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Cover art: A typical *jiagongchang* household workshop in Guangzhou, 2018. Photo by Nellie Chu.

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I dedicate this book to my grandparents and parents,

Shirley and Louis Chu.

They have given me life, love, and hope.

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Contents

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Introduction

MIGRANT BOSSHOOD AND THE MAKING OF GLOBAL FAST FASHION

On the evening of November 14, 2022, hundreds of migrants in Zhaocun and the surrounding urban villages of Guangzhou stormed out of their apartments and pushed down the tall, water-filled plastic barricades that lined one of the main thoroughfares of this garment district. The demonstrators, most of whom were migrants from Hubei Province who formed the informal *Hubeicun* (Hubei village), organized the collective action against stringent COVID restrictions, including daily mass testing and strict quarantine requirements. Most of the protesters included migrant bosses, the owners of small-scale household workshops that manufacture garments for fast fashion brands. Prior to the lockdowns, these migrant bosses and the laborers they hired had been frantically preparing garment production orders for November 11, or "Singles' Day," marketed by China's online corporate giants Taobao, Tianmall, and Alibaba as one of the biggest and most profitable shopping days of the year.

Here, in Guangzhou's largest garment district, migrants work across the global supply chains for low-cost fast fashion. Fast fashion is the "just in time" delivery of trendy and low-cost fashion garments and accessories, which are sold in low volumes. It relies critically on the transnational subcontracting of low-wage labor and manufacturing capabilities among rural-to-urban migrants in China and across the Global South. Globally recognized brands source their samples and accessories within these urban villages. Falling profits and dwindling production orders since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in late 2019 made the flood of these production orders especially important to the economic survival of the small-scale businesses in Guangzhou and, along with them, to the financial livelihoods of the migrants who sustain them.

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The lockdown mandates in the weeks and months prior to the protest event brought most, if not all, garment manufacturing activities to a halt. During the night of the protests, demonstrators cheered as they walked down the road in collective resistance against the long-standing lockdowns and other strict COVID measures in Guangzhou. Images of resistance and protest quickly circulated across social media channels in China and abroad, garnering international media attention for the scale and intensity of anger and discontent.

While observers and audiences across China and around the globe applauded the demonstrators, citing the collective action as rare direct resistance against state mandates, a deeper ethnographic analysis reveals the extent of exploitation and extraction that migrant bosses and laborers in these urban villages had already endured to keep up with fast fashion supply chains. Their experiences of ambivalent success and ongoing uncertainty had become structurally part of migrants' engagements with small-scale entrepreneurship and transnational capitalism, long before the COVID-19 pandemic. This book focuses on the market dynamics that shaped migrants' experiences of labor and livelihood as they worked across the transnational supply chains of fast fashion before and during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Mainstream critiques of fast fashion frequently center on problems related to climate change, sweatshop labor, unethical knockoffs, and cultural appropriation (Cline 2013; Klein 1999; Bravo 2020; The F Team 2021; Minney 2017; Siegle 2011; D. Thomas 2019).[1] While these criticisms highlight the nefarious effects of producing and consuming low-cost, disposable fashion characteristic of post-Fordist, "just in time" capitalism, this book lays out the stakes of fast fashion in a distinctive and unconventional light. It analyzes this sector of the global fashion industry as a historic movement in transnational capitalism that is specifically tied to China's postsocialist transformations of land, labor, and personhood.[2]

At the heart of these transformations is the emergence of the small-scale migrant entrepreneur, colloquially known as "boss," or *laoban*. Bosshood, I argue, is a transitional mode of personhood that migrants variously take on as they cross the threshold between labor and capital, attempting to convert their social statuses from working-class migrants to rightful entrepreneurs. Attention to migrant bosses therefore also shifts our analyses from fashion as a realm of consumption associated with cosmopolitanism and middle-class livelihood to migrant subcontractors in the worlds of production and distribution, whose own aspirations for these values compel them to take on various accumulative practices that are essential to the

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operation of fast fashion supply chains.[3] As a figure of capitalist accumulation, the migrant boss is characterized by the tension between the compulsion to accumulate capital and the various forms of dispossession that migrants experience in their pursuit of wealth and financial autonomy. I introduce the concept of *precarious accumulation* to bridge these structural conditions of precariousness with the intersubjective dimensions of aspiration and desire for bosshood. The figure of the migrant boss hovers on the knife-edge between boundless riches and merciless ruin in southern China's so-called workshop of the world.

While the title of "boss" implies control over stable and continuous accumulation, its juxtaposition with the position of the "migrant," as someone who embodies risk and economic instability, illustrates the ambivalence and contradictions that characterize precarious accumulation among migrant laborers and subcontractors in the world of fast fashion in Guangzhou. As a middle ground between freedom and constraint, bosshood enables migrants to negotiate the terms of their own exploitation so as to claim for themselves, albeit in limited terms, a sense of identity, autonomy, and respect. Migrants' aspirations and hopes tell us about more than the sense of hyperreality, false consciousness, or the manufactured reality of their experiences of labor and livelihood (as thinkers in the Frankfurt School might suggest, e.g., Horkheimer and Adorno [2002]). They lend insight into the structural violence that persists on a transnational scale and that remains deeply embedded within the promises of freedom through migratory self-enterprise.

In Guangzhou, rural migrants from China's countryside collaborate with South Korean jobbers and West African traders, two of the largest populations of transnational migrants in the city's fast fashion markets and urban villages, as they collectively bridge the transnational supply chains of low-cost garments and accessories via small-scale entrepreneurship. In their attempts to escape poverty, wage work, and unemployment in their home countries and native places, these migrant entrepreneurs aspire to become good, even godly, model entrepreneurs by improvising novel forms of subcontracted labor and cross-cultural collaboration.[4] While there is no single instantiation of bosshood, migrants' experiences of *laoban* are intimately shaped by these broader socioeconomic dynamics as well as by the employment and migration histories they bring into their divergent roles and positions along fast fashion supply chains.

By delving into the figure of the migrant "boss," this book takes the worlds of labor and capital not as separable entities. Rather, it examines

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the generative relations between these worlds, narrating how land, labor, and personhood in a postsocialist context are transformed into forces that are made ready and available for extraction. The migrant boss, as I show, is critically linked to deepening postsocialist China's engagements with global capitalism. The rise of this figure through small-scale subcontracting represents a historic moment in which productive energies that were once invested in Maoist projects of collectivization in China are now fragmented, individuated, and mobilized for profit: the main organizing principle of free market enterprise (Nitzan and Bichler 2009; Veblen 1904). Capital, in this sense, represents more than just an object or an ideology. It is a mode of power through which the dynamics of accumulation materialize via the extraction, exploitation, and extortion of the creative forces that undergird relations of class, industry, and labor (Nitzan and Bichler 2009). As a corollary, the "boss" is an agent of capital, an emergent mode of accumulative power.

An ethnographic analysis of the migrant boss reveals how this figure of labor and livelihood exceeds the notion of individual will or hard work. It exposes the underlying dynamics of power and inequality that entice vulnerable segments of society to engage in risky economic endeavors. Through their engagement with transnational fast fashion supply chains, migrant bosses enter a world of labor exploitation, racialized policing, and extortion in Guangzhou's urban villages across unequal relations of extraction and accumulation.[5] In this predatory "bust economy," peasant landlords, private officers, and market competitors extract fees and siphon profits from the migrant bosses. While the structural pressures of capitalist accumulation, including urbanization, low wages, debt, and discriminatory practices, continually operate against their best interests, the migrant bosses seek temporary gaps or market niches from which they can accumulate capital. In other words, my ethnographic analyses tell stories of broader relations of capitalization, inequality, and power (Marx 1857; Nitzan and Bichler 2009) whereby global supply chains for fast fashion accelerate and intensify the relations of accumulation among market participants in postsocialist China.

These experiences leave migrant bosses hovering in an ambiguous and ambivalent space somewhere in between the figure of the sweatshop laborer and the globe-trotting entrepreneur.[6] Their experiments in precarious accumulation demonstrate how vulnerable populations stake hope and better ways of living (more secure, less precarious, and less brutal) upon the rhythms of transnational capitalism. These life-generating projects

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paradoxically leave them with feelings of ongoing deferment, marked by ambivalence and vulnerability. Following this insight, this book asks: If entrepreneurship and self-enterprise are inherently risky, why do migrants and other vulnerable groups, who remain among the bottom segments of society, persistently aspire to achieve the perceived status and wealth associated with being an entrepreneur? What do they imagine are the promises of entrepreneurship? How do migrants' experiences of transnational and domestic rural-to-urban migration shape their cross-cultural encounters and experiments with bosshood? What does the rise of migrant bosshood tell us about China's postsocialist transformations and its position in global capitalism, particularly amid its intensified participation in transnational supply chains?

The stories that I present in these pages illustrate the spectrum of dilemmas and fantasies that make fast fashion and transnational capitalism possible. They also narrate how market liberalization leaves gaps through which state governance and neoliberal governmentality assert their influences upon migrant populations. Migrant bosses' actions shed light on the innovative work and imaginative possibilities that they forge for themselves to achieve some degree of wealth and accumulation while, at the same time, these novel practices leave them in conditions of precarity. Their experiences provide alternative perspectives to the notion of "freedom," whereby their experiences of market "freedom" leaves them vulnerable to divergent mechanisms of everyday regulation and governmentality delivered squarely via the market and not via direct policies of state control. As such, their stories demonstrate how capitalist concepts—including exploitation, extortion, racism, and expulsion—that are conventionally tied to waged labor play out through nonwage work across supply chains.[7] The chapters that follow show how capitalist accumulation materializes in cultural and relational practices. Ultimately, although migrants do not see their participation as "labor," this ethnography reveals the cultural labor that makes capitalist accumulation across transnational supply chains possible.

