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THE CONTRADICTIONS OF MARKET SOCIALISM

LABOUR, CAPITAL AND WELFARE IN
PRIVATISING CHINA AND VIETNAM

RESEARCH IN COMPARATIVE & GLOBAL SOCIAL POLICY



THE CONTRADICTIONS OF MARKET SOCIALISM

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Labour, Capital and Welfare in
Privatising China and Vietnam

Edited by
Minh T.N. Nguyen and Jingyu Mao

With a foreword by
Pun Ngai



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High-tech, low security: Vietnam's electronics boom and the crisis of reproduction

Do Ta Khanh and Pietro P. Masina

Introduction

Our chapter focuses on electronics workers involved in the production of high-end goods for international markets. It examines how relatively high wages coexist with labour precariousness and the persistent reliance of workers on their rural households for livelihood support. We explore what appears to be a contradiction. On the one hand, the recent surge of foreign direct investment (FDI) in Vietnam's electronics industry showcases a high level of capitalist modernity. State-of-the-art industrial facilities produce top-brand products for international markets, with supply chains deeply integrated into global networks and production adhering to rigorous total quality manufacturing standards. Industrial relations are structured to maximise productivity, employing modern managerial practices that combine relatively high salaries, discretionary bonuses and disciplinary measures to enforce worker compliance. On the other hand, employment in this sector continues to follow traditional patterns, where industrial work remains a temporary phase for most employees – particularly women. However, we argue, this is not a contradiction at all. The integration of total quality manufacturing with highly precarious forms of industrial employment enables capital to extract maximum value from workers during their most productive years. Far from being a paradox, these industrial relations in Vietnam's electronics industry represent a sophisticated and highly profitable model, one that builds upon and reinforces established patterns already prevalent in the region (Masina and Cerimele, 2018). While our research confirms and further validates previous analyses, it also reveals new modern patterns of capitalist accumulation through the making and remaking of a semi-proletarian working class (Wallerstein, 1974; Rigg, 2006; van der Linden, 2008; Rigg et al, 2016; Nguyen and Wei, 2024). In other terms, our chapter highlights a deeper structural contradiction addressed by the book: the coexistence of modern industrial spaces with intensifying labour

precarity – a defining feature of market socialism’s approach to development under global capitalism. This form of state-mediated accumulation prioritises gross domestic product (GDP) growth and foreign capital inflow while systematically displacing the costs of social reproduction onto households and informal networks.

This chapter draws on research conducted in Vietnam from 2017 to 2022 as part of the European Union-funded project ‘Empowering Civil Society and Workers’ (Grant Contract CSO – LA/2016/380-719). The project was implemented by the Institute for European Studies (Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences), the University of Naples L’Orientale (Italy), the Center for Social Work and Community Development Research and Consultancy (SDRC – Vietnam) and the Institute for Research and Consultancy on Development (RCD – Vietnam). The research employed both quantitative and qualitative methods, involving 3,020 workers (1,437 garment workers and 1,593 electronics workers) completing structured questionnaires via QuestionPro software on tablets and more than 100 workers participating in life-history in-depth interviews. Workers came from the electronics and garment industries in ten industrial parks across eight provinces/cities in Vietnam’s three key economic regions: Bac Ninh, Vinh Phuc, Hai Phong, Da Nang, Quang Ngai, Dong Nai, Tay Ninh and Ho Chi Minh City.¹

From modern factories to precarious lives: capitalist accumulation and the persistence of semi-proletarianisation

Like many Southeast Asian nations, Vietnam heavily relies on FDI-led industrialisation – a trend that emerged in Malaysia in the late 1970s and expanded across the region following the 1985 Plaza Accord. This process is deeply embedded within global value chains, which are characterised by asymmetrical power relations between workers, states and global capital (Marslev et al, 2022). Aiwa Ong’s seminal 1987 ethnography, *Spirit of Resistance*, examined the situation of women workers in Penang’s electronics industry, exploring how these migrant workers navigated the tensions between traditional cultural values and the demands of industrial modernity. Ong’s analysis highlighted the women’s agency and resistance within a system characterised by power and control, and introduced themes later explored by other scholars and validated by our own research (Ong, 1987). For many young rural migrant women, employment in export-oriented manufacturing presents an opportunity to enhance their autonomy and decision-making power within their households. However, achieving these gains usually requires enduring poor working conditions and curtailed labour rights (Kabeer, 1999).

For many migrant women, this sense of empowerment is closely tied to their role as primary breadwinners within their households. Nevertheless,

this empowerment is often reversed once they leave industrial employment and return to their home communities. For many migrant women – both national and cross-border migrants – industrial employment remains a time-limited experience, shaped by multiple, interrelated factors. [Kaur \(2010\)](#) highlights that manufacturing jobs, particularly in export-oriented industries in Southeast Asia, are predominantly structured around low-wage, low-skill, and precarious employment. Similarly, [Athukorala and Manning \(1999\)](#) and other labour economists emphasise the cyclical nature of demand in industries such as textiles and electronics, which are highly vulnerable to global market fluctuations. Temporary migration is often required to meet these fluctuating demands, without offering workers stable, long-term employment prospects. [Kaur \(2004, 2010\)](#) also discusses ‘gendered migration patterns’, noting that women’s employment in manufacturing is frequently framed by societal norms that prioritise their roles as caregivers and homemakers. Women often return home after achieving short-term financial goals, driven by cultural expectations and familial responsibilities ([Lin and Nguyen, 2021](#)). Our research confirms that many migrant women choose to return ‘to the village’ when their children begin primary school, as they perceive it to be their maternal duty to support their children’s education. This finding aligns with [Piper and Roces \(2003\)](#), who suggest that migration in Southeast Asia is strongly influenced by traditional values that view women as temporary earners outside the home.

