

**LIVING WITH THE REVOLUTIONARY LEGACY:
COMMUNICATION, CULTURE AND WORKERS'
RADICALISM IN POST-MAO CHINA**

By

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ABSTRACT

China in the reform era has seen its expanded industrial labour force fragmented along cleavages such as localities, industrial sectors, ownership patterns, gender and generational gap, and above all, a *hukou* system that creates a deep fissure between urban workers and rural migrant workers. Accordingly, varieties of contending political ideologies have influenced the nature, directions, dynamics and trajectories of labour politics and labor movements in post-Mao China. However, current scholarship in labor studies tends to focus on Chinese workers' resistance along with trade unionism and theorize the formation of their insurgent identities in terms of labour and industrial citizenry. This one-dimensional and unilinear liberal perspective often characterizes workers' invocations of China's revolutionary and Maoist socialist legacies as either the signs of nostalgia or the tactical weapons of struggles for livelihood.

This dissertation takes issue with this emergent academic orthodoxy, which purports to bid farewell to China's revolutionary and socialist past and declare the end of class in Chinese politics. It foregrounds fragmentary groups of Chinese workers whose class-consciousness is counter-hegemonic and alternative to trade unionism. Drawing on a formational approach to class analysis and foregrounding communication and culture as a pivotal site, this dissertation investigates a sectional posture of Chinese workers' autonomous communication activities and their everyday cultural practices of resistance, largely obscured and suppressed by China's repressive regime of media representation. The multi-faceted research encompasses fieldwork, discourse analysis and case studies on communicative and cultural activities involving both urban industrial workers and rural migrant workers. The inquiry sheds light onto the continuing relevance of China's revolutionary and Maoist socialist legacies to the subjectivity and agency of segments of the Chinese working class. The findings point to contestation, rather than consensus, as the defining feature of working-class subjectivity formation and serve as a caveat for any generalization regarding the nature of labour politics in a deeply fractured post-Mao Chinese society. The dissertation recovers the "missing links" in Chinese political studies, labour studies, and communication studies.

Keywords: revolutionary legacy; radicalism; workers' resistance; counter-public sphere; insurgent identity

Subject Terms: China; class; labor politics; culture, media and communication

DEDICATION

This project is

Dedicated to my wife, kids and father-in-law

For their love and patience for the accomplishment of the thesis

And

In memory of my mom, an illiterate Chinese village woman who
expected a son of PhD degree

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INTRODUCTION

Tonghua is a small city based in an isolated corner of Jilin, one of China's three Northeastern Provinces, bordering North Korea. After the Korean War concluded in 1953, a portion of disarmed Chinese soldiers settled in the city and majority of them became steelworkers of Tonghua Iron and Steel Group (Tonggang). The state-owned enterprise (SOE) was set up in 1958 during the Second Five-Year Plan of The People's Republic of China (1958-1962), which had the expansion of heavy industry as one of its core tasks. Tonggang had created most local jobs and been a major revenue source for the local government. Usually, the children of the first generation of steelworkers have followed their parents and have become the primary component of the mill's workforce. Under China's *Danwei* (work unit) system that offers permanent employment and attendant benefits,¹ generations of steelworkers have lived comparatively well over the past half century.

Since the planned economy, particularly SOEs and the so-called "Iron Rice-Bowl" (secured life-long workplace, social security and retirement), were blamed for poor economic performance in the late 1970s, the Party-state introduced market-oriented reforms. The SOE reforms began in the 1980s and have since become the core of China's economic policy. Especially, since 1992 when Deng Xiaoping toured the Southern China to push forward a market economy approach, China has dramatically transformed SOEs. In the mid-1990s, all levels of government decided to convert numerous small- and medium-sized SOEs into shareholding

¹ Xiaobo Lü, Elizabeth J. Perry (eds.), *Danwei: The Changing Chinese Workplace in Historical and Comparative Perspective*, (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1997).

companies with mixed public and private ownership, sell or lease them to private investors, have them merged with one another, or just bankrupt them under the slogan of *zhuada fangxiao* – “grasping the big and letting go of the small.”² Located in the rustbelt of Northeast China, Tonggang could not be immune to the wave of privatization of the SOE sector, the process characterized by the radical reshuffling and dismantling of SOEs.

Tonggang had fallen into a poor performance in late 1990s as the world steel markets were in recession. During its difficult times, a private steel group based in Hebei Province named Jianlong Steel Holdings (Jianlong) as an outside investor approached Tonggang. Zhang Zhixiang, an iron and steel merchant from Zhejiang Province, runs Jianlong Steel. Promising to improve the mill’s performance, Jianlong Steel purchased a 36.19% stake of Tonggang in 2005. Although Jianlong did not have a majority representation of the SOE, it managed to shake up the Tonggang managerial staff and replace them with its own managers. Nevertheless, Tonggang continued its downward spiral and reduced most workers’ salaries. Mill workers suffered in the harsh cold of winter when the company turned off heat, as they could not pay the heating bills. By the second quarter of 2009, Tonggang had lost over 11 billion yuan (\$159.5 million). Jianlong Steel decided to sell out all of its shares of Tonggang. By March 2009, Jianlong declared that it had completely withdrawn from Tonggang.³

Nevertheless, as the market recovered, Tonggang once again begun to make profits. In June alone, it earned a profit of 45 million yuan (\$6,255,000). As Tonggang rebounded, Jianlong renewed its interest and once again asked to purchase the Tonggang shares in July 2009, merely

² Chen F, “Industrial restructuring and workers’ resistance in China,” *Modern China* 29, no.2 (2003): 237–240; Zheng Y and Chen M, “China’s state-owned enterprise reform and its discontents,” *Problems of Post-Communism* 56, no.2 (2009): 36–42.

³ Luo Changping, Zhang Boling, Ouyang Hongliang and Zhang Bing, “Blood on the Hands at a Bleeding Steel Mill,” *Caijing Magazine*, August 21, 2009.

four months after its complete pullout. Promising to inject new capital, upgrade the SOE and lead it to modernize in the 21st century, Jianlong this time offered to hold the controlling share of 65% of the stock. Provincial officials of Jilin province approved the request.⁴ News spread that the Jianlong take-over would bring about a major company layoff to improve the mill's productivity and efficiency. Chen Guojun, a corporate executive from Jianlong Steel, had a plan to cut a total number of 30,000 employees to 5,000. Workers were dissatisfied with Chen's proposal. They earned a monthly salary of about 300 to 500 yuan (\$43.92 to \$73.20), compared with 2,500 yuan (\$366) per month before the first takeover bid by Jianlong. While Chen was paid a salary of 3 million yuan (\$438,000) in 2008, some retirees received as little as 200 yuan (\$29) a month.⁵

On July 24, tens of thousands of disgruntled workers, including retired and laid-off workers and their family members, protested the planned takeover of the SOE by the privately held Jianlong Steel. The angry steelworkers clashed with riot police to block the privatization, in which about 100 people were injured and several police cars destroyed. Workers blockaded Chen in his office where he was meeting with managerial staff and some workers to implement the restructuring plan. The infuriated workers chased and beat Chen to death as he threatened to lay off most of them in three days if he were alive.⁶ The workers' riot finally forced the government to cancel the Jianlong takeover deal and declare that the private company would permanently abandon the Tonggang acquisition. For the time being, the privatization was blocked and the government promised to keep Tonggang as an SOE. After that, the steel workers ended their

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Austin Ramzy, "How China's Steel Boom Turned Deadly?" *Time*, July 27, 2009, <http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1912928,00.html>

⁶ Ibid.

protests and set off fireworks in the factory's residential courtyard to celebrate their victory in resisting the selling of state-owned assets to private business at the expense of their interests.⁷

The Tonggang workers' riot was the latest sign of increasing militant labour activism in post-Mao China. The incident struck a big blow against the privatization of SOEs ongoing across China for over a decade. Privatization has been characterized by losses of state assets, wage cuts, massive layoffs and precarious working class conditions. Compared to histories of labour movements in other countries – for example, Western Europe and the United States in the nineteenth-century, the Polish workers' Solidarity movement in the 1980s, or South Korean labour unrest from the 1960s to the 1990s,⁸ Chinese workers' activism and labour movements in post-Mao market transition have mostly been limited and pacified.

The unusual and militant episode in Jilin Province noted above, therefore, suggests a need to pay attention to aggrieved Chinese workers' resistance in post-Mao market reforms. Tonggang workers' exceptional resistance has stunned the international press, as exemplified by a columnist of Financial Times Chinese Edition who asked, "Why the workers' fists are so hard?"⁹ This incident underlines the importance of scholarly inquiry into collective identity and agency embedded within Chinese workers' resistance.

China's market reforms since 1978 have been a process of undoing Mao Zedong's version of state socialism. In post-Mao China, Deng Xiaoping and his successors have reworked the idea of *Socialism with Chinese Characteristics* to provide a theoretical and ideological

⁷ Luo Changping, et al, "Blood on the Hands."

⁸ Ira Katznelson and Aristide R. Zolberg (eds.), *Working-Class Formation: Nineteenth-Century Patterns in Western Europe and the United States*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986); Michael Burawoy and Janos Lukacs, *The Radiant Past: Ideology and Reality in Hungary's Road to Capitalism*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); Hagen Koo, *Korean Workers: The Culture and Politics of Class Formation*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001).

⁹ Lao Yu, "Why are workers' fists hard?" *Financial Times* Chinese Edition Online, August 28, 2009, available at <http://www.ftchinese.com/story.php?storyid=001027991>.

underpinning for capitalist development.¹⁰ As China re-inserts itself into the global capitalist system, what is distinct from the process is the restructuring of the Chinese workforces. Reforms of SOEs since the 1980s have deprived urban workers of their entitlements under Mao's work-unit socialism and have brought about massive lay-offs. In the "rush to the bottom" by global capital, private, foreign-owned and joint venture firms have prospered in China. Nearly 200 million migrant workers, more than the combined population of the United Kingdom, France and Australia, have migrated from the countryside into China's "world workshops".¹¹ As Chin Kwan Lee observes, the structure of the Chinese workforce has been fundamentally transformed along two historical formations - the "unmaking" of the urban Chinese working class which was a bedrock of Mao's state socialism; the "making" of "rural migrant workers" (*nongmingong*), who have departed from their farm lands and enter capitalist production relations, especially in southern-eastern coastal cities.¹²

In the process of developing a new labour regime to accommodate China's integration with global capitalism, the state has imposed wage labour on the urban industrial workers, the supposed "masters" of the country since Mao's work-unit socialism was established. Meanwhile, the rural workforce has become cheap labour for China's export-oriented industrial growth. The transformation of the Chinese workforce into a new labour regime, coupled with the process of what David Harvey calls "accumulation by dispossession" in China's market reforms,¹³ has worsened conditions of the Chinese working class and has triggered Chinese workers' resistance.

¹⁰ Guoxin Xing, "Hu Jintao's Political Thinking and Legitimacy Building: A Post-Marxist Perspective," *Asian Affairs: An American Review*, Volume 36, Number 4 (2009): 217-218.

¹¹ China's rural migrant workers top 225 million, *Xinhua*, March 25, 2009, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2009-03/25/content_11072242.htm. Thereafter, I will call the massive numbers of peasants who depart from villages and move to cities for jobs as "rural migrant workers" (*nongmingong*).

¹² Chin Kwan Lee, "Livelihood Struggles and Market Reform: (Un)making Chinese Labour after State Socialism," United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD) *Occasional Paper 2*, 2005.

¹³ David Harvey, *The New Imperialism*, (Oxford: Oxford University, 2003), 145-147.

While urban state workers, pensioners and laid-off workers have risen up against privatization, corruption, inadequate compensation and unemployment, rural migrant workers have protested against wage arrears, worsening working conditions and harsh capitalist exploitation.

While current scholarship has given much attention to Chinese workers' protests and unrest themselves,¹⁴ it also turns its eyes to the subjectivities and collective identities of the working class in contemporary China during the volatile social conflicts of the post-Mao era. In theorizing Chinese workers' resistance in the era of market reforms, works in labour studies, particularly done by overseas Chinese scholars, that take a sociological approach to the insurgent identities of the Chinese workers have become influential. However, the sociological approach lacks attention to the communication and cultural dimensions of Chinese labour politics, which are vital to the formation of subjectivity and agency of Chinese workers.

In addition, as Yuezhi Zhao argues, there has been a conspicuous dearth of studies that examine the subjectivity and class-consciousness of China's highly segmented working class by communication and media scholars.¹⁵ There is the dual vacuum, therefore, in China labour studies and communication studies in approaching the formation of subjectivity and agency of Chinese workers - while sociologists tend to ignore the dimensions of media and communication, media and communication scholars showing less interest in Chinese labour studies.

This dissertation focuses on the obscured undercurrent of the re-composition of Chinese workers' class-consciousness in the context of China's post-socialist transformation. As a

¹⁴ Cai Yongshun, *State and laid-off workers in reform China: the silence and collective action of the retrenched* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2006); Cai Yongshun, "The Resistance of Chinese Laid-off Workers in the Reform Period," *The China Quarterly*, No.170 (June 2002), pp.327-44; William Hurst and Kevin J. O'Brien, "China's Contentious Pensioners," *The China Quarterly*, No. 170 (June 2002), pp.345-60. Kevin J. O'Brien and Lianjiang Li, *Rightful Resistance in Rural China*, (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

¹⁵ Yuezhi Zhao, "For a Critical Study of Communication and China: Challenges and Opportunities," *International Journal of Communication* 4 (2010), Feature, 545-548.

response to new initiatives in Chinese communication studies,¹⁶ it investigates autonomous communication and cultural forms of identifiable segmented groups of the Chinese workers in their resistance and everyday lives, often suppressed by the Chinese dominant and repressive communication system and neglected by market-driven media. The research examines the ways in which working class communication and cultural symbols mediate the subjectivity and collective political agency of the segregated Chinese workers.¹⁷ It is an attempt to recover a number of “missing links” in Chinese political studies, Chinese labour studies, and Chinese communication studies.

In order to explore the missing links and elaborate on the study’s rationale and objectives, it is useful to review briefly some of the current scholarship in Chinese labour studies and communication studies with regard to the subjectivity and identity of Chinese workers.

Workers’ Resistance and Collective Identity: Sociological Approaches in Chinese Labour Studies

In examining Chinese workers’ resistance and collective identities of the Chinese working class in market reforms, China sociologists, particularly those trained overseas, have undertaken considerable work on the making of the Chinese working class and labour subjectivity in the reform era. There are two major strands of research on class dynamics and insurgent identities in Chinese workers’ unrest, strikes, protests and other forms of resistance.

¹⁶ Zhao, “For a Critical Study,” 549.

¹⁷ In the light of a gigantic working class and highly segmented groups of the Chinese workers, for sure it is problematic to generalize my findings in this dissertation. It provides alternative perspectives to labour politics in post-Mao China by foregrounding repressed groups of Chinese workers and their resistance. From now on, the term “Chinese workers” or “the Chinese working class” in my research refers to the target workers – the identifiable segments of the Chinese workers my studies focus on. I have no ambitious intent to generalize their activities into that of the Chinese working class as a whole.

The first strand of this research focuses on the issues of class identity and workers' subjectivity in terms of industrial labour and citizenry. For example, through ethnographic research and comparative case studies of workers' protests in China's Northeastern Rustbelt and the Sunbelt of the Pearl River Delta, Ching Kwan Lee pays much attention to the subjectivity of Chinese workers in market reforms. Lee argues that the insurgent identities of the Chinese workers are fluid and fragmented and we can understand Chinese labour subjectivity in terms of what she calls "context-dependent contingency and diversity."¹⁸ Lee argues that labour protests in post-Mao China, yet to escalate into "large-scale, coordinated, cross-regional unrest", have so far taken the form of localized, workplace-based "cellular activism."¹⁹ It is understandable to see Chinese workers make use of mixed discourses of "Maoism, socialism, and liberal ideologies of legal justice and citizenship" to safeguard their rights.²⁰

Through investigating the practical struggles and resistance of Chinese workers, however, Lee suggests that in Chinese labour politics, workers act more as rights-conscious citizenry than a politically assertive "class." Looking at the transformation of the state-society (labour) relation in China through the lenses of "rule by law," Lee considers the law as a contested terrain for the formation of class and citizenship consciousness among the Chinese workers. Lee argues, "Chinese workers' class-consciousness exists as a fading relic from the past, and the persistent weakness of workers' class capacity is not likely to nourish or sustain its development." While Chinese workers lack class-consciousness, Lee concludes that "[T]he most empowering identity workers have found is grounded in one variation of citizenship – citizen's rights to legal justice

¹⁸ Chin Kwan Lee, *Against The Law: Labour Protests in China's Rustbelt and Sunbelt*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 26.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

(*gongmin de hefaquanyi*).” In general, Lee insists that Chinese workers’ resistance is an example of “livelihood struggle” more than “class struggle.”²¹

However, Lee’s argument has an inherent contradiction. On the one hand, Lee theorizes the formation of the Chinese labour identities in terms of “context-dependent contingency and diversity”; On the other hand, Lee attempts to generalize the identity of “rights-conscious citizenry” to a broad and diverse segment of Chinese workers’ resistance.

If Lee tends to conceptualize the identities of contemporary Chinese workers in terms of citizenry more than class, Jianrong Yu, an influential domestic Chinese sociologist, attempts to de-construct the concept of the “working class” in contemporary China. Yu records the Anyuan workers’ collective memory of the small town’s glorious revolutionary past and contrast it with their worsening conditions in post-Mao market reforms. Based on the contrast, Yu suggests that the subjectivity of “masters” of the country, which has been identified with the Chinese working class since the Mao era, is no more than a hollow political discourse.²²

According to Yu, early Chinese Marxist intellectual agitators played a vital role in the formation of the contemporary Chinese working class. Yu makes a distinction between Marxist revolutionaries (the Communist Party) and labour movements, arguing that the former, as a political party, took advantage of the latter in order to seize political power. As a result, at its formation, the Chinese working class developed “politicized” class-consciousness as articulated through Marxist revolutionary ideology as expressed by the Communist Party. This “ideological” class-consciousness has confounded the Chinese working class and has undercut its capacity to recognize its own interests and tasks, inherently different from any political parties. According to

²¹ Lee, *Against the Law*, 27-29.

²² Jianrong Yu, *Zhongguo Gongren Jieji Zhuangkuang: Anyuan Shilu* (The Plight of Chin’s Working Class: Annals of Anyuan), (Mirror Books, 2006).

Yu, “politicized” class-consciousness is not “real” and the Chinese working class has never formed its own class-consciousness.²³ As such, the Chinese working class should give up the false consciousness that they are the “masters” of socialist China and instead, reconstruct its own class-consciousness and identity as industrial labourers and citizens.²⁴

In the light of the plight of the contemporary Chinese working class in post-Mao market reforms, it is reasonable for Yu to question the Party state’s claim of being the “vanguard of the working class” and the Chinese workers’ subjectivity as the “masters” of PRC. Indeed, the working class has been politically weak in China, where the Party state - a combination of the state apparatus and the ruling “communist” party - dominates political power.²⁵ Still, it is hard to deny that Chinese workers have strong collective memories of socialism and identify with the idea of being the “masters,” an identity deeply attached to public ownership of the means of production during the Mao era.²⁶ The subjectivity of the working class in contemporary China appears more complicated than Yu suggests. The severing of China’s revolutionary and socialist legacies is arguably still at odds with Chinese workers’ memories and identities.

Feng Chen examines workers’ resistance against the restructuring of SOEs since 1997 through his fieldwork in Shanghai and Luoyang, Henan province and analyses of the official *Gongren Ribao* (*Workers’ Daily*) reportages. Chen tries to apply a “moral economy” approach to account for the labour protests in question, and for the claims of SOE workers, arguing that

²³ Jianrong Yu, “Zhonguo Gongren Jieji Zhuangkuang Yu Shehui Zhengzhi Fazhan (The Conditions of the Chinese Working Class and The Development of Society and Politics),” *Lecture in Beijing Sanwei Bookstore*, July 15, 2006, quoted in Pei Haide, *Cong Liangge Anli Kan Chengshi Chuantong Gongren* (Looking at Urban State Workers from Two Cases), *The Chinese Workers Online*, <http://zggr.net/?action-viewnews-itemid-6>.

²⁴ Yu Jianrong, *Dangdai Gongren de Yili Weiquan* (Right-safeguarding of Workers in Contemporary China by means of Right), Speech in Yale University, April 3, 2006, quoted in www.wehoo.net.

²⁵ Lynn Walsh, “China: A State of Transition,” *Socialism Today*, Issue 132 (October 2009).

²⁶ Chin Kwan Lee and Guobin Yang (eds.), *Re-envisioning the Chinese revolution: the politics and poetics of collective memories in reform China* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2007); Yuezhi Zhao, “For a Critical Study.”

disenfranchised state workers have anachronistically resorted to Maoist socialist legacies as tactical weapons.²⁷ As Chen argues,

Protesting workers, in other words, are locked into the concept of rights inherited from the past, and they attempt to redress perceived injustices by recourse to the norms of the old days, rather than seeking to redefine and contest their rights in the new property relations. This labour contention thus points to political and institutional restraints on workers' consciousness and their ability to define and defend their interests in the economic transformation.²⁸

Chen insists that state workers should adapt themselves to capitalist property relations and redefine their identity, role, and interests in the market economy, instead of being nostalgic for the “good old days” and challenging the formation of capitalist or quasi-capitalist property relations per se in China. Similar to Yu, Chen argues that workers' consciousness should develop in terms of the collective identity of industrial citizenship – knowing how to protect their rights in an increasingly capitalist economy by independent organizing. As Chen argues, this is “critical for the development of their class-consciousness and of their ability to define and defend their rights under new property relations.”²⁹ Although Chen acknowledges that moral economy-oriented protests against industrial restructuring could help construct workers' collective experiences, “resistance to new labour relations sometimes can be counterproductive and even self defeating.”³⁰

In China's paternalistic socialism during the Mao era, Chinese workers were truly obedient to the Party state and in turn, the state was obligated to provide protection and welfare benefits.³¹ The principles of reciprocity and mutuality have overlapped with the values of a

²⁷ Feng Chen, “Industrial Restructuring and Workers' Resistance in China,” *Modern China*, Vol. 29 No. 2 (April 2003), 237-262.

²⁸ Chen, “Industrial,” 238.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 258.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 257.

³¹ J.R. Mandle, “Strategies of Change in Paternalistic Socialism: The Case of China,” *International Journal of Social Economics*, Vol. 11 Issue 3/4 (1984); Xiaobo Lü, Elizabeth J. Perry (eds.), *Danwei: The Changing Chinese Workplace in Historical and Comparative Perspective*.

“moral economy,” embodying “norms and sentiments regarding the responsibilities and rights of individuals and institutions with respect to others.”³² However, it is simplistic for Chen to compare Chinese workers’ resistance in post-Mao reforms, particularly against the privatization of SOEs, with English peasant bread riots - collective action representing the “moral economy” of an era theorized by eminent British historian E. P. Thompson.³³ Indeed, in their critiques of Mao’s ten-year Cultural Revolution, scholars have emphasized the historical specificity of the ideological indoctrination of Chinese workers with revolutionary working class subjectivity.³⁴ Even though it was the “politicized” class-consciousness, as Yu argues, imposed upon Chinese workers by the Party, Chinese workers in post-Mao capitalist development have strong memories of this subjectivity, often dismissed as empty political slogans and once disregarded even by many workers themselves.

In sum, all of the authors discussed above, tend to downplay the Chinese revolutionary and socialist legacy in making sense of the new dynamism of grassroots politics and in particular, the subjectivity and collective identity of Chinese workers in labour movements of the post-Mao era. Their arguments are controversial in suggesting that Chinese revolutionary and socialist legacies are now little more than a sign of nostalgia or a mere tactical weapon used by workers in their resistance. This view is arguably influenced by what John R. Hall identifies as twin processes – “the end of class as a historical subject” and “the deconstruction of class as a

³² Andrew Sayer, *Moral Economy and Political Economy*, published by the Department of Sociology, Lancaster University, Lancaster LA1 4YL, UK, 2000, at <http://www.comp.lancs.ac.uk/sociology/papers/sayer-moral-economy-political-economy.pdf>.

³³ E. P. Thompson, “The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century,” *Past and Present* 50 (1971): 76–136.

³⁴ Jürgen Domes, Marie-Luise Näth, *China after the Cultural Revolution: Politics Between Two Party Congresses*, translated from the German by Annette Berg and David Goodman, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977).

theoretical object.”³⁵ The authors discussed tend to replace a class discourse with a citizenry discourse as an analytic category to look at tendencies and directions of labour movements in post-Mao China.

A second strand of Chinese labour studies explores the formation of Chinese workers’ class subjectivity and identity in post-Mao reforms from the perspective of post-structuralist discourse analysis. For example, through ethnographic research in the Pearl River Delta, Pun Ngai examines the formation of subjectivity of *dagongmei*, a new class of working girls who are in their late teens and early twenties and have migrated from rural Chinese areas to cities to engage in factory work. In studying the subjectivity of *dagongmei*, Pun considers the constitution of the new worker-subject as a specific cultural-symbolic artefact as well as a worker-subject during China’s integration with transnational capital in its post-socialist transition. As Pun argues,

Dagongmei thus is a newly embodied social identity emerging in contemporary China to meet and resist the changing socioeconomic relations of the country and the needs of capital. As a condensed identity, it tells the story of how a state socialist system gave way to the capitalist world economy and of how capitalist practices depended on the regulation of class and sexual relations. As a worker-subject, it foretells the new configurations of social resistance and the coming of a silent ‘social revolution’ from below.³⁶

Though Pun tries to make sense of the class struggles in contemporary China, she argues that in terms of discursive and institutional effects, the hegemonic project of the market has sentenced to death the discourses of class, class-consciousness and class struggle in China. As Pun argues, the *dagongmei*’s bodily pain, their screams and dreams represent

“[A]n outcry in the present epoch in which state, capital, and patriarchal relations simultaneously inflict violence on society and individuals. It is also a scream directed at the age of reform and

³⁵ John R. Hall, “The Reworking of Class Analysis”, in John R. Hall, ed. *Reworking Class*, (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1997), 4-15.

³⁶ Ngai Pun, *Made in China: Women Factory Workers in a Global Workplace* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 19.

globalization in which the formation of a new working class has been given no space to articulate itself, as if the language of class were sentenced to death by the hegemonic project of the market.”³⁷

Clearly, Pun pays attention to the political, ideological, cultural and discursive factors in the formation of the labour subjectivity. However, she tends to account for class struggle of the working class as what she calls “a minor genre of resistance,”³⁸ despite the fact that the screams and pains of *dagongmei* are fundamentally political and represent the subversive power to counter and challenge the meta-narrative of the market and capitalism and the hegemonic discursive practice.

Similarly, Sit Tsui develops a subaltern and feminist perspective to criticize representations of Chinese rural women moving to cities for jobs in academic research and literary works, as well as in films, documentaries, TV dramas, photography and popular magazines.³⁹ Applying a subaltern and cultural studies approach to the Chinese context, Tsui identifies working rural women as spectral figures of the subaltern class demonstrably haunting dominant regimes of representations of modernization. Although urban intellectuals speak for, and often portray rural women in contemporary cosmopolitan settings as a subaltern class, Tsui argues that through incongruities within the texts, one can posit the figures of rural women as symbols of resistance to the predominant discourse of modernization. The textual analysis suggests the irreducible figures of rural women, in which “there are contradictions, paradoxes and ambivalences in narrating and portraying rural women as actors of modernization, victims of

³⁷ Pun, *Made in China*, 24.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 191.

³⁹ Sit Tsui, *A Critique of Representations of Rural Women in Contemporary China*, PhD dissertation, Lingnan University (2005).

industrialization, agents of proletarian struggle, consumers purchasing commodities, and as the residual from agrarian society.”⁴⁰

Pun and Tsui’s works focus primarily on the issue of “discursive resistance” against the neoliberal ideology that has been spreading through China since the 1980s. They employ the analysis of discourse at the expense of a focus on the materiality of lived experience and tend to view semiotic-symbolic resistance as an end in itself.⁴¹ With regard to the formation of working class subjectivity and identity politics in contemporary China, however, a post-structuralist and cultural studies approach risks overemphasizing discursive and cultural resistance to hegemonic frames by focusing on individualized subversive readings and negotiations of meaning, instead of theorizing the Chinese workers’ resistance in broad collective terms. As Ellen Meiksins Wood observes, such approaches have typically rejected the centrality of the working class in favour of analyzing “people with contingent and discursively negotiable social identities,” thus emphasizing “‘discourse’ and ‘difference,’ or the fragmentary nature of reality and human identity.”⁴²

Scholarship in China Communication Studies: Labour as a Blind Spot and New Initiatives

At large, media scholars have paid less attention to labour, what Catherine McKercher and Vincent Mosco call “a blind spot of communication studies.”⁴³ In the early 1980s, Mosco and Wasko explored the relationship of labour and working people to the mass media and

⁴⁰ Ibid., 4.

⁴¹ Deepa Kumar, *Outside the Box: Corporate Media, Globalization, and the UPS Strike*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007), 158.

⁴² Ellen Meiksins Wood, *The Retreat from Class: A New ‘True’ Socialism* (Berlin: Schocken Books, 1986), xii and 197.

⁴³ Catherine McKercher and Vincent Mosco, *Knowledge Workers in the Information Society* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2007), 21.

information technologies and attempted to illustrate the transformation of workplaces by communication and information-related technologies and the concomitant effects on workers.⁴⁴ More broadly, with respect to communication studies and labour issues, Mosco and McKercher provide an understanding of how to theorize knowledge labour in the information society.⁴⁵ They focus on trade unions and convergence in the communication industry in North America and at the international level. In their latest research, Mosco and McKercher make further efforts to understand communication, culture, and workers in the communication and related knowledge industries.⁴⁶

The latest communications scholarship contributes to a switch from an instrumental approach to “media and labour” of what Jeremy Tunstall calls “intrinsically interesting but discrete topics”⁴⁷ to a political economy perspective. Though the research highlights knowledge labour in information and communication sectors, instead of theorizing communication and industrial workers’ subjectivity, this work can inspire China communication studies to go beyond placing labour on the fringes of the discipline.

Similar to communications scholarship in the West, labour has also been a blind spot in China communication studies. At worst, the work that goes into communication and culture has either ignored or dismissed Chinese workers. At best, scholars have treated media and communication instrumentally in understanding Chinese labour. As Zhao argues, studies of workers’ communicative practices, political consciousness of identifiable segments of Chinese

⁴⁴ Vincent Mosco and Janet Wasko, eds. *The Critical Communication Review, Volume I: Labour, the Working Class and the media* (Norwood, NJ: Ablex Publishing Co., 1983).

⁴⁵ McKercher and Mosco, *Knowledge Workers*. 168.

⁴⁶ Vincent Mosco and Catherine McKercher, *The Labouring of Communication: Will Knowledge Workers of the World Unite?* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2008).

⁴⁷ Jeremy Tunstall, *Media sociology: a reader* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1970), 36.

workers and the making of a gigantic Chinese working class in the reform era are less developed.⁴⁸

Recently, there is an emerging small but growing literature by China media scholars that brings communication and culture into the analysis of Chinese workers' collective identity. For example, Hong Yu analyses the historical process of information and communication technology (ICT)-driven class formation by relating it to the broader socio-economic and political transition associated with China's re-integration into the global information economy. Hong also examines both objective and subjective aspects of class formation.⁴⁹ Hong's research provides an understanding of the class relations and class identities of Chinese information workers by focusing on the political economy of ICT development, work relations and the labour process, and the socio-economic background and experiences of industrial wage-labour in the ICT sector. However, Hong's focus, primarily on the social patterns of class formation in the ICT sector, neglects the role of media and communication in developing Chinese information workers' class-consciousness and subjectivity.

If Hong examines the formation of Chinese information workers' class-consciousness by looking at the production process and political economy of ICTs, Jack Linchuan Qiu discusses the implications of consumption in ICT for the process of working class formation in post-Mao China. As an effort to relate working-class formation in the industrializing society of China and the rise of a "network society," Qiu examines how historical configurations of technological, policy and socio-economic conditions shape working-class ICT usage patterns in China and the ways workers integrate information technologies into working-class economic, social and

⁴⁸ Zhao, "For a Critical Study of Communication," 548.

⁴⁹ Yu Hong, *Class Formation in High-tech Information and Communications as an Aspect of China's Re-integration with Transnational Capitalism*, Doctoral Dissertation. University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, 2008.

cultural practices. Compared to Hong who foregrounds the evolving nature of labour relations and class identities in the ICT sector as a crucial dimension of China's industrialization, Qiu's approach focuses on the "working-class network society" from the society-wide end-user perspective.⁵⁰ As Internet and mobile phone services become affordable and accessible, and are closely integrated with the everyday work and life of low-income communities in a newly mobile, urbanizing China, they provide a critical seedbed for the emergence of a new working class of "network labour" crucial to China's economic boom. Accordingly, Qiu argues, between the haves and have-nots are the information "have-less": migrants, laid-off workers, micro-entrepreneurs, retirees, young, and others, increasingly connected by cybercafés, prepaid service, and used mobile phones. By investigating the working-class network society in China, Qiu brings class back into the scholarly discussion, considering it not as a secondary factor but as an essential dimension in our understanding of communication technology with regard to the re-composition of class in the industrializing society of China. However, Qiu's work lacks complexity and retains an instrumental approach to the ICT and the Chinese workers' identities.

Through investigating and analyzing narratives of both housemaids and middle-class employers, TV dramas, newspapers, magazines and cartoons collected in her fieldwork, Wanning Sun explores the construction of identities and agency of female domestic workers in post-Mao China.⁵¹ Sun suggests that the symbolic and cultural boundaries between the maids, who are from rural areas in China, and their employers, who are members of the emerging middle classes who live in rapidly growing and changing Chinese cities are constantly being negotiated and mutually created by reference to their place of origin - rural and city. For Sun,

⁵⁰ Jack Linchuan Qiu, *Working Class Network Society: The Information Have-less and Working-class ICTs in Urban China* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009).

⁵¹ Wanning Sun, *Maid in China: Media, Morality, and the Cultural Politics of Boundaries* (London: Routledge, 2009).

China's population registration system (*hukou* system), created in the Mao era, plays a vital role in differentiating rural women from city residents. This system creates a social, economic and legal gap, which in turn creates a symbolic gap in terms of gender and class. Sun's research illustrates the production and consumption of popular media, the cultural politics of inequalities and the subaltern figure of the domestic worker. Sun emphasizes identity politics and individual resistance with less attention to collective agency and class struggle.

Among the first to divert media studies to the Chinese labour issue, Zhao points to the importance of the ongoing struggles and communicative activities of China's industrial workers to their political subjectivity. Monopolized by the political, economic and cultural elite, the Chinese communication system offers less chance for Chinese workers to articulate themselves.⁵² The obscuring of the industrial workers' struggle in mainstream communication is likely to lead to mistaken interpretations of the Chinese labour movement by neglecting Chinese workers' counter-hegemonic communicative practice, which is vital to the re-composition of the working class and the formation of their collective subjectivity.⁵³ Zhao argues that the evolving Chinese communication system is a contested terrain of ideological power in shaping political subjects of Chinese workers. This is evident in Zhao's comparative analysis of Chinese media and internet mobilization regarding the sufferings of two migrant workers.⁵⁴

In filling the dual vacuum with regard to labour and communication, the latest scholarship in China media studies has prompted the thesis that communication and cultural

⁵² Yuezhi Zhao and Rob Duffy, "Short-circuited? The Communication of Labour Struggles in China," in *Knowledge Workers in the Information Society*, ed. McKercher Catherine & V. Mosco, 229–247 (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2007a).

⁵³ Yuezhi Zhao, "Neoliberal Strategies, Socialist Legacies: Communication and State Transformation in China," in Paula Chakravarty and Yuezhi Zhao (eds.), *Global Communications: Toward a Transcultural Political Economy*, 33 (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008a).

⁵⁴ Yuezhi Zhao, *Communications in China: Political Economy, Power and Conflict*, 245–280 (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008b).

practices lie at the heart of the potential re-composition of working-class political movements and specifically, the formation of working class subjectivity.⁵⁵ Specifying workers' communication capacities and models, Caffentzis argues that independent and autonomous communication networks are essential to the composition of working class movements and the development of their collective self-understanding and class-consciousness.⁵⁶ Through dominant communicative structures, the state and capital have suppressed workers' struggle. In terms of communicative and organizational linkages, workers need to develop vertical and horizontal communicative networks as well as enhanced communicative capacities to counter the powers of state and capital in the symbolic discursive environment.⁵⁷ This antagonism is what Dyer-Witheford calls "a conflict between communication and information"- the latter is "centralized, vertical, hierarchic" while the former is "distributed, transverse, dialogic."⁵⁸ As Caffentzis argues, working class movements still have much to learn from Lenin's 1902 booklet *what is to be done?*, in which Lenin presented the world with a "communication model" of revolution.⁵⁹

The Subjectivity of the Chinese Working Class in Post-Socialist Transformation

Just before the Tonggang incident took place, I had conducted a fieldwork research in China for my dissertation attempting to explore Chinese workers' autonomous communication and cultural forms, and the re-composition of working class subjectivity in post-Mao reforms. As Zhao argues, the Tonggang workers' riot underlines "the unremitting urgency of studying the

⁵⁵ Zhao and Duffy, *Short-circuited*; Nick Dyer-Witheford, *Cyber-Marx: Cycles and Circuits of Struggle in High-technology Capitalism*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999); George Caffentzis, "Lenin on the Production of Revolution," in *What is to be done? Leninism, Anti-leninist Marxism and the Question of Revolution Today*, ed. W. Bonefeld and S. Tischler, (New York: Ashgate, 2002).

⁵⁶ Caffentzis, *Lenin on the Production*.

⁵⁷ Zhao and Duffy, *Short-circuited*, 231.

⁵⁸ Dyer-Witheford, *Cyber-Marx*, 86.

⁵⁹ Caffentzis, *Lenin on the Production*.

subjectivity and agency of the Chinese working class from a communication perspective.”⁶⁰

From the literature on labour studies in sociology, we can see that sociologists tend to focus on Chinese workers’ resistance and material struggles in post-Mao China along with trade unionism. There is a tendency to theorize their insurgent identity in terms of labour and industrial citizenry. This focus on class formation highlights the re-making of the Chinese working class and class-consciousness amidst capitalist production relations under market reforms. This is empirically evident in workers’ protests and resistance, particularly in China’s main coastal export manufacturing areas - the Pearl River Delta, in the southern province of Guangdong, and the Yangtze River Delta, near Shanghai. Nevertheless, there are flaws in the unilinear and liberal approach to collective identity and agency of the working class evident in many sociological studies when it generalizes a sectional posture of a rights-based defence of labour’s position within capitalism into the broader context of labour movements in post-Mao China. The prevalent views characterizing workers’ invocations of China’s revolutionary legacy and Maoist socialism as either the signs of nostalgia or the tactical weapons of struggles for livelihood are debatable. On the one hand, labour studies in sociology, exemplified by Lee’s influential work overseas, acknowledge that the paradigm of post-Mao labour movements takes the pattern of “cellular activism,” in which the Chinese workers’ resistance is localized, single-factory-mobilized, demand-plural, and short-lived.⁶¹ On the other hand, many labor studies in sociology have drawn on a liberal and transitional approach to China politics broadly and labour politics specifically, paying incidental attention to China’s revolutionary and socialist past and its implications for working-class consciousness.

⁶⁰ Zhao, “For a Critical Study of Communication,” 546.

⁶¹ Lee, *Against the Law*, 5.

This dissertation takes issue with an emergent academic orthodoxy that purports to bid farewell to China's revolutionary and socialist past and declares the end of social class in Chinese politics. It foregrounds fragmentary groups of Chinese workers whose class-consciousness is counter-hegemonic and alternative to trade unionism. I recognize that the Chinese working class is by no means under a single identity. There are diversified groups of the Chinese workers, which are fragmented by geographic cleavages (the rustbelts and the sunbelts, for example), sectors, employments (on duty or lay off), salaries, ownerships of factories (state-owned, collectively-owned, joint venture or privately owned) and above all, the *hukou* system (urban workers and rural migrant workers based on their registered residence permits). Drawing on a formational approach to class analysis and foregrounding communication and culture as a pivotal site, this dissertation investigates identifiable segments of Chinese workers' autonomous communication activities and their everyday cultural practices of resistance, largely obscured and suppressed by China's repressive regime of media representation.

The dissertation takes multiple research methods, including fieldwork, discourse analysis, and case studies on communicative and cultural activities involving both urban industrial workers and rural migrant workers. My inquiry sheds light onto the continuing relevance of China's revolutionary and Maoist socialist legacies to the subjectivity and agency of segments of the Chinese working class. The findings point to contestation, rather than consensus, as the defining feature of working-class subjectivity formation and serve as a caveat for any generalization regarding the nature of labour politics in a deeply fractured post-Mao Chinese society.

The Chinese working class gained its subjectivity through the Communist revolution and Maoist socialist practices. As Shanghai-based media scholar Xinyu Lu argues, the presumed

“master” status of the Chinese working class was a historically specific subjectivity in the state socialist household - the establishment of a state-owned national industrial base.⁶² The working class enjoyed the status of “masters” of the socialist state during the Mao era and it has lost the entitlement since post-Maoist economic reforms. While post-Mao China has introduced capitalist production relations, it has maintained a Leninist Party-state nearly three decades after Mao’s death and almost two decades after the Tiananmen incident in 1989.⁶³ The Chinese Communist Party, despite its pro-capitalist reforms, still claims to be the vanguard of the Chinese working class and to be loyal to China’s revolutionary inheritance. It is possible that the Party-state can take advantage of its revolutionary heritage for the purposes of maintaining its authoritarian power. However, this self-proclaimed “socialism with Chinese characteristics” - the process of incorporation and legitimation – also makes it possible for the re-composition of radical subjectivity and revolutionary class-consciousness in the Chinese working class in post-socialist transformation. As Lu argues, “the sense of being the masters,” once gained by the oppressed, “will never be and should not be forgotten and this is precisely the ineradicable important legacy of socialism today” in China.⁶⁴

My dissertation is an attempt to interrogate conventional interpretations of Chinese society with the thesis that the memory of revolution and Maoist socialism has become an ideological and cultural resource for class-consciousness and the recomposition of the Chinese working class in the post-socialist transformation. Nevertheless, I do not purport to insist the possibility of restoring Maoist socialism literally, nor chime in with Maoist beatification of

⁶² Xinyu Lu, “Ruins of The Future: Class and History in Wang Bing’s Tiexi District,” *New Left Review* 31 (January-February 2005).

⁶³ Perry, Elizabeth J. “Studying Chinese Politics: Farewell to Revolution?” *The China Quarterly*, Issue 57 (January 2007).

⁶⁴ Lu, *Ruins of The Future*.

China's state socialism as a sort of "Golden Age." Instead, I attempt to make sense of the political subjectivity of the Chinese workers and their implications for the trajectory of Chinese socialist transformation from a democratic socialist perspective.

This dissertation tries to grapple with the formation of subjectivity and agency of fragmented groups of the Chinese workers in the era of market reforms through the entry points of communication and culture. This research works to understand the nature, dynamics, diversities, disunity and contestation of Chinese workers' resistance and subjectivity in post-socialist transformation. It aims to provide an integrated analysis of communication and cultural dimensions in the formation of subjectivity of the Chinese working class. As Zhao and Duffy argue, "[I]ndependent communicative networks are integral to any process that might eventually weave together a collective, class-based political identity from the multiple subjectivities of China's stratified, regionalized, and gendered wage labourers."⁶⁵ The research that underpins my arguments encompasses fieldwork on urban industrial workers' political debates, leisure activities, cultural practices, and collective memories; discourse analysis of working class literature and online communication activities; as well as case studies in rural migrant workers' cultural empowerment.

As Zhao and Duffy observe, Chinese bureaucratic and economic elites have attempted to pre-empt Chinese workers from consolidating their communicative and organizational linkages, which are necessary to develop their lost subjectivity. Nevertheless, Chinese workers and their organic intellectuals are making efforts to reconstitute their subjectivity through material economic struggles and independent communicative and cultural activities. The dissertation is an expanded research on segments of Chinese workers' communicative and cultural struggles for

⁶⁵ Zhao and Duffy, *Short-circuited*, 231.

regaining their subjectivity and reconstructing a proletarian public sphere. By investigating political debates, leisure and working class culture, collective memories and internet-based activism and mobilization involving urban industrial workers and rural migrant workers, the research has included three concerns. First, it looks at Chinese workers' struggles for creating their own communication networks and developing their own forms of culture. Second, it explores Chinese workers' communicative and cultural practices and the possibility of creating their own public sphere and counter-hegemonic alternatives in China's class-divided society. Third, it examines the potential implications of workers' contested public spheres for subjectivity and agency of the working class in contemporary China.

Organization and Outline of the Dissertation

In chapter one, I attempt to build up a theoretical framework for understanding Chinese workers' communicative and cultural activities in post-socialist transformation. Drawing on a "formational approach" to class, I provide an analytical theoretical framework for relating Chinese workers' autonomous communication and cultural practices to a proletarian public sphere, through which Chinese workers' collective identities and agency is constituted.

Chapter Two provides a conceptual grounding to the research in this dissertation and clarifies the methodological traits I use in my findings. I theorize fundamental concepts which underline the thesis, such as class and the state in the Chinese context and the revolutionary legacies and workers' radicalism. In term of a "class" society, China is unique as the Chinese state has the revolutionary legacy of Maoist socialist practices. An overview of this historical background is helpful for understanding the Maoist idea of Chinese workers as "masters" and its transformation in the reform era which has introduced capitalism. The methodological

clarifications will deal with concerns about the representativeness of target groups I observe and focus on in my research and inquiry on the potential generalizations of my findings.

Chapter Three begins by examining the political and cultural constitution of the Chinese working class-consciousness during the Mao era through cultural activities in the workers' cultural palaces. It provides a historical overview of the role of culture and ideology in constructing Chinese workers' class-consciousness in Communist-led labour movements. A case study of the transformation of the Henan Provincial Workers' Cultural Palace suggests that Maoist socialism and class politics become part of social-cultural heritage in Chinese society, upon which urban workers in post-socialist transformation have drawn. Through Communist revolution and Maoist socialist experiments, Chinese workers have gained their subjectivity of "masters." I argue that urban Chinese workers have internalized this identity, despite the emerging divisions and fissures within the social group. This chapter explores the way in which the Chinese workers could take the workers' cultural palace as a spatial zone of rebuilding the proletarian public sphere and regaining the subjectivity of the working class with revolutionary consciousness.

Chapter Four investigates working-class culture in contemporary China during the market reform era and the implications for the reconstruction of a proletarian public sphere in post-socialist transformation. It makes a comparison between the corporate-oriented, enterprise-based culture, the commercial and bourgeois culture, and the urban industrial workers' culture. Through a case study of the Zhengzhou workers' cultural activities in city parks, I find that contemporary working class culture has been struggling to survive the commercial culture by continuing the proletarian culture promoted by Mao. Working class culture in contemporary China has inherited the revolutionary themes and socialist culture. Chinese workers in the

present have self-consciously incorporated the officially sanctioned ideology and culture, once seemingly imposed upon them, as part of their contemporary leisure culture, empowering them to rise up against capitalist exploitation in market reforms.

Chapter Five examines urban workers' collective memory of socialism and the constitution of a proletarian public sphere in post-Mao China. Some scholars often equate Maoist socialism with a 'moral economy' of present-day societies and Chinese workers' subjectivity is confused with identity in a moral economy of class. Clearly, a modern form of moral economy has profoundly influenced Chinese socialism in which the mutual rights and obligations of the governing and the governed are controlled and condensed. However, the Chinese working class has maintained its subjectivity as "the masters" of socialist enterprises, distinct from the dichotomy between the governed and the governing in the moral economy, through what Lu calls the "anti-Western-capitalist, counter-hegemonic project of third world nationalism." Therefore, this chapter distinguishes Maoist socialism from today's moral economy, and the subjectivity of the Chinese working class in the Mao era from contemporary identities in moral economy. Through interviewing "three-generation" urban workers in a Zhengzhou textile mill, I make a comparison between their collective memories of Maoist socialism and their subjectivities as urban state workers in the Maoist era and in post-Mao reform China. Despite the diverse narratives of Chinese socialism in the Mao era, the three-generation workers have possessed their collective identity as the Chinese working class, whose interests are different from the state cadres (capitalist roaders) and the newly emerged Chinese capitalist class. They question the hegemonic discourse in reform China that the restructuring SOEs represent the direction of advanced productive force.

While previous chapters focus on cultural and communicative practices of urban state workers in reform China, chapter six turns to discuss the dynamics of the cultural and communication domain of rural migrant workers, who are emerging as what the party-state calls “the new members of the Chinese working class.” This chapter points to the question of cleavage between the urban state workers and rural migrant workers and their potential convergence through rebuilding a proletariat public sphere. I examine a museum in Beijing for recording the history of the Chinese rural migrant workers, a music troupe in Beijing for entertaining peasant workers, *dagong* poetry and literature, and the role of workers’ organic intellectuals in these cultural and communicative activities. Through analyzing rural migrant workers’ cultural and communicative practices, I attempt to examine to what extent rural migrant workers have identified with proletarian culture and socialist class-consciousness.

In chapter seven, I explore internet-based media as forums and autonomous communication networks through which worker intellectuals and leftist intellectuals play their role in labour politics and radicalism. Through a case study of a rural migrant worker’s killing of his bosses over a labour-capital dispute in the Pearl River Delta, this chapter examines a proletariat public sphere, nurtured by internet-based new media. This case study follows Zhao’s comparative analyses of the Sun Zhigang case and the Wang Binyu case. It further reinforces Zhao’s observations on the exclusionary and class-dominated nature of the “bourgeois public sphere” existing in Chinese society. Broadcast, computer, and information technologies have mediated the seeming dominant communication and machinery of representations of Chinese workers by the logic of state and the logic of capital. The Chinese state and economic elites have imposed censorship and communication blockages to retard the formation of a new Chinese working class-consciousness. However, Chinese workers have taken advantage of internet-based

media to establish autonomous cultural and communicative networks through which they are building a new working-class culture and a proletarian public sphere. This chapter also explores the role of organic intellectuals in the construction of a proletarian public sphere.

In the concluding chapter, I discuss the implications of Chinese workers' autonomous and cultural practices and the nascent proletariat public sphere for the resurgence of class politics in post-Mao era and for China's post-socialist transformation. I raise questions both about the future orientation of Chinese labour movements in the post-Mao era and the potential renewal of Chinese socialism.

CHAPTER ONE

WORKING-CLASS FORMATION AND SUBJECTIVITY IN THE POST-MAO ERA: A FORMATIONAL APPROACH

In examining Chinese workers' subjectivity in the post-Mao era, I draw on a "formational approach" to class in political economy of communication.⁶⁶ I begin by revisiting existing theories of working-class formation, including classical Marxist formulations and Ira Katznelson and Aristide Zolberg's comparative historical sociological work. The brief review is helpful for understanding a formational approach to the working class subjectivity. Three dimensions of a formational approach to class have mostly inspired this dissertation - cultural analysis of class formation in the work featured by E.P. Thompson, an "autonomist Marxist" approach and the concept of "proletarian public sphere." This will provide an integrated analytical theoretical framework, which builds on communicative and cultural issues to understand the formation of subjectivity and agency of the working class in contemporary China.

Working-Class Formation: The Distinction Between the "Class in Itself" and "Class for Itself"

Classical Marxism uses the concept of "class" to designate an aggregate of people having a common location in the relations of production, which would give rise to an inherent tendency to common collective action. Therefore, class is simultaneously an objective and subjective phenomenon. If the former represents something independent of members' consciousness, the latter is expressed in conscious thought and practice. Goran Therborn argues we must conceive

⁶⁶ Vincent Mosco, *Political Economy of Communication*, Second edition (London: Sage, 2009).

of “class formation” as a double process – both objective and subjective. While it is “a socio-economic process accompanying the development of a mode of production,” it is at the same time “the process of agents moving into, being shaped by, and being distributed between the different kinds of economic practices which constitute the given mode of production.”⁶⁷ Without exception, working-class formation entails this dual process as a massive labour force, developed with the advent of industrialization and capitalist development, and as agency taking up labour movements to win concessions from capital.

