

## Intern Labor in China

Jenny Chan

Department of Applied Social Sciences  
Hong Kong Polytechnic University  
jenny.wl.chan@polyu.edu.hk

## 中国实习劳工

陈慧玲

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### Abstract

Internships have become integral to the development of vocational education in China. This article looks into the quasi-employment arrangements of student interns, who occupy an ambiguous space between being a student and being a worker at the point of production. Some employers recruit interns on their own, while others secure a supply of student labor through coordinated support of provincial and lower-level governments that prioritize investments, as well as through subcontracting services of private labor agencies. The incorporation of teachers into corporate management can strengthen control over students during their internships. While interns are required to do the same work as other employees, their unpaid or underpaid working experiences testify that intern labor is devalued. Exposés of abuses, such as using child labor in the guise of interns, have pressured the Chinese state and companies to eventually take remedial action. Reclaiming student workers' educational and labor rights in the growing intern economy, however, remains contested.

### Keywords

intern labor, student workers, internships, vocational schools, labor agencies, the state, China

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**摘要**

学生实习已经成为中国职业教育发展的重要组成部分。本文旨在探讨实习生面对的特殊雇佣关系,了解他们的工作处境,就是在劳动过程中占据了一个介于学生和工人之间的模糊位置。目前企业一般自行招募实习生,或通过地方政府和私人的中介机构进行大规模动员。校企合作之下,老师的介入加强了实习过程中对学生的劳动控制。当这些实习生被要求和其他工人一样工作时,他们的薪酬和福利待遇却往往低于一般工人,甚至是无酬的。近年来,以实习之名而使用童工为实的事件曝光以后,政府官员和公司主管被迫采用了一些应对措施。然而,在快速发展的“实习经济”中,要实现实习劳工的基本教育和劳动权利仍是困难重重。

**关键词**

实习劳工、学生工、实习、职业技术学校、中介、国家政府、中国

Student internships are typically required to meet educational qualifications in the medical profession, the hotel and tourism business, creative industries, cultural studies, and many other fields (Perlin, 2012; de Peuter, Cohen, and Brophy, 2015). In China, internships are mandatory in secondary and tertiary vocational education. This article examines the roles of enterprises, private labor agencies, vocational schools, and local governments in recruiting and managing student interns. It also seeks to explain the growth of intern labor in a changing market facing rising costs and in an environment of educational reforms.

Previous research on the commodification of education has shown that, under China's market reforms, vocational schools are incentivized to diversify funding sources through expanding student enrolment and engaging in business partnerships (Kuczera and Field, 2010). The quality of teaching and learning varies widely. Terry Woronov (2016) and Minhua Ling (2015), based on their ethnographic studies, observe that “passing time” is a way of life among vocational school students who no longer face intense academic pressure from exams. In under-resourced and poorly governed schools, many students play with handsets and online games, read comic books, and even sleep through the ill-prepared lectures, with the disillusioned dropping out altogether. Vocational schools are thus stigmatized as “holding tanks” for “bad students” who have failed in the mainstream education system.

In looking at the school-to-work transition, I focus on the institutional practices of student internship programs and the lived experiences of interns. For Guy Standing (2011: 16), “internships are potentially a vehicle for channelling youths into the precariat.” Is a precarious intern economy comprising young students growing in China? Between 2011 and 2012, I interviewed 38 student interns from working-class rural migrant families and 14 teachers participating in the internship program at the Taiwanese-owned Foxconn Technology Group, the largest such program in the world. Supplementing fieldwork in Sichuan and Guangdong, in August 2016 I interviewed three managers of a private labor agency responsible

for student internships and summer job assignments in Jiangsu. In addition to analyzing these first-hand research data, I review the educational and labor reforms in student internship governance over the past four decades. I also assess the wider consequences of the informalization of labor in the wake of China's regulations on vocational school internships adopted in April 2016.

### Labor Informalization in China

Until the early 1990s, graduates from vocational schools, along with their counterparts in high schools and colleges, were assigned to state-owned enterprises or the collective sector, and hence enjoyed a high level of job security. As market reforms and enterprise restructuring deepened, this job assignment system through government planning was phased out (Hoffman, 2001). A job seeker is now assumed to have full responsibility for his or her own career in China's competitive environment. The ethos is centered on individual effort and social mobility, profit maximization, and organizational efficiency and autonomy (Gallagher, 2005; Harvey, 2005). Different terms of work and employment, differentiated by one's educational credentials and social status, are applied in "flexible" workplaces.

