

Peter Custers, *Capital Accumulation and Women's Labour in Asian Economies*, London: Zed Books, 1997 and 2012 (401 pages, \$27.95)

And

Hsiao-Hung Pai, *Scattered Sand: The Story of China's Rural Migrants*, London: Verso, 2012 (302 pages, £16.99)

On the surface, these two books seem to share just one subtopic - workers in Asia – and then so widely different to be incorporated in one book review. Custer's *Capital Accumulation* is a theoretical piece on Marxist labour theories examined through the cases in Asia of earlier decades (1960s-1980s). Pai's *Scattered Sand*, on the other hand, is a journalistic exposé that reveals the depressing realities of migrant workers in contemporary China. Yet, despite these seeming disparities, these two works demonstrate the contradictions and human sacrifices that accrue in the process of capitalist economic development. The former brings into light the double oppression of patriarchy and capitalist exploitation experienced by women workers while the latter highlights the violent process of industrialization through which peasants from remote rural areas are transformed into industrial and service workers in urban towns. Both of the authors push the readers to be constantly cognizant of the toiling labour of women and men, which is often hidden underneath the spectacular growth records. This review will first introduce the two books and their core propositions, and close with a discussion on their contributions as well as limitations.

Custer's *Capital Accumulation* is a comprehensive exposition devoted to a critical assessment and application of labour theories to Asian economies such as India, Bangladesh, and Japan. If it was just about labour theories, it would have been a simple reiteration of existing works on labour studies. However, what makes Custer's work distinctive and significant is his reinterpretation of existing theoretical frameworks through a gender dimension. In Part 1, he carefully overviews the historical evolution of feminist labour theories and argues for the need of renewed Marxist thinking in understanding women's labour in contemporary capitalist system. In Part 2, he critically applies these theoretical frameworks to analyze informal women workers in West Bengal's garment industry, women factory workers and women peasant workers in Bangladesh, and female workers as labour reservoir under the Japanese system of Toyotism. Throughout his exposition, Custer demonstrates why

the classical Marxist theory fails to adequately problematise gender issues in capitalist production and how a feminist lens can uncover the real picture of capital accumulation both at the national and global level. In short, capitalist development creates hierarchies between men and women's labour, treats women's labour as unskilled (or semi-skilled), thus under-valued, and de-recognizes women's domestic labour as a crucial factor contributing to capital accumulation.

While Custer's book is set in a historical context dating back several decades, Pai's *Scattered Sand* explores the ongoing reality faced by millions of migrant workers in contemporary China. As a renowned journalist, she details various personal stories that represent the plight of millions of peasants from China's vast rural interiors to urban centers searching for work and survival. Through the voices of migrant workers in coal mines in the Yellow River region, brick kilns in the Northern provinces, the factories of the Pearl River Delta, and Olympic construction sites in Beijing, Pai chronicles a powerful exposé of brutal conditions faced by 200 million Chinese migrant workers toiling under the banner of "capitalism, Chinese style." What defines their life experience is a "forced" mobility from their rural hometowns to urban sectors that treat them with extreme precariousness, uncertainty, and abandonment. This is a story of brutal process of capitalist transformation in China where political and social institutions fail to offer a minimum level of protection to its people.

If anyone wants to understand the behind-the-scene story of China's spectacular growth and ascendance to global power, Pai's book definitely fills that need. What makes her detailed, empathetic but still objective journalism even more powerful is her ability to combine a knowledgeable historical narrative to provide the contextual understanding of the huge social transformation taking place in China. So, readers gain not only personal stories of Chinese migrant workers but also rich historical and social knowledge that backgrounds China's transformation.

A similar recommendation can be made regarding Custer's *Capital Accumulation*. Anyone who is interested in grasping the theoretical intersection of labour studies and feminist perspectives, this book is a must read. It offers a solid theoretical overview as well as a balanced critique of each theoretical approach anchored in an empirical discussion of Asian economies. Yet, I see two

shortcomings associated with his analysis. First, critiquing “Western” theories by applying them to “non-Western” cases is not such an intriguing method because it is too often practiced by a great majority of scholars in their studies. That is, capitalism in Asia is not understood “as is” to generate its own theoretical trajectory but merely used as a test bed for existing propositions generated in the West. Readers can easily agree that “Western” theories are insufficient to fully explicate the realities of women’s labour in Asian capitalism, which has taken its own historical path. However, Custer remains unclear regarding what new propositions are generated from his novel empirical examination of Asian cases. For instance, are the forms of women’s double exploitation found in Asia similar to those observed in Western societies? How do pre-existing social hierarchies or colonial legacies modify or reinforce the gendered dimension of capital accumulation in Asia?

Another missing chain I see in Custer’s work is the role of the government and state institutions. While he discusses in many of his chapters that even the existing labour laws are not abided by economic actors, the critical role played, or intentionally not played, by state institutions to enable a smooth process of capital accumulation is not fully explored. Making women’s labour invisible, worthless, subordinate, and double-exploitative is not only the work of capital but a duet coordinated with political elites and institutions.

A similar loophole is found in Pai’s *Scattered Sand*. While it is hinted from various passages in her book that the Chinese state is unable to develop state regulations and enforcement institutions to the same pace of capitalist growth, she does not clearly put her finger on “political failure.” As much as gendered labour markets in capitalist economies are the creation of political elites, the miseries experienced by Chinese workers today are also the creation of the Chinese Communist Party-state. As Karl Polanyi wrote in *The Great Transformation* a long time ago, the trajectories of capitalist development need to be understood in conjunction with the adaptations made in political and social institutions. Human greed might be the engine for capitalist growth but when politics fails to institute and implement social constraints against unlimited greed, the human toil paid for the growth remain deplorable.

Therefore, the works by Custer and Pai share a common message behind their seeming differences. Capital accumulation has

never been an honorable process. Child labour was widely practiced in England during the Victorian era; America's rise would not have been possible without the slavery system. More contemporary capitalist growth also seems to stand on under-paid, discriminated, and exploited labour, be it women, rural migrants, or ethnic minorities. The first step is to recognize these "invisible" human faces within the development projects if we are to understand the nature of capitalist growth. A further message that can be drawn from these studies is perhaps that curbing these inequalities and injustices ask for the response of state institutions. Rising inequalities brew social discontent and without timely intervention by the government social discontent may even grow to undermine social cohesion. Then, the whole project of capital accumulation might become highly unsustainable when society falls into political instability.

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