Drawing on passages from *The Eighteenth Brumaire And The Poverty of Philosophy*, Marxian scholars assume the distinction between “a class in itself” and “a class for itself,” entailing an opposition between the economic and the political and cultural – with the former as objective reality and the latter as subjective expressions of the underlying economic reality.⁶⁸ This distinction presupposes that the constitution of classes take place in the socio-economic realm, prior to political or cultural engagements. Accordingly, political struggle and forms of culture and consciousness are no more than symptoms, expressions, and perhaps even necessary effects of the socio-economic class structure, or the relations of production. The political, cultural, or conscious expression of class is neither constitutive nor definitive of class structure.

According to this class in itself/for itself distinction, economic relations (class-in-itself) generate a set of class experiences, and these experiences give rise to class-consciousness (class-for-itself). On the one hand, the development of capitalism will polarize class structure and bring proletarianization forth; on the other hand, exploitative capitalist economic relations give rise to class struggles, through which the proletariat becomes conscious of itself as a class with the

⁶⁷ Goran Therborn, “Why Some Classes Are More Successful than Others?” *New Left Review* 138 (1983): 39.

⁶⁸ E. Andrew, “Class in Itself and Class against Capital: Karl Marx and His Classifiers”, *Canadian Journal of Political Science / Revue canadienne de science politique*, Vol. 16, No. 3 (1983), 577-584.

mission of abolishing exploitation and alienation in production through collective organization and revolutionary action.

This distinction between class in itself and for itself is open to the charges of economic reductionism, especially given the failure of socialist movement and the lack of composition of revolutionary consciousness of the workers from their labour movement against capitalism.⁶⁹ In criticizing the problematic distinction, Przeworski writes:

The difficulties encountered by Marxist theory in analyzing the class structure of concrete capitalist societies had already appeared at the time of the formation of the socialist movement. Their roots are to be found in the formulation by Marx of the problematic in which the processes of class formation are seen as a necessary transition from a “class in itself” to a “class for itself,” a formulation in which economic relations have the status of objective conditions and all other relations constitute realms of subjective actions.⁷⁰

In sum, the Marxian formulation of “class in itself-for itself” presupposes that differences in the relationship of groups to the means of capitalist production provide a necessary but not sufficient condition for working-class formation. The final factor necessary for the emergence of the working class “for itself” is a group, organizing themselves and participating in a “political struggle.”

E.P. Thompson’s Theory of Working-Class Formation: a Cultural Marxist Turn

In conceptualizing the dual process of objective and subjective aspects, contending approaches to working-class formation have developed in contemporary Marxist research. However, while classical Marxism follows Marx’s formulation of “class in itself-for itself” to

⁶⁹ Margaret R. Somers, “Deconstructing and Reconstructing Class Formation Theory: Narrativity, Relational Analysis, and Social Theory,” in *Reworking Class*, ed. John R. Hall, (Ithaca, New York; London: Cornell University Press, 1997).

⁷⁰ Adam Przeworski, “Proletariat into a Class: The Process of Class Formation from Karl Kautsky’s *The Class Struggle* to Recent Controversies,” *Politics and Society* 7 (1977): 343.

prioritize its concrete economic location, the cultural Marxist current since E.P. Thompson tends to conceive of the making of working class as a process of conscious self-identification.

The master narrative, the thesis of how capitalist development leads to the formation of the working class, as Lee comments, “forms the bedrock of the working-class formation literature.”⁷¹ However, since E. P. Thompson, there have been increasing critiques of this structural-reductionist or determinist conception of class. The historical or constructivist perspective has inspired many recent studies of nineteenth-century working-class formation. This historical or constructivist conception of class highlights the role of culture and institutions in shaping people’s “lived experiences” within the production process and outside of it. As Thompson argues, cultural factors “embodied in traditions, value-systems, ideas and institutional forms” influence the way in which people make sense of their material condition and respond,⁷² in other words, their class-consciousness. As his oft-quoted phrase says, “class is a social and cultural formation (often finding institutional expression) which cannot be defined abstractly, or in isolation, but only in terms of relationship with other classes; and, ultimately, the definition can only be made in the medium of time—that is, action and reaction, change and conflict.”⁷³

Critical of the structural definition of class, E. P. Thompson understands class as constituted by a form of conflictive behaviour generated primarily but not exclusively by common experiences in the production process. Similarly, in examining the formation of the French working class in the nineteenth-century, Sewell stresses the ideological and political discursive impact of the French Revolution on the emergence of class-consciousness. As he argues, “the transformations of the early 1830s created the intellectual, linguistic, and

⁷¹ Lee, *Against the Law*, 13.

⁷² E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, 10 (New York: Pantheon Books, 1964).

⁷³ E.P. Thompson, “The Peculiarities of the English,” in *Social Register 1965*, ed. Ralph Miliband and John Saville, 357 (London: Merlin Press, 1966).

organizational space on which the subsequent workers' movement was built. These transformations established for the first time a class-consciousness discourse and institutional practice that was further elaborated by workers over the following decades."⁷⁴

In improving Marx's "class-in-itself and class-for-itself" model, Katznelson proposes four levels or layers of class – the structure of capitalist economic development, patterns of life, dispositions and action - to understand working class formation.⁷⁵ The fundamental changes in the structure and conditions of life will bring about basic changes in language, consciousness and institutions, in other words, the symbolic and organizational aspects of culture. Through cultural configurations, people come to a set of subjective perceptions of the objective realities. This four-level formation of the working class has begun to absorb E. P. Thompson's cultural Marxist conceptualization of class. Since then, the analysis of working class formation should take into account the political, ideological and cultural bases of societies. As Therborn argues, in terms of subjectivity, class formation is "an ideological and political process of the tendential unification of class members into forms of common identity and of concerted action as conscious class members in relation to members of other classes."⁷⁶

A Formational Approach to Class

As theories of working-class formation take a historicist or constructivist conception of class and stress political, ideological and cultural factors in constituting class-consciousness and identity, there are good reasons for considering communication and culture to be a central entry

⁷⁴ William H Sewell, "Artisans, Factory Workers, and the Formation of the French Working Class, 1789-1848," in *Working-class Formation: Nineteenth-Century Patterns in Western Europe and the United States*, ed. Ira Katznelson and Aristide R. Zolberg, 64 (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1986).

⁷⁵ Ira Katznelson, "Working-Class Formation: Constructing Cases and Comparisons," in *Working-class Formation: Nineteenth-Century Patterns in Western Europe and the United States*, ed. Ira Katznelson and Aristide R. Zolberg, 16 (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1986).

⁷⁶ Goran Therborn, "Why Some Classes Are More Successful than Others," *New Left Review* 138 (1983): 39.

point for comprehending working-class formation. As communication occupies the realm of culture, meaning and subjectivity, it is necessary to integrate analysis of modes of communication and cultural expressions into a more general theory of working-class formation in labour studies from a sociological perspective. This integration is relevant for a “formational approach” to class, as taken by political economists of communication considering class as “an active process of social formation that makes use of, and is constrained by, the resources available in the class structure.”⁷⁷ Mosco argues, there is mutual constitution between communication and society - whereas communication is socially constructed and determined by the structure of social relations, communication practices construct society.

Therefore, what distinguishes a formational approach to class from the causal argument of an objective class structure is its emphasis on the mutual constitution of structure and agency, a landmark turning point for perceiving class formation from the centrality of structure to a locus of agency:

First, reversing the causal primacy of objective class structure leading to subjective class agency, a formational approach to class draws on the concept of structuration to understand how human agents, acting through the resources available in the class structure, including communication and culture, produce and reproduce class structure.

Second, instead of concentrating on categories, structures and social reproduction, we can understand social class as both a central material force in social life and the product of social action carried out by people on all sides of class relations.

Third, subaltern classes can build their own means of communication and cultural expressions to develop popular hegemony, countering the hegemony of the ruling classes. In

⁷⁷ Mosco, *Political Economy*, 229.

sum, a class formational approach stresses the process of constituting classes through the mutual formation of social structures, communication practices and culture, and the agency of individuals who act as social beings in social relationships. As Mosco argues, classes can constitute themselves through constraining rules and enabling resources available in class structure.⁷⁸

An Autonomist Marxist Approach to Working Class Formation

While political economists of communication take a formational approach to class by examining labour's communication and cultural practices, they also sometimes reference another branch of the Marxian tradition – autonomist Marxism, seeing new forms of knowledge and communication as potential resources of anti-capitalist struggle, through which the working class is constituted.⁷⁹

Autonomist Marxism, referred to in Italian as *operaismo* (which translates literally as “workerism”), first appeared in Italy in the early 1960s. The early autonomism grew from automotive workers in Turin who were not satisfied with their union, which had reached an agreement with Fiat. Because the workers were disillusioned with their organised representation and initiated riots by themselves, a theory of self-organised labour representation outside the scope of traditional representatives such as trade union developed.⁸⁰ However, “autonomist Marxism” has gone beyond the Italian context and many tributaries have developed during its international diffusion since 1979. While the original thread recognizes the capacity of varied strata of labour to self organize, independent of centralized organizational structures, such as

⁷⁸ Ibid., 230.

⁷⁹ Dyer-Witheford, *Cyber-Marx*.

⁸⁰ Sylvere Lotringer and Christian Marazzi (eds.), *Autonomia: Post-Political Politics* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2007); Steve Wright, *Storming Heaven: Class Composition and Struggle in Italian Autonomist Marxism* (London: Pluto Press, 2002).

trade unions, political parties, or state institutions, the term autonomist Marxism implies something broader than operaismo and its aftermath. As Harry Cleaver, the first who coined the term, describes,

What gives meaning to the concept of ‘autonomist Marxism’ as a particular tradition is the fact that we can identify, within the larger Marxist tradition, a variety of movements, politics and thinkers who have emphasized the autonomous power of workers – autonomous from capital, from their official organizations (e.g. the trade unions, the political parties) and, indeed, the power of particular groups of workers to act autonomously from other groups (e.g. women from men). By ‘autonomy’, I mean the ability of workers to define their own interests and to struggle for them – to go beyond mere reaction to exploitation, or to self-defined ‘leadership’ and to take the offensive in ways that shape the class struggle and define the future.⁸¹

Therefore, autonomist Marxism has expanded to see autonomy as that from the official leaderships of the trade unions and political parties and from capital as well. While working class struggle is against capital, it gives emphasis to the self-organization of the working class and to opposition to statist conceptions of socialism and communism. In relation to capital, autonomist Marxist theorists and activists use the expression “working class composition” to refer to the specific forms of social organization of the working class. Unlike in some traditional Marxist contexts, the “working class” is no longer an object or a classification, rather it is always in process of becoming and exists in a context of struggle. It is continually changing and in the process of remaking itself and being remade. History and shifting forms of social organization therefore become crucial to grasping working class experience and struggle. Capitalists attempt to “decompose” the capacities and strengths of working class composition by exacerbating and re-organizing internal divisions in the working class, ripping apart sources of working class and oppressed people’s power, fragmenting groups and struggles and extending social surveillance.⁸² In turn, these attempts to decompose working class create new conditions for the possible re-composition of working class struggle and power. For autonomist Marxism, the continuing

⁸¹ Massimo De Angelis, An Interview with Harry Cleaver, 1993, <http://www.geocities.com/CapitolHill/3843/cleaver.html>.

⁸² Dyer-Witford, *Cyber-Marx*.

process of composition, decomposition, and re-composition of the working class constitutes a “cycle of struggle.”⁸³ These cycles of struggle involve what Negri analyses as the antagonism between *communication* and *information*. On the one hand, the labour force is capable of composing the working class through communication, delivered and distributed by capital in technological advances, which are transverse and dialogic; on the other hand, capital attempts to increase its powers of control by appropriating the communicative capacity of the labour force and producing information, which is centralized, vertical, and hierarchic.⁸⁴

Drawing on Antonio Negri, Michael Hardt, Paolo Virno, and others of the autonomist Marxist tradition, Dyer-Witheford develops the Marxist concepts of “general intellect” and “immaterial labour” to examine the historical trajectory, the emergent forms of counter-power against high technology, globalized capital and possible future of insurgencies in information capitalism. Human subjectivity and “immaterial labour,” other than the accumulation of fixed capital in machinery, are vital to determine a post-Fordist global capitalism. Capital can appropriate the communicative capacities of an intellectual and inventive labour force (immaterial labour and socialized worker) to create knowledge and information, necessary for capitalist domination. In turn, the new forms of knowledge and communication constitute potential resources for working class struggle, in which “the socialised worker has come to develop the *critique of exploitation* by means of the *critique of communication*.”⁸⁵ Therefore, the conflicts between information and communication features working class struggle in the information age, including that over the collective organization of work in production and the

⁸³ Ibid., 81.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 83-87.

⁸⁵ Dyer-Witheford, *Cyber-Marx*, 86; “Capital & Class as ‘Autonomist Marxism and the Information Society’,” *Issue* no. 52 (1994).

expansion of alternative media activism against the corporate control of news and imagery as well.

Clearly, as Gary Kinsman argues, “[A]utonomist Marxism has shown how differing forms of organization and consciousness emerge in relation to different forms of working class composition and different cycles and circulation of struggles. These forms of organization are historically and socially specific.”⁸⁶ In the Chinese context, the Chinese Communist Party claims to be a vanguard party composed of and representing the interests of the Chinese working class. Despite the revolutionary and socialist legacies, however, the Chinese working class has suffered the most from oppression and exploitation in China’s post-socialist transformation. Still claiming to rule in the name of the Chinese workers, the Party state has successfully suppressed their protests and working class communicative and self-organizing activities. China’s mainstream media, either by imposing censorship or by articulating hegemonic neoliberal discourses, often excludes coverage of worker unrest. As Zhao and Duffy observe, nascent autonomous labour communication networks, media and organizational structures have been under harsh repression. These communication blockages have helped pre-empt the development of a collective identity that might recompose China’s stratified working people as a political subject.⁸⁷

Among many branches in autonomist Marxism, therefore, the original thread with emphasis on the self-activity of the working class has informed this dissertation in particular. Communication and cultural domain has become the vital site of contestation in China. It is the same important for Chinese workers to struggle for autonomous communicative and cultural spaces as to go ahead with their material struggles. The original thread of autonomist Marxism

⁸⁶ This is quoted from Gary Kinsman in a presentation, titled “The Politics of Revolution: Learning from Autonomist Marxism,” at a public forum organized by Sudbury [UK] Autonomy & Solidarity in Feb. 2004. Accessible at <http://www.elkilombo.org/the-politics-of-revolution-learning-from-autonomist-marxism/>.

⁸⁷ Zhao and Duffy, Short-Circuited.

can allow us to rethink and recreate a politics of labour in China's post-socialist transformation to re-compose the Chinese workers' subjectivity as a social class that builds on the revolutionary and socialist legacies. Crucial to this is the building of a proletarian public sphere where the Chinese workers can begin to experience and live a sense of what a world defined by working class culture and communication, without the domination of capital and without forms of oppression from the authoritarian and neoliberal-driven Chinese state.

A Theoretical Approach to a “Proletarian Public Sphere”

In Chinese studies, much current scholarship draws on Habermasian conception of the public sphere to examine market reforms, civil society and democratization, and to focus on the expansion of the private sector and growth of a cosmopolitan middle class. However, the three decades of market reforms have polarized Chinese society in which “a capitalist class, an old middle class, and a new middle class have emerged side by side with poor peasantry and urban workers.”⁸⁸ While the former has been a focal point for scholars to observe civil organizations, which have the potential for engaging in democratic movements, scholars often ignore and exclude the latter from their concerns and consideration. After synthesizing critiques of Habermasian conception of public sphere, I will introduce Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge's conception of “proletarian public sphere”⁸⁹ and employ it as a conceptual framework for accounting for the role of the working masses in Chinese society, working class struggle and the implications for social change.

⁸⁸ Alvin Y. So, “The Changing Pattern of Class and Class Conflict in China,” *Journal of Contemporary Asia* Vol.33 No.3 (2003): 374.

⁸⁹ Oskar Negt and Alexander Negt, *Public Sphere and Experience: Toward an Analysis of the Bourgeois and Proletarian Public Sphere*, foreword by Miriam Hansen; translated by Peter Labanyi, Jamie Owen Daniel, and Assenka Oksiloff, 163 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993)

Habermas' original formulation of the public sphere has highlighted its rational and cognitive character. The public sphere is an arena that exists outside the institutions of the state and mediates between society and the state, in which a range of views and opinions can form in relation to matters of public concern. Habermas' ideal-typical conception of the public sphere is both an institutional mechanism for rationalizing political domination by rendering the state accountable to the citizenry and an ideal of unrestricted rational discussion of public matters through guaranteed universal access to the public sphere for all citizens.⁹⁰

Inheriting from an earlier stage of historical development in modern Europe, Habermas' version of "bourgeois public spheres" considers public spheres constituted by bourgeois as counterweights to absolutist states. In her cogent overview of Habermas, Nancy Fraser points to the exclusionary nature of the "bourgeois public sphere" at three levels. First, the "private persons" who assembled to constitute the publics and discuss matters of "public concern" or "common interests" were from "bourgeois society." The public sphere aimed to mediate between society and the state by holding the state accountable to society via publicity. Here, the generalized "bourgeois society" was equal to be "the public" and the "general interest" of "bourgeois society" was the same as "public concern" or "common interest."⁹¹

Second, as the public sphere was both an institutional mechanism for rationalizing political domination by the state to be accountable to the citizenry and an ideal of unrestricted rational discussion of public matters, private interests were inaccessible to this domain. The "general interest" of "bourgeois society" had the equation with the "public interest," and the interests of multiple groups, other than bourgeois society, still meant "private interests." In this

⁹⁰ Craig Calhoun (ed.), *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, 437 (Cambridge Mass.: MIT Press, 1992).

⁹¹ Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," in *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, ed. Craig Calhoun, 109-142 (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992).

way, the public sphere, the domain supposed to be open to all citizens who may assemble and unite freely, and express and publicize their opinions freely, could thus exclude certain categories of people.

Third, access to the public sphere by non-bourgeois strata had eroded the clear separation of society and state, and rendered it impracticable to realize the full utopian potential of the bourgeois conception of the public sphere, for Habermas, underpinning a form of public discussion that excluded “private interests.” With society polarized by class struggle, the public fragmented into a mass of competing interest groups. This would displace reasoned public debate about the common good.

Overall, as Fraser argues, Habermas’ account “idealized the liberal public sphere” even though “the official public sphere rested on, indeed was importantly constituted by, a number of significant exclusions,” such as race, gender, property ownership.⁹² As such, the public sphere was a way for white, male bourgeois to see themselves as “a universal class,” preparing to “assert their fitness to govern.”⁹³ Actually, they had succeeded in making the norms of the public sphere eventually become “hegemonic, sometimes imposed on, sometimes embraced by, broader segments of society.” Therefore, “[A] discourse of publicity touting accessibility, rationality, and the suspension of status hierarchies is itself deployed as a strategy of distinction.”⁹⁴

Therefore, it is inadequate to define the emergence of the bourgeois public solely by the struggle against absolutism and traditional authority. At the same time, it is the institutional vehicle for popular containment through rule based on consent.⁹⁵ The bourgeois public sphere

⁹² Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere,” 114-15.

⁹³ Ibid., 114.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 115.

⁹⁵ Zhao, *Communication in China*.

has its conflicts with other counter-publics, such as nationalist publics, popular peasant publics, elite women's publics, and working-class publics. What Fraser calls "the subaltern counter-publics" has contested the exclusionary norms of the bourgeois public sphere from the very beginning.

In explicit opposition to Habermas' conception of the public sphere, resting on a class-biased notion of publicity, Negt and Kluge introduce the concept of a proletarian public sphere to differentiate a counter-public sphere from the bourgeois public sphere, which has increasingly become part of the capitalist production process. Considering the transformation of the capitalist production process and its far-reaching impact on concrete human experience, Negt and Kluge reformulate the "public sphere" as the central category, which organizes human experience, mediating between the changing forms of capitalist production on the one hand, and the cultural organization of human experience on the other.⁹⁶ By juxtaposing the concepts "public sphere" and "experience," Negt and Kluge suggest the consideration of social relationships go beyond their historically institutionalized manifestation. If Habermas' conception was concerned with the investigation of full-blown institutionalized forms of the bourgeois public sphere, Negt and Kluge attempt to define the public sphere as a category relating to the totality of society, a historically developing form of the mediation between the cultural organization of human experience and the development of capitalist production. This conceptual framework of the public sphere has laid the groundwork for investigating and analyzing the potential emergence of a proletarian public sphere where the working class can organize their real needs into politically relevant forms of consciousness and activity. The proletarian public sphere could potentially

⁹⁶ E Knodler-Bunte, "The Proletarian Public Sphere and Political Organization: An Analysis Of Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge's *The Public Sphere and Experience*," *New German Critique* 4 (Winter 1975): 51-75.

oppose the organized interests of the bourgeois public sphere through its organization of human needs and interests among the working masses.

Negt and Kluge's conception is distinct from Habermas in that it represents the historical counter-concept to the bourgeois public sphere and a fundamentally new structure in the public organization of experience. As Knodler-Bunte comments, "[B]y expanding their conception of the public sphere to include the class basis in which experience is molded and appropriated, Negt and Kluge refuse to permit the reduction of their investigation to mere institutional or intellectual history."⁹⁷ Instead, they focus on the general horizon of social experience, which enables individuals to formulate interpretations of social reality. Negt and Kluge examine the rudimentary forms of the proletarian public sphere by citing the English working class' attempt to form independent communication media in the early 19th century, the concept "self-expression of the masses" proposed by Lenin as opposed to party propaganda, and May 1968 in France. For Negt and Kluge, the proletarian public sphere designates the contradictory and non-linear process of the potential formation of class-consciousness. They understand the proletarian public sphere as "nothing other than the form in which the proletarian interest itself develops."⁹⁸

By reformulating the public sphere as organizing human experience, Negt and Kluge are among the pioneers opening up the possibility for imagining what Fraser calls a "post-bourgeois" public sphere based on the transcendence of economic inequality.⁹⁹ As Zhao argues, a "post-bourgeois" public sphere should correct the rationalism and cognitivism of most theorizing about

⁹⁷ Ibid., 54.

⁹⁸ Oskar Negt and Alexander Negt, *Public Sphere and Experience: Toward an Analysis of the Bourgeois and Proletarian Public Sphere*, foreword by Miriam Hansen; translated by Peter Labanyi, Jamie Owen Daniel, and Assenka Oksiloff, 163 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).

⁹⁹ Fraser, "Rethinking Public Sphere".

Habermas' notion of the public sphere and instead, give attention to the affective dimensions.¹⁰⁰ According to Schlesinger, what is important in understanding the public sphere is to “recognize the likely importance of the affective dimensions of collective belongings and social cohesion.”¹⁰¹ For Schlesinger, Habermasian rationalism does not “provide a convincing framework for understanding what makes collectives cohere. It quite underestimates the undoubted power of non-rationalistic elements of political and national culture that confers a wider, non-deliberative sense of solidarity and belonging.”¹⁰² Therefore, as Zhao argues, a “less rationalist” and a “more abstract” understanding of the public sphere enables us to understand it as a form of life and thus we can also focus on the moral and cultural dimensions of contemporary social transformation, other than solely on economic and political dimensions.¹⁰³

A Formational Approach to the Working Class Subjectivity in Post-Socialist Transformation

Negt and Kluge's notion of proletarian public sphere provides a conceptual framework for accounting for concrete forms of the public sphere with Chinese workers as counter-bourgeois publics. In light of China's class-divided society, we must move beyond Habermas' conception of “the public sphere” to account for the transformation of Chinese society, polarized between what Cheek calls “the winners” - the emerging middle class and capitalist class, and

¹⁰⁰ Yuezhi Zhao, “Rethinking Chinese Media Studies: History, Political Economy, and Culture,” in *Internationalizing Media Studies*, ed. Daya Kishan Thussu, 187 (London and New York: Routledge, 2009).

¹⁰¹ Philip Schlesinger (1999). “Changing Spaces of Political Communication: The Case of the European Union,” *Political Communication*, 16(3): 270, quoted in Zhao, *Rethinking Chinese Media Studies*, 187.

¹⁰² Philip Schlesinger, “From Cultural Defense to Political Culture: the European Union, the Media and Collective Identity,” *Media, Culture and Society* 19(1997), 387.

¹⁰³ Zhao, *Communication in China*, 187.

“the losers” - the aggrieved urban and rural migrant workers who are marginalized in post-Mao market reforms.¹⁰⁴

Through comparative analyses of Chinese elite-driven media and liberal intellectuals’ distinct reactions to the particular cases of two migrant workers, Zhao points to the emergence of contested public spheres in class-polarized Chinese society.¹⁰⁵ The first case involves Sun Zhigang, a university graduate, gaining urban citizenship through white-collar employment, detained and beaten to death by police. The innocent death of Sun caused a national sensation in the media outlets and the Internet across the whole country and eventually mobilized a crusade, identified with by urban citizens and liberal intellectuals, for civil rights in terms of personal freedom and security against arbitrary state and administrative power.

The second case concerns the politicization of the criminal case of Wang Binyu, a rural migrant worker, executed by the state for killing four people after failing to get his unpaid salary. While Internet-based popular opinion overwhelmingly expressed its sympathy with Wang and understood his brutal action as an unbearable reaction to the social injustice Wang and millions of rural migrant workers were suffering, advocates of liberties and civil rights against arbitrary government power chose to justify the pro-capitalist Chinese state’s execution of Wang. Even before Sun’s tragedy, many rural migrant workers have been tortured, forced to labour and even beaten to death under the same detention system. Few media outlets and urban citizens have ever given attention to their ordeals and destiny. Clearly, the liberal and citizenship crusade has discriminated against the economic and social rights of Chinese lower classes. As Zhao (2008) argues, this stark contrast illustrates the class nature of the liberal outcry for constitutional governance and civil rights.

¹⁰⁴ Tim Cheek, *Living With Reform: China Since 1989*, 103-110 (Nova Scotia: Fernwood Publisher 2006).

¹⁰⁵ Zhao, *Communication in China*.

Similarly, Zhao's analysis of a blog of "Workers of Chongqing 3403 Factory" suggests that the Chinese mainstream media, either the party media or the market-oriented media, are not prepared to safeguard "the class interests of Chinese workers as potential owners of the means of production."¹⁰⁶ Rather, functioning as the mouthpiece of either government officials or corporate managers, the mainstream media communicate the neo-liberal reform agenda. Zhao makes a contrast between liberal intellectual and mainstream media representation of the three cases, bringing forth the class nature of China's budding public sphere. Zhao argues, in class-natured public sphere, "an individual-based civil rights appeal" is favored over "a class-based appeal on workers' minimum economic right to be paid" or "a class-based appeal concerning the fundamental right of the different economic classes in controlling the means of production."¹⁰⁷

In examining the subjectivities and identities of Chinese workers in post-Mao reforms, authors from a sociological perspective primarily take it for granted that Chinese workers' resistance and labour movements develop in a liberal and civil rights-oriented direction. However, in terms of political subjectivity, Chinese workers are increasingly buying the traditional Maoist notion of the masses constituted by "workers, the peasantry, the intelligentsia and the national bourgeoisie whose interests were harmonious with each other and also with the state."¹⁰⁸ Instead of asserting autonomy vis-à-vis the state, as Zhao argues, many ordinary people demand that the Party-state "(re)assume the social redistribution, social protection, and public welfare provision functions relinquished during an era of unprecedented market expansion."¹⁰⁹ Although resistant workers have upgraded their consciousness of social rights, it is

¹⁰⁶ Zhao, *Communication in China*, 313.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 313.

¹⁰⁸ Chin Kuan Lee, *Made In China: Labor as a Political Force?* Panel Statement, Mansfield Conference, The University of Montana, Missoula, 18-20 April, 2004, cited in Zhao, *Neo-liberal Strategies, Socialist Legacies*, 34.

¹⁰⁹ Zhao, "Neo-liberal Strategies, Socialist Legacies," 33.

hard to assert that they have construed themselves completely as rights-bearing subjects in a liberal civil society.¹¹⁰ Instead of being antithetical to the state, they are making political claims for state protection.

The liberal empiricist observation of Chinese workers' subjectivity is misleading because of China's undemocratic communication system and the government censorship of media. Although it is difficult to assert that Chinese workers' political subjectivities have the potential of evolving towards a revolutionary class, it is simplistic to reduce the Chinese labour movement either to the political subjectivity of citizenry as the tendency toward trade unionism in a liberal civil society. As Zhao and Rob Duffy argue, the Chinese communication system, monopolized by political, economic and cultural elite, offers less chance for Chinese workers to articulate themselves.¹¹¹ The obscuring of the industrial workers' struggle is likely to lead to mistaken interpretation of the Chinese labour movement by neglecting Chinese workers' counter-hegemonic communicative practice, which is vital to the re-composition of the working class and the formation of its collective subjectivity.

Theorizing the transition to capitalism and class formation in post-communist Central Europe, Gil Eyal, Ivan Szelenyi and Eleanor Townsley argue, "Post-communist capitalism is being promoted by a broadly defined intelligentsia which is committed to the cause of bourgeois society and capitalist economic institutions."¹¹² Similar to "making capitalism without capitalists" in post-communist Central Europe, the Chinese technocratic-intellectual elites have played a key role in switching post-Mao China into the path of capitalist development by manufacturing consensus over the market economy and establishing the discursive hegemony of

¹¹⁰ Zhao, "Neo-liberal Strategies, Socialist Legacies"; Perry, "Farewell to Revolution".

¹¹¹ Zhao and Duffy, *Short-Circuited*, 243.

¹¹² Gil Eyal, Ivan Szelenyi and Eleanor Townsley, *Making Capitalism without Capitalists: Class Formation and Elite Struggles in Post-Communist Central Europe*, 1 (Verso, 1998).

capitalist-oriented modernization in the cultural and ideological front. Yet, unlike the Western European Countries and the United States in the 19th century, China is unique with its revolutionary and socialist past through which Chinese workers have had their historical memory of class subjectivity. As such, China's post-socialist transition began with a cultural and ideological transformation. The process carries on with communication practices decomposing the Chinese workers' class-consciousness acquired during Maoist socialism and the Cultural Revolution. In reconstituting the identity of the Chinese working class to pave the way for capitalist development, post-Mao China has displaced class discourse and re-defined Chinese socialism.¹¹³ The dominant and repressive communication regime has legitimized the wider social, economic and cultural realities of post-Mao China, in which the Chinese working class is suffering from exploitation and suppression.

Nevertheless, media and communication domination should not be overemphasized to the extent that the power of the Chinese workers' resistance is underestimated. As Golding and Murdoch argue, the processes of incorporation and legitimation – co-opting disadvantaged people into the existing social order through dominant communication systems and presenting the prevailing structure of advantage and inequality as natural, are by no means smooth. They insist, “Gaps and contradictions are constantly appearing between what is supposed to be happening and what is actually taking place, between what has been promised and what has been delivered. Into these cracks and fissures, flow currents of criticism and movements of

¹¹³ Guoxin Xing, “Hu Jintao's Political Thinking,” 220.

contestation.”¹¹⁴ Similarly, in her critiques of theories of resistance in communication and media studies, Kumar argues that media domination should not be overemphasized.¹¹⁵

It is important to look at Chinese workers’ material economic struggles in theorizing workers’ resistance and collective agency of the working class. As Kumar insists, “The struggle to create a public sphere must be located within the larger struggle against the structures of oppression and exploitation.”¹¹⁶ In the Chinese context, however, the working class encounters dual dominations – while Chinese workers are exploited and oppressed during capitalist-oriented development, they are suppressed at the same time by the disciplinary ideological, communicative and cultural regimes of the Party-state still claiming to the vanguard of the working class. As such, Chinese workers have been not only dynamic in engaging in material struggles against oppression and exploitation, it is also vital for them to counter the symbolic violence from the state and capital logic in their resistance. Therefore, it is the same significant to give attention to Chinese workers’ autonomous communication and cultural practices and their struggles for a proletarian public sphere.

According to classical working-class formation theory, capitalist economic development gives rise to modern workers, who use class as “a way of organizing, thinking about, and acting on society.”¹¹⁷ Drawing on this structure-centered approach to the formation of the working class, China labour studies in sociology tend to perceive the re-making of the Chinese working class in post-Mao reforms along the line of “labour” identity and industrial citizenry and the labour movements along trade unionism.

¹¹⁴ Peter Golding and Graham Murdoch, “Theories of Communication and Theories of Society,” *Communication Research* 5, no.3 (July 1978):353, cited in Yuezhi Zhao, *Communication in China: Political Economy, Power and Conflict*, 8 (Rowan and Littlefield Publishers, Inc, 2008).

¹¹⁵ Deepa Kumar, *Outside the Box*.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 171.

¹¹⁷ Katznelson, “Working Class Formation,” 3.

This unilinear perspective is debatable in the light of a formational approach to the working class subjectivities because the latter will point to an alternative tendency. Distinct from the Western context, class-consciousness and the working class formation in Chinese political practice, as Wang Hui argues, is “not merely a structural category centred on the nature of property ownership or relation to the means of production.” Rather, it is “a political concept based on the revolutionary party’s appeal for mobilization and self-renewal.”¹¹⁸ Due to the historical memory of Communist revolution and Maoist socialism, understanding the formation of Chinese working class in post-socialist transformation must consider the legacy and give much attention to communication, culture and ideology, which has become the site of contestation in the constitution of Chinese working-class-consciousness and the potential for the emancipatory renewal of Chinese socialism.

Through class analysis of popular communication and cultural practices by Chinese workers, this dissertation focuses on Chinese workers’ efforts to re-build working class culture and communication for constituting popular hegemony and their own public sphere in post-socialist China. However, this dissertation does not intend to ascertain the future direction of the working class identity and subjectivity amidst the contending tendencies. Instead, the purpose is to examine the extent to which post-socialist transformation in China broadly, and the working class subjectivity/identity and labour movements in particular, are still open-ended processes involving hegemonic struggles between contending ideologies that would mediate the trajectories of labor politics and labour movements.

¹¹⁸ Hui Wang, “Depoliticized Politics: From East to West,” *New Left Review* 41 (September-October 2006): 36.

CHAPTER TWO

THE REVOLUTIONARY LEGACY AND WORKERS’ RADICALISM IN CHINA: CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND AND METHODOLICAL TRAITS

Class formation in China is distinct from that of the Western industrial societies.

Capitalism had been underdeveloped before the Communist Revolution in 1949. Since the Communist Party took power, new China has experienced different patterns of classes and class conflict during the Maoist era (1949-1978) and in the post-1978 market reforms. Through the socialist transformation in the 1950s and the 1960s, Mao had dissolved the economic foundation of class and set up a statist society. To prevent the restoration of capitalism, Mao had resorted to “classes” and “class struggles” to launch successive political campaigns to purge what he called “capitalist roaders” in the bureaucratic establishments and intellectual circles and educate the Chinese people, particularly the working class, with the socialist ideal. The Maoist era had constructed class-consciousness and subjectivity of the Chinese working class along with revolutionary socialist consciousness. Post-1978 market reforms have rebuilt the economic foundation of classes and as such, class conflict has intensified. As Alvin Y. So argues, however, post-Mao is “a class-divided society embedded in a strong Leninist party-state, thus social classes and class conflict are mediated through the state and shaped by the state.”¹¹⁹ On the one hand, therefore, post-Mao capitalist development will influence the remaking of the working class and the formation of class-consciousness within capitalist production relations under market reforms. On the other hand, the revolutionary legacies and Maoist socialist practices,

¹¹⁹ So, “The Changing Pattern of Classes,” 367.

which are still part of the Leninist party state legitimacy, would re-work the re-composition of subjectivity of segments of the working class. Tensions, contradictions and contestation are thus the defining features of the remaking of the Chinese working class, which has different and even contending segments. As such, my methodological traits will clarify and specify the segmented groups of the Chinese workers I have focused on. My findings do not represent the essential understanding of the whole picture about the making of the Chinese working class in post-Mao capitalist development, but a component piece of the landscape of working class struggles in post-Mao “capitalism with Chinese characteristics.”

From New Democratic Revolution to Socialist Revolution: The Chinese Revolution And Mao Zedong’s Class Analysis

Western authors have often referred Mao’s thought as “Maoism.” The Chinese themselves often use the term “Mao Zedong Thought,” referring to practical ideology innovated by Mao drawing on Marxism-Leninism. As the official Chinese definition goes, it is the “application of the universal truths of Marxism-Leninism to the concrete practice of the Chinese socialist revolution and construction.” In other words, Mao Zedong Thought is the selective application of Marxism-Leninism to the concrete practice of the Chinese revolution and socialist construction. Class analysis and class struggles had been significant component elements of Mao Zedong Thought.

Mao wrote an article in 1926, titled “Analysis of the Classes in Chinese Society,” to categorize Chinese society into five major classes: the landlord and the comprador; the middle bourgeoisie; the petty bourgeoisie; the semi-proletariat; and the proletariat. The first category was the landlord and the comprador. According to Mao, they colluded with foreign imperial power. Mao considered them as the most hostile enemies of the Chinese Communist revolution.

The second category was what Mao called the middle bourgeoisie, which represented the capitalist relations of production in China. The middle bourgeoisie was nationalist as it was under the oppression of foreign capital and the warlords in China. It supported the revolutionary movement against imperialism and the warlords. However, as Mao argued, the class had an ambiguous attitude towards the revolution that had involved the militant Chinese proletariat and international proletariat.

Mao labeled the third category of class “the petty bourgeoisie,” including the owner-peasants, the master handicraftsmen, lower-level intellectuals, such as students, primary and secondary school teachers, lower government functionaries, office clerks, small lawyers, and small traders. According to Mao, it belonged to the lower middle-class, vulnerable to the uncertainty of economy dominated by foreign capital and the warlords in China, and surviving on the edge of sinking into the proletariat class.

Mao called the fourth category the semi-proletariat, including the overwhelming majority of the semi-owner peasants, the poor peasants, the small handicraftsmen, the shop assistants and the pedlars. In the countryside, semi-owner peasants and poor peasants constituted a very large part of the rural masses.

For Mao, the last but the most important category was the proletariat. Although, at that time, there were only two million industrial workers in China, which was economically backward, Mao recognized that the industrial proletariat represents China’s new productive forces. Mao considered them as the most progressive class in modern China and the leading force in the revolution.¹²⁰

¹²⁰ Mao Zedong, *Analysis of the Classes in Chinese Society*, *Selected Works of Mao Zedong* Volume 1, http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-1/mswv1_1.htm.

Although Mao acknowledged communist revolutionary ideology, which is based on the concept of a workers revolution, he recognized the crucial role of peasantry in the communist revolutionary movement in an agrarian society like China. Mao's revolution ended up in appealing to peasant grievances and creating the revolutionary bases in rural areas. Contrary to the October Revolution in Russia, the Chinese revolution had followed what Mao called the path of "encircling the cities from the rural areas and then capturing them." Mao had relied on the poor peasants as the driving force of the Chinese revolution. However, Mao developed a peasant revolution under the guidance of a proletarian worldview and the leadership of the CCP – a highly disciplined and professional Leninist communist party.¹²¹

The victory of Mao's peasant revolution founded the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949. Mao developed the theory of New Democracy to define the nature of the Chinese revolution. According to Mao, the Chinese revolution from 1911 to 1949 had aimed to overthrow feudalism and achieve China's national independence from colonialism. Consistent with his class analysis in the 1920s, Mao viewed the Chinese revolution as the New Democratic Revolution involving the coalition of the "Bloc of Four Social Classes" - proletarian workers, peasants, the petty bourgeoisie (small business owners), and the nationally-based capitalists – against the imperial powers, the landlord class and the comprador class in China. The New Democratic Revolution is distinct from the Sun Yatsen-led bourgeois revolution in that its ultimate goal is leading to socialist and communist revolution in China. The Maoist conception of the Chinese revolution envisioned a two-stage revolution for China, the New Democratic stage followed by the road to full-blown socialism and ultimately, communism. As Mao wrote,

¹²¹ Stuart R. Schram, ed., *Mao's Road to Power: Revolutionary Writings 1912-1949* Vol VII *New Democracy, 1939-1941* (Armonk, NY: Sharpe, 2005). Translation of the full text, based on 1943 edition.

Although such a revolution in a colonial and semi-colonial country is still fundamentally bourgeois-democratic in its social character during its first stage or first step, and although its objective mission is to clear the path for the development of capitalism, it is no longer a revolution of the old type led by the bourgeoisie with the aim of establishing a capitalist society and a state under bourgeois dictatorship. It belongs to the new type of revolution led by the proletariat with the aim, in the first stage, of establishing a new-democratic society and a state under the joint dictatorship of all the revolutionary classes.¹²²

The stars on the national flag of PRC embodies the bloc of classes reflecting the principles of New Democracy - the largest star to represent the Communist Party of China's leadership, surrounded by four smaller stars symbolizing the Bloc of Four Classes. However, the New Democratic Revolution was an "intermediate stage," setting a stepping-stone to socialism. During the New Democratic Revolution, China had taken the path of class collaborationism – allowing private ownerships by peasants, petite bourgeois and nationalist capitalists. However, after 1953, China began to develop Maoist socialism through a series of programs, including the Transition to Socialism (1953-1957), the Great Leap Forward (1958-1960), Readjustment and Recovery (1961-1965) and the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). Mao described Chinese socialism as "state-capitalism." In 1953, Chairman Mao wrote:

The present-day capitalist economy in China is a capitalist economy which for the most part is under the control of the People's Government and which is linked with the state-owned socialist economy in various forms and supervised by the workers. It is not an ordinary but a particular kind of capitalist economy, namely, a state-capitalist economy of a new type. It exists not chiefly to make profits for the capitalists but to meet the needs of the people and the state. True, a share of the profits produced by the workers goes to the capitalists, but that is only a small part, about one quarter, of the total. The remaining three quarters are produced for the workers (in the form of the welfare fund), for the state (in the form of income tax) and for expanding productive capacity (a small part of which produces profits for the capitalists). Therefore, this state-capitalist economy of a new type takes on a socialist character to a very great extent and benefits the workers and the state.¹²³

Mao had envisioned a three-stage theory about the whole process of the Chinese revolution. If the New Democratic Revolution was a prerequisite stage, the next stage was to

¹²² Mao Zedong, "On New Democracy," January 1940, *Selected Works*, Official PRC translation. http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-2/mswv2_26.htm.

¹²³ Mao Zedong, "On State Capitalism," July 9, 1953, in *Selected Works of Mao Zedong*, 22 (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1977, Vol. V).

transform China into socialism, and ultimately move on communism. Accordingly, Mao developed his class analysis further and attempted to constitute socialist ideology to push forward socialist revolution in China. For Mao, to achieve socialism, China must enforce the dictatorship of the proletariat. Replacing class collaborationism in the New Democracy, Mao advanced his theory of class struggle for achieving socialist revolution and the ultimate goal of socialist construction in China - the creation of a stateless, classless and moneyless communist society. In 1962, Mao warned of “never forgetting class struggle.” Socialist transformation - the “establishment” of a socialist system through transformation of ownership of the means of production - had eliminated the system of exploitation and weakened the landlords and bourgeoisie.

However, Mao argued that individual members of the overthrown classes and the “new” classes arising within socialist society itself, all of them hostile to socialism, would attempt to restore capitalism in China. While the changing of the ownership system had removed the economic basis on which these exploiter classes were defined, Mao insisted the remnants from the former society remained. Mao further argued, “The bourgeoisie is a class which can be born anew.” Therefore, Mao asserted that there are still classes, class contradictions and class struggle in socialist society.¹²⁴ Subsequently, Mao developed the “theory of continuing the revolution under the dictatorship of the proletariat” by 1967. Mao had worried about the potential abandonment or reversal of socialist revolution in China, which would lead to the restoration of capitalism. He had kept exploring a theory of class struggle to ensure the continuation of socialist revolution, maintain and strengthen the dictatorship of the proletariat.¹²⁵ He finally waged the

¹²⁴ Graham Young, “Mao Zedong and the Class Struggle in Socialist Society,” *The Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs*, No.16 (July 1986): 41-80.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*

Cultural Revolution as a means for consolidating socialist revolution and preventing the restoration of capitalism in China. Mao insisted on relying on the working class, the poor and lower-middle peasants and the revolutionary masses. He mobilized them to counter what he called the “new bourgeois elements” and “capitalist roaders” who grew from the new middle class intellectuals and the ranks of Party and government officials and management of enterprises.

Mao’s theory of class struggle and class analysis in the context of socialist transformation in the 1950s and 1960s has often been dismissed as means for political campaigns and purges of political rivals. As So argues, the terms “classes” and “class struggles” used by the Maoists were outdated during the Mao era when the economic foundations of classes and relations of capitalist production had been dissolved.¹²⁶ However, Mao not only acknowledged the economic definition of class, but also understood classes in terms of politico-ideological agents.¹²⁷ On the one hand, Mao used the term “class-in-itself” to describe an economic class formation as yet unconscious of its existence as a class. A class in itself was a body of human agents occupying a particular location within a system of production relations. It was economically a class, but unaware of such an identity. In Mao’s works, he had made sense of classes as economic entities and defined them in terms of their placement in a configuration of production relations and distribution relations. As China had started socialist transition, this dismantled the economic foundation of exploitation and oppression between classes. For Mao, however, there were potential threats of abandoning or reversing socialist revolution and restoring capitalism in China. The class struggle between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie would be protracted during

¹²⁶ So, “The Changing Pattern of Classes”.

¹²⁷ Paul Healy, “Misreading Mao: On Class and Class Struggle,” *Journal of Contemporary Asia* Vol. 38, No. 4 (November 2008):535-559.

the entire socialist transition period.¹²⁸ For Mao, the class struggle would be salient in the superstructure. Despite his insistence on the economic designation of classes, therefore, Mao emphasized that classes emerge as combatants in superstructural conflict. Classes and class struggle would take political and ideological forms.¹²⁹ For Mao, the distinction between “class in itself” and “class for itself” could be denoted in the political and ideological development of a class.

As Schräm argued, Mao emphasised subjective, rather than economic, factors in the determination of class membership.¹³⁰ While classes are economically defined in orthodox Marxism in terms of their relationship to the means of production, Mao defined classes “ideologically and politically.”¹³¹ Mao’s conception of class is voluntarist in the sense that he thought about classes as politico-ideological categories in the period of socialist transition. Compared to Marxism defining class position in economic terms, Mao came to define it in superstructural terms, specifically on the basis of political behaviour.¹³² Mao believed that direct “moral transformation” would be the force to generate social change and the key to eliciting social change would be “the making of a new revolutionary soul.”¹³³ As Wakeman argues, for Mao, “[I]n modern China, socialist man did not determine his social self by his own labor; he was fashioned by internalizing noneconomic ideas imposed upon him by a personalistic state.”¹³⁴ With regard to the Chinese working class, therefore, awareness of class identity or consciousness

¹²⁸ Young, “Mao Zedong and the Class Struggle”.

¹²⁹ Healy, “Misreading Mao.”

¹³⁰ S Schräm, *The Political Thought of Mao Tse-tung* (New York: Praeger, 1977).

¹³¹ S Schräm, “Classes, Old and New, in Mao Zedong’s Thought, 1949-76,” in *Classes and Social Stratification in Post-Revolution China*, ed. James L. Watson, 29-56 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

¹³² Healy, “Misreading Mao.”

¹³³ Andrew G. Walder, “Marxism, Maoism and Social Change: A Re-examination of the ‘Voluntarism’ in Mao’s Strategy and Thought,” *Modern China* Vol.3, No.2 (April 1977): 145.

¹³⁴ F. Wakeman, *History and Will: Philosophical Perspectives of Mao Tse-tung’s Thought*, 28 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), cited in Walder, “Marxism, Maoism and Social Change,” 145.

had been raised through Maoist socialist ideology and politics. When I discuss class consciousness and subjectivity of the Chinese working class in this dissertation, I trace back to the Maoist definition of classes by reference to political and ideological factors.

“Two Line Struggle” and Subjectivity of Workers as Being “Masters”

Class-consciousness and subjectivity of the Chinese working class in the PRC have developed with Mao’s thesis on the “two line struggle” and class struggle under socialism, the continuing existence of the bourgeoisie and the necessity of pushing forward socialist revolution under conditions of proletarian dictatorship. Considering socialist construction in China after the New Democratic Revolution as a socialist revolution, Mao argued that it was necessary to regenerate class struggle and establish the dictatorship of the proletariat.¹³⁵ The class struggle had been primarily featured by what Mao called the “Two-Line Struggle” within the Chinese Communist Party itself – a “proletarian revolutionary line,” led by Mao and a “bourgeois reactionary line,” led by Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping.¹³⁶ While the former line upheld socialist revolution and construction, representing the interests of the proletariat, the latter one had an attempt to restore capitalism and represent interests and privileges of the bourgeoisie born anew in post-revolutionary China. As Dittmer argues, the struggle, which represented an ideological division within the Chinese leadership, had affected China thoroughly.¹³⁷ We have to

¹³⁵ In the Leninist theory, the dictatorship of the proletariat is qualitatively different from previously existing forms of the state, all of which had been a special force for suppressing the exploited classes in the interests of the exploiting classes. However, the proletarian state represented not a dictatorship of an exploiting minority, but rather a “dictatorship of the exploited class,” of “the majority over the minority,” embodying the interests of the proletariat. See *Long Live Leninism* (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1960); Paul Healy, “Mao and Classical Marxism,” PhD Thesis, Griffith University, 1987, cited in Healy, “Misreading Mao,” 551.

¹³⁶ Lowell Dittmer, “‘Line Struggle’ in Theory and Practice: The Origins of the Cultural Revolution Reconsidered,” *The China Quarterly* 72(1977): 675-712.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*

contextualize our understanding of class-consciousness and subjectivity of the Chinese working class being “masters” in what Mao formulated the “two-line struggle” paradigm.

As Dittmer argues, “line” struggle within the Party and class struggle in society are integrally connected. The “proletarian revolutionary line” was considered as the correct line. Following Marxism-Leninism-Maoism, this line is linked to a mass constituency of workers and peasants and must represent their interests. By contrast, the opposing line is viewed as a “bourgeois reactionary line,” linking to and representing the interests of a mass constituency among the bourgeoisie and the counter-revolutionary revisionist classes. The two-line struggle and class struggle are at the same time a struggle between two “roads” - socialist revolution and capitalist restoration in China.¹³⁸ As Dittmer analyses,

At stake are two different policy programmes whose purpose is to set guidelines for movement towards quite different types of regime: the proletariat aims to establish a dictatorship of the proletariat and move towards socialism, while the bourgeoisie wishes to subvert socialism and establish a bourgeois dictatorship. Not modern capitalism, to be sure, but rather pre-revolutionary Chinese feudal capitalism - the bourgeois line is regressive, “reactionary.”¹³⁹

As the PRC was established through Mao-led peasants’ revolution and the mobilization of workers, the “proletarian revolutionary line” insisted that the new revolutionary state would have to reflect demands and interests of the majority of masses and working people through socialist construction.¹⁴⁰ However, despite being a revolutionary organisation and the vanguard of the working class, the Party had turned into a bureaucratic organisation which sought its own power and interests and alienated itself from the ordinary working people.¹⁴¹ This tendency had concerned Mao, who saw the “bureaucratic class” as antagonistic to the workers and poor and lower-middle peasants. He wrote, “These people have already become, or are becoming,

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ Ibid., 680.

¹⁴⁰ Minqi Li, “Socialism, Capitalism, and Class Struggle: The Political Economy of Modern China,” *Economic & Political Weekly* (December 27), 2008.

¹⁴¹ Maurice Meisner, *Mao’s China and After: A History of the People’s Republic* (New York: The Free Press, 2003).

bourgeois elements sucking the blood of the workers.”¹⁴² In turn, Maoist socialism sought the higher form of ownership by the whole people. In theorizing the relationship between man and man in socialist enterprises, Mao claimed that the workers are “masters” and cadres should take the “mass line” to unite with the workers closely. He argued, “[i]f cadres do not discard haughty behaviour, do not become closely united with the workers, then the workers will frequently look on the factory not as their own but as the cadres.”¹⁴³ Mao warned that the failure of the “creative cooperation” between workers and cadres would have class implications, arguing that the workers would overthrow the cadres, who were divorced from the masses and production, as the bourgeoisie in “sharp class struggle.”¹⁴⁴

The constitution of class-consciousness and subjectivity of the working class had been featured by economic advantages, political privilege and ideological education during Mao’s socialist revolution.