The composition of the Chinese workforce is increasingly heterogeneous and labor relations contentious. In *Inside China's Automobile Factories*, Lu Zhang (2015) showed that the ranks of temporary workers, such as agency laborers and student interns, had been growing in step with pressure on the industry to cut costs and intensify labor. At assembly factories Zhang surveyed, temps earned a half to two-thirds of formal employees' wages and received far fewer welfare benefits. Auto production has been further streamlined by the use of lower-cost contingent workers on the one hand, and the application of advanced technologies in place of human labor on the other hand. Across China the downsizing of the industrial labor force is also a product of the government policy favoring a wide spectrum of low-end and high-paying service work (Evans and Staveteig, 2009). Interns or trainees from vocational schools—who, according to their legal status, remain students rather than employees—are a new source of "informal workers" or nonstandard labor in factories, hotels, metro stations, and other workplaces (Smith and Chan, 2015; Chan, Pun, and Selden, 2015; Pun and Koo, 2015; Su, 2010; Otis, 2009).

While there are national and international regulations that protect student interns' basic rights and interests in China and in other countries (Brown and deCant, 2014), employers frequently ignore them with impunity, as Ross Perlin (2012) documents in his *Intern Nation*, and Greig de Peuter, Nicole S. Cohen, and Enda Brophy (2015) comment in their introduction to the *tripleC: Communication, Capitalism & Critique* special issue on "Interrogating Internships." In what ways are student interns rendered as cheap and disposable labor in global electronics production chains? Jenny Chan, Ngai Pun, and Mark Selden (2015) draw on their ongoing investigation of the labor conditions at Foxconn, the world's largest electronics manufacturer, to show the critical role played by Chinese provincial and lower-level governments in manipulating internships through direct intervention

into school policies. The visible hands of local officials and teachers in charge are clearly evident in student mobilization and in-factory management throughout the internship period, ensuring worker acquiescence. This active alliance between local states, schools, and capital, however, is inherently unstable.

Student interns and their co-workers at the Nanhai-based Honda auto parts plant, for example, went on strike between May and June 2010, paralyzing the entire close-knit, just-in-time supply network of Honda from within China. Despite the power asymmetry between managers and teachers in charge of internships on the one side and workers including interns on the other, the strikers, with external support from scholars and activists, won a big pay raise (Butollo and ten Brink, 2012; Chan and Hui, 2014; Lyddon et al., 2015). Students, all classmates and friends who went to work by company shuttle buses and lived in the same dormitories, supported the worker leaders in solidarity actions. The trade unions at the municipal and higher levels were compelled to mediate the wage disputes to restore production and stability, although they were far more reluctant to accede to workers' demands for reforming the company union (Friedman, 2014; China Labor Bulletin, 2015).

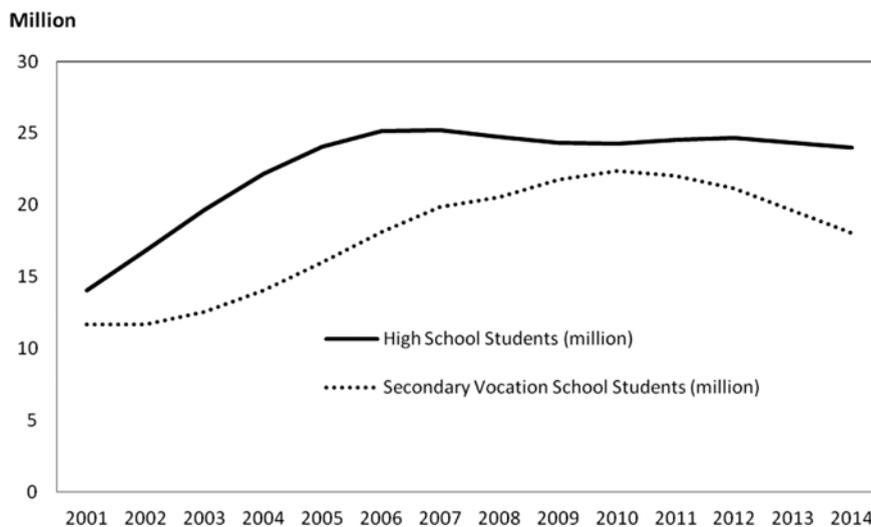
What remains understudied is the complex power structure faced by teenage student interns amid the slowing economy, the growing competition for jobs, and the collusion between vocational schools, labor agencies, and local governments in shaping the internship system. As we will see, employers utilize student labor coordinated by local officials as well as by private agencies through labor subcontracting. Inequalities are deepened when the dispatch of student interns by schools in cooperation with local governments and labor agencies does not seem to serve the learning objectives of the interns at all.