MIGRANT BOSSHOOD IN POSTSOCIALIST CHINA

"Our fate took a turn for the worst. The accident came at a time when we were financially struggling the most. Looking back, the short period of financial success we had turned out to actually be an omen, a curse," Xiao Ye, a thirty-year-old migrant and mother of two, confessed to me when I met

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her one afternoon in 2014. Earlier that day, I was wandering through the maze of factory workshops, pedicabs, and pedestrian traffic that stretched behind the towering accessories market in the garment district of Guangzhou. As I passed through the alleyways, I met Xiao Ye in her thread and yarn stall that served the fast fashion supply chains. During our conversation, Xiao Ye informed me that her brother had experienced a tragic hit-and-run motorcycle accident along one of the alleyways nearby that left him handicapped. Sadly, fires and vehicular accidents in these urban villages were quite common because traffic, fire, and other safety regulations were often neglected or, at best, infrequently enforced. The police never caught the driver, leaving Xiao Ye and her family to wonder why the accident befell them. Hospital bills left the family in financial hardship, but they were relieved that his life was spared.

Looking back ten years later, Xiao Ye acknowledged that those years of prosperity had, sadly, already passed. The family's initial enthusiasm for small-scale enterprise deteriorated over years of struggle and impermanent success. Xiao Ye explained that the prices of cotton and other raw materials had skyrocketed within a few years, making their business difficult to maintain. Private security officers had begun to exercise strict regulatory oversight over the flows of people, commodities, and money into and out of the urban villages. Oftentimes, these top-down pressures resulted in unexpected fines and threats that impinged upon the sense of security migrants once felt about living in the urban villages. "Right now," as she complained, "Business is no good, but there's not much else we can do. It's difficult to find workers [who are willing to work for us]. Factory jobs pay too little, and we don't have state security. We can't rely on anyone to take care of us. We need to rely on ourselves (*kao ziji*)." The financial burden that resulted from her brother's accident, compounded by the fall in profits of their small-scale business, led her to wonder whether they could ever reclaim their early successes. In a hushed tone, Xiao Ye said, "It's not good to make too much money. Having too much money brings bad luck."

As undocumented migrants from China's countryside, Xiao Ye and her family have no rights to the state-sponsored health and welfare benefits that city residents can access. This exclusion is due to the *hukou* household registration system, a policy that designates citizens as either rural or urban and agricultural and nonagricultural (Smart and Zhang 2006). It was initially enacted to contain the migration of peasants from the rural regions to the cities during the Maoist period, and it continues to be enforced in

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the present day. Migrants whose *hukou* remains tied to the countryside are excluded from state protections and benefits in the cities. As outsiders (*wai di ren*) and members of the "floating population" (*liudong renkou*), migrants are left without state protection and without a social safety net. Their status as migrants leaves them vulnerable to the exploitation associated with low-wage labor. They thus become exposed to the shadow economies of policing, extortion, and rent/fee extraction that often threaten the survival of their small-scale enterprises.

In Guangzhou's urban villages, for instance, rural migrants are often asked to show *hukou* identifications and business licenses to patrolling officers. Sometimes, officers order migrant bosses to shut down their vendor stalls or factories without notice. These examples show how rural migrants are compelled to navigate the entanglements of postsocialist urbanization in China, particularly the secondary extractive economies that have emerged as a result of urban renewal. In response to the uncertainties of livelihood and labor that they face in the cities, migrants like Xiao Ye take on the role of the "boss" to dictate the conditions of their precarity and exploitation.

To be sure, the *laoban*, as an illustrative figure of the entrepreneur in transnational Guangzhou, serves as an allegorical and culturally significant persona that underscores growing class-based inequalities and market uncertainties in a globalizing China built squarely on the backs of migrant laborers. The "boss" persona appropriates the trope of an American brand of rugged individualism, yet it is firmly rooted within the widening gender- and class-based disparities that characterize China's postsocialist transformation. Historically, since the introduction of market reforms, the "boss" as an aspirational figure embodies the Chinese counterpart to the American dream; the "boss" is publicly personified by a man, or by a similarly masculinist figure, who not only amasses wealth but also assumes *ownership* over his wealth by making deals, mediating requests, and acting as a provider among networks of personal dependents.

The demonstration of the "self-made" boss is dependent on one's ability to possess and assert control over one's wealth. As a self-made person, the boss attempts to defy administrative oversight and accountability by state powers while overcoming market crises through their attempts to gain access to global markets. More importantly, this figure mobilizes *aspirations* of entrepreneurial freedom among other bosses who have not quite secured their ranks in the globe-trotting elite classes. As Liu Xin (2002, 37) writes:

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> The person who pays is in charge; the person who is in charge owns; the person who owns takes responsibility for what happens; the person who takes responsibility for what happens is *laoban*. It does not mean that this term of address cannot be used, as a metaphor, by someone who addresses a person in charge, such as an official calling his superior, but in the story of (capitalist) development, particularly in South China, the word's connotations are determined by the emergence of an image of someone who is in charge by virtue of ownership.

In other words, the *laoban*, or "boss," takes charge of their fate in the face of increasing socioeconomic uncertainties, which are simultaneously marked by the retraction of state-sponsored welfare and by global market crises. At the same time, bosshood mobilizes people's dreams and aspirations for a better life despite these growing uncertainties.

The figure of the boss may be compared to other masculine risk-taking figures in the corporate world, such as stock market traders, Wall Street bankers, and the "salarymen" in Japan (Allison 1994; Hertz 1998; Ho 2009; Miyazaki 2013). In China, the biological reproduction of the family—upon which the Made in China model of low-wage, subcontracted labor power depends—is also gendered, since reproductive labor remains within the domain of women's work even though the family unit critically undergirds men's performances of entrepreneurial freedom (Federici 1975; Hochschild 1985, 2012; Prieto 1997; Pun 2005). While scholarly works tend to highlight the flexible strategies and disciplinary regimes associated with the crafting of gendered and class-based accumulative strategies around the world, many observers tend to overlook how migrants' involvement in these transnational modes of flexible accumulation, upon which their livelihoods depend, leads directly to precarious conditions. Indeed, one critical aspect of being economically "self-made"—assuming responsibility for and taking charge of one's financial future—also means taking on all the associated risks of becoming an entrepreneur.

For example, in recounting her story, Xiao Ye framed her experience of becoming her own boss (*zuo laoban*) in terms of misfortune, inexplicable tragedy, and state bias toward her and other working-class migrants, thus implicitly underscoring the social inequalities that have widened since Deng Xiaoping's introduction of market reforms in 1978. Such growing inequalities are exemplified by the prejudice and discrimination that local Guangzhou residents often display toward migrant workers who have taken up residence and low-wage employment in the city's urban villages.

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Popular discourses of violence, danger, and crime that city residents project onto this garment district and its residents compel migrants like Xiao Ye to position themselves as aspirational bosses in relation to the post-Mao project of massive urbanization in the hope of escaping their former status as rural citizens. Her deep-seated feelings of personal loss, compounded by her struggles to sustain the family business, led her to reassess whether her family's entrepreneurial pursuits were worth the cost to the family's sense of security.

While the personification of the migrant boss in Guangzhou resembles other figures of entrepreneurial self-enterprise, bosshood in China, as I argue, is a uniquely postsocialist phenomenon. More specifically, it signifies a broader transformation of land, labor, and personhood as collective identities and senses of belonging fracture along class-based divisions of rural and urban designations. Displaced from their native places in the countryside and excluded by the *hukou* from state welfare benefits and protections offered by the cities (L. Zhang 2002; Yan 2008; Pun 2005; Siu 2007; Smart and Zhang 2015; Zhan 2015; Ling 2020), Chinese rural migrants have little recourse but to embrace the persona of the boss despite the precarious conditions of their labor. They take on the risks and rewards of small-scale, individual, and privatized experiments of capitalist accumulation—without the social safety nets needed to offset the losses entailed in risky self-enterprise (Y. Zhan 2022). Meanwhile, transnational migrants, particularly those from the Global South, especially West Africa and South Korea, are not part of the *hukou* system. Yet as noncitizens of China, they encounter similar exclusions and discrimination to Chinese rural migrants in Guangzhou (Lan 2016b; Castillo 2016; Wilzcak 2018; G. Huang 2019). For this reason, migrants retain their statuses as migrants, or *wai di ren* (domestic and transnational), regardless of the amount of wealth or social status they manage to accumulate.

The conditions of precarity and precariousness among migrants in China are especially apparent in the domain of property ownership (Lan 2016b; Castillo 2016; Wilzcak 2018; G. Huang 2019).[8] Although migrants can discursively declare, to a limited extent, ownership over the conditions of their labor and exploitation, they are able to claim only a very limited idea of ownership in practice, since the *hukou* and immigration policies legally and administratively constrain them from owning property while also excluding them from labor and business protections in the cities (Liao and Zhang 2020). The categorization of people as foreign and local as well as rural/urban and agricultural/nonagricultural, according to the *hukou*, critically determines

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migrants' access to sources of wealth and capital accumulation, including mortgage loans, fixed capital, property ownership, and state welfare benefits (Liao and Zhang 2020).[9] In turn, the *hukou* and immigration policies determine the spectrum of risks that domestic and foreign migrants must take on in order to accumulate or to build their wealth. In a broader sense, the exclusions of the *hukou* and other forms of policing transnational migrant populations create a migrant surplus, whose labor becomes available when the market needs them (Hillenbrand 2023). At the same time, the *hukou* and other migrant-regulation policies deny them claims to state protection and entitlements.

