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In the research on the organising strategies of migrant workers in advanced economies, community unionism is now considered to be more effective than workplace unionism, as migrant workers’ segregation and ethnic solidarity facilitates their mobilisation. Drawing on ongoing ethnological research, my article will document the evolution of the interaction between Chinese migrant workers in France and the Confédération Générale du Travail (CGT), France’s biggest labour union. My central question is: what can the case of Chinese migrants in France tell us about the relationship between trade unions, migrant workers and their respective ethnic economies? Analysing the CGT’s changing strategies for mobilising Chinese workers demonstrates main tensions in organisation strategies of migrant workers. On one hand, CGT’s recent call for a strike shows issues around participation – conflict with employers and ethnic solidarity discourage workers’ involvement through social pressure. This shows the importance of conducting an intersectional analysis to study the structure of the ethnic economy and how, in this case, the employer-employee relationship is a source of domination rather than a mechanism of mobilisation. On the other hand, employment structures in the ethnic economy are not unchangeable; SMEs are often stigmatised by local authorities for employing undocumented workers, but the union’s ability to help formalise these workers has convinced some entrepreneurs to cooperate more readily with the CGT. The French example proves that it is possible to include legislative change as a movements’ goal, but also demonstrates how a political goal, in this case legalisation of workers, can undermine the importance of pursuing improvement to working conditions.
Introduction

“Our challenge today is that, migrant workers are no longer in the factory, on the assembling line where there is a union structure; but they are totally immersed in the out-sourced structure, in small companies, and we won’t be able to organize them if we don’t go looking for them. ... We should bring back the theme of migrant workers to the political battles of today.”

On 27 November 2012, Mme. Francine Blanche, the secrétaire confédérale and head of the “anti-discrimination and equality” section of the Confédération Générale du Travail (CGT), gave this speech during the conference “The CGT and migrant workers since 1945”. Her talk was simultaneously a political diagnosis but also a reflection on the movement after several years’ engagement in organizing undocumented migrant workers in France. Since 2008, the CGT, one of the oldest and most important trade unions in France, has been involved in the political mobilization of migrant workers. Whereas in other developed countries, unions’ actions concerning migrant workers seem to concentrate on organization at a local level in order to pursue better working conditions (Ness 1995, Holgate 2005, Holgate et al. 2012), the CGT’s movement in France has a different type of objective: demanding legal change through publicized demonstrations and strikes by undocumented workers. Since 2006, a series of highly publicized actions including sit-ins, occupations, strikes and protests by undocumented workers were launched in all over France. The goal is always the same: to demand the immediate legalization of undocumented workers until the government agrees to make a law allowing more undocumented workers to leave the informal sector. During these years, at least 20,000 undocumented workers have joined the CGT through the movement, including 1000 Chinese workers who have become formal members.

In the era of economic crisis and decline of syndicalism, migrant workers, often involved in the subaltern or peripheral sector, are considered by unions as a possible source for the “union revitalization” (Mustchin 2012). However, various difficulties – language barrier, mobility, and the culture of self-mobilization from home country - also make organization a challenge (Heyes 2009, Simme and Holgate 2010). Therefore, mounting interest in community unionism has arisen as a viable solution in the relevant research. In the French context, community unionism is far from being developed: most migrant workers were incorporated into the union structure, with the exception of the Chinese workers; however, CGT has had difficulties encouraging Chinese workers to participate in the mobilization. Compared with studies done in the U.S. or Britain, the French case may provide an interesting contrast in two senses: first of all, most studies on community unionism have focused on migrant workers employed by native employers. Will the fact that Chinese migrant workers employed by businesses operated by fellow countrymen pose different challenges to the organization? Furthermore, how does the strategy of making legal-political changes cause different perceptions and reasons of participating in union activities?

Drawing on my on-going ethnographical research, this article is a study of CGT’s engagement with Chinese workers since 2009, when I first started to be involved

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1 My field note, 27 November 2012.
in the movement as an observer, and gradually become an interpreter and activist as CGT deepened its contact with Chinese workers. Combining biographical interviews with migrants, participation in the various strategic meetings and union sessions, as well as formal and informal discussions with union leaders, this article provides an in-depth portrait of the three years’ experience organizing the mobilization of a community longtime considered to be “discreet” and “mafia-controlled” in France.

My central question is: what can the case of Chinese migrants in France tell us about the relationship between trade unions, migrant workers and their respective ethnic economies? I posit that economic concerns are the primary condition that structure Chinese migrants’ lives in France. Meanwhile, my knowledge of this community has been built through three years’ contact in Paris, as well as a trip to China to visit migrants’ home regions, which has also given me deeper understanding of the community pressures that shape the moral universe that keeps the Chinese workers from fully accepting CGT’s ideology and political goals. Therefore, the more I get involved in the movement, the more I find myself often in a position of explaining to CGT’s activists how to translate the movement’s goal into understandable language for the Chinese workers. The role of mediator/translator between a highly politicized union and workers who are worried for their jobs and liberty of movement thus brought me to address the question of the intersection of ethnic belonging and class consciousness in the workers’ movement. Developed by feminist theorists, the concept of intersectionality perceives “ethnicity/nation, gender and class as an involving process relating to a range of economic, political and social interests and projects and to distinctive (and variable forms) of social allegiance and identifications which are played out in a nuanced and highly context-related fashion” (Anthias 2010). CGT’s engagement with Chinese workers provides a unique case to reflect on the co-construction of economic situation and ethnic belonging, and necessitates the analysis of intersectionality concerning the organizing strategies of minority workers. Pondering the challenges and failure of organizing migrant workers through this perspective, in this article, I will try to show that “migrant workers” is not just another category of organization; the condition of being a migrant, and more specifically certain moral imperatives and collective values of the Chinese community, has penetrated the economic behavior and hence create different obstacles of organization.