### Vocational Education and Student Internships

Vocational schools offer employment-oriented courses for eligible applicants who have completed nine years of schooling. Throughout the 1990s, the Chinese government's figures showed that an approximately equal number of students were enrolled in secondary vocational schools (grades 10–12) and high schools (Ministry of Education, 2015). Figure 1 shows that in the past fifteen years, however, high schools have begun to attract a larger number of students than secondary vocational schools nationwide. In the first decade of the twenty-first century, the share of secondary vocational school students doubled from 11.7 million in 2001 to 22.4 million in 2010, but by 2014 it had dropped to 18 million.

Vocational schools follow the work-study model, emphasizing the integration of education with production 产教结合, as laid down in China's 1996 Vocational Education Law. From the perspective of skills training and human capital accumulation, interning—"working for free" or "working for little"—is framed by neoliberal policy makers as investing in one's future. This is somewhat rationalized or internalized by the interns themselves, even when the imagined future can be highly uncertain (Hope and Figiel, 2015). While many college graduate interns in

Figure 1. Composition of Students in China's Senior Secondary Schools, 2001–2014.



Note: The small number of students enrolling in “adult high schools” (between 0.3% and 1.2% of the total enrollment) is not shown.

Source: Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2015.

the United Kingdom and the United States come from “privileged backgrounds” (Perlin, 2012), by contrast vocational school student interns in China are mostly rural or urban working-class youth (Woronov, 2016). In Shanghai second-generation migrant youths are able to build useful social networks during their full-time studies and part-time jobs, and may eventually move upward in a competitive market economy (Ling, 2015).

For students 中职生/高职生, the key question is the quality of teaching in the classroom and in internships among a wide range of vocational training programs. A standard course lasts from three years (at the secondary level 中专) to five years (3+2, from the secondary to the tertiary level 大专). A 6,000-student vocational school that trains equipment and machinery technicians proclaims its mission:

Master one skill, create a career;  
 Master one skill, make a blue sky.  
 学一技之长, 创一番事业;  
 学一技之长, 创一片蓝天。

In a larger, 7,000-student school specializing in auto repair and mobile mechanics, Zhumadian Higher Technical School (upgraded to Zhumadian Technical Institute in 2013), the recruitment brochure elaborates on the importance of “studying real skills”:

Our country has a good policy that families in difficulty pay no tuition!  
 To look for a job without learning technical skills is a life-long mistake!  
 It is best to have a skill in this world, to save you if times get tough!  
 Parents with foresight have their children learn skills!  
 Study real skills at Zhumadian Higher Technical School!  
 Seeking wealth has limits, but skills and know-how lead to riches!  
 Zhumadian Higher Technical School is a cradle of talent!  
 Young people who do not learn technical skills will age with terrible regret!  
 For a technically skilled person, the world is wide open, the benefits last a lifetime!  
 Working will not guarantee an easy retirement, a good retirement requires skills!

国家政策好,家庭困难可免学费!  
 不学技术去打工,将遗憾终生!  
 世间艺业要会一件,有时贫穷救你患难!  
 父母有眼光,让儿学技术!  
 学真正技术,到驻马店高级技工学校!  
 钱财有限,技术致富!  
 驻马店高级技工学校是技术人才的摇篮!  
 年轻不学技,年长悔莫及!  
 一技在身,走遍天下,受益终生!  
 打工不养老,养老靠技术!

The school's marketing campaigns focus on learning skills, which is said to provide a solid foundation for career building and lifelong security. It is at this intersection of education and economy that the country's leaders have aspired to nurture a skilled labor force through the improvement and expansion of vocational training across all levels. One clear, official goal is to recruit up to 23.5 million students into three-year vocational schools, that is, 50 percent of the nation's secondary student population, by the year 2020 (Ministry of Education, 2010a: table 1; Ministry of Education et al., 2014: table 1).

There are many different forms of internships. Some are chosen by students on their own initiative, while others are coordinated by educational institutions on students' behalf as a partial fulfillment of study requirements. Good internship programs are participatory, reflective, useful to students' growth and development, and related to their field of study (Ip, 2015). By contrast, my research reveals that the interns' work positions at Foxconn are *not* related to their field of study.

### The Disconnect between Students' Majors and Internships

The 38 interviewed interns were studying arts, construction, petro-chemistry, automotive repair, herbal medicine, horticulture, secretarial services, computer science, business management, accounting, textiles, electronics and mechanics, among others. Only eight of them were in their third year, the final year when internships are supposed to take place. Their average age was 16.5, just above the national statutory minimum working age of 16. In terms of the length of internship, the fourteen teachers who were dispatched to Foxconn reveal that the company internships

were often extended to meet production needs, ranging from three months to a full year, with scant regard for student training needs.