As Chinese rural migrants encounter transnational migrants in Guangzhou, both populations mutually realize the possibilities and limitations associated with the fragmentation of class collectivities across global supply chains. In light of the retreat of class as a source of political collectivization and personal identification, bosshood offers both domestic and transnational migrant subcontractors a social role through which they can invest their labor and social identifications in the worlds of fast fashion and capitalist accumulation. The societal valorization of individual control, autonomy, and risk-taking enterprise draws migrant bosses into the supply chains through which they must learn the ropes of small-scale subcontracting. However, they take on the role of the boss without the state and social protections that offset the risks of entrepreneurial self-enterprise. As subcontractors, domestic and transnational migrants in Guangzhou experience firsthand the consequences of large-scale divisions of class and labor as well as the increasingly unequal dynamics of accumulation that undergird them.

Upon their arrival in the urban villages, migrants encounter peasant landlords (*tu er dai*), whose accumulative interests rest upon the rental incomes they receive from migrants who have no formal claims to land or property in the cities. Indeed, the mushrooming of garment mass manufacture in the urban villages provides a lucrative income for the *tu er dai*, who paradoxically were once peasants themselves—and thus demonstrating the large-scale effects of the class-based fragmentation of former peasants along rural/urban divides. Moreover, as migrants learn the ropes of small-scale subcontracting, they encounter competitors and bigger bosses, whose profit-driven interests may put migrant bosses' attempts to accumulate capital at risk. Competition, debt, and bankruptcy color migrants' experiences of small-scale entrepreneurship in Guangzhou. The figure of

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the full-fledged entrepreneur thus remains aspirational for many migrant bosses in Guangzhou.

In tracing the accumulative practices of domestic and transnational migrant bosses, I do not approach class and labor as ahistorical or preconceived categories. Rather, I view the discourses of class and labor as critically linked to the changing dynamics of accumulation among various migrant groups amid large-scale societal transformations, whereby factory work is no longer recognized as labor, a source of class-based collectivization and political identification. Migrant bosshood emerges from these postsocialist transformations. As an administrative and legal category, the migrant signifies social abandonment by the state through the exclusion of welfare and social protection (via the *hukou*), on the one hand, and entrepreneurial hope, dignity, and possibility, on the other.

Bosshood, as I argue, offers an imaginative, albeit ambivalent, space for migrants to grapple with, negotiate, and reflect on the complexities and paradoxes of human freedom and dignity in the era of transnational capitalism. These values, though expressed in public discourse as universalist and equally achievable for all, remain implicated in broader dynamics of wealth and accumulation that are dictated by the interests of landlords, multinational corporations, state officials, and even God. These overlapping and competing worlds of accumulation comprise the global supply chains of commodity manufacture and exchange. The ethnographic analyses that I sketch in the following chapters illustrate the paradoxes and tensions embodied by the figure of the migrant boss, which has emerged from and continues to signify the postsocialist fragmentation of class as well as the retreat of labor as a political category in China and beyond.

Today, the migrant boss is a figure of precarity and possibility. As aspirations shift from low-wage labor to entrepreneurial self-enterprise, Chinese migrants, particularly youths, no longer desire to work in the factories as employees (Y. Zhan 2022; Rofel and Yanagisako 2018; Ling 2020). The decline of the welfare state, rural decollectivization, and the breakup of the so-called iron rice bowl have compelled migrants to strive for capitalist accumulation at the scale of the individual. In a segment of the global fast fashion industry that relies on market speed, flexibility, and temporariness, the risks of migrant bosshood become even more pronounced for small-scale subcontractors who must anchor their aspirations for freedom, hope, and mobility upon the whims of global supply chain capitalism (Tsing 2009).

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PRECARIOUS ACCUMULATION

China remains the largest source of fast fashion commodities in the world (Simpson 2020). In 2018, for example, sales in China's apparel market exceeded $322 billion USD with a growth rate at 7.8 percent, the fastest growth rate since 2014 (Daxue Consulting 2019). In Guangzhou, rural Chinese, West African, and South Korean migrant subcontractors become aspiring agents of capital. As "bosses," they are not solely figures of low-cost labor, mere victims of exploitation upon which capitalists or multinational corporations depend. Rather, they labor as mediators and facilitators of transnational subcontracting, who in their efforts to become bosses themselves, generate novel practices of capitalist accumulation while inadvertently intensifying the fracturing of the migrant classes and relations of inequality across global supply chains. As an analytical framework, *precarious accumulation* lends insights into these everyday practices of capitalist accumulation and into how global supply chains mobilize the desires for migrant bosshood, in all its unique and divergent forms.

Precarity and precariousness are useful conceptual lenses through which to examine the social fragilities and volatilities associated with China and global capitalism since the late 1970s (the post-reform period); they help reveal the socioeconomic effects of labor and livelihood when collective identities and senses of personhood are no longer defined through the discourses of labor and class (Rofel 1999; Butler 2004; Neilson and Rossiter 2005, 2008; Tsianos and Papadopoulos 2006; Ong and Zhang 2008). More specifically, I use precarity and precariousness to bridge the structural dynamics of postsocialism and neoliberalism with the paradoxical conditions of mobility and immobility characteristic of migrant bosshood.

In China, the dismantling of state-operated enterprises, urban work units (*danwei*), and Maoist rural collectives mirrored in many ways the gradual decline of the welfare state, Fordist factories, and stable employment after the enactment of free market and neoliberal policies in countries across Western Europe and the former Soviet bloc, from which the discourse of precarity historically emerged (Dirlik 1989; Solinger 2022; Hillenbrand 2023).[10] More specifically, in China, state-sponsored projects of decollectivization, including the household responsibility system and township and village enterprises (TVEs) in the countryside, left millions of former peasants with little choice but to migrate to the cities in search of employment and affordable housing (Anagnost 1997; Rofel 1999; L. Zhang 2002; Siu 2007; Yan 2008).[11] Since the 1980s, migrant laborers have

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found employment in export factories that have mushroomed in Special Economic Zones (SEZs) such as Shenzhen and Guangzhou, fueling foreign direct investments and industrial development (Lee 1998; Pun 2005; Chang 2009; Breznitz and Murphree 2011; Litzinger 2013; Pun and Chan 2012; Friedman 2014).[12] At the same time, foreign subcontractors have migrated to the SEZs to forge industrial and financial relations with Chinese factory owners, thereby creating the early socioeconomic links that help to sustain global supply chain capitalism in the present day.

The rise of migrant bosses and the associated Made in China model of globalized, low-cost production have been made possible by linking the postsocialist experiments of market liberalization in China with the global capitalist economy after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War. Impoverished in the countryside and their native places, rural Chinese and transnational migrants have left their native places to seek better employment opportunities and higher wages in the cities (Gaetano and Jacka 2004; Yan 2008). The popular discourse of *chuang* (or going out) into the worlds of entrepreneurship and self-enterprise draws migrants to cities like Guangzhou. However, for rural Chinese migrants, the *hukou* policy of population control excludes them from claiming rights and benefits in urban areas. Meanwhile, transnational migrants arrive in Guangzhou in hopes of achieving wealth and entrepreneurial freedom, though their statuses as foreigners also leave them excluded from certain rights and protections in the city. The combination of the deregulation of rent-seeking, profit-making activities and increased regulation of the mobility of these low-waged migrant laborers creates an opening through which third-party agents, village landlords, and more powerful bosses compete alongside migrant entrepreneurs across the fast fashion commodity chains, leaving self-enterprising migrants vulnerable to extraction and exploitation.

These large-scale postsocialist transformations have compelled some scholars and observers to question the extent to which the Chinese economy can be appropriately deemed neoliberal (H. Wang and Karl 2004; Harvey 2005; Rofel 2007; Ong and Zhang 2008; Weber 2018a, 2018b, 2020, 2021; H.-M. L. Liu 2023). Some scholars have asserted that neoliberalism is not a one-size-fits-all package of economic reforms and policies prescribed by the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the World Trade Organization and passively adopted in China (H. Wang and Karl 2004; Rofel 2007; Weber 2018b). They argue that the Chinese state has enacted its own policies of market reforms, restructuring society and the economy in ways that have diverged from neoliberal policies, or *shock therapy*, as had

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been prescribed by the capitalist nations of the Global North and experimented in regions across the Global South (Rofel 2007; Weber 2021). After all, the Chinese state, at various levels, continues to assert its ongoing control and regulation over market activities across divergent domains of economic life, both domestic and abroad, leading some scholars to describe China's political economy as a mixed economy, or as state capitalism (Ong and Zhang 2008; Hung 2009; Liebman and Milhaupt 2015; Weber 2021; H. Zhang 2021; Du 2023).

While the question of whether China's economic growth since Deng's introduction of market reforms entailed policies that should be legitimately deemed neoliberal exceeds the scope of this book, it is imperative to address *how* neoliberalism, as an analytical framework, is relevant to China, particularly those aspects of economic life and livelihood in which the retreat of the welfare state and the rise of market-based practices of governmentality have deeply affected migrant laborers there (Weber 2018b). My approach to the intersecting topics of neoliberalism, precarity, and China focuses on the low-waged domestic and transnational migrant populations in China as well as on the modes of market-based regulation and government regulation of their mobility that emerged following market reforms. I argue that the freeing of certain market controls, accompanied by the large-scale withdrawal of state welfare, leaves spaces through which officials, third-party agents, and bigger bosses compete with small-scale migrant entrepreneurs. These forms of regulation and governmentality do not fit solely into an authoritarian order of institutionalized state governance. They rely on everyday nonstate practices of capitalist accumulation among migrant entrepreneurs that draw upon market mechanisms of supply and demand.