First, the urban working class worked in public-owned enterprises during Mao’s unit socialism from the 1950s to the 1970s. These enterprises were owned either by different levels of governments or by government sponsored collective entities. All the workers enjoyed a broad scope of economic and social rights in employment, healthcare, education, housing and pensions.¹⁴⁵

Second, under Mao’s socialist revolution, the Chinese working class as a whole was also a politically privileged class. Since 1949, the Constitution has named the Chinese working class as the nation’s leading class. This was consistent with Mao’s analysis of classes in Chinese

¹⁴² Mao Zedong, *Mao Zedong Sixiang Wansui* (Long live Mao Zedong Thought, hereafter *Wansui* 1967) (n.p., April 1967), cited in Young, “Mao Zedong and Class Struggle in Socialism,” 38-39.

¹⁴³ Young, “Mao Zedong and Class Struggle,” 52.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁵ Li, “Socialism, Capitalism, and Class Struggle.”

society even before the victory of the Chinese revolution, as Mao stated that “though not very numerous, the industrial proletariat represents China’s new productive forces, is the most progressive class in modern China and has become the leading force in the revolutionary movement.”¹⁴⁶ During the Cultural Revolution, Mao declared, “The working class must exercise leadership in everything.”¹⁴⁷ The political status of the Chinese workers was by no means empty and hollow, merely in term of political slogans. This had been manifest in socialist industrial relations. Chinese workers were not “free” labour during the Mao era. Workers enjoyed advantages in becoming the Party members and candidates for promotion in the political hierarchy. They were crowned as the “master” of the state-owned enterprises. The state would permanently employ them without labour contracts.¹⁴⁸ Through his firsthand study of factories in China in the 1960s, Barry M. Richman drew impressive comparisons in terms of management practices. In a Soviet or American factory, a visitor can distinguish top managers from the workers by certain clues - salaries, dress, education, working and living conditions, and personal relations. However, there are fewer such clues in the Chinese factories.¹⁴⁹ Richman found that managers, technicians, or workers all ate together in the same canteen and there were no substantial differences in their housing conditions. In terms of the ratio between upper managers’ income and the average factory workers’ pay, the Chinese factories were less than two to one - the smallest in the world, compared to that as high as nine to one in a Soviet factory or numerous US industrial firms.¹⁵⁰ Not only did the worker-management relationship embody the

¹⁴⁶ Mao, *Analysis of the Classes*, 18.

¹⁴⁷ “Great Cultural Revolution in Progress: Workers’ Mao Tse-tung’s Thought Propaganda Teams in Colleges and Schools,” *Peking Review* Vol.11, No.43 (October 25, 1968):13-16.

¹⁴⁸ Qi Dongtao, “Chinese Working Class and Trade Unions in the Post-Mao Era: Progress and Predicament,” *International Journal of Chinese Affairs* Vol. 1, No. 2 (October 2010): 413-433.

¹⁴⁹ Barry M. Richman, *Industrial society in Communist China: a firsthand study of Chinese economic development and management, with significant comparisons with industry in India, the U.S.S.R., Japan, and the United States* (New York: Random House, 1969).

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

subjectivity of the Chinese working class - being “masters” of socialist enterprises. Workers had internalized the political status and articulated it by their participation in technical innovations and improvements of production. As Richman observed,

Hence if supplies do not arrive according to the plan, Chinese factory workers generally do not remain idle or unproductive – at least by the regime’s standards. In factories I visited where this type of situation arose, workers undertook some education or training during the period of delay in order to improve their skills; or they studied and discussed Chairman Mao’s works or, as was the case at the Tientsin Shoe and Wuhan Diesel Engine factories, they undertook various construction and modernisation activities; or they worked on developing new or improved processes and products.¹⁵¹

Mao’s opposition to party bureaucracy and his valorization of the Chinese working class identity and subjectivity as “masters” led to his advocacy of the “Angang Constitution” in 1960. The Angang constitution refers to an innovative management approach initiated by the Anshan Iron and Steel Company, a model industrial enterprise in Liaoning during the Mao era. Attempting to involve workers in management and achieve industrial democracy, the factory implemented the system called as “Two Participants, One Reform and Three Unions.” “Two participants” referred to the participation of executives in labor and the involvement of workers in management, “one reform” allowed for the corrections of unreasonable rules and regulations, and “three unions” asked for the combination of workers, cadres and technicians and their share in management, production and technical innovation. It represented the opposition to the Soviet-style management the Chinese factories had previously followed. In seeking democratic management of the enterprises and supervising the administration and management cadres, Mao approved the establishment of workers’ representative meeting system under the directives of the

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 9.

factory party committee.¹⁵² As Lin argues, the Mao-era system for worker management of industrial enterprise was an attempt to achieve equality, shared responsibility and efficiency.¹⁵³

Thirdly, the subjectivity of the working class as “masters” has been part of working class consciousness in contemporary China, constituted during Maoist socialist practice through class struggle and the specific “two-line struggle” in political and ideological terrain of superstructure. As the working class became the masters of the country, Mao intended to raise class consciousness during class struggle between the working class and the bourgeoisie – with the former bent on taking the socialist road, the latter the capitalist road. Therefore, Chinese workers articulate the subjectivity of being “masters” by their political and social motivation. As Richman observed,

The Chinese enterprise is not viewed as a purely economic unit where economic performance clearly takes priority. In fact, Chinese factories seem to pursue objectives pertaining to politics, education, and welfare as well as economic results. ...The Chinese factory is a place where much political indoctrination occurs both at the individual and at the group level, with the aim of developing the pure Communist man as conceived by Mao. It is a place where illiterate workers learn how to read and write, and where employees can and do improve their own work skills and develop new ones through education and training. It is a place where housing, schools, and offices are often constructed or remodelled by factory employees. It is also a place from which employees go out into the fields and help the peasants with their harvesting.¹⁵⁴

Through political and ideological education in the Chinese factories, Mao tried to raise revolutionary socialist consciousness – class consciousness in Maoist socialist practice - among the Chinese working class, whom Mao considered the core of socialist revolution in China. Therefore, political motivation or ideological indoctrination was not just to raise production and efficiency. In his conception of the importance of “subjectivity” in proletarian revolution, Mao emphasized political consciousness, the willpower of the masses to transform society and the

¹⁵² Yun Chen, *Transition and Development in China: Towards Shared Growth* (Farnham, England: Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2009).

¹⁵³ Chun Lin, *The Transformation of Chinese Socialism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006).

¹⁵⁴ Barry Richman, *Industrial Society in Communist China*, 9.

role of the Party in guiding, organizing and disciplining the masses.¹⁵⁵ Through political/ideological education and superstructural conflict, Mao expected the Chinese workers to get rid of self-interest and material gain as key motivating factors for production, and realize the relevance of their destiny to socialism. For Mao, the proletarian attributes – selflessness, mutual aid, solidarity, sacrifice and diligence, and the revolutionary zeal of the working masses were vital to carry out socialist revolution, check party bureaucratization and routinization, and prevent the restoration of capitalism in China.

Living with the Revolutionary Legacy: Class and Labour Politics in Reform-Era China

The Chinese revolutionary legacy and the implications of Maoist socialist past have by no mean became irrelevant in reform-era China. As Perry argues, the prevalent, but misleading, claim today in Chinese politics studies is that the Chinese revolutionary legacy and socialist past is fading as China – an authoritarian capitalist regime – is set to become one of the major economic powers of the twenty-first century.¹⁵⁶ China specialists have mostly taken the transitology approach to post-socialist transition in China.¹⁵⁷ Drawing on the linear logic of market transition, they have primarily diverted their interests to analyze the development and deviation of China’s transition towards capitalism with a liberal democratic polity, as market forces have eroded the power of China’s one-party state, brought about social and economic

¹⁵⁵ Roderick MacFarquhar, *The Origins of the Cultural Revolution, 2: The Great Leap Forward, 1958-1960* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983).

¹⁵⁶ Perry, “Farewell to Revolution.”

¹⁵⁷ For critiques of the transitology perspective, see Michael Burawoy, etl, “Introduction,” in *Uncertain Transition: Ethnographies of Change in the Postsocialist World*, ed. Michael Burawoy and Katherine Verdery, (Lanham, Md.; Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999). In critiquing transitology literature, Rudolf L Tokes argues that one of transitologists’ hidden ideological assumptions is regime change, from authoritarian to post-authoritarian and communist to post-communist, in a non-Western and post-communist context. See Rudolf L Tokes, “‘Transitology’: Global Dreams and Post-Communist Realities,” *Central Europe Review* Vol 2, No. 10 (13 March, 2000): 28.

transformation, and weaken a state-socialist economic system and a quasi-totalitarian political system.¹⁵⁸ Questioning the transitology approach to studies of Chinese politics and reviewing the failure of China specialists in predicting the development of post-Mao reforms, Perry insists on bringing the revolution and Maoist past back in the field of Chinese politics studies. The sustainability and resilience of post-Mao China highlights the “continued salience” of the Maoist legacy. I believe that it is vital for China specialists to take into account the Maoist past, to which a range of governing techniques in political-administrative, legal, social, and economic terrains of post-Mao China can be traced back.¹⁵⁹ Tim Cheek argues, “[P]olitical and economic reform took off from Mao’s death in 1976, but this did not entail a wholesale rejection of his thinking, his legacy, or previous Party experiments in governance.”¹⁶⁰ Therefore, reform-era China has been living with the revolutionary legacy.

If “Living with reform” has challenged the Chinese people to deal with the complexity of politics with regard to the problems of development such as inequality, social injustice, corruption and environmental degradation,¹⁶¹ “living with the revolutionary legacy” has haunted post-Mao China to re-visit the Maoist past to go ahead with post-socialist transformation. For Chinese politics studies in general and labour politics studies specifically, we must confront the resurgence of class politics in understanding the dynamics and trajectory of post-Mao transformation in China and have to, as Heilmann and Perry advise, “embrace uncertainty.”¹⁶²

¹⁵⁸ The transitology perspective and studies are exemplified by Pei Minxin’s work. See Minxin Pei, *China’s Trapped Transition: the limits of developmental autocracy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006).

¹⁵⁹ Sebastian Heilmann and Elizabeth J. Perry, “Embracing Uncertainty: Guerrilla Policy Style and Adaptive Governance in China,” in *Mao’s Invisible Hand: The Political Foundations of Adaptive Governance in China*, ed. Sebastian Heilmann and Elizabeth J. Perry, 19 (Harvard University Asia Center, 2011).

¹⁶⁰ Cheek, *Living with Reform*, 55.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid*, 10.

¹⁶² Heilmann and Perry, “Embracing Uncertainty.”

Living with the revolutionary legacy has challenged labour studies to reconsider its focal point on the making of a new working class along with interest-based labour protests and class-consciousness of the Chinese workers as industrial citizenry or labour in capitalist production relations in post-Mao China. Instead, we should recognize that the legacy of the Mao era is still kept alive and the urban working class of those who had experienced the struggle for socialism during the Mao era would articulate in the remaking of the Chinese working class. As Robert Weil argues, labour politics in contemporary China has been informed by an old-generation of urban industrial workers' knowledge of Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong Thought and the level of worker consciousness nurtured through Mao's "two-line struggle."¹⁶³ During his fieldwork in Zhengzhou, Weil observes,

This historical legacy has fundamental significance for the revival of the Chinese left today. As one former Red Guard in Zhengzhou put it, the understanding of a "two-line struggle," a clear demarcation between the socialism of the revolution and the capitalism of the present, is now coming out primarily from the working classes themselves, and not mainly from the intellectuals.¹⁶⁴

In Zhengzhou, workers of SOEs have been aware that their current sufferings and struggles against the privatization are the continuation of Mao's "two-line struggle." State and party officials have colluded with managers and entrepreneurs to convert the means of production, publicly owned by the working masses during the Mao era, into the private property of the newly emergent capitalist class and cadre-capitalist class. Therefore, their struggle is not just for economic compensation, but also for opposing the cadre-capitalist class' reversal of the socialist gains made by the workers and peasants in the revolutionary era.¹⁶⁵ Worker activists in Zhengzhou have kept the revolutionary legacy alive in labour politics.

¹⁶³ Robert Weil, "Conditions of the Working Classes in China," *Monthly Review* Volume 58, Issue 2 (June 2006).

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 32.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

The Maoist legacy has reminded us of the complexity of state-society relations, labour movements and labour politics. My intention in the dissertation is to divert attention to somewhat unexpected pigeonhole – unexpected, because hegemonic discourse and dominant transitology perspective have neglected its existence – where social practices and ideological legacies are re-politicized. Bringing up the revolutionary past would serve a caveat for labour studies focused on labour politics and the capitalist production relations in China. As So observes, unlike other class-divided societies, post-Mao China is “a state-mediated class-divided society” where the Leninist Party state still plays a decisive role in mediating class relations.¹⁶⁶ As the Party state still claims its loyalty to the revolutionary legacy for building up its legitimacy, it makes it possible for a segmented working class to view the state as a terrain of contestation. The changing state policies, shifting ideologies and conflicting social forces will mediate the trajectory of labour politics. In China’s class-divided society, tensions and conflict would be the defining features of labour movements. It is problematic to predict the direction of labour politics, either along with trade unionism or with the potential revival of socialist revolution. It is impossible for this research to predict the future of China’s labour politics. The research is an attempt to revisit the revolutionary legacy and stimulate more discussion on its implications for labour politics.

A Methodological Note

Unlike other disciplines in social sciences that intend to generalize their findings, this research foregrounds the return of the repressed and thus has methodological limitations in making broader generalizations of the segmented groups of the Chinese workers in the gigantic Chinese working class. This dissertation does research on urban industrial workers and rural

¹⁶⁶ So, “The Chinese Pattern of Classes.”

migrant workers. For understanding the target groups in the pattern of classes in post-Mao market reforms, the Li Yi model of the Chinese Social Stratification, 2005,¹⁶⁷ is helpful (see Figure 2.1; Figure 2.2 and Figure 2.3). Although the author applies “social stratification” instead of class analysis, it sketches the pattern of classes in a state-mediated, class-divided society in post-Mao China, examined by Alvin Y. So, who draws on an approach of class analysis and class conflict.¹⁶⁸

I gather the primary data for this dissertation through four major components: First, I conducted a fieldwork research in Beijing, Zhengzhou in Henan province, and Xiangfan in Hubei province. During my trip in Zhengzhou, I was able to enter Zhengzhou workers’ everyday life through a family composed of three generations of textile workers living in the city. I visited three SOEs under the ongoing restructuring process. In one factory, workers were protesting against the privatization of their enterprise. Another factory just completed the privatization. The third factory just entered the final stage of privatization. I had tours into workers’ communities and homes, and interviewed worker activists, retired state workers, urban young workers, local trade union cadres, the Henan Provincial Workers’ Cultural Palace cadres, and local commercial newspaper journalists. In the Workers’ Cultural Palace in Zhengzhou, I did non-participant ethnographic observations on urban workers’ daily cultural and communicative activities. I knew a young worker who worked with a state-run enterprise and found a job in a privately owned factory. Through a snowballing approach, I got to know three other urban young workers who entered state-owned enterprises in late 1980s, went through the privatization in the 1990s and now work for privately owned textile mills in Zhengzhou. I invited the four young workers to watch a Chinese movie shot in the 1960s, which portrayed the Chinese workers as protagonists

¹⁶⁷ Li Yi, *The Structure and Evolution of Chinese Social Stratification* (University Press of America, 2005).

¹⁶⁸ So, “The Changing Pattern of Classes.”

and “masters” of building the Chinese socialist country. After watching the movie together, I organized a focus group to discuss the subjectivity of “masters” of Maoist socialist enterprises and urban workers’ identities in market reform era. This is to examine the historical memory of socialism and working class radical discourse from the Mao era and their implications for the formation of working class identity and class-consciousness in post-socialist transformation.

Second, I generated data from China’s online society and in particular, internet-based communication networks set up by Chinese workers. The Internet has become a separate space in China where individuals and institutions emerge and interact. The dramatic changes in society in the reform era have set the new context for Chinese workers to struggle for autonomous communication. While China’s Party state in post-socialist transformation has harshly repressed labour movements and workers’ rights activists on the one hand, the commercialization of the Chinese media system has constrained the representation of Chinese workers on the other hand. Sandwiched between the dual dominations of state and capital, for Chinese workers, like most Chinese citizens, the Internet provides the instrumental networked means of communication, through which they articulate their concerns and interests and seek self-organization and mobilization. As Zhao observes, “[T]oday, the most popular activity of ‘free press’ crusaders is to publish webzines, post their ideas on the Internet in various web forums, or increasingly, to blog. ... [t]his is currently the most feasible and effective means of independent communication.”¹⁶⁹ Since 2007, I have followed up several workers’ websites to understand the latest development of China’s labour politics by accessing workers’ forums, blogs and chat rooms. I corresponded with worker intellectuals, writers and musicians, and leftist intellectuals,

¹⁶⁹ Zhao, *Communication in China*, 201.

conducting interviews by email. I collected massive materials of working-class literature and art, music and poetry in reform China, and data from labour NGOs.

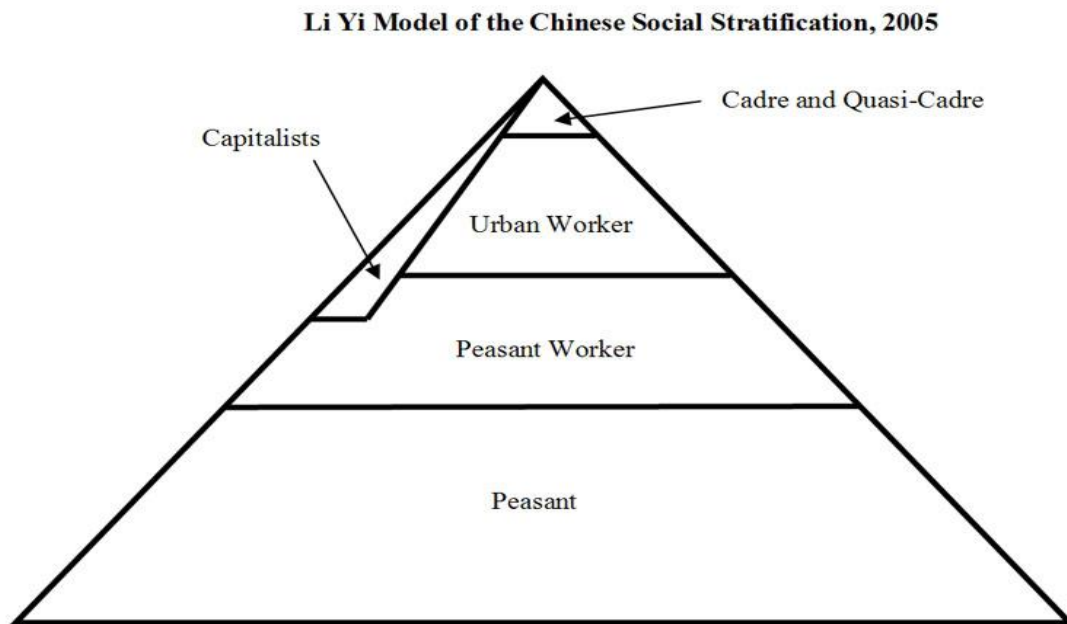
Third, I interviewed dozens of rural migrant workers in construction in Beijing and visited a museum inaugurated by rural migrant workers recording their own history. Those rural migrant workers come from my hometown province, Henan. They were very open, warm-hearted and bold as they realize my hometown is from Henan. During the interview, they talked about their miserable conditions, their daily life and leisure. Through their introduction, I get to know a person working for an NGO committed to safeguarding migrant workers' rights and empowering them through communication and cultural activities. I conducted an interview with the worker activist responsible for the organization. I toured the Migrant Workers' Museum initiated by several migrant workers, one of them migrant singer Sun Heng, who set up the Beijing Young Migrant Workers' Art Troupe, an amateur music band "of, for, and by migrant workers."¹⁷⁰ In the museum, I gathered newspapers, magazines and audio-visual products reflecting the rural migrant workers' cultural and communicative activities. I also interviewed five activists of labour NGOs working for rural migrant workers. The texts and interviews provided a rich source for understanding the political thought of rural migrant workers at the bottom of Chinese society and their cultural orientations.

Because of the segmentation of the working class, I am cautious about generalizing my findings. Even within the target groups of the working class, I am conscious that more investigation and empirical evidences are necessary to verify my propositions. As the first

¹⁷⁰ Zhao and Duffy, "Short-Circuited," 241.

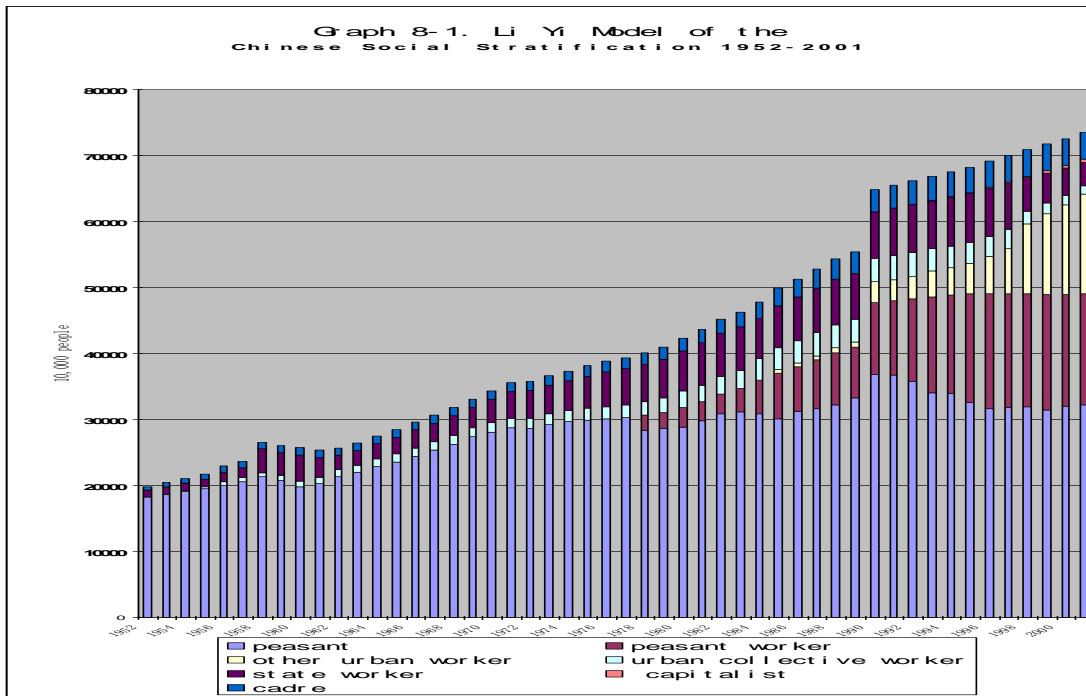
attempt to examine labour politics and socialist movements in China's post-socialist transformation, the dissertation has attained its objectives if it could divert our attention to alternative working class activism in China and arouse more research and debates.

Figure 2.1



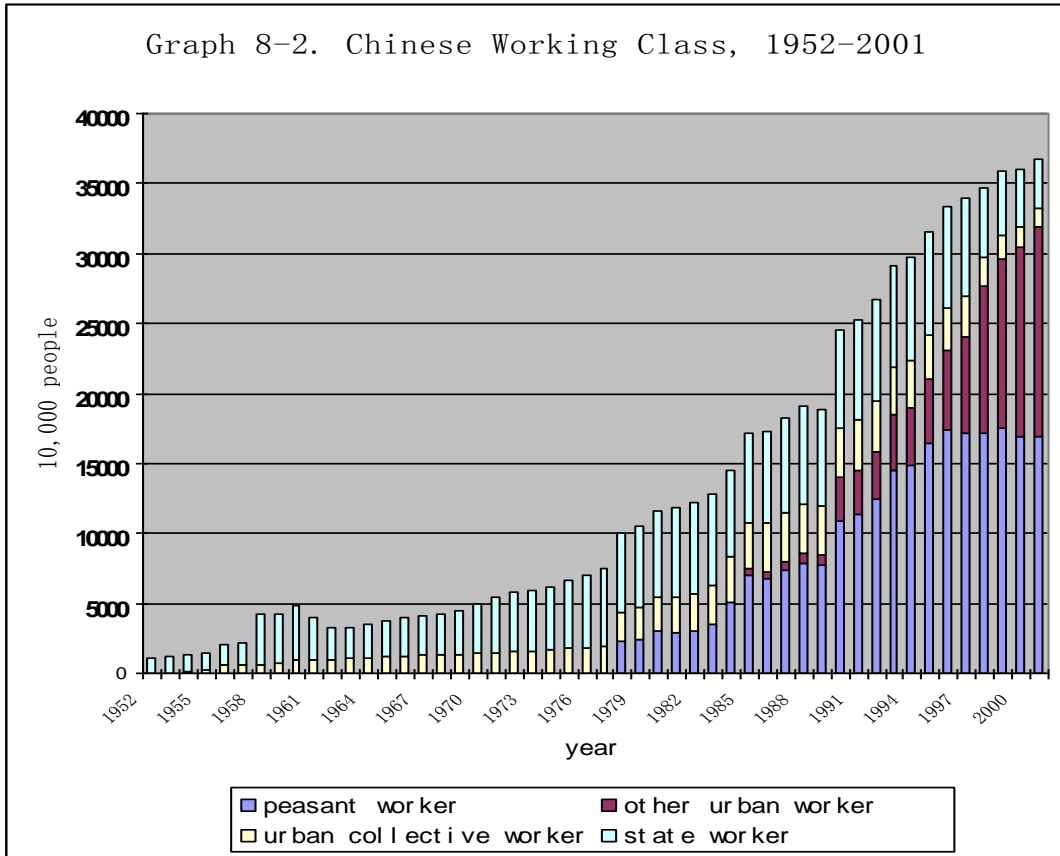
Source: Li Yi, *The Structure and Evolution of Chinese Social Stratification*, University Press of America, 2005, p.88.

Figure 2.2



Source: Li Yi, *The Structure and Evolution of Chinese Social Stratification*, University Press of America, 2005, p.118.

Figure 2.3



Source: Li Yi, *The Structure and Evolution of Chinese Social Stratification*, University Press of America, 2005, p.190.

CHAPTER THREE

WORKERS' PALACE OF CULTURE AND THE RE-COMPOSITION OF CHINESE WORKING-CLASS IN POST-SOCIALISM

Chairman Mao built this palace of culture for us the workers, thus allowing us to come here for learning and entertainment. This is one of the rights, which we deserve to enjoy. Nowadays, while factories are no longer our own, here is still our spiritual homeland.

A retired worker in Zhengzhou¹⁷¹

The workers' palace of culture, as its name implies, is the cultural site, which should serve workers. If workers cannot access workers' palaces of culture, and there are no cultural activities sponsored in the workers' gardens, has the workers' cultural palace deviated from its original aim and attribute? Reforming workers' palaces of culture is inevitable. However, whatever we carry out reforms, we should change neither its aim nor its original colour. Otherwise, it is no longer workers' palace of culture.

*Workers' Daily*¹⁷²

When Soviet Russia invited John Dewey to observe its society and education in first hand in 1928, what impressed Dewey mostly was a kind of civic complex called the "House of Popular Culture" in Leningrad. In his essays *Impressions of Soviet Russia and the Revolutionary World*, Dewey gave this account of the building:

Here was a fine new building in the factory quarter, surrounded by recreation grounds, provided with one large theater, four smaller assembly halls, fifty rooms for club meetings, recreation and

¹⁷¹ An interview with a retired worker at Zhengzhou, the capital city of central Chinese province Henan, during my field work in June, 2009.

¹⁷² "Wenhua gong yao jianshou zongzhi jianchi bense" (workers' palaces of culture should stick to their aims and purposes, and maintain their raw color), *Workers' Daily*, June 5, 2007.

games, headquarters for trade unions, costing two million dollars, frequented daily—or rather, nightly—by five thousand persons as a daily average. Built and controlled, perhaps, by the government? No, but by the voluntary efforts of the trade unions, who tax themselves two percent of their wages to afford their collective life these facilities. The House is staffed and managed by its own elected officers. The contrast with the comparative inactivity of our own working men and with the quasi-philanthropic quality of similar enterprises in my own country left a painful impression. It is true that this House—there is already another similar one in Leningrad—has no intrinsic and necessary connection with communistic theory and practice. The like of it might exist in any large modern industrial centre. But there is the fact that the like of it does not exist in the other and more highly developed industrial centers. There it is in Leningrad, as it is not there in Chicago or New York...¹⁷³

The house, or palace, of culture, which had fascinated Dewey, is the site of recreational and cultural activities, prevalent in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, earmarked to accommodate industrial workers before the post-communist transition. As Dewey described, a typical palace of culture houses one, or several, cinema halls, concert halls, lecture halls, dance studios, a public library, and many other facilities, providing workers and their families with room for all kinds of hobbies, sports, collecting, and arts in their leisure time. Together with workers' clubs, which tended to serve workers from a single enterprise, palaces of culture constituted the working-class cultural institution in the socialist states of former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, and in People's Republic of China as well, which still professes socialism.

Whereas Dewey appreciated the house of culture for having “no intrinsic and necessary connection with communistic theory and practice,”¹⁷⁴ most Western scholarship on workers' palaces of culture characterizes the establishment as organizing leisure and cultural activities for workers and indoctrinating them with socialist and communist orthodoxy. As Regine Robin argues, workers' clubs and palaces of culture in the Stalin period represented a “cultural base of a total *vospitanie* [education].” They worked on four “levels”: the cognitive (access to knowledge), axiological (“values or ideology, or, if one prefers, that of propaganda and

¹⁷³ John Dewey, *Impressions of Soviet Russia and the revolutionary world: Mexico-China-Turkey 1929*, 60-61 (Teachers College, Columbia University, 1964).

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 60.

agitation-propadanda”), symbolical (“a new social imaginary”), and cultural (“new social codes”).¹⁷⁵

It is undeniable that the socialist Soviet state had played cultural politics – defined by John Hatch as “conscious activity directed at the transformation of Russia’s masses along socialist and enlightened lines.”¹⁷⁶ Nevertheless, the rendition of palaces of culture as no more than spatial dimensions of acculturation of the masses ignores the other side of the same coin: does the palace of culture, as a site of organized leisure and cultural activities, empower the working class in its social and cultural experiences? Does the palace of culture, a quintessentially Stalinist institution, paradoxically enable workers to inhabit a home provided for them and adopt it as their own for potential emancipation?

Soon after its revolutionary victory and the founding of People’s Republic of China, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) began to model its cultural institution on the Stalinist-style workers’ palace of culture to shape Chinese workers’ leisure. This was the continuation of the logic of the Chinese Communist revolution. In a Leninist Party-state, which aimed to promote socialist revolution, Mao had attempted to transform the identity of Chinese industrial workers along socialist lines and raise socialist consciousness among them. The workers’ palace of culture during the Mao era had functioned to instil socialism into Chinese industrial workers and construct their subjectivity as “masters” of the socialist Chinese state. Critics may designate this subjectivity as an ideologically false consciousness, as what Yu argues, and consider the workers’ palace of culture as the extension of political controls in the cultural sphere. Nevertheless, Chinese industrial workers’ consciousness of being masters of a socialist state,

¹⁷⁵ Regine Robin, “Stalinism and Popular Culture,” in *The Culture of the Stalin Period*, ed. Hans Gunter, 19, 21 (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1990).

¹⁷⁶ John Hatch, “Hangouts and Hangovers: State, Class and Culture in Moscow’s Workers’ Club Movement, 1925-1928,” *Russian Review* 53 (January 1994): 98.

inculcated in Mao's state socialism and probably dormant in cultural politics, had been aroused, enabling them in post-Mao market reforms to rise up against what David Harvey calls "accumulation by dispossession."¹⁷⁷

This chapter attempts to understand the contours of the working-class culture in contemporary China and the constitution of Chinese industrial workers' subjectivity along socialist lines by examining the transformation of the workers' palace of culture. Post-Mao market reforms have seen workers' cultural palaces displaced as key sites of workers' cultural institutions. Today, the workers' place of culture is becoming a key site, where commercial culture and working-class culture are juxtaposed. However, Chinese workers are struggling to retake palaces of culture as what they call their spiritual homelands. As my field work in Zhengzhou indicates, despite the penetration of commercial and consumerist culture, workers attempt to retain the cultural palace as the spatial dimension of working-class culture. A legacy of Maoist socialism, the workers' palace of culture makes itself salient in what Oskar Negt calls the "proletariat public sphere."¹⁷⁸ As cultural and communicative activities in the workers' palace of culture facilitate the discursive production of class-consciousness and socialist vision within Chinese workers, the cultural site is vital for the re-composition of Chinese working-class subjectivity. Through a case study examining urban workers' political debates and discussions in Henan Provincial Cultural Palace, this chapter reconsiders the role of Maoist socialist legacies in rebuilding a proletariat public sphere in China's post-socialist transformation. I begin by a brief

¹⁷⁷ Drawing on Marx's notion of 'primitive' or 'original' accumulation during the rise of capitalism, David Harvey proposes the rubric of 'accumulation by dispossession' to make sense of the continuation and proliferation of capitalist accumulation under neo-liberalization. This includes commodification of land, conversion of property rights publicly owned into private property rights, and commodification of labour power, etc. See David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neo-liberalism*, 159 (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

¹⁷⁸ Oskar Negt, "The Proletariat Public Sphere," in *Communication and Class Struggle: an Anthology* in 2 volumes, ed. Armand Mattelart and Seth Siegelaub, 92 (New York: International General; Bagnolet, France: International Mass Media Research Center, 1979-83).

history of labour movements and the mobilization by early Communist revolutionaries in the 1920s by setting up workers' clubs and through cultural enlightenment. This overview bridges into the analyses of the transformation of workers' cultural palaces in contemporary China, workers' leisure and contested public sphere.

The Prototype of Workers' Palace: Workers' Clubs and Labour Movements Organized by the Communists, 1920-1923

As cultural institutions of the Chinese working class, workers' palaces of culture originated from workers' schools and clubs set up by early Communist labour activists.¹⁷⁹ Western scholarship has in general interpreted the Chinese Communist revolution before 1949 as a peasant revolution led by Mao. Actually, the Chinese Communist revolution began with the mobilization of urban workers to counter capitalist encroachment of imperial powers, their clientele in China and warlords in the 1920s. Workers' schools and clubs were the sites of political mobilization and organization, where early Communist revolutionaries approached factory workers, railroad workers and miners by opening up literacy schools, and developed class-consciousness among urban workers through teaching them Marxist theory.

Thus, the Chinese labour movement preceded the Communist movement. During the period of the Sun Yatsen-led Republican Revolution, Chinese workers, primarily in Shanghai where industrial workers increased with the growth of foreign-invested ventures and national industries, had begun to form their own political organizations to launch massive strikes. Based on their studies of the Shanghai labour movement during the Revolution of 1911, Liu Ping and Hui Zhuoyao argue, "Chinese working class has developed elementary forms of class-

¹⁷⁹ Hans J. van de Ven, *From Friend to Comrade: the Founding of the Chinese Communist Party, 1920-1927* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).

consciousness, was able to act independently in the arena of political struggle.”¹⁸⁰ They disagree with the Chinese scholarship on the Chinese Communist movement, tending to designate the strike wave, particularly the Shanghai workers’ strikes during the May Fourth period, as the starting point of the formation of class-consciousness within the Chinese working class.

This chapter does not intend to engage with the polemic about the symbolic turn of Chinese workers becoming “a class for itself” from “a class in itself.” The argument is, though Chinese labour history should not be equal to that of the Communist movement, Communist labour activists of Marxist intellectual origin, emerging from the May Fourth period, did inculcate workers with a vision of socialist revolution and arouse their proletariat class-consciousness. As Eric Hobsbawm argues, while the working class may spontaneously develop “elementary forms of class-consciousness, class action and organization,” revolutionary socialist regimes “arise not out of a class, but out of the characteristic combination of class organization. It is not the working class itself which takes power and exercises hegemony, but the working-class *movement* or *party*, and (short of taking an anarchist view) it is difficult to see how it could be otherwise.”¹⁸¹

Obviously, the Chinese working class and the socialist revolution could have ever been like the two parallel tracks of a railroad. Without the intervention of Communist labour activists of Marxist intellectual origin, the two would not necessarily have converged. As Daniel Y. K. Kwan observes, there was a daunting gap between Marxist intellectuals and workers in the

¹⁸⁰ Liu Ping and Hui Zhuoyao, “xinhe geming yu zhongguo gongren Jieji de juexing (The 1911 Revolution and Awareness of Chinese Working Class),” in *The 1911 Revolution and Chinese Modern Society*, ed. Tian Fulong and Rao Huaimin (Changsha, Hunan: Yuelou Shushe, 2003).

¹⁸¹ Eric Hobsbaum, “Class-consciousness in History,” in *Aspects of History and Class-Consciousness*, ed. Istvan Meszaros, 16, 17 (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971).

Chinese labour movement.¹⁸² In his monumental study of Chinese labour history in the 1920s, the French Sinologist Jean Chesneaux argued the relations between the labour movement and the Communist Party “grew ever closer as one by one the other political and ideological currents that had at one time influenced or tried to influence, the working class began to lose ground.”¹⁸³ Therefore, the combination of Marxism and the Chinese labour movement is a process of ideological contestation and the formation of hegemony, in which cultural and communicative activities, initiated by organic intellectuals, played a vital role in channelling the making of the Chinese working class in the direction of the Communist revolution.

Early Communist revolutionaries undertook two major methods in attempting to combine themselves with the Chinese labour movement: one was to publish labour journals, and the other to open up literacy schools as a breakthrough for encountering urban workers. From August 1920 to early 1921, early-period groups of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), officially founded in July 1921, started appearing in Shanghai, Beijing, Changsha, Wuhan, Jinan, Guangzhou, Japan and France. The diverse communist groups focused on enlightening Chinese workers with Marxism and organizing them politically. The Chinese Marxist intellectuals published labour journals to propagate Marxism to workers and give a voice to workers’ miserable lives. In August 1920, the Shanghai Communist Group, led by Chen Duxiu, who, with Li Dazhao, was the CPC’s main initiator, started publication of a weekly *Laodong jie* (The World of Labour), the first newspaper intended for workers as readers in Chinese labour history. Totally, the small communist group published twenty-three issues between August 1920 and January 1921. The weekly had columns including lectures, poetry and fiction, articles on the

¹⁸² Daniel Y. K. Kwan, *Marxist Intellectuals and the Chinese Labour Movement: A Study of Deng Zhongxia (1894-1933)*, 265 (Seattle & London: University of Washington Press, 1997).

¹⁸³ Jean Chesneaux, *the Chinese Labour Movement, 1919-1927*, trans. H.M. Wright (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1968).

conditions of workers in China and the rest of world, and readers' letters. Workers were encouraged to submit articles. It featured discussions of Marxist theory in popular language, inspiring workers to recognize the exploitation by capitalists and calling for class struggle.¹⁸⁴

Other small Communist groups followed suit. In November 1920, Deng Zhongxia and his comrades from the Beijing Communist Group published a labour journal named *Laodong Yin* (The Voice of Workers). In the editorial of its first issue, Deng Zhongxia made it clear that the goal of the journal was to develop workers' consciousness and enable them to engage in class struggle and improve social organization. In plain language, which was understandable for semi-literate workers, the journal reported the sufferings of workers and workers' strikes. Although each issue had a circulation of about two thousand copies, and its publication ceased within a few months, the journal had a tremendous influence on railroad workers in Changxindian, a railway junction on the outskirts of Beijing in the Beijing-Hankou railroad (later to be well known in the February Seventh Strike of 1923).¹⁸⁵ Elsewhere, the Guangzhou Communist Group published *Laodong Zhe* (The Worker) and *Laodong yu funu* (Women at Work), which featured articles on the Marxist theory of class struggle, conditions of the local proletariat and preparations for setting up a trade union for the printing workers of Guangzhou.¹⁸⁶ Overall, these labour journals functioned to teach Chinese workers basic Marxist theory. Using vivid examples from workers' daily experience and simple language, they illustrated to Chinese workers the theory of labour value, the inevitable replacement of capitalism with socialism, the historical

¹⁸⁴ *Wusi Shiqi Qikan Jieshao* (May the Fourth Journals) [145] II: 61-71 (Beijing: People's Publishing, 1959).

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 71-74.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 75 and 80-85.

mission of the working class in toppling capitalism and building a society with workers and peasants as masters.¹⁸⁷

The Communist revolutionaries quickly realized that they had to engage workers in person to mobilize and organize them for political struggles. However, differences in social and cultural backgrounds posed a chasm between the Marxist intellectuals and the poorly educated workers. It was not easy for early Communist revolutionaries to gain trust and friendship from workers. However, the high rate of student dropouts among workers' children because of poverty provided a chance for the Communist intellectuals to approach workers. In late 1920, Deng Zhongxia and his comrades from the Beijing Communist Group went to Changxindian to commence a workers' school, named *Laodong Buxi XueXiao* (the Labour Literacy School). Changxindian was a town densely populated by workers, from various enterprises, among them about three thousand railway workers. In the daytime, Deng and his comrades taught children to read Chinese characters. In the evenings, they invited their off-work parents to the school, not only instructing them to read, but also introducing them to Marxist theory in plain language. In this way, Deng and his comrades inaugurated the Chinese labour movement in the direction of Marxism.

The Communist labour activists spared no efforts to be friendly and approachable to workers. Deng Zhongxia's original name was Zhongxie. As he thought workers would not easily remember it, Deng adopted Zhongxia as his new name. The labour activists also compiled a convenient dictionary of colloquial Beijing dialect and learned to speak the workers' language. At the beginning, nevertheless, few workers were enthusiastic to attend the literacy classes and evening schools. They considered themselves as coolies and thought that literacy would be

¹⁸⁷ Wang Huilin, *Zhongguo xiandai shi (shangze)* (The Chinese Modern History I), 52 (Beijing: Advanced Education Publishing, 1983).

useless for them. Some workers cynically joked to Deng, “Only if you ration *wotou* (buns made of corn flour) to us, will we come over to the literacy classes.” Deng Zhongxia convinced them of the importance of literacy, arguing that only when they were literate, would workers no longer be bewildered and bullied. As workers swarmed to the literacy classes, Deng introduced them to Marxist theory.¹⁸⁸

Deng Zhongxia was adroit in making the complicated Marxist theory comprehensible to workers and thus raising their class-consciousness. As one worker recalled, for example, they used an analogy related to workers’ daily experience to lecture on the topic of imperialism:

When we were learning the characters for “railway lines,” the teacher said, “The railway lines that we are serving are just like a python. Every other country tried to get a piece of meat from it. Those people governing our country always borrow money from other countries by offering the railway as collateral. Mortgage this, mortgage that, then all railway lines and mines will soon belong to others, and we will be finished.” He then made another analogy: “this situation is just like a family in which the head of the family does not manage the house and keep its books properly and puts its property up for mortgage. Then others will manage the house. Would not the other members of the family feel miserable? This is called imperialist penetration!”¹⁸⁹

In this way, Communist labour activists achieved great success in raising workers’ political consciousness in a short time. On May Day 1921, the students of the workers’ school formed the Changxindian Workers’ Club. It was through this workers’ club that Deng organized a May Day procession, in which more than a thousand Changxindian workers participated. Deng Zhongxia called this procession “an unprecedented demonstration by the masses of workers in China.”¹⁹⁰ In his fieldwork on the plight of Anyuan miners, Yu Jianrong considers such efforts by early Communist labour activists as to brainwash workers and indoctrinate them by Marxist ideology. This revisionist interpretation is detached from the historical context. How could

¹⁸⁸ Luo Zhanglong, *Chunyan Daiji* (Reminiscences in Garden Chun). 111 (Beijing: Sanlian Chubanshe, 1984).

¹⁸⁹ Beifang de hongxing [Red Star over the North], ed. Changxindian jiche cheliang gongchang changshi bianweihui, 66 (Beijing: Zuoja chubanshe, 1960), cited in Daniel Y. K. Kwan, *Marxist Intellectuals and the Chinese Labour Movement: A Study of Deng Zhongxia (1894-1933)*, 23 (Seattle & London: University of Washington Press, 1997).

¹⁹⁰ Deng Zhongxia, *zhongguo zhigong yundong jianshi* (Brief History of the Chinese labour movement), (Peking: Xinhua Bookstore, 1949).

workers, who were illiterate and struggling for their daily lives, be responsive to early Communist revolutionaries if only they imposed empty and hollow Marxist theories upon workers without sincere motivation to liberate them from exploitation?

The Changxindian Workers' Club exemplifies the model in which early Communist revolutionaries attempted to combine Marxism with the Chinese labour movement. With the workers' literacy and evening schools as the entry, the activist set up workers' clubs to mobilize and organize the labour movement through activities comprising recreation, training and political education. Workers' clubs had prepared for the CCP to be able to develop modern trade unions before the CCP First Congress adopted a resolution in July 1921, instructing the Chinese Communists to establish the Chinese Labour Organization Secretariat (renamed as All-China Federation of Trade Unions in May 1925). Even after the founding of the Labour Secretariat, Communist revolutionaries still adopted this model to establish close contact with workers. In September 1921, only two months after the founding of the Communist Labour Secretariat, Mao Zedong and five other Communist organizers arrived in Anyuan, Jiangxi Province, in an attempt to launch the workers' movement under the pretext of touring the charcoal mines, managed by Chinese bureaucratic compradors collaborating with Japanese imperial power. In his first tentative and brief trip, while conversing with the workers and understanding their living and working conditions, Mao distributed the *Gongren Zhoukan* (Workers' Weekly) and other labour journals and pasted up information posters in the neighbourhood of the mines.¹⁹¹

In three months, Mao and his brother visited Anyuan again. They formed a workers' club and a night school to bring in the miners. However, the reactions from the workers were

¹⁹¹ Liu Shaoqi and Zhu Shaolian, *Anyuan lukang gongren julebu lueshi* [A short History of the Anyuan Miners and Railroad Workers' Club] (August 10, 1923). Reprinted 1958 in HNLSZL 1:3-26, <http://www.jxcn.cn/1941/2009-7-6/30079@538621.htm>.

lukewarm. Soon, Mao replaced the night school with a day school for the miners' children.

Committed to workers' literacy campaigns even before becoming a Marxist, Mao was adept at teaching and agitating. As Ross Terrill describes,

He (Mao) took the Chinese character 工, which is the first part of the term for 'work' or 'workers.' The top horizontal line, he explained, is the sky; the lower one is the earth. The vertical stroke that joins them is the working class. Workers stood upon the earth but reached to the sky! Theirs was the universe.¹⁹²

In no time, the Communist labour organizers stirred up the Anyuan miners to be agitated about their misery. Under the guise of a mass education movement, Mao sent Li Lisan, who headed the CCP later from 1928 until 1930, to start a workers' school, from which Mao instructed him to organize a union and build a legal workers' movement. Li became the first Communist organizer to live in Anyuan. Mao instructed Li how to mobilize the workers. He told Li, "Just say that you are a teacher and that you are setting up a workers' night school to teach the workers to read and write, and you will be welcomed."¹⁹³ As miners were obsessed with struggling for a living and considered learning meaningless, few were attracted to the school at first. However, Li spent so much time trying to recruit students that it was not long before the class grew to sixty students every night.

In March 1922, the preparatory committee of the Anyuan Miners' Club was formed with Li nominated as director. The labour activists signed a petition to register the club with the district magistrate in Pingxiang, which had jurisdiction over Anyuan. With the approval, the club moved into new and larger quarters, setting up a classroom, a library, and a recreation centre. On May Day of that year, the club was officially formed with a membership of 300.¹⁹⁴ More workers

¹⁹² Ross Terrill, *Mao: A Biography*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 89 (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1999).

¹⁹³ Li Rui, *Lushan Huiyi Qinli Ji* (Witnessing Lushan Conference), 181-182 (Guangzhou: The Southern Publishing House).

¹⁹⁴ Li Rui, *Lushan Huiyi Qinli Ji*, 183.

joined up after the club's slogans spoke to immediate concerns and interests of workers, such as "creating a consumer cooperative so we can get cheap goods," instead of idealistic propaganda.¹⁹⁵

From creating the workers' school to establishing the workers' club, the Communist labour organizers successfully combined literary classes with the injection of Marxism to enlighten class-consciousness of the Anyuan workers. The communicative process of diffusing culture and Marxism paved the way for the Anyuan Railroad Workers' and Miners' Strike in 1923, which represents the most famous strike organized by the Hunan Labour Secretariat under the leadership of Mao.

In the primary period of initiating the workers' movement, workers' clubs were the institutions, used by early Communist labour organizers, to inspire workers' strikes for immediate economic benefits more than the sites of what Leon Trotsky referred to as the "culturalization" of the masses - influencing the working masses and creating proletariat culture through shaping their leisure.¹⁹⁶ Though the Communist labour organizers had enlightened workers with the basic principles of Marxism in a bid to develop their class-consciousness, the first priority was for them to have a toehold in the Chinese labour movement. Therefore, they had to accommodate other popular culture and pastimes that did not conform to the advanced culture approved by socialist revolution. Many workers were members of secret societies such as regional fraternities (Bang).¹⁹⁷ The mass culture prevalent among workers was sworn brotherhoods of the "rivers and lakes" fighting for justice for the common people. Communist

¹⁹⁵ Liu and Zhu, *Anyuan Lukuang*, 7.

¹⁹⁶ Leon Trotsky, "Leninism and Workers' Clubs," in his *Problems of Everyday Life and Other Writings on Culture and Science*, 318 (New York: Monad Press, 1973).

¹⁹⁷ Chesneaux, *the Chinese Labour Movement*, 117; Lynda Sahffer, *Mao and the Workers: The Hunan Labour Movement, 1920-1923*, 82 (London: M.E. Sharpe Inc, 1982).

revolutionaries had to conciliate the foreman and contractors who controlled rank-and-file workers in order to win them over to the side of the working class. The working masses were also not immune to the degraded vogue prevailing in society for whoring, gambling and opium smoking.¹⁹⁸ This popular culture posed the major obstacle for early Communist labour organizers to imbue the labour movement with the spirit of a proletarian revolution.

Though early Communist labour activists intended to promote salutary recreation and educate workers with proletariat culture and values, they saw workers' clubs as the sites of political mobilization and where they could inspire class politics more than the sites of contestation over the definition of culture with respect to workers' daily life and how to shape it. As Deng Zhongxia argued, the ultimate objective of workers' clubs was to organize workers for struggling with capitalists, developing their class-consciousness by education, and training them with management capabilities for governing a workers' state in the future, instead of providing a home to workers for entertainment, mutual aid and literary school.¹⁹⁹ Deng asked, "Before capitalists are toppled down, how can workers have fun?"

Proletariat Culture in Practice: Workers' Palaces of Culture and the Making of Chinese Working-Class During the Mao Era

Soon after the founding of the People's Republic of China, the first workers' palace of culture was constructed in Beijing, named The Working People Cultural Palace, and was open to the public in 1950 as a "school and amusement park" for workers in the capital. Under the slogan of "endeavouring to enrich the spiritual and cultural life of the workers," workers' palaces of culture and clubs have since then started appearing throughout China. According to a survey

¹⁹⁸ Liu Shaoqi, *dui julebu gongzuo de huigu* [A Reflection of Work in Anyuan Workers' Club], 1923. See The Marxists Internet Archive, access to: www.marxists.org/chinese/liushaoqi/marxist.org-chinese-lsq-19230820.htm.

¹⁹⁹ Deng Zhongxia: on a trade union (excerpt), retrieved from <http://www.marxists.org/chinese/dengzhongxia/marxist.org-chinese-gong-19251222.htm>.

issued by the All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU) in 2006, its grassroots trade unions across China possessed approximately 26,000 workers' clubs and cultural palaces, which host 14, 000 libraries, 16,000 stadiums and gymnasiums. However, we should know that all these workers' cultural facilities were established during the Mao era and before Deng's market reforms, which began in the 1980s. As its grandiloquent title indicated, the first workers' palace of culture was built on the Imperial Ancestral Temple, to the east of Tiananmen, which was used by emperors of the Ming and Qing dynasties to offer sacrifices to their ancestors. As the apparatus of culture for the Chinese working class, its construction on the site of the emperors' ancestral temple symbolizes the continuation of the struggle against Confucian culture since the May Fourth era and the beginning of proletariat culture in practice for furthering socialist revolution in China.