A 16-year-old Foxconn intern said, "Come on, what do you think we've learned standing for more than ten hours a day manning machines on the line? What's an internship? There's no relation to what we study in school. Every day is just a repetition of one or two simple motions, like a robot." Interns at Foxconn are required to work punishing ten to twelve hour shifts, six or seven days a week. The 2007 Administrative Measures for Internships at Secondary Vocational Schools 中等职业学校学生实习管理办法 (Ministries of Education and Finance, 2007) states that "interns shall not work more than eight hours a day," and the 2010 Education Circular specifies that "interns shall not work overtime beyond the eight-hour workday" (Ministry of Education, 2010b). Not only must interns' shifts be limited to eight hours, all their training is required to take place during daytime to ensure students' safety and physical and mental health, in line with the Law on the Protection of Minors 未成年人保护法. The law, revised and promulgated in 2013, aims to protect young people under 18 through balanced development and healthy growth. Article 20 stipulates that schools, including vocational schools, shall "cooperate with the parents or other guardians of minor students to guarantee the students' time for sleeping, recreational activities, and physical exercise and may not increase their burden of study." In reality, Foxconn student interns ranging in age from 16 to 18 were subjected to the same working conditions as regular workers, including alternating day and night shifts and extensive overtime, defying the letter and the spirit of the law.

In explaining the design and purpose of internships, a teacher showed me the following school letter addressed to students' parents 告家长书:

Participation in this internship will advance students' respect and appreciation of employment 敬业爱岗, their honesty and integrity 诚实守信 as the main part of a vocational moral education 职业道德教育, will help students understand enterprise and become familiar with a business environment and culture, will lead students to develop employee awareness 员工意识 in both practice through study and learning by doing, will cultivate students' comprehensive career capabilities 综合职业能力, and will integrate their overall qualities 综合素质 and inure them to hardship and promote endurance 吃苦耐劳的精神 so that in the future they will enter the job market with a solid foundation.

The letter, with its high moral tone, claims that through the school's assigned internship students' "employability" in the market will be enhanced, yet it neither specifies the curriculum nor provides any clue to the content of the technical training.

A 17-year-old student intern recalled: "I enrolled in an automotive repair course in September 2009, and according to the curriculum, the specialized course lasts for three years, with two years at school and one year of internship." But less than a year into the program, by June 2010, he and his fellow classmates had been sent to Foxconn's production site based in Shenzhen to intern for seven full months,

working not on automobiles but on iPhones. “It’s exhausting. It’s a waste of time,” he concluded. Not long after their return, in April 2011, the school began to arrange still more internships for graduates. “The school had still not finished planning our specialized classes, but they began setting up internship assignments. We haven’t yet completed even the core classes in our specialization, nor have we grasped the basic skills of automotive repair. How are we going to do an internship in an auto company?” The student was very upset. “We followed the rules and paid for three years of tuition, but we haven’t completed the professional training. The school changed the most basic agreement, contradicted the student recruitment brochure, arbitrarily changed the curriculum, treated its students’ future like a plaything, and failed in its responsibility to us. We students have not attained sufficient knowledge in our education, and come time for employment, we’ll have no competitive advantage.”

### “Consenting” to Internships

The “consent” of students to assigned internships is sometimes open to dispute. In my fieldwork, students are sent in bulk by school teachers to undertake so-called internship assignments. Some had only a few articles of clothing in coarse rice bags, having responded to the school announcement of the internship on short notice. One of the students explained what had happened: “Our teacher announced that every vocational school in the province had to cooperate with the local government and send students to Foxconn to take up internships.” He added, “Unless we could present a medical report certified by the city hospital that we were very ill, we had to depart immediately.” During the summer of 2010, according to the company’s own public statement, 150,000 students were interning at Foxconn. Interns thus made up 15 percent of the company’s million-strong workforce across China (Foxconn Technology Group, 2010a: 2). This means that Foxconn dwarfed Disney’s College Program, often cited as one of the world’s largest internship programs, which received more than 50,000 interns cumulatively over thirty years from college partners in the United States and abroad (Perlin, 2012: 6). In a large Foxconn business group that exclusively serves Apple, 28,044 “student interns” from over two hundred schools were working on the assembly line in 2010, a six-fold increase from 4,539 such interns in 2007 (Foxconn Technology Group, 2010b: 23). With the loss of their capacity to control the timing, location, and training content of the internships, a student interviewee expressed his pent-up anger by condemning the program as “fake internships” 假实习 and “forced internships” 被实习.

A 26-year-old teacher told me of some students who were reluctant to go to work during the first week after they arrived at the Foxconn factory.