After more than 40 years of Southeast Asia’s deep integration into global value chains, circulatory migration patterns – where workers, particularly women, move in and out of industrial employment after only a few years – can no longer be viewed as a temporary or transitory phenomenon. Instead, they should be understood as a structural characteristic of Southeast Asian industrialisation, at least in the current historical context ([Tappe and Nguyen, 2019](#)). The work of Marcel van der Linden provides valuable insights to contextualise the Southeast Asian case. His studies reveal that the circulatory movement in and out of industrial employment results in partial proletarianisation as a dominant labour condition, especially in the Global South. Workers often navigate between formal employment and informal or subsistence work, challenging classical definitions of the proletariat ([Amin and van der Linden, 1997](#)). In Vietnam, this condition is not a sign of incomplete development but a deliberate and profitable feature of the market socialist system – where social reproduction is externalised to rural households, sustaining capital accumulation without comprehensive welfare integration.

The workers interviewed in our research confirmed that their lives were suspended between the place of work and the place where their household lived – typically ‘back in the village’. From a world-system perspective, Immanuel Wallerstein analyses integration into capitalist system through

the lens of semi-proletarianised labour – workers who engage in wage labour while relying on subsistence farming or other non-wage activities. This dual dependence allows capitalists to reduce labour costs by externalising the reproduction of labour power to non-capitalist sectors such as families and rural communities (Wallerstein, 1974). Translocality literature deepens this analysis by showing how the reproduction of labour is managed across spatially dispersed but functionally connected sites. As Nguyen and Wei (2024) demonstrate, rural *chaoshi* traders in China – many of whom are themselves migrants – cater to the daily needs of factory workers while maintaining ties to their own rural households. This informal economy helps sustain low-cost urban labour and exemplifies how social reproduction is outsourced beyond the nuclear family, involving kin networks and rural-origin service providers. These dynamics reveal how mobility, self-employment and unpaid care work together to support industrial labour while fragmenting the labour force. Similarly, Rigg (2006) and Rigg et al (2016) highlight how livelihoods in the Rural South are increasingly shaped by non-farm income, migration and delocalised household strategies. Although smallholder farming has diminished as a primary livelihood, rural land and family networks remain essential to household security and the intergenerational renewal of labour. Rather than disappearing, rural ties persist as part of a flexible translocal regime that facilitates labour circulation while allowing capital to externalise the costs of reproduction. Together, these perspectives show that the reproduction of labour under capitalism is not confined to the factory or the wage relationship but is dispersed across mobile, often informal, translocal arrangements that sustain both workers and accumulation. From a feminist perspective, the implications of semi-proletarianisation processes become very relevant when studying women recruited into low-wage, precarious jobs in export-oriented industries. These women, maintaining ties to rural households, are less likely to resist exploitative conditions because they see factory work as a transient phase in their lives (Elson and Pearson, 1981; Federici, 2019).

More recently, the literature on social reproduction has delved into how the daily and generational reproduction of labour power – through activities such as childcare, education and household work – underpins capitalist economies. Silvia Federici and Nancy Fraser have emphasised that these processes, often unpaid and predominantly carried out by women, are fundamental to the functioning of capitalist production yet remain undervalued and externalised (Fraser, 2016; Federici, 2019). The social reproduction framework offers a particularly valuable lens for analysing the findings of our research. It elucidates how the disconnection between production and reproduction experienced by migrant workers represents a contemporary and powerful strategy for capital to maximise profits, while

perpetuating the workers' structural vulnerability and negating the possibility of permanent emancipation from poverty.

Our research examines a case study of capitalist modernity, focusing on high-end electronics production in the Red River Delta. In this context, value is systematically extracted from workers during their most productive years using sophisticated managerial strategies. These strategies are characterised by strict discipline, economic incentives, exhausting and often hazardous working conditions, and wages that exceed national averages. Within this model of purported modernity, labour precariousness is central to capitalist accumulation through two interrelated mechanisms. First, it facilitates reliance on a perpetually young, compliant and highly productive workforce predominantly composed of migrant women. Second, it discourages workers from pursuing a long-term social contract between labour and capital, one that would also address the costs associated with social reproduction. These patterns of semi-proletarianisation and externalised reproduction are not anomalies but core mechanisms of accumulation under Vietnam's market socialism. As explored in this volume's introduction, the Vietnamese state simultaneously facilitates integration into global capital circuits and reproduces inequalities by relying on informal, gendered systems of support.

Development of electronics in Vietnam

The electronics industry is a key contributor to Vietnam's GDP growth and exports. It gained significant momentum after Vietnam's accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2006, marking what is regarded as the second wave of foreign investment, facilitated by the endorsement of fully foreign-owned capital investments (Do, 2013; Masina and Cerimele, 2018). Although some foreign electronics firms, such as LG (1997) and Canon (2001), established operations in Vietnam prior to 2006, a major milestone in the industry was Samsung's decision to invest in 2008. Samsung established a large factory in Bac Ninh province, approximately 40 kilometres from central Hanoi. Over time, Samsung has expanded its presence in Vietnam with additional factories, including a significant facility in Thai Nguyen province. These factories specialise not only in smartphone assembly but also in manufacturing smartphone components, TVs and home appliances. Hundreds of Korean and Japanese companies relocated to Vietnam to operate as vendors for Samsung, particularly in supplying smartphone components. Samsung's investment, along with that of its suppliers, paved the way for other global electronics giants, including Foxconn, Goertek, Intel and LG, to expand their operations in Vietnam. These companies constructed factories to capitalise on the emerging industrial 'ecology'. Most of these factories are concentrated in the Red River Delta, in provinces connected by efficient

transportation infrastructure and located within a one-hour drive from each other. Key provinces include Hanoi, Bac Ninh, Bac Giang, Thai Nguyen, Vinh Phuc, Hai Duong, Hai Phong and Quang Ninh. The strategic location of these factories facilitates efficient connectivity between the main ‘mother’ assembly factories and their satellite facilities run by vendors.