Through the study of labour in Shanghai, Elizabeth J. Perry emphasizes popular culture and workplace experiences of the Chinese workers and thus questions "the decisive role of the Communist Party in molding, and remoulding, first class-consciousness and then a compliant working class."²⁰⁰ This "new labour history" echoed Yu Jianrong's research on Anyuan miners. However, Perry and Yu concluded in an opposite way. While Perry's "new labour history" perspective neglects the efficacy of Mao's advocacy of a proletariat culture in elevating Chinese workers to become the working class of socialist consciousness, Yu argues that there had been the efficacy but dismissed them as ideological indoctrination and for the advantage of the Chinese Communist Party to seize political power. Both Perry and Yu overlook the liberating dimension of the seemingly oppressing proletariat culture in practice under the guidance of Mao's Chinese-styled Marxist culture theory. The paradoxical dimensions of what Mao extolled

²⁰⁰ Elizabeth J. Perry, *Shanghai on Strike: The Politics of Chinese Labour*, 252 (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993).

as “the new socialist mass culture” can be illustrated through detailed studies of the Henan Provincial Workers’ Cultural Palace in Zhengzhou.

In what Piper Rae Gaubatz calls “uniform, standardized landscapes of mixed industrial and residential compounds” during the Mao period,²⁰¹ the western outskirts of Zhengzhou were developed as an industrial district, which was noted for housing five major state-run textile enterprises. Built in 1956 and located in the industrial district, the nominally provincial-level workers’ cultural palace was primarily to serve as a complex recreation place for hundreds of thousands of local industrial workers. The various forms of programs and activities organized in the workers’ cultural palace could be divided into several major fields – political mobilization and trade union education, cultural and sports activities, expertise and literary training, specialized interests (radio, inventions, chess, sewing, painting and calligraphy), and social and civic life (library, dancing). As one staff member put it, “Although political tasks and slogans for actions have varied in different historical periods, the workers’ cultural palace has been centered on the purposes of serving politics, production and the masses.”²⁰²

The organization (see Figure 3.1 below) functioned to provide administration, logistic support and daily maintenance. It was affiliated with the provincial trade union, and subordinate to the ACFTU. As a voluntary and partially self-financing institution, the workers’ cultural palace was mainly subsidized by state revenue. The workers’ cultural palaces operated as the transmission-belt, through which the Party state could hear the voices of Chinese workers from

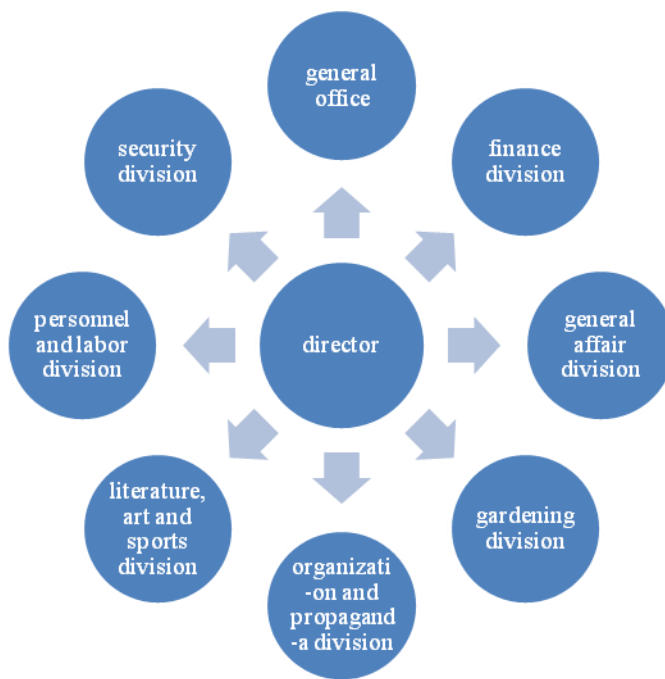
²⁰¹ Piper Rae Gaubatz, “Urban transformation in post-Mao China: impacts of the reform era on China’s urban form,” in *Urban spaces in contemporary China: the potential for autonomy and community in post-Mao China*, ed. Deborah S. Davis, Richard Kraus, Barry Naughton and Elizabeth J. Perry, 28 (Cambridge University Press, 1995).

²⁰² I conducted an interview with the anonymous staff from the general office of Henan Provincial Workers’ Cultural Palace in Zhengzhou, June 6, 2009. The functions are summarized, based on the palace’s archive and chronology in manuscript, written by fountain pens.

below and conveyed the directives of the party down to the workers. From the archives, the workers had been fervently involved via the cultural palace in the mass movements and political campaigns initiated by Mao, ranging from the Anti-Rightist Campaign of 1957, the Great Leap Forward from 1958 to 1961, the Five-antis' and Socialist Education Movement in 1963, and the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution.

Figure 3.1

Internal Administration Structure of Henan Provincial Workers' Cultural Palace



Note: this structure is organized in 2009 and the palace has employed 117 staff. There is no big difference in terms of the administration structure compared to that of the Mao era.

Applying class analysis, Mao framed all the political campaigns he initiated during the socialist transformation in the 1950s and the 1960s, into “class struggles,” though as Alvin Y. So observed, “[T]he economic foundation of classes was dissolved and the intensity of class conflict

was much reduced” during the Mao era.²⁰³ Mao’s political campaigns were obviously targeting the Chinese elites, either within the Communist Party or without. For example, the Three-Anti Campaign was aimed at the Communist Party members, former Kuomintang members and non-party-member bureaucratic officials, and the Five-Anti Campaign targeted the capitalist class which was still being remolded.²⁰⁴ The mass line and the massive political campaigns, however, educated the working masses the approaches to class and class struggle. As one essay during the Cultural Revolution summarized, “For the more than twenty years since liberation, we have been continuously strengthening the Party’s leadership, arming the worker masses with Marxism-Leninism and Mao Tsetung Thought and raising their class awareness and consciousness of the two-line struggle.”²⁰⁵

Most importantly, Chinese workers were impressed by Mao’s assertion that “we must wholeheartedly rely on the working class” and his proposition to educate workers from being hired labourers to being “masters of the enterprises”. Mao argued that it is impossible to reconcile the contradiction between the working class and bureaucratic apparatus, believing that a continuous socialist revolution in China would liberate the workers ultimately. This may have led to the Cultural Revolution, which started in the cultural/ideological field and soon expanded to an all-out political campaign. Whatever Mao’s motivations were, it is not difficult to ascertain the effect that his political campaigns had on the labour movement and the re-making of the Chinese working class in post-Mao market reforms. The seemingly hollow, false political slogans - “the working class must lead everything” and “being masters of socialist enterprises”

²⁰³ So, “The Changing Pattern of Classes,” 364.

²⁰⁴ The three antis imposed were corruption, waste and bureaucracy and the five antis were bribery, theft of state property, tax evasion, cheating on government contracts, and stealing state economic information.

²⁰⁵ Kung Hsiao-wen, “Workers are the Masters of Socialist Enterprises,” in *Workers and Workplaces in Revolutionary China*, ed. Stephen Andors, 320 (White Plains, New York: M.E. Sharpe, Inc., 1974).

have been substantiated during workers' resistance against privatization under the heading of SOEs restructuring since the late 1990s. For example, in 2009 when some 30,000 disgruntled Chinese steel workers in state-owned Tonghua Iron and Steel Group in North-eastern China clashed with riot police in protest over a takeover deal, and they beat an executive from another steel company to death, Chinese liberal commentators asked why the workers' fists are so hard.²⁰⁶ No doubt, Chinese workers are motivated by class-consciousness raised during the Mao era. Therefore, it is simplistic to boil down Mao's class discourse and analysis to ideological indoctrination.

Mao launched political campaigns to purge the elites whom he believed would nurture bourgeoisie thinking and have the potential for capitalist restoration. At the same time, he attempted to raise class-consciousness among Chinese workers and arm them with his thought to patrol the Maoist socialist path by promoting socialist mass culture to construct the identity of Chinese workers as "masters" of socialist enterprises. Three debates on mass-culture have taken place in China since Mao wrote his work in 1942, *Talks at the Yan'an Conference on Literature and Art*, to define the role of literature and art in the communist state. The first debate happened during the Anti-Japanese War period in the 1940s. In his work, Mao raised the question of literature and art for whom. Following his class analysis, Mao argued that literature and art should work for the masses of the people. First, it serves the workers, the class leading the revolution; second for the peasants, the most numerous and most steadfast of allies in the revolution; thirdly for the soldiers, the main forces of the revolutionary war and lastly, for the

²⁰⁶ See Lao Yu, "why are workers' fists hard?" *Financial Times Chinese Edition Online*, available at <http://www.ftchinese.com/story.php?storyid=001027991>.

urban petty bourgeoisie and petty—bourgeois intellectuals.²⁰⁷ For Mao, this was the class stand of the proletariat and not that of the petty bourgeoisie for understanding literature and art. The “Yan’an Talks” had dictated the approved style in art and literature in China during the Mao era.

The second debate occurred in the 1950s when the ruling Chinese Communist Party started “socialist construction.” The third debate was in the 1980s when the Party implemented market reforms. Through China’s second mass culture debate of the proletariat culture versus the bourgeois culture in the mid-1950s, Mao elaborated that the socialist mass culture is essentially a proletariat culture, serving the workers, peasants and soldiers. For Mao, “socialist culture stages” should serve and articulate lives of “the workers, peasants and soldiers,” instead of “ghosts, monsters, ancient emperors, kings, generals and officials.”²⁰⁸ As Liu Kang argues, critics dismiss Mao’s conception of culture as the literary orthodoxy that “has always valorized a revolutionary collective identity at the expense of individuality.”²⁰⁹ Mao has been criticised for abandoning the humanist goals of the May Fourth Movement in the course of the Communist Party’s struggle for seizing and maintaining power. However, Mao’s cultural perspective was consistent with his class analysis. The debate between Mao’s cultural approach and his critics have persisted in the contending general attitudes towards the revolutionary legacies and the potential direction for the transformation of post-Mao China – towards socialist alternative or liberal democracy.

The workers’ palace of culture functioned as theater, concert and cinema primarily for workers, constituting one of the important “socialist culture stages” with the purpose of the

²⁰⁷ Mao Zedong, *Talks at the Yan’an Forum on Literature and Art*, May 1942, www.marx2mao.com/Mao/YFLA42.html

²⁰⁸ Junhao Hong, “Mao Zedong’s Cultural Theory and China’s Three Mass-Culture Debates: A Tentative Study of Culture, Society and Politics,” *Intercultural Communication Studies* IV, No 2 (1994): 96.

²⁰⁹ Liu Kang, “Subjectivity, Marxism, and Cultural Theory in China,” in *Politics, Ideology, and Literary Discourse in Modern China: Theoretical Interventions and Cultural Critique*, ed. Liu Kang and Tang Xiaobing, 24 (Durham, NC, USA: Duke University Press, 1994).

creation of what Mao called the Socialist New Man. The popularity of Maoist-era Chinese cinema with audiences of the cultural palace indicates the efficacy of instilling revolutionary and socialist legacies into the working masses. The archive of the Henan Provincial Workers' Cultural Palace described the grand occasion of projecting *Tracks in the Snowy Forest*, one of the worker-peasant-soldier films featuring the Communist revolution in the artistic method of Soviet-style socialist realism as follows:

When the film of *Tracks in the Snowy Forest* was projected in the workers' cultural palace, audiences swarmed and the theatre had to project the movies around the clock. The first day, a total of nine projections were scheduled. To satisfy audiences, one more drama was staged in the theater.

According to the survey of the cultural palace, it had an average of 1000 film-projection events annually in the 1960s, with the average attendance rate of 65 percent. In the year 1963, the palace had totally 1331 film-projection events with a total attendance of 1,220,993 (compared to a population of less than 700,000 in Zhengzhou then). In the 1970s, the cultural palace repeatedly projected filmed model plays, such as *the Legend of the Red Lantern*, *Shajiabang*, *the Red Detachment of Women* and *the Azalea Mountain*, the most famous of the few operas and ballets permitted during the Cultural Revolution in China. All the model plays had Communist and revolutionary themes with workers-peasants-soldiers as protagonists. Though often criticized as oppressing cultural pluralism and diversity, the "purely proletarian" themes and forms of expression were very appealing to the working masses. Audiences were still enthusiastic compared to the period before the Cultural Revolution when movies were particularly vivid and of high quality.

Despite the domination of officially sanctioned art and literature, creative self-expression of workers had been encouraged. Exhibitions or training courses in literature, mechanics, painting, calligraphy, photography, music, dance, sports and gardening were regularly held in the

cultural palace. A Workers' Art Ensemble and a Workers' Orchestra were created in the cultural palace for amateurs to perform. The cultural palace published a journal, *Workers' Art and Literature*, soliciting workers' submissions of their creative novels, poetry and prose reflecting their own life. The working masses were enthusiastic in creating their own drama and other works. Because of the massive participation, cultural and sports activities were universalized among common people. As one staff puts it, "The cultural palace sponsored literary education and expertise training for young workers who had just come to the nearby textile enterprises from rural areas; many of them became skilled technicians later." Deng Yaping, a Chinese table tennis player who won six world championships and four Olympic championships, began playing table tennis at age five with her father at the cultural palace. Ballroom dancing was organized in the cultural palace, though adjourned during the Cultural Revolution, providing energetic young workers in the working-class district with an opportunity to socialize and meet potential life partners. For ordinary workers, the cultural palace was their rest home and paradise. As one retired worker recalls, "the cultural palace is the pleasure palace which I have frequented for decades. Here is the place bearing my dreams."²¹⁰

An Emergent Proletariat Public Sphere and Working-Class-consciousness: the Transformation of the Henan Provincial Workers' Cultural Palace

The repercussions of market reforms on the entitlement of Chinese workers is exemplified no more than by the staging of Giacomo Puccini's "Turandot" in the Working People Cultural Palace in September 1998 in Beijing. The Italian opera tells of a romance between Turandot and a Persian prince. The callous Chinese princess beheaded her suitors who could not answer three riddles and decorated her palace with their skulls. Puccini had never been

²¹⁰ An interview with workers in my fieldwork in Zhengzhou in summer 2009.

to Asia. The Italian composer followed an Orientalist perspective of the 19th century to write the opera and imagined the original setting of the story at the Forbidden City, Beijing's imperial palace. Infamous for his Orientalist fantasies about Asian women,²¹¹ Puccini's work *Turandot* was dismissed as a bourgeois indulgence in China during the 1960s and 1970s.

However, the story of *Turandot* was staged in Beijing in post-Mao era when China has made efforts to import Western culture to satisfy cultural and spiritual needs of the booming Chinese middle-class, many of whom are obsessed with opera and classical music. Chinese filmmaker Zhang Yimou, the director famous in the West for his film *Raising the Red Lantern* and *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, directed the \$15-million exotic Puccini extravaganza.²¹² Unfolded at the venue of *Taimiao*, a component part of the Forbidden City which was converted into the workers' cultural palace in 1950, it is ironic that the Forbidden City was again off-limits to Chinese workers for the first time since the Communists liberated the imperial capital in 1949. Tickets for the extravagant staging of the Puccini opera were expensive, ranging from 150 to 1,250 dollars each for foreigners and as high as 120 dollars each for mainland Chinese, well beyond the reach of the average Beijing worker.

Similarly, most Beijing workers could not afford tickets to see the ultra-high-tech concert in May 1998, performed by the Greek-born musician Yanni at the Working People Cultural Palace. The cultural mega-events organized in workers' cultural palaces have been increasingly inaccessible and irrelevant to Chinese workers, who do not care to make inquiries about cultural performances at their own venue. The cultural performance excluded Chinese workers from the audiences, which are primarily composed of foreigners in Beijing and newly rich Chinese

²¹¹ Sean Metzger. "Ice Queens, Rice Queens, and Intercultural Investments in Zhang Yimou's *Turandot*," *Asian Theatre Journal*, Vol. 20 (2003).

²¹² *Ibid.*

capitalists. Even the Chinese revolutionary classics of Mao's Cultural Revolution, which may still be interspersed with Western operas in China's major performing arts festivals, are not for their appreciation and consumption.²¹³

The marginalization of Chinese workers in the Working People Cultural Palace, the best-known and most centrally located palace of culture in China, epitomizes the transformation of workers' cultural palaces throughout the country in post-Mao market reforms. During Maoist-era socialism, trade unions fully funded workers' cultural palaces. Trade unions levied obligatory membership fees on workers (less than one percent of monthly income) partially to finance workers' cultural palaces. The state revenues often subsidized deficits. As non-profit cultural institutions, workers' cultural palaces have not been immune to the consequences of market reforms. From the middle of the 1980s, the state suspended its subsidies and pushed workers' cultural palaces to the wave of market economy for their financial survivals. Through the 1990s, they had to rely on their own revenues and profits from commercialization of their facilities. Chinese workers have since lost what they called their "schools and paradises" once granted under state benefactions for the masters of socialist enterprises.

If the Working People Cultural Palace in Beijing shut the door upon Chinese workers by prohibitively expensive high culture, commercialization has drained the working class culture and penetrated workers' cultural palaces by clamouring consumer culture amidst the development of capitalism in China. Trade unions rent out facilities of workers' cultural palaces to businesspeople to manage KTV boxes, discos, ballrooms, centers of bath, sauna and massage, restaurants, bars, billiard rooms, mahjong rooms and all other forms of entertainment and leisure

²¹³ Barbara Demick, "China's got this thing for Puccini," *Los Angeles Times*, home edition, Part A, Pg.1, July 28, 2009.

appropriate for customers of the Chinese urban middle class.²¹⁴ Some of the leisure choices are tainted with offers of pornographic or sexual services. The so-called “bourgeois” values, which the vanguard party suppressed during the Mao era, are endemic in the workers’ cultural palace, once the stronghold for nurturing proletariat culture. What Leon Trotsky condemned as “fantasizing about daily life”²¹⁵ is overwhelming public life through workers’ cultural palaces, which provide the ideal urban space for spreading new ideas. In Workers’ Cultural Palace of Jing’an District in Shanghai, a sex exhibition has attracted thousands of visitors who view displays on topics such as finding erogenous zones and revitalizing couples’ flagging sexual enthusiasm.²¹⁶

The diversification of daily life and leisure choices and cultural pluralism are certainly a welcome progress compared to the abstinence of the puritan era of Mao. However, the growth of bourgeois culture and popular culture has developed and squeezed workers and working-class culture out of urban spaces. Privatization of SOEs has driven the majority of Chinese workers out of their factories, dispossessed their accumulation and dismantled the entitlements they enjoyed during Mao’s socialism. Workers’ cultural palaces, once spatial barriers to resist bourgeois culture, are taken over to facilitate the development of capitalist relations in China. Under the heading of promoting “All People Fitness Activities” and “Urbanite Cultural and Sports Activities,” some cultural and policy experts suggest detaching workers’ cultural palaces from trade unions and transferring their jurisdiction to cultural departments of the government. In

²¹⁴ Sun Xiuling, “Kong wu wenhua huanshi wenhuagong ma” (the palace without culture, can we still call it cultural palace?), *People’s Daily* online, available at <http://sports1.people.com.cn/GB/guandian/1034/3059136.html>; also see Wen Xin, “shui dajie le wenhuagong li de wenhua” (Who robs cultural palace of culture)? *Workers of China* online, available at <http://ent.worker.cn/contentfile/2009/08/14/210614106721116.html>.

²¹⁵ L. Trotsky, “Leninism and Workers’ Clubs,” in his *Problems of Everyday Life and Other Writings on Culture & Science* (New York, 1973), 305; cited in Lewis H. Siegelbaum, “The Shaping of Soviet Workers’ Leisure: Workers’ Clubs and Palaces of Culture in the 1930s,” *International Labour and Working-Class History*, No.56 (Fall 1999): 80.

²¹⁶ John Gittings, “Sex and Fun Replacing Puritan Era in China,” *The Guardian*, Thursday 19 August, 1999.

this way, state appropriations can fully fund workers' cultural palaces for supporting non-profit "public" cultural institutions. However, this shift must begin by changing the image of the workers' cultural palace through deleting the name "workers" from its title, thus legally and legitimately expanding its functions to serve all urban inhabitants, instead of the working class alone.²¹⁷

In the Henan Provincial Workers' Cultural Palace, where I conducted my fieldwork, local government has dismantled old buildings and facilities from the Maoist era. The location has been converted into a wide-open, forested urban space named "The May First Park." A new office building has been built close to the major street, and indoor facilities on the borders of the park are available for commercial rental to earn revenues for the palace to survive financially. The cultural palace's administration office is relegated to an old and small two-storey building at one corner of the park, with its functions primarily in maintenance. The out-door centre of the park is full of workers, retirees, and other urbanites who voluntarily and spontaneously join the cultural and leisure activities available. Compared to the in-door facilities available to younger and middle-class consumers, majority of the participants of the outdoor activities belong to the working class people. The power of capital has driven Chinese workers out from their "inherently spiritual temple hall" endowed under Maoist socialism. Despite the banishment that changes the pattern of cultural and communicative activities among workers in post-state socialist transformation, as the legacy of the Maoist socialism, the workers' cultural palace

²¹⁷ Wang Xuejin is vice editor of Shaoxing Education, Zhejiang Province. He is an influential blogger with China's biggest internet portal Sina.com. See his blog, Sanbuguan gongren genhuagong chulu hezai (How to get workers' cultural palaces out of the three-no-administration situation)? Available at <http://www.ccdy.cn/pubnews/511022/20080309/537672.htm>.

provides the urban space in the working- class district, in which the working class is re-composed through what Burawoy calls “potential nuclei of solidarity and self-organization.”²¹⁸

Proletarian Public Sphere: The May First Park in Zhengzhou as “The Hyde Park of the Oriental”

In reflecting on the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, Burawoy argues that it was no more than the failure of state socialism under Stalinism. The class-consciousness of state socialist workers will turn toward critique of capitalism in post-communist transformation.²¹⁹ Class struggle will be organized again, but on the terrain of active society or civil society. Therefore, the strengthened autonomy of civil society and organized social forces within it are vital for the working class to turn the critique into mobilization and play their transformative role in directing post-communist market transition towards emancipatory socialism.²²⁰ In the context of Chinese post-Mao market transformation, the public sphere of the workers is empirically observable. The May First Park in Zhengzhou, reconstructed from the residue of the provincial cultural palace, is tuning into a prototype of what Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge coin “the proletarian public sphere.”

Negt and Kluge use proletarian public sphere to differentiate it from that of the bourgeois public sphere conceptualized by their mentor Jurgen Habermas. They argue that a range of public spheres, hosting different and competing constituencies, exist simultaneously beyond the exclusive property of the bourgeois public sphere. Officially unrecognized and operating outside the parameters of institutional legitimation, the formations of these public spheres are responding

²¹⁸ Burawoy and Lukacs, *The Radiant Past*, 134.

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 21.

²²⁰ Michael Burawoy and Erik Olin Wright, “Sociological Marxism,” in *Handbook of Sociological Theory*, ed. Jonathan H. Turner, 459-487 (New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum Publishers, 2002).

to the contingent needs of all of the subaltern groups whose self-expression is “blocked” from the usual arena of public discourse.²²¹ The constituency of Zhengzhou workers shapes the proletariat public sphere through which the workers express the life context of the proletariat and develop their own identity by resistance to their bourgeois opponent.

Many workers and retirees gather at the May First Park every day from daylight hours until night for relaxation, exercise, entertainment, chatting, and most significantly, talking animatedly about politics. A huge crowd of workers who gather routinely at the eastern margin of the central space always try to make sense of, and critique, the current events in China and the rest of world from the Maoist socialist perspective and Mao Zedong Thought. In this group of workers, which amounts to more than one hundred loyal participants, in addition to unnumbered ad hoc visitors, the discussions usually begin with one worker who briefs them of major domestic or international news, even gossip, from varieties of newspapers, televisions, books and the internet. Obviously, the briefer is knowledgeable and informative through access to diverse news media, and often plays the role of opinion leader. This group has about three briefers. They are well-informed and clear narrators, telling the stories from Maoism. The participants are good listeners and they are allowed to ask questions and express their comments after the briefings. Discussions are often hearty. Sometimes, workers are filled with indignation, condemning what they call “capitalist reformists” of betraying the working class and Mao’s socialism. They speak out in rough, obscene dialect to curse capitalist restoration in China. Sometimes the workers roar with laughter as one discussant uses satire to slam Chinese capitalism. They are nostalgic for the good old days during the Mao era. Any depreciation of Mao is intolerable for them. They

²²¹ Negt and Kluge, *Public Sphere and Experience*.

appreciate Mao for his socialist vision – equality, honest and incorruptible government serving the people, and the working class as masters of socialist enterprises.

The defense of Maoist socialism is by no means echoed by all the other workers at the May First Park. Another group of retired, on-duty, and laid-off workers often huddle together, primarily complaining of the unfair economic treatment granted in post-Mao market reforms. They acknowledge that Maoist socialism did not work and market reforms since Deng have made their life better off. However, they tend to compare with other social strata such as cadres and conclude that as workers, they are left in a disadvantaged situation and have been unfairly treated in terms of wage increases, medical plans, pensions and other measures of welfare. They care more about economic returns than the political direction of post-Mao market reforms. Compared to the first group, they are indifferent to the Maoist era and show implicit resonance with the official reform-oriented discourses and ideology in post-Mao China. This stance of economism overlaps to some extent with the Maoist advocates among the first group, thus not necessarily incurring the wrath of pro-Maoist workers. They are sympathetic to each other and sometimes ally with each other.

The polar opposite of the pro-Maoist group is the third crowd of workers who gather regularly at the western margin of the park. In reflecting the destiny of the Chinese working class in contemporary China, they blame Marxism, Maoism and the Chinese Communist Party for their sufferings. Their opinion leaders collect and distribute clippings of newspapers and magazines, or photocopies of articles from tabloid newspapers revealing Mao's scandals and secret party history. This group of workers resonates with Chinese liberal intellectuals and applies a liberal democratic narrative to analyze all the problems and issues in post-Mao transformation. They enthusiastically support the Charter 08, a manifesto initiated in 2008 and

signed by over three hundred Chinese liberal intellectuals and human rights activists to promote political reform and democratization in China. For those workers, the future of China and the working class lies in whether China will model itself after the United States. China should not only implement capitalism in economy, but also democracy and freedom in politics. In this way, Chinese workers can be protected as industrial citizens with rights and obligations guaranteed by the state laws and international labour norms. Opinion leaders in this group often carry short-wave radio sets and tune in to *Voice of America* to be instantly informed of news. Official Chinese media are not trustworthy and dismissed as propaganda.

The chasm that divides the industrial workers in the park is unbridgeable. The liberal group of workers ridicules the leftist crowd in a nickname of “*Maomao*,” insinuating that they are a swarm of ossified fogies brainwashed by Maoism. As the liberal workers are thought to vilify Mao’s personalities and Maoism, and attack China’s revolutionary and socialist legacies in a wicked way, the leftist group retorts with a contemptuous nickname “*Gougou*”, meaning doggies in English, referring to the former group as running dog (literally jackal) of Chinese capitalists and American imperialism. The leftist and liberal groups of workers are physically divided and no face-to-face debates happen between them now. However, one worker told me that at the beginning, all the workers with contending perspectives gathered together to discuss the condition and fate of the Chinese working-class. Heated debates took place among them and at times quarrelling turned into violent infighting. Gradually, the workers have been separated into the three major camps with different interests of concerns and approaches. Despite the physical separation, ideological confrontations continue between the leftist and liberal camps. For a while, the liberal camp displayed a long chain of banners in the park, posting de-Maoist and pro-liberal democratic articles clipped from various publications.

As a counter-attack, workers of the leftist camp voluntarily garnered articles of favourable appraisal of Mao and socialism, totally produced 270 posters and displayed them in the park on May 1 in 2005, the official holiday for labourers in China. The battle for ideological position was fought fiercely between the two camps through their creative forms of communication. The administration of the workers' cultural palace later intervened and banned their publications by saying that "big-character posters are against the constitution." When I visited the park, the leftist group displayed two posters again in their territory. The two articles were selected from the *Reference News* daily, published by the official Xinhua News Agency, with one titled "*Chairman Mao long live in hundreds of millions of Chinese hearts*" and another "*Focus on Korea*." Both articles advocate the socialist vision through highly appraising Maoism and briefing a Xinhua reporter's personal experience of North Korea in a favourable light. Many visitors paused to read the posters. I heard some readers question Maoist socialism by raising the severe famines that occurred during the Mao era and in North Korea. However, the bustling readers in the Maoist eastern side made the liberal western side look dreary. One worker in the liberal camp encouraged one of their opinion leaders, who had previously produced the posters but now irregularly publishes flyers named "*The Ground Newspaper*," "you should enlarge the Ground Newspaper to posters like what *Maomaos* are doing. As an old saying goes, if the bourgeois does not occupy the ideological position, the proletariat will take it over." Workers in the eastern side looked heartened, joking, "The eastern wind prevails over the western wind" - a euphemism for socialism beating capitalism.

The three kinds of political orientations among the Zhengzhou working crowds – namely those who are nostalgic of the Maoist past, those who are anti-Maoist and anti-Marxist, and those in the middle who are neither nostalgic about Maoist socialism nor repulsed by it but felt that

they are disenfranchised as compared to other classes, have operated in the same terrain. The disunity among workers with regard to their diverse, sometimes conflicting, ideological orientations indicates that workers' "structure of feeling" is not singular and homogeneous. The antagonistic perceptions of Mao and China's revolutionary and socialist legacies among Zhengzhou workers point to an ongoing process of ideological contestation involving incorporation and resistance. On the one hand, the Chinese capitalists are establishing hegemony to universalize the interests of one powerful section of post-Mao Chinese society as the interests of the society as a whole. Some groups of the Chinese working class appear to subscribe to the liberal values and objectives. On the other hand, enlightened by the Chinese revolution and socialist practice, other groups of the Chinese working class articulate the life context of their sufferings from "dispossessed capitalist accumulation" in China and resist the hegemonic capitalist discourse. The result of such a struggle for hegemony is vital to the re-composition of the Chinese working class.

Since Deng began to dismantle Maoist-era socialism and introduce capitalism in 1978, a reaction of self-defense has been typical in the process of the re-composition of the Chinese working class. The May First Park is the epitome of a proletarian public sphere through which workers' interests are self-organized. The framework of a proletariat public sphere is also a terrain for ideological struggle between the socialist vision and the capitalist perspective among workers. The result of the competition is still undecided. The leftist group of workers resorts to the official state ideologies to re-shape their identity along the subjectivity of "being masters" of socialist China. Compared to the ideological indoctrination from top to the bottom during the Mao era, the workers arm themselves with Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong Thought to perceive post-Mao market reforms as drifting towards capitalist restoration. Their historical mission is to

redeem the Chinese socialist legacies. In contrast, the liberal workers are disappointed at the Communist Party and China's revolutionary and socialist legacies. The experience and feeling of betrayal have led them to conclude that trade unionism is a workable solution for their liberation, and for this purpose, they must abandon Maoism and its legacies. The ideological contestation will have implications for the re-composition of the working class in post-Mao market reforms. What is happening in the May First Park in Zhengzhou indicates that capitalist ideology has yet to conquer the public spheres nascent in Chinese society in the aftermath of market economy. It is uncertain if the Chinese bourgeois will win the battle and, as Negt and Kluge argue, "[t]hen at once it has at its disposal norms and patterns of behavior with which it fills the space it has conquered."²²²

The Emergent Proletarian Public Sphere and Working Class Agency in Post-Mao China

The discussions and narratives of Maoist socialism among the radical and leftist Zhengzhou workers in the park had begun since the early 1990s when massive numbers of urban state workers were laid-off. For those who are still dedicated to the struggle for socialism, their actions are not limited to the cultural forms and discussions in the park. One of the overt political forms is Zhengzhou workers' conspicuous celebrations of the anniversary of Mao's birth or death dates. The Zijinshan Square is a small public park in the downtown of Zhengzhou, where stands the last Mao statue in the city. In 2001, tens of thousands of workers gathered in the square and paid their tribute to Mao by laying wreaths and reciting poems before Mao's statue. The workers clashed with 10,000 police sent by the local authorities, worrying about the memorial would incur large-scale labour unrest amidst ongoing SOE restructuring and political

²²² Negt and Kluge, "The Proletarian Public Sphere," 93.

instability at large.²²³ Since then, the local authorities have prohibited workers from gathering in the square to commemorate Mao. Disregarding the warning, however, workers confronted the police and went ahead with their memorial activities each year. This has culminated in the ostensible event in 2004, known as the “Zhengzhou Four.”²²⁴ For celebrating the 28th anniversary of the death of Mao, Zhang Zhengyao, a worker activist in Zhengzhou, handed out copies of a commemorative piece, titled *Mao Forever Our Leader*, to the working masses in the square. In his leaflet, Zhang accused the Communist Party and government of deserting the interests of the working classes and taking part in widespread corruption. The flyer also denounced the party and government in post-Mao China of restoring capitalism in the country and called for a return to the “socialist road” taken by Mao. Zhang and other three workers were detained. When Zhang and the co-author of the leaflet Zhang Ruquan were each sentenced to three years in prison in a closed trial, many leftists travelled to Zhengzhou from all over the country to protest.

In Zhengzhou, labour politics is often understood from a leftist perspective, informed by Mao’s notion of class struggle. In the leaflet, Zhang states,

The historical practice and stark social realities of the past 28 years have opened our eyes and raised our class-consciousness; the bourgeois elements within our Party are the head and the backbone of the Chinese bourgeois class. These are extremely selfish persons, stubbornly pursuing the capitalist road. They are much more sinister, ruthless, greedy, and devious than an average capitalist outside the Party.²²⁵

This political and ideological ramification had also pervaded Zhengzhou workers’ protests in the process of SOE restructuring. Here I examine protests by workers of the Zhengzhou Paper Mill against the SOE restructuring as a case-specific reference pointing at how

²²³ Robert Weil, “Conditions of the Working Classes in China,” *Monthly Review* Volume 58, Issue 2 (June 2006)

²²⁴ *Monthly Review*, 2005.

²²⁵ *Ibid.*

Maoist socialism, articulated in the workers' public sphere, has informed workers' collective actions.

Harvey characterizes China as “Neoliberalism with Chinese Characteristics,”²²⁶ where the wave of privatization of the SOE sector began since the mid-1990s. In the Chinese version of neo-liberal privatization, the Party state has eroded urban state workers' interests and rights systemically and brutally. The worse is that the restructuring program has mostly ended up with the embezzlement of state assets by the cadre-capitalist class.

For example, the Zhengzhou Paper Mill, established in 1958, was a state-owned, medium-sized factory, which was efficient until 1995 when it stopped production because of governmental environmental policy. The factory was idle for two years until 1997 when it was merged with the Fenghua Company, which claimed it was a SOE enterprise affiliated to the Office of Port-Of-Entry in Henan Province. At the time of the merger sponsored by the Zhengzhou Municipal Government, Fenghua promised to pay the mill workers' basic living expenses and re-employ them as the new company decided to restore the production line and ambitiously, expand business into other sectors. After the merger was completed, however, the Fenghua Company started to siphon off the assets of the old paper factory and plan real estate development of the factory land. The company was not interested in improving the workers' livelihood and re-employing them. Workers realized that local cadre-capitalist class falsely created the company to embezzle the money and the assets of the paper factory. They sought to nullify the merger and protect workers' basic rights by appealing to the government. As their repeated petitions had met with no responses, the workers decided to organize themselves to take back the factory.

²²⁶ Harvey, *A Brief History*, 120.

In October 1999, Li Jiaqing, the former deputy manager of the factory, organized a workers' congress at the mill and the workers' congress first democratically elected a slate of leaders. In January 2000, the workers circulated an eight-point petition to the Zhengzhou municipal government and the Bureau of Light Industry, demanding safeguards for their factory's assets and nullifying the merger. As the petition met with no response, more than one hundred workers occupied the factory and forced out the Fenghua company managers in June 2000. The workers prevented the removal of equipment and instituted their own control of the factory. However, the local authority suppressed the workers' protests and struggles. On August 7, police detained Li Jiaqing. The next day, around 500 public security personnel and armed police forced their way into the factory and detained twenty worker activists.²²⁷ However, the workers persisted their struggles against what they believed were corruption and privatization and for upholding socialism. Finally, the Zhengzhou municipal government sent a workforce to the factory. The workers re-elected a "staff and workers' representative congress" at the mill and established a union committee. The workers' self-organization led the workers to continue their negotiations and struggles with the local authorities and the Fenghua Company. Through twists and turns, the local authorities and Fenghua Company gave up. The local government had to declare the nullification of the merger and the workers regained their factory. The jailed worker leaders were also set free.

As educated in Maoist socialism, the Zhengzhou paper mill workers believed that they were and are the masters of the factory. When the workers found that enterprise reforms, in the name of restructuring, were actually taking the path of privatization, they rose up to safeguard their rights and interests. As Li Jiaqing, the worker activist of the factory, wrote,

²²⁷ Wuyi fu Zhengzhou shehui shijian baogao (Report on social survey and practice in Zhengzhou on Labour Day), *Tian tian jiayou online*, access to http://www.ttadd.com/yingyongwen/HTML/41867_2.html.

The assets are created and accumulated by hundreds and thousands of people with their youth, sweat and blood. As for me, it has been thirty years since I came to the factory from Guangzhou. I have devoted my best youthful years to the plant. During the final years of my life, it is a matter of course of me to do something for the safety of the plant's assets and make my final contribution.²²⁸

In his in-depth field interviews, Weil met with some workers of the Zhengzhou paper mill and found that Maoist socialist ideology, which advocated workers' control over the factories, particularly during the Cultural Revolution, had provoked their struggles.²²⁹ As Weil observes, Zhengzhou workers have primarily taken collective actions from a leftist historical perspective embodied in Mao Zedong Thought.²³⁰ This had been behind the collective agency of the workers in Zhengzhou Paper Mill. When I talked to a worker activist from the factory in the park, he argued that corruption, capitalists and cadre-capitalist have caused Chinese workers' worsening conditions. Mao had predicted the current situation and attempted to prevent its happening through launching the "two-line struggle." The Zhengzhou Paper Mill workers had consciously distinguished their struggles, informed by Maoist socialism, from trade unionism. Overseas liberal organizations and media, for example, Human Rights Watch, Labour Watch, The New York Times and The World Journal, the largest Chinese newspaper in North America, reported their protests, asserting that Li Jiaqing was an "independent union leader" and that the workers of the Paper Factory established an "independent union organization." However, the Zhengzhou workers disagreed with this liberal interpretation of their resistance. Through Li Minqi, an overseas China scholar and a declared socialist, the Zhengzhou workers asked for help issue a statement in his blog, clarifying that their struggles are against capitalism and privatization, and for upholding socialism. Their goals are different from that of the "independent union movement" run by Chinese liberal intellectuals. For the Zhengzhou workers,

²²⁸ This is excerpt from Li Jiaqing's Letter from Prison to a Union Head. See World Class History Archive, accessible at <http://www.hartford-hwp.com/archives/55/741.html>.

²²⁹ Weil, "Conditions of the Working Classes."

²³⁰ Ibid.

they believe that western imperialism has co-opted the Chinese liberals.²³¹ The workers cite the 1988 State-Owned Enterprise Law and the 1992 Trade Union Law – stating that “The workers’ representative congress is the basic form of enterprise democratic management,” as their legal basis for establishing their self-organizations. Instead of initiating free trade unions, they just took the laws seriously to organize their site-specific “staff and workers’ representative congresses” at the state-run enterprise, often left on paper by the party state, which is led by what they call “capitalist roaders.” This is what the workers mean by “law,” socialist conception of law distinct from Lee’s liberal assumption and legal discourse to make sense of workers’ struggle.

Conclusion: Communication, Proletarian Public Sphere and the Re-composition of Working Class in Post-Mao China

Workers’ palaces of culture have been forms of communication and cultural institution linking and corresponding to the construction of the Chinese working masses as conscious actors. In his critique of workers’ clubs and palaces of culture in the Stalin era, Lewis H. Siegelbaum makes them analogous to Fascist Italy’s off-work program and Nazi Germany’s “Strength through Joy.” Through organizing recreational pastimes and linking them with state beneficence, the leisure regulation provided the regime “with ‘a highly articulated institutional framework’ for incorporating what previously had been autonomous social expressions”.²³² Though applying this critique to the Chinese context may argue for oppression by regulating

²³¹ See Minqi Li’s webpage article, Guanyu Zhengzhou zaozhichang zigong fanfubai fansiyouhua douzheng de yanzheng shengming (A solemn statement about the struggle of workers in Zhengzhou Paper Mill against corruption and privatization), 18 March, 2001 at <http://www.bignews.org/20010326.txt>, also at <http://www.mail-archive.com/pen-l@galaxy.csuchico.edu/msg54013.html>.

²³² Lewis H. Siegelbaum, “The Shaping of Soviet Workers’ Leisure: Workers’ Clubs and Palaces of Culture in the 1930s,” *International Labour and Working-Class History*, No.56 (Fall 1999): 89; Also see Victoria de Grazia, *The Culture of Consent: Mass Organization of Leisure in Fascist Italy* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1981); Detlev Peukert, *Inside Nazi Germany: Conformity, Opposition and Racism in Everyday Life*, translated by Richard Deveson (London: Batsford, 1987).

Chinese workers' leisure through workers' palace of culture, it is also undeniable to recognize workers' clubs and palaces of culture as what Chinese workers call a paradise during the Mao era in their collective memory.

As the sites of forging proletariat culture and establishing its hegemony, workers palaces of culture constituted empowerment. During Mao's era of socialist construction, workers' palaces were accessible to all urban workers, organizing activities that were collective, voluntary and accessible. Beyond political socialization and highly politicized leisure, the important cultural institution in the Mao era created working-class culture, defined by Raymond Williams as "the basic collective idea, and the institutions, manners, habits of thought, and intentions which proceed from this."²³³ Even though dismissed by critics as the ideological indoctrination of class-consciousness, for the Chinese working class, the discourse of "masters of socialist enterprises," to which they are habituated through the proletariat culture, has provided them with categories to make sense of the bewildering experiences of industrial restructuring in post-socialist transition and empowered them to resist. Invoking Walter Benjamin's critique of the Arcades in Paris, I would argue that the "ambiguity" of workers' palaces of culture constitutes what Theodor W. Adorno calls "a dialectical image", pointing "in two directions at once and expressive of both oppression (by the ideology of consumption) and liberation (into a utopia of plenty)."²³⁴

Through analyzing workers' cultural palaces in general and the case of Zhengzhou specifically, this chapter has advanced three propositions in conceptualizing the re-making of the Chinese working class in post-Maoist socialist transformation. First, it is necessary to reconsider

²³³ Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society* 313 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963).

²³⁴ Christopher Rollason, "The Passageways of Paris: Walter Benjamin's Arcades Project and Contemporary Cultural Debate in the West," in *Modern Criticism*, ed. Christopher Rollason and Rajeshwar Mittapalli, 264 (New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 2002): 262-296.

official state ideologies and legacies of the Maoist socialism. Workers' cultural palaces, as part of Louis Althusser's conception of the Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs),²³⁵ have functioned to interpellate concrete individual workers as subjects of working class-consciousness during Maoist socialism. Critics have often highlighted the oppressive effects that the consumption of state socialist ideology and proletarian culture has had on Chinese workers. Workers' cultural palaces are dismissed as what Robin refers to the "cultural base of a total *vospitanie* [education]," through which the Leninist Party-state expected the Chinese working class to be remoulded as a docile and obedient workforce. Maoist socialism was often reduced to what Branko Horvat calls "etatism."²³⁶ According to Horvat,

If the role of the vanguard party is not only to rule on behalf of the proletariat, but also to instil a socialist consciousness into workers and teach workers about their real interests, then the bearer of socialism is not the working class but the party and its leadership. Since the bearer of every social system is its ruling class, we arrive eventually at a theory consistent with the facts, though not a theory of socialist transition. If economic centralization is added to political totalitarianism, what emerges is a system with an immense concentration of power in the hands of the ruling class. We have identified this system as etatism.²³⁷

Nevertheless, workers' cultural palaces, as part of unwavering Chinese revolutionary and socialist legacies, provide the workers with urban space indispensable for working people's lives in post-socialist China. Workers could adopt it, as the case of Zhengzhou indicates, as a proletarian public sphere to re-compose their socialist class-consciousness from the bottom up. In this way, the ruined "palace" with its connotation of the Chinese working class as the leadership, conjures up a memory of socialist practice, even if unsuccessful, in China. The vision of utopia is liberating, as Benjamin's critique of the Arcades indicated, when it empowers the

²³⁵ Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological state apparatuses," in *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader*, 2nd edition, ed. John Storey (Hemel Hempstead: Prentice Hall, 1998).

²³⁶ According to Branko Horvat, "A society will be called etatist if its ruling strata profess the basic tenets of traditional socialist ideology, such as the elimination of private productive property and the emancipation of the exploited classes, but revise the socialist approach in regard to one crucially important aspect: the role of the state." See his book, *The Political Economy of Socialism: A Marxist Social Theory*, 21 (M.E. Sharpe, Inc).

²³⁷ Horvat, *The Political Economy of Socialism*, 379-380.

workers to a form of resistance. This proposition is inconsistent with most sociologist research of Chinese labour that insists an instrumentalist perspective of workers' memory of Maoism, "a sign of nostalgia rather than class-consciousness."²³⁸

Second, it is important to look at possible forms of communication that workers use for self-expression. As Burawoy and Lukacs argue, discourses of state ideologies propagated in the radiant past are turning into resources for working class formation, and community life, instead of the shop floor, is becoming the central terrain for class formation.²³⁹

While post-Mao reforms has degraded Chinese workers as the subaltern class and denied them a voice in the politics of representation, workers' cultural palaces - the spatial component of community life for the working class, make it possible for them to take creative communicative activities to speak for themselves. Seth Siegelau argues, "Communication plays a very special role in the historical transmission of accumulated experiences, struggles and ideas, in the creation of a certain type of consciousness, a certain memory, in the formation of a certain type of human being."²⁴⁰ The posters created by the leftist workers in Zhengzhou to propagate socialist vision, even though they perhaps naively believe in a Maoist utopia, embody the importance of the communicative dimension in shaping the working class identity.

Third, the proletarian public sphere emerging in post-Mao market reforms is a positive development for Chinese workers to refurbish their identity as a proletarian and revolutionary force for emancipatory transformation of capitalism towards the prospect of democratic socialism in China. The proletariat public sphere, empirical in the case of Zhengzhou, works as,

²³⁸ Chris King-Chi Chan and Pun Ngai, "The Making of a New Working Class? A Study of Collective Actions of Migrant Workers in South China," *The China Quarterly*, No.198 (June 2009):.302; Also see Lee, *Against the Law* and Chen, "Industrial restructuring and workers' resistance."

²³⁹ Burawoy and Lukacs, *Radiant Past*.

²⁴⁰ Seth Siegelau, "Preface: Working Notes on Social Relations in Communication and Culture," in *Communications and Class Struggle Vol. 2: Liberation, Socialism*, ed. Armand Mattelart, 15.

what Negt and Kluge call, “the self-defense organ of the working class,” protecting proletarian class and individual workers from the cooptation by bourgeois interests and ideologies. As workers’ public sphere, the workers’ cultural palace provides a basis to mobilize consciousness into collective action. For example, my interview shows that the talks and discussions in the workers’ cultural palace have informed protests and resistance at the Zhengzhou Paper Mill. Therefore, we cannot disconnect the cultural domain from workers’ collective action.

CHAPTER FOUR

CONSTRUCTING PROLETARIAN PUBLIC SPHERE: WORKING-CLASS CULTURE, LEISURE AND LITERATURE IN POST-MAO CHINA

The previous chapter examines urban workers' public debates at the Henan Provincial Workers' Cultural Palace. This chapter focuses on working class culture in general and genres, such as urban workers' leisure culture, including outdoor exercise, entertainment, singing and improvised drama performance, and working class literature in post-Mao China, to understand and explore a proletarian public sphere in terms of workers' affective, moral and cultural articulation of life experience in China's reform era.

During Maoist-era socialism, the proletariat culture in practice shaped Chinese workers' leisure and organized sensible entertainment and education along socialist consciousness of the working class. Post-socialist market reforms, however, have seen the transformation of workers' cultural palaces from promoting proletarian culture to accommodating the taste of emerging Chinese middle class leisure culture. Chinese political and cultural elites are cultivating corporate culture and attempting to equate it with working class culture for establishing the new labour regime. Whereas the Party-state in post-Maoist China attempts to displace class and class struggle discourses, segments of urban Chinese workers and organic intellectuals have taken the "purely proletariat" social and linguistic forms of expression by retrieving pre-existing class discourse and socialist ideology during the Mao era to reconstruct working class culture and broadly, a proletarian public sphere in contemporary China.

Corporate Culture as Working- Class Culture

In the era of post-Mao market economy, the Party state maintains its legitimacy by holding up to the concepts of “socialism” and “proletarian dictatorship.” In this way, the Party-state, for political control and stability, continues to claim its role as the sole arbiter of and protector of workers’ rights, allowing no place for workers to protect their own interests by themselves. In China, the ruling party still claims to be the vanguard of the working class. Therefore, working-class culture has been equated with the shifting official ideology, for example, currently towards prevailing neo-liberalism, and the promotion of working-class culture with state propaganda: First, Chinese workers’ cultural and sports activities are administrated by the departments of publicity and education in China’s trade unions. This organ, set up at the national and provincial level, is in charge of investigating political thought in the labour movement, shaping workers’ cultural activities and propagating labour models and corporate culture adapting to market economy. In China’s state corporatist model of trade unions,²⁴¹ working-class culture has been boiled down to corporate culture, manufacturing the consent of Chinese workers to the labour regime in post-socialist transformation;

Second, the official trade unions have promoted narrowly defined corporate culture, instead of broadly defined working-class culture through the workers’ press. In the Leninist imagery of the “transmission belt,” China’s trade unions publish around fifty newspapers and magazines. Almost every provincial trade union has one newspaper, either daily or weekly, with “workers” included in its title. At the national level, the ACFTU sponsors the leading Workers’ Daily in Beijing. In addition, there are about 11 workers’ magazines, respectively sponsored by the ACFTU and several provincial trade unions. Nevertheless, instead of functioning as a system

²⁴¹ Anita Chan, “China’s Trade Unions in Corporatist Transition,” in *Associations and the Chinese State: Contested Spaces*, ed. Jonathan Unger, 69-85 (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 2008).

of political representation of workers' rights and interests by bottom-up transmission, the workers' press has functioned as no more than the mouthpieces of the trade unions' offices at the central and provincial level, by top-down transmission, promoting corporate culture which aims to accommodate Chinese workers to the post-Mao market economy;²⁴²

Third, almost all of the workers' press no longer targets ordinary workers as their readership. With SOEs restructuring and massive numbers of laid-off workers, the workers' press has switched to the readership of the affluent middle class and attempts to satisfy their taste for commercial culture in order to survive financially in the liberalization of the market. In what Zhao Yuezhi calls "the twin processes of economic enfranchisement/dispossession and social inclusion/exclusion",²⁴³ workers are once again abandoned and suffer from a cultural deficit. In 1988 when the provincial trade union of Heilongjiang, one of the three Northeast provinces, published a monthly workers' magazine, its title was "Northern Workers." With the dismantling of SOEs and large-scale unemployment of urban workers, the magazine had to be renamed as "Northern People" later and presently as "Northern People (Reading for Fun)", turning itself from a worker-oriented magazine into a kind of metropolitan magazine, totally irrelevant to a workers' press.