I asked my students to manage their emotions. Calm down. Think carefully if you want to leave; won’t your parents be disappointed? I visited my students in the dorm to see if they felt okay on Tuesday night. They answered “not too bad.” I met them again on Friday night. They said “fine.” They’ve gradually gotten used to the work rhythm. Finally, when I asked if they want to leave, they replied “no.”

During the entire internship, the teacher focused on managing his students' emotions because maintaining a high retention rate of student interns was a primary criterion for judging teacher performance. A number of teacher interviewees, as I found out later toward the end of the month, pretended that the internships had educational and self-management value because they were motivated to get two paychecks—one regular monthly salary from their schools and the other from Foxconn in direct exchange for their onsite supervisory service during the entire internship period. For the school year of 2011–2012, each teacher received an extra pay of 2,000 yuan/month from Foxconn. The transposition of teachers' authority into the corporate hierarchical structure was intended to strengthen labor control, thus the student interns were serving “two bosses.”

In a broader structure, teachers were pressured to coordinate internships tailored for Foxconn, an influential corporate player in the local political economy. Teacher Jiang explained,

There's a need to respond to the Education Department's call to get the whole class of students organized. To take action uniformly 统一行动. Because an internship is not a summer job 不是打暑假工 that one gets on one's own. Think about this—if fifty students are left in the school during the semester, we won't be able to take care of them. We go with our students to the internship site.

Between September 2011 and January 2012 (a school semester), in Foxconn's Chengdu factories, more than 7,000 students—approximately 10 percent of the labor force—were working on the assembly line. One of the participating schools, Pujiang Vocational School, sent 162 students on September 22, 2011, to undertake three-month internships that were extended in accordance with iPad production needs. The large Pengzhou Technical School signed up 309 students, accompanied by three male and three female teachers, for the entire internship. This is typical of the 1:50 teacher-student ratio maintained throughout the Foxconn internship program in 2011–2012.

At Foxconn, student interns are *not* free to leave work at any time upon reasonable notice without negative repercussions. Working on the line and living in the factory dormitories, the students must comply with the Foxconn internship program on pain of not graduating. One Chinese literature teacher in his forties observes that the student intern system is not unlike the abusive “contract labor system” 包身工 of the 1930s. He draws a parallel to the desperate Occupation-era children and teenagers from poverty-stricken villages who were sold to labor contractors and dispatched to toil day and night under harsh conditions in Japanese-owned cotton mills in Shanghai. Laughing bitterly, he confides that “I'm a modern day contractor,” referring to his role as a coordinator of the internship program. “My daughter is seventeen years old, my only daughter. She's now preparing for the national college entrance exam. No matter what the result is, I won't let her come to intern, or work, for this company.” Most important, he states that “at Foxconn, there's no real learning through integration of classroom and workshop. The distortion of vocational education in today's China is deeply rooted.”

## The Devaluation of Intern Labor

Intern labor is cheap labor. In early 2008, during her fieldwork in Nanjing, Terry Woronov (2016: 124) found that a whole class of bookkeeping students—still in their second year of a five-year vocational program—were brought to a university to undertake a two-week unpaid “internship.” The interns were responsible for doing nine hours a day of “data entry” at the university’s admission office. She reported that most, if not all, of the students “agreed” to do the routine clerical work, which was justified by their teachers in charge as “good work experience” that nurtured “good discipline.” When young students are socialized to “unthink exploitation,” mainly through the discourse and practice of acquiring hands-on experience and networking while interning, the relations of labor and the expropriation of surplus value are obscured and hidden (Rodino-Colocino and Berberick, 2015).

In Foxconn’s “iPad city” in Chengdu, capital of Sichuan, as of January 2011, although new workers and interns were paid the same at 950 yuan/month, interns were not entitled to a 400 yuan/month skills subsidy even after they passed a three-month probationary period. Foxconn justifies this tiered treatment by referring to the “pay reasonably for the labor of interns” legal requirement, wherein what constitutes “reasonable pay” went unspecified under the national regulations at that time.<sup>1</sup>

Maintaining that student interns are not employees—even when they perform work identical to that of production workers—Foxconn, not unlike many others, does not enroll interns in government-administered social security, which covers medical insurance, work injury insurance, unemployment benefits, maternity insurance, and old age pensions. As of 2015, in Guangdong, employers were supposed to contribute 29.2 percent and employees 11 percent of the employee’s wages to social insurance on a monthly basis. For example, the company’s insurance payment should be 876 yuan if the monthly income of a worker is 3,000 yuan in total. By dispensing with all of these benefits, the company saves money.

