan 09).

‘It takes much money for children to study. The most important difficulty is the child problem,’ (Fujian 06).

The work situation of the parents is also a source of trouble, because they have to take important decisions linked to their career and work opportunities: dealing with shift work, long working hours and employment opportunities. Those situations lead to different attitudes in order to combine family and work or to privilege family. Some female workers would prefer to work less or to stay at home.

‘For children, it is better not to work,’ (Fujian 04).

‘I feel tired. It is so tiring to take care of a baby’ (Fujian 07).

‘Maybe because I am more traditional, I also have many job opportunities outside. But I give them up in order to take care of the child, because what about the child when you work outside?’ (Sichuan 06)

‘When I went to the middle shift, I carried the child on the back. When my husband was off the middle shift and I went to work at night shift, he took the child back at home. In 1996, when the grandma retired, the child went to live with his grandparents until college and came back when he graduated. At that time, I was too tired and now I am much better. The only child is always taken care of by the older,’ (Sichuan 10).

‘For this reason, I didn’t work in shifts. If you work on night shifts, no one will look after your child in the evening, then when you come back at 8 o’clock in the morning, the child has gone to school, right?’ (Sichuan 13).

Children have a particular place in China. A possible explanation is that industrialisation induces a future-orientated vision of society and that the descendant is valorised compared to ascendancy and tradition. Birth control did emphasise this tendency by reducing the number of young people compared to an aging population that seems to be a real problem for the years ahead<sup>12</sup>. As descendance is rarified, it is valorised and promoted as a symbol

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<sup>12</sup> As the number of children decreased in the 30-year period of birth control, as well as the social welfare, the issue of the elder is becoming more and more important.

for future and a better life. Marriage is the basis for the descendants of the family. So, it is not astonishing that after school and work, the marriage of the children is considered as a main problem and goal for the parents. On the one hand, the bridegroom side has to afford the payment of the house. It is a large sum of money for every family. In addition, organising a wedding is very expensive, because friends and the whole family should be invited and the start for the new life of the young couple must be initiated and financially supported. On the other hand, marriage still is a social problem, especially in small cities, that is to say people who are not getting married until a certain age face negative imaging not only by their parents or entourage. Those economic and social reasons show why parents are so engaged in focusing on the marriage of their children.

‘If I have a job, I will go to work. I have three sons and they all have not got married. So I have a long way to go,’ (Fujian 10).

‘Because I need to prepare my son’s future marriage. I want to help my son. I have to earn more money,’ (Sichuan 03).

As a conclusion, we can observe that children are venerated in China. At the same time, parents express that children are their most important problem regarding school, work-life balance and also marriage. Parents consider children as both a reason to accept difficult living conditions and an insurance for the future, a sign that life will improve. These representations of social times also show the meaning of work as the representation of a future (Mercurio 1995) that parents do not expect for themselves, but at least for their children. This time configuration may be called a ‘projected future’. The parent’s representation of future is projected on the descendants, their children. Careers, progression, and better working conditions seem to be blocked in manufacturing industries, so parents transfer on their children the hope for that ‘better’ future. The idea of future in the Chinese society remains ‘strong’ from a political and economic point of view. That configuration of a projected future is grounded in the every-day life, but also into the expectation that, perhaps one day, the children will care for their parents.

## Conclusions

Our article is based on fieldwork in two Chinese locations: a shoe and a steel factory. Therefore, our conclusions are limited to the results of those case studies. Also, research about social times must be seen as an emerging topic in China, as almost no previous studies are known on the subject.

We first observe that problems of discontinuity of social times in manufacturing industries are not fundamentally different from that of other industrialised countries. Literature pointed to this problem for example by indicating that the family is today a main place for dealing with that discontinuity<sup>13</sup>.

Our explorations add to that literature, a specific Chinese reality in manufacturing industries. First, we think that the scale of discontinuity of social times that we observed in Chinese manufacturing industries is quite important and at least as meaningful as that of new industries in other developed countries. That argument confirms that discontinuity of social times itself is not a new phenomenon, but permanent within industrialisation.