In the following sections, I will begin by a brief presentation of the structure of Chinese migrant communities in Paris. Then, I will bring up the CGT’s changing mobilization strategies with Chinese workers according to three phases: the first encounter in October 2009 through a political mobilization to demand legalization; the initiative of unionization (May 2011-), and the failed attempt of mobilization before the 2012 Presidential election. A discussion on this process will follow to conclude the article.

**The Chinese migrant economy in Paris**

Despite being one of the largest Chinese communities in Europe, the Chinese community in Paris is rather young compared to other parts of the Chinese
diaspora. Before China’s reform in 1978, Chinese neighborhoods were hardly visible in Paris, and it wasn't until the 1970s that two large waves of immigrants, one from south-east Asian and another from Wenzhou, a city 500 kilometers from Zhejiang, begin to arrive in Paris (Poisson 2005). The former mostly arrived as political refugees during the Vietnam War, and often acquired legal status immediately. This is contrary to the migrants from mainland China who have often had to tolerate long periods as illegal migrants.

One important element to understand about the Chinese community is its high homogeneity. More than 70% of migrants are from the same region (Gao and Poisson 2005: 26). Migrating as family networks, they tend to maximize profit by filling the same niche in the economy, and are currently concentrated in the restaurant and clothing industries. New migrants from other Chinese regions are either employed in these “classic” professions, or in more feminized professions such as “care” work – as live-in maids or nannies for families, but still employed by other Chinese families.

In comparing two factories in Southern China, Ching-Kwan Lee (1995) distinguishes two ideal types of labor control: “local despotism” and “familial hegemony”. In the case of Chinese migrants working in small family–styled restaurants, families or textile workshop, we find that the employment relationship is closer to the ideal type of “familial hegemony”, where the relationship is characterized by reciprocity and essentialist discourse. Where being in an illegal situation often renders bad working conditions inevitable, it is often masked and euphemized by essentialist rhetoric to portray the “hard-working” virtue of Chinese migrants. It is often heard that “French people would not tolerate long working hours like us. Only Chinese workers are this hard-working!” Memories of exile tend to be interwoven with a justification of long working hours and low pay, and constitute a hegemonic discourse of “the migrant condition”. As Ray, a migrant born in 1983 in Fujian, states:

“My first job was to wash the dishes and to prepare ingredients in a small restaurant. I often complained of being tired. My colleague, who had come from Cambodia as political refugee told me, ‘When I reached here, I didn’t even have shoes on my feet. I worked like hell and slept in the restaurant after working. Your generation is already lucky enough!’ His generation suffered much from the war, so no matter how hard we work, for them we are already lucky enough. Another day I burned my hand while washing an iron plate, he just said, ‘Keep working, restaurant work is just like this!’”

However, in addition to the moralizing discourse that justifies demanding working conditions, in the restaurant, the relationship between employers and employees are often nurtured by reciprocity. This narrative from Hua, a worker in the garment workshop, shows the ambiguous relationship between him and his employer:

“My employer always said that I brought her good luck, because she got her residence permit on the 3rd day after I started working for her. However, working there is really tiring. The hours are too long, we have to get up before 9 in the morning and finish after midnight, and we only get 30 euros per day. I had been thinking about leaving for a long time but I didn’t dare tell her. Finally I decided to say that I had go work in Greece with my relative. She reluctantly agreed and gave me 300 euro as bonus, saying that she would be happy if I were to come back.”
Besides economic help, other forms of assistance ranging from lending legal documents, looking for accommodation or buying food is also common. The employment relationship is deeply nurtured by reciprocity.

These moralized principles constitute the elements of Chinese workers’ collective action. In the following paragraph, we will see how the CGT attempted to organize workers and the challenges they faced.

October 2009: CGT’s political first encounter with Chinese workers through a political mobilisation

Political context and movement strategy

CGT’s engagement with migrant workers began in 2006 when six undocumented African workers from a dry cleaners in Issy-les-Moulineaux, a southern suburb of Paris, launched a three month long strike with the help of local CGT activists in order to improve their working conditions, after which they were legalized. In 2007, Nicolas Sarkozy was elected with the rhetoric of “immigration choisie au lieu de l’immigration subie” – selected immigration instead of submissive immigration, or to choosing ‘useful’ and ‘desirable’ migrants instead of passively receiving unwanted migrants. The public hostility towards migrant workers thus reached a high point, which pushed the CGT to frame the migrants’ problem as an issue of the right of work – an issue of capital instead of a threat to or dependence on French society.