The societal effects of market liberalization and the subsequent precaritization of life and livelihood, as I show, are most evident among the low-waged migrant populations in China. Since the 1990s, during which the central government dismantled collective enterprise and promoted the market economy, the state oversaw the retreat of its welfare programs as well as the decentralization of its planned economy. These moves critically signaled a gradual shift in its role from overseeing a centralized, planned economy during the Maoist period to regulating economic practices based on market mechanisms via the everyday rhythms of migratory life and labor. As I will show in the chapters that follow, state entities, third-party agents, and other competitors—whether at the central or local levels—enter the market as active participants rather than as merely passive facilitators

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(Weber 2018b, 2021). Their market-based activities, in turn, determine the opportunities and chances for profit-making and accumulation that small-scale migrant bosses encounter. Furthermore, the state engages with techniques of neoliberal governance, which entails cultivating desirable citizen-subjects and which ideologically justifies the central state's move away from a socialist planned economy along with the promises once guaranteed by a socialist welfare system, or the iron rice bowl, while simultaneously maintaining controls over the flows of commodities, people, and capital (Rofel 2007; Ong and Zhang 2008).

The notion of the neoliberal self that is embodied through migrant subcontracting and self-enterprise thus converges with China's postsocialist transformations in Guangzhou's urban villages. More specifically, the desiring, entrepreneurial self, particularly the figure of the rational, self-interested, and risk-taking boss (*laoban*) exemplifies the ideal citizen-subject characteristic of the reform era. As Margaret Hillenbrand (2023) argues, postsocialism and neoliberalism in China are twin conditions, structural developments that mirror and reinforce one another.[13] Both are characterized by the fracturing of class collectivities as well as by the individualization and privatization of the self whereby work is no longer politically and socially valued as labor. Rather, work is seen as a platform for self-enterprise and entrepreneurial risk-taking endeavors, practices of capitalist accumulation that have been made privatized, modulated, and immediate (Amin 1994; Harvey 1987; Ong 2006; Rofel 2007; Ong and Zhang 2008; Tsing 2009; Yanagisako and Rofel 2018; Amin and Richaud 2020; G. Huang 2020; Kornbluh 2024; Nguyen et al. 2024).

This book provides ethnographic analyses of these socioeconomic transformations from the perspective of migrant laborers in China, demonstrating how small-scale self-enterprise does not spontaneously emerge from a privatized, autonomous self. Rather, it materializes out of historical and social relations of land, labor, and personhood that are anchored upon postsocialist transformations. For example, aspirations for entrepreneurial self-enterprise, or bosshood, have been promulgated in the state-sponsored projects of the "China Dream," serving as an alternative vision to the capitalist, accumulative aspirations of the "American Dream." This campaign aims to further flatten out the contradictions of free market practices and state regulation, that is, practices that do not fit strictly within a purely neoliberal or socialist ideology. As Lisa Rofel (2007) argues, the creation of desiring subjects across China's domains of public culture aims to remake the aspirations and desires of its subject-citizens in ways

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that reimagine the new world order and China's place in it in the aftermath of the Cold War. The figure of the migrant boss and the boss's entrepreneurial aspirations thereby signify a key moment whereby China's postsocialist transformations of land, labor, and personhood critically intersect with its intensified participation in the world's capitalist supply chains.

My ethnography thereby traces how migrant self-enterprise remains embedded in shared meanings and experiences of socioeconomic uncertainty, even if the language of class no longer holds the same social meaning and political force as it did during the Maoist period (Dirlik 1989; Pun 2005; Anagnost 2008; Smith and Pun 2018; K. Lin 2019; Chuang 2020; Hillenbrand 2023). This focus contributes to scholarly understandings of precarity and precariousness in several ways. First, I frame precarity and precariousness as not solely tied to waged employment, as conventionally defined, particularly with respect to economies of the Global North (Butler 2006; Standing 2011; Muehlebach 2011; Allison 2013; Swider 2015; Pang 2019; Driessen 2019; Hillenbrand 2023). Rather, I link precarity and precariousness with relations of accumulation and risk to flesh out the moments in which migrants are drawn into transnational supply chains through the aspirational forces of bosshood as well as the moments in which they are dispossessed and expelled from the chains. Precarity, in this sense, seems to mirror the notions of cruel optimism, anxious desire, and competing desires in the context of transnational capitalism (Berlant 2011; Millar 2018). Yet I view entrepreneurial aspiration, and the associated conditions of precarity and precariousness, as specifically tied to the movement of capital, particularly to the *dynamics of accumulation*, that fluctuate in unpredictable ways.

As I demonstrate, migrant bosshood (both domestic and transnational) emerges across fast fashion supply chains that continuously change according to variable market conditions on both national and transnational scales. As small-scale and self-employed subcontractors across the intermediary links of the commodity chains, migrant bosses become extremely vulnerable to fickle consumer demands that may change on a whim at one end of the production chain, while having to remain responsive to competing bosses and local manufacturers on the other end. In this way, migrant bosses must exploit their subcontractors and hired workers while at the same time learning to compete and evade exploitation by other, competing bosses in the industry.

Amid the proliferation of transnational subcontracting around the globe, the rise of the migrant boss illustrates what Silvio Lorusso (2019)

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describes as the emergence of the *entreprecariat*, a class of laboring subjects who have thrown off the shackles of wage labor and have embraced the spirit of entrepreneurship and self-employment. Free market enterprise taps into their dreams and imaginations, mobilizing their innate qualities of being human in the world.

The entreprecariat sheds critical light on entrepreneurship not only as an economic activity but also as a set of cultural values and particular ways of life that are becoming a defining aspect of labor and livelihood among workers around the world. This set of values champions the principles of rugged individualism, *race to the bottom* competition, masculine freedom, and risk-taking enterprise so as to marshal workers' human potential in pursuit of the universalistic ideals of autonomy and security (Lorusso 2019). Thus, in contrast to current framings in the anthropology of capitalism, the contradictory experiences of risk and reward, mobility and immobility, and freedom and exploitation show that precarity is produced out of aspirational entrepreneurialism through a combination of intersecting and contingent socioeconomic relations. These relations are intimately tied to forms of bosshood that remain fragmented and uneven.

Second, my book exposes how the notion of being self-made obscures the relational dimensions of precarity and precariousness, highlighting the relations of inequality that produce conditions of exclusion and dispossession in the first place. Migrants' experiences of bosshood shed light on precarity and precariousness as *uneven* relations of accumulation among various class groups. Scholars have cogently elaborated the creation of the migrant classes as a flexible reservoir of surplus workers, whose labor is mobilized and extracted when markets demand them and then subsequently disposed of when no longer needed (Solinger 1999; Zhang 2001; Pun 2005; Pun and Smith 2007; Siu 2007; Yan 2008; Swider 2015; I. Pang 2019; Evans 2020; Ling 2020; Y. Zhan 2022; Hillenbrand 2023).[14] This book contributes to these scholarly conversations by focusing not only on the labor practices of migrant groups but also on their accumulative practices and relations as they traverse the edges of labor and capital.

Across fast fashion supply chains, migrants move into and out of unemployment, wage work, and self-employment, thus blurring the boundaries between workers and entrepreneurs as well as between the conditions of wage work and those of self-employment. As aspirational entrepreneurs, migrant bosses are dispossessed and excluded from the legal statuses of legitimacy and security. Denied of labor protection, property ownership, and national citizenship in Guangzhou, they feel as if they are treading in

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place—a condition of *stalled mobility* that I return to below. As they experience the risks and rewards of bosshood, precarious accumulation highlights how transnational and domestic migrants become exposed to wider forces of extraction and dispossession by more powerful bosses who compete and seek to accumulate for themselves.

Finally, my work highlights the transnational dimensions of precarity and precariousness, challenging framings of these concepts within the boundaries of individual nation-states or solely within the Global North.[15] My stories of South Korean and West African migrant bosses in Guangzhou uncover the broader transnational and cross-regional dynamics of precarity and accumulation, which exceed national scales of analysis. Migrants' experiences of precarious accumulation unfold across both global and national scales, as they cross national boundaries and imagine China as a platform for religious and ethnic accumulation. While West African Christian traders echo the principles of the prosperity doctrine and attempt to accumulate God's graces of health and wealth as self-enterprising entrepreneurs in Guangzhou, South Koreans tap into the networks of ethnic accumulation by catching the global K-pop wave and operating as intermediary agents, colloquially known as jobbers, in the world of global Korean pop culture and fast fashion. The landscapes of precarity and precariousness weave together the cross-regional worlds of migrant uncertainty and dispossession across the global supply chains.

Furthermore, as transnational migrants, South Korean and West African migrants must bridge linguistic and cultural divides to settle and build their client bases in Guangzhou and to kickstart their businesses. While West Africans build relationships of trust, friendship, and romance with Chinese locals and migrants, South Koreans rely on the Korean Chinese (*Chaoxianzu*) ethnic community to serve as their cultural, linguistic, and market intermediaries. Thus, migrants' experiences of bosshood cast precariousness in a similar yet contrasting light from that which Lorusso (2019) proposes, linking it specifically to bosses' personal experiences of migration and mobility (domestic and transnational), which are themselves uniquely shaped by kin- and faith-based relationships as well as by migrants' aspirations for freedom, recognition, and distinction.