FDI plays a crucial role in Vietnam’s economy and is a key driver of industrialisation, with the electronics industry standing out as a prime example of FDI-led, export-oriented growth. In 2021, Samsung alone accounted for 20 per cent of Vietnam’s GDP (US\$74.2 billion) and 20 per cent of export value (US\$65.5 billion) (Tổ Quốc, 2022). The electronics industry’s exports are categorised into two main groups: telephones and spare parts, and computers, electronic products and spare parts. For this research, we focused on these categories, excluding products like cameras and printers.

Despite rising exports, Vietnam has not achieved meaningful industrial upgrading in electronics and continues to rely on cheap labour as its main competitive edge. The country’s 2020 industrialisation goals remain unmet (CPV, 2017). Foreign-invested firms dominate the sector, controlling technology and global value chains. Domestic firms struggle due to weak investment and limited capabilities. Technology spillovers have been minimal, and foreign–local linkages remain shallow. Only a handful of Vietnamese suppliers – mostly in plastics or printing – serve major firms like Samsung (VIR, 2017; VCCI, 2022). Consequently, value added in electronics is low, as Vietnam primarily assembles products and imports key components (Do and Dang, 2023), reflecting the persistent limitations of its FDI-driven model. These structural constraints not only limit technological advancement but also negatively affect labour, as the reliance on low labour costs is closely tied to poor working conditions and restricted rights.

Precarious lives in the Vietnamese electronics industry

Although the electronics industry is often regarded as a technology- and capital-intensive sector, it is, in practice, highly labour-intensive in its assembly factories, as the Vietnamese case makes clearly visible (Do and Masina, 2017). There are no regularly published official statistics on the number of workers in Vietnam’s electronics industry. However, estimates suggest there are approximately 1.3 million workers, primarily engaged in manual tasks on assembly lines, occupying the lowest tier of the value chain (VnExpress, 2022). The labour force in this industry in Vietnam follows common patterns of feminisation and migration, trends also observed in the electronics and garment sectors in countries like India and China (Mezzadri, 2016; Pun et al, 2016; Do and Masina, 2017; Lin and Nguyen, 2021; Mezzadri and Banerjee, 2021; Do et al, 2022). In our study, 68.2 per cent of the 1,593 surveyed electronics workers are women, and 85.8 per cent are

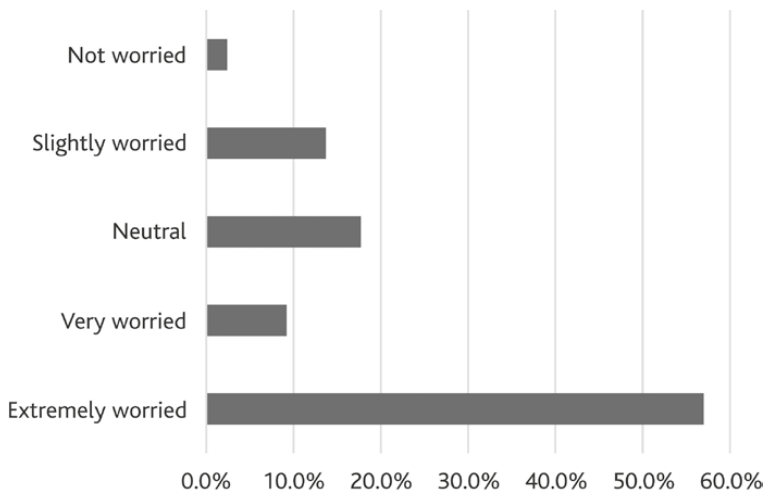
migrants. Vietnamese electronics workers share similar characteristics with their counterparts in other countries, including high labour turnover, the prevalence of dormitory regimes, exploitation and self-exploitation, and precarious working and living conditions.

Contractual insecurity and labour discipline

As noted, Vietnam's electronics industry is dominated by FDI firms, primarily from South Korea, Japan, Taiwan and, more recently, China. These employers generally adhere to labour laws requiring them to recruit workers with formal labour contracts and contribute to social insurance funds on behalf of their employees. Under current regulations, employers and workers may sign a maximum of two fixed-term contracts before transitioning to an indefinite-term contract. Fixed-term contracts must last a minimum of 12 months and cannot exceed 36 months. However, as Luong (Chapter 3) illustrates, compliance with labour law is uneven across production networks. In practice, a hierarchy of care has emerged in which core workers at major firms receive the most comprehensive welfare protections, while workers employed by subcontractors experience increasingly precarious conditions and limited benefits. This stratified system allows lead firms to maintain a caring public image while outsourcing labour discipline and cost-cutting to vendors further down the supply chain.

Workers in the study expressed significant anxiety about their employment status. Among surveyed workers, as reported in Figure 5.1, 57 per cent reported being extremely nervous about whether their contracts would

Figure 5.1: Worry about labour contract renewal



Source: Generated from the ECOW field research database

be renewed, while 9.2 per cent and 13.7 per cent stated they were very or slightly nervous, respectively. Only 2.4 per cent of respondents reported no concerns about their contracts. Workers under fixed-term contracts face greater vulnerability, as employers can decline to renew contracts upon expiration, leaving them unemployed.

The electronics workers surveyed were relatively young, with an average age of 26.5 years. Among the 1,593 participants, only 31.3 per cent held indefinite-term contracts, while 58.3 per cent worked under fixed-term contracts. Workers demonstrated a strong awareness of the differences between contract types and the benefits of indefinite-term contracts. This was reflected in their expressed preference, with 73.4 per cent indicating a desire for indefinite-term contracts due to the job security they provide.