The non-payment of social insurance for interning students deserves attention. When the central government promulgated the Social Insurance Law, effective July 1, 2011, it required that employers and employees co-contribute to social insurance on a monthly basis, and that premium contribution payments by the company as well as those by workers be carried forward and portable throughout the country. The accumulation and continuity of insurance enrollment is important (cumulated up to fifteen years before any disbursement of retirement benefits) when labor mobility has become more common. But this is an aspiration that has yet to be fulfilled for many employees (Wang and Li, 2011; Chen, 2015; Schmalz, Sommer, and Hui, 2016). And student interns—in actuality “student workers” 学生工—are completely excluded from the government-administered social insurance schemes.

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<sup>1</sup> Article 8 of the “Administrative Measures for Internships at Secondary Vocational Schools” 中等职业学校学生实习管理办法 (Ministries of Education and Finance, 2007) stipulates that interns be paid at a reasonable level 合理的实习报酬.

### Labor Dispatch of Student Interns

In the market, labor agencies have increasingly undertaken a new form of labor subcontracting: the dispatch of student interns. Some vocational schools had engaged with for-profit labor agencies to supply students to workplaces in return for economic gains. How is one to make sense of the business model of labor dispatch in general and student labor dispatch in particular?

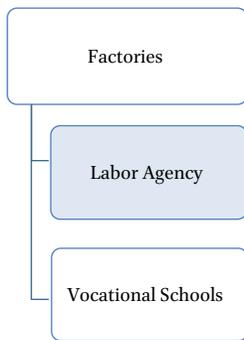
In reviewing the expansion of labor dispatch services in China, Feng Xu (2014) points out that the first such agencies were founded by local governments to deploy laid-off urban workers before they could foment social disorder. The agencies also created new sources of revenues for officials. Private domestic firms and multinationals quickly joined this niche market, absorbing the unemployed, rural migrants, and fresh graduates, among other groups (Zhou, 2013). Government statistics showed that by 2011 there were 27 million (data from the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security) to 60 million (data from the All-China Federation of Trade Unions) agency workers—a very wide range of rough estimates at the national level (Liu, 2014: 14). As I will explain, student interns are also joining the ranks of the fast expanding labor dispatch force.

During August 2016, I conducted preliminary fieldwork at a private labor agency in the city of Danyang, Jiangsu 江苏丹阳. The headquarters of the labor agency branch are based in Lianyungang 连云港, 345 kilometers and four hours by car from Danyang. From within Jiangsu, vocational school students—some who were born in 2000—were dispatched to small privately run auto parts processing factories, regardless of their subjects of study. The students were paid an internship subsidy 实习补助 of 10 yuan per hour during the summer months (compared to the 15.5 yuan local minimum hourly wage standard), with the longest working month of 308 hours. The labor agency pocketed the difference between the interning students' "standard hourly pay" (that is, 10 yuan per hour) and the factory rate (which is negotiated on a case-by-case basis). For the factory boss, the use of dispatched or outsourced student workers helps to cut both administrative and labor costs (see Figure 2).

Student internships are profoundly marketized. The labor agency, registered in 2011 as a wholly owned private business, is responsible for the hiring and management of student interns, such as the signing of "labor dispatch (hourly work) agreements" 劳务派遣 (小时工) 协议书, the payment of wages in cash or via bank transfer, and the deduction for commercial insurance fees. According to the manager, whom I interviewed, "55 yuan is deducted from each student for the monthly insurance premium. But the cheapest general insurance plan costs only 22 yuan. We maximize our gains by taking the difference, that is, 33 yuan." Student employees of the agency are insured against industrial accidents, but they are not entitled to health care or pensions. "Small things like making an advance payment of 100 yuan to the sick and other needy students are helpful in retaining them," said the manager.

As for the interns, according to an interviewed assistant manager:

Figure 2. The Dispatch of Student Interns through a Labor Agency



Many want to make some money during the summer holidays and the regular school term to support their own studies and everyday expenses, thus reducing the burden on their parents. In looking for paid jobs, the students ended up bumping into our labor agency through friends' introductions and online searches. Others have no expectations at all about learning or training.

He also commented on the entrepreneurial, rather than educational, role of the teachers:

Teachers are interested to getting a cut [from student internships], too. We either have to make a good deal, or reach out to students directly through our local agents, whom we call downstream suppliers 供货商, but not via the school teacher gatekeepers. In this way, we don't have to pay them commissions. You know what, meeting with teachers means spending on cigarettes, food and drinks, KTVs, and so on. The Mid-Autumn Festival is approaching [on September 15] and we've got to present them with Maxim's mooncakes 美心月饼. All this will cost you quite a lot before you'll get any return. The negotiations over the distribution of gains, that is, our profits, often take a few rounds, and it's cumbersome 很烦.