In post-Mao politics of discourse, the concept of "workers", previously with the narrow-notation of industrial or manual labour, is often replaced with a broad term of "employees" (staff and workers) which refers to all the employed people, including white collars and all kinds of professionals. As the influential workers' journal *Contemporary Workers*, published by another Northeastern province, Liaoning's general trade union, boasts, under the wave of market

²⁴² Hu Yinan, "Undercover at Foxconn shows workers 'numbed'," *China Daily*, June 2, 2010. Available at http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/cndy/2010-06/02/content_9920456.htm

²⁴³ Zhao, *Communication in China*, 91.

economy, it has stuck to the initial aims of a workers' press as "serving trade unions, employees and the building of socialism." The journal of *Contemporary Workers* was inaugurated in 1980 and had its peak of circulation in the early 1990s with subscriptions of half million. Since 1994, its circulation began to decline sharply. By 2006, the journal dropped to the bottom with a circulation of 180,000. The journal had tried to attract the majority of urban consumers by obscuring the Chinese character of "work" in its cover so as to make its title look like "Contemporary People." Later, the journal had to re-define its readership in terms of "employees" rather than "workers", and differentiate its readership of "employees" between ordinary industrial, manual labour and elite workers. In 2006, it began to publish a fancy edition of the journal, titled *Contemporary Workers (The Exquisite Edition)*. While the initial edition continues to meet the taste of grassroots workers, the exquisite edition serves the cultural demands of Chinese elites and trade union officials. For example, one issue of the exquisite edition in 2009 reported the successful stories of several recipients of "Labour Models" at the national and provincial level, whose capacities are entrepreneurs, the Red Capitalists, or aristocratic workers and intellectuals. None of them is ordinary industrial or manual workers.

Even though published in the name of Chinese industrial workers, the *Workers' Daily* has joined the official organs and market-oriented papers' chorus to push forward China's integration with neo-liberal global capitalism. In her detailed analysis of the *Workers' Daily* coverage of China's WTO entry, Zhao finds that the newspaper did not take workers as its exclusive focus of discourse, but spoke to affluent consumers. Instead of analyzing potential negative impact of WTO entry on ordinary Chinese workers, the newspaper envisioned how Chinese consumers would fulfil their middle class dream in a post-WTO world. Overwhelmed by the "national interest" discourse and neo-liberal rationale, as Zhao observes, the *Workers' Daily* did not

assume any consistent discursive position as the voice of the Chinese workers, but instead maintained a business and capital-centred perspective.²⁴⁴

However, as Anita Chan argues, the new power relations operating across the field of social conflict are complicated. The bureaucracy itself has internal pluralism and may in turn affect the labour protest movements. As such, our understanding of the ill treatment of Chinese workers is often from direct reports in the Chinese press, indicating that there are different groups in pursuit of divergent interests.²⁴⁵ Despite the neo-liberal orientation in the Party state, the official trade unions and the labour bureaus of local government are mostly sympathetic to Chinese workers. Newspapers and journals published by the ACFTU and the Ministry of Labor have reported and discussed many cases typically facing Chinese workers. Chinese workers have learned how to use the media for help.²⁴⁶ While disfranchised workers are adept at invoking the Party state's residual socialist discourse to push the authorities towards coming down on their side, on the other hand, it also indicates that Chinese workers have not been entirely disillusioned with the revolutionary and socialist legacies.

Fourth, under the framework of trade union culture, the workers' press has advocated mastery of technique and awareness of rights as the most important component of working-class culture reconstruction in market economy. During the Mao era, Mao's conception of socialist mass culture had informed the Chinese workers' press to work for the building of working-class culture characterized by the political slogan "Working Class Must and Is Able to Lead Everything" or the lyric of "Our Workers Have Power". In post-socialist transformation, laid-off

²⁴⁴ Yuezhi Zhao, "'Enter the World': Neo-liberalism, the Dream for a Strong Nation, and Chinese Press Discourse on the WTO," in *Chinese Media, Global Contexts*, ed. Chin-Chuan Lee, 45 (London; New York: Routledge, 2003).

²⁴⁵ Anita Chan, *China's Workers under Assault: The Exploitation of Labor in a Globalizing Economy* (Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 2001).

²⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

SOEs workers, rural migrant workers and other urban workers have put their livelihood as the first priority. Yu Xian, associate dean of the law faculty at the University of Liaoning, comments that working-class culture in contemporary is “the culture of survival” in market economy. Therefore, he argues that how to raise workers’ awareness of rights and guide them to resort to legal means to safeguard their rights is an immediate part of working class culture reconstruction. In the long term, only independent trade unions can guarantee workers’ rights. In this way, the neoliberal ideology on workers’ culture would dissolve the revolutionary working-class culture.²⁴⁷

Jiang Ran, chief editor of *Contemporary Workers*, argues that encouraging workers to become skilled labour and right-safeguarding citizens would be the entries into the reconstruction of working class culture in the journal. As editor of a working-class culture journal, Ran argues that he is ambivalent to conceptualize contemporary working-class culture. In the 1980s, the journal had clearly designated working-class culture as a set of positive values and beliefs: “workers are fresh troops, primary builders with the attributes of unselfishness, revolutionary spirit, devotion and constructiveness” sticking to the socialist path in post-Mao reforms. However, what the journal had promoted as the inherent core values of working-class culture is becoming increasingly irrelevant to the logic of capital and the mass culture of the present. Workers, supposed to be a dynamic force in post-Mao market reforms, have become synonymous with the term “disadvantaged masses”. The advocacy of unselfish sacrifice and devotion makes no sense for workers and benefits only capital in a profit-based, hedonically - oriented popular culture. As the clearly – defined boundaries between working-class culture and

²⁴⁷ There points of view are expressed in a symposium on contemporary working-class culture, sponsored by the journal of *Contemporary Workers* in 2003. The symposium was reported in a personal web blog. Please access to the link: http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_49030bb301000e52.html (retrieved on November 12, 2010). The remarks by other participants from the same symposium are also cited and discussed below.

corporate culture, promoted by trade unions or between working-class culture and the mass culture, have blurred during the emerging of the market economy, the journal has sought to re-define working-class culture and seeks to anchor itself at the nexus of right-safeguarding and the mass culture. As Ran argues, the journal encourages workers to acquire skills and become skilled labour required by the market economy on the one hand; on the other hand, the hard work they do must be fairly treated and rewarded. In other words, the re-defined working-class culture is to have workers acknowledge the reality that they are sellers of labour as commodities on the one hand, and on the other hand, the capitalists, as buyers of labour, must treat them legally and fairly. This is the logic of capital and the market economy. As such, the editor stresses that the workers' journal is exploring "skill learning culture" and "right-safeguarding culture" as the entries of reconstructing contemporary working-class culture. This would improve the conditions of the Chinese working class.²⁴⁸

For the working class press, as Zhao observes, "Underlying the ostensible discursive focus on the worker is the neo-liberal agenda of 'total mobilization for competitiveness' and the discursive disciplining of workers."²⁴⁹ As the market-oriented press does, the working class newspapers and magazines have also advocated the virtues of market competition, prodding workers to have a "sober understanding of the increasingly intensive and ruthless nature of competition" and to acquire "a sense of urgency, a sense of crisis" of learning skills and making endless efforts at self-improvement.²⁵⁰

²⁴⁸ Ibid.

²⁴⁹ Zhao, "'Enter the World': Neo-liberalism," 46.

²⁵⁰ Ibid., 47.

Contemporary China's Working-Class Culture Revisited

Although some other Chinese scholars recognise the difference between contemporary working class culture and corporate culture or the trade unions' top-down transmission, they depart from the elite-centric perspective and argue that the potential way for improving the condition of Chinese workers lies in their subscribing to the market economy, through which they can rebuild their culture and identity. Zhang Xu, associate professor at Shenyang University in Liaoning province, argues, "working class culture should be neither corporate culture nor trade union culture. Instead, it should be a kind of cultural configuration formed spontaneously by workers as a group through their life experience. The cultural formation is evolving contingent on the changing identity of workers as a group."²⁵¹

According to Zhang, however, there was no working class culture in the planned economy and if it existed, it was trade union culture characterized by the provisions of entertainment activities and welfare to workers. As Zhang comments about this period, "workers and enterprises are bound together. They have no worries about their livelihood. All their lives, either spiritual or material, are undertaken by the enterprises to which they belong."²⁵² With SOEs' restructuring, the status of workers is converted from the "state masters" into employed labour. With their changing identity, workers encounter new options, including new cultural patterns. Zhang insists, most important of all, the reconstruction of working class should begin with "the culture of livelihood." Chinese workers must learn how to survive in market economy. For this purpose, workers must learn a kind of expertise in being able to find jobs, at the same time, be aware of their rights and interests and know how to protect them. The survival culture

²⁵¹ This remark was also made in the symposium on contemporary working-class culture, sponsored by the journal of *Contemporary Workers* in 2003. Please access to the link: http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_49030bb301000e52.html (retrieved on November 12, 2010).

²⁵² Ibid.

will lay the groundwork for forming working-class culture. As Zhang argues, it is the emergence of survival culture that has finally given rise to the formation of the Russian working class and working class culture in Russia's post-Communist transition. During the struggle for livelihood, Russian workers voluntarily formed many organizations of mutual aid and support, such as reading clubs and other associations. Once Russian workers become a mainstream social force, the formation of working class culture is accomplished. Chinese workers must learn from their Russian counterparts in terms of unity and mutual help. Zhang argues, the making of working class in post-Mao market transition is at the beginning stage and the formation of the working class is not completed.²⁵³

For Chinese elites, it is necessary to switch Chinese workers' identity formed in planned economy towards a new identification with a role in market economy. This definition of contemporary working class culture during neo-liberal shifting in post-Mao China in terms of corporate culture or the equation of working class culture with commercial culture of the masses is polemical. As Zhang Sining, an expert with the Liaoning Provincial Academy of Social Sciences, argues, workers as a distinct group must have their unique cultural attributes, which are becoming vague in market economy. As a result, individual workers lost their class identity. As an atomized worker, rights and interests are difficult to be protected.²⁵⁴

Adapting to the logic of capital, trade union and corporate culture are promoted from the top down in post-Mao China, with the agenda of reconstructing Chinese workers' identity with labour and imposing on them an obligation to forget about the previous identity with "masters of socialist enterprises". This promotion has dissolved the cultural uniqueness of the working class from other social classes in the capitalist productive relations emerging in China's market

²⁵³ Ibid.

²⁵⁴ Ibid.

reforms. The dissolution will flatten any significant difference between working class culture (proletarian culture) and commercial culture of the masses (consumerist-oriented). The corporate culture (enterprises-promoted and based) which the workers' press and China's trade unions promote by top-down transmission is equally applicable to the professionals and other white-collar employees. Therefore, what is at stake is to revisit contemporary working class culture in China going beyond the narrowly defined trade union or corporate culture, for the Chinese working class emancipation.

Meng Fanhua, a senior researcher of the Literary Institute at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, argues that working class culture should be understood beyond the survival culture in terms of skill learning in contemporary China. Meng insists that the conception of working-class culture should be broadly defined in terms of a proletarian culture. Meng poses the question,

Have we abandoned the proletarian culture itself totally with the ebb of the proletarian culture in the 20th century? Proletarian culture is a cultural pattern created by working class as the subjectivity of being masters. This cultural pattern still exists in social reality. We should turn back and look for resources from the proletarian culture (for reconstructing contemporary working class culture in China). The resources refer to idealism, heroism, love, beauty and sincerity. The basic virtues of human being are disappearing. The more people become rich, the more they are indifferent to and estranged from each other. Nowadays, we do not know what could move us or make us feel the warmth. This kind of feeling seldom wells up inside our hearts. However, this kind of resource is very rich in the proletarian culture. Therefore, when we discuss working class culture, we should broaden our outlook and resort to the proletarian culture for new resources. If it were possible, it would be very significant to reconstruct working class culture.²⁵⁵

Working-Class Culture From Below

Cultural Marxism, featured by works of Richard Hoggart, Raymond Williams, and E. P. Thompson, provides an applicable perspective to look at and evaluate the cultural process in contemporary China. Individual workers take on spontaneous activity in the interest of their self-

²⁵⁵ The remarks were made in the same symposium on contemporary working-class culture, sponsored by the journal of *Contemporary Workers* in 2003.

development. This would facilitate the evolution of class-consciousness among the Chinese working class in post-socialist transformation. The three major English theorists illustrate a culturalist approach to cultural texts and practices of a society in order to reconstruct the modes of behavior and the experiences and values shared by particular groups or classes who produce and consume the cultural texts and practices of that society.²⁵⁶ Hoggart made a distinction between a culture of “the people” and a “world where things are done for the people” to characterize the attributes of working class culture in the context of England.²⁵⁷ Based on his childhood experience in the 1930s, Hoggart claims that working class culture is a culture, largely, made by the people. It represents a popular culture that is communal and self-made. The working class culture intrinsically expressed what he calls “The rich full life”, distinguished by a strong sense of community. However, such a traditional working-class culture is obscured by the popular culture of the 1950s, as described by Hoggart, which lacks a popular aesthetic but offers mindless and trivial fare. Hoggart describes the aesthetic of the working class as an “overriding interest in the close detail” of everyday life, a profound interest in the already known and fondness of culture that “shows” rather than “explores”. This aesthetic is undermined by the new commercial mass culture, which is manipulative and debilitating by promoting hedonism. However, the working class maintains the ability to resist many of the manipulations of mass culture.

Williams introduces the “social” definition of culture that is crucial to establishing the general perspective and the basic procedures of culturalism. He outlines three new ways of thinking about culture: first, we can understand culture from the “anthropological” position as a

²⁵⁶ The following cursory of examination of the trios at the Birmingham School is primarily based on John Storey’s summation of them. See John Storey, *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: An Introduction*, 3rd edition, 37-51 (Pearson Education Limited, 2001).

²⁵⁷ Richard Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy*, 151 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990).

description of a particular way of life; second, culture “expresses certain meanings and values”; third, cultural analysis should be the “clarification of the meanings and values implicit and explicit in a particular way of life, a particular culture”.²⁵⁸ The three points embodied in the “social” definition of culture should constitute a totality of cultural analysis as a method of understanding culture. As he explains,

I would then define the theory of culture as the study of relationships between elements in a whole way of life. The analysis of culture is the attempt to discover the nature of the organization that is the complex of these relationships. Analysis of particular works or institutions is, in this context, analysis of their essential kind of organization, the relationships that works or institutions embody as parts of the organization as a whole.²⁵⁹

In addressing the “complex organization” of culture as a particular way of life, cultural analysis intends to make sense of four tiers: what a culture is expressing; “the actual experience through which a culture was lived”; the “important common element”; and “a particular community of experience”.²⁶⁰ Briefly, the purpose is to reconstitute what Williams calls “the structure of feeling”.²⁶¹ As John Storey sums up, “By structure of feeling, he [Williams] means the shared values of a particular group, class or society. The term is used to describe a discursive structure which is a cross between a collective cultural unconsciousness and an ideology.”²⁶²

In an early response to Williams’ claim that culture meant a “whole way of life of a social group or whole society”, E. P. Thompson suggested an alternative definition of culture not as a “whole way of life” but as a “whole way of struggle”.²⁶³ For Thompson, culture is the consequence of mutual competitions and conflicts between different social forces and interest groups, among them the most important is class struggle. Culture plays a very important role in

²⁵⁸ Raymond Williams, “The Analysis of Culture”, in *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader*, 2nd edn, ed. John Storey, 48 (Hemel Hempstead: Prentice Hall, 1998).

²⁵⁹ Williams, “The Analysis of Culture,” 52.

²⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 52-53.

²⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 53.

²⁶² *Ibid.*, 45.

²⁶³ E.P. Thompson, “The Long Revolution,” *New Left Review* 1/9 (May-June 1961): 33-34.

the formation and remoulding of class-consciousness. As Thompson argues, “The class experience is largely determined by the productive relations into which men are born – or enter involuntarily. Class-consciousness is the way in which these experiences are handled in cultural terms: embodied in traditions, value-systems, ideas, and institutional forms”.²⁶⁴ In other words, culture is mediation between class experience (class-in-itself) and class-consciousness (class-for-itself). With regard to class, therefore, as Thomson argues, “we cannot understand unless we see it as a social and cultural formation, arising from processes which can only be studied as they work themselves out over a considerable historical period.”²⁶⁵ For Thompson, the making of the English working class is the process of cultural formation, a process full of cultural antagonism in which workers participate actively and consciously.

Despite the lack of a consensual definition of culture or working-class culture, as Storey argues, the culturalist perspective provides a methodology “which stresses culture (human agency, human values, and human experience) as being of crucial importance for a full sociological and historical understanding of a given social formation.”²⁶⁶ Although the three theorists conceptualize culture and working-class culture with their distinct emphases, they give rises to the common concern with regard to working class formation – the development of a class discourse among the working class. Informed by the English cultural theorists, I investigate the (re)construction of class discourse through analyzing working-class culture in China’s post-socialist transformation.

²⁶⁴ E.P. Thompson, *The Making of English Working Class*, preface, 9-10 (New York: Pantheon Books, A Division Random House, 1964).

²⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 11.

²⁶⁶ Storey, *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture*, 51.

Urban Workers' Leisure Culture and the Return of Class: The Case of Zhengzhou

In the same way that Hoggart evaluates working-class culture of England in the 1930s as “not an escape from ordinary life”,²⁶⁷ contemporary Chinese working class culture develops as workers face up to their daily lives. Synthesizing the contentious definition of culture between Williams and Thompson, I would describe working-class culture in post-Maoist China as the entire way of “struggling for livelihood.” Instead of describing the entire way of struggling-for-livelihood, I analyze the cultural phenomena of outdoor fitness and entertainment activities that have come into vogue among Chinese workers. Beyond the production process, Chinese workers' survival culture has primarily presented itself by their cultural and entertainment in leisure. I would theorize the emergence of working-class discourse out of Chinese workers' cultural activities in leisure.

Self-organized workers often swarm into the parks in the working-class district in Zhengzhou, where they engage in performing singing songs, dancing, performing local operas, kicking shuttlecocks, or *taichi*. All participants join in their groups, which attract audiences. Various forms of fitness are self-made by workers and are widely popular among them. In evening, around one hundred people gather in an urban park and practice a newly invented group fitness exercise. Participants pat their hands, arms and shoulders while speaking a pithy formula in a rhythm with four beats to a line. In the residential compounds of five state-run textile factories, the configuration that is the legacy of Maoist socialism, workers play poker or Chinese chess in the late afternoon in the open-space around the restaurants that fill the pedestrian streets. The usual scenario is four players in a poker game or two rivals in a chess game with many

²⁶⁷ Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy*, 120.

spectators surrounding and intervening. Below a bridge arc in the western industrial zone of Zhengzhou, dozens of mahjong desks are set up in the daytime and workers sit gambling.

Whether Chinese workers have a taste for outdoor activities or they have no other options but to take advantage of the convenient and free outdoor urban space due to their lower purchasing power, their leisure pattern is in stark contrast with the Chinese middle class who swarm to bars, dance halls, cafes, discos, bowling alleys, clubhouses and even golf courses. Since post-Mao economic reforms have depoliticized leisure, a more commercial leisure culture has been re-introduced to meet the booming Chinese middle class. Accordingly, leisure culture, characterized by Westernization and commercialization, has polarized leisure patterns in terms of income level.²⁶⁸ The gulf between “haves” and “have-nots” has separated the urban population spatially in leisure, which represents, in Marx’s view, a haven from the “dull compulsion of economic relations.”²⁶⁹

Embodied in the prevalent outdoor leisure and physical exercise is the “structure of feeling” among workers in post-Mao market reforms, through which class discourse is reconstructed to maintain class-consciousness. First, the spatial segregation in leisure has impact on the formation of social groups’ identity. When I asked workers in Zhengzhou during my field work the following question: “What cultural and leisure activities do you have in your everyday life?” most of them felt confused at the beginning and later answered that they have no time for cultural and leisure activities as they are busy labouring and struggling for a livelihood. As one younger paper mill worker said, “such things are what the idle rich play at. As a wage earner, I work 12 hours per day and have a one-day break every 15 days. I have 30 minutes for every meal

²⁶⁸ Shaoguang Wang, “The Politics of Private Time: Changing Leisure Patterns in Urban China,” in *Urban Spaces in Contemporary China: The Potential for Autonomy and Community in Post-Mao China*, ed. Deborah S. Davis, Richard Kraus, Barry Naughton, Elizabeth J. Perry, 149-172 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

²⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 152.

during my daily work. When I get off work, I am so exhausted that the only thing I want is going to bed for a sleep. How do I have leisure time for cultural and entertainment activities? ”

Obviously, workers ordinarily understand cultural and leisure activities as something luxurious for the Chinese middle class, and the rich (capitalists) and the powerful (officials). This understanding contains what Haug calls “seeds of a conscious class culture”,²⁷⁰ through which Chinese workers develop the identity of their interests against that of other people who have very different interests from them.

For the Chinese middle class, especially newly rich capitalists and corrupt officials, extravagant patterns of leisure appear arguably to be as much for relaxation, pleasure and social status, as for showing personal fulfilment,²⁷¹ whereas Chinese workers put physical and mental recuperation as their first priority. This discrepancy makes the plights of Chinese workers salient and provokes them to think about their conditions. As one retired worker explains, “The most worrisome for workers is sickness. If workers get sick, they have to add medical expenses to their financial constraints. Once they suffer from severe sickness, most of them have to wait for death because they cannot afford the prohibitive medical expenses. That’s why the fever of body building goes on among workers.” In Zhengzhou, there are several cases of ailing laid-off workers committing suicide to reduce financial burdens for their families. These sad stories spread among workers and frankly stun them. This miserable situation has taught them to acknowledge that the vanguard party has indeed abandoned the working class. The self-claimed socialist state that they have sacrificed themselves for has turned to depend on the capitalists more than the working class in market reforms. As one laid-off worker comments, “This is

²⁷⁰ Wolfgang F. Haug, “Some Theoretical Problems in the Discussion of Working-Class Culture,” in *Communication and Class Struggle: An Anthology in Two Volumes*, ed. Armand Mattelart and Seth Siegelaub, 95 (New York: International General; Bagnolet, France: International Mass Media Research Center, 1979).

²⁷¹ Shaoguang Wang, *The Politics of Private Time*, 168.

burning the bridge the moment you cross the river, killing the donkey the moment it leaves the millstone. Workers are no longer ‘big brothers’. Nowadays, we have to help ourselves. Fitness exercises and entertainment help us to stay healthy and relieve stress.” As one worker asks, “There was a popular song singing that ‘our working class has power’, but why are we designated to be among vulnerable groups, treated as disabled people who have lost their ability to work?” Former Chinese Premier Zhu Rongji first introduced the discourse of “vulnerable groups” in a March 2002 government work report, vaguely referring to “distressed employee” or “laid-off workers.” While the party state primarily uses this sociological concept to justify market reforms by institutionalizing welfare and the labour regime, workers continue to try to make sense of their conditions mainly from a class discourse.

Third, compared to the leisure culture appealing to the booming Chinese middle class, Chinese working-class culture embodies its self-actualizing, communal and social, life-oriented and resistant attributes. Workers tend to satisfy individual pleasure in leisure through social and collective exercises and activities. Favouring collective and group activities, workers would reinvent any individual and performing form of leisure into a collective game. Take shuttlecock kicking as an example. As a traditional popular folk game, shuttlecock kicking is often an individual exercise or an individually performed and competitive game. However, workers in Zhengzhou kick a shuttlecock in groups, as in playing team sports such as basketball, soccer or volleyball. While the Chinese middle class may go to gyms or fitness centers to use a treadmill or elliptical for exercise, workers often gather to exercise in groups, taking the form of banned *Falungong* practice. Solidarity, cooperation, group loyalty, mutual aid, self-sacrifice and collectivism are cultivated through group action among Chinese workers. Such personal traits

developed in these pastimes are desirable for potential self-organization and mobilization of workers in the labour movement.

However, Chinese workers are at the same time influenced by consumerist culture and leisure emerging with the depoliticized private time in post-Mao China. Near the May First Park in Zhengzhou, two younger girls distribute flyers promoting a pole dancing fitness program to woo young female workers if they want to get themselves fit and charming or train themselves for commercial performance in nightclubs. When critics dismiss it as a form of dancing in sleazy venues, experts defend it as having nothing to do with sex but to help people improve their overall fitness. Brilliant and giant real estate advertising decorates one of the main streets in the working-class district to market newly developed condominiums, which will stand in the remnant of Zhengzhou No.1 State-Run Textile Factory. The promotion phases say, “This is a window of the world, providing you with up to date urban amenity by copying Paris gardens, being prosperous like New York, guaranteeing quality up to German engineering standards, being constructed in Singapore styles and serving you with UK-style property management.” Near the residential compounds of textile workers, a shop sells mechanical mahjong machines. The machine is a fancy desk with the function of automatically reshuffling mahjong for players. Considered a debased game, the Maoist era had exclude mahjong playing from working class culture. To rehabilitate the game’s previously degraded reputation and attract workers as buyers, the shopkeeper hangs three slogans on the wall, quoting Li Yining, a leading Chinese neo-liberalist economist, as saying the cultural connotations of mahjong playing are positive. In a workers’ residential compound, the blackboard, supposed to propagate model workers in sacrificing themselves to building socialism, instead posts an advertisement stimulating workers to consume on May Day. The consumerist-oriented slogan said, “I am the master of my May

Day. The most pleasant thing on May Day of this year is shopping, tasting fine foods and watching movies.” The new mass culture is often cited as evidence of increased autonomy and freedom in urban life in post-Mao China amid positive changes of market reforms.

In what Hoggart calls “shiny barbarism,”²⁷² commercial culture either covers up the brutal exploitation of China’s primitive capitalism or suggests socialism, as practiced during the Mao era, is a synonym for a backward economy, dull culture and repressive politics. One Zhengzhou worker pointed to the brand-new buildings decorated with shiny billboards and told me, “Look at the big changes brought about by market reforms. Deng Xiaoping is great compared to Mao Zedong.”

While China’s hegemonic capitalist culture is trying to co-opt workers, the latter has an inherent resistance to the encroachment of what Hoggart calls the “candy-floss world,”²⁷³ presented by the Chinese commercial bourgeois. In a grocery full of children’s fun food, a retired worker reproaches his granddaughter who pesters him to buy a bottle of yogurt for her, “You don’t like the milk but take a fancy to the colorful package. This kind of junk food with artificial additives is not healthy to you.” As exemplified by the debate between liberal group of workers and Maoist workers in the May First Park, therefore, the re-constitution of working class discourse characterizes what Gramsci conceptualized as a hegemonic struggle between traditional working class culture and the new commercial mass culture, involving both resistance and incorporation.

Fourth, while the Party-state in post-Mao China intends to have the revolutionary and socialist legacies selectively forgotten, for example, displacing class discourse and class struggle,

²⁷² Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy*, 193.

²⁷³ *Ibid.*, 206.

to avoid the eruption of social conflicts in post-socialist transition, in a reverse direction, Chinese workers would rather retrieve pre-existing class discourse through cultural activities and have working-class conscious discourses remembered. In the parks of Zhengzhou, amateur Yuju Opera performers sing the repertoire of revolutionary and socialist themes, such as *Liu Hulan*, *Marriage of Xiao Erhe*, *The Red Lantern*, *Chao Yang Gully*. Together with Peking Opera and Pingju Opera, Yuju Opera, to which Henan Province is home, is one of China's famous national opera forms. Yuju is famous throughout the country for its smooth voices, beautiful melodies and strong local flavour of Henan culture. The simple style has made Yuju popular among local workers. While the middle class diverts their interests to commercial culture and entertainment, such as to Puccini's *Turandot*, local workers are among the enthusiasts preserving and revitalizing the Yuju art form. Their amateur performance in the parks often appeals to passers-by and visitors pause to listen. When I visited the May First Park, one female worker was singing excerpts from *the Red Lantern*. The opera tells the story of a revolutionary family from the February 7 strike movement of 1927, which started in Zhengzhou, until the War of Resistance against Japan. The three-generation family is composed of railway worker Li Yuhe, who is working secretly for the Communist Party, his mother Grandma Li and his daughter Li Tiemei. Actually, the family members are from different families of Li, Zhang and Chen, survivors of workers who are killed in labour movement. The opera reassessed the traditional relationships of Chinese society based on ties of blood, reminding audiences of the necessity of a class-based identity for the common cause of liberating themselves from exploitation and oppression. In carrying out a mission, Li Yuhe was unfortunately arrested by Japanese military police and he was executed. Grandma Li educated granddaughter Tiemei to follow her father to become a revolutionary. Eventually, Grandma Li was also murdered, but Tiemei carries out the unfinished

task. The drama makes frequent use of words and phrases redolent of Communist thought, such as “revolution”, “class hatred” and “the Communist Party.”

Workers with performing talent often improvise on comic tragedies by singing and playing the plots of movies with revolutionary themes. In the May First Park, two worker amateur players who are active in the park and well known among the masses performed a plot from *Red Guards on Honghu Lake*, known as one of the 20th century classical Chinese musical movies. In the movie, a poor little girl led her blind grandfather, wandering in a city and making a living as street performers. With the applause of the audience, the female worker, playing the little girl, led the male worker who closed his eyes pretending to be the blind grandfather. The two walk around and the female worker sings the lyrics from the movie:

The hand takes the small dishes to knock,
Songs are good to sing but the mouth is difficult to open.
Songs can endlessly sing out the people’s suffering in the world,
Gentlemen listen and burst into laughter.
The moon is crescent illuminating tall buildings,
The poor people originally constructed the tall buildings.
In the winter the north wind blows,
The rich people laugh heartily but the poor people worry.

The female worker sings in a miserable voice, while pointing to the newly built high rises nearby, insinuating severe inequality in post-Maoist China and commodities they create have excluded and alienated workers.

The two amateur worker players go on to sing a song representing the hardships of laid-off workers. At this moment, another drama unfolds in the park. A middle-aged laid-off worker wraps a white scarf around his head, and wears two red armbands, with one side stung with a badge of Chairman Mao, the other inscribed with the characters of “Peasants, Workers, Soldiers, Intellectuals and Businessmen.” While he beats a gong, a traditional Chinese percussion instrument, he speaks out Mao’s slogans. This man is one of what workers call “the voluntary

propagandists of Mao Zedong Thought” in Zhengzhou. When another retired worker wearing a Tang-style costume approached him and expressed disagreement, the two began to debate. The Mao Zedong Thought propagandist pointed to the retired worker, “You must be a descendant of a landlord or capitalist family because you abhor Chairman Mao and socialism so much.” In Zhengzhou, many workers still use Mao’s class analysis to make sense of the reality.

Another impressive cultural form that workers in Zhengzhou take to restore class discourse in post-Mao China is singing revolutionary songs in the parks. Every night on weekdays and every Saturday morning, workers gather in two parks to sing songs of Chinese revolutionary themes and former Soviet Union popular songs. Led by a conductor, a group of musicians keep the choir in accompany. The participants include elder retired workers, middle-aged workers and even younger generations. One retired work explains, by singing the majestic and resonant revolutionary songs, they recall the passionate years during the Mao era. They maintain mental and physical health through singing songs, but also expect to keep Chinese revolutionary and socialist legacies inherited from generation to generation by the popular genre of songs.

I observed workers sang revolutionary songs and paid tribute to Mao during my fieldwork in Zhengzhou. However, this does not mean such cultural activities by workers are exclusive in that central Chinese city. In Luoyang, a neighbouring city of Zhengzhou, workers often gather in city parks to sing revolutionary songs and memorize Mao. In 2010, local government was believed to employ a group of thugs to beat one worker cultural activist, intimidating workers from their cultural activities, which may raise class-consciousness and

mobilize collective action.²⁷⁴ Singing songs of revolutionary theme is not just for leisure. The Luoyang workers also hold memorial for Mao and other revolutionary martyrs. These activities are neither merely nostalgic. Their actions can be understood in terms of Maoist class-consciousness. This is clear in the holding of an “Anti-revisionist People’s Rally” by the Luoyang workers in 2010, commemorating and calling for continuing Mao’s two-line struggle against revisionism and for socialist revolution.²⁷⁵ Because the official ideological shifting towards the neo-liberal reforms represses the articulation of leftist social forces, the mainstream media – the party organs and commercial outlets- have rarely reported workers’ cultural activities, proliferating across China and refurbishing the revolutionary and socialist past.

It is noteworthy to think over whether the bottom-up working class culture has the tendency to sway the Party state tilting towards Mao’s legacies. This is happening in Chongqing China’s most populous city. Chongqing has outpaced other Chinese cities in social-welfare policies, for example, in subsidizing public housing to the city’s masses. What the city’s party secretary Bo Xilai calls the pursuit of “red GDP,” a reference to economic development that exemplifies Maoist egalitarianism, has guided Chongqing’s economic and social policy. The transformation of social policy in Chongqing began with the cultural and ideological sphere. Since Bo became party chief of Chongqing in late 2007, he has flamboyantly advocating Maoist norms. Bo often cites Mao-era slogans in his speech and resuscitates Cultural Revolution-vintage revolutionary operas. He asked party officials to regularly text-message Mao quotations to the students in the city. Since the summer of 2008, Bo and the publicity officers have been promoting a campaign of “singing, reading, telling and forwarding” songs and stories of

²⁷⁴ “Surprise! Luoyang Worker Beaten for Singing Red Songs,” *Xinhua Forum*, <http://forum.home.news.cn/detail/76077227/1.html>.

²⁷⁵ “An Anti-revisionist People’s Rally in Luoyang,” *Utopia*, April 14, 2010, <http://www.wyzxsx.com/>; to see the rally, goes to: http://v.youku.com/v_show/id_XMTYzMDk5OTky.htmlluoyang people.

revolutionary and socialist themes – “red songs” which had been composed before market reforms to compliment the Party’s leadership, Mao, the Chinese revolution and socialist practices.²⁷⁶ The Chongqing campaign is significant in the sense that when grassroots workers hold onto the revolutionary and socialist legacies and become outspoken, the Party state responds by echoing them in order to enhance its legitimacy. Chongqing is becoming a national pacesetter in the Party state’s ideological shift from dominant neo-liberalism of “Chinese characteristics” in reform-era China towards re-embracing Maoist legacies.

In short, we can understand contemporary working-class culture, as the case of Zhengzhou indicates, in terms of the entire way of life of workers in experiencing hardships and social disadvantages in post-socialist transition. The structure of feeling among workers is that they are an excluded and marginalized class as post-Mao China takes the path of capitalist development. The cultural genres I observe above provide means of generating class discourse. Thompson described the emergence of working-class discourse in England not only as reflecting the exploitation in capitalist productive relations, but also as a transformation of pre-existing discourses.²⁷⁷ In contrast, capitalist production relations have mostly displaced industrial workers of SOEs in post-Mao China. The genesis of class discourse is more the retrieval of pre-existing discourse to account for their experience of dispossession in Chinese capitalist accumulation than an outcome of capitalist productive relations.²⁷⁸ While commercial culture in post-Mao China has greatly changed most people’s lifestyle, working-class culture has developed in its own way and drawn on old-fashioned genres imbued richly with class discourse. As William H. Sewell

²⁷⁶ Hu Yanan, “Chongqing: From Sin City to Red Capital,” *China Daily*, Feb 28, 2011.

²⁷⁷ William H. Sewell, Jr. “How Classes Are Made: Critical Reflections on E.P. Thompson’s Theory of Working-Class Formation,” in *E.P. Thompson: Critical Perspectives*, ed. Harvey J. Kaye and Keith McClelland, 69 (London: Polity Press, 1990).

²⁷⁸ The rural migrant workers have become the major workforce entering capitalist productive relations in China. The formation of class-consciousness among them will be discussed in Chapter five.

argues, “Thus, the genie of class discourse, once created, proved very difficult to get back into the bottle.”²⁷⁹

In a nascent civil society, Chinese workers may develop and re-build a proletarian culture from the bottom-up and on its own spontaneously. If the Mao era had imposed a proletarian culture upon Chinese workers by top-down transmission and ideological indoctrination, socialist consciousness and class discourse may evolve among Chinese workers in the aftermath of capitalist development in China. We may make sense of the formation of the Chinese working class in the post-socialist transition in terms of “re-composition”, instead of “the making” by applying mechanically the Western-centric concept of working class. After all, in Western capitalist countries, the working class has formed class-consciousness but they have never experienced socialist revolution, while China, ironically, had practiced socialism, but has not completed the formation of working-class in terms of trade unionism and other Western-style forms of community workers’ organizations.

Translating Experience into Working-Class Culture: Workers’ Traumatic Literature and the Evolution of Class-consciousness

In the late 1970s, soon after Mao’s death, traumatic literature merged as a genre of Chinese literature portraying Chinese cadres and intellectuals’ traumatic memory and experience of the Cultural Revolution and persecution of the Gang of Four.²⁸⁰ As part of repudiating what the post-Mao Party-state called ultra-leftism, the genre of traumatic literature contributed to the twin process of De-Maoisation and economic reforms by paving the way ideologically and

²⁷⁹ Sewell, Jr., “How Classes Are Made,” 71.

²⁸⁰ Xiaoming Chen, “The Disappearance of Truth: From Realism to Modernism in China,” in *the Party Spirit: Socialist Realism and Literary Practice in the Soviet Union, East Germany, and China*, ed. Hilary Chung, 158-166 (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1996).

culturally.²⁸¹ However, post-Mao market reforms have brought about the suffering of the Chinese working class, who are dispossessed of their enterprises economically and excluded from the representation system politically and culturally. Deng's decree of "no debate" on whether market reforms are capitalist or socialist has suppressed workers' groan from the bottom and reflections over the capitalist-oriented market reform. The literary works in market reforms have not culturally represented Chinese workers' traumatic memory and experience of post-socialist transformation. The novel "Na-er," authored by Cao Zhenglu in 2004, initiates what Kuang Xinnian calls "workers' traumatic literature" which emerged after more than two-decades of market reforms.²⁸² The novel narrates contradictory complexity of workers' identity, memory, dispossession, contestation and class-consciousness during the process of privatization in the name of MBO (managerial buy-out).²⁸³

In the novel of Na-er, the protagonist *Xiao Jiu* (junior uncle) resisted against MBO and privatization of SOEs by resorting to socialist consciousness, class discourse, models of revolutionary labour activists in Chinese Communist history and the Communist ideal of "With the Internationale, the human being will arise." All these are symbols of the Chinese revolutionary and socialist legacies that had imbued Chinese workers' consciousness during the Mao era. The title of the novel "*Na-er*" literally meaning "there", is a mispronunciation of "ying te na xiong nai er" (Internationale) by the grandmother in the story. Originally, the author titled his novel "Internationale." However, the editor of the journal *The Contemporary* renamed it as "Na-er," borrowing from the grandmother's mispronunciation, to get approval from the regime's publication censors in post-Mao China, which sees revolutionary discourse and themes as

²⁸¹ Ibid.

²⁸² Xinnian Kuang, "Xin Zuoyi Wenxue and lishi de kenengxing" (Neo-Leftist Literature and The Possibility of History), *Zuoan Wenhua* (Leftist Culture), available at <http://www.eduww.com/Article/200901/22905.html>.

²⁸³ Cao Zhenglu, Na-er, *Dangdai* (The Contemporary), No.5 (2004).

politically sensitive. When the protagonist commits suicide after his resistance failed, he dies on the spot littered with sickles and hammers he forged before he decided to end his life.²⁸⁴ Through all these symbolic representations, the story seems to encourage its readers to rethink the status of the working class in the past and of what the proletariat means in contemporary China. As Ji Shuya comments, “the author wants to pose such a question to readers – as a protective force, would socialist ideals and practice of equality and justice implied in the ‘Internationale’ be borrowed again by us to use as a historical resource to blaze the trail of an alternative modernity?”²⁸⁵

However, hostile liberal literary critics consider the symbolic representations in *Na-er* in terms of its class discourse and workers’ narrative as a form of lost, anachronistic art in contemporary China. Ji is sceptical of the applicability of class discourse and socialist consciousness of the working class to contemporary China and argues that the marginalization of the work, written from a working-class position, is unavoidable in the era of global capitalism. Ji asks,

After all, is it effective for the cultural text to be accomplished by borrowing the legacies of previous ideologies and discourses? As the official concepts between 1950s and 1970s, “class” and “class oppression” have become “the effects of reality” in the novel of *Na-er*. However, this set of discourses has been de-constructed in the 1990s by the popular culture. As a result, does it still have the power of “ideological interpellation”?²⁸⁶

According to Ji, *Na-er* follows the tradition of socialist realism in what Lu Xun called “the revolutionary proletarian literature” to constitute, instead of expressing, social reality in proletarian culture and class discourse to inspire Chinese workers’ resistance in the post-socialist

²⁸⁴ In Chinese ideological connotations, the sickle represents farmers, the hammer represents workers and also soldiers. The combination of the two symbolizes the Communist Party which is the representative of the working class with the worker-peasant alliance as its foundation.

²⁸⁵ Shuya Ji, “Zuoyi wenxue chuantong he ta de liliang” (The Revitalization of Tradition Left-wing literature and its power), *China Writers’ Net*, available at <http://www.chinawriter.com.cn/2007/2007-05-03/43849.html>.

²⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

transformation. As post-Mao China has abandoned class discourse and legacies of Chinese revolution and socialism, they would definitely cause no resonance among Chinese workers. Similarly, Hee Wiam Sian evaluates Na-er as rustic by calibrating its artistic quality and feels surprised that such a work following socialist realism has been highly praised by some other critics. The new era since the 1980s has witnessed the efforts in the field of literature and art to say farewell to revolutionary proletarian culture and replace it with the struggle for the principle of “artistic quality first, politicization second.” However, after decades of effort, Chinese literature and art seems to have turned full cycle back to the proletarian revolutionary culture. The emergence of workers’ traumatic literature, represented by Na-er, seems to mark the end of the “New Era” associated with the “traumatic literature” of the 1980s. Therefore, Hee asks, “Have the efforts in the field of literary criticism since the 1980s been made totally in vain?” Hee cites the subaltern studies to question the legitimacy of the revolutionary narrative exemplified in Cao’s novel of Na-er:

First, who speaks? Is it the author or the literature speaking on behalf of others? Did characters in the novel speak the truth? Is the proletarian in the subaltern society really speaking again? Are the intellectuals wearing the mask of rescuers again lamenting to heaven and knocking their heads on earth, here and there, (on behalf of the subaltern proletariat)? Second, who is muffling your (the subaltern) voices? Are they the state apparatuses? Are they still the disciples of post-modernism who are among the disadvantaged group? Nevertheless, why do the relentless slams on the latter intentionally obscure the fact that the former is a strong presence?²⁸⁷

Hee’s critique of Cao’s narration of the subaltern in Na-er is elite-oriented. It is the very comments by Hee that suggest what Kuang Xinnian calls “the thorough breakage between Chinese elites and the underlying society, intellectuals and the masses in terms of interests and sentiments.”²⁸⁸ As I mentioned before, the documentary of *Tiexi district* focused on the fate of the Chinese working class during the reform era and depicted the disintegration of the working class

²⁸⁷ Hee Wiam Sian, “Who Spoke?” *Journal of Hainan Normal University*, Vol.1 (2006).

²⁸⁸ Kuang Xinnian, “Xin Zuoyi Wenxue.”

as a historical subject. Similarly, Lu's reading of the work was dismissed as a class perspective by critics who would treat Wang's documentary as a piece of pure art.²⁸⁹ However, Lu argues,

The ruins of the factories and the collapse of human subjectivity revealed in an allegorical way a past we once had, a present that we cannot seem to alter, while also posing questions for the future. On the basis of this documentary, I attempted to explore the relationship between the history of industrialization in the New China and the development of our entire human industrial civilization, as well as relationships between art, a particular historical epoch, society and human subjectivity.²⁹⁰

As evident in the proletarian public sphere in the May First Park of Zhengzhou, Chinese workers indeed draw on Maoist ideologies to make sense of their present conditions and China's post-socialist transformation. Indeed, in a very conscious and voluntary way, Chinese workers have revived the historical legacy of Chinese revolution and socialism as resources of the re-composition of working-class in post-socialist transformation. As Robert Weil observes in his fieldwork in Zhengzhou, workers consider post-Mao market reforms since Deng definitely as "a return to the capitalist road" and account for their ongoing resistance as the continuation of what Mao called a "two-line struggle". Weil describes the perspective of a labour activist in Zhengzhou as follows:

As one former Red Guard in Zhengzhou put it, the understanding of a "two-line struggle," a clear demarcation between the socialism of the revolution and the capitalism of the present, is now coming out primarily from the working class themselves, and not mainly from the intellectuals. It takes an anti-corruption form, in particular – not only in the narrow sense of opposing financial malfeasance and bribes, though that is part of it, but as a broader attempt to block the alliance of state and party officials, managers, and entrepreneurs from completely converting the means of production into the private property of the newly emergent capitalists and reversing the socialist gains made by the workers and peasants in the revolutionary era.²⁹¹

Therefore, Na-er can be seen an ethnographic record of actual events happening in contemporary China. Similarly, documentaries in what Lu theorizes China's New Documentary Movement (NDM), the genres are closely linked to China's lower social classes and provide an

²⁸⁹ Yuezhi Zhao, "Chinese Modernity, Media and Democracy: An Interview with Lu Xinyu," *Global Media and Communication* 6:1 (April 2010).

²⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 12.

²⁹¹ Weil, "Conditions of the Working Classes."

alternative communication contributing to constructing “subaltern” narratives and reconstituting the subjectivity of workers.²⁹² The conditions of the working class and class discourse that Cao describes in the novel of *Na-er* correspond to what I observe in Zhengzhou. When I pause and pay attention to the street gossip and common talk in parks or residential compounds of Zhengzhou’s working-class district, I often encounter workers who gather and talk about current events and the destiny of working class. They apply Mao’s two-line struggle to understand the MBOs and SOEs restructuring. Workers clearly express their nostalgia for the Mao era and the planned economy, having the greatest esteem for Mao Zedong Thought. In Zhengzhou Paper Mill, workers had been mobilized to resist the MBOs and protect their enterprise assets by drawing on the legacies of the Chinese revolution and socialism. The intensity of contestation the workers experienced is far more than what Cao describes in the novel of *Na-er*. In Zhengzhou, the working class-consciousness is very clear. As a labour activist argues,

The working class has been reduced to one of the disadvantaged groups and their condition is very miserable. Who should be blamed for our sufferings? There are capitalists and bureaucratic capitalists and capitalist-oriented reformists within the party. Therefore, our contestation should not just seek short-term economic gains, but as Lenin argued, a struggle between capitalism and socialism, a long-term question of politics. We must arm ourselves with Mao Zedong Thought to protect the socialist path.

Although not all workers continue to subscribe to Maoist socialism, it is indisputable that the historical legacy and the experience of the Mao era and the Cultural Revolution have become a ready-for-use resource for the re-composition of Chinese working class in the post-socialist transformation. It is misleading to apply the Roland Barthes’s critique of realism and dismiss *Na-er* and the author as no more than constituting reality and class discourse. Instead, *Na-er* as the cultural text articulates urban working-class conditions and frustrations. If it is flawed, it does not adequately reflect workers’ inherent culture, class discourse, and class-consciousness in reality.

²⁹² Xinyu Lu, *Jilu Zhongguo: Dangdai Zhongguo xinjilu yundong (Recording China: The New Documentary Movement in Contemporary China)*, (Beijing: Shanlian Press, 2003); Zhao, “Chinese Modernity, Media and Democracy.”

As Zhao argues, either a whole range of communication institutions under the heavy hand of the Chinese state that has committed to the integration with global capitalism, or its concomitant commercial media and culture, have muffled the voices of Chinese workers.²⁹³ While Chinese elites turn deaf ears and blind eyes to the internalization of radicalism in Chinese workers, Cao digs it out and lets the subaltern speak in his novel. Ironically, Chinese elites, detached from the subaltern society, condemn the author for speaking for the subaltern. They imagine that the subaltern must have abandoned China's revolutionary and socialist legacies, which they would think as the culprit of their sufferings. However, the very pursuit of artistic quality and pure culture has neglected the real voices of Chinese underlying society and stopped the subaltern speaking. In his epic documentary *Tiexi District*, director Wang Bin depicted the disintegration of the working class as a historical subject by focusing on urban workers' fate in a heavy industry district in Shenyang city, Liaoning Province. However, scholars from an elite perspective would rather perceive the work from an artistic evaluation. As Lu argues, "they criticized my reading of this work from a class perspective, as they would rather treat it as a piece of 'pure art'."²⁹⁴ In her article "*Ruins of the Future: Class and History in Wang Bing's Tiexi District*", Lu argues that the collapse of Chinese working class subjectivity and the ruins of the factories revealed a past in an allegorical way, a past when the working class was once Chinese society's indisputable mainstream.²⁹⁵

The unwavering historical legacies have become an indispensable component of our understanding of contemporary working class culture and the formation of the working class. Like Lu who comments on documentaries in China's NDM, workers' traumatic literature has

²⁹³ Zhao, "Neoliberal Strategies, Socialist Legacies," 23-49.

²⁹⁴ Zhao, "Chinese Modernity, Media and Democracy," 6.

²⁹⁵ Xinyu Lu, "'Ruins of the Future': Class and History in Wang Bing's Tiexi District," *New Left Review* 31 (January/February 2005): 125-36; Zhao, "Chinese Modernity, Media and Democracy."

also treated Chinese workers as subjects and let the subalterns speak for themselves. In this way, the working class literature in post-Mao China attempts to make sense of workers' everyday lives, struggles and class-consciousness.

Investigating contemporary working-class culture, I find that it is necessary to evaluate workers' literature that has translated Chinese workers' experience into culture. As Williams argues, we can understand the idea of culture as a convergence of "a whole way of life" and its association with intellectual and artistic activity. For Williams, cultural analysis is to see the idea of culture as a signifying system, "through which necessarily a social order is communicated, reproduced, experienced and explored".²⁹⁶ Like a critical ethnography of a contemporary working class community, Na-er translates Chinese urban workers' daily life and experience of post-socialist transformation as culture, "the entire way of life of a struggle-for-livelihood." The analysis of the cultural text can contribute to our understanding of urban workers' everyday life, contestation, and class-consciousness in post-Mao China. Williams's notion of cultural analysis may suggest that creative work and cultural practice be conceived as constituting, rather than "expressing," a given social order. However, the novel of Na-er as a cultural practice is not "constituting" a given social order but "expressing" social reality in post-socialist transformation. Nevertheless, the proletarian literature would help contribute to the re-constitution of socialist and class-consciousness among Chinese workers.

Conclusion and Discussion

Unlike the making of the English working class with the industrial revolution as the key economic impetus, China's proletariat acquired a working-class identity as the product of a Communist revolution that promised to rely on them as the masters for accomplishing a socialist

²⁹⁶ Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society 1780-1950*, 13 (London: Fontana Books, 1958).

revolution.²⁹⁷ During Maoist-era socialism, Chinese workers enjoyed the state entitlements in the process of production with SOEs. Chinese workers had embraced a socialist class-consciousness, inherently different from class-consciousness among the Western working class expressed in the antagonistic labour-capital relations of production but without experience of revolution. As a leading workforce for the building of socialism, Chinese workers have been rebuilt as the working class with revolutionary class-consciousness. It gives rise to the question: can we neglect proletarian revolutionary culture in understanding the re-composition of Chinese working class in post-Mao capitalist development?

In theorizing the formation of the Western working class in the Nineteenth Century, Katznelson and Zolberg argue that traditions in pre-industrial and pre-capitalist society, such as social relations, political system, lifestyle, culture and ideologies should be taken into account, not only workshop relationships. However, China has a revolutionary and socialist past. The historical legacies count in the re-composition of Chinese working class in post-Mao reforms. As part of the historical legacies, proletarian revolutionary culture and Maoist socialist consciousness constitute a component of working class cultural configurations, through which Chinese workers meaningfully respond to their circumstances in post-socialist transformation. In the case study of Zhengzhou, workers are recovering past ideologies and revolutionary traditions to create a politics for the present. The novel of Na-er clearly presents Chinese revolutionary and socialist legacies in accounting for the present Chinese working class conditions. As Kuang argues, “If the process of privatization goes ahead incessantly in China’s reforms, the intensifying gap between the wealthy and the poor in society will gradually make class-consciousness clear-cut. But in a socialist state like China which rises up as a product of

²⁹⁷ Elizabeth J. Perry, “Preface,” in Yu Jianrong, *The Plight of China’s Working Class: Annals of Anyuan* (New York: Mirror Books, 2006).

revolution, the revolutionary tradition will stir again sooner or later.”²⁹⁸ Kuang’s comments provide the backdrop against which working class culture and literature re-emerge in post-Mao market reforms, which have deviated from the revolutionary and socialist past. *Na-er* and *Tiexi District* are not isolated “pure art” or literary form. They represent the re-emergence of working class culture and literature in a counter-movement against neo-liberalism in China and calling for the re-construction of workers’ subjectivity.

