

CSWS Research Matters

Worlds of Work in Walmart, China

Research examines how migrants from rural areas navigate China's new urban class system.

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Eileen Otis

I met Ling one day as I was wandering the aisles of a Walmart store in Beijing. We immediately hit it off, and I especially appreciated her dry wit. She worked as a promotion agent for Kleenex and stood in front of a cardboard display piled with multipacks of moistened tissues announcing to customers the day's tissue sale. She was 17 years old and from a rural village in Anhui province. Beijing was the second city to which she had migrated for work. The first was Guangzhou, a much longer journey. It was there that she met a 17-year-old boy for whom she developed great affection. But her parents refused to allow them to marry; he was from a poor family who lived in a village distant from their own. Her parents insisted she consider a local lad from a village in Anhui, a 23-year-old who resided with his father in Beijing. Ling found the situation disconcerting, but she nevertheless obeyed her parents. This was curious to me because she felt little connection to them. Ling was a second-generation migrant worker. Soon after she was born, her parents left for work in a distant city, leaving her



A migrant woman sells yogurt in a Beijing Walmart. She holds out free samples on her tray and wears a microphone over her face mask to announce the product and price to customers.

in the care of her paternal grandparents, like millions of children born to China's first wave of migrants. When her brother was born some years later, her parents bundled him up and brought him along to the city, even as Ling remained at home with her grandparents. Today Ling feels scant affection for her parents. Now she earns 130 yuan a day selling Kleenex at Walmart. Paying rent of 500 yuan a month, plus transportation and food costs, she has little material security; her job with the global tissue company lasts only two weeks. As we chatted a customer asked for cocktail napkins. She pointed him to the next aisle. A few minutes later he re-approached us to show her the napkins, grousing that they were not in the location she specified. Ling finds many customers to be snobbish. She hates it when people show off their wealth. She thinks it's good to be simple.

Ling is one of the many migrant workers I talked to during my CSWS-funded research in Beijing, China, last June. Ling and millions like her are drawn to urban centers by work opportunities in the rapidly expanding consumer market, where Walmart is now a major contender. The retailer operates 370 outlets throughout China. The largest firm in the world, Walmart is of particular interest. As a template of business success, other firms imitate its practices. While the mass merchandiser directly employs 87,000 formal staff members, it hosts at least as many "outsourced" workers. Like Ling, these are migrant women who are paid by the firm's suppliers to peddle items in the aisles of each store.

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These workers, who number between 200 and 400 in individual outlets, labor under a diverse array of contracts, wage, and commission arrangements and expectations for product promotion. There is little direct oversight of their work.

Ling's story contains many strands common to migrants working in Walmart and other mass merchandise retailers, domestic and foreign alike, in urban China. The second generation feels varying degrees of attachment to biological parents who left them behind to be raised by grandparents. They bristle against urban customers who demean them for their rural origins. And many find urban displays of wealth offensive. They struggle to make ends meet in cities where prices are prohibitive. These workers are excluded from permanent legal residence in many major urban centers, yet they are on an upwardly mobile trajectory, compared to their parents. They work alongside urbanites, who labor directly for Walmart as cashiers and greeters. These workers tend to be downwardly mobile and struggle to make a living in precarious service jobs, but have legal entitlement to urban residence and enjoy cultural inclusion in the urban center.

China's urban centers have rapidly stratified and are among the most unequal in the industrialized world. Instead of

appealing to the most price-conscious shoppers, as in the United States, Walmart outlets in China are designed to attract the rapidly expanding middle class, selling goods like expensive cognac, fine French wines, rare ginseng, and groceries specifically marketed to allay growing concerns about food safety. Such retail spaces have a pedagogical quality in that they convey new practices associated with an image of "the good life," for example, with pictures of happy families in their comfortable kitchens and living rooms by products for sale on shelves, displayed throughout the stores. As customers navigate such environments they selectively absorb these images and lessons, making choices about how they will eat, dress, treat their bodies, equip their homes, and care for their children, all the while interacting with armies of sales agents, like Ling, attempting to direct their shopping behavior.

Such shopping environments can be viewed as sites of class formation, as customers make myriad seemingly banal decisions that coalesce into a "lifestyle." In the process they also interact with workers of different backgrounds. Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu points to the underestimated role of consumption in the formation of class distinction. Styles of consumption, he argues, are used to fix



Checkout stands in Beijing Walmart.

boundaries between different groups and naturalize as well as legitimate resource asymmetries. I will use Bourdieu's notion of consumption as a strategic practice to analyze my observations of workers and customers in Walmart outlets across China. Ling's employment can be understood as "consumption labor" as she promotes products she herself has little interest in using. In the process Ling finds herself living in a new middle class world, one she finds alluring for its comforts and distasteful for its waste and inauthenticity. My research will examine how she and millions of migrants like her navigate China's new class system. ■