Accumulation is one of the foundational principles of free market enterprise. For migrants in Guangzhou who have emerged from unemployment, construction labor, and wage work in factories, urban legends of migrant bosses in the fast fashion industry unexpectedly tapping into a windfall of profits fuel their aspirational desires for wealth and security.

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These aspirations for bosshood drive them to seek self-enterprising capitalist accumulation, while other means of fulfillment and manifestation of their desires for autonomy and dignity become foreclosed due to state-sponsored neoliberal projects and policies of privatization. Yet, many persist in their attempts to accumulate capital across the fast fashion supply chains, leaving them in conditions of ambivalence, uncertainty, and precariousness—stalled mobility.

STALLED MOBILITY

Scholars oftentimes approach aspiration and precariousness as separable facets of social life, placing the two ideas in a causal relationship such that aspiration leads the working class and vulnerable populations to conditions of precariousness or vice versa. Yet, the question remains as to whether the aspiration for wealth leads to precariousness, or whether the experience of precariousness leads to a deeper desire or need for capitalist accumulation. Taking this question as a stepping-stone, this book argues that in the current era of neoliberal transnational capitalism, accumulation and aspiration cannot be conceptually separated. More specifically, migrant bosshood bridges these concepts, grounding capitalism and accumulation in the everyday cultural practices of people who engage in and remake the meaning of entrepreneurship through their lived experiences.[16]

Accordingly, one aspect of precarious accumulation that migrant bosses experience when they encounter obstacles to accumulation is the experience of a treadmill-like effect of chasing after capital and social mobility, which I call *stalled mobility*. As migrant bosses move back and forth between the categories of worker, entrepreneur, and back again, their sense of stalled mobility instructs us that displacement is more than a condition that results from either mobility or immobility. Stalled mobility refers to a condition in which migratory bosses may be mobile yet feel that they are not going anywhere in life. They may also feel that their aspirations have been put on hold or are not aligned with their current circumstances and social positioning.[17]

My concept of stalled mobility draws inspiration from labor "in and of time" by framing the rhythms of migratory labor as sources of both fixity and mobility as well as of regulation and freedom (Bear 2014). For migrants, an itinerant life of uncertainty and precarious labor is the only recourse through which they can preserve their sense of human dignity and economic survival. Moving in and out wage and nonwage labor, migrants

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perceive time, specifically impermanence, as a source of constraint *and* as a source of autonomy. In this sense, stalled mobility differs from conditions of suspension (*xuanfu*) and involution (*neijuan*) among China's migrants and urban middle classes (Xiang 2021b; Q. Wang and Ge 2020). The notion of stalling underscores migrants' exclusion from meaningful accumulation and social mobility precisely through their market activities, not only through their exclusions from meaningful political participation. Migrants become vulnerable to the detrimental effects of free market enterprise, including debt, bankruptcy, and competition. Their aspirations remain *off*, that is, disjointed, led astray, and disconnected from the value of their labor across the supply chain. Even for those who are able to join the ranks of bosshood, contestations over their *legitimacy* as bosses are embedded within larger questions of claims to authenticity, land-owing power, the ability to extract rental income, and the state's legal authority to criminalize them as migrants.[18]

Recent studies of contemporary Chinese society have insightfully described the subjective dimensions of uncertainty, vulnerability, and insecurity that migrant populations grapple with as they face the large-scale retreat of state-sponsored welfare and protections. While Margaret Hillenbrand (2023) employs the notion of zombie citizenship to describe the dispossessive effects of creating a surplus labor population, Huwy-Min Lucia Liu (2023) describes funeral brokers in Shanghai as fragile to highlight migrants' demonstrations of personal agency as possibilities for political and civic participation are foreclosed in an increasingly authoritarian milieu.

This book draws from these insights and intervenes in them by approaching subjectivity not only as a singular role, persona, feeling, or state of being. Rather, I conceptualize bosshood as the ongoing tensions and paradoxes between the aspiration to accumulate capital and the forces of dispossession that leave migrants in conditions of stalled mobility, including authoritarian state surveillance, identification checks, bribery, and rent collection by landlords and competing bosses as well as by public and private security officers. As I demonstrate in the chapters that follow, local state agents operate as active competitors and regulators across the fast fashion supply chains in Guangzhou rather than as passive facilitators of the so-called free market. They regulate the physical movements of its migrant population via the *hukou* policy of population control. This form of neoliberal governmentality highlights how the role of the state seemingly diverges from the prescriptions of laissez-faire capitalism as promulgated by proponents of neoliberalism during the early decades of postsocialist

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market reform. State regulation and the free market, after all, are *not* mutually exclusive. The Chinese government continues to maintain control over economic life, but in ways that still allow market mechanisms of supply and demand to determine how capital, money, and limited resources are distributed across different areas of economic life in China, including its production chains.

Such forms of state regulation and neoliberal governmentality over market activities are evidenced in policies related to urban planning, land reform/property rights, the restructuring of the countryside via the household responsibility system, and most importantly, the *hukou* policy of population control. These policies may be thought of as aspects of market governance characteristic of so-called socialism with Chinese characteristics, whereby market liberalization is guided by a Party-state that maintains tight controls over political and civic lives of its migrants—but paradoxically without providing adequate welfare and economic safety nets for them in the cities where they live and work. This term, however, fails to fully capture migrants' experiences of bosshood or the ways in which regulatory practices within an authoritarian context operate *alongside* neoliberal and free market enterprise (Ong 2006; Rofel 2007; Ong and Zhang 2008). As my ethnographic analyses show, market forces operate together with the authoritarian state and quasi-state agents to produce dynamics of displacement and dispossession that leave migrants in conditions of stalled mobility. In fact, as I demonstrate, some migrant bosses describe the state as an invisible competitor in their attempts to accumulate capital. In chapter 3, for example, I show how the state furthers projects of capitalist accumulation within a globalized, neoliberal market economy in postsocialist China.[19] In my explication of *state effects*, the state may not be overtly present in the urban villages, but market forces *enable and intensify* state regulation over migrants' accumulative practices in Guangzhou. This is evidenced through the practices of *hukou* enforcement and what I call the *shenfen* economy: the collection of fees and rents, the regulation of counterfeit goods, and the enforcement of visas and citizenship.

Stalled mobility, in this sense, underscores the contradictions and ambivalences associated with the paradoxes of mobility and immobility characteristic of migrant bosshood. Though stalled mobility may be described as a type of cognitive dissonance that arises when the promises of free market enterprise directly clash with migrants' experiences of dispossession and exclusion (Hillenbrand 2023), I argue that it is more than a cognitive condition, whether shared or individual. It is a structure of feeling and a

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relational dynamic that shapes migrants' intersubjective experiences of bosshood, on the one hand, and the moments of collaboration and competition among migrant bosses, on the other (Williams 2014). While domestic and transnational migrants declare their work as "free," they paradoxically labor ten to twelve hours a day on the factory floor under the supervision of their clients. Meanwhile, their attempts to accumulate capital compel them to exploit other migrants further down the fast fashion supply chain as they learn to evade exploitation from other competing bosses.

Because domestic and transnational migrant bosses remain excluded from formal property ownership as well as from any legal claims to labor protection and state welfare in the cities, the *hukou* and other policing and regulatory practices make bosshood an all-or-nothing game of capital accumulation whereby migrants fall completely into and out of bosshood, and not in a partial or fractional sense. Their efforts to secure a rightful place in society as "boss" show how transnational subcontracting practices become zero-sum arrangements, in that one works either only for oneself or only for others, even if embeddedness in social obligations, reciprocity, and debt leave migrants dependent on kin-based or friendship relations. The worlds of migrant bosshood in Guangzhou and on the global stage thus demonstrate how the entrepreneurial self as a subject of capital accumulation is entangled in broader relations of dependency, competition, predation, and vulnerability. For these reasons, precarious accumulation cannot be taken out of larger contexts of exploitation, regulation, and competition within which it is situated.

At the same time, migrant bosses become exposed to the exploitative and unstable effects of global market forces. These various limitations compel migrant bosses to remain mobile, that is, in continual search of the next hub of capital accumulation (akin to David Harvey's spatial fix), even if this keeps them in conditions of precarity and precariousness (Harvey 1982). Migrants' experiences of bosshood in Guangzhou's fast fashion sector are directly affected by the fluctuations of global fashion exchange. Migrant bosses, for example, often complain about how rising prices in raw materials, climate change, and wars lead to downturns in the global fashion markets. Despite these challenges, many migrants continue to experiment with possibilities that embrace their aspirations and might lead them to what they perceive as freedom and prosperity. Transnational and domestic migrants' aspirations for bosshood and their attendant desires for freedom and prosperity compel them to leave conditions of poverty, war, exploitation, and debt in former socialist and colonial contexts. After their arrival

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in Guangzhou, however, their status as migrants, including the social exclusions and various forms of discrimination they face, place them in even more precarious circumstances.

Thus, migrants' affective investment into the figure of the entrepreneur is itself a political project, since it appropriates and reinforces state campaigns that publicize the Chinese Dream (Wielander 2018). In the current moment of market liberalization and the retrenchment of state-sponsored welfare, being boss, with its attendant risks and responsibilities, has taken on significant political meaning. For migrants in Guangzhou, laboring to become an entrepreneur has become an economic and social necessity. With the gradual erasure of the worker and the peasant as the vanguards of socialist transformation and the erosion of state-sponsored services and welfare, one of the most immediate spaces of economic and political hope for migrants remains market participation via entrepreneurship. Through this state-endorsed narrative, the entrepreneur embodies all that capitalist activities have to offer, though the role is devoid of meaningful improvements by the state to the lives and livelihoods of working-class migrants.