²⁹⁸ Kuang, “Xin Zuoyi Wenxue.”

CHAPTER FIVE

COLLECTIVE MEMORIES AND WORKING-CLASS-CONSCIOUSNESS

In the aftermath of market reforms, the Chinese state has switched to a labour-based discursive ground and attempted to have the Maoist political identity formation of the Chinese working class forgotten. While old generations of Chinese workers going through the Mao era have internalized the socialist political subjectivity, younger generations are confused over their identity during the new labour regime and the establishment of hegemonic capitalist discourse. Therefore, collective memories of the Chinese revolution and socialism have been related to the reconstructing of a proletarian public sphere in post-socialist transformation.

This chapter examines the formation of socialist political subjectivities, the making of the Chinese working class in Mao's socialism and the de-construction of class-based political identities of workers in post-Mao reforms by studying and comparing two-generation urban workers' memories of SOEs during Maoist socialism and in reform China in a Zhengzhou textile mill. It attempts to understand the meanings and feelings among urban workers with regard to the socialist political subjectivities in their collective memories. I also examine the implications of the collective memories for the re-composition of the Chinese working class in the post-socialist reform era by conducting a focus group discussion involving younger generations of workers.

The Working-Class Without Class-consciousness: Conventional Interpretations of Chinese Workers' Identity under Maoist Socialism

In theorizing identities and class-consciousness of Chinese workers, three scholars – Jean Chesneaux, Elizabeth Perry and Andrew Walder – have shaped Western scholarly views of the formation of China’s proletariat throughout the twentieth century.²⁹⁹ Chesneaux followed a Marxist perspective of class formation to determine participation in capitalist production as the causal factor in the creation of the Chinese proletariat and class-consciousness. According to Chesneaux, China’s proletariat in the 1920s had begun to forge a distinct collective identity as they experienced capitalist relations of production. The Chinese proletariat articulated class-consciousness in political organization and activism against the capitalist employers, the nascent bourgeois state and the imperial powers.³⁰⁰

Drawing on the Weberian approach to class,³⁰¹ Perry holds an ambivalent opinion on the formation of the Chinese proletariat and class-consciousness through the case of Shanghai workers’ activism between the 1920s and 1940s. For Perry, class-consciousness is “an awareness of exploitation by owners and a propensity to redress grievances through independent collective action.”³⁰² While the achievement of class-consciousness manifested in skilled, urban artisans’ strikes, the semi- and unskilled working masses, such as dockworkers, silk spinners and tobacco packers, designated as proletarians, staged strikes without class-consciousness. According to Perry, experiences of capitalist production are necessary but not sufficient for achieving workers’ class-consciousness, which is a developmental process of interaction between pre-existing identities, culture and workplace experience.

²⁹⁹ Sally Sargeson, *Reworking China’s Proletariat* (MacMillan Press Ltd, 1999).

³⁰⁰ Chesneaux, *The Chinese Labour Movement*.

³⁰¹ Richard Breen, “Foundations of a Neo-Weberian Class Analysis,” in *Approaches to Class Analysis*, ed. Erik Olin Wright, 31-50 (Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

³⁰² Perry, *Shanghai on Strike*, 47.

In examining the identity of Chinese workers during the Maoist-era socialism, Andrew Walder argues that Chinese state sector workers have not achieved class-consciousness in the socialist party state.³⁰³ They had neither experienced exploitation from the capitalist relations between capital and labour, nor engaged in collective activism. Under the all-encompassing ideology, policies and economic activities of the socialist party state, Chinese workers have formed a compliant working class. The Chinese revolution and Maoist socialism have “ushered in the *unmaking* of the Chinese working class,”³⁰⁴ which begun to take shape before the revolution of 1949. As Sally Sargeson argues, all the three leading western scholars in Chinese labour studies have premised their discussion of class-consciousness on the same teleological assumptions. Such a causal approach to capitalist development and the working class formation would deny the importance of human actors and contingency of the working class formation and instead, solely consider the process as an expected outcome of capitalist development.³⁰⁵

In studying the subject of labour protests in post-Mao market reforms, some other scholars tend to make China’s state-owned enterprises in a paternalistic socialist party-state analogous to a type of the moral economy. With regard to labour protests in post-Mao reforms, Feng Chen categorizes them into three major types: Chinese state workers’ protests against SOEs restructuring programs, protests by workers laid-off from SOEs who are outside the industrial system and protests by workers who are in private enterprises.³⁰⁶ Chen argues that the first two types of protests represent workers’ attempts either to resist the formation of capitalist or quasi-capitalist property relations that are detrimental to their interests or to safeguard their basic

³⁰³ Andrew Walder, “Organized Dependency and cultures of authority in Chinese industry,” *Journal of Asian Studies*, 43:1 (1983):51-72; “The Remaking of the Chinese Working Class 1949-1981,” *Modern China* 10.1 (1984): 3-48; *Communist Neo-Traditionalism: Work and Authority in Chinese Industry* (Berkeley: University of California Press).

³⁰⁴ Walder, *The Remaking of the Chinese Working Class*, 41.

³⁰⁵ Sargeson, *Reworking China’s Proletariat*.

³⁰⁶ Chen, “Industrial Restructuring,” 237-262.

welfare after restructuring. It is different from the last type of protests, which targets labour processes and rights abuses in the private sector but do not challenge property relations per se. Therefore, Chen tends to consider Chinese state workers' protests against SOEs' restructuring as a response to the erosion of state paternalism by the market reform that has broken their "iron rice bowl." Like moral economy protests, their resistance is "defensive" and "restorative" as Chinese state workers have been informed by pre-reform ideological legacies and attempted to maintain the status quo. Chen concludes, "[I]f restructuring is the only possible way for many ailing SOEs to escape demise and is necessary for China's reform, then the resistance to it appears backward looking and anachronistic." Chen suggests that Chinese state workers should learn to "turn their moral economy protests into a labour movement that strives to protect their rights in an increasingly capitalist economy which will depend on some overall structural changes that allow political space for independent organizing."³⁰⁷

Through analyzing the diversity of workers' memories of Chinese socialism, Lee argues that most state workers have understood socialism as "a mixed and ambivalent historical experience."³⁰⁸ On the one hand, socialism represents certain principles, including "psychological and economic security, relative egalitarianism, social justice, and collective purpose," which have been lost in post-Mao market transition; on the other hand, workers remembered it negatively as such "a period plagued by violent campaigns, cadre despotism, and poverty" that workers have no intention to go back. Jonathan Unger and Anita Chan echo this emphasis on the benevolent paternalistic relations between socialist enterprises and Chinese workers, drawing on the moral economy premise to study the case of a large liquor distillery in

³⁰⁷ Ibid., 230.

³⁰⁸ Ching Kwan Lee, "What Was Socialism to Chinese Workers? Collective Memories and Labour Politics in An Age of Reform," in *Re-envisioning the Chinese Revolution: the Politics and Poetics of Collective Memories in Reform China*, ed. Ching Kwan Lee and Guobin Yang (Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center Press; Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2007).

China. As they argue, collective memories of SOEs convey the message from workers that they have committed and sacrificed themselves to building up the enterprises; in return, the enterprises paternalistically owes them benefits and solicitous concern. As workers feel abandoned in post-Mao market reforms, they resort to the moral discourse for holding the state and enterprises accountable.³⁰⁹ Briefly, Chinese urban workers' present – day resistance is characterized by the “moral economy” protests carried out by the subaltern class in other social contexts, such as peasants' resistance to capitalist penetrations into a traditional economy that threatened their subsistence and artisans' resistance to the capitalist mode of production in the early days of Western industrialization.³¹⁰

This moral economy interpretation has misunderstood what is central to the political identity of workers as masters of the country in the SOEs under Maoist socialism. The notion of “masters of socialist enterprises” has ideologically distinguished a view of the Chinese workforce in socialism from capitalism. This fundamentally different view of the worker has comprised the making of the political subjectivity during the Maoist-era socialism. As an article, published by the party theoretical journal during the Cultural Revolution, argues, a socialist factory should treat workers as “masters” of the enterprise, human beings instead of “hired labour” in a capitalist factory.³¹¹ As hired labour, workers must give up their lives in exchange for money. Externally imposed restrictions are respectively the carrot and the stick of management systems in capitalist plants. By contrast, as “masters” of a socialist factory, workers

³⁰⁹ Jonathan Unger and Anita Chan, “Memories and the Moral Economy of a State-Owned Enterprise,” in *Re-envisioning the Chinese Revolution: the Politics and Poetics of Collective Memories in Reform China*, ed. Ching Kwan Lee and Guobin Yang (Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center Press; Stanford, Calif. : Stanford University Press, 2007).

³¹⁰ On moral economy, please see James C. Scott, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976); E.P. Thompson, “The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the 18th Century,” *Past & Present* 50 (1971): 76-136.

³¹¹ Hsiao-wen Kung, “Workers are the Masters of Socialist Enterprises,” in *Workers and Workplaces in Revolutionary China*, ed. Stephen Andors, 315-322 (White Plains, New York: M.E. Sharpe, Inc. 1974).

are empowered, taking responsibility and control consistent with the technical realities of production and the educational level of the work force. The goal of a socialist factory is to create greater collective well being and a society without class inequality. Therefore, discipline, rules and regulations come from discussion and consultation with workers. Philosophically, the ideological conception of workers as “masters” is based on Marx’s labour theory of value to overcome the problem of alienation with regard to labour. This is the ontological difference between the moral economy and SOEs in socialist economy. We should not neglect this difference in understanding the party state’s production of political subjects and workers’ identification. Through collective memories, Chinese workers narrate their identification with the subjectivity of revolutionary vision.

Socialist Consciousness as Class-consciousness: Workers’ Memories of Being “Masters of Socialist Enterprises” During the Maoist Decades

During the first five-year plan (1953-57) when China took the Soviet approach to economic development, the textile industry was established in Zhengzhou, the provincial capital of cotton-rich Henan. Although Zhengzhou had one large-scaled cotton mill before 1949, many years of wars had torn down the factory. Almost from scratch, the central government invested 176 million RMB and consecutively built five major state-owned cotton mills in Zhengzhou. The country reassigned tens of thousands of skilled textile workers and managerial cadres to Zhengzhou from Shanghai and other provinces, such as Jiangsu, Zhejiang, Hunan and Hubei to the newly built factories. By 1958, Zhengzhou hosted six major state-owned cotton mills and had one hundred thousand textile workers. Several women workers in a Zhengzhou textile mill gave the following accounts. They had worked in Shanghai’s cotton mills before 1949 as child labour. They are among the skilled workers relocated to Zhengzhou from the southern provinces in the

1950s. As the first-generation of textile workers in new China, they experienced the whole era of Maoist socialism before they retired in the early 1980s when urban-centered economic reforms began in China. In their collective memories of the textile cotton mill during the Mao era, what stood out is a time of enthusiastic and voluntary dedication and commitment to building a socialist country as masters of the SOE, not just a time of material equality and psychological security featured by the moral economy. As an eighty-three-year-old woman worker described,

When I was 13 years old in 1939, I began to work in a Shanghai cotton mill run by the Japanese. One day, I had a stomachache and had to rest by burying my head on a desk. The Japanese manager encountered this and asked me to his office. He disciplined me and threatened to dismiss me. Later, because of some Chinese people's help, I was fined and the incident was resolved. In the old society, my family often starved. My father pulled a rickshaw as a coolie. One day, he was very tired and slow paced with an obese man sitting in the rickshaw. In the end, the man did not pay and kicked him. It was the Communist Party that liberated us the poor people from exploitation and oppression in old societies. I felt so happy in new China. That is the reason why I did not hesitate to give up a comfortable life in Shanghai and responded to Chairman Mao's call to move to Zhengzhou, where life was very harsh in the 1950s, to train workers for the newly built factory. In the beginning, so many workers were not skilled and there were too many broken lines. Other skilled workers and I often worked overtime to teach unskilled workers in the workshop without any break. Cadres forced us to go out of work to have a rest. But we often sneaked back to the workshop to continue our job. When I was single, seven days a week, from day to night, I stayed in the workshop to work. Some workers who relocated from the southern provinces complained lower wages and hardship in Zhengzhou. I told them it was good enough. If it were not for Chairman Mao who empowered us to be masters, we would still be under exploitation and oppression by the capitalists. Since we were masters of a socialist enterprise, we were under fair treatment by cadres and our state. The working conditions were improved. We were secure in terms of maternity and sickness leave. Co-workers helped each other. I often cooked delicious food for sick co-workers. In the old society, we laboured like the cattle and horses. The more we worked, the more we were exploited. Now we were working for our own state. The state is our home, and our home is the state.

This woman worker's memory highlighted the consciousness of "masters of the country" by comparing her conditions in new China to the past ordeal of capitalist exploitation and suppression. Three features are distinct in terms of the masters' consciousness: voluntary enthusiasm for work, caring little about remuneration, and collectivism. Class-consciousness solely in terms of economic interpretation is not applicable to the political subjectivity of the "master" consciousness in a socialist enterprise. By contrast, Walder argues that the party-state moulded a compliant, cliental work force by splicing the material interests and status aspirations

of urban workers to their employer enterprises, and by suppressing all ideas and vehicles for resistance.³¹² This explanation is not suitable at least to the first-generation SOE workers before market reforms.

Another retired woman textile worker's account echoed the political identity with "masters of the country." She explicitly emphasized the feeling of considering the factory as her own home. Like the first woman worker, she did not think of enterprise welfare and security as distinct in socialism, but the feelings of treatment as "human beings" and "masters" of their own factory:

In 1938 when I was still a child, I began to work in a Shanghai cotton mill owned by the Japanese. Later in 1945, I continued to work in the factory taken over by the Guomintang government. In 1949, the Communist Party appropriated the factory and renamed it as Shanghai No.9 State-Owned Cotton Mill. I worked there until 1954 when the central government called for skilled textile workers to support Zhengzhou. I volunteered to leave Shanghai for Zhengzhou. I helped young workers in Zhengzhou and worked as a machine tender. I looked after 36 weaving machines at the same time by myself. I walked more than 40 kilometers per day in the workshop. In my team, we helped each other in work and life. I even intervened to solve family disputes between co-workers and their spouses. Workers respected cadres and cadres thought of workers considerately. When it snowed, cadres cleaned up the snow to open a trail for workers. The trade union cadres were in charge of organizing movie watching. They never kept good seats for them and their families and friends. They thought of workers first. These trivial things reflected the relations between cadres and workers. At that time, we were so exhausted from work but we could endure it without complaint. The proudest thing is to be evaluated as a labour model. It is only nominal reward without substantial material interests, but workers were proud of that and everyone worked hard to compete for the reputation. During off-work hours, we did not rest and continued to meet to discuss technical issues or political education. This was voluntary. This was from our heart and we were willing to do so. A socialist enterprise is a home of workers. Nowadays, our factory is gone. We feel that we lost our home. When we looked at the remnant of our old factory, we feel sad and our eyes are full of tears.

Although in the Maoist-era state socialism, workers prevailed over managerial cadres, the intellectuals, the bourgeois and the peasants in terms of political status, wages, welfare and employment security, the intensity of urban workers' labour was indeed tough. Although a woman textile retiree described the hardship in the workshop of the textile factory, she still thought the years were sweet:

³¹² Walder, "The Remaking of the Chinese Working Class," 166-70.

The workshop was very noisy, hot, humid, and filled with floating swollen cotton flakes. I myself took care of 300 spindles and up to 600 spindles after expertise advancement in late 1950s. After eight hours, many workers' legs got swelling. Before 1980, the factory implemented the shift pattern which was called "three teams three run" to operate the machines in the factory 24 hours a day and seven days a week. Workers were divided into three groups. Each group took morning duty, middle duty and evening duty every day. They switched their shift once a week. Workers did not easily recover from fatigue and it had a great impact on the health of workers. The evening duty was so intolerable. Workers often fell asleep and workshop leader had to wake them up. We were exhausted through the "three teams and three run" and often felt tired. Up to now, I am still obsessed with the occupational diseases. However, at that time, workers kept energetic and no one was lazy. Workers were in solidarity in completing their work. If workers in the previous shift did not finish their work, they did not want to go off-duty and would continue until the work was finished. Pregnant women workers often voluntarily persisted to work until the last due days. They often went back to work before the fifty-four days of maternity leave were not over. Sometimes worker mother stayed on their work after their shift and caregivers came to complain that it was time to breast-feed the babies who were already so hungry. Managerial cadres also took the evening shift. They cared for our work and life. During the holidays, they often went to visit workers' families and praised skilled women machine tender workers as "founding members" of the factory. That was a wonderful workshop.

The first-generation textile workers were proud of their contribution to new China as each factory's annual profit in the 1950s was equal to the original investment by the central government. The economic entitlement of SOEs alone could not explain what motivated them to sacrifice for the party state. Clearly, they were class conscious by comparing new China to their miserable conditions as employed labour before 1949. They identified themselves with the masters of the country under Mao's advocacy of socialist consciousness. For Chinese workers under the Maoist socialism, socialist consciousness is equal to class-consciousness, developing through workers' experiences of capitalist production in conventional interpretations of labour politics. As a woman textile worker retiree recalled,

I still miss the life during Chairman Mao's leadership, which was simple and passionate. Although the workload was heavy and hard, everyone was glad and rushed to work. It was common to do extra-work without letting others know. Workers were voluntarily willing to do more work. No one forced us to do so. At that time, if I was tired, I laid down in the workshop for ten minutes. After I woke up, I continued to work.

Another woman textile worker further elaborated what the consciousness of "masters" mean,

At that time, each worker had six morning shifts, six middle shifts and seven night shifts, which rotated each week. In addition, the factory regularly held meetings. Sometimes, several meetings

were held in one day. Without supervision, coercion or penalty, workers were willing and voluntarily equated the factory with their own home. Workers came to work early and went off duty late. It was common to work while sick. Although the profit of the factory could build a new one each year, workers paid attention to saving production material and maintain equipment. Workers often said, we would rather sweat more to guarantee products without any defects. After eight hours of work, workers also used their spare time to do voluntary labour. For example, workers themselves spent their spare and leisure time to construct the road to our factory.

The Subjectivity of “Masters” Lost: Second-Generation Textile Workers in Reform China

The production of socialist political subjects during Maoist socialism has not been linear, but through Mao-launched “class struggles” and political campaigns. As Alvin Y. So argues, Mao had waged successive political campaigns, from the land reform program to dissolve the landlord class, the collectivization to dissolve the rich peasants, the nationalization to dissolve the capitalist class, the Hundred Flower Campaign to dissolve the new middle class intellectuals, and finally, the Cultural Revolution to re-educate the new middle class intellectuals and the state managers. These political activities had eroded the objective economic bases of antagonistic classes.³¹³ Although he dissolved the economic bases that would cause class-based inequality, Mao had failed to solve inequality and achieve social justice, in terms of division of labour, sectors, and territorial differences, in a statist socialist society. In mounting difficulties of achieving full employment, worker entitlement linked to SOEs had become more salient. The pursuit of economic security and welfare under the moral economy of a state-owned enterprise prevailed over socialist consciousness. This shift is manifest in the second-generation textile workers’ memories.

The textile industry in Zhengzhou in the 1980s had been still prosperous and contributed to majority of Zhengzhou’s revenues. Many second-generation textile workers were very happy to join the high wage factories in Zhengzhou by replacing their retiring parents in the early

³¹³ So, “The Changing Pattern of Classes,” 365.

1980s. In the pre-reform labour regime enforced from 1956 to 1983, the succession system,³¹⁴ “parents retired, children replace,” was a major part of state control and allocation of urban labour supplies to state or collectively owned enterprises. If Mao’s successive political campaigns contributed to overcoming the drawbacks of state socialist enterprises, with Mao’s death, SOEs had been boiled down to the “iron rice bowl” system, in which there were ensured jobs for ordinary workers, life-long posts for managerial cadres and guaranteed wages without consideration of employees’ performance. Compared to their parents’ memories, the second-generation textile workers focused more on wages, welfare, bonuses, job comfort, and other entitlements of an enterprise than on socialist consciousness. As a woman worker employed in the 1980s described,

I replaced my mother to work in this textile factory. Our factory had a high level of economic efficiency. As a big contributor to Zhengzhou’s financial revenues, we were fairly treated. When the Zhengzhou municipal government began to install a natural gas and heating system, our factory and residential compounds had the privilege to be the first users. Our average wage was higher than all other enterprises or public-service institutions in Zhengzhou, even higher than cadres were. Many people hoped to work in the cotton mills. Young women felt proud of working at our factory. There was a popular doggerel in Zhengzhou, saying ‘little girls, little girls, quickly growing up, when you grow up, you can enter the cotton mills.’ However, in 1986 and since, our factory began to decline. Privately owned cotton mills started appearing in neighbouring areas. They posed severe competition to our state-owned factories. They paid skilled machine tenders more than twice that of state-owned workers. Urban youths no more wished to join our factory. The factory could only recruit rural migrant workers. I began to feel very tired and could not endure the hardship in the cotton mill. Although the working conditions and intensity were almost the same as in the years when my mom worked, I felt I could not keep on any more. Finally, in 1989, I determined to retire early by virtue of occupational diseases. Then I began to do my own small-sized business with my husband.

As a first-generation woman textile worker argues, “my children were born in new China and they grew up under the red flag. They did not experience the old society in which workers laboured like the cattle and horses. Therefore, they did not cherish their status as masters of the country.”

³¹⁴ Aiyun Wang, “woguo lishang zinu dingti jiuye zhidu de xingcheng ji feizhi” (The origin and suspension of the replacement system in labour regime in China), *News of the Communist Party of China*, available at <http://dangshi.people.com.cn/GB/9666589.html>.

The textile industry in Zhengzhou as a whole has decayed since 1990. The six major state-owned cotton mills, together with other textile-related factories, either shut down or had their production cut down in large-scale, in July and August in that year. Compared to 1989, a total of seventeen factories' profits dropped to 84.48 million Yuan, down 45.37 percent. From 1995 to 1997, the losses of the textile industry in Zhengzhou reached a total of 160 million Yuan and 97 percent of the enterprises have lost money. In the ten years since 1994, the textile industry has not increased workers' wages. Workers have earned an average wage of 400-600 yuan per month.³¹⁵ The old worker's granddaughter graduated from a university in 1997 but it was difficult for her to find a job. The grandmother offered to help her work in the cotton mill for a while. Her granddaughter refused by saying that "the state-owned cotton mill has not only a very exhaustive workload, but also pays the lowest wage in Zhengzhou, so I don't want to work there." In 2003, all the six major state-owned cotton mills declared bankruptcy and the local government sold to private-owned enterprises.

The second-generation textile workers tend to understand SOEs in terms of the moral economy, what Unger and Chan refer to as "a community demand that those who control resources should abide by a shared notion of economic justice, often grounded in a vision by subordinates of what they insist are honoured traditions of what is right and wrong."³¹⁶ With the process of state-owned enterprise restructuring, mostly the process of privatization, the political subjectivity of being "masters of the country" is deconstructed. One middle-aged laid off textile worker narrated her loss of identity,

³¹⁵ Po Shi, "Zhengzhou fangzhiye de sige niandai" (The four historical turns of Zhengzhou textile industry), *Nan Feng Chuang* (for the public good), August 16, 2005.

³¹⁶ Unger and Chan, "Memories and the Moral Economy," 120.

When I had just replaced my father to work in the factory in 1980, I felt very good because our wage was among the highest in Zhengzhou. My job was like an 'iron rice bowl' and I was economically secure. Later with economic reforms, the iron rice bowl was broken. Our labour intensity was still severe, but wage became lower. Like many other urban workers, I did not want to stay in my factory. I asked to be laid-off and then started my own business. However, it was difficult to do business. It was then impossible to go back to the factory as it had been privatized. As a former worker from a state-owned enterprise, I do not want to work for any private bosses. Unlike in the past, if you work for a private boss, you are no longer masters but employed labour. The boss can fire you at his will anytime. Your job is neither guaranteed nor your wage. Thus, you cannot have the feeling of belonging, like in the past, to the enterprise. That is why I would rather work as a bank guard than look for a job in any private factories. Nowadays, the working-class is the most unfortunate group in China. We are living at the lowest bottom. We are more miserable than the peasants are as they own a piece of land at least. I feel so lost. It is impossible to go back to the past, as our state-owned enterprises are no more.

Although the retired and laid off urban workers I interviewed in the cotton mills deplored the loss of their political and economic status as the masters of a socialist enterprise, they have acquiesced to the unfortunate destiny imposed on them. For urban workers in Zhengzhou who have experienced Maoist socialism and worked in the 1980s, SOEs still hold their subjectivity of being the masters of the country, even though they are dispossessed of the status in post-socialist transformation. I went to interview a first-generation woman textile retiree and her laid-off son. The son is struggling for his livelihood and has gained financial support by his mother's pension. I asked whether he got the minimum living guarantee for urban residents, the bottom line of China's "three guarantees" system, established in 1999, to ensure the minimal needs of state-owned enterprises' laid-off workers are met, with the basic living security and unemployment insurance as the two upper level protections. The retiree felt offended by my question. She argued,

The minimum living guarantee is just for disabled people, people unable to labour. It is a humiliation for my son to ask for this. If everyone relies on the state to feed them, how can our country bear the big burden? My son can work. If he earns less money to feed his family, I would rather support him with my pension. We should increase our country's burden and make trouble for the state.

Her son agreed with his mother. He further explained, at the beginning of SOEs' restructuring, workers could not make sense of the process in terms of privatization. Due to their

subjectivity of being “the masters of the country,” Zhengzhou workers had taken less militant protests against the restructuring, believing that they should share the difficulties with the country. Although they were not satisfied with inadequate arrangements for their medical insurance and pension payments, they still thought themselves “masters” and it was legitimate to endure the difficult moments with the state. Later when they saw the losses of state assets by private businesspeople and corrupt officials, they began to realize that post-Mao reforms had disowned them of their political status. However, their political subjectivity acquired during the Mao era would empower them to perceive post-Mao market reforms and take actions. As Robert Weil observes, state-owned factory workers in Zhengzhou apply Mao’s notion of a “two-line struggle” as a framework to make sense of post-Mao market reforms since Deng and designate it definitely as “a return to the capitalist road.”³¹⁷

Individual Life Stories, Collective Memories and Working Class Subjectivity: the Case of Zhengzhou

Through comparative analysis of urban workers’ generational understandings of “masters” of a socialist enterprise, we can see that the first-generation state workers’ narratives are salient in terms of political and class connotations, while the second-generation urban workers’ memories are in terms of the economic entitlements, similar to the subaltern under the moral economy. However, the common thread going through urban workers from the Mao era to reform China is their political subjectivity of being the masters of the country. Therefore, urban workers have primarily held the Chinese state either responsible for their worsening situation or accountable for protecting them by living up to its revolutionary and socialist

³¹⁷ See Weil, “Conditions of the Working Classes.” He garnered empirical evidences through his fieldwork in Beijing, Jilin province in the northeast and Henan province in central-east. I observed the same scenarios in my field work in Zhengzhou in summer 2009 as his trip five years ago.

mandate. The working class subjectivity acquired during Mao's socialist enterprises is different from what scholars call the workers' claims and identities in terms of the moral economy. With regard to the ideological or political claims, class-consciousness is manifest in the working class subjectivity. Maoism and socialist consciousness has embodied itself as class-consciousness of the contemporary Chinese working class.

From Individual Life Stories to Collective Memories: Comparative Analysis

In Katznelson's four-tiered formulation of working-class formation, class formation at the third level refers to shared dispositions. People occupying similar positions conditioned by capitalist economic development and social relations at one of the first two levels pronounce similar subjective orientations, discourses and ideologies, different from other social groups.³¹⁸ Primarily dealing with the level of discourse, which often takes a narrative form, George Steinmetz argues that the formation of the working class involves two dimensions - individual and collective narratives relevant to a class-form of identity, and narrative coherence at the individual and collective levels.³¹⁹

From their personal life stories, Maoism and Maoist socialism have greatly influenced the ways individual urban workers I interviewed narrate their own lives. The individual workers unfolded their memories against the backdrop of China's capitalist economic development and the loss of their subjectivity with masters of the country in socialist enterprises. Their narratives clearly developed around a class-based identity. Furthermore, I look at individual workers' memories of the Maoist socialism recorded by other researchers in Zhengzhou and Kaifeng, another major industrial city in Henan, and find that they are synchronous with the accounts of

³¹⁸ Katznelson and Zelberg, "The Working Class Formation," 16.

³¹⁹ George Steinmetz, "Reflections on the Role of Social Narratives in Working-class Formation: Narrative Theory in the Social Sciences," *Social Science History* 16:3 (Fall 1992): 489-506.

individual workers I interviewed. Their individual life stories comprise the collective memories and coherent narratives of Maoist socialism and urban workers' political subjectivity during the Mao era.

Without elaborating many other workers' accounts, here I present the remarks by a Kaifeng retiree whom college students from an anonymous Beijing university interviewed in their fieldwork in Henan.³²⁰ This worker was a national-level model worker in the 1950s and received by Chairman Mao. Typical in his retelling of the past is what the political subject of "masters of the country" meant to ordinary workers during the Mao era:

In my childhood, I began to work in a Japanese-run factory. After the Japanese surrender, I still worked in the factory taken over by the Guomintang government until the liberation of Kaifeng. Once the liberation set up our own state, everything was good. We were slaves during the Japanese occupation and the rule of Guomintang. Only when the Communist Party began to rule did we really become the masters of the country. Any difficulties others could not solve could be addressed by the factory. Even though the Japanese and the Guomintang also took care of our lives, they could by no means settle the problem of political status. It is impossible to address the problem fundamentally without being the masters of the country. But during the old society, it was impossible to allow you to turn over and become the masters.

When I laboured for the Japanese, it was very miserable. ... At that time, I was so exhausted at work but all the profits were extracted by the capitalists. ... In 1953, my wage was very high, more than 400 Yuan per month, higher than Chairman Mao's. As the piece-rate wage system was implemented, many workers earned wages higher than Chairman Mao. Workers were very active in doing their jobs. An income of 400 Yuan was not used up every month. Later, the piece-rate wage system was changed into the eight-level wage system. Workers were not satisfied, me neither. Later, I recalled the past when I worked for capitalists. I not only did the harsh job, but also was often beaten and starved. Compared to the old society, we are masters of the country now. Although it was true that the wage decreased a lot, the deductions were neither appropriated by the capitalists, nor occupied by the cadres. They were handed over to state revenues. We were the masters of the country. Where was the money used by the state? Was it not the state that spent the money in building our own country? If the country were built up, our next generation would live a better life. The revolutionary pioneers had sacrificed their lives for redeeming us as the masters of the country, could we not endure to spare a little money? Many workers resonated with my reasoning as they recalled that they had been oppressed in the old society like me.

Nowadays, all the people are crazy over money. The people's soul is spoiled. With regard to the Cultural Revolution, I have different comments from many others, especially those totally rejecting it. If Mao could live longer and finalize the Cultural Revolution, it would change the

³²⁰ A Team of Practice from a Beijing university, Henan Bufen Guoqi Lao Gongren Fantan Lu (Dialogue with Some SOEs workers in Henan Province), *Chinese Workers Online*, April 11, 2007. Available at <http://www.wyzxss.com/Article/Class22/200704/17447.html>.

Chinese people fundamentally. During the Cultural Revolution, I was a conservative and almost beaten to death by the rebels one day. Now the three big mountains again suppress the people.

The restoration of capitalism has taken place. The peasants' conditions are worse than the workers are. They are more oppressed than the workers are. Whenever, during the period of the revolutionary wars, the era of building socialism, or in the time of reforms and opening up, have not the peasants committed themselves? However, they end up in abject poverty. How do we address their difficulties? How can they sweat for nothing beneficial? Chairman Mao shouted, 'long live the people!' it is clear that Chairman Mao had taken root deeply in the people's hearts.

As "part of culture's meaning-making apparatus,"³²¹ the collective memories of the Chinese revolution and Maoist socialism have provided a powerful way of forging state workers' political identity with "the masters of the country." Workers told the stories of themselves as social actors. Similar to what Somers call the "ontological narratives,"³²² the workers use their narratives to make sense of their lives and to act for changing their lives. As cultural expressions, Zhengzhou workers' collective memories have borne political meanings and consequences. Workers' class-consciousness and political identity have manifested themselves no more than in the politics of memory in Zhengzhou.

Reading the Present from the Past: the Politics of Memory in Zhengzhou

Zhengzhou was one of the central areas of the Communist movement back in the early 1920s.³²³ In Zhengzhou, the party built a double pagoda-like tower in 1971 to commemorate the more than a hundred workers killed in the 1923 Beijing-Hankou railway strike, led by early Communist labour activists and violently suppressed by the military warlord. In 1925, the Communists organized the Yufeng textile workers' strike by taking part in the wave of labour strikes sweeping China after the May 30th Movement, when bloodshed in Shanghai triggered

³²¹ Barry Schwartz, *Abraham Lincoln and the Forge of National Memory*, 17 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

³²² Margaret Somers, "Deconstructing and Reconstructing Class Formation Theory," in *Reworking Class*, ed. John Hall, 73-105 (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1997).

³²³ See Odoric Y.K. Wou, *Mobilizing the Masses: Building Revolution in Henan* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1994).

nationwide demonstrations and labour strikes against foreign imperial powers in China. Zhengzhou was a stronghold of radical Maoism during the Cultural Revolution as the city prospered and developed as the result of Mao's socialism. A China scholar interviewed many people in Henan and Shandong and estimated that during the post-Cultural Revolution purge and de-Maoisation campaign, the authorities had put into jail around 500,000 Maoist activists in the two provinces. As many SOEs, which had even profited in the 1980s, have ended up in bankruptcy in post-Mao market reforms due to the process of privatization and official corruption, Zhengzhou has re-emerged as a hotbed of radical Maoism. State-sectors have lay off workers massively and have difficulties in re-employing them. Most retirees have pensions insufficient to support their families financially. Realizing the restoration of capitalism in China, Zhengzhou workers began militant protests. Since 2000, many Zhengzhou workers often gather before Mao's statue in the Zijinshan Square, a public park in downtown Zhengzhou, to pay tribute to Mao's memory by laying wreaths or reciting poems on the anniversary of Mao' death on September 9. Each year has seen incidents of confrontation and arrest when workers clash with the police who attempt to stop the memorial to Mao.

Zhengzhou made itself well known in 2004 when the local court tried four Maoists for having handed out leaflets that denounced the restoration of capitalism in China and called for a return to the "socialist road."³²⁴ Zhang Zhengyao, 56, a local resident, handed out copies of a commemorative piece, titled Mao Forever Our Leader, specifically written for the occasion of the 28th anniversary of the death of Chairman Mao Zedong. Judging that the leaflets Zhang distributed as inflammatory or subversive in nature, plainclothes agents took him into custody.

³²⁴ "Maoists in China Get Three Year Prison Sentences for Leafleting: A Report on the Case of the Zhengzhou Four," *Monthly Review*, January 2005.

Zhang's wife was under the police surveillance for posting the commemorative piece on an internet Maoist website, Mao Zedong Flag. The local authorities initially charged them with state subversion and later with a lesser crime of libel, accusing Zhang of attaching reform policies by Deng Xiaoping and Jiang Zemin and calling them names.

Zhang's leaflet provides an alternative interpretation of the three-decade market reforms in post-Mao China, opposed to the official history and narrative. First, Mao's mass line was highly praised in the leaflet as Mao urged the party and the cadres to represent the interests of workers and peasants who accounted for more than 95 percent of the Chinese population.

Second, the working people during the Mao era are the masters of the country and "dignified socialist labourers," whereas the commodification of labour in reform China has reduced Chinese working class as tools that they have to sell for their livelihoods and the capitalists can buy their labour freely.

Third, in the capitalist restoration in China, the capitalist class has re-appropriated state-owned enterprises and millions of peasants migrate to cities for jobs. As labourers, the working class exists to create surplus value for the capitalist class, instead of working for their own interests. Under cruel capitalist suppression and exploitation, rights without guarantee, and the commercialization of education, health care, cultural activities, sports and legal recourse, the working class has suffered from abject poverty.³²⁵

The leaflet employed Mao's "two-line struggle" to make sense of the post-Mao reforms, in which state and party officials have colluded with managers and entrepreneurs to convert the publicly-owned means of production into the private property of the newly emergent capitalists and the Chinese bourgeois class, reversing the socialist gains made by the workers and peasants

³²⁵ Ibid.

in the revolutionary era. Looking at the struggle of the Chinese working class beyond an economic struggle for better conditions, the leaflet suggests it should be a political problem. As the leaflet states,

The historical practice and stark social realities of the past 28 years have opened our eyes and raised our class-consciousness; the bourgeois elements within our Party are the head and the backbone of the Chinese bourgeois class. These are extremely selfish persons, stubbornly pursuing the capitalist road. They are much more sinister, ruthless, greedy, and devious than an average capitalist outside the Party.³²⁶

Informed by Maoism speaking for “the oppressed and exploited classes,” therefore, the leaflet insists a perspective of the class struggle to look at labour politics in China. As it states, “As the entire history of China’s revolution has repeatedly shown, as long as the revolutionary people follow steadfastly the guidance of Mao Zedong, their struggle will surely advance from victories to victories.”

The state workers’ memory narratives are the discursive expressions of their political identity and subjectivity shaped during the Maoist socialism. Their memories interpret the post-Mao reforms distinct from the official history, fostering critiques of the present. The workers have appropriated these alternative interpretations for their political actions. The discursive structuring of class-consciousness among the urban workers in Zhengzhou, informed by Maoism, has critical implications for collective action taking cultural forms either in their ordinary life or in the protests for improving material conditions.

Invoking the Past for the Present: Collective Memories and Urban Young Workers

Many urban young workers who either graduated from post-secondary technical schools or from the middle school entered the workplace in the late 1980s or early the 1990s when the

³²⁶ Ibid.

SOEs were in the peak of difficulties and subject to varieties of experimental restructurings. They have only an imagined memory of Maoist socialism by acquiring second hand stories from their parents or the movies of the revolutionary era. In a narrative-research method (NRM), I invited four young urban workers to watch a movie *The Pioneers* (Chuangye), which dramatized the creation of China's biggest oilfield Daqing in late 1950s, to have an analytical intervention to look at the critical implications of collective memories for the younger generation's class-consciousness.

The Pioneers was a popular movie shot in 1975 to tell the stories of legendary petroleum workers who explored China's first oilfield in the wilderness known as Daqing in the northeast. The movie was about the biography of Wang Jinxi, well known in China as a national hero for his feats in drilling the oilfield. Wang was born to a poor peasant family in Gansu Province. He took jobs as a shepherd and a coal carrier before starting work in the Yumen Oilfield in 1938 at the age of 15. As he described, his "life in the old society was a nightmare." Like the Zhengzhou first-generation textile workers, Wang formed class-consciousness and his political identity with "the masters of the country" by comparing Mao's new China to the past. When Mao Zedong and the Party Central Committee decided in 1960 to "fight a massive battle" to open up Daqing, an oilfield between Harbin and Qiqihar, Heilongjiang Province, so as to break China's dependence on foreign oil supplies, Wang and his famous No. 1205 Drilling Team rushed to the bleak grasslands from Yumen Oilfield. They worked through fatigue and injury in temperatures as low as minus 30°C before finally striking oil. Within three years, Daqing became China's first-rate big oilfield. Despite fatigue, injuries and hardships, Wang kept going throughout. Thus, the people called him as the "Iron Man." Since then, the name "Iron Man" Wang stuck and spread. In 1960, the party called upon the whole nation to learn from Wang, who became the poster-boy

of the working class in Mao's new China. The movie *the Pioneers* renamed the protagonist as Zhou Tingshan, but all the audiences knew Zhou was Wang Jinxi. The movie was shot in 1975 when the Cultural Revolution began to lose its hectic momentum.³²⁷ Nevertheless, it highlighted the consciousness of workers as the masters of the country and their socialist consciousness under Mao's conception of the two-line struggle. In the early 1980s, the party state used Wang Jinxi's example again to entice young people to move to hardship areas to assist in the development of China.

Thirty-four years later in China's post-socialist transformation, China again produced a feature film, *The Iron Man*, on the life of Wang Jinxi, the No.1 model worker in China. The narratives of "the Iron Man Spirit" embodied in Wang Jinxi in the new movie center around Wang's ethics, dedication, sacrifice and courage in overcoming the hardships during his work. As the first national model worker in China's industrial sector, Wang's heroism had touched the whole country. An official of the ACFTU urges all union workers to learn from the "Iron Man" and organize their colleagues to contribute to China's economic development and deal with the impact of the current financial crisis.³²⁸ The Iron Man spirit is framed in terms of personal traits and ethics. As the official media *Xinhua* quotes workers' audience, "The Iron Man spirit is the essence of Chinese ethics, philosophy and the soul of the Chinese people," "When I meet difficulties, I always ask myself what would Wang Jinxi do," highlighting that his courageous remarks, "We have to do everything possible. And we have to make the impossible possible," have become a motto for all the Chinese in overcoming their difficulties.³²⁹ Since the 1980s,

³²⁷ Woei Lien Chong, *China's Great Proletariat Cultural Revolution: Master Narratives and Post-Mao*, 295 (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Inc, 2002).

³²⁸ "Movie on life of China's model worker 'Iron Man' to debut May 1," *Xinhua*, March 24, 2009. http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2009-03/24/content_11065635.htm.

³²⁹ "China's 'Iron Man' an undying legend," *Xinhua*, September 17, 2009. <http://english.people.com.cn/90001/90776/90882/6760061.html>.

China has encouraged the production of “main melody” (the party lined-oriented) films to accommodate the changing official ideologies in post-Mao market reforms. Many of the films take the form of “role model movies,” which advocate good ethics, optimism and dedication. This is to assuage the outcry of massive urban laid-off workers and educate young workers to adapt themselves to the market economy and the changed regime of labour.³³⁰ Instead of remembering the “Iron Man” spirit as embodying the socialist consciousness and workers’ political identity as the masters of the country in opposition to capitalism under the framework of Mao’s two-line struggle, the Party-state has advocated it in terms of corporate culture. As the Daqing Oil Field Company summarizes,

Daqing spirit is the essence of the corporate culture and is the integral reflection of ethics, values and working styles of staff in Daqing Oilfield Company.... The Iron man spirit is the integral reflection of the honorable thoughts and moral ethics of the hero in Daqing - Iron Man Wang. It is also the representative for all of the petroleum industrious workers. The Iron Man spirit is one of the major components of Daqing spirit, which is only more specific and personified. The connotation of Iron Man spirit is that: patriotism, quoting what Iron Man Wang said, “to alleviate the nation’s burdens and to fight for the pride of the nation”; selfless struggling, quoted as “to sacrifice 20-year’s life to fight for the successful development of the oilfield”, and “to throw the bad name of petroleum deficiency in China into the Pacific Ocean”; hard work, quoted as “under whatever conditions, never cease working until success”; accuracy, quoted as “be responsible for the oilfield all through one’s life” , “the work done should be capable to undertake the checks by future generations”; and last but not the least, “buffalo spirit”, meaning being diligent and conscientious in serving others. Iron man spirit is a product from both the pioneering struggle period and the new period of socialism construction. The iron man spirit will always be the motivation for staff in Daqing oilfield.³³¹

From *The Pioneers* to *The Iron Man*, the story line has changed. Clearly, the official narrative of the Iron Man has tried to forget the memory of Wang as the Maoist-era model worker selectively, who had contributed to a socialist country, which was founded in part to further the interests of working people and had the working class as the masters of enterprises. The new feature film has neglected the worsening working class conditions in general in post-socialist transformation. The great wave of strikes hit the northeastern rustbelt in 2002, during

³³⁰ “‘Role model’ movie’s bumpy road to success,” *Xinhua News Agency*, July 14, 2009.
http://www.china.org.cn/culture/2009-07/14/content_18131269.htm.

³³¹ See “Spirit,” Daqing Oilfield Limited Company website, <http://www.cnpc.com.cn/dq/eng/qywh/>.

which several hundred beleaguered oil workers gathered to protest at the statue of Iron Man Wang in Daqing and thousands more may have joined them if not for local government threats. Oil workers in Chongqing that same year hoisted a banner that read, “Iron Man, Iron Man look back, corrupt officials are at your back. Iron Man, Iron Man look ahead, your kids live by begging.”³³² Workers invoke the Maoist past to indict the present.

First, the four young workers watched the movie *The Iron Man*. Before they watched *The Pioneers*, we discussed *The Iron Man*. They echoed the Iron Man spirit in terms of a corporate culture. One worker commented,

Nowadays, most SOEs have gone. It does not matter if there are no SOEs. Maybe it is a good thing as more opportunities are available for us after SOEs are gone. If I work hard, I can earn more money. It is good to earn money to support your family and improve their lives. In this way, I can fulfill my responsibilities as a father, husband or son.

Another laid off worker found his job at a private enterprise. He compared the working conditions between the former SOEs and the current private employment as follows,

A privately-owned enterprise does not feed workers who are lazy. I am reemployed from a bankrupt SOE to the current private enterprise. In the private enterprise, if you can endure hardships and humble yourself as a worker to sell your labour, you can do it better. In a private enterprise, you will be fired if you do not work hard. I have gradually adapted myself to the new rule. It is good to work in the private enterprise.

The third worker acknowledged that workers during the Mao era had the consciousness of the masters of the country. However, both the state and workers have changed. As young workers, they have to adapt themselves to the changed state and society. As he argued,

Now where I can earn more money I will go to work there. The society has changed and workers have changed too. It is unthinkable for workers of the present to do things like the Iron Man in the past. In the Mao era, workers did not have to worry about their housing, medical care and their children’s education. Therefore, they could dedicate themselves to their job. The workers in the 1950s had experienced the hardships in the old society. Once they became the masters of the country, they sacrificed themselves to the country without asking for any return. Young workers have not experienced the hardships as what the old workers had. We are unable to do what the old workers did. Furthermore, the state really treated workers fairly in the past. Nevertheless, it does

³³² Timothy Weston, “The Iron Man Weeps,” in *State and Society in 21st Century China: Crisis, Contention, and Legitimation*, ed. Peter Hays Gries and Stanley Rosen, 67 (New York: Routledge Curzon, 2004).

not work only with the Iron Man spirit now. Workers have to earn money. Otherwise, we cannot survive. Time has changed. Now private enterprises have provided more opportunities for us. If we work hard, we can earn more money. We will also have chances of promotion in the private enterprises. It is correct to break the iron rice bowl in the private enterprises. I acknowledge that there is exploitation in the private enterprises as we work for the capitalists. However, if workers are fairly paid, the exploitation is justifiable.

For young workers, their memories of SOEs in the late 1980s and the whole 1990s are primarily mismanagement in the SOEs and corruption during the process of SOEs restructuring. They do not question the reform itself but corruption in the process. As the fourth worker commented,

SOEs in Zhengzhou had a good reputation for their products, such as textiles, flour, paint, and mechanicals for agricultural use. Until the 1980s and the middle 1990s, those factories had still been prosperous. However, all of them are bankrupt, restructured or merged now. All of them are gone. The managerial cadres broke down the factories and benefited from the process. Take the No.5 textile factory, the managerial leaders allowed a lot of equipment to fall into disuse in the name of reforms and privately opened up their own textile factories using the “outdated” equipment. They became rich at the expense of the state and workers’ interests. Workers are weak and stand idly by seeing their factories collapse and go. In some factories, workers indeed resisted. The textile workers in the No.5 textile factory laid down on the railway tracks to block the transportation and protest against the restructuring. Though it cost a lot of the state lose, it ended up useless. Now in a few viable SOEs, the managerial cadres earn several times more than workers who labour in the frontlines in the factories. The factory leaders sit in luxury. Without restructuring or privatization, the managerial cadres will eventually steal the SOEs totally. Therefore, it is no worse to privatize them.

The urban young workers have experienced the dark, corrupt stage of SOEs during the market reforms. However, they could not realize it is the consequence of China’s neo-liberal agenda and privatization. Instead, influenced by the capitalist hegemonic discourse, they regard privatization as a possible solution to their situation. Therefore, they identify with the corporate culture in the market economy as labour, embodied in the Iron Man spirit represented in the movie *The Iron Man*. After the discussions of *The Iron Man*, I asked them watch *The Pioneers*, which represented the Iron Man spirit from a perspective of the proletariat revolutionary culture and Maoist socialism. They relate the present to understand the consciousness of the “masters” of the country among the workers in the 1950s. As one worker argued,

I feel that the managerial cadres in the 1950s still had more power and authority than ordinary workers did. Although they consulted with workers and listened to their opinions on major issues,

the cadres eventually made the decision. It depended on the personalities, qualities and moral leadership of the cadres. Workers were lucky if the cadres were good. Otherwise, a bad cadre would certainly make a mess of things. Still, workers would not make a difference. Ultimately, workers were not really the masters of the country. The state had just mobilized them to contribute to the building of the country. Although workers were fairly treated in the past, it was tough and hard in workers' life and workload. The good thing is that the state could guarantee workers' jobs and decent lives. Now life is more comfortable but difficult. If you have money, your material life will be greatly improved.

Clearly, young workers tend to make sense of the workers and Maoist socialism from the film *The Pioneers* in terms of the moral economy of a socialist enterprise, rather than perceiving the socialist consciousness of the 1950 workers. As another worker comments,

What is consciousness of the masters the country? I only admire the workers' spirit of working hard and enduring hardship. Now it is the market economy. I will learn from their spirit to work hard in my job and earn more money. I only hope to improve my family's life and fulfill my responsibilities. Although the state could guarantee workers' provisions in the past in terms of housing, medical care and other entitlements, there was shortage of almost everything in life. The people lived a harsh life and in poverty. By contrast, the market economy has brought the prosperity of material production. There are rich and varied supplies of commodities. However, we have to work hard to make money for buying these things. That is a dilemma. Therefore, it is hard to assert which era is better or worse. The private enterprises develop and provide more job opportunities. For those workers who work hard or have unique skills, the bosses will fairly treat them. Otherwise, you may resign and jump over to other enterprises. That will be a loss for the bosses. Therefore, the capitalists expect to retain talented workers. With fair payment, we will not take issue with the notion of exploitation. China has a rich workforce and it is fortunate to find a job. It is a luxury to talk about capitalist exploitation. As a labourer, I am afraid of not being "exploited." Unemployment means no exploitation. That is terrible for us.

Compared to workers who experienced Maoist socialism, urban young workers who have grown up in reform China have subscribed to post-Mao official and market-oriented mainstream narratives which equate the Mao era socialist practice with poverty, inefficiency, egalitarian distribution, managerial corruption and lazy workers. Without experiencing the brutal capitalist exploitation, urban young workers would rather consider capitalist development in China a liberating force for workers whom they think have been under the state oppression. They have neither echoed old workers with the framework of a two-line struggle to perceive market reforms, nor agreed with their political subjectivity with the socialist-conscious masters of the country. As a young urban worker aged thirty year old argues,

Although I am a laid off worker, I continue to support market reforms. There is no way for the SOEs to perform well because of official corruption. In the past, the state employed workers and now we labourers work for the capitalists. For labourers, it is the same situation, except that the bosses are changed. In the past, Mao Zedong Thought educated and mobilized workers to work hard. Now we are mobilized by the corporate culture. There has been no difference. If there is any difference, workers can resist against unfair payment. However, workers dared not protest under Mao's socialism.

Collective Memories, Proletarian Public Sphere and Reconstruction of Working Class Subjectivity

There are diverse generational experiences with Chinese socialism. Urban workers who have experienced Maoist socialism and reform China have different memories of SOEs. Due to the fractured worker memory, class-consciousness among them involves fragmentation or difference. Urban workers passing through the Mao era have selected and emphasized events, which are relevant to the subjectivity of being the masters of the country, mainly in class terms. Senior Zhengzhou workers eulogize socialism of the Mao era and criticize post-socialist market reforms. Informed by Mao's two-line struggle, they had formed their subjectivity. As Steinmetz argues, "Working-class formation requires that social class be the key organizing principle of individual and collective histories."³³³ Senior Zhengzhou workers organize their collective memories, relevant to social class and re-compose themselves as the working class to resist against what they conceive as capitalist restoration in China.