In summary, dispatched student interns are treated like a commodity in the human resources supply chain. Labor agency managers, unlike school teachers, do not seem to even have to defend their trade by talking about ethics, such as self-learning or learning by doing, no matter how shallow or hollow the meaning is. As an experiment, the labor agency is now investing and running its first vocational school, looking forward to sending the students directly to labor-hungry enterprises in return for higher profits.

### Regulating China's Intern Economy

Earl Brown and Kyle deCant (2014: 195) argue that when internship programs are "devoid of any relevant educational component and maintained solely for the benefit of the employer's bottom line...interns should be afforded the full protection of

China's labor laws." As evidence from research has shown, student interns were weakly protected, and I would further argue that the corporate use of these millions of informal workers has been driven by China's rising wages. By 2012, "real wages for migrant workers were two and a half times what they had been in 2003, increasing by 10.8 percent annually" (Naughton, 2014: 21). There are multiple factors that explain this trend. In the mid-2000s, the government moved to abolish the agriculture tax and introduce new social insurance schemes to raise rural incomes in reaction to the widening of the urban-rural income gap that began in the mid to late 1980s and worsened when China's joining the World Trade Organization put downward pressure on agricultural prices (Frazier, 2014). In a few localities with good infrastructural support, increased opportunities in agricultural and nonfarm work are keeping more youthful laborers in their hometowns (Zhan and Huang, 2013). For the first time, a shortage of migrant labor has reportedly emerged in coastal export zones, and will soon emerge in the booming interior cities too, where investors are bidding for lower-cost labor, land, and other resources under the Go West macro development policy (Pun and Chan, 2012; Chuang, 2015). These factors, plus the younger cohort's frequent jumping from job to job (Shen, 2013; Wang and Zhai, 2013), compel employers to raise wages to recruit and retain workers. At the same time, the central leadership has been raising minimum wages to rebalance the economy and to stimulate domestic demand. Government surveys showed that in 2015, Chinese rural migrant workers' average wage was 3,072 yuan/month (including overtime premiums), a 7.2 percent increase from the preceding year (National Bureau of Statistics, 2016: table 8). The government's regulations against the overuse of interns are, therefore, generally not observed.

Exposés by media and advocacy groups have shown that Chinese student interns—the youngest ones only 14—are thinly disguised child labor, overworked, and unguided (BBC, 2012; DanWatch, 2015; Chakraborty, 2016). In these "sheep-like internships" 放羊式实习, interns are confused and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. In response, in 2016, the central government eventually took some measures to protect the basic rights of student interns.

Specifically, vocational schools should manage student internships in accordance with the latest regulations promulgated by the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Finance, the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security, the State Administration of Work Safety, and the China Insurance Regulatory Commission, which superseded the 2007 Administrative Measures and came into force on April 11, 2016 (Ministry of Education et al., 2016). Under the "Regulations on the Management of Vocational School Student Internships" 职业学校学生实习管理规定, the duration of workplace-based internships should normally be for six months.<sup>2</sup> The minimum level for paying interns is clearly specified: "Wages

<sup>2</sup> Article 10 of the "Regulations on the Management of Vocational School Student Internships" 职业学校学生实习管理规定 (Ministry of Education et al., 2016) states that internships should normally be for six months 学生在实习单位的实习时间根据专业人才培养方案确定,顶岗实习一般为6个月.

shall be *at least* 80 percent of those of employees during the probationary period” (italics added),<sup>3</sup> On insurance benefits, vocational schools and enterprises are required to undertake “joint responsibility” to provide interns with commercial general liability insurance.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, the regulations, when vigorously implemented, require that student internships have substantial educational content and work-skill training provisions, along with comprehensive labor protections for student interns such as an eight-hour day, no overtime, and no night shifts.<sup>5</sup> Above all, no more than 10 percent of the labor force at “any given facility,” or no more than 20 percent of the workers in “any given work position,” should consist of student interns at any point in time.<sup>6</sup>

The intricate interests shared by company, labor agency, school, and local governments, however, will not be easily done away with. Rob Lederer, the executive director of the Electronic Industry Citizenship Coalition (EICC), an industry association with a hundred-plus members around the world, acknowledged that “one large potential source of reliable, quality labor may be student workers” (EICC and REAP, 2015a: 2). At the invitation of the EICC, Scott Rozelle, co-director of the Rural Education Action Program (REAP) at Stanford University, has assisted in designing a monitoring and evaluation program of China’s vocational schooling system since 2013. The major objective is to achieve “responsible vocational education,” beginning with a pilot project of 118 secondary vocational schools in heavily populated Henan province (EICC and REAP, 2015a, 2015b). In July 2016, the academic research team, with support from leaders from the provincial Department of Education, created a list of 22 credentialed vocational schools to benchmark teaching standards, school resources, and student learning experiences against a set of criteria (EICC and REAP, 2016).