Teetering on the edges of boss/worker and employer/employee, migrant bosses experience a certain degree of mobility, but their attempts to fix and convert capital into a trajectory of progressive accumulation slip from under their feet. Their experiences of unemployment, debt, and violence lead them to realize that welfare services by the state do not benefit them. Instead, they must rely on their own labor and initiative, however risky their migratory routes and dreams of entrepreneurship may be. Along the way, migrants encounter competing bosses who hold similar dreams of wealth and financial security. They experience physical mobility as they move along the circuits of commodity and capital. However, the broader landscapes of factory discipline, racialized policing, real estate speculation, and even otherworldly divinity restrict their ability to embed and convert their economic gains to the authority and wealth necessary to elevate them into the ranks of rightful entrepreneurs.

UNKNOWING THE SUPPLY CHAIN

This ethnography presents accounts of fast fashion supply chains in Guangzhou that are anchored upon the everyday lives of domestic and foreign migrants who labor in postsocialist spaces that are critically linked to transregional chains of commodity manufacture and exchange

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via their accumulative practices. Rather than conceptualizing transnational capitalism as a top-down, homogeneous, and all-encompassing system of economic life, I remain committed to the experiences and perspectives of my interlocutors as they unfold on the ground. More specifically, I focus on the ways in which precarity, precariousness, and the entreprecariat are variously experienced by low-paid subcontractors across fast fashion supply chains—specifically, I look at domestic and transnational migrants in Guangzhou.

This ethnographic project grew out of my initial curiosity in migration, labor, and counterfeit culture in factory towns and other industrial zones in the Pearl River Delta region. In 2011, after a year of interviewing fashion designers, factory owners, and migrant laborers, I realized that these market participants were concerned not with fakes and counterfeits per se but rather with strategies that would sustain their small-scale businesses in light of cutthroat competition, extractive officials, and the rapid, unforgiving turnover of fast fashion trends for export.

Through ethnographic methods of participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and personal conversations, I analyze migrants' personal reflections and how they articulate their experiences of precariousness. I also pay attention to their perceptions of social inequality as they intensify their accumulative activities via commodity production and exchange across the global supply chains for fast fashion. Remaining faithful to the experiential dimensions of my ethnographic subjects, I approach global supply chains as a heuristic device; these supply chains remain partially visible and imperfectly understood in their fragmented and incomplete forms. Through this, my analyses demonstrate how occluded aspects of the supply chains are, in fact, key to understanding how migrants navigate the fragmented and isolated worlds that sustain these fast fashion supply chains in Guangzhou. My conceptual framing of transnational capitalism as partial, fragmented, and situated in cultural practices informs the ethnographic approaches I have taken in this study of global supply chains.

As such, these accounts must necessarily be fragmented, partial, and incomplete. Indeed, migrant labor has been, for the most part, rendered invisible by the dictates of capital accumulation. For this reason, I highlight how migrants across the supply chains attempt to know or make visible other bosses and production sites further down the chains. This practice, as I demonstrate in chapter 2, involves creative guesswork among two or more bosses in a cross-cultural encounter, as well as improvisation and

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luck. This book draws inspiration from such practices among migrant bosses and laborers by narrating transnational supply chains as they are imagined and perceived by those who sustain them—in their incomplete and fragmented forms—through their everyday labor. This bottom-up perspective, as I assert, is no less empirical or scientific than other conceptualizations of commodity chains in other social science disciplines. In fact, representing global supply chains as diverse, partial, and fragmented reflects more closely the heterogeneous and particularistic worlds that come together as a supply chain.

While this project traces fast fashion commodities through the spheres of manufacture, exchange, and export, the human stories of migrants' successes and struggles—which breathe ethnographic life into the global commodity chains for fast fashion—are, at best, imaginations and interpretations that illuminate the affective nuances and rhythmic textures of migrant entrepreneurship. This partial, interpretative approach is critical to and reflective of this contemporary post-Fordist moment. The segmentation of processes through which commodities are mass manufactured and exchanged leaves spaces of production and labor that are incoherent, isolated, and fragmented from one another. The conjoining of spatially segmented sites of mass manufacture and exchange is akin to what Anna Tsing describes as the productive *friction* of dynamic cultural exchange—including coincidences, accidents, and misinterpretation—that comprises what she calls "supply chain capitalism" (Tsing 2005, 2009). The coming together of these disparate spheres of labor and exchange through a dynamic friction, as I elaborate in the chapters that follow, leaves openings or gaps where third-party agents or other market participants insert themselves to compete in their aspirations for capitalist accumulation.[20]

Moments of *unknowing* how supply chains operate thus become more concrete and revelatory than moments when observers and market participants assume with absolute certainty the organization of a supply chain. As scholars (Sontag 2001; Haraway 1988; Berger 2008; Lam 2019, 2020; E. Y. Huang 2021) have cogently explained, a distant and totalizing bird's-eye view of capitalist practice is a masculinist and artificial construct that not only flattens the cultural dynamics of economic activity but also privileges seeing as the primary mode of knowledge production and dissemination. Erasure, immobility, disconnection, uncertainty, and mistrust among bosses across the supply chain yield key ethnographic insights into how capitalism makes invisible the everyday rhythms of labor and livelihood upon which it depends.

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This approach to ethnographic writing and analysis draws inspiration from feminist scholars (Rofel 1999; Ong and Collier 2004; Guyer 2004; Tsing 2005; Graham 2006a, 2006b; M. Zhan 2009; Bear et al. 2015; Rofel and Yanagisako 2018) who emphasize the diverse and particularistic lifeworlds that animate the affective and intimate contours of global commodity chains and other forms of commodity exchange. It also highlights how fast fashion operates precisely via the shadows, gaps, and partial linkages that are situated between these fragmented worlds.[21] Indeed, few if any individual subcontractors or corporate players, whether they are the movers and shakers of the fashion industry or the laborers at the bottom of the social ladder, truly see or understand the fast fashion supply chain in its entirety. There are no puppet masters, nor are there cogs in a grand machine. Like a house of mirrors, multiple moving parts enable these transnational supply chains. The blind spots and gaps make the ever-elusive mysteries of fast fashion and transnational supply chains critical mechanisms of capitalist accumulation.[22] At times, as Xiao Ye shows us, migrants confront unpredictable tragedies and inexplicable accidents threatening to eject them from the supply chains. Contending with the unknowable or the inexplicable becomes a way of life for many migrants who labor across the links of commodity production and exchange.

At the same time, my book pushes the limits of these feminist critiques of capitalism by exploring how migrants' aspirations for entrepreneurial freedom rub up against those of other market participants across the supply chains. The chains of commodity production that I describe are anchored upon land tenure, property relations, and worldly accumulative practices that overlap, compete, and clash in the life cycle of a fashion trend. Migrants' improvised and inventive practices include job hopping, reading clients, and flipping fashion objects as well as performing intersectional national, racial/ethnic, and religious identifications. Although migrants' access to relative mobility opens new horizons of aspiration and possibility, these horizons become co-opted by third-party agents of finance and real estate capital, who vigilantly police the boundaries between labor and capital. These third-party agents hold the migrant bosses back from realizing the wealth that they imagine should be possible given their entrepreneurial activities. The clashing as well as the conjoining of their profit-driven interests give rise to competing classes of laborers, bosses, landlords, officers, and other rent seekers in overlapping accumulative worlds.

Along this vein, my approach vis-à-vis globalization and transnational capitalism refuses predetermined logics of capitalist valuation and

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personhood along a spectrum of high- or low-end forms of globalization (Mathews 2011; Mathews et al. 2015) because the logics of market exchange are key to perpetuating the deleterious effects of global capital, including racial exclusion, poverty, climate change, and other forms of socioeconomic inequality. I pay particular attention to moments of contestation, competition, and ambivalence among market participants who personify and lend cultural meaning to entrepreneurship and other forms of capitalist exchange (Tsing 2009; Guyer 2004; Freeman 2014; Haugen 2018; Krause 2018; Rofel and Yanagisako 2018). This book thus argues for an intersectional approach to transnational capitalism, one that considers how class aspirations and belonging intersect with a spectrum of racial, ethnic, gendered, and nationalistic identifications.

The following chapters highlight different aspects of precarious accumulation as they manifest across the supply chains. The chapters take readers along the migratory pathways that are activated by fast fashion commodity chains, from small-scale household workshops to wholesale markets, underground churches, migrant neighborhoods, and into homes. They shadow processes ranging from mass manufacture in factories to commodity distribution in wholesale markets, to final export across transnational markets. Each chapter delves into a world of fast fashion in Guangzhou in ways that reveal how economic risks and uncertainties are passed along a network of domestic and transnational migrant bosses.

Throughout, my analyses show how migrants' personal sacrifices and family labors confront the accumulative interests of landlords, security agents, and bigger bosses who make the lives and livelihoods of these migrants more precarious. These dynamics highlight the tensions between mobility/immobility and freedom/unfreedom. The chapters unfold to show how migrant bosses encounter and negotiate the covert economies of fee collection, rent-seeking, and policing that are part and parcel of the fast fashion world. Ultimately, this book reconceptualizes migrants (both domestic and transnational) as aspiring agents who traverse and remake the boundaries between labor and capital. Yet in doing so, migrants' accumulative practices change the broader landscapes of power and inequality characteristic of transnational subcontracting. The migrants inadvertently reproduce social inequalities and structural violence in their drive for capital accumulation. Ultimately, they experience various forms of entrepreneurial deferment, namely stalled mobility, surveillance and regulation, flexible appropriation, and spatial imaginations of Guangzhou and China.