The dry cleaners’ successful strike received a lot of publicity and led to more, similar strikes. Through social networks, their success immediately stimulated wider protests by other fellow workers from the same region and expanded to other sectors, in particular a chain restaurant called “Bufallo” (Barron et al. 2011). In 2008, on a May 1st labor demonstration, CGT incorporated, for the first time, a group of undocumented workers into their demonstration, showing the union’s commitment to organizing undocumented migrant workers.2

In early 2009, CGT prepared a larger movement aimed at attracting wider social attention. It was at this stage that the union decided to expand and reach out to other communities than the previously targeted African and North African communities in order to highlight the importance of the problem and construct wider resistance. With neither knowledge nor cooperation within the community, the only contact that activists had was a South-East Asian restaurant owner who had previously contacted the CGT to ask how to help his employees become legalized. After some negotiation, the latter finally agreed to support his two employees in their participation in the “strike” with workers from other communities.3 A mobilization message was put on the biggest internet forum of Chinese community in Paris. As the movement’s leader recalls:

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2 Tract 1st May 2012: from 2008 to 2012: 4 years of CGT’s action with migrant workers
3 Interview 21 Sep 2011 with two union activist.
"It was a total innovation, completely new. At the end of 2008 we met just in terms of regularizing. It is at that point that we foresaw that the union movement would be more powerful than the small employers anyway. It is rather in the construction of power relations. When we launched the second movement, the idea was that this movement could only be built if there was another community involved. So it seemed important to try to reach the Chinese community, and as there was no link, the only link was Mr. Z... so we had several meetings, and then the decisive meeting on October 12... He was committed to relaying information about how this movement would take place. At the protest, we were surprised that we had 35 Chinese employees among 2000 people mostly with dark skin. At the same time we had encouraged the situation by hiring an interpreter.

By the beginning of November, the number of Chinese participants had increased to 740 people. And, together with other communities, the "strike" went on for eight months, with visible public occupation, followed by a period of rupture, and then a three-week occupation of the place de la Bastille in May 2011. The victory of occupation was remarkable: on 18 June 2010, after an eight month strike and three weeks of occupation, the ministry of internal affairs agreed to the exceptional legalization of the 6700 strikers, as well as a legal article of law that can be used by other undocumented workers in France once they have accumulated 12 to 18 paychecks (depending on if they were engaged in the movement or not). For many Chinese migrants who have been working in underground economy, this article is revolutionary since it allows them to leave the informal economy and have the right to be declared immediately.

Feedback and Problems

The arrival of large number of Chinese workers provided the union with an unprecedented opportunity to have a closer contact with a migrant community, but there were also a number of surprises. So says Eric Wichegrald, the general secretary of the 9th Paris division of the CGT, who later became one of the most engaged CGT members in organizing Chinese workers at the grass-roots level, when he admitted that he only had limited knowledge about Chinese workers before they entered in the movement:

"My idea about the Chinese workers was maybe a bit unrealistic before I met them in the movement. I imagined a community totally controlled by the mafia; a community that was self-sufficient and thus remained closed in itself... However, in 2003, there were already rumors in the Chinese community that CGT gave papers. So, when Chinese workers entered in the movement, we were all prudent, because we did not know that they come as individuals to seek to improve their working conditions, or if they simply were controlled by some other forces..."

If the prejudice of a "mafia-controlled community" was soon shattered, the union was also shocked by the banality of undeclared jobs in the community. In contrast with African workers who are often integrated into the employment structure of French companies, the Chinese workers were almost systematically employed in the informal economy operated by their other Chinese migrants. There are two primary consequences of this situation: first of all, the movement

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A restaurant owner who had contacted CGT one year ago in order to help his two employees acquire legalisation. Before seeking help from the union, he has declared his workers since several years and hired a lawyer to demand working visa for them, but only in vain. With his encouragement, both employees have participated in the movement since the beginning.
was obliged to take into account the situation of undeclared or informal jobs and incorporate the legal improvement of undeclared workers’ situations into the movement’s demands. On the other hand, and which might be surprising, this also allowed the union to develop a link with the entrepreneurs since they had been largely discriminated against by the local administration.

“They work amongst themselves. And working informally is almost systematic.”

The immediate consequence was confusion: in mid-December, after two month’s strike, the CGT concluded an agreement with the government for the legalization of strikers under the condition that the latter would show paychecks and furthermore obtain a CERFA (a promise of employment). As soon as the decision was announced, the Chinese strikers, many of whom are not sure able to obtain their employers’ consent for the CERFA, submitted a petition to the movement’s leader to demand more diverse condition of legalization, such as family reunification. In fact, after the short period of “victory” as the addendum was delivered on 18 June 2010, many Chinese strikers became disenchanted by the reality of the situation. Contrary to common understanding of social capital, the fact of having a large number of family members in France does not necessarily help strikers obtain a legal contract. In fact, the general practice of informal work turned the declaration into a “troublesome favor”. As a result, of the 740 Chinese workers on the list of strikers, only about two hundred succeeded in acquiring a CERFA. Even for those who did manage to convince their employer, the action of declaration is often considered an exceptional “favor” by the employer, which allows the employer to demand something in return: longer working hours, less salary, or asking the workers to pay OFII tax (an annual tax that employers pay to immigration authority when hiring a foreigner) and monthly social benefits in the employers’ place. In order to get declared and demand legalization, many workers have no choice but to accept such conditions in exchange of the accumulation of paychecks. These behaviors all reveal the distance between the French labor law and norms within this immigrant community, who consider the taxes and social benefits in the labor contract to be an “extra” cost.