Urban workers entering the workplace in the 1980s and the 1990s have interpreted SOEs and socialism in a different way. Unlike their parents, they blame the state for the worsening conditions of the Chinese working class more than Chinese capitalists. While senior state workers who account for labour politics from a political perspective, urban young workers pursue economic gains and rights. Traditionally, class-consciousness and working class formation have involved notions of convergence and homogeneity. If applying the classical

³³³ Steinmetz, Reflections on the Role of Social Narratives, 502.

hypothesis regarding the working-class formation, it is hard to assert the re-composition of working class in post-China reforms because of fragmented workers groups and generational gap. Nevertheless, despite their diverse narratives, state workers have acknowledged their distinct identity as a social class from the state or the Chinese bourgeois. As Steinmetz suggests, “Subjectivity is strongly structured around narratives, and that these narratives explain to individuals who, where, and ‘when’ they are.”³³⁴ If the younger generation has access to another set of memories based on the older generation workers’ experience, they will invoke the Chinese revolutionary and socialist legacies against the present loss of identity and worsening working class conditions. Therefore, older workers’ collective memories of the Chinese socialism are an important component of a proletarian public sphere in post-Mao China in reconstructing the working class subjectivity. As a retired worker in Zhengzhou explained, they have intended to inform the young workers of the revolutionary and socialist legacies through cultural activities and discussions in the park.

³³⁴ Ibid., 505.

CHAPTER SIX

“THE NEW MEMBERS OF THE WORKING CLASS”: RURAL MIGRANT WORKERS AND IDENTITIES

In chapter three, I have discussed the disunity and conflicts amongst urban industrial workers exemplified in Workers’ Cultural Palace in Zhengzhou. As Weil argues, “There are many remaining divisions within the urban proletariat—economic, generational, and even political—with some more supportive of the ‘reforms’ and the government and others holding to the socialist perspective.”³³⁵ In the light of the fragmentation of urban workers, it is comprehensible to recognize the divisions between urban workers and rural migrant workers. Although both urban workers and rural migrant workers have suffered in post-Mao capitalist market reforms, it does not mean that the two sides can easily join to struggle as a united proletariat and the unification of the working classes is out of question. The cleavage is vividly manifest when the police hired rural migrant workers as thugs to beat urban workers in Zhengzhou Electrical Transmission Equipment Factory who were protesting against privatization.³³⁶ Therefore, it is necessary to examine the identities of rural migrant workers in post-Mao reforms. Building a proletarian public sphere would dissolve the potential convergence between the two classes. This is a long and difficult process.

Post-Mao market reforms have seen massive rural labourer migration to cities, providing cheap labour for the world factories in China, and other industries such as construction, commerce, food, services and sanitation, playing a primary role in improving urban residents’

³³⁵ Weil, “Conditions of the Working Classes.”

³³⁶ Ibid.

lives (see Figure 6.1). By the end of 2009, rural migrant workers nearly reach 230 million, accounting for around 40 per cent of rural labour.³³⁷ Rural migrant workers mostly come from China's underdeveloped western and central provinces such as Sichuan, Anhui, Henan, and Gansu. They rush to the industrial sunbelts of the Pearl River Delta and the Yangtze River Delta in Southern eastern coastal areas, metropolises like Beijing, and medium-sized cities and provincial capitals.³³⁸ The rural migrant workers are shaping the new proletariat class during China's industrialization and urbanization. This chapter investigates the communicative and cultural practices of rural migrant workers and examines identities of the new working class in post-socialist transformation.

Rural Migrant Workers as Representational Objects in China's Dominant Discourse Regime

In Gramsci's use of the term, a subaltern group is "deprived of historical initiative, in continuous but disorganic expansion, unable to go beyond a certain qualitative level, which still remains below the level of the possession of the State and of the real exercise of hegemony over the whole society."³³⁹ Rural migrant workers are a subaltern group in China. They are on the margins of society, denied a voice and their own history in official historical narratives, and ideologically interpellated into a continuing position of subjugation and marginality. The collective and cultural identities of rural migrant workers are mainly constructed by China's

³³⁷ "China Rural Migrant Workers Number Nearly 230 Million," *People's Daily Online*, March 24, 2010. <http://english.people.com.cn/90001/90776/90882/6929156.html>.

³³⁸ Ping Huang, "Some Strategic Thinking on Rural-urban Migration in China," in *Together with Migrants* (Beijing: UNESCO Office Beijing, 2004).

³³⁹ Antonio Gramsci, *Letters From Prison /Selected*, tr. from the Italian, and introd. by Lynne Lawner, 395-396 (New York: Harper & Row, 1973).

three most politically powerful institutions – the state, media and the capital, which are composed of what Hall calls the dominant regimes of representation.³⁴⁰

China's dominant regimes of representation have labeled the rural migrant workers as "blind migrant" (*Mangliu*) in the late 1980s, the "migrant working daughters/sons" (*Dagongmei/dagongzai*) in the 1990s, and "peasants-workers" (*Nongmingong*) and "outside labourers" (*Wailaigong*), the elements of the "floating population" (*Liudong Renkou*) and "new workers" (*Xin Gongren*) in the new millennium. The cultural and collective identities constructed by the dominant regimes of representation and imposed on the rural migrant workers have indicated, as Hall argues, "a critical exercise of cultural power and normalization," making the rural migrant workers see and experience themselves as "other" – uneducated, unskilled and uncivilized labour. This representation of rural migrant workers involves the ideological power that legitimizes and justifies the ways rural migrant workers are suffering as cheap labour in China's burgeoning capitalist development. The consequence of representing rural migrant workers in this way is an attempt to dissolve the formation of their class-consciousness in the light of the violation of workers' rights and the disastrous working conditions in the manufacturing sector.

As Potter argues, in Chinese society, "negative attitudes and values toward peasants have been deeply embedded in Chinese thinking for more than 2,000 years."³⁴¹ Even the victory of Mao's Communist revolution could not address the issue. As a response to a massive exodus of the rural population into urban areas, officials designated a formal rural/urban population division in the PRC in the late 1950s. This has served as the basis for the creation of two caste-

³⁴⁰ Stuart Hall, *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, 36 (London; Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage, 1997).

³⁴¹ Sulamith Heins Potter and Jack M. Potter, *China's Peasants: the Anthropology of a Revolution*, 299-300 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

like and hereditary civil status groups.³⁴² Under the “urban-rural dual structure,” substantiated by the household registration system (*hukou*) and resulting in differentiated access to various social welfare and life chances, China has strictly limited the rural to urban migration. This inequality has placed peasants in an inferior position to city-dwellers (*Chenglire*), as well as prioritizing the city over the countryside.

China lifted the ban on migration in the 1980s when economic reforms demanded cheaper labour. Waves of migration from the countryside to cities have since then been pulsing throughout China.³⁴³ The party and city elites had identified the influx of rural people into cities as one of the major sources of social instability in post-Mao China. When rural labourers began to flood into cities and caused disturbances, the Chinese media used the term “blind migrant” to describe the phenomenon and raise concerns about the “flood of migrants.” The category of “blind migrant” imposed on the rural migrant workers is not only what some Chinese media scholars call a stigmatization through which the Chinese media pursues news sensationalism.³⁴⁴ As Li Zhang argues, it is also an attempt by the party and city elites to turn the rural migrant workers into a distinct kind of subject for new forms of control and regulation in China’s “late socialism.”³⁴⁵ On the one hand, rural migrant workers provided the workforce for the post-Mao party state to pressure the state workers in the SOE reforms and switch the *danwei* system to the labour regime. On the other hand, the reformist party elites re-appropriated the residential permit system in the Mao era to justify institutional discrimination against the rural migrant workers, converted into “immigrants from the interior.”

³⁴² Ibid., 296–7.

³⁴³ Tie-jun Cheng and M. Selden, “The Origins and Social Consequences of China’s Hukou System,” *The China Quarterly* 139 (1994): 644–668.

³⁴⁴ See Hongtao Li and Tongzhou Qiao, “Stigmatizing and Labeling: The Image of Peasant Workers in the Chinese media,” *21st Century Online*, Issue 40 (July 31, 2005), <http://www.cuhk.edu.hk/ics/21c>.

³⁴⁵ Li Zhang, *Strangers in the City: Reconfigurations of Space, Power and Social Networks within China’s Floating Population* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001) .

The Chinese elites have constructed the collective identity of “blind migrant,” relating rural migrant workers to irrationality and lack of civic sense or low quality (*suzhi di*), which form the sources of disorder, instability and disturbance in cities. Therefore, it is necessary to discipline the multitudes of the floating masses to prevent them from wandering about blindly in the cities. As Eric Florence argues, the control mechanisms of residential and work permits operate concomitantly with the discourse on disorder, to make the migrants outsiders on the margins of society.³⁴⁶ In this way, the rural migrant workers have suffered from exploitation for three decades of capitalist-oriented reforms with their groaning voices suppressed.

The pejorative category of “blind migrant” indicates the party elites’ moral panic in the light of migratory movements at the beginning of market reforms. In the 1990s when the path of neoliberal –oriented market reforms were more clearly mapped out, the “blind migrant” categorization, which was at the centre of public debates in the late 1980s, has subsequently disappeared. As the restructuring of SOEs went ahead and state workers resisted entering the world factories in China, rural migrant workers turn out to be an ‘unlimited’ supply of low cost and unorganized workforce for China as a global manufacturing center. The dominant regime of representation has been defining the collective identity of rural migrant workers simultaneously by the institutional legacy of China’s state socialism and by the rising tide of capitalism. As rural migrant workers are increasingly associated with the market economy and capitalist development, the representation regime abandoned the term “blind migrant” (*mangliu*), which itself is a homophonic inversion of *liumang*, a pejorative expression roughly equivalent to “hooligan.” The pejorative term of “blind migrant” was replaced by a positive image of labour migration in late 1990s – *Dagong*, simply meaning “working for the boss.” As Pun Ngai argues,

³⁴⁶ Eric Florence, “Debates and Classification Struggles Regarding the Representation of Migrant Workers,” *China Perspectives*, May-June 2006.

this term “powerfully connotes the commodification of labour, or the exchange of labour for a wage.”³⁴⁷ The regime of representation constructs rural migrant workers as the *Dagong* subject and has it gendered between *Dagongmei* (working little girls) and *Dagongzai* (working little sons), while they have been major sources of Chinese industrial workers in building the country as the center of the global manufacturing industries.

The dominant regime of representation does not intend to crown them with the identity *gongren* (worker) popular in the Maoist era. As Pun observes, “the Chinese *gongren* virtually worked for the state, with the state as a *socialist boss*.”³⁴⁸ Therefore, the switch from the term *gongren* to *dagong* signaled a departure from the state as the socialist boss and the advent of new bosses from global capitalist societies. If the identity of *gongren* (workers) means state protection, *Dagong* means casualization of labour, which can be dismissed at the employer’s will and have no access to medical, housing and other benefits like urban workers.

Although *dagong* “signifies the change to capitalist labour relations [with] the *dagongzai/mei* as a new configuration imbued with awareness of labour exploitation, and with class and gender consciousness,”³⁴⁹ the party state has attempted to dislocate migrant workers’ class formation through labour regulation and the dual urban-rural structure, privileging the construction of non-class identities among them. As Huiyu Zhang argues, the dominant regime of representation has protruded *Daongmei* in representing the peasant-workers, thus obscuring the presence of *Dagongzai*, the male counterparts of *dagongmei*. This representation of rural migrant workers in a gender-salient way is a strategy of dislocating class discourse to an issue of gender, reducing the class nature of the “floating population” to a landscape of gender and thus

³⁴⁷ Pun Ngai, “Engendering a New Working Class: Social Trauma and Labour Resistance in China,” UCLA Center for Chinese Studies, <http://www.international.ucla.edu/china/article.asp?parentid=70655>.

³⁴⁸ Ibid.

³⁴⁹ Ibid.

dissolving the class imagination inherent in the rural migrant workers.³⁵⁰ During the Maoist era, class was accentuated and sexual differentiation negated. By contrast, the post-Mao regime of representation has negated the class and highlighted the gender differentiation. As Pun argues, “capitalist production and consumption rely on a sexual discourse as the basis of the system of difference and hierarchy.”³⁵¹

In 2002, then Prime Minister Zhu Rongji used the term of “Ruoshi qunti” (disadvantaged masses) to collectively identify laid-off workers, retirees, peasant workers, distressed peasant households, other disabled and underprivileged elements, such as beggars, handicappers, homeless and wanderers. While this new collective identification is to invoke state protection for the losers, marginalized economically and politically during post-Mao market reforms, it is problematic to homogenize the diverse groups into a single identity. As one laid off worker in Zhengzhou argues,

How have the working class and the peasants, who are supposed to be the ruling class in the Chinese constitution, been boiled down to disadvantaged masses like disable people? We are labourers and have two hands to labour. However, why cannot we feed ourselves through our hard working?

To put laid-off state workers and rural migrant workers into the “disadvantaged group” is the Party-state’s ideological interpellation, making them the subaltern class whose interests are at the mercy of the party’s benevolence and thus stemming any potential awakening of their class-consciousness.

As Lee argues, such an identity, constructed by the Party-state is to reinforce a hierarchical political imagination – inviting laid off worker and peasant workers to resorting to

³⁵⁰ Huiyu Zhang, “Zhebi yu tuxian: ‘nongmingong’ zai dazhong chuanmei zhong de weizhi” (Obscuring and Protruding: The Image of Rural Migrant Workers in the Mass Media), *Shijie Zhongguo* (Century China), Nov 6, 2005, <http://www.sachina.edu.cn/Htmldata/news/2005/11/621.html>.

³⁵¹ Pun, “Engendering a New Working Class.”

the central state as the source of paternal authority and protection, thus preventing workers' activism.³⁵² However, as the Chinese state still claims its loyalty to its revolutionary and socialist legacies, workers' activism is not necessarily antithetic to the state protection in the Chinese context. The construction of *Ruoshi Qunti* as a new collective identity, imposed on laid off workers and rural migrant workers, is to dissolve their potential self-identification with the proletariat identity which was constructed during the socialist transformation in the 1950s and the 1960s, thus disabling them to understand their conditions from a class analysis viewpoint.

All the official government documents in China have even used the peculiar and contradictory term “peasant-worker” (*Nongmingong*) to describe the social status of nearly 230 million of China's industrial workers who hail from the rural areas. Underlying the construction of this ambivalent identity, striding over peasants and workers, is the Party state's hesitation to extend the privileged treatment, currently bestowed to urban workers, to rural migrant workers. This collective identity is to keep reminding rural migrant workers of their status as “peasants,” who are supposedly to be locked to their farmlands. Their residency and work permits in the cities are temporary. They are the “borrowed” industrial workers or workforce in China's market economy. No matter what sector they work in for the moment, they remain “peasants.” Ultimately, they should return to their farmland. Even nominally, the rank of the Chinese working class would not admit them.

For over two decades, the Party state has kept the dual urban-rural structure working well. Under an ambivalent identity, also an inferior social status, China's economic miracle takes place by extracting rural migrant workers. However, such a system is precarious, as the younger generation of peasant-workers has gone beyond their predecessors' gratitude at obtaining

³⁵² Lee, *Against the Law?* 28-29.

employment and earning cash income. Unlike the first generation of migrant workers, the younger generation has struggled for being fairly and equally treated as citizens and acquiring residence permits in cities permanently.³⁵³ The labour unrest and elevated expectations have shaken the dual urban-rural structure, which has kept the peasant-workers as second-class citizens.

Addressing the 14th congress of China's only legal union in 2003, Wang Zhaoguo, chairperson of the All-China Federation of Trade Unions, salutes rural migrant workers in his work report, for the first time, calling them "new members of the working class."³⁵⁴ The new title comes out amidst the proliferation of various organizations spontaneously set up by rural migrant workers themselves for safeguarding their legal rights and interests. This tendency has caused the ACFTU concerns over the movement of independent trade unions among rural migrant workers. In the past, the Federation would admit only city workers. By acknowledging rural migrant workers as a rising and major force of China's working class, the AFCTU has paved the way for accepting peasant-workers, who still hold the social status of peasants under the system of residency permits, into the union. However, this acceptance does not mean to abolish the segregation of rural migrant workers from their urban counterparts nor to provide welfare and benefit equally. Instead, the main purpose is to take over all the organizations the peasant-workers themselves establish and prevent any potential labour movement independent from the federation.

By co-opting all the rural migrant workers into the federation, the AFCTU is not to encourage the formation of subjectivity and class-consciousness among peasant-workers. It is no

³⁵³ Dorothy Solinger, *Contesting Citizenship in Urban China: Peasant Migrants, the State, and the Logic of the Market* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

³⁵⁴ Josephine Ma, "Trade Union is Urged to Ease Plight of Jobless," *South China Morning Post*, Pg. 7, September 23, 2003.

more than an Althusserian ideological interpellation of rural migrant workers in the dominant regime of representation. As a government organization rather than an autonomous organization of the working class, the ACFTU has acted in the interests of the neoliberal-oriented government instead of the working class members. While it claims to play a role of protecting workers' rights, it also intends to prevent workers from protesting against the capitalists. The party, still claiming loyalty to the working class, has made overtures to capitalists. Therefore, crowning rural migrant workers with "the new members of the working class" is not to construct a class-based collective identity - the Marxist conception of classes, differentiated and defined by their relations with the means of production, but in terms of occupational and social status in the depoliticized sociological stratification.

From "blind migrant" to the "new members of the working class," the dominant regime of representation has constructed these labels and identifications and imposed them upon rural migrant workers. Through three principal modes – firstly as unifying and homogenizing, secondly as de-historicizing and dehumanizing, and thirdly as abnormalizing, as Li Zhang argues, rural migrant workers are represented as "a monolithic and formless entity consisting of unregulated, dangerous labourers who require stringent social control and surveillance."³⁵⁵

The integration of rural migrant workers into a modern labour regime in post-Mao market reforms has involved coercion. The imposition of cultural and collective identifications, constructed by the dominant regime of representation, is to dissolve the potential formation of class-consciousness among rural migrant workers, who have been all within the production centre under a capitalist class relation. This is a process of what Wang Hui calls the "depoliticized politics" in post-Mao China, in which workers and peasants, who are supposedly

³⁵⁵ Li Zhang, *Strangers in the City*, 30-33.

social or political forces toward revolutionary politics, would be transformed into an “essentialized identitarian” social class.³⁵⁶ Mao’s ideology embodies a double meaning in the concept of class – class “as a radicalized imagery for reactivating a socialist utopia in a perpetual class struggle, and as a signifier of class status to identify every Chinese subject.”³⁵⁷ However, the two dimensions of the political articulation have been conflated in de-politicization of post-Mao China. The concept of class has been hollowed out as the latter (the identitarian connotation) replaces the former (political connotation of class).

The Subaltern Speaks: Chinese Rural Migrant Workers Telling Their Own Stories

Rural migrant workers are the subaltern, as the party and elite have spoken for or on behalf of them in China’s dominant regime of representation, at the same time, political representation. However, the term of representation has its second meaning of what Hall identifies as “meaning producing practices,”³⁵⁸ in other words, representation as signifying practices, such as cultural and artistic production. This gives rise to the question of the subaltern as agency for being able to achieve social transformation, revealing the intrinsic nature of representation with agency. It suggests the representation-agency dialectic, through which the subaltern articulates a voice that both challenges dominant representation and provides as an alternative world-view for realizing the potential for emancipation.³⁵⁹

As Harindranath argues, Gramsci’s formulation of the subaltern conceptualized the realm of culture, more than the economic, as the terrain of social and political contestation, where

³⁵⁶ Wang, “Depoliticized Politics,” 23.

³⁵⁷ Pun Ngai and Chris King–Chi Chan, “The Subsumption of Class Discourse in China,” *Boundary 2* 35:2 (2008): 79.

³⁵⁸ Hall, *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, 28.

³⁵⁹ Ramaswami Harindranath, *Perspectives on Global Cultures*, 56-57 (Maidenhead, Berkshire, England; New York, NY, USA: Open University Press, 2006).

struggles for hegemony take place.³⁶⁰ The dominant regime of representation creates and reproduces subalternity. However, as Harindranath argues, the cultural realm also provides the space for challenges and alternatives to hegemonic narratives and representations. Therefore, Gramsci's conceptualization of the subaltern suggests the potential for transformative practice. Beyond a victim of dominant forms of representation, the subaltern is an agent embodying the principal mode of challenge through cultural practice.³⁶¹ In theorizing the emancipatory possibility for the working class, Armand Mattelart argues that it is vital to constitute "popular hegemony" and "overcome the alienation eroding their collective memory and accede to their own representation of themselves, to cease being a class-object, a class-for-others to become a class-for-itself."³⁶²

In the case of Chinese rural migrant workers, they use museums, music, literature, poetry and other genres as cultural and communicative practices to narrate their own history, experiences of the workshops, daily life in the cities, and hopes for the future. The representation of rural migrant workers by themselves has contributed to their identity and class formation. This chapter attempts to analyze cultural activities by segments of rural migrant workers and examine the relevance of the revolutionary legacy.

The Culture and Arts Museum of Migrant Labour: Recording Their Own History of "the Floating Population"

Pi Cun (Leather Village) is in east Beijing's Chaoyang district and about forty kilometers away from downtown Beijing. Near Beijing Capital International Airport, the small town has around 10,000 migrant workers as its inhabitants. The Culture and Arts Museum of Migrant

³⁶⁰ Ibid.

³⁶¹ Ibid.

³⁶² Mattelart and Siegelau, *Communication and Class Struggle*, 29.

Labour occupies the site of a former factory in a corner of Pi Cun. The museum which was opened on May 1, 2008, intended to tell their own story of the millions of migrant workers who have flooded into China's cities in search of work and a better life over the last three decades. When I entered the museum in June 2009, the first thing I encountered in the main display area is a large red banner bearing the characters - "Respect for Labour and Labourers is a Basic Value of Our Country."

The museum has five exhibition halls, including displays on the three-decade history of migratory movement, on female workers, and the children of migrant workers, the NGOs of the Labour and the life of *Dagong*. Most of the exhibits were constructed by donations from the migrant workers themselves. In the entrance hall, a wall chart narrates the origin and growth of migrant workers who have left the countryside to work in the factories, construction sites and service sectors in the booming cities, contributing to China's successive double-digit economic growth. It highlights the arbitrary state power, featured by China's residence permit laws before 1980 confining rural labour to the farmland, and the vagrancy law since 1982 that allowed the police to arrest migrant workers randomly, ending up in the tragic death of Sun Zhigang in 2003.

In the second exhibition hall, the women workers tell their stories. Women workers have suffered from a double burden, the factory work and family duties. In China's world factories – coastal areas' export processing zones, women workers provide the major workforce for the assembly lines, textile and toy factories, and China's ICT industry. It records the harsh reality of life for women workers. One of the most heart-breaking items is a letter written by a young women worker at a toy factory in Shenzhen. Just four months after she told her family how much she missed them, she died in a workplace fire.

The third exhibition hall raises the issue of children of the migrant workers. Around 19.82 million children under 18 years old have migrated to the cities with their parents, while around 58 millions stay in the countryside without their parents' company. Living in cities, children of migrant workers are subject to discrimination. They are not eligible for free or low-paid state education because public services are only available for people with the official permits of urban residence. Like their parents, the children have suffered from underprivileged treatment and prejudice.

However, the museum is to tell the migrant workers that they are the labourers, the engine of having contributed to China's economic miracle through their tireless work and self-sacrifice. It is glorious to be a labourer. Furthermore, they should struggle for their rights as labourers to win respect and protection. As Sun Heng, a migrant worker himself with music talent who initiated the museum, said, "Migrant workers are invisible to the outside world and even to most Chinese, but they are the real heroes of China's modernization drive. We are part of history, we have our own history, and we want to record it in our own words."³⁶³

The museum has set its long-term target as to promote the formation of the migrant workers' own culture, call for respect for the value of labour, encourage labourers' self-esteem and confidence, and help improve the condition of the migrant workers. For this purpose, it collects and displays cultural, literary and artistic works created by the migrant workers and all other materials they use in their city life, such as their pay stubs, permits of temporary residence, tools, to form the archives of recording their own history. Through a variety of exhibitions, the museum functions as a cultural stronghold of migrant workers to nurture their own culture, featured by collectivism, mutual aid, and the value of "Working is Glorious." Whether migrant

³⁶³ He Shan & John Sexton, "Migrant workers tell their story in new museum," *China.org.cn*, November 7, 2008.

workers call themselves the masses of *dagong* or “new workers,” they try to use their own culture to challenge the hegemonic narratives and representation of them. As Sun Heng, the curator and cofounder of the museum said, “We want the museum to record migrant workers’ history and build people’s awareness. We want to make a difference.”³⁶⁴

The museum tells the story of rural migrant workers from a narrative of reformist discourses alongside Chinese Socialism of Characteristics, a euphemism for capitalist development in China. However, rural migrant workers do not blame Chinese capitalists for their sufferings, but the state for retreating from its protections. Considering the state as the terrain for their struggling and contestation has rendered the revolutionary legacy and promises still relevant to the rural migrant workers’ livelihood and collective resistance.

The Beijing Young Migrant Workers’ Art Troupe: the Rediscovery of Proletarian Culture

Wang Dezhi hailed from a peasant family in Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region in northern China. Although Wang liked reading books since his childhood, he had to discontinue his education in junior middle school because of poverty. When Wang was 20 years old, he migrated from the countryside to Beijing for a new life. While labouring in Beijing, his initial dream was to perform *Xiangsheng* (crosstalks or Chinese comic dialogue, a traditional Chinese folk art) at the Chinese lunar New Year gala in China Central Television (CCTV), a cultural phenomenon in China and a staple fixture of lunar New Year’s nights since 1982 with an estimated 700 million viewers nationwide. Wang invested fully in his ambitious dream that ended up smashed. Wang had worked in a restaurant, a bakery, a water delivery center and advertising pamphlets-distributor on streets. He did not give up the dream of being a comic

³⁶⁴ Ibid.

dialogue actor. However, he finally realized that it is difficult for the mainstream cultural stage to admit a migrant worker artist.

Wang has kept reading quite a lot of books. His favorite books include *Capital* and *The Selected Works of Mao Zedong*. He also likes foreign literature. From the novel *Le Rouge et le Noir* (The Red and the Black), Wang deplored the destiny of Julien Sorel, the protagonist from a poor family, who had attempted to climb up to the high society but ultimately end up in a tragic death. Linking to his own dream and experience, Wang said, “I feel that as one of the migrant workers, I am still excluded from this city, even though I have lived here more than a decade. Gradually, I found my identification with rural migrant workers as one of the masses, though it was vague.”³⁶⁵ Wang knew where his stage is and for whom he should perform his comic dialogue. Later he joined a non-profit organization entertaining migrant workers as a part-time comic dialogue actor. His audiences are in the construction sites, in the factories and in the schools for children of rural migrant workers. Rural migrant workers fervently welcome his performance. He refused chances to join professional troupes, which had wooed him in light of his achievements. Wang has dedicated himself to entertaining rural migrant workers and communicating their own culture. Excluded from the circle of the urban popular culture, Wang feels he belongs to rural migrant workers, for whom he should work with his artistic talent.

Like Wang, Sun Heng has searched for “meaning, identity, and commercial success in the hyper-commercial and de-politicized popular entertainment scene in China” for years.³⁶⁶ Sun believed in the power of music when he left home at 23 looking for a new life far from the cramped buildings of Kaifeng, a bleak city in central province of Henan. His decision angered

³⁶⁵ “The Story of A migrant worker,” *Jinghua Shibao*, May 12, 2008, <http://news.sohu.com/20080512/n256787832.shtml>.

³⁶⁶ Zhao and Duffy, “Short-Circuited,” 241.

his parents because he gave up what they considered a decent and stable job as a middle school music teacher. Sun migrated to Beijing as a migrant singer. Sun hoped his guitar would bring him fame and fortune but like any other rural migrant workers to big cities, he encountered a great deal of hardship. He carried heavy loads, cycled pedicabs, busked and sang in nightclubs. During the hardest time, Sun had to live on 1.5 yuan (19 US cents) a day. Walking, singing, observing, Sun realized that his dream is hard to achieve. As a migrant worker, the police often harassed him. Sun said, "I left Beijing for other cities and realized that there are millions of migrant workers just like me. They come to the cities determined to make their lives better."³⁶⁷ Once he visited Tianjin, Sun played his guitar for a group of construction workers. Sun said, "They smiled broadly and their faces lit up. I realized that music goes straight to their hearts."³⁶⁸ His experiences as a migrant worker have inspired him to create songs for millions of such workers, whom he calls his "brothers." Although Sun was not a peasant to begin with, he has finally converted to be an organic intellectual of rural migrant workers.

Through a long and winding road, the two young artists of migrant workers came together. In 2002, Wang and Sun Heng, together with other educated migrant workers, set up "The Home for Migrant Workers", a non-profit organization to provide social services for migrant workers. After frequently moving around, they finally settled in "The Home for Migrant Workers" in Pi Cun Village in the eastern suburbs of Beijing in 2005. This organization has expanded to include ten sub-sections. It includes the museum, one primary school for migrant workers' children, one culture and education association for migrant workers' leisure, one arts troupe for entertaining migrant workers, one consultation center for providing legal aid,

³⁶⁷ "Musical Dream of a Chinese migrant worker," *Xinhua News Agency*, December 22, 2006.

³⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

emergency aid and rights protection training for migrant workers, and five cooperative stores for serving affordable commodities to rural migrant workers.

As an amateur music band composed of migrant workers talent in music and performing art, the “Beijing Young Migrant Workers’ Art Troupe,” now renamed as “New Workers’ Art Troupe,” has developed their own forms of popular culture as an alternative to the state dominated and market-driven media fare which does not resonate with rural migrant workers’ daily experience and lives.³⁶⁹ The troupe has recorded three albums of songs, carrying a powerful message about the plight of China’s rural migrant workers, their sentiment and their uncompromising struggle for decent wages and dignity. In the first album “Migrant Workers Belonging to the Same Family,” Sun’ well known anthem “To work is glorious” is an ironic reference to Deng’s catchword “To get rich is glorious” in the 1980s. Another song, “Fighting in Solidarity to Get Our Wages Paid,” tells of workers occupying a construction site to force unpaid wages out of “boss Zhou who pretends to be kind but is a man without conscience or shame.” In the second album “Sing for the Labourers,” a popular anthem is “Ode to the Labourer,” which borrows the South Korean ballad. It sings,

We’ve left our family and friends,
We’ve travelled an arduous path
We’ve come to live and to work,
We’ve come for dreams and to struggle
We’re not useless,
We have brains and two strong hands
We’ve used our hands to build roads, bridges, and skyscrapers
Coming and going in the wind and rain,
We can’t stay for a moment
The sweat pours from our brows,
But we raise our heads and press on
All our fortune and rights comes from our own hard work
Work created this world, the labourer s life is the most glorious!
From yesterday to today to the end of time,
The labourer’s life is the most glorious!³⁷⁰

³⁶⁹ Zhao and Duffy, “Short-Circuited,” 241.

³⁷⁰ “Musical Dream of a Chinese migrant worker,” *Xinhua News Agency*, December 22, 2006

All other albums have kept the theme of “To Work is Glorious.” In the third album, the thematic song “Our World, Our Dream” promotes the values of equality, solidarity, mutual help, collectivism, and co-operation among workers, glorifies labourers and calls for workers to unite to create a new world,

Our world is in this nine square meters space,
We are busy working day and night,
From the countryside to the city and from construction sites to factories,
To build a world is our dream.

Our world is the long assembly line,
We work overtime feeling worn-out,
Young, tears and blood,
Sending money home is our dream.

Our world is concrete and steel,
We build bridges and high-rises,
With tiresome and dirt, we work day and night,
Receiving our salary on time is our dream.

Wave hands, hey! Don't look back, hey! Tears and vows are always remembered, hey!
Hand in hand, hey! March forward, hey! Even if we do not see any light ahead, hey!
Stand up, hey! Look up, hey! Wind and rain will not stop us, hey!
Go ahead together, hey! We join together, hey! We build our own path.

Our world is full of loneliness,
To make a living, I left my native place and wander around,
The city neon lights only shine into my emptiness,
I dream to go back to my Mum.

I live in a world full of discrimination,
I am used to cold-shoulders and biases,
Feeling bighearted, I neither steal nor rob,
Standing in between the heaven and the earth, I am with dignity.

Our world is strong liquor mixed with homesickness
Meeting friends from all over the country,
We share both happiness and bitterness,
With help, we feel strong.

Wave hands, hey! Don't look back, hey! Tears and vows are always remembered, hey!
Hand in hand, hey! March forward, hey! Even if we do not see any light ahead, hey!
Stand up, hey! Look up, hey! Wind and rain will not stop us, hey!
Go ahead together, hey! We join together, hey! We build our own path.

Our world is a battlefield without gunfire,
Only the roaring machines are crazily running,
Industrial accident, occupational disease, pain and despair,

Our dreams are safety, health and security.

Our world is in this small village in the suburb,
Our children are playing and studying here,
Like the children from the city, they grow up under the same blue sky,
Our dream is to materialize what our Premier has promised.

We share the same dream,
We share the same world,
Equality, solidarity, mutual help and co-operation,
Our dream is to create a new world.

Wave hands, hey! Don't look back! Tears and vows are always remembered!
Hand in hand, hey! March forward! Even if we do not see any light ahead!
Stand up, hey! Look up! Wind and rain will not stop us!
Go ahead together! We join together! We build our own path.³⁷¹

Since the band was set up in May 2002, it has staged over 200 performances for more than 50,000 migrant workers. It has distributed more than 100,000 cassettes and CDs. The ballads have touched the lives of the legions of migrant workers who toil on construction sites and in factories. Inspired by Woody Guthrie and John Steinbeck who recounted the struggle of American migrant workers through songs and novels, Sun and his band have attempted to reach out to the 2.8 million migrant workers in Beijing and over 200 million nationwide by their songs. Sun is clear that migrant workers need songs about their own lives, not hollow ditties and sweet melodies about urban vanity.³⁷²

The verses of the songs have sung their protests against class inequality, migrant workers' life far from home, antagonism from urbanites and their dreams for a better life. "Hand in hand/ Shoulder to shoulder/ Out of the mist/ Out of hardship/All workers are a family," Sun sang passionately with his voice backed by bass and drums. "Work is glorious! Work is glorious!" Sun boomed to the workers, who in response rolled up their sleeves, clapped their hands and sang along with him. "Unite your hearts and strive as one/and get your money when

³⁷¹ Ibid.

³⁷² "Musical Dream," *Xinhua*.

the work is done.” The song *Get Back Our Wages, Fighting in Solidarity* tells a story in northwest China’s Shaanxi provincial dialect about bosses that owe the workers back pay.

For Sun and his troupe, music is not the end, but the means that can enrich migrant workers’ lives and help them form bonds among them. Sun said, “Once in 2006, we helped a blind masseur ask for back pay. The boss hired six musclemen to beat us up right in front of the local bureau of labour and social security. However, we did not give up and got the money back. After that, we knew we could do more for our migrant worker friends.”³⁷³

Rural migrant workers do not have money for costly karaokes, shows, opera houses and other commercial cultural consumption like urbanites. Sun and his troupe have tried to go to the factories and construction sites to perform and sing to rural migrant workers. However, employers believe the troupe is threatening as the songs and performances are empowering migrant workers. The troupe often encounters obstacles to gaining permission to perform in construction sites and factories, where migrant workers work and live. Realizing the importance of rural migrant workers’ struggles for autonomous communicative and cultural spaces,³⁷⁴ the “Home for Migrant Workers” opens a small community cinema in Picun village in the compound that homes the museum. It is free to project movies for local migrant workers, who come to spend every weekend. Wang Dezhi made two documentaries, *Pi Cun* and *A Fellow Named Smooth Entering City*, with his DV to record the migrant workers’ life and experience. These movies were projected in the cinema. Wang said, “We want to be a loudspeaker for hundreds of millions of migrant workers in China. We try to develop our own culture as a special

³⁷³ He Dan, “Workers descend skyscrapers, climb onstage,” *China Daily*, April 13, 2010. http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2010-04/13/content_9719254.htm

³⁷⁴ Zhao and Duffy, “Short-Circuited,” 242.

group in the society. We intend to record our history by ourselves. Our perspective may be subjective, but it is closer to reality.”³⁷⁵

The compound also opens the “New Workers’ Theatre” where the troupe often performs concerts and dramas. In 2009, the compound inaugurated the First Culture and Art Festival for and by migrant workers. The rural migrant workers’ organization, the “Home for Migrant Workers,” insist their rights to communicate their voices by saying the slogan “singing on the central stage built by ourselves.” It invited around twenty workers’ NGOs from Chongqing, Shenzhen and Xiamen to join the festival. More than one thousand people, including migrant workers, villagers, scholars, journalists, university students, and children of migrant workers, had gathered in Pi Cun, listening to migrant workers’ singing and watching their performances, including folk music, dramas, poems, independent films and a one-day forum on labour, exhibition in the Museum of Migrant Workers, and a flea market. It was to make migrant workers’ culture visible and respect the values of labour by expressing their own voices in society.

In a drama, “Our World, Our Dream,” migrant workers voiced their sacrifice and contribution to China’s economic miracle, modernization and global prestige, being proud of themselves as the builders and labourers and trying to arouse respect for them to improve their conditions. The recurrent phrases in the drama are, “The reforms and opening up have been carried out for three decades, and so far we have been enduring.” Beneath the phrases is that migrant workers are neither ignorant nor numb about their hardships and unfair treatment, but have the spirit of self-sacrifice, collectivism, dedication, perseverance and endurance for building up their country. Under severe exploitation and oppression for three decades, it is time for them

³⁷⁵ He Dan, “Workers Descend.”

to struggle for improving their conditions. They expressed their will to struggle for social justice through solidarity, mutual aid, and collectivism, advocating the labourers' culture to counter a market-driven culture of building wealth and pleasure onto exploiting the labourers.

Following the Beijing Migrant Workers' Art Troupe, rural migrant workers in other cities have tried to establish their own cultural and art troupes across China. Rural migrant workers often use the identity of "new citizens" or "new workers" to name their cultural and art troupes. Migrant workers have attempted to form their self-identification with "working class." Their institutions and cultural practices have contributed to the formation of what Yunlei Li calls "an elementary common class-consciousness of China's new proletariat."³⁷⁶ Through speaking of their common experiences and their common identity as migrant workers, the songs have transcended the segregations of regions and occupations among individual migrant workers.

The Dagong Literature and Poetry: Migrant Workers Representing Themselves

The migrant workers as the subaltern also speak for themselves through creating their own poetry and literature. The "others" constructed and obscured by the dominant regime of representation has acquired the ability to speak and express in their own words and discourses, re-composing the subjectivity and finding their existence through literature and poetry articulation. As Yunlei Li argues, they speak as historical subjects, rather than representational objects.³⁷⁷ Their literature and poetry are articulating and identifying the subaltern once obscured and neglected in Chinese society.

³⁷⁶ Yunlei Li, "dagongzhe de ge, changgei dagongzhe ting pingdagongqingnianyishutuan de yinyue jiqi Shijian" [workers' songs for workers: on the music and practices of young workers' art troupe], 2005, <http://www.eduww.com/bbs/dispbbs.asp?boardID=15&ID=16902&page=3>, quoted from Zhao and Duffy, *Short-Circuited*, 243.

³⁷⁷ Zhao and Duffy, *Short-Circuited*, 243.

Born in 1980 in Southwest China's Sichuan Province, Zheng Xiaoqiong left her hometown to Dongguan in 2001 at the age of 20 after graduation from a medical vocational school. She did several mundane jobs on assembly lines, worked as a warehouse keeper as well as an office clerk. In her first job at a Dongguan factory, she suffered four-month salaries in arrears. Then she went to a furniture factory, and got only 284 RMB (37 US dollars) for a month's work. She said she "wanted to commit suicide" thinking of the 10,000 RMB her parents borrowed for her education.³⁷⁸

She frequently experienced injuries that worsen her worker fellows' misery in the factories. When she was in the metal factory, a machine severed her nail from her thumb. Such accidents happen almost once every month at the factory where she worked for five years. For a long period, she dreamed of her hands being half severed by a machine, like many other migrant workers. As a shy girl who does not talk very much, Zheng vented her pain and homesickness through her writing.

She published her first poem "Lotus" in a Dongguan newspaper. The unexpected success encouraged her, and she "suddenly saw brightness and some ray of hope in her life."³⁷⁹ Since then she spent all her leisure time writing poems. Her poems tell the migrant workers' real life and work in the cities, their bodily and mental scars. As her work "An Iron - Plastic Factory" describes the agony of migrant workers in southern China,

From Sichuan to Guangdong/I am only an itinerant.
Encircled among assembly lines
Their teeth leave their marks in the hands, on the body and into the bones
...
There are over 40,000 severed fingers in the Pearl River Delta.
I often think:
How long will the fingers extend if they were connected one by one?

³⁷⁸ "Migrant worker poet wins People's Literature Awards," *Xinhua*, June 14, 2007, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2007-06/14/content_6241615.htm

³⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

But my poor words cannot restore any of the fingers.³⁸⁰

Zheng won People's Literature Awards in 2007, China's most prestigious literary awards. The judging panel composed of established writers evaluated her poems "shows the real life of a sensitive migrant worker... it provides thought-provoking insights into the unhealthiness, and inhumanity of the industrial system here." However, the acceptance is reserved. Some elite writers recognized the merits of her works as they remind people of the pain, blood, and tears of migrant workers in factories, and on the assembly lines, providing a new perspective different from the writers of the 1980s born in the cities and living a well-to-do life. However, some others fussily point to poor grammar in the worker-writer's works and dismiss them too "cynical and gloomy."³⁸¹

Zheng said she does not know what gloominess or brightness really is. She argues, "I only see facts. If my poems are gloomy, that is because the world is gloomy. I feel pain in my work, which forces me to write." Zheng dislikes the title of "a migrant-worker poet," saying that the term "poet" was too lofty a word for people like her. She has found that she belongs to the migrant workers. That is her world. After winning the award, Zheng has some offers of office jobs with higher salaries, but she has declined. She does not want to leave her "gloomy world." She said, "Without any pain, my poems will be bereft of any soul."³⁸²

A group of new poets have emerged from among the migrant workers. Like Zheng, the worker-writers have risen by penning the lives of migrant workers. While some expect to change their own destiny by their poems, most others remain migrant workers sweating in assembly lines and construction sites throughout China. Through shocking verses, they fully express

³⁸⁰ Ibid.

³⁸¹ Ibid.

³⁸² Ibid.

migrant workers' hard labour in China's global workshops or construction sites, their aspirations and disappointments, their naivety and learning. They sneer at the elite, urbanite critics who have put labels such as "migrant worker-poet" on them. As another young poet Xie Xiangnan said, "It is common sense that writers write from their own life experiences, emotions and existence. No one is entitled to give labels to others."³⁸³

China has witnessed a significant degree of spontaneous and unorganized labour unrest in the Sunbelt of Southern China, where have employed massive numbers of migrant workers.³⁸⁴ As Chan and Pun argue, a new working class is in the making in "interest-based or class-oriented labour protests."³⁸⁵ Therefore, the literature award for Zhang, similar to the official media recognition of Sun Heng, has invoked the controversy on the state's attempt to co-opt organic intellectuals of rural migrant workers in a bid to forestall the emergence of a politically conscious, organized labour movement by migrant workers from their spontaneous and unorganized labour unrest. It is true that the Party state has attempted to prevent independent trade unionism in post-Mao capitalist development. However, rural migrant workers have been under dual suppression –capitalist exploitation and the state household registration system. To liberate them from the dual domination of the state and capital, rural migrant workers have to struggle for improving their livelihood at the contestation site of the state, which still claims its loyalty to socialism. In other words, rural migrant workers have to seek state protection by holding it accountable for its ideological promises. Therefore, it is inadequate to perceive the rural migrant labour-state relationship as only antagonistic onto each other and frame citizenry-

³⁸³ Li Xing, "Workers find their voice with poetry," *China Daily*, August 16, 2007, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/opinion/2007-08/16/content_6029127.htm

³⁸⁴ Chan, *China Workers Under Assault*.

³⁸⁵ Chris King-Chi Chan and Pun Ngai, "The Making of a New Working Class? A Study of Collective Actions of Migrant Workers in South China," *The China Quarterly*, 198 (June 2009): 287-303.

state dichotomy into the reality. That is why we should take into considerations state ideology in the making of rural migrant workers' class-consciousness, or the making of a new working class.

Articulation of the Subaltern, State Ideology and Class-consciousness

Maoist socialism had fixed Chinese peasants onto their farmlands and not allowed them to move to the cities freely. Under the strict family register system, the *Hukou* system broadly categorized individuals into a “rural” or “urban” worker, a “villager” or “urbanite”, and the movement of people between urban and rural areas was rigidly controlled. In what scholars call “China’s apartheid,”³⁸⁶ peasants had been underprivileged in education, medical care, housing, marriage, grain rations, employment, culture and leisure, and in general, social status. This legacy has persisted until now, perpetuating the rural-urban divide and the unfair treatment of rural migrant workers living and working in cities.

The rural-urban dualism has structured labour resistance and insurgent identities among rural migrant workers. As Lee observes, “migrant workers, feeling deprived of the socialist social contract available to state-owned enterprise workers, see the Labour Law as the only institutional resource protecting their interests vis-à-vis powerful employers and local officials.”³⁸⁷ Through her case study of rural migrant workers’ labour movement in the Chinese Sunbelt of Guangdong province, Lee argues that class-consciousness is not evident among rural migrant workers, who rarely speak of themselves as the “working class” and “workers.” Instead, Lee purports to a citizenship-based labour movement, in which “claims made on the basis of equality before the law and of citizens’ right to legal justice are impassioned and firm.”³⁸⁸

³⁸⁶ Anita Chan and Robert A. Senser, “China’s Troubled Workers,” *Foreign Affairs*, March / April 1997.

³⁸⁷ Lee, *Against the Law*, 160.

³⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 195.

Nevertheless, my analyses of cultural practices by rural migrant workers indicate that the unpleasant collective memory of the command economy and the *Hukou* system has by no means prevented rural migrant workers from embracing Maoism as an ideological and cultural source, which empowers them in their labour resistance. Compared to the first-generation peasant-workers, the younger generation has deeply integrated themselves into the cities. Among them, their own intellectuals are creating their own music, poetry and literature, broadly their own culture. They have begun to organize themselves, struggle for autonomous communicative and cultural spaces, and safeguard their rights. The formation of identity and class-consciousness among rural migrant workers has potential political implications on the transformation of post-Mao China. The worker narratives that exist in songs and poems have embraced a wide variety of expression, ranging from dreary accounts of oppressive circumstances to the empowerment of the migrant workers as a class, serving to give meaning to their lives. They intend to articulate their narratives and stories, and to penetrate the callous and repressive surroundings. The songs and poems are to refurbish the proletarian culture that once shone during the Mao era and dimmed in post-Mao market reforms, beaming over the market-driven, commercial-oriented urban consumer culture. The narrative of rural migrant workers' history in the Museum of Migrant Workers in Beijing and the drama performed during the migrant workers' cultural festival have been framed along the official state ideologies which claim China's market reforms as the self-perfection of socialism. Though more evidence and text analyses are needed to confirm that rural migrant workers have the tendency to identify with proletarian culture and socialist consciousness, it is either problematic to assert that citizenship as a civil rights discourse has shaped rural migrant workers' identity during their resistance. We cannot rule out the

possibility in which rural migrant workers would draw on China's revolutionary and socialist legacies to construct their class-based subjectivity.

Figure 6.1



CHAPTER SEVEN

INTERNET, WORKERS' AUTONOMOUS COMMUNICATION AND RECONSTRUCTION OF PROLETARIAN PUBLIC SPHERE

The deconstruction of the Chinese working class in post-Mao market reforms proceeded when the Party state began to deprive workers of their communication rights. During the Mao era, the “four great freedoms” – the right of the Chinese people to “speak out freely, air views freely, hold great debates, and write big-character posters” was enshrined into the Chinese Constitution in 1975. Shortly after Mao’s death in 1976, the Chinese leadership who ousted the “Gang of Four” launched a massive propaganda campaign against “ultra-leftism” to pave the way for the economic reforms. During a brief period of political liberalization called “*The Beijing Spring*” in 1977 and 1978, the public had gained greater freedom and the party tolerated the independent press in criticism of the Cultural Revolution and the government’s behavior. This open criticism eventually escalated to challenge new leadership and the Communist Party system with the “Democracy Wall” movement. When the dissidents invoked the “four freedoms” as self-defense, Deng Xiaoping decided to strip it from the Chinese Constitution in 1980 and simultaneously removed a constitutional clause guaranteeing workers the right to strike.³⁸⁹ As Yuezhi Zhao observes, the post-Mao Chinese state has deployed symbolic violence significantly. The party switched to neoliberal-oriented economic reforms in the late 1990s, particularly upon

³⁸⁹ Maurice Meisner, *The Deng Xiaoping Era: An Inquiry into the Fate of Chinese Socialism, 1978-1994*, 118, 122-123 (New York: Hill and Wang, 1996).

urban Chinese workers in the overt and covert privatization of state-owned enterprises, it had denied popular participation.³⁹⁰

In theorizing resistance in communication and media studies, the intellectual tradition of political economy in Western democracies has provided a better understanding of the mechanisms of capitalism and a vision for an egalitarian society, namely a democratic socialist society. While some political economists have campaigned for publicly owned media outlets to counter corporate media, others acknowledge the importance of locating the struggle for a public sphere within the larger struggle against the structures of oppression and exploitation of the capitalist system.³⁹¹ Chinese labour politics have seen massive strikes and protests with their connections to the wider political economic field. However, it lacks what Vincent Mosco calls “resistance, opposition, and efforts to create counter hegemonic alternatives,”³⁹² thus leading to heterogeneous identities of the working-class people and cellular activism. In the context of China, therefore, what is at stake is the establishment of an autonomous communication and a proletarian public sphere for Chinese workers.

In examining the making of the working class in England during the period from 1792 to 1948, Michael Vester has argued that the autonomous communication network, which is independent of bourgeois forms of the public sphere and of state regimentation, is central for the formation of the proletariat as a class for itself.³⁹³ As Vester argues,

³⁹⁰ Zhao, *Communication in China*, 19-21.

³⁹¹ Kumar, *Outside the box*, 171.

³⁹² Mosco, *Political Economy of Communication*, 95-96.

³⁹³ Michael Vester, et al, *Die Entstehung antikapitalistischer Theorie und Praxis in England 1792 – 1848* (the emergence of the proletariat as a learning processes: the emergence of anti-capitalist theory and practice in England from 1792 – 1848), with a foreword by Alfred Krovoza and Thomas Leithäuser, Dissertation Hannover 1968, Frankfurt am Main 1972. Also see Negt and Kluge, *Public sphere and experience*, 187.

Due to the heterogeneity of the situations, the unity of the working class could only be reached indirectly, as coalition. The development of a communicative countersystem stood in close interaction with the development of substantial objectives. For only intensive, continuous, and broad communication realized in their own press, educational, protective, and action organizations sufficiently made possible the articulation, exchange, examination, and further development of views. The right to communication was a central object of conflict between the establishment and the workers' movement. The flip side of laissez-faire was a strict regulating of the freedoms of correspondence, speech, press, assembly, and association, which was initially practiced violently, later increasingly manipulative. In fact, specifically oppression, above all under the emergency laws of 1792 to 1818, taught the movement the necessity of better solidarity. As a consequence of this oppression and of the discontinuous progress of the industrial revolution, the workers movement could not continually expand and develop, but only in cycles that, in each case, ended with a defeat; after their evaluation, a renewed and, in the main, also qualitatively more progressive attempt followed. The evaluation of failure was essentially the task of the leading theoreticians, journalists and organizers of the movement. And their strategies had to undergo a test relative to their receivability and practical feasibility in the following wave of struggle. The most significant contributions to the theory of the early workers' movement were achieved by the 'workers' intelligentsia,' a group of urban and, in part, rural tradesmen and industrial specialists, either from their own resources or as interpreters of theoreticians who originated from other classes.³⁹⁴

This chapter examines the internet as the new media and its implications for workers' autonomous communication. Whereas censorship and communication blockages imposed by the Chinese state have retarded the formation of Chinese working class-consciousness,³⁹⁵ proletarian public sphere nurtures from workers' autonomous communication, built on the independent media, particularly the internet-based network. I provide a cursory review of autonomous working class communication. Against this backdrop, I conduct a case study to illustrate and map out working class network communication and the construction of a proletarian public sphere in post-Mao China. I also evaluate the role of workers' organic intellectuals in the nascent proletarian public sphere.