In this industrial relationship, workers occupy a weak position, leaving them vulnerable. They cannot negotiate the type of labour contract when applying for a position offered by employers. The uncertainty surrounding the potential renewal of contracts compels workers to consistently perform at their best to meet company standards, as they await managerial decisions often made through opaque processes. An electronics worker at Yen Phong Industrial Park in Bac Ninh province expressed her anxiety, explaining that her continued employment was contingent on her manager's evaluation. She shared her hope for another contract renewal, pointing out that some co-workers had received lower performance grades than she had (Female electronics worker, single, Yen Phong Industrial Park, Bac Ninh, 1 February 2021).

Cerimele (2018), in her study of electronics workers in Hanoi's Thang Long Industrial Park, highlights how employers strategically rely on fixed-term labour contracts to enforce discipline and maintain workforce flexibility in response to shifting business demands. This strategy, while beneficial for firms, exacerbates labour circulation and undermines workers' job security. Similar dynamics are observed in other contexts across Asia. In China, Mao and Tian (Chapter 4) describe how dispatch labour and the *fanfei* (seasonal bonus) system serve as powerful mechanisms for disciplining workers and ensuring peak-season labour supply, while transferring welfare responsibilities onto workers themselves. This hyper-flexibilised regime is marked by an illusory sense of autonomy that conceals workers' deep social precarity and exclusion from protections such as social insurance. In Vietnam, Luong (Chapter 3) shows how global firms like U-Tech construct a hierarchical labour regime through subcontracting, in which core workers receive enhanced welfare while peripheral vendor workers are subject to precarious contracts, low pay and minimal benefits. This hierarchy not only enables cost-cutting but also reinforces managerial control by threatening workers with downward mobility. Trần (Chapter 8) further reveals how Vietnam's evolving legal framework facilitates these

practices, allowing the expansion of temporary and informal contracts while weakening enforcement of social protection laws. Trần's concept of 'cicada capitalism' captures how employers evade social obligations by disappearing or exploiting legal loopholes, leaving workers without recourse. As underscored by Mezzadri (2016) and Pun et al (2016), these patterns are emblematic of labour regimes in global value chains, where precarity, informality and turnover are not incidental but structurally embedded to reduce costs and maximise flexibility.

Health, stress and workplace pressures

As electronics workers are often young, they frequently quit their jobs or 'jump' (*nhảy việc*) to seek better conditions, particularly those that offer less stress. Workplace stress primarily stems from physical exhaustion, challenging working conditions and negative interactions with managers. Many workers reported feeling drained after standing for extended periods on assembly lines, where sitting during shifts is not permitted. Among those experiencing health issues, 29.6 per cent reported dizziness at work and 15.4 per cent experienced leg pain.

Some workers expressed concerns about their ability to sustain long-term employment in manufacturing due to the physical demands of their jobs. A 24-year-old worker at Yen Phong Industrial Park shared that her eyes had become strained, and she appeared to have developed short-sightedness from inspecting smartphone cameras under a microscope. She planned to leave her job soon to protect her eyesight. Additionally, some workers described poor relationships with managers, who often shouted at or insulted them for mistakes. This negative environment contributes to workplace stress, which in many cases 'pushes' workers to leave their factories in search of more worker-friendly conditions.

Beyond the stress generated by daily routines and workplace interactions, another key factor pushing workers to change jobs is the uneven distribution of health risks across different firms in the supply chain. While conditions are challenging throughout the electronics sector, a clear hierarchy exists: core factories operated by lead firms tend to enforce better safety standards, while hazardous operations are increasingly outsourced to subcontractors. In Bac Ninh, Samsung and other major players have strategically delegated toxic tasks – such as painting, plating and handling volatile chemicals – to local suppliers with fewer protections and weaker regulatory oversight (Lee et al, 2024). This strategy not only allows lead firms to preserve a reputation for modern, safe production but also shields them from direct responsibility or confrontation with core employees. Subcontracted workers, meanwhile, face disproportionate exposure to toxic chemicals and inadequate safety measures.

Infrastructural gaps and reproductive burdens

Industrial workplaces in Vietnam cluster in urban and peri-urban zones with infrastructure and incentives for export production. Most workers are rural migrants from distant provinces who cannot settle near factories due to high housing costs. Consequently, workers tend to have two housing options: employer-provided dormitories or private rentals. Dorms, while cheaper, are highly regulated spaces that extend employer control over workers' lives through curfews and surveillance – forming what [Smith and Pun \(2006\)](#) call a 'dormitory labour regime'. [Masina and Cerimele \(2018\)](#) also show how these arrangements reinforce precarity and limit autonomy. Many workers, especially young women, increasingly choose private rooms despite the cost. As [Kaxton Siu \(2020\)](#) notes, informal rentals offer privacy and the freedom to maintain social and romantic lives – needs largely suppressed in dorms. This choice represents a pushback against surveillance and a desire for autonomy. This spatial divide – between employer control and costly independence – reflects broader trends in global value chains, where social reproduction is fragmented and shifted onto the shoulders of precarious workers.

In our study, a significant proportion of electronics workers are single (50.4 per cent), and the percentage of those with children is correspondingly low (40.1 per cent). This aligns with the workers' prevailing age, as most are in their early 20s. Among those with children, the high cost of housing and limited access to social services, such as childcare, forces many to leave their families in their home villages. Typically, children live with their mothers in the industrial parks for the first one or two years, supported by the worker's mother or mother-in-law, who temporarily relocates to assist with childcare. After this period, the children are sent back to the village to be raised by their fathers or grandparents (see also [Nguyen, 2020](#)). In some cases, female workers leave their jobs after giving birth and return to industrial parks to seek new employment after one or two years. Many interviewed female workers expressed their intention to quit their jobs and return home permanently once their children reach school age, citing fears that their children may struggle in school or be negatively influenced by societal issues such as drug addiction.