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Chapter 1, "Made in China, Just in Time," details how Chinese, West African, and South Korean migratory pathways and global fast fashion supply chains are spatially mapped out across the postsocialist urban villages (*chengzhongcun*) and city districts of transnational Guangzhou. Specifically, I demonstrate how Guangzhou's postsocialist urban transformations articulate with the infrastructural organization of the global supply chains. The chapter introduces the specialized, family-based organization of life and work in household assembly workshops (*jiagongchang*), where migrants' low-wage piecework, low-volume production, and use of outmoded tools sustain the everyday rhythms of transnational subcontracting. The chapter also describes the transnational migrant districts of Guangzhou, where South Korean and West African migrants draw upon their national and religious identifications to carve out market niches in fast fashion supply chains. These same identifications, however, mark them as targets of ethnonationalist campaigns, forcing them to negotiate the risks and rewards of migrant entrepreneurship and possibly removing them from the supply chains altogether. The chapter's ethnographic accounts lay the foundation for understanding what the role of "the boss" means for different groups of people, how this role is differentially experienced and enacted, and what the risks are for migrants who take on this role.

Chapter 2, "Stalled Mobility," situates readers within the maze of dark alleyways of Guangzhou's urban villages, where small-scale, unregulated *jiagongchang* sustain the "just in time" delivery of fast fashion worldwide. With an ethnographic focus on the Wongs, a migrant family from neighboring Guangxi Province, the chapter elaborates the paradoxical condition of *stalled mobility*, whereby migrants describe their labor as "free" even though they struggle to keep up with the rapid pace of fast fashion production. As migrant bosses, the Wongs remain caught in the double bind of evading exploitation by clients and competitors while also exploiting other migrant laborers. Their experience demonstrates that accumulation by exploitation is a relational and dynamic practice that involves uncertain assertions of discipline and uneven power. Over time, the freedom of physical and social mobility they experience wears off and transforms into a sense of freedom deferred. Stalled mobility highlights how the Wongs and the temporary migrant workers they hire must negotiate the contradictory dynamics of mobility and immobility, as well as freedom and unfreedom.

Chapter 3, "Surveillance and Regulation in the *Shenfen* (Identification) Economy," moves from the narrow confines of migrants' household workshops (*jiagongchang*) into the wider context of Guangzhou's urban villages,

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tracing long-standing disputes over property relations between *tu er dai* village landlords, real estate corporations, and government officials, all of whom increasingly speculate on and contest the value of the land. It delves into the *shenfen* (identification) economy, whereby migrant bosses' everyday rhythms of life and livelihood are animated by racial criminalization, economic regulation, and extortion by local landlords, real estate speculators, and the police. While most studies on law enforcement consider the police the quintessential manifestation of state power, this chapter shows how nonstate actors like local landlords, property managers, and private security officers also take up violence to protect property rights and rental income. As such, the chapter shows how the market, and not only the state, serves as the impetus for (racialized) violence. The chapter explores how the everyday operations of fast fashion supply chains determine the kinds of surveillance and economic regulation that emerge in urban villages, how migrant bosses confront them, and how these regulatory constraints color migrants' gendered and racialized experiences of bosshood, including the deferment of their entrepreneurial aspirations.

Chapter 4, "Speculative Real Estate and Flexible Appropriation," moves into Guangzhou's wholesale markets to examine the boom-and-bust rhythms of the fast fashion sector that emerge from the intersection of commodity exchange and rampant real estate speculation. Amid the chaos of these markets, landlords and building managers carefully calculate and map the rhythms of fee collection and rent-seeking practices that govern the ways in which fast fashion commodities are produced and exchanged. Small-scale migrant bosses, in response, attempt to dodge predatory rent-seeking practices while struggling to catch up to the speedy turnover of fast fashion. The chapter shows how rent-seeking and fee extraction accelerate the relentless pursuit of profits among migrant bosses, compelling them to engage with the unique forms of fashion production that I call *flexible appropriation* that undergird Guangzhou's fast fashion markets. Flexible appropriation strategies include retagging garments, reassembling garment pieces, and "flipping" finished goods (*chao huo*) from one market to another. The chapter traces how the extractive economy of collusion and rent-seeking emerges like a shadow, deferring migrants' entrepreneurial dreams by following the creative and profit-seeking practices of migrant bosses who, in turn, seek to escape it. This dynamic intensifies the aura of "high stakes, high rewards" that entrepreneurship and fast fashion promise, thus highlighting the uncertainties and paradoxes embodied by the migrant entrepreneur.

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Chapter 5, "Transnational Migrant Bosshood," brings the reader into the worlds of bosshood as experienced by West African and South Korean migrants in Guangzhou. Specifically, I present ethnographic analyses to illustrate how, in the years before the COVID-19 pandemic, these transnational migrant bosses were drawn into the supply chains in China based on their religious, ethnic, and nationalist identifications. West African and South Korean migrant bosses took and continue to take financial and social risks that are distinct from those faced by Chinese rural migrants, particularly through significant investment in bridging economic and cultural links to overseas markets. At the same time, these transnational migrants often lack the local connections and legal protections to offset the surveillance and other regulatory practices that they encounter based on their status as foreigners.

While rural Chinese migrants view Guangzhou as a platform for transnational capital and cross-cultural exchange, foreign migrants view China as a stage for worldly and otherworldly forms of ethnic and faith-based accumulation. Transnational migrants' religious faiths and ethnic identifications lead them to pursue precarious accumulation based on these affiliations: West African migrants bridge their religious faiths with desires for wealth via the prosperity doctrine, while South Korean migrants draw upon their ties to Korean Chinese (*Chaoxianzu*) ethnic communities in Guangzhou to accumulate capital that crosses ethnic and national boundaries. However, these very same religious and ethnic affiliations eventually lead to their departure from China. In effect, West African and South Korean migrant entrepreneurs demonstrate similar dynamics of stalled mobility as rural Chinese migrants, yet on different spatial scales of mobility/immobility.

Overall, the book shows that if the entrepreneurial self is never fully autonomous, it is also never fully realized. In light of China's postsocialist transformations of land, labor, and personhood, migrants' experiences of mobility and accumulation do not follow a linear path of future-driven, progressive growth. These migrants' experiences of small-scale entrepreneurship reveal how their entrepreneurial identities materialize in parts, or in gradients, as part of a longer nonlinear process of actualization and becoming. In the absence of state-sponsored protections for their risky endeavors, migrants' senses of entrepreneurial personhood become tied solely to their accumulative practices, which in turn are anchored to the fluctuations of global markets. Their claims to bosshood are possible only through their transactional engagements with the worlds of capitalist

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exchange, which occur unevenly in fits and starts. Migrants thereby view the actualization of their entrepreneurial agency and accumulative potential as possible only through relations of exchange, leaving them vulnerable to exploitation, extortion, and financial loss. They view entrepreneurship as a promise of prosperity, though not necessarily a delivery of that promise.

In their urgency to convert labor and subjectivity to the dictates of capital, migrants transgress the boundaries of nation-states as well as those of secular and spiritual worlds, along the crossroads of race, gender, class, and ethnonationalism. Their efforts to remake themselves into rightful entrepreneurs, however, are met with structural constraints that stem from debt, family obligations, predatory extortion, racial profiling, criminalization, and excessive regulation. Over time, migrants realize that working for oneself leads to their implication in the structural vulnerability that undermines their aspirations for entrepreneurial wealth and autonomy. These dynamics operate through cross-cultural encounters within webs of postsocialist profit-making and capitalist accumulation. They shed light on the delicate nuances, unexpected paradoxes, and contingent outcomes that make transnational supply chains possible. In short, precarity and the possibilities for overcoming it emerge from the practices and relationships of everyday labor and livelihood.

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Notes

INTRODUCTION

1 Other studies have documented how fast fashion production exposes Chinese workers to danger and poses serious health risks. For example, migrant workers work in sweatshops, live in crowded dormitories, and are exposed to harmful chemicals and molecules such as silica dust and lead. Mothers have no access to childcare. Above all, fast fashion in China has been linked to human trafficking, including forced labor trafficking (Simpson 2020).

2 Social scientists and anthropologists have characterized "just in time" production as exemplary of the post-Fordist condition. See Appadurai 1996; Bauman 2000; Harvey 1990; Tsing 2009; Muehlebach 2011; Hoffman 2011; Appel 2019; Rofel and Yanagisako 2018. These works emphasize the reproductive features of "just in time" production of the current political economy, or what Karl Marx (1857) calls "concrete abstractions." They may also be approached as what Susan Narotzky and Gavin Smith (2006) describe as the social ensemble of labor and material production that "condition(s) the possibilities of social reproduction" (5). Other works on futurity, time/space compression, and flexible accumulation approach "just in time" production as a singular logic, characterized by either the temporal dimensions of speed and flexibility or the dilemmas of the present in relation to the past and future (Harvey 1990).