The provincial government encouraged companies to select students and graduates from quality schools for internships and employment, thereby providing economic incentives for both teachers and students to improve their performance. Cooperating schools were also promised increased government funding for long-term educational development. This is framed by the Stanford University research team as a “win-win-win action research” to strengthen collaboration between the government, schools, and companies (Rozelle, Loyalka, and Chu, 2013). In engaging with the world’s largest electronics association, the researchers took aim at

<sup>3</sup> Article 17 (Ministry of Education et al., 2016) stipulates that interns shall be paid “at least 80 percent of the employees’ wages during the probation” 不低于本单位相同岗位试用期工资标准的80%，and the wages shall be fully paid in local currency without delay 以货币形式及时、足额支付给学生。

<sup>4</sup> Article 35 (Ministry of Education et al., 2016) emphasizes the shared responsibility of vocational schools and enterprises to insure student interns against work-related injuries and death 为实习学生投保实习责任保险。

<sup>5</sup> Article 16 (Ministry of Education et al., 2016) prohibits employers from lengthening the workday and assigning night work to student interns 不得安排学生加班和夜班。

<sup>6</sup> Article 9 (Ministry of Education et al., 2016) sets the legal limits on the use of student interns at the level of the work position and the workplace 顶岗实习学生的人数不超过实习单位在岗职工总数的10%，在具体岗位顶岗实习的学生人数不高于同类岗位在岗职工总人数的20%。

vocational schools, holding them accountable for bad learning experiences and poor internship arrangements. They have not, however, addressed the managerial abuses involving the violation of China's internship provisions at the workplace level.

## Conclusion

Greig de Peuter, Nicole Cohen, and Enda Brophy (2015: 331) indicate that internships are “an entry point for interrogating contested conditions of life, labour, and learning at a historical moment when precarity is an encroaching structure of feeling.” Young and inexperienced students, along with many other kinds of low-skilled workers, face formidable challenges in the face of credential inflation, ineffective governance, and the flexibilization of production of services and goods around the globe (Kuruvilla, Lee, and Gallagher, 2011; Huang, 2011; Standing, 2011; Warhurst et al., 2012; Chan and Selden, 2016; Lee, 2016). “Unification of school and business, unification of theory and practice, unification of teacher and technician, and unification of student and employee” 学校企业一体化, 理论实践一体化, 教师师傅一体化, 学生员工一体化 proclaims a school mission statement. Instead of a seamless unification, this article concludes that the discrepancy between promise and reality could scarcely be larger.

Ross Perlin in his book on contemporary American and European internship practices, *Intern Nation*, comments, “The very significance of the word *intern* lies in its ambiguity” (Perlin, 2012: 23, italics in the original). In China, student interns have become an important source of labor that is growing in step with the expansion of vocational education and the informalization of employment. The hopes that internships will lead to careers are being systematically undermined by practices that sabotage the fundamental concept of internships in order to assure employers a cheap and disposable labor supply. Facing financial and political pressures, many schools—even the better ones—are unable to shield students from internships that violate the law.

At a time of slowing growth and an ageing population, the growing numbers of young, vocationally trained workers could play a critical role in China's economic and technological development. The strengthening of labor laws and internship regulations is an attempt by the authoritarian state to boost its legitimacy. Yet with each loophole that the government closes, corporations react by circumventing the new rules and regulations. Eli Friedman and Ching Kwan Lee (2010: 513) insightfully comment that, at the workplace level, multitiered employment arrangements are “problematic not just from the perspective of the informal workers, but also from [that of] the regular workers, who will find it increasingly difficult to make collective demands on their employers.” Worse still, provincial and lower-level governments have bent the laws and regulations to attract investment and accelerate inland relocation, at the expense of workers' rights and interests. Stronger protection of labor, particularly student workers, will require much more sustained joint efforts from the state, companies, and civil society.

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**Jenny Chan (PhD, 2014)** is an Assistant Professor of Sociology and China Studies in the Department of Applied Social Sciences, the Hong Kong Polytechnic University. She is also an elected board member of the International Sociological Association's Research Committee on Labor Movements, an editor of the *Global Labour Journal*, and a contributing editor of the *Asia-Pacific Journal*. Between 2014 and 2016, she taught on the MSc in Contemporary China Studies at the University of Oxford's School of Interdisciplinary Area Studies, and held a Junior Research Fellowship at the University of Oxford's Kellogg College. Her email contacts are [jenny.wl.chan@polyu.edu.hk](mailto:jenny.wl.chan@polyu.edu.hk)/[wlchan\\_cuhk@yahoo.com](mailto:wlchan_cuhk@yahoo.com).