On the other hand, for some employers under legal pressure to declare their workers, the condition indeed created the obligation for them to approach the union. Such is the case of a restaurant in Pau, a city in the south of France. Suffering from a shortage of workers, the employers, a young couple who had arrived in France in the ’80s, were obliged to respect the condition of addendum to declare four strikers who had begun working at their restaurant after the movement. However, the practice of informal labor in the Chinese restaurant industry is so well-known that the labor administration in the region did not accept the demand of legalization made by the employer. Therefore, in March

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5 Interview ibid, 21 Sep 2011.
6 According to French immigration law, a foreigner in an illegal situation could ask for legalisation through several means, including family reunification (especially through marriage or the evidence of children educated in France), work, or simply more than 10 years’ presence in France. However, whereas the a family visa is that it allows the detainer to launch their business as legal resident in France, legalisation by proof of work will condition the detainer of visa in the situation as employee, which is the reason why Chinese strikers prefer a family visa.
2011, the employers contacted CGT in the hopes that the union could intervene and convince the labor administration. This was intended to make the case an example that the movement can change the practices inside the Chinese community. Raymond Chauveau, the movement’s leader, decided to travel to southern France and negotiate with the labor administration as well as with the restaurant owner. Upon arrival, the labor inspector immediately expressed her distrust toward the restaurant owner:

“This employer has very bad record regarding workers’ rights. They have already been accused of hiring undocumented workers, and they also made the workers sleep in the restaurant instead of providing them accommodation. To validate their demands of legalizing their workers implies approving of their abusive behavior.”

Having persuaded the labor inspector to convince the employer to improve their practice in exchange for the legalization of the four workers, the leader met with the employer and explained that the situation. The agreement was reached: in addition to providing a legal contract to the workers, the employer agreed to pay for accommodation and free French classes to help workers’ integration, and – to the immense pride of the unionist – to establish a system in the restaurant in order to regulate the working hours. Result: after several weeks’ negotiation, the four workers finally gained approval for their legalization.

The two cases – the frustration of migrant workers to get declared as a general situation, and the restaurant owner’s compromises, shows the contradictory situation of petty entrepreneurs with CGT. For most Chinese entrepreneurs, as migrants and petty entrepreneurs, they would prefer to stay as distant as possible from the state and maintain informal practices. However, the pressure coming from public administration also creates circumstances in which the trade union can be their ally – instead of their enemy. This contradiction situation for migrant entrepreneurs will continue to dominate the movement in the following phases.

The organization period (May 2011 – September 2011)

Political context and movement strategy

Since January 2011, the movement has entered a much quieter period as the union’s energy was concentrated on the paperwork of strikers’ demands for

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7 Field note 4 March 2011. I have travelled with Raymond Chauveau as interpreter. We firstly met the labor inspector to understand why they did not authorize the application of working permit. Then, the local union secretary drove us to the restaurant to meet the employer and four workers. We explained the situation to the employers until they accepted Chauveau’s proposition of improving workers’ condition and better investment on accommodation and French classes. An agreement was signed, and Chauveau immediately contacted labor inspector to suggest her to agree on the four workers’ demand of legalisation. All four workers have thus obtained legal status three months later.

8 What happened later is of course not a happy ending. One year later, all four workers have left the restaurant due to different disputes with their employer, and the meter was never used – they still worked more than 12 hours per day in spite of the agreement signed. They still worked more than 12 hours per day.
legalization. At the same time, the issue around the illegal work pushed the CGT to highlight the generality of informal, undocumented workers, and seek to put on more pressure on the government to loosen the laws.

Such a conjuncture makes it an inevitable issue for the CGT to deepen its contact with the Chinese workers. In late March 2011, several days before a formal meeting with Chinese workers, the CGT leader addressed a message of mobilization to Chinese workers through a short video on internet.

“Hello, on 30th March, CGT will launch a new political movement. We invite all the Chinese workers, both those who were in the 2009 strike and those who weren’t, to join us. Since 2009, more than seven hundred Chinese workers have participated our movement. However, only a hundred or so have succeeded in having their employers declare them and can thus provide the documents to demand legalization. This is indeed a very important movement, so we would like a maximum presence of Chinese workers! “

This is the first step by the CGT to reach those who were not yet in the movement. At the same time, the possibility to leave illegal work as described in the “addendum”, the legal article acquired by the 2009 movement, has also stimulated a wider movement among Chinese workers to contact CGT.