Many workers, particularly women, view their jobs in industrial parks as a temporary opportunity to accumulate savings before returning to their hometowns. This aspiration often drives them to voluntarily work long overtime hours to increase their earnings. While previous studies (for example, [Oxfam, 2019](#); [Nguyen, 2020](#)) have noted how low base wages compel workers to take on excessive overtime, [Nguyen et al \(2024\)](#) suggest that workers often perceive overtime not as a burden but as a 'privilege' and a form of welfare. This perception is shaped by a combination of economic necessity and temporal labour governance, in which employers construct

overtime hours as scarce, desirable commodities selectively distributed to ‘deserving’ workers.

Remittances and social reproduction

The strong connection between workers and their households is evident in the remittances they send to family members. Among surveyed workers, 69.7 per cent reported sending remittances home, with 48.6 per cent doing so at least once per month and 43.7 per cent less frequently. Of those sending remittances, 89.2 per cent indicated that the money is primarily managed by their parents, while only 9.7 per cent reported that their spouse oversees the funds. Single workers often entrust their savings to their parents for future use, such as marriage-related expenses. Married workers, on the other hand, frequently send their children to live with their parents in their hometowns, remitting money to cover childcare and related costs.

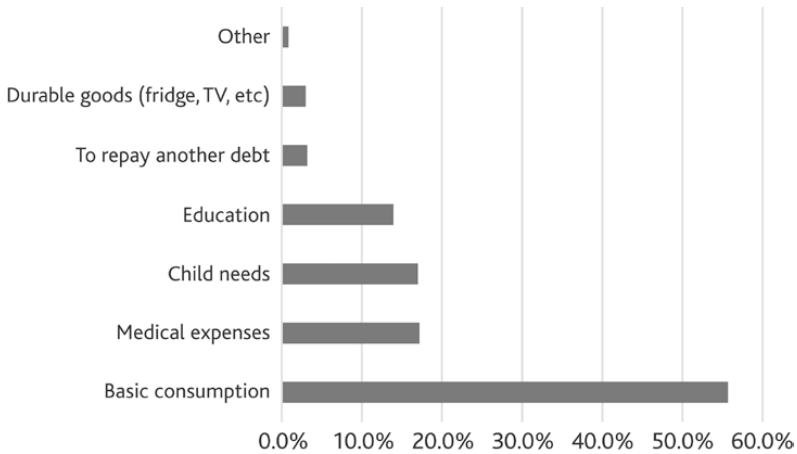
Our research demonstrates that even among ‘modern’ workers employed in high-end electronics manufacturing, families in their home communities continue to play an essential role in sustaining industrial employment. This dynamic is particularly pronounced for workers with children, whose reproductive responsibilities are frequently assumed by extended family members in rural areas. Such familial support effectively subsidises the cost of social reproduction, ultimately benefiting employers (Fraser, 2016). By shifting the burden of childcare, education and other reproductive activities away from the workplace, this arrangement enables firms to maintain low wages and avoid the additional labour costs that would arise if workers were required to independently secure these services in industrial zones (Federici, 2012).

Workers reported (see Figure 5.2) that remittances are mainly used for basic consumption (59.1 per cent), child-related needs (16.4 per cent), medical expenses (13.6 per cent) and children’s education (11.5 per cent), with only a small portion allocated to debt repayment or durable goods. About 50 per cent of workers stated that they do not discuss how the remittances are spent with family members, while approximately 20 per cent said they consult with the recipients.

Beyond remittances, workers’ connection to their hometowns is also reflected in housing ownership. Among surveyed workers, 66.2 per cent owned a house in their hometown, which remained the centre of their family life. Single workers reported plans to inherit land from their parents to build a house after marriage. Married workers were either living in their own homes or with their parents, following rural traditions, particularly for the eldest son.

Despite their exposure to ‘modern life’ in industrial and urban areas, most workers intended to return to their home villages. In fact, 79.5 per cent of participants stated they had no plans, even if they could afford it,

Figure 5.2: The use of remittance at hometown



Source: Generated from the ECOW field research database

to purchase accommodation in industrial areas. Even among the 20.5 per cent who expressed intentions to buy a house or apartment, 47.9 per cent planned to buy in their hometown, while 47.2 per cent considered buying near their workplace. These figures highlight a prevailing desire among workers to reconnect with their hometowns rather than establish permanent roots elsewhere.

As migrant workers constitute much of the industrial labour force, this pattern highlights a significant trend: rather than severing ties, migrant workers tend to maintain strong connections to their hometowns. For many, migration is viewed as a temporary strategy to accumulate capital or acquire skills in preparation for a future life back in their home villages. This approach is also reinforced by government policy, encapsulated in the slogan *ly nông bất ly hương* ('leave agriculture, not the hometown'), which mirrors similar policies in China aimed at encouraging *nongmin gong* (rural migrant workers) to eventually return to rural areas after completing their life cycle in the manufacturing sector.