A Brief History of Autonomous Working Class Communication

The Chinese media system had operated during the Mao era based upon the "Party principle" and the mass line. For the Party principle, it defined the foundation for the relationship

³⁹⁴ Vester, *The Emergence of the Proletariat*, 188.

³⁹⁵ Zhao and Duffy, *Short-Circuited?*

between the Party and the media. Following the Leninist positive connotation of media, the Party has historically designated the role of Chinese media as its mouthpiece – literally “throat and tongue.” This means that all the media should be subject to the control of the Party. The media should accept the leading role of the Party in media production. It is obligatory for the Chinese media to promote Party policies, campaigns and directives.³⁹⁶ To counter the elite-oriented and bureaucratic deficiencies, Mao developed the mass line to govern the entire operation of the Chinese media at the same time. The Chinese media should collect and envision the opinions, needs and ideas of ordinary people and communicate them up the Party structure to the central level where the party formulates policies by incorporating the voices and concerns of the masses. Subsequently, the Chinese media is responsible for communicating policies back down the party structure to the masses and mobilizing the masses and officials to implement the policies at different levels. Therefore, a Leninist Party state in China is not just an administrative or bureaucratic structure, but also a system of two-way communication between the masses and the central authorities.

However, in practice, the existing party-state media structure had tended to deviate from the mass line and represent the elite and the bureaucracy at the expense of the masses. During the Cultural Revolution, Mao mobilized the Red Guards and other “organizations of the revolutionary masses” to assault what he saw as the spectre of “revisionism” and the “bourgeois rightists” or “capitalist roaders” within the party-state apparatuses. As the latter had controlled the existing party-state media system, Mao and his popular followers sought autonomous communication for achieving their revolutionary objectives. As such, the various organizations of the revolutionary masses had established their own communication channels with varying

³⁹⁶ Yuezhi Zhao, *Media, Market, and Democracy in China: Between the Party Line and the Bottom Line* (Urbana and Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1998).

degrees of autonomy from the party-state media structures.³⁹⁷ From tabloids, big-character posters and newsletters sponsored by Red Guards and revolutionary workers' organizations, the autonomous communication networks attempted to independently collect, produce, disseminate and exchange information and commentaries with regard to the campaigns of the Cultural Revolution. Because the Red Guard and workers' media and communication were used by Mao in the party infighting to purge "capitalist roaders," some scholars suspect its autonomy. However, as Zhao argues, the fact that Mao called upon them to initiate the Cultural Revolution is not sufficient to claim that they were completely manipulated. Instead, Zhao makes Red Guards and Chinese workers' brief experience of anarchical "freedom" and communicative empowerment during the Cultural Revolution analogous to the "press freedom" which liberal intellectuals and party-state journalists enjoyed during May 1989 in reporting student demonstrations because the party infighting weakened the reins over the party-state media system.³⁹⁸ Through his analyses of the communicative activities of the Red Guards, Michael Schoenhals argues that they constituted "non-state-controlled current information networks" and represented an important case of state-enabled grassroots "information empowerment."³⁹⁹ In examining Red Guards publications, Elizabeth Perry and Li Xun find the relationship between the party-state, party-state media and Red Guards tabloids was too complicated to be featured as "a simple one-way street of top-down manipulation."⁴⁰⁰

³⁹⁷ Zhao, *Communication in China*; Michael Schoenhals, "The Great proletarian Information Revolution"? News Networks of China's "Revolutionary Masses" 1966-1967, Paper for the Workshop, titled "Between Revolution and Reform: China at the Grassroots, 1960-1980," May 28-30, 2010, Simon Fraser University.

³⁹⁸ Zhao Yuezhi, *Communication in China*, 197.

³⁹⁹ This is recited from Zhao Yuezhi, communication in China, who made the citation based on Michael's lecture at the Institute for Asian Research, UBC, September 13, 2005.

⁴⁰⁰ Zhao, *Communication in China*, 199. Also see Elizabeth Perry and Li Xun, *Proletarian Power: Shanghai in the Cultural Revolution* (Boulder, Co: Westview Press, 1997).

While scholars have primarily examined the tabloids of Red Guards, who were mostly students and other young people mobilized by Mao, here I highlight autonomous communication initiated by workers as the revolutionary masses during the Cultural Revolution. Under the slogan of “To Rebel Is Justified” and “The Working Class Must Exercise Leadership in Everything,” the working mass movements took off. Using printing machines, mimeograph machines, loudspeakers, and portable microphones, which were the common media technologies in the 1960s, like other mass organizations, Chinese workers published tabloids, put up big-character posters, disseminate media materials, printed leaflets, and organized public debates and mass struggle meetings.⁴⁰¹ Among proliferating workers’ publications, Shanghai-based *Workers’ Rebellion* was the most influential press. Shanghai was the only city in which leaders of workers’ mass organizations actually took power during the Cultural Revolution. The newspaper was published in 1966 by the “Headquarters of the Revolutionary Revolt of Shanghai Workers,” an alliance of many different worker-based groups in Shanghai’s factories. It printed around 30,000 copies per issue at the beginning and increased to 410,000 in 1969. It had even reached 6400,000 in early 1970s, exceeding the Shanghai party organ.⁴⁰² If the working masses, as Jackie Sheehan argues, “were by then prepared and equipped to act autonomously and collectively in pursuit of their own interests and in opposition to party-state authorities in the enterprise and beyond,”⁴⁰³ the workers’ media had contributed to the upgrading of workers’ status and influence. The workers’ publications had substantiated “the mass line,” proposed by Mao to counter and prevent bureaucracy and elitism. During Mao’s time, however, empowerment and autonomy had a long

⁴⁰¹ Guobin Yang and Craig Calhoun, “Media, Power, and Protest in China: From the Cultural Revolution to the Internet,” *Harvard Asia Pacific Review* Vol 9. No.2 (Spring 2008).

⁴⁰² Chen Donglin, “wenge qunzhong zuzhi baokan yanjiu” (studying newspapers and journals published by the masses during the Cultural Revolution), *China Elections and Governance*, http://www.iccs.cn/detail_cg.aspx?sid=36

⁴⁰³ Jackie Sheehan, *Chinese Workers: A New History*, 103 (London; New York: Routledge, 1998).

distance from reality and ordinary workers mostly had not improved a lot.⁴⁰⁴ Nevertheless, as Sheehan argues, the experience of large-scale collective action outside normal party control by Chinese workers during the Cultural Revolution has left an important legacy for China's labour politics – workers' readiness to resort to self-organization and strikes against the existing power structure likely to betray their interests.⁴⁰⁵

In post-Mao reforms, the Democracy Wall movement surged in 1978-1979, in which state workers sought to democratize Chinese socialism. During this period, worker activists published non-officially approved journals to voice their concerns and interests. Specifically, workers had expressed their concerns about their living standards, pay, corruption, official misconduct and cadre privilege.⁴⁰⁶ The Democracy Wall movement began in mid-November 1978.⁴⁰⁷ While liberal intellectuals were involved in the post-Mao democratic campaign, primary activists and participants of the Democracy Wall were mostly workers, such as Wei Jingshen. In Beijing, worker activists put up large numbers of big-character posters on the roadside wall in Xidan, to the west of Tiananmen Square. This gave the movement its name. In addition to posters, unofficial journals sprang up in Beijing and other cities all over China, including Guangzhou, Changsha, Wuhan, Taiyuan, Tianjin, Qingdao, Harbin, Shanghai, Nanjing, Guiyang and Kunming.⁴⁰⁸ Among them, influential were journals like *Enlightenment*, *Beijing Spring*, *April 5th* and *Theoretical Banner*.

⁴⁰⁴ Schoenhals, "The Great Proletarian Information Revolution"; Perry and Li, *Proletarian Power*.

⁴⁰⁵ Sheehan, *Chinese Workers*, 103.

⁴⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 158-160.

⁴⁰⁷ For the Democracy Wall campaign in details, see Merle Goldman, "The Twentieth Anniversary of the Democracy Wall Movement," *Harvard Asia Quarterly*, No.105 (April 1999).

⁴⁰⁸ Ruoxi Chen, "Democracy Wall and the Unofficial Journals," *Studies in Chinese Terminology no. 20*, 107-15 (Berkeley: Center for Chinese Studies, Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California Press, 1982).

If Mao had attempted to empower the working class through the Cultural Revolution in vain, the Democracy Wall activists took advantage of Deng's "thought liberation" campaign – repudiating the Cultural Revolution as radical leftist, purging Mao's followers and launching China's capitalist experiments, to reassert the working class leadership through promoting political democracy. Individual workers and activist groups either posted big and small character wall posters, or produced mimeographed journals. The unregistered workers' journals numbered around 55 in Beijing and 127 in other cities, compared to the official newspapers at that time.⁴⁰⁹ The brief flourishing of workers' publications in the Democracy Wall movement had seen Chinese workers' autonomous communication practice – workers as citizens and workers' groups as voluntary associations of citizens owning and controlling their own means of communication beyond state sanction or intervention.

The pro-democracy movement in 1989 provided the working class in the PRC with the third historical moment in their struggle for autonomous organizations and communication. The Western media usually described the Tiananmen Incident in 1989 as the student movement for democracy, capitalism and market reforms. This framing is simplistic and indeed wrong, as it overlooks the participation of workers and their demands. This has greatly neglected Chinese workers' involvement and impact upon the direction of the movement. Just a few days after university students in Beijing demonstrated in memorial to the former party chief Hu Yaobang, who died from a heart attack on April 15, a small group of workers founded the Beijing Workers Autonomous Federation (WAF) on April 20. The WAF emerged as the organising centre of the workers' movement by mid-May. Two days later, 100,000 people assembled in Tiananmen Square and one million took to the streets for Hu's funeral - most of them workers. On that day,

⁴⁰⁹ Zhao, *Communication in China*, 199.

the WAF distributed leaflets, condemning the wealth of Deng Xiaoping's family, the cadre privileges and the flaws of Deng's market reform, demanding prices be stabilized and urging the government to make public the top Chinese leaders' wealth. Not only in Beijing, but also in other cities across China workers began to take action. For example, many workers in Shanxin very often gathered before the provincial Communist office to discuss the political situation, prices, wages and housing. Thousands of workers joined the WAF, not only in Beijing but also in other Chinese cities. Eighteen provinces reported large-scale protests. Workers joined the students' hunger strike and occupation of Tiananmen Square. This had publicized the WAF and provided it with chances to recruit new members, agitate among more workers and coordinate visits to factories. While students pressured the authority to recognize the Students Autonomous Federation as legal, the workers demanded recognition of the WAF. The authority held "dialogues" with workers' representatives, particularly of the 200,000 workers at Capital Iron and Steel in Beijing in an attempt to defuse the radicalization within the working class.⁴¹⁰

Workers' activism had dramatically shifted the pro-democracy and pro-capitalist movement initiated by students to the left. The more radical students shouted new slogans of "No victory can be achieved without the support of the working class."⁴¹¹ As an expression in support of socialism, students and workers gathered and sang the Internationale before the world media. In a declaration, the WAF called for workers' control of industry and all peaceful means, including strikes, to achieve their goals, asserting, "With our blood we will reconstruct the walls of the Paris Commune."⁴¹²

⁴¹⁰ John Chan, "Origins and consequences of the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre," *World Socialist Web Site*, 4 June 2009, <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2009/jun2009/tien-j04.shtml>

⁴¹¹ Ibid.

⁴¹² Rob Lyon, "15th Anniversary of Tiananmen Square Massacre," *In Defense of Marxism*, 4 June 2004, <http://www.hartford-hwp.com/archives/55/855.html>.

While the liberalized party-state sector and the emergent liberal intellectual elite in the official media had promoted the movement, workers still used handbills, wall posters and old technologies including mimeograph machines, portable loudspeakers, and handheld megaphones to express their opinions and demands and mobilize the masses.⁴¹³ Unlike the liberal intelligentsia advocating democracy and capitalism, the workers expressed hostility to the CCP's betrayal of its revolutionary and socialist promise. A leaflet issuing a WAF statement on May 26 declared:

We [the working class] are the rightful masters of this nation. We must be heard in national affairs. We absolutely must not allow this small band of degenerate scum of the nation and the working class [the Stalinist leadership] to usurp our name and suppress the students, murder democracy and trample human rights.⁴¹⁴

One of the WAF's leaflets declared, "We have conscientiously documented the exploitation of the workers. The methods of analysis given in Marx's *Das Kapital* provided a basis of the method of understanding exploitation... We were astonished to find that the 'peoples' public servants' have devoured all surplus value created by the people's blood and sweat."⁴¹⁵ In a wall poster expressing workers' hatred of Deng's market reforms, the WAF proclaimed, "we must unite to sweep Deng Xiaoping from the historical stage".⁴¹⁶

Workers' resistance and struggle for autonomous communication in post-1989 market reforms have resurged against the backdrop of China's neo-liberal economic agenda. The party state has harshly suppressed leftist discourse and the emergence of the internet. Since the 1990s, the party state's regime of censorship has assumed the regulatory role of managing media and

⁴¹³ Yang and Calhoun, "Media, Power, and Protest in China."

⁴¹⁴ Andrew G. Walder and Gong Xiaoxia, "Workers in the Tiananmen protests: The politics of the Beijing Workers Autonomous Federation", the *Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs* No.29 (Jan 1993).

⁴¹⁵ Maurice Meisner, *The Deng Xiaoping Era: an inquiry into the fate of Chinese socialism 1978-1994*, 446 (New York: Hill and Wang, 1996).

⁴¹⁶ Beijing gongren zizhi lianhe hui [the WAF], 'Renmin de haoling' [Command of the People], wall poster dated 29 May 1989. Reprinted in *Zhongguo minyun yuan ziliao*[China Democracy Movement Data], no.2, 48.

communication entering the era of commercialization, commodification and conglomeration.⁴¹⁷ The space for unofficial publications, which proliferated in the various movements until 1989, has become precarious under harsh state repression. Though enormous numbers of urban workers have been laid-off and the cadre-capitalists stole state assets in the process of neo-liberal privatization, they are unable to express their dissatisfaction through the party organs and commercial media. When workers resorted to unregistered publications, such as working class newsletters, to disclose official corruption and demand social justice and protection, the party strictly suppressed the workers' protests. Several laid off workers in Northwest China were put into jail in 1999 because they published a newsletter Chinese Workers' Monitor (Zhongguo gongren guanCha) unearthing the official corruption and misconduct in managing their SOE.⁴¹⁸ Since Deng Xiaoping toured southern China in 1992 and warned against the leftist resurgence, the party-state even suspended registered leftist political and literary periodicals including *The Pursuit of Truth* (zhenli de zhuiqiu) and *Midstream* (zhongliu) in pushing forward the neo-liberal agenda.

However, the rise of the internet provides a networked means of communication through which Chinese workers express their voices and build up their own public sphere. In the transformation of the political economy in post-Mao China, as Yuezhi Zhao observes, the Chinese "bourgeois public sphere" has taken shape.⁴¹⁹ On the one hand, the nascent Chinese "bourgeois public sphere" is historically progressive in containing abusive state power and protecting individual-based civil rights. As individual-based industrial citizens, the Chinese workers will benefit from popular mobilization by the media, urban intellectuals and the internet

⁴¹⁷ Zhao, *Communication in China*, 19-64.

⁴¹⁸ *Ibid*, 202.

⁴¹⁹ Zhao, 13; 313; 329.

community for civil rights. However, as Zhao points out, it is necessary to recognize the exclusionary and class-dominated nature of the “bourgeois public sphere.” The limits of civil right discourses and the class nature of legal justice have been vividly manifest in different reactions in the emergent Chinese bourgeois public sphere to the two cases of Sun Zhigang and Wang Binyu. The former involved the death of a university graduate beaten by the police, triggering an unprecedented mobilization in the media, China’s intellectual community and the internet advocating civil rights and social reforms. By contrast, the latter involved a rural migrant worker killing his boss and three foremen for wage arrears, bringing to the surface antagonistic class conflicts in post-Mao China. While it waged crusades for citizens’ rights in the case of Sun, the Chinese bourgeois public was reluctant to participate in the petition of exempting the sentencing of Wang to death. They insisted on upholding the authority of the rule of law and ignoring the class-based social justice and basic economic rights of hundreds of millions of rural migrant workers Wang Binyu symbolizes.

The reluctance of the Chinese bourgeois public sphere to safeguard Chinese working class interests was further present in another case study by Zhao with regard to workers of Factory 3403 in Chongqing. The workers issued urgent calls to the internet community to communicate their struggles against the SOE privatization process, in which state property was transferred into the hands of private capitalists at the expense of workers’ interests and state asset loss. However, the mainstream internet community, with the market-oriented liberal media, humanistic intellectuals and their middle-class allies which had showed its dynamic mobilizing power in the case of Sun, ignored the workers’ call. The three case studies have reminded us, the Chinese bourgeois public sphere is the same exclusionary and class-based as the “bourgeois

public sphere” in the Habermasian formulation emerging in the Western Europe. As Zhao observes,

The contrast between the Sun and Wang cases on the one hand and the 3403 Factory case on the other, and the degree of media and Internet openness in these three areas – one an individual-based civil rights appeal, the other a class-based appeal concerning the fundamental right of the different economic classes in controlling the means of production – is thus obvious. That is, while the media, urban intellectuals, and the Internet community were willing to mobilize themselves fully around Sun Zhigang and partially around Wang Binyu, this active “Chinese public” with symbolic power was *not in a position* to fight for the class interests of Chinese workers as potential owners of the means of production.⁴²⁰

Zhao’s comparative analyses provide the necessary vantage point to “denaturalize any universalistic claims of an emerging Chinese bourgeoisie aiming to replace the party to establish hegemonic rule over Chinese society in the current historical conjuncture.”⁴²¹ If the Chinese bourgeois public sphere aims to “defuse social conflicts, transform the post-revolutionary party-state into a liberal constitutional polity, and contain the threat of yet another radical social revolution,”⁴²² the potential emancipation of the Chinese working class lies in holding the Party state accountable for redeeming its revolutionary and socialist promises. For their own class interests, the emerging Chinese bourgeoisie has developed a public sphere composing of the market-oriented liberal media outlets, the Internet community in cyber-space, civil society of citizen movements and academic salons sponsored by citizen-conscious activists and public intellectuals.⁴²³ The Chinese working class is also seeking to build a counter public sphere and articulate its own interests. The May First Park constitutes a communicative space where Zhengzhou workers who use Mao’s “two-line struggle” openly slam post-Mao reforms and

⁴²⁰ Ibid., 313.

⁴²¹ Ibid, 13.

⁴²² Ibid., 278.

⁴²³ See Guobin Yang and Craig Calhoun, “Media, Civil Society, and the Rise of a Green Public Sphere in China,” *China Information* 2007: 21; 211; Edward Gu and Merle Goldman (eds.), *Chinese Intellectuals Between State and Market* (London and New York: Routledge Curzon, 2004); David Kelly, “Public Intellectuals and Citizen Movements in China in the Hu-Wen Era,” *Pacific Affairs*, Vol.79, No.2 (summer 2006):183-204; Gloria Davis, “Habermas in China: Theory as Catalyst,” *The China Journal* Issue 57 (January 2007): 61-85.

discuss working class interests. As my studies in chapter three indicate, the Chinese bourgeois public sphere has been successful in winning the consent of groups of the Chinese working class who believe that both capitalism and liberal democratic change would liberate them in China. The case study of Zhengzhou shows that it is vital to build a proletarian public sphere, where the proletarian would express their everyday experience in a class-conscious and oppositional language and develop a class-based identity different from that of the emerging Chinese bourgeois. As Negt and Kluge argue, this counter-public sphere expresses the life context of the subaltern, excluded and silenced from hegemonic discourse and representation mechanism.⁴²⁴

The Maoist era constructed the mastery of the working class and guaranteed to Chinese workers the superiority of socialism. Mao's "two-line struggle" had attempted to pre-empt the potential formation of bourgeois-capitalists in socialist China and empower the working classes to prevent the restoration of capitalism. The conflating of state interests and working class interests had blurred the boundaries between a proletarian public sphere and state regimentation. The Maoist imagery of Chinese socialism turns out to be fragile once the post-Mao Chinese state and the public sphere, of which the Party-state media sphere is a component, have allied itself with the capitalist class and interests and betrayed the interests of the working class. The failure of Maoist socialism in the aftermath of his death had quickly worsened the conditions of the working class. As Wu Yiching argues,

The power of the state was supposed to be wielded in the interests of the working people, to be sure. But in fact, the subordinate working classes were at best to be the dependent beneficiaries of a paternalistic bureaucracy — not to mention that such hard-won benefits can be easily taken away

⁴²⁴ See Negt and Kluge, *Public Sphere and Experience*.

as political circumstances may change, as recent developments in China have so clearly demonstrated.⁴²⁵

The dramatic development in post-1989 workers' resistance is that the Chinese working masses have gone their own way towards safeguarding their rights and interests by constructing their own public sphere, autonomous from both state regimentation and the Chinese bourgeois public sphere. The following case study is to illustrate the appropriation of the internet among migrant workers and young workers and worker intellectuals at the grass roots level to construct a proletarian public sphere in the post-1989 class-divided Chinese society.

The Liu Hanhuang Case: Autonomous Communication, Solidarity and Class-consciousness

Liu Hanhuang is a 26-year-old migrant worker from rural Guizhou province. Among the hundreds of millions of China's "floating population," Liu migrated to the booming Pearl River Delta, one of the world's most intensive manufacturing and export basins in Southern China. He found a job in the Taiwanese-run Zhan Ming Hardware Products Co, Ltd in Dongguan City, the epicenter of the Chinese capitalist experience that began as early as in the 1980s. Without any professional training, the factory assigned unskilled Liu to work on a punch press machine, the most dangerous job in the factory, on September 18, 2008. Six days later, the malfunctioning and unguarded machine tool suddenly came down and severely injured Liu's right hand. The doctor had to amputate his right hand. With a crippled body, Liu lost the ability to work and earn money to support his family who had urgent financial needs back in a remote and poor Guizhong village. Liu sued the company over compensation. The labour arbitration authority negotiated 110,000 Yuan (around 20,000 dollars) as compensation. Liu accepted the agreement but the

⁴²⁵ Wu Yiching, "Rethinking 'Capitalist Restoration' in China," *Monthly Review* Vol.57 Issue 6 (2005): 48-49.

company refused. The two sides went to court and in March 2009, the court ruled 160,000 Yuan (30,000 dollars) as once-and-for-all compensation. Liu agreed with the verdict, but the company still did not accept it and instead, offered a bid of 70,000 Yuan (12,000 dollars). During the prolonged negotiation of compensation, the court obligated the factory to allow Liu, disabled and unable to support himself in Dongguan, to live and eat inside the factory compound. However, Liu did not get proper care and treatment. The factory authority often abused and rudely treated him. They limited Liu's personal freedom to go outside the compound and tried to prevent Liu from meeting his lawyer for the compensation. Repeatedly, the company threatened to drive Liu out of the company quarters. In a protest on June 13, 2009, Liu attempted suicide by threatening to jump from a fifth-floor ledge at the factory. With police intervention, the factory promised Liu to continue his stay in the factory before the settlement of the compensation. Two days later, Liu attempted to go outside for an appointment with his lawyer. The factory guards blocked him at the factory gate. During his negotiation with the guards, three vice general managers of the company approached the gate in a car. The factory administrators tried to block Liu from going out of the gate. Quarrelling between the two sides took place. Liu was under physical attacks. The fighting ended up with Liu fatally stabbing his two Taiwanese employers and leaving a third critically injured.

Like the fate of Wang Binyu four years ago, Chinese law would likely sentence Liu to death. If the case of Wang Binyu had put economic and social justice of migrant workers under scrutiny, including low wages and wage arrears, the case of Liu Hanhuang has also revealed the tip of the iceberg of China's bloody GDP. It highlights the inhumane working conditions of the vast majority of migrant workers in China's Sunbelt. In the Pearl River Delta, every year sees more than 40,000 fingers or hands cut off due to industrial injuries caused by the punch press

machine tools alone.⁴²⁶ Worse, local authorities and capitalists colluded to have the procedure of compensation prolonged. It often takes more than three years to go through the whole procedure and finally settle the compensation. As such, injured rural migrant workers, who have no time and income to sustain the prolonged procedure of compensation, have to give up the lawsuits and accept the conditions offered by the factories. With little money as compensation, the disabled migrant workers often return to their hometowns in the countryside for the rest of their life.

A Killer, a Hero? Questioning the Popular Sympathy with Liu in the Chinese Bourgeois Public Sphere

Because of his resistance, Liu has become an internet hero among workers and the left in China, which have launched a popular campaign to reduce his sentence. Just a few months prior to Liu's case, Deng Yujiao, a 21-year-old female pedicure worker in Hubei province, rebuffed a local government official who had come to the hotel looking for sexual services. Acting in self-defense, Deng allegedly stabbed her assailant in the neck trying to fight him off, causing his death. The case came to national prominence through internet forums and chat rooms, her story angered netizens. Under the massive public pressure and protests across the nation, the court freed Deng from any sentence. Like the case of Sun Zhigang analyzed by Zhao, the case of Deng Yujiao, as it involved local Party cadres and with no "class" conflict entailed, had become another crusade for civil rights and legal justice mobilized by elite intellectuals and the popular by using media and internet. This time, even the Chinese leftists actively joined the mobilization. However, like the case of Wang Binyu, to contain class conflicts, the market-oriented media and the official media sphere have kept a distance from the case of Liu Hanhuang. Soon after the tragedy took place, Xinhua News Agency, the most authoritative state media in China, issued

⁴²⁶ "Zai Shijie Gongchang Shenchu: Zhusanjiao Mingong Shengcun Zhuangkuang Tiaocha" (Deep into the "World Factory": The Investigative Reporting of Migrant workers' conditions in the Pearl River Delta), *China Youth News*, August 22, 2007.

two news items in English, but both had distorted the truth. The first Xinhua story wrote, “Liu came to the general office of the factory Monday morning to discuss compensation with the three administrators. They agreed to continue their discussions in the afternoon, but shortly after midday, Liu attacked the three with a knife. Liu fled the scene but was apprehended not far from the factory later Monday.”⁴²⁷ The Xinhua story did not contextualize the incident at all. If Liu really “fled” the scene after killing people, according to the Chinese legal custom, it would greatly reduce the chances of giving Liu a lenient sentence. One day later, another Xinhua story described the incident as “a mainland worker’s murder of two factory employers from Taiwan,” instead of “fatal stabbing of factory managers” in the first news item. The Xinhua correspondent clearly understood the severity of the term “murder.” As the first Xinhua story wrote, “Officials haven’t yet specified what charges they will bring against Liu. Under Chinese law, the maximum penalty for intentional injury could be death with a two-year stay. The maximum penalty for murder could be the death sentence and immediate execution.”⁴²⁸ If the prosecutor had yet to decide how to charge Liu, how could Xinhua rush to determine the incident as “murder”?

In the case of Wang Binyu, as Zhao argues, Xinhua had hoped to focus on the economic rights of the migrant workers and the necessity of securing these rights through the legal system.⁴²⁹ However, in the case of Liu Hanhuang, as Xinhua issues the official position of the party-state, the voice of the state has swung back to capital again. Probably because the incident involved the deaths of two Taiwanese capitalists and might complicate the relationship with Taiwan, which is vital to the re-unification of China, the Party-state chose to prioritize national interests over class interests. Therefore, the “party-state media sphere” anchored in the *People’s*

⁴²⁷ “Worker detained in fatal stabbing of factory managers,” *Xinhua*, June 16, 2009.

⁴²⁸ “Mainland ‘highly concerned’ over worker’s murder of Taiwan factory managers,” *Xinhua*, June 17, 2009.

⁴²⁹ Zhao, *Communication in China*, 280.

Daily, the *Guangming Daily*, CCTV and Xinhua News Agency, would less be a component of a proletarian public sphere. In structural terms, they belong to state regimentation and only represent the realpolitik discursive position. It is not the representation of working class interests, but as what David Shambaugh calls “a legitimate tool for transforming and building the kind of society sought by the Party – a society labeled, since the 1980s, a ‘socialist spiritual civilization’ (shehuizhuyi de jingshen wenming) or, more recently, a ‘harmonious society’ (hexie shehui).”⁴³⁰

Based on the verdict of the Intermediate People’s Court of Dongguan, I provided the background regarding the case of Liu Hanhuang as above. The court finally sentenced Liu to death but with a two-year stay in its primary judgement on September 3, 2009. Clearly, the Xinhua stories had distorted the truth in favor of the Taiwan businessperson. When I examined the *Nanfang Metropolitan News* (NMN), the market-oriented media that took the lead in covering the Liu Hanhuang case,⁴³¹ I found that the Xinhua stories had mostly repeated the NMN coverage without its own investigation. According to the NMN account, Liu accidentally encountered the Taiwanese managers on June 13, 2009. He took advantage of this opportunity to ask for immediate compensation. It was Liu that refused the manager’s agreement to discuss the issue later. Liu angrily drew out his knife and stabbed them to death. Liu then ran away from the scene. As the two major powerful media in China – Xinhua as the party organ and the commercial media like the NMN that has claimed itself as “new mainstream,” they have greatly misled the public opinion in the case of Liu Hanhuang. The misleading articles led to the lukewarm public support, far from what the worker activists who launched a campaign for rescuing expected to gain.

⁴³⁰ David Shambaugh, “China’s Propaganda System: Institutions, Processes and Efficacy,” *The China Journal*, No.57 (January 2007): 29.

⁴³¹ “Huילong Liu, Suopei bucheng noutong gaoguan ersi yishang” (Unsuccessful asking for compensation lead to furiously stabbing of senior managers, causing two died and one injured), *Nanfang Metropolitan News*, DA03, June 16, 2009, <http://gcontent.nddaily.com/b/b0/bb04af0f7eaae4a/Blog/f99/2d7917.html>.

Rescuing Liu Hanhuang: Class-Consciousness, the Internet Community and the Self-Organization of the Working Class

China's industrial workers are developing their own public sphere anchored in the internet-based communities. Exemplified in the popular campaign to rescue Liu Hanhuang is a potentially important cluster of Chinese websites that represent the network for workers' solidarity. Educated Chinese migrant workers initiate all these websites, registered in mainland China. They are worker intellectuals appearing from the industrial workers. Radical political thoughts like Marxism, Leninism, Trotskyism and Maoism have greatly influenced them. They have tried to keep a distance from the leftists and the New Left intellectuals in China and the labour movements informed by trade unionism, even though they have sought to ally themselves with the latter. Echoing the urban Zhengzhou workers, these worker activists adopt Mao's "two-line struggle" to perceive the post-Mao reforms. They are opposed to the post-Mao leadership that has betrayed the Communist Party's promise as the vanguard of the working class. They attempt to struggle for a socialist China by re-asserting Marxism and Maoism in their self-organization. In the Sunbelt of Southern China, tens of millions of migrant workers feel disoriented and confused over their futures. The worker activists devote themselves to enlightening them with class analysis and class struggle for emancipating themselves. They have the potential to form the dynamic social force for a socialist movement in China's post-socialist transformation.

Soon after the first hearing, a Chinese website honghuacao.com from Shenzhen on September 17, 2009 initiated the internet mobilization for rescuing Liu Hanhuang. Honghuacao is a medicinal herb with pretty flowers, which means Chinese milk vetch. The grass-roots internet community of the working class uses the metaphor to dedicate itself to serving the Chinese workers. All the worker activists are educated migrant workers. The website is

composed of Honghuacao Rights Protection Mutual Aid Network and Honghuacao Workers' Rights-Protection Consultation Network. Providing free of charge consultation to migrant workers via face to face, phone call or internet -based service, the activists, compromising workers' intellectuals and class-conscious workers, attempt to encourage workers' solidarity and raise their class-consciousness. As the website clearly states,

The objectives of setting up Honghuacao Network are to engage ourselves with the working class indefinitely, grow up with them, become members of them and dedicate ourselves to promoting the progressive cause and awareness of the working class. We primarily discuss with workers the way out of their plights, in other words, the issue of future. Through our work, we will do our best to raise our class-awareness, integrate ourselves with the working class and increase our and workers' understanding of the future of workers as a class.⁴³²

In its petition and a letter calling for donations to pay the families of the killed Taiwanese businesspeople and thus exempting Liu Hanhuang's death penalty, Honghuacao calls for ordinary workers and progressive elements in society to reach out for reducing the sentence for Liu. Through this campaign, Honghuacao hopes to promote mutual aid, generate workers' solidarity and raise their class-consciousness. Like the workers' club in the 1920s, it regularly organizes reading groups among workers every week and provides a library, sports and entertainment facilities for workers to spend their rare leisure time. Labour scholars and lawyers of "rights-protection" (*weiquan*) inform workers of China's labour law against unscrupulous capitalists.

Another workers' website, called Workers' Portal (*gongren menhu*) with *chui zi.net* as the URL of the main site, echoed Honghuacao's initiative for collecting donations. The name of the site *chui zi* means hammer, as in the hammer and sickle. The homepage of *chui zi.net* has several sub-sections in addition to separate sections listed alongside it, some leading to sections of *chui zi.net*, others to other websites. The confusing layout indicates that workers' activists are

⁴³² About Us, Honghuacao organization, <http://honghuacao.com/thread-56-1-1.html>.

fighting an internet-based “guerrilla warfare” to deal with the Chinese internet police blocking or shutting down their virtual communities. The main sections listed on the homepage are: Workers’ News, Workers’ Forum, Workers’ Rights-Protection (honghuacao.com), Workers’ Photos, Workers’ Blogs, Mutual Aid Q & A, Workers’ Web (maopai.net – this means “Maoist” and the site is also called “Mao Portal”) and Special Section for Liu Hanhuang, the latest sub-section for the case of Liu. Worker activists established the Workers’ Portal in 2006. It is a non-profit public welfare website created by a group of “youth in society” (*shehui qingnian*) and “independent scholars” (*minjian xuezhe*). A few volunteers maintain the website with the mission to “serve workers and promote the workers’ spirit of solidarity, mutual aid and perseverance.”⁴³³ As a sub-section of the chuizi.net, the Workers’ Forum functions as “an internet-based platform of garnering information with regard to the Chinese working class.” Its fundamental tasks are to “promote the working class understanding of the socialist system,” “advocate understanding of theories by linking to practices” and “emphasize class position.”⁴³⁴

The sub-section of Workers’ News reports workers’ ongoing struggles mainly in foreign countries, including South Korea and advanced Western capitalist countries. It also reports domestic workers’ struggles with less space given. The Workers’ Forum provides the place to learn about ongoing workers’ struggles and workers’ grievances involving worsening working and living conditions, greedy bosses and corrupt officials. Through a Bulletin Board System (BBS), the workers’ portal website has set up 36 sub-sections for workers in different provinces and cities across China, which primarily report and discuss local workers’ ongoing struggles and conditions. As the labour activists are workers intellectuals who have come from workers, they are actively facilitating mutual aid and raising class-consciousness among workers and their

⁴³³ This is from [honghuacao](http://honghuacao.com) organization website, link to <http://bbs.chuizi.net/thread-2905-1-1.html>.

⁴³⁴ This is from [honghuacao](http://honghuacao.com) website, <http://bbs.chuizi.net/thread-3620-1-1.html>.

supporters. They deal with the working class interests from a worker's position, instead of from political doctrines. The Workers' Portal prescribes the ideals of "Five Major Guarantees" to meet workers' immediate economic demands – secure employment, affordable medical care, accessible housing for labourers, children's education, and decent life after retirement.⁴³⁵ However, it places the social justice agendas under the broad political objectives of realizing "the working class as the masters of the country." Shiqiu is a worker intellectual active in the workers' internet community. The organic intellectual argues that the realization of the "five major guarantees" is one of the fundamental objectives for the working class struggle. Though the future of the working class lies in socialism through the proletarian revolution in China, it is wrong to disregard their down to earth, immediate demands by abstractly talking about political doctrines. Shiqiu warns the advanced elements emerging from the workers of elitism in the working class struggle, emphasizing "the mass line" and mobilizing the Chinese workers to struggle as a class-for- itself.⁴³⁶

The third workers' internet-based community actively responded to the Honghuacao campaign for saving Liu Hanhuang is the Workers' Poetry Alliance (*gongren shige lianmeng*), another worker intellectuals' forum. The workers' cyberspace is to collect and compile written materials with regard to what activists call "the culture for class struggle." Through setting up an alliance of garnering proletarian literature and art, it has compiled classical works in the historical socialist, communist and labour movements in China and the rest of the world. For worker intellectuals, the proletarian culture advocated by Marxism-Leninism is essentially class culture and working class struggle culture. It also garners poetry, literature and articles written by

⁴³⁵ "Guanyu wuda baozhang de shixian" (on how to make the achievement of 'five guarantees'), honghuacao website, <http://bbs.chuizi.net/thread-2679-1-1.html> (accessed on November 18, 2009).

⁴³⁶ See Qiushi's blog at the Workers' Portal, <http://chuizi.net/space.php?uid=23&op=bbs>.

migrant workers recording their plights in the Sunbelt of China. Through the collection campaign, its primary task is to pave the way for working class consciousness and train advanced elements from the workers for potentially dynamic labour movements. As the forum claims, it is “an alliance of labourers through literature and art. Our strongholds are in the workshops, in the construction sites and wherever labourers are needed.”⁴³⁷

This workers’ forum attempts to inform workers of China’s labour laws and help them to protect their rights by seeking legal means. However, for worker intellectuals, it is naïve to believe that the “rule of law” and the civil rights movement would fundamentally improve the Chinese working class conditions as much as what the market-oriented media and liberal intellectuals promise. The legal means is part of safeguarding workers’ rights. The self-organization of the working class is essential to the emancipation of Chinese workers. One activist said:

In order to maintain their regime, the ruling class will possibly make reforms to alleviate the suffering of the exploited. For our part, we should inspire the workers themselves to struggle for socialism or communism where workers organize themselves. From now on, as advanced elements among the workers, we hope to arouse the awareness of the exploited: all of the ruling classes are parasites; therefore, their bestowed benevolence is undependable. Above all, there has been little space for implementing reforms in China now as reducing the pressure on workers and peasants to survive means lower efficiency and profits for the Chinese bourgeois. The current capital-labour tensions have foreseen the intensity of forthcoming class conflicts.⁴³⁸

Like the Taiwanese bosses in the case of Liu Hanhuang, the worker activists believe the Chinese bourgeois and capitalists are unwilling to give up even tiny concessions to meet workers’ meager demands, let alone major concessions to pacify workers’ struggles. The worker activist I interviewed above predicts, China will see fierce and implacable class conflicts, in his words, “you die and I live.” This scene has indeed taken place when angry workers in the Tonghua Iron and Steel Group rioted. When workers faced the fate of laid off surrounded and

⁴³⁷ See the Workers’ Poetry Alliance website, http://tw.netsh.com/eden/bbs/713969/html/tree_27336715.html

⁴³⁸ This is from my interview with a worker intellectual from the Workers’ Poetry Alliance by email.

beat Chen Guojun, a corporate executive from Jianlong responsible for the restructuring, the latter still threatened, “If I live, I will fire all of you.” As the provocative words incurred more beating, Chen began to plead, “At your mercy, save me. I still want to live.” However, the indignant workers replied, “If you live, all of us would die.” The riot eventually beat Chen to death.⁴³⁹ The worker intellectual I interviewed is pessimistic about the prospects of harmonious capital-labour relations in China’s post-socialist transition. As he argues,

It is inevitable to see the development of class conflicts and the working class struggle, which would begin with reformist struggles. However, the reforms by the ruling class will never address the worsening working class conditions. If Chinese workers are hopeful of concessions given from the ruling class, they will end up benumbing themselves and causing calamities for themselves. Unless the ruling class decapitates millions of workers, the labour movements will not be suppressed or begin to ebb.⁴⁴⁰

These three workers’ websites have vocally expressed their support for collecting donations to exempt Liu Hanhuang from death penalty as the first step, and joined the petitions, initiated by Taiwanese labour-protection organizations, for the court to set Liu free with a verdict of “not guilty,” as Deng Yujiao was exempted from any sentence due to popular pressure.

Workers and Organic Intellectuals

When Honghuacao initiated the campaign for collecting donations, it expected at least three implications from the internet mobilization. First, successful donations would collect adequate money to compensate the victims and thus exempt Liu Hanhuang from death penalty immediately. Secondly, the campaign would facilitate mutual aid and solidarity among the massive numbers of ordinary migrant workers who are miserable but fragmented like a sack of potatoes in China’s world factories. Thirdly, they consider the mobilization as an entry for

⁴³⁹ “Tonggang Beiju: Jilin Tonggang Zongjingli Bei Zhigong Dasi Shijian Quan Jilu” (The Tragedy of Tonggang: Recording the whole story of the death of the CEO Beaten by the Workers), *China News Weekly*, July 26, 2009; also see Austin Ramzy, “How China’s Steel Boom Turned Deadly,” *Time* online, July 27, 2009, <http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1912928,00.html>

⁴⁴⁰ My interview with a worker activist from Workers’ Poetry Alliance in 2009 by email.

advanced elements of the workers, or worker intellectuals, to organize workers and raise their class-consciousness, thus preparing for the long-run socialist revolution in China from the bottom up through “mass organizations.”⁴⁴¹

Considering these reasons, Honghuacao sent its initiative to the influential leftist websites. These include the Mao Zedong Flag (maoflag.net) sponsored by China’s Old Left; the Utopia (wuyouzhixiang) developed by the New Left intellectuals; the Chinese Workers Study (zhongguo gongren yanjiu) hosted by worker activists. It also contacted major commercial internet forums sponsored by Tianya, Mop, Sina, Sohu, Netease and Baidu. Moreover, it spread the petition to “Strengthening the Nation” web forum (qiangguo luntan) affiliated to the party organ *People’s Daily* and “Xinhua Forum” under the official news agency’s website *Xinhua Net*. Among them, only the Mao Zedong Flag website responded and distributed the initiative on donations for saving Liu Hanhuang. For Honghuacao activists, it was understandable to see the major Chinese commercial portals and forums, which represent the emerging Chinese bourgeoisie and are usually eager to join any crusade for civil rights, and the party media sphere, which is a component of the state censorship regime, give their voices the cold-shoulder. However, it was frustrating for them to see other leftist internet communities not resonate with their campaign. Although there were sympathetic discussions on the case of Liu Hanhuang and the plights of workers in the leftist websites, they did not use their communicative power to

⁴⁴¹ This analysis is based primarily on the blogs posted by Shiqiu regarding the case of Liu Hanhuang and his debate with Li Xianyuan. See Shiqiu, “yige putongren de geming shiye, yiqun putong gongren de geming shiye (an ordinary person’s revolutionary cause, an ordinary multitude of workers’ revolutionary cause),” *Chuizi.net*, <http://bbs.chuizi.net/viewthread.php?tid=4153> (accessed on November 20, 2009); “yingxiong, qishi shi women de diren (Heroes, indeed our enemies),” <http://bbs.chuizi.net/viewthread.php?tid=4116> (accessed on November 20, 2009). Also see Li Xianyuan’s blog on the debate, “women kao shenme jiuyuan liu hanhuang: tongxin lianzai (By what means shall we save and aid Liu Hanhuang: A series of correspondence)?” Li Xianyuan Blog in Sina, October 15, 2009, http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_4b7982e10100g4rv.html#comment1 (accessed on November 20, 2009).

mobilize their constituencies to join the donation campaign or the petition campaign initiated by the Taiwanese labour organizations.⁴⁴²

When a Honghuacao worker activist, nicknamed Shiqiu, wrote an email to Li Xianyuan, an opinion leader in the leftist internet community, asking him join the campaign, Li expressed his disapproval of the initiative to save Liu by collecting donations. Li answered,

[I] do not agree with the option of saving Liu by means of economic redemption [to the capitalist]. Instead, we should do our best to enlighten social conscience and mobilize public opinion. We should make efforts to enforce ‘long live Mao Zedong Thoughts.’ [the slogan which was repeated by the Hu-Wen leadership during the 60th anniversary of the party rule], and we should think over how Chairman Mao would deal with this incident if he were still alive, and make this as the benchmark for analysing the inherent demands from ‘socialism with Chinese characteristics’ in order to seek a reasonable solution.⁴⁴³

Li’s suggestion on publicizing Maoism and thus holding the party state, which still claims loyalty to Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong Thoughts, accountable for protecting workers’ rights enraged Shiqiu, who criticized Li, and the Chinese leftists as a whole, of being “verbal revolutionaries,” who have indulged themselves in empty talk but done nothing practical for the workers. For Shiqiu, at best, this has exposed the leftist detachment from the working masses. At worst, they have been simply attempting to take advantage of the workers’ worsening situation for their own partisan interests, like what the bureaucratic-capitalist within the Communist Party has done. Like the Communist Party that claims to be the vanguard of the working class, once they have succeeded in their political comeback, they will betray the working class interests later. Another activist, who is also from Honghuacao with the pen name Xiaojian, calls the leftists “petit bourgeois,” arguing that they have not transcended the gap between their leftist

⁴⁴² “Zhuānfāng honghuacao tuānduì chéngyuán: guānyú ‘juānkuan jiùyuán liú hánhuáng xíngdòng’ de zhēnglùn” (Exclusive interview with a member of Honghuacao on the debate on the “mission to save Liu Hanhuang by donations,” Chuizi.net, October 18, 2009, <http://chuizi.net/?action-viewnews-itemid-12285> (accessed on November 20, 2009).

⁴⁴³ Li, “By What Means.”

stance and the working class position.⁴⁴⁴ Xiaojian further identified five political forces in contemporary China's labour politics. He makes a stark contrast between the Chinese leftist intellectuals and the growing "advanced elements of the workers" (organic intellectuals grown up from workers and are workers themselves), the two major groups which have spoken out for working class interests.⁴⁴⁵ For Xiaojian, the former has detached from the workers and held an instrumentalist perspective of labour politics, while the latter is from the workers and has involved themselves with the working masses. Xiao Jian describes the latter as:

[t]he advanced elements from the unnoticed workers. As part of the working class, they have actively engaged themselves with workers. They are concerned about the impoverishment and hardships of the working masses. Whenever they encounter needy workers, they treat them as their own family members, offer help and look after them. They not only care for workers' basic needs of life, but also raise their class awareness. They have put Mao Zedong Thought into practice, embodied them in their actions. They work to provide unselfish aid and consultation for all the workers who have the will to protect their rights and struggle against the capitalists. Like all other workers, they live a simple life and spend their personal savings to the cause of emancipating the working class. This is a venerable group.⁴⁴⁶

The ultimate political objective for them, according to Xiaojian, is to lead the working class struggle under the guidance of Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong Thought and through workers' self-organization to set up a workers' state.

As Honghuacao worker activists have reacted to the leftist websites and their debates with Li Xianyuan emotionally, this poses the important questions. How can we define organic intellectuals in the reconstruction of the post-Mao proletarian public sphere and working class subjectivity? Is there a distinction between leftist intellectuals and worker intellectuals? If so, does that matter? Is Gramsci still relevant to the recomposition of working class subjectivity in post-Mao China? Will the working class movement move towards autonomous Marxism?

⁴⁴⁴ See Xiao Jian's blog at honghuacao, "zuopai weihe lengluo liu hanhuang" (why did the leftists cold shoulder Liu hanhuang)? Honghuacao forum, <http://honghuacao.com/thread-333-1-1.html> (accessed on November 20, 2009).

⁴⁴⁵ See Xiao Jian's blog, "wokan weilai jushi" (my outlook on the future situation), *chuizi.net*, November 14, 2009, <http://chuizi.net/a/space.php?uid=634&do=blog&id=9211> (accessed on November 21, 2009).

⁴⁴⁶ Ibid.

Because I focus this chapter on the internet and its appropriation in the working class struggle for autonomous communication and building a proletarian public sphere, here I would examine the latest connections between workers and organic intellectuals and highlight the potential implications for the direction of working class activism.

Zhao and Duffy have overviewed the linkages between workers and organic intellectuals in the workers' struggle for autonomous communication and developing a counter-hegemonic social movement in post-1989 China.⁴⁴⁷ As Zhao and Duffy observe, there are six groups of Chinese intellectuals actively involving themselves in working class activism in contemporary China. Among them, the first two groups of intellectuals belong to working-class intellectuals who come from workers and are on-the-ground leaders. For example, before his arrest and exile to the United States, Han Dongfang, the primary leader of the WAF during the 1989 Tiananmen movement, had organically connected with workers to lead strike and protests. Zhu Rui, originally a teacher at a school affiliated to a state garment factory in Beijing, became a protest leader by organizing workers and spreading leaflets and newsheets. She represents a stratum of lower-level intellectuals and knowledge workers who have organic ties to the working class and play important roles in labour struggles.

The third group is leftist intellectuals who are not workers themselves. Nevertheless, they have also played important roles in trying to restore a socialist China and working for the emancipation of the Chinese working class. Currently, China's underground labour activists are those who are either the Maoist advocates, "fervent remnants of the rebel fraction during the Cultural Revolution" or "younger, university-educated, New Left Marxists who are critical of

⁴⁴⁷ Zhao and Duffy, *Short-Circuited?* 236-240.

both excesses of Mao and the reforms of Deng”.⁴⁴⁸ Because of political persecution, primarily they keep a low profile and work as consultants in forming underground unions and publishing leaflets. Zhao and Duffy call another group of intellectuals “virtual leaders” of the Chinese working class as they often publish political essays on the internet to offer theoretical analysis and political strategies for workers’ movements. A self-proclaimed Marxist-Leninist author Que Fang wrote an article to help Chinese workers make a distinction between the political demands of the working class and Chinese liberal forces, and concluded that Chinese workers must struggle for their economic well-being by struggling for political freedom themselves.

The last two groups who have greatly contributed to articulating a new Chinese workers’ movement include the Old Left of the Chinese Communist Party and New Left intellectuals. As Zhao and Duffy argue, the marginalized Old Left within the party attempts to recruit younger intellectuals and party members in a bid to rejuvenate the strength of Marxist –Leninist and Mao Zedong Thought in the party. They pose a direct challenge to the Party state’s authoritarian capitalism and have rallied the working class by their critiques of “capitalist restoration” and the party’s betrayal of the working class”

Though their organic ties with the working class are not obviously evident, New Left intellectuals have contributed to refurbishing China’s revolutionary and socialist legacies and counter the hegemonic establishment of liberal democracy, capitalism and modernity advocated by the fledging bourgeois public sphere in China. Their critiques of market reforms have made it possible to re-imagine China’s democratic socialist prospects, which would emancipate the working class ultimately. As Zhao and Duffy argue, most importantly, their social-political-

⁴⁴⁸ Chin Kwan Lee, *Is Labour a Political Force in China?* Paper presented at the Grassroots Political Reform in China conference, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, October 29-30, 2004, cited in Zhao and Duffy, *Short-Circuited?* 237.

cultural critiques would nurture a stratum of young, university-educated Chinese New Leftists. Because many young university graduates have difficulties finding suitable work, they have to enter the ranks of China's new proletariat. This will create the social condition for a new generation of rank-and-file working class organic intellectuals to grow up and direct workers' movements.

From Zhao and Duffy's overview, we can see that workers' organic intellectuals and leftist intellectuals have joined workers' struggle for material benefits and political democracy by developing a counter-hegemonic proletarian public sphere with the goal of restoring a socialist China. Li Xianyuan's disagreement with Honghuacao activists' initiatives primarily came from different strategic considerations in workers' activism. After all, an e-media activist and a well-known Maoist who resides in Canada, Li's points of view cannot represent all leftist