Numerous questions on how to join the union and how to get declared were circulated on the forums. In the end of April, before the May 1st demonstration, a leaflet addressed to the Chinese undocumented workers was distributed to encourage more undocumented workers to participate in the May 1st demonstration. On the leaflet, CGT clearly argues that the May 1st demonstration demands the improvement of the situation of those who work on black:

“This exceptional movement helped to positively change the image of public opinion vis-à-vis migrant workers, said one “undocumented” worker. He managed to force the government to negotiate with the unions for national criteria for regularizing all workers "without papers" in the territory. This "addendum" of 18 June 2010 has been extended until 30 June 2011 on the basis of a promise of employment or temporary assignment with 12 months paychecks in the 18 months preceding the filing of the case and five years of presence in the country, every worker 'undocumented' can be regularized. The text has been expanded to include employees who do not have a job offer at the time of submission of their application. These texts must be applied by all prefectures! It should improve especially for employees who work on "black"." 

A second stage thus commenced: CGT starts to recruit undocumented Chinese workers to become members.

30 April 2011, the day before the May 1st demonstration, the 9th local union of CGT in Paris formally opened its doors to undocumented Chinese workers for their first day of unionization. At 10 o’clock, when Eric, the general secretary of 9e local union arrived at his office, more than 100 Chinese workers were already waiting outside. Excitation, fatigue and curiosity were on their faces; there were a significant number of young Chinese mothers arriving with their strollers and young children. Opening the office’s door, Eric delivered a talk to thank the workers for their participation and explain CGT’s goal. He also called for the participation in the Mayday demonstration scheduled for the next day.

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9 CGT’s tract 18 April 2011, "1st May, everybody go to the demonstration!"
The excitement of the first encounter with Chinese workers was soon replaced by frustration. As soon as the traditional “membership form” was distributed, several questions are immediately posed – for one thing, most of the workers are not declared at all, which makes it impossible to fill in the details concerning their employer, nor was it possible to calculate the membership’s fee. For another, the workers’ language barrier was more extreme than the French activists had imagined: very few people present were able to name the city where they live and even fewer could write correctly their address. Finally, the traditional categorization of CGT to classify their workers according to their jobs also appeared inappropriate with undocumented workers: in fact, outside a select few who work in restaurants, most of the workers sway between different precarious jobs and workplaces. The traditional membership forms which classify union members according to their professions and workplaces thus appeared to be totally inadequate.

This first encounter with Chinese workers thus pushes CGT to reconsider their organization strategies.

In fact, most workers arriving at the CGT offices do not understand its role and mission. The absence of independent trade unions in Chinese society was illustrated by the confusion between the word 工會 (trade union) and 公會 (public union) written on the internet forums. Lacking of knowledge of trade union’s role and the culture of self-mobilization, migrants tend to consider the CGT to be an ordinary association who helps legalization without necessarily understanding the political mission of CGT. As a result, a typical “unionization day” often involves a lot of confusion, repeating explanations on union members’ rights and obligations, and attempting to communicate to understand workers’ situations – often via multiple translations. Arriving with a hope of submitting the demand of legalization through the union immediately, workers were often disappointed to find that paychecks are indispensable. “How do I get a paycheck?” then became the most frequently asked question.

“How to get a paycheck?” This question that sounds a bit naïve for most of the French workers, is however the most difficult obstacle for the migrants. After being asked the same question for 50 days, Eric came up with an idea: why not encourage the union members to demand to be declared according to the rights detailed in the addendum? Eric thus decided to give each new member a certification paper with CGT’s position to encourage the employer to declare their workers. So is it written:

To the police authorities and president of administrative court,

By my presence, I affirm that Mr/Ms. XXX, who lives in XXX (address) and work in XXX sector as XXX (title), is part CGT’s union member who CGT constitute their demands for legalization and defend his/her rights.

This is the reason why I ask you to allow Mr/Ms. XXX to continue to travel freely so she can continue to work. In case of the difficulty, you may contact our local branch at this number : (telephone number).

CGT National Branch for Migrants’ Rights
It is important to note that the certificate is an innovative extension of the right attributed by addendum. Whereas the addendum only allows the 6700 workers on the list of “strikers” to be declared as a precondition of demanding legalization, the certificate seeks to extend the validity of the addendum to ordinary undocumented workers. It is therefore a political experimentation that seeks to create the social transformation through increasing number of demands from undocumented workers and their employer.

This innovative strategy has helped to improve CGT’s reputation. Although not every migrant worker has succeeded in convincing their employer to declare them, the hope to get out of black market still attracts hundreds of migrant workers to every union session. As a result, within one year, the 9th local union has attracted more than 600 migrants to join CGT.

**Challenge and Feedback**

Eric’s attempt to unionize undocumented migrants is a creative attempt in two senses: the number of workers in the informal sector among the Chinese workers, and the patience to overcome the linguistic barrier. However, two difficulties can be resumed at this stage. The first is the various challenges to CGT’s traditional organization which resulted from the specific structure of Chinese ethnic economy. The second results from the contradiction between CGT’s movement strategy towards migrant workers, and the contradiction between grassroots organization and “rootless” mobilization.

