Migrant workers in suburban HCMC: towards an emergent autonomous activism?

In HCMC’s metropolitan area, suburban areas are home to a significant concentration of population and industrial estates. Essentially funded by foreign companies, HCMC’s industrial parks are hubs for export activities and flows of internal migrant workers.

This concentration leads to various social and economic issues, including the temporary and incomplete integration of migrant workers into the community. Mostly coming from rural areas, Vietnamese migrant workers suffer various social and economic difficulties essentially due to a restrictive and obsolete internal residency permit system known as the 'hộ khẩu' system. In response to such a precarious situation, Vietnamese migrant workers establish multiple individual and collective adaptation strategies. Furthermore, the dynamics linking the suburban areas, industrial estates and worker dormitories, create a new dominated social class eager to claim social rights and seek recognition from the authorities.

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From economic insecurity and social stigmatisation to adaptation strategies

Migrant workers’ integration into the city is complicated for several reasons: social, material and immaterial. Firstly, the majority of migrant workers live in poorly equipped dormitories, sharing small rooms of 5-18 square metres. Migrant workers’ consumption patterns and lifestyles are also characterised by the rationalisation of essential expenses, leaving aside leisure expenses. Their working lives are monotonous and exhausting, yet they are poorly paid, with monthly wages ranging from 100 to 200 euros per month.

Alongside the economic insecurity, migrant workers in HCMC also suffer from social stigmatisation, reflected clearly in a restrictive residential registration system and a widely held anti-migrant mentality in the Vietnamese urban society. The majority of migrant workers in HCMC only own short-term residency permits (KT3 or KT4), which have many administrative constraints: owners of these residency permits are unable to access public services such as buying property, getting a public school or benefit from the local healthcare system. Furthermore, the administrative process to obtain permanent residency permits for migrant workers is particularly slow or even deliberately delayed by local authorities. The anti-immigrant mentality pervades in the Vietnamese society leads to inhumanisation of the migrants. Finally, the relationship between migrant workers and the local suburban population could be described as an identity conflict between a young and dynamic urban world, inspired by modernity, and a declining ancient rural world. Indefinable between these two worlds, metropoles are a perfect theatre for these oppositions to flourish, and in doing so, they contribute to the production of ‘unequal cities’ in Vietnam.

Spatially dispersed and socially stigmatised, migrant workers in HCMC suburban areas develop a large range of adaptation strategies to facilitate their integration into the city. Community support networks, tightly linked to worker dormitories, represent the most primitive form of these adaptation strategies. They are strictly based on regional affiliations of migrant workers. They are also characterised by their omnipresence and versatility: community networks are able to disseminate information and to provide daily and financial support to migrants. Despite their unquestionable importance, these networks have many structural weaknesses. As they rely mainly on workers’ dormitories and regional affiliations, they create a new communautarism that aggravates the segregation between local population and migrant workers, and also between different migrant communities.

Emergence of a new, autonomous, decentralised and spontaneous worker activism

The collective dimension of migrant workers’ adaptation strategies relies less on community support networks than on the development of an autonomous, spontaneous and decentralised worker activism. The dối mỏ reforms marked the beginning of an important liberal turn of the State on labour relations with a withdrawal from the negotiations between workers and employers. Consequently, tensions between workers and companies have progressively increased, leading to industrial disputes from 2006 to 2008. Since then, a strong worker activism has emerged.

Struggle and opposition methods are sophisticated. Based on local migrant communities, workers’ mobilisations are spontaneous and decentralised, waves of actions are organised from one industrial zone to another. The leaders of these movements are usually active children, as their organisational roles are essential for these mobilisations.

To better protect migrant workers, multiple stakeholders are involved: media, provincial authorities, informal workers’ leaders. Among the State, the Vietnamese General Confederation of Labour (VGCL) and the Ministry of Labour serves as a key player to manage worker issues by conducting negotiations between companies and workers. In 2007, a revision of the Labour Law defined a solid framework for workers’ mobilisations. Consequently, the VGCL has been attached to provincial authorities, while its local cells have been involved in companies’ management. In HCMC, this new political actor and the State is particularly conflictual. For the State, the VGCL is categorically opposed to this change, as it considers informal workers’ leaders to be reactionary agents. In 2014, the anti-China worker riots in Binh Duong province threatened the involvement of the State. The government decided to oppress worker activism, condemning anti-China riots as a reactionary movement. In conclusion, the relationship between the State and worker activism is extremely ambiguous and fragile. By tackling political issues, contemporary activism appears to be directly opposing the VCP hegemony.

Despite the State’s attempts to pacify the situation, the recent policies present several weaknesses. Firstly, the majority of migrant workers are still excluded from permanent residency because companies commonly refuse to sign long-term contracts, which is one of the most important criteria to obtain permanent residency permits. Secondly, microcredit and social housing are scarce and hardly accessible to migrant workers. Finally, migrant workers do not show a strong will to integrate. Migrant workers’ careers are unstable, temporary and insecure, which also encourages for permanent settlement in HCMC. The intention to return to their native provinces is rooted in many migrant workers’ mentality.

In conclusion, the dynamics linking the suburban areas, industrial estates and worker dormitories, create a new dominated social class eager to claim social rights and seek recognition from the authorities.

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References


2 This paper is based on results collected from the author by surveys, interviews (150) and fieldwork observations conducted in eastern suburban districts of HCMC, from February to April 2015, for a master thesis dissertation entitled “Les ouvriers migrants en périphérie de HCMC: Entre intégration à la ville et exclusion sociale. Etude de la situation précaire des migrants ouvriers d’une zone périurbaine dans une métropole d’Asie du Sud-Est.”