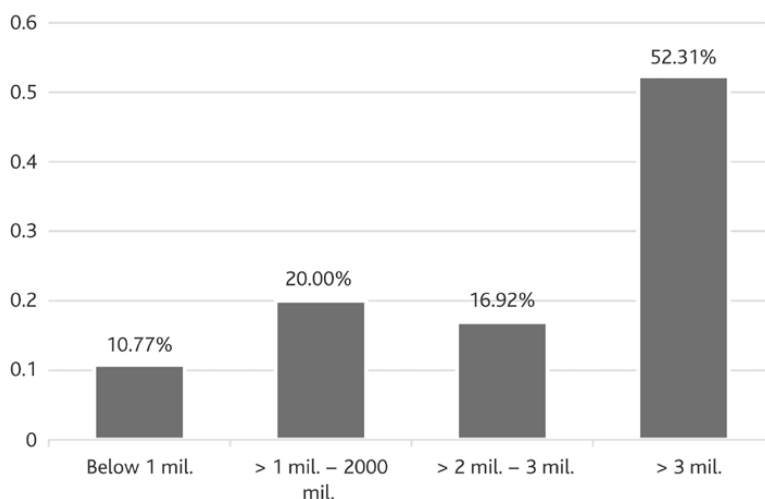
While some workers may perceive returning to their hometown as a voluntary choice, the data indicate that factory work in FDI-led manufacturing offers limited prospects for sustainable emancipation from rural poverty. Pushing and pulling factors perpetuate a young, transient labour force in this sector. High salaries are attainable primarily for functionally single workers – those without parental care duties – who can endure demanding overtime schedules and comply with strict factory rules to secure discretionary bonuses (Masina and Cerimele, 2018). This regime allows global capital to extract labour at minimal cost (Fraser, 2016).

The factory regime is effectively designed to accommodate a workforce that is young, physically strong, compliant and transient. This is particularly evident in the electronics sector, where employees are required to maintain a rapid work pace while adhering to stringent accuracy standards. For families with children, the high cost of living in industrial areas and the lack of essential services, such as kindergartens and schools, make sustaining a livelihood difficult. More fundamentally, the factory regime itself is inherently incompatible with family life. As [Pun et al \(2016\)](#) note in their study of migrant labour in Asia, such arrangements reinforce precarity by denying workers the means to integrate production with family reproduction, leaving workers dependent on informal networks for support.

This disconnection between production and labour reproduction is intrinsic to this model of industrialisation. It creates significant advantages for global capital by minimising labour costs, but it does so at the expense of workers' stability and well-being, perpetuating their precariousness and vulnerability. [Federici \(2012\)](#) describes this dynamic as a 'crisis of social reproduction', where the costs of sustaining labour are displaced onto households, predominantly borne by women and other marginalised groups.

The fundamental incompatibility between factory employment and long-term life projects is evident in the case of Yen Phong Industrial Park, which represents one of the best employment opportunities available to migrant workers. In our sample, as shown in [Figure 5.3](#), 35 per cent of workers reported earning between 7 and 9 million dong (approximately US\$300

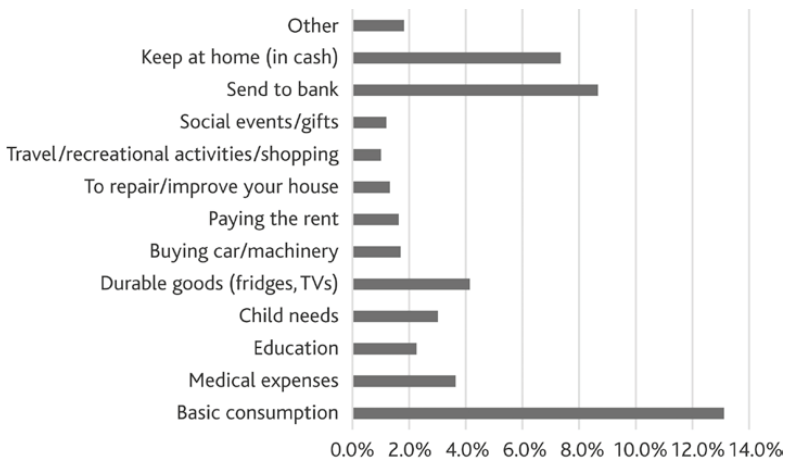
Figure 5.3: Savings in the previous month by workers in Yen Phong IP



Note: 1 mil. VND is approximately US\$43, with the exchange rate at the time of research.

Source: Generated from the ECOW field research database

Figure 5.4: Expenditure of savings in 12 months



Source: Generated from the ECOW field research database

to US\$390, exchange rate at the time of research, 23,200 VND/ US\$1) in the previous month, while 26.9 per cent earned more than 9 million (US\$390). This indicates that approximately 62 per cent of workers earned above the national average salary in the electronics sector, estimated by VCCI at 7.2 million dong (US\$310) (VCCI, 2022, p 54). However, as Mezzadri and Banerjee (2021) argue, higher wages in global production systems often come at the cost of extreme labour discipline and exploitation, creating a cycle of temporary uplift followed by long-term precarity.

Among the workers at Yen Phong Industrial Park, 52.3 per cent reported saving more than 3 million dong in the month preceding the interview. However, a significant portion of these savings was allocated to supporting their households in their home villages. Only workers without the financial responsibilities of supporting children or extended family members could reasonably expect to save enough to invest in a future activity after leaving factory employment. This is also confirmed by the data on expenditure during the previous year, as reported in Figure 5.4.