3 Focused on consumption, theorists of fashion and material culture have aptly conceptualized fashion as a generative dreamworld of capitalist desire and aspiration (Wilson 1985; Horning 2011), elaborating on clothing and adornment as intersubjective and embodied experiences that intersect gendered, racial, sexual, religious, nationalistic, and ethnic identifications. While some anthropologists, for example, have demonstrated that certain veiling practices within the worlds of global Islamic fashion enable women to feel more pious and modern at the same time, thus emphasizing the fantasies and religiosities that certain adornment practices generate, other scholars underscore the anxieties,

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alienation, and violence often associated with clothing (Woodward 2005; Jones 2007; Woodward and Miller 2007). Highlighting fast fashion, Rob Horning (2011) concludes, the multiplication of new looks through shorter production cycles perpetuates consumers' desires for constant shopping. For him, the globally recognized fast fashion chain, Forever 21, serves what it purports to deliver; that is, never-ending desires among its targeted female consumers to achieve or maintain perpetual youth through constant shopping (Horning 2011).

4 Capitalist accumulation, as Karl Marx (1885) informs us, requires a certain degree of "fixity," or stability, in both dimensions of time and space in order for capital to grow. In contrast, in the world of contemporary fast fashion, spatial fixity and temporal stability are no longer the primary strategies of accumulation, particularly for the financially vulnerable migrant populations. Rather, the ongoing circulation of people, commodities, and money through migration, commodity speculation, and the unregulated redistribution of wealth have become channels through which regulatory authority governs the distribution of profit and through which Guangzhou's migrant populations anchor their entrepreneurial dreams and desires across the supply chains for fast fashion.

5 Jonathan Nitzan and Shimshon Bichler (2009) describe this dynamic as differential accumulation.

6 As David Harvey (1990) notes in his analysis of the postmodern condition: "Indeed, learning to play the volatility right is now just as important as accelerating turnover time. This means either being highly adaptable and fast-moving in response to market shift or masterminding the volatility" (286–87). Furthermore, he writes, "Within this matrix of (modern and post-modern) relations, there is never one fixed configuration, but a swaying back and forth between centralization and decentralization, between authority and deconstruction, between hierarchy and anarchy, between permanence and flexibility" (339). As such, this book explores these complex and contradictory dynamics of autonomy and control, as experienced by migrant laborers and entrepreneurs in Guangzhou.

7 Some anthropological studies have analyzed the generative aspects of forms of life and livelihood among people who labor outside of formal waged labor (Guyer 2004; Millar 2018; Tsing 2009; Bear 2014). These works have tended to focus on how people engage alternative forms of value, practices of labor, cosmological orderings, and ritualistic performances in face of privatization, rising debt, and the large-scale retreat of state welfare. They also tend to highlight how ordinary people create spaces of dignity, desire, and hope for themselves that cannot be easily subsumed by the structural demands of capitalism. For these scholars, the creation of capitalist relations and the reproduction of

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market value critically depend on noncapitalistic relations, as exemplified by gift-giving relations, kinship, cosmology, ritual, and hope within spaces *outside* of capitalism from which to territorialize and accumulate productive and reproductive labor and surplus value. These ethnographies emphasize contingency over structural conditions of transnational capitalism as the primary determinant in the creation and reproduction of life, labor, and value.

8 As Judith Butler (2009) points out, "precarity" is distinguished from "precariousness" in that precarity describes a generalized condition of human sociality, whereas precariousness refers to a condition of dependence and mutual vulnerability in a human relationship. See Melinda Hinkson 2017 for an elaboration of these concepts.

9 There are varying structures of real estate ownership among different classes of rural and urban citizens in China, ranging from full ownership of property or land among urban citizens (with the implicit understanding that property in China belongs to the central government and is "leased" to the owner for seventy years); possession of use-rights over formerly agricultural land among wealthy peasant landlords who are rural citizens; and no or insecure access to property ownership of urban land and housing among migrants based on their rural statuses in the cities. Low-end housing projects set up by the state are an exception to this general structure, since they enable migrants to gain access to affordable housing in the cities. But these projects are often left incomplete and unfinished, sometimes even unlivable, leaving migrants in the cities even more precarious and vulnerable to financial losses and instability.

10 More recently, precarity's origins in work and employment have been expanded to more generalized conditions of uncertainty, permeating various aspects of social life outside the contexts of labor and economy (Neilson and Rossiter 2005; Butler 2006; Rofel 2007; Allison 2013; Anagnost et al. 2013; Amin and Thrift 2016; Richaud and Amin 2020).

11 For more on the specific dynamics of class and labor in relation to rural-to-urban migration in China, see Solinger 1995, 1999; Pun 2005; Pun and Smith 2007; Swider 2015; Evans 2020; Hillenbrand 2023.

12 Butollo (2014), Lüthje et al. (2013), Lüthje (2019), and Gereffi et al. (2022) further discuss industrial development and upgrading across transnational commodity chains in China.

13 While some scholars have questioned whether China's market reforms can be appropriately described as neoliberal, I join the interdisciplinary scholars of labor, migration, and urbanization in China who have analyzed at length the widening socioeconomic inequalities, rising unemployment, and growing discontentment that migrant groups have experienced since the opening of Deng Xiaoping's market reforms in 1978 (Solinger 1999; L. Zhang 2002; Pun 2005; Pun and Smith 2007; Siu

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2007; Yan 2008; Swider 2015; I. Pang 2019; Evans 2020; Ling 2020; Y. Zhan 2022; Hillenbrand 2023).

14 These class groups include the so-called flexi-precariat classes, including independent subcontractors, contract workers, and part-time employees, whose conditions of temporary and part-time labor leave them pendulating between the roles of a full-time employee and a self-employed entrepreneur (Hillenbrand 2023).

15 The disproportionate focus on precarity/precariousness in liberal democracies in the Global North has compelled some observers to critique the Eurocentric tendencies that remain implicit in these concepts. Scholars of Africa and Latin America have argued that these regions of world have never witnessed the economic growth and stabilities associated with Fordist economies of the Global North and that unemployment and informal/contingent labor, along with associated conditions of economic uncertainty and vulnerability, have long been the defining characteristics of life and livelihoods in these places (Neilson and Rossiter 2005; Mezzadra and Neilson 2012; Munck 2013; C. K. Lee 2018; I. Pang 2019; Driessen 2019; H.-M. L. Liu 2023).

16 Anthropological studies have addressed precarity and precariousness as analytical lenses through which to view the ways people interpret their social worlds. By using ethnography as a mode of interpretive sensibility (Narotzky and Smith 2006), these studies underscore a pervasive condition of livelihood and labor that reinforces and is produced by the uneven effects of privatization, globalization, and flexible accumulation (Tsing 2009; Narotzky and Smith 2006; Millar 2018). Taking practices of the everyday, or ordinary affects as the central object of inquiry, these scholars bear witness to the uncertainty and nostalgic yearning that exemplify the post-Fordist condition.

17 Through their market participation in the chains of fast fashion manufacture and exchange, migrant bosses engage in ongoing speculation about what aspects of the supply chain they can control, manage, and manipulate. They are not passive subjects in the processes of capital accumulation.

18 Much like the Cameroonian market boys and other intermediaries (the population *flottante*) that collectively form the basis of Janet Roitman's (2005) study of the unregulated economy in Central Africa, market participants across the fast fashion supply chains in Guangzhou bring together various conflicting appropriations of economic concepts, including price and quality. Together, these contestations question the foundational distribution of profit and wealth, thus shedding light on the dynamics of economic regulation, state surveillance, market exclusion, social inequality across supply chains.

19 The large-scale suppression of protests, the discourse of *suzhi* (human quality), and the social credit system are other contemporary examples

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of the ways in which neoliberal market mechanisms intersect with and enhance the authoritarian governance of the central state in China (Hillenbrand 2023).

20 Anthropologists and geographers who have written extensively on globalization, commodity chains, and transnational labor regimes have also acknowledged that acts of laboring across the global supply chains invariably entail various projects of global scaling (Friedberg 2004; Chalfin 2004; Tsing 2009; West 2012; Rofel and Yanagisako 2018; Litzinger 2013; J. Chanet al. 2020). Scaling or scale-making is the cultural and discursive framing of place-based practices, resources, meanings, and symbols, which make capitalist accumulation possible. While urban geographers have tended to highlight spatiotemporal dimensions of capital accumulation and labor flows, anthropologists have underscored various practices of world-making, which are contingently made through worldly encounters and other cross-cultural relations of mobility exchange (Faier 2009; M. Zhan 2009; Tsing 2009; J. Chu 2010; Faier and Rofel 2014; Rofel and Yanagisako 2018).

21 Some scholars highlight the role of contingency in the making and remaking of socioeconomic life; their conceptual framing of possibility remains embedded within larger structural dynamics of power, regulation, and social reproduction. For instance, John Halloway (2010) describes contradictions of global capitalism as "cracks" or emergent openings that reveal potential alternative lives and livelihoods to capitalist relations.

22 Such ethnographic moments, as I argue, are key to revealing the cracks and fissures that mar the seemingly seamless flows of commodity, objects, and people around the globe. They are particularly significant since the "just in time" delivery of post-Fordist forms of mass manufacture, along with contemporary practices of subcontracted labor, have increasingly collapsed the boundaries that once defined spaces inside and outside of capitalism. The conceptual vocabulary and categorical frameworks that strive to imagine the possibility of life outside of capitalism, such as resistance, disavowal, and revolution, take on different meanings and valences in dissimilar contexts. This is particularly true across the fast fashion supply chains in Guangzhou, where the categorical boundaries between formal/informal as well as waged/nonwaged labor are continuously challenged through everyday practices.

CHAPTER 1. MADE IN CHINA, JUST IN TIME

1 Other anthropologists have drawn from Karl Polanyi's idea of economic ideologies as embedded within particular social relationships. For example, Chris Hann et al. (2001) emphasize the contextual specificities of "actually existing socialism," a term introduced by German social scientist

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