Second, how specific is the Chinese case compared to the industrialisation process of other countries? We have mentioned specific characteristics like the Hokou system and birth control in order to account for a different context. But our main result points to the definition, the scope, and the rules set up to deal with social times in those Chinese industries. Those are indicated by the association of different time configurations. We have indicated three of them: subsistence time, continuity time and a projected future.

‘Subsistence time’ is reflected by the dominant position of working time within all other social times. In this regulation between employers and employees, that is not without conflict or consent, the social rule implies long working hours and the emblematic

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<sup>13</sup> “Shaped by working hours, school, transport and commercial services, the family has now become the main place where the multiple discontinuities of rhythms in daily life are expressed. Indeed, it must adapt to the various personal rhythms of its members and adapt its own activities to a multitude of time constraints over which it has little control. Harmonisation between divergent social times thus becomes her daily challenge. However, under such pressures, family temporality also becomes fragmented. A privileged territory of private life and an environment par excellence of socialisation to time, the contemporary family is also the place where the fragmentation of the lived temporalities that characterise modern societies is most acutely expressed,” (Mercurio 1995:37).



discussions about the 12-hour day in the steel industry, or the piece-work system in the shoe industry. Subsistence time as a common feature has the signification of means dedicated to the social survival of the individual and the family. It is aimed to increase revenue by working time. It eliminates mostly leisure activities and free time.

‘Continuity time’ is a configuration that concerns women, men, the enlarged family and children. It is aimed to ensure the articulation of productive and domestic work, the continuity of family life and the continuity of the production process. The working family unit is a solution for those problems of discontinuity. In the context of isolated women and men by major migration issues and less developed social security, continuity time needs to engage the whole family and all social times.

‘Projected future’ is a time configuration that concerns parents and their children. But it also reflects on current work and living conditions and on the concept of family within society that remains a core value. In the context of birth control, the ‘royal’ child is the result of a parent’s projection of future. In our analysis ‘everything is about the child’, because the future of parents’ lives seems stuck in manufacturing industries, with not much room for social mobility and with interrogations about their own future and aging.

By integrating objective and subjective dimensions, the association of those time configurations (subsistence, continuity and projection) describes social times in Chinese manufacturing industries. Future investigations are necessary both to question those first results and to explore other work places and sectors to add on the knowledge about social times in China.

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## Appendix

Tab.1

Number	Local	Gender	Age	Working Years	Education	Current Occupation	Job Title	Schedule of Work	Second Job	Spouse's Occupation	Brief description
1	Fujian	Female	36	16	high school	Handwork (overedging+molding)	ordinary worker	Summer time 7:30 A.M.- 7:00 P.M. During the winter 8:00 A.M.- 8:00 P.M.	No	Paint contractor	Have been working in the factory for 6 years and had put career on hold for 3 years to get married and bear a child; the working time is very flexible.
2	Fujian	Female	42	26	Junior high school	Handwork (folding)	ordinary worker	7:30 A.M.- 5:00 P.M.	No	Businessman	Had put career on hold for 10 years to get married and bear a child; changed jobs for two times in between; have been working in this factory for 5 years.
3	Fujian	Female	42	25	Junior high school	Arrange the working process; control the quality of the products	Factory employer	8:00 A.M.- Noon 1:30 P.M.- 5:00 P.M.; Have right to choose whether to work at night	No	Widowed	Went out as migrant worker for 12 years; put the career on hold for 5 years to get married and bear a child; started to manage the factory in 2010. When business is needed, she has to go out at 6:00 A.M. and may come back at night.
4	Fujian	Female	37	20	Junior high school	Arrange the working process; control the quality of the products	Team leader	Start time: 7:30 A.M. end time: from 8:00 pm to 9:00 pm	No	Worker in the same factory	put the career on hold for 10 years to get married and bear a child; got promoted from an ordinary worker to group leader
5	Fujian	Female	41	25	Junior high	Stitching	temporary	8:00 A.M.-	No	Businessman	changed jobs several times; stopped