Post-industrial work and the future of welfare

Preparing for life after the factory

Due to the precarious nature of their employment and the challenges of prolonged separation from their families, many workers begin preparing for alternative livelihoods while still employed in industrial parks. Interestingly, this trend is sometimes supported by firms, as our interviews with Samsung employees revealed. While it was expected that the Korean conglomerate

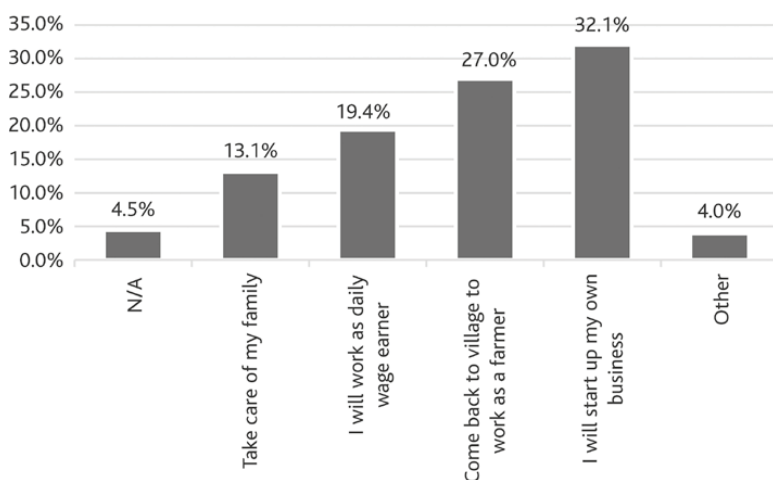
offered short-term Korean language courses to align with its corporate interests, it was surprising to learn that Samsung also provided courses to train workers as spa therapists or nail technicians. In essence, employees at the country's leading electronics firm – relatively young and earning salaries above the national average – were being encouraged by their employer to prepare for transition into typically informal sectors.

The case of Huong (a pseudonym), a female Samsung worker from Thanh Hoa province, exemplifies this dynamic. Huong has worked at a Samsung factory in Bac Ninh province for five years. Married for nearly five years, she has a young child who currently lives with her husband in their home village. Her husband, who did not graduate from high school, is ineligible for employment at Samsung. Initially, he migrated to the industrial park to work alongside Huong, but the COVID-19 pandemic forced him to return home, where he now works as an informal construction labourer and farmer. During their time in the industrial park, their child was cared for by grandparents in the village.

Huong earns up to 10 million dong (US\$430) per month with overtime, although her basic salary is 5.6 million dong (US\$241). In the month preceding the interview, she earned 8.1 million dong (US\$349). After covering expenses for rent, food and her child's education, she saves between 1 and 1.5 million dong (US\$43 and US\$65) per month. In preparation for her future, Huong has trained as a spa therapist and is currently studying nail care. She plans to open a spa in her hometown within the next one to two years when her child starts primary school. For Huong, returning home is motivated by a desire to reunite with her family and to provide educational support for her child (In-depth interview, 6 February 2021, Yen Phong Industrial Park, Bac Ninh).

More than half (57.9 per cent) of the interviewed electronics workers stated that they did not plan to remain in manufacturing until retirement, while 22.2 per cent expressed an intention to stay, and 20 per cent were uncertain. The transient nature of migration to industrial zones is further reflected in workers' long-term plans. A significant majority, 81.3 per cent, indicated that they intended to spend their later years in their village or hometown. In contrast, only 12.4 per cent envisioned moving to a city, while 6.3 per cent were undecided.

Among those who had already decided to leave manufacturing before retirement, their plans for future livelihoods varied. As reported in [Figure 5.5](#), a substantial proportion intended to start their own small business (32.1 per cent), while others planned to work as farmers in their hometown villages (27 per cent), as daily wage earners (19.4 per cent) or to focus on family care (13.1 per cent). These findings align with [Fraser's \(2016\)](#) and [Mezzadri's \(2016\)](#) analyses, which emphasise that the structural incompatibility between production and social reproduction in contemporary labour systems pushes

Figure 5.5: Planned job after leaving industrial work

Source: Generated from the ECOW field research database

workers toward informal, self-sustained livelihoods. For many, industrial employment serves as a temporary means of accumulating capital and skills, rather than a pathway to long-term stability.

Long-term plans and structural constraints

As extensively discussed in previous research and by the mass media in Vietnam and other Asian countries (Nguyen, 2020; Mezzadri and Banerjee, 2021; Báo Điện tử Chính phủ, 2023; Lao Động, 2023), formal workers in industrial parks are entitled to welfare benefits as regulated by social welfare laws. Participation in the social security system provides workers with a formal safety net, protecting them from vulnerabilities such as unemployment, sickness and workplace accidents, while also offering long-term benefits like old-age pensions.

However, studies have indicated that formal workers in Vietnam often view their contributions to social insurance funds – comprising payments from both employers and employees – not as long-term investments but as savings for urgent needs or as ‘capital’ for investments once they leave industrial employment (Nguyen, 2020). Our research revealed the challenges workers face in navigating the social insurance system and their – often contradictory – attitudes toward it. A majority of workers interviewed in in-depth discussions expressed a strong intention to withdraw their social insurance funds, prioritising immediate financial needs over long-term benefits. This trend was corroborated by the quantitative survey: 59.8 per cent of respondents indicated their intention to withdraw their social

insurance, while only 33.1 per cent expressed a willingness to remain in the system after leaving industrial employment. At the same time, qualitative interviews revealed a more nuanced picture. Many workers acknowledged the advantages of social insurance and expressed a desire to maintain their contributions. However, they also conveyed uncertainty about their ability to continue payments due to the irregular income and expenses associated with informal sector work. This ambivalence contrasts with the quantitative data, in which 49.8 per cent of respondents believed they could afford to continue paying social insurance premiums even if they transitioned to informal employment.

A female worker from Nghe An province, employed at the Samsung factory in Bac Ninh province, planned to leave her job once she and her husband had saved enough money to start a small business in their hometown village. They owned a house near the main road, a location she believed was ideal for opening a shop. She intended to withdraw her social insurance to secure additional capital for their investment. Reflecting on her future, she remarked that only well-educated workers seemed to have long-term careers at Samsung, which she felt did not include her (Female electronics worker, Yen Phong Industrial Park, interview, 29 January 2021).