First of all, although CGT has tried to incorporate migrant workers into the CGT’s structure since 2009, several problems have made Chinese workers’ integration particularly difficult. On the conscious level, for one thing, the absence of self-mobilization culture tends to hinder the workers to understand trade union’s objective, and one of the direct results of this is that it was extremely difficult to find volunteers among the Chinese members to engage in the daily routine of administrative work, as ordinary French members would do. As a result, every new unionization session was penetrated by similar frustration: on the one hand, the CGT members repeated every time the reasons for joining the union and why members have to pay the membership fees, while trying their best to understand the reality of work in the informal sector and the possible situation not taken into account by the membership form; on the other hand, Chinese migrant workers, always arriving in the hundreds and tired of waiting, have no understanding as to why a simple membership card would take the activists so much time for interviews. Translation difficulties are often augmented by crying babies, the workers’ eagerness to have the membership card in short time, and their difficulty in understanding the union’s mission, emotions sometimes cause complaints and blame. Faced with Chinese migrant workers’ impatience, it is not rare that Eric suddenly loses his temper and says, “Attention please! CGT is NOT a service association! We do this for you, and even sacrifice our own weekends. However, all this does not mean that we have to be fast!”
Moreover, two specificities of Chinese community’s structure challenges CGT’s traditional universalist model and strategy of recruiting according to place of work. As the scenario presented above has shown, the language barrier and cultural obstacles have complicated the procedure of unionization. Thus, whereas numerous African workers coming from former colonies have no problem joining the union and even become activists’, Chinese migrants’ can only approach the 9e union where Eric works. If the language barrier raises the question of “should we have a sector for migrant workers especially aimed at recruiting Chinese workers?”, another specificity has made incorporating Chinese in the CGT structure more delicate: the Chinese workers are much more mobile than what CGT is used to. As Chinese restaurants are all over France, and as workers who have precarious statuses tend to change their place of work often, but still have their families and apartment in Paris, the CGT’s tradition of unionizing according to the place of work has been challenged by this mobility. As a result, whereas the new experiences and the increasing understanding on Chinese community has urged Eric to call for the CGT to make extra effort to incorporate Chinese workers, between activists’ hesitation and movement leaders’ ambition of more “political goals”, for a very long period, the 9e local union in Paris remains “The Chinese migrant workers’ local union” according to the movement’s leader.

September 2011 – May 2012: re-politicization and the failed mobilization

Political context and CGT strategies

In early September 2011, as the French presidential election approached, migration policy started to become the main focus of the political debate as Marine Le Pen (National Front’s candidate) began to rise in popularity. Therefore, CGT started to prepare a new wave of social protests to influence in the public debate on migration.

Evidently, the huge numbers of new Chinese members were considered the precious resource for the mobilization necessary to construct the new movement. CGT thus tried to convince them to participate in the new strike through raising awareness and meetings. However, although workers generally agree that obtaining papers would be an important step to improve their working conditions, the demand of “strikes” is often considered impossible for the workers under the pressure of a community economy.

Traditionally, when one worker had conflicts or abusive cases with the employer, the union in the place of work can intervene immediately. In the case of Chinese workers, since the restaurants are totally dispersed all over France, it happens a lot that when one worker is sacked by the employer, or forced to leave due to police control, he/she would immediately quit the city and looked for jobs elsewhere, but the legal case has to be submitted in the city where he worked before and rely on the intervention of the local CGT. As a result, several cases has happened that it take two or three CGT branches in different city to collaborate together in order to follow the workers’ legal process.
The tension between CGT and their call for workers to strike and the migrant workers’ concerns can be illustrated with the discussion as followed: one afternoon in the beginning of January 2012, Eric called a meeting with five Chinese “strikers” who had been part of CGT for a long time. He explained the political situation: the validation of “Circulaire Géant” that made the situation worse for all the undocumented migrants’ freedom of circulation in France; the mounting debates on migrant policy as the election approached, hence the necessity of mobilization.

“We are planning a larger movement and we need your cooperation. The idea is to have a chain Sushi restaurant on strike, better in the city center of Paris, and in that case we can highlight Chinese workers’ situation in France. This would be an important movement at the heart of the election!”

Eric’s call immediately caused unease among the workers. They discussed in Chinese about the impossibility of going on strike. Julien, a cook in a Japanese restaurant who speaks the best French among the strikers, said with an embarrassed smile, "It’s such a small community. If I strike, it would be impossible to find a job later!” Ms. Li, who was involved in filming a television program in 2009 to illustrate the system of "on-site relocation" in the world of confection, whispered: "If my boss were Chinese, I wouldn’t dare denounce it either.”

Eric’s tone got more severe: "The CGT is not only here to help you get papers. We fight for better working conditions. It is not normal that you continue to work 7 days a week without paid leave ... this is not what we fight for.” Julien agreed, but explained that the culture is not the same and that Chinese migrants come to France to work. Ms. Li commented that the situation was not the fault of the bosses, to which Eric responded, “A boss is a boss and he cannot be your friends! You see, Mr. M, he worked for 12 years in the same restaurant. 12 years! His boss never came to see him while he was in the detention center. You still think it is a friend? If you just want to use the CGT to get the paper, my work with the Chinese has no meaning.”

This discussion on the impossibility of a strike reveals how workers perceive their relationship with the employer in the intimate universe of migrant community. Contrary to what Ness observed that workers’ isolation can be an ressource for mobilization (1995:187-188), in the case of Chinese community where social relation between families intimately intertwined in the employment relationship, the social capital constitutes also the obstacle of resistance.