					school	machine operator	worker	11:00 A.M.- 1:30 P.M.- 4:30 P.M.			working for 8 years to get married and bear a child; went to another city with her husband for a year; .work when the child goes to school and in the period of children's winter and summer vacation
6	Fujian	Female	44	24	high school	Stitching machine operator	ordinary worker	8:00 A.M.- 5:30 P.M. One hour rest in lunch time	No	Businessman	Put the career on hold to get married and bear a child
7	Fujian	Female	43	On and off	Primary school	Quality inspector	Manager	8:00-7 pm One hour break in lunch time, Flexible work	No	Owner of a small factory	With two kinds. Began to work since 16 years old, stopped working for 4 years to bear and look after kind. Then went back to work in different small shoe factory. Hope to earn more money
8	Fujian	Female	35	5	Junior high school	Stitching machine operator	worker	8:00-8:00 Could leave work for looking after kids	No		The family and kids are the most important. Would like to work in an informal factory in order to look after family. Has no idea about the future.
9	Fujian	Female	42	Half a year in this factory	Junior high school	Stitching machine operator	worker	Flexible working time, have to do housework in the daytime and work for a factory in the night	No	business	Born and grow up in Guangdong, worked in Guangdong for many years, married with a Fujianness and moved to here. She works in several sectors. Kids are the centre of life. Plan to do business after the kids grow up.
10	Fujian	Female	53	Began to work since	Primary school	Hand work	worker	8:00 to 8:00 or later	No	Driver (ex-husband)	Remarried. With 3 children. Have to give money to an adult son. Adding to work in the factory, she has to work in the fields.

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11	Fujian	Female	44	8 years	Junior high school	Stitching machine operator	worker	8:00 to 8:00 or later	No		Three children, some time work overtime
1	Sichuan	Male	44	24	Technical school	Smelting (front line)	Foreman	Shift every eight hours	No	retired worker	Junior manager, work in this factory for a long time, no shift job. Used to this kind of work.
2	Sichuan	Female	41	21	Technical school	Material loading (special type o f work)	worker	Shift every eight hours	No	worker	Hardworking, some complain, shift time with her husband to look after the child.
3	Sichuan	Male	50	31	Technical school	Material loading (special type o f work)	Team leader	Shift every eight hours	No	worker, buyout	Refused promotion, will retire soon. A lot of complaints. Pay much attention to his child.
4	Sichuan	Male	42	22	Technical school	Material loading (special type o f work)	Ordinary worker	Shift every eight hours	Didi driver ( Uber )	worker	Under enormous economic stress, has two jobs. After 8 hours work, he works a driver.
5	Sichuan	Female	37	18	Technical school	Dosing	Monitor	Shift every eight hours	Play online games, sell virtual equipm ent	worker	Born in 1980s, being more avant- garde. Not satisfied with the work and life. She tries to change the situation by herself.
6	Sichuan	Female	45	11	Technical school	Dosing	Ordinary worker	Shift every eight hours	No	Policeman	Family-oriented, worked in another city for 12 years and did several kinds of jobs. Want to have a stable life.
7	Sichuan	Male	49	33	Junior high school	Smelting (front line)	Ordinary worker	Shift every eight hours	No	worker, buy out	Negative about life and work, worker for a long time, no promotion.



8	Sichuan	Male	43	26	Junior high school	Electrician (maintenance)	Ordinary worker	Shift every twelve hours	Salesman in security company	Worker in same factory	Has a second job in security company. Does not have much time to rest.
9	Sichuan	Female	45	26	Technical school	doorkeeper	Ordinary Worker	Shift every eight hours	Has worked in a restaurant	w	Has refused a promotion
10	Sichuan	Male			Senior high school	overhead crane (technical)	Senior Technician	shift 8:00 A.M.-12:00 A.M., 1 pm-5: pm	No	Worker Buy out	Ex-soldier. Not very satisfied with the situation. Often works overtime with no pay.
11	Sichuan	Male	49	30	Technical school	Smelting (front line)	Section chief	Shift every eight hours	Invest in Stocks	Worker buy out	Pay much attention to current politics; invest in the stock market; really miss the old days of planned economy period.
12	Sichuan	Male	47	24		Smelting (front line)	Team leader	Shift every eight hours	No	worker	Work in other places in early times, hardworking, always tired, hopes to have more free time.
13	Sichuan	Female	47	27	Technical school	Water pump+ air compressor (operation)	Ordinary worker	Shift every twelve hours	No	worker	Detailed knowledge about working time