The growing trend of withdrawal from Vietnam's social insurance system poses a serious policy challenge for long-term welfare sustainability. Although FDI-led industrialisation has created formal jobs requiring employer contributions, formalisation has not resolved deeper contradictions within the labour regime. As [Nguyen et al \(2024\)](#) argue, Vietnam's welfare model – while claiming to protect workers – facilitates labour recommodification through thin coverage, high contribution rates and failure to accommodate fragmented work trajectories common among industrial workers. Minimum wages remain low to attract foreign investment, leading many workers to view overtime not as supplementary income but as essential for survival. These findings are reinforced by [Nguyen \(2020\)](#), who shows how workers' engagement with social insurance is shaped not by institutional trust but by precarious employment, familial obligations and survival needs. Many workers perceive social insurance contributions as a form of enforced savings to be accessed during emergencies, rather than a long-term security net. As a result, lump-sum withdrawals have become a common coping strategy, despite their long-term consequences. Together, these studies illustrate the disconnect between policy frameworks and workers' lived realities. As [Mezzadri \(2016\)](#) and [Federici \(2012\)](#) remind us, without addressing the structural tension between production and social reproduction, formal labour regimes risk reproducing precarity under the guise of protection.

The fragility of the Vietnamese state's efforts to construct a comprehensive and inclusive social security system is deeply intertwined with the structural characteristics of its FDI-led industrialisation model. Manufacturing

employment, especially in the electronics and garment sectors, is typically perceived by workers as a temporary phase in their life trajectories rather than a pathway to stable, long-term livelihood. As a result, workers' contributions to the social insurance system are often short-lived and insufficient to secure a decent standard of living in old age. Consequently, workers continue to depend on informal safety nets rooted in household and, more broadly, rural kinship networks. Young rural migrants often enter industrial employment with aspirations of upward mobility, shaped in part by state narratives that promote inclusive growth and social protection. However, many return to their hometowns prematurely – often without having secured long-term entitlements or adequate financial safeguards for the future. Upon return, they reintegrate into household-based livelihood strategies that combine multiple income sources, including small-scale agriculture, off-farm activities, informal urban employment and periodic participation in industrial labour. Within these complex and adaptive strategies, remittances from factory work constitute a vital contribution to household survival. Nevertheless, such transfers rarely lead to sustained improvements in rural living standards, reflecting the structural limitations of industrial employment as a pathway out of poverty.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored the lived experiences of Vietnam's electronics workers, whose labour sustains one of the country's most dynamic export sectors. Despite the appearance of industrial modernity – embodied in foreign-invested, technologically advanced facilities – the employment regime in this sector remains deeply precarious. Workers, especially young migrant women, are integrated into global value chains under conditions that emphasise productivity, discipline and short-term employment. As our findings show, factory work is widely perceived as a transitory phase rather than a sustainable career, leading to circulatory migration patterns and a persistent dependence on rural safety nets. These dynamics confirm a broader structural condition of semi-proletarianisation (Wallerstein, 1974; van der Linden, 1997), in which formal wage labour is interwoven with unpaid reproductive labour and informal livelihoods.

In Vietnam, this process is closely tied to the FDI-led development model, which has privileged rapid industrial growth while neglecting the infrastructures of social reproduction. As various contributions in this volume argue, the Vietnamese state has embraced an export-oriented strategy that leverages cheap and flexible labour without embedding robust social protections. Our data support this critique: while workers contribute to the social insurance system during their industrial employment, they frequently withdraw their savings upon exit and rarely benefit from long-term entitlements. The notion of 'cicada capitalism' (Chapter 8) captures

this phenomenon well – firms appear, extract value and disappear, leaving behind a workforce that remains unprotected and structurally vulnerable.

At the household level, workers' remittances and family support remain crucial for sustaining livelihoods. However, these informal mechanisms cannot substitute for institutionalised welfare. The social reproduction framework (Federici, 2012; Fraser, 2016; Mezzadri, 2016) helps illuminate the cost-shifting dynamics at play: reproductive labour, largely carried out by women in rural households, is essential for sustaining industrial labour in urban zones. Rather than reducing rural dependency, the current development path entrenches it, reinforcing gendered and spatial inequalities.

Furthermore, the Vietnamese case mirrors trends observed across Southeast Asia, where migration, precarity and informality define the labour regimes of export-oriented manufacturing (Ong, 1987; Kaur, 2010; Rigg et al, 2016). As Luong (2024) and Nguyen et al (2024) have shown, even within formal factories, welfare is stratified across core and peripheral workers, with subcontracted labour exposed to greater risks and denied entitlements. This segmentation not only enables capital to discipline labour but also fragments worker solidarity, making collective demands for change more difficult to articulate.

In sum, the Vietnamese electronics industry exemplifies a model of capitalist modernity built on the disjuncture between production and reproduction. The very mechanisms that drive economic growth – labour flexibility, spatial separation from family and outsourcing of social costs – also produce chronic precarity. As long as development strategies prioritise competitiveness and integration into global markets without addressing the reproductive needs of workers, the promise of industrial work as a pathway out of poverty will remain unfulfilled. A more inclusive model requires reimagining labour not merely as a factor of production but as embedded in social and familial life – demanding recognition, support and rights across the full spectrum of workers' existence.

Note

¹ The fieldwork was conducted in four rounds: two in 2019 in the Central and Northern regions (Da Nang, Quang Ngai, Bac Ninh, Vinh Phuc, Hai Phong), one in 2020 in the South (Dong Nai, Tay Ninh, Ho Chi Minh City) and a final round in early 2021 in Bac Ninh, focusing on in-depth interviews with electronics workers for a documentary film. Field research was interrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic, with the third round delayed until after the first period of national social distancing. Additional questions were included in the questionnaires to assess the pandemic's impact on workers' lives and working conditions. However, this chapter does not address pandemic-related impacts due to the limited scope and complexity of the issue.

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