*Feedback: the ethnic entrepreneurs’ reaction*

To stimulate discussion and expand the network, three weeks later, another meeting was held in Belleville, one of the principal Chinese neighborhood in Paris. Four militants of the CGT direction of movement undocumented migrants

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11 A legal article distributed by Claude Guéant, the Minister of Internal Affairs, on 31 May 2011. In the article the Minister announced clearly the government’s plan to diminish the numbers of legal migrants by rendering the condition of acquiring working visa more strict and controlling the quota of legalization of undocumented workers.
are present to explain the importance of mobilization. "We are politically
sensitive, says the leader of the movement, and we have the advantage of putting
pressure on the Sarkozy governme
nt." Once the proposal of "strike" was
launched, an atmosphere of distrust covered the room. Having considered ethnic
solidarity as the major obstacle to mobilization, the union tried to convince
Chinese migrants could leave the moral standards of the ethnic enclave. "We
need you to resist and confront your bosses. Because you are Chinese workers,
but you're all workers."

This speech was immediately confronted with suspicion from the crowd. Faced
with the universal appeal of the union leadership, a girl spoke in French, "But it
does not work like that. We work a lot. We like to work more to earn more!"
Then the union leader continues to explain the importance of challenging
employers to build the balance of power. Some seemed to confuse the "strike"
and other forms of protest and thus proposed to demonstration or public
occupation instead of the strike. Others have attempted to refute the image of
"victims" in CGT's discourse and spoke of the material price of strike: "The boss
is not the problem. The boss is not God, we know that. But when you are
undocumented, you cannot risk losing the job. We know people who were
trapped in undocumented situation and who spent three months, six months,
even one year to find a job ... we just cannot stand this price! "Finally, after a
discussion concerning the efficiency of the strike, a small entrepreneur from the
neighborhood entered the meeting and interrupted the discussion. He asked the
CGT not "demonize" the image of a boss. "I myself am an entrepreneur. I have a
store and I have four employees. I work as much as they do. I recall that many
bosses can not afford the price of the strike and we must see if there are other
ways to help them get their papers." This interruption was immediately referred
to the opposition representatives the CGT. One of the officers blamed for
threatening the autonomous decision of workers.

After the meeting, the young entrepreneur has proposed lunch together with
trade unionists. On the table, he explained their relationship with work
migration trajectories: "In China, we have experienced the communist era, so we
are a generation that grew up in poverty. I know people who have died of
hunger. That's why when you come to work, we just want to work hard. For
many Chinese here, we never think we may have retired. This is not our idea.
That's why we work hard. [...] There are still many who open their restaurants by
taking debts. If you strike, the bosses could not stand by. "Faced with these
explanations, the union tried to negotiate. They explained that the plan is not to
organize a strike in one or two Chinese restaurants unimportant, but to find the
garment factories or power and highlight the integration of Chinese workers
across production system in France. The Chinese entrepreneur has promised to
consider if they have knowledge of these areas and be aware. However, once the
CGT militants are gone, the contractor told me: "It is not possible to work with
them. Nobody will be nasty to this point! Whether it's a Chinese boss, Turkish or
Jewish strike, it will push employers to suicide!"

Both meetings are just some examples that demonstrate the "missed rendez-
vous" of undocumented Chinese workers and the aspirations of the CGT.
addition to the materialist explanation, it seems that there is yet another cultural factor that has made the mobilization among Chinese workers unimaginable: the lack of a culture of self-organized resistance. That is why, even after obtaining their regularization, workers seem quite ignorant with labor law, and have always sought the explanation of the peculiarity of "culture" and "migrant practice." In other words, given the lack of civic tradition of self-mobilization, Chinese migrants tend to see participation in the CGT as a shortcut for regularization. However, they fail to develop awareness of the law, or recognize the operating structure. Thus, the project mobilizing undocumented Chinese workers ended. In the following months, the CGT continued to call for Chinese workers' presence in the event to raise political support for the Left Front, the only political party that had agreed to the regularization of all undocumented workers, but no more protesting action was organized.

Discussion

CGT's experience of organizing Chinese workers since 2009 raises important issues concerning the organization of migrant workers. Previous studies on this subject tend to consider community unionism to be a more effective approach than traditional work-place organization (Holgate 2005, James and Kasalnowa 2012, Mariano 2012). Indeed, in the case of Chinese workers working in SMEs operated by their fellow countrymen, workplace organization seems almost impossible. However, compared with migrants from other countries, the specificity of ethnic economy gave Chinese entrepreneurs a much more relevant and important role in the mobilization. As petty entrepreneurs, their economic interest is to maintain informal practices so as to maximize their profit, and thus prefer to keep their workers from contacting trade unions. In the same time, as foreigner living under certain prejudice from the public authority, CGT's privileged position can help them get legal assistance and avoid legal penalties. This ambivalent position created a space of collaboration in CGT's movement for legalization: in 2009, Chinese entrepreneurs' encouragement made workers' participation in the movement possible. As the movement achieved legal progress, union also succeeds to convince the entrepreneurs to - at least show the willingness to - change their labor practices in order to acquire working permit for their employers.

However, the flexibility of the ethnic economy reached its limits when trade union tried to increase the intensity of its action. On the discussion around the strike, workers were clearly embarrassed by the moral pressure. In a migrant community where social relations are based largely on reciprocity, acquaintance and reputation, and where the difficulty of insertion and adaptation justify the hegemony of “working hard”, the price of going on strike is more than economic loss, but a risk of being labeled a “bad/selfish worker” and rejected by the entrepreneurs. The specific dependency between ethnic entrepreneurs and employees constitutes thus an opaque “moral economy” (Scott 1984), where the reciprocity is an important part of the reproduction, justifying the ostensible labor exploitation, rendering the idea of strike an unbearable betrayal.
Of course, CGT is not unaware of this reality. On the contrary, the leaders have made an effort to show their engagement with Chinese workers and their awareness of their particularities. One of the illustrations is a separate team of Chinese workers in the May 1st demonstration in 2012, with a bilingual banner written: “In France like in China: better salaries, better working condition, and more dignity for workers.” The sentence “In France like in China” shows clearly unionists’ attempt to imagine Chinese migrant workers’ capacity of resistance through a different context – the context of Chinese society. Similarly, in the conference on “CGT and migrant workers since 1945” in November 2012 (cited in the beginning of this paper), another leader of the undocumented workers’ movement has emphasized CGT’s incorporation of Chinese migrants by saying: “We already have almost 1000 Chinese workers in our structure. We have to admit that our communication is still limited, because we haven’t learned to speak Chinese.” Without hesitating to admit the weakness of workers’ education and organization, his joke assumes the union’s responsibility to recognize the difference and make efforts to approach the workers.

However, so far, this recognition of difference has not been able to transform into concrete strategy to adapt Chinese migrants’ specificity. All along the different stages of the movement, CGT’s rhetoric towards migrants remains universalistic, trying to make workers feel as if they are part of the working class population in France and deserve the same rights through similar model of resistance: demonstration, strike, filing legal proceedings against their employer in case of abuse and violations of their rights. The rhetoric of “You are not only Chinese workers, but also workers” reflects the universal vision of France’s social movement: French Republicanism, a value born in the reversal of ancien régime, has encouraged the ideal that all humans – despite national origins, gender or class – can be treated with equal rights in France (Brubaker 1995). Whereas such an ideal tends to make the pursuit of equality the core of movement, it tends to obscure the different condition and experience of being “minority” in practice, even in the universe of left-wing politics (Masclet 2003). Similar dilemma is found here: the more CGT activists emphasize that they are workers like others, the more Chinese workers (and employers as well) emphasize their particularity. As a result, trapped in the moral economy of ethnic, small-middle-sized enterprises, workers’ choose not to participate in the resistance. Indeed, the failure of the last attempt of mobilization is also the failure of CGT’s universalist tradition embedded in the tradition of class struggle of French socialist tradition.

We might draw two reflections from CGT’s experiences.

First of all, on the theoretical level, it invites the situation of the labor politics of migrants community in a wider vision of intersectionality that perceive being “workers” and being “migrants” as two co-constructive dynamics of domination. Contemporary feminists’ reflections on intersectional belonging have theorized how social locations are changing categories of domination, and different power relations will over pass each other according to different occasions and importance in various political contexts (Yuval-Davis 2012). Identifying the dynamic and possible functions of these power dimensions is an indispensable
step to come up with effective movement strategy. In the case of Chinese migrants who mostly work inside the ethnic economy, being Chinese is not only a social-ethnic membership, but also a social and economic relationship. In other words, in the case of Chinese migrant workers, economic relations are already ethnicity-based – which is not the case for the BME (Black and minority ethnic workers) workers in Britain absorbed by national sector, nor for the African workers engaged with CGT mainly working in the construction industry or French-operated enterprises. An effective strategy of organization thus needs to take into account the specificity of migrant community’s structure and values in education and mobilization. In the case of Chinese workers, it seems that mobilization will be more possible with ethnic employers’ support. In other words, petty entrepreneurs should also be incorporated in the coalition in order to change legal limits on migrant workers.

Secondly, on the practical level, setting legalization as the movement’s principal goal has had mixed results. As I have shown, this objective created space for cooperation with Chinese entrepreneurs. However, concentrating on political mobilization has postponed the work of education about workers’ consciousness and of grassroots organization due to the workers’ focus on legalization. The objective of union recruitment ended up being to persuade employers to declare their workers. For the Chinese workers, who are particularly distant from French syndicalism, creating a space of discussion, education as far as conscious-raising is a crucial stage for strong mobilization.

Epilogue

What is the future of the movement after the arrival of the socialist government in May 2012? For now, the work of unionization is temporarily suspended due to the lack of resources. With the new ministry of internal affairs announcing a new legal article of legalization in the end of November, CGT is planning a new wave of mobilization to highlight the problem of “working on black”, urging the government to make a legislation more generous, especially for all those who work in the informal sector. The movement’s goal thus remains strongly political. Under such a circumstance, we can expect that extensive participation of Chinese workers would be difficulty unless there is a wide mobilization through community’s network – including small entrepreneurs. And, despite the possibility of workers who have succeeded in leaving their clandestine situations, the transformation of the working culture in Chinese-operated restaurants and workshops would be hard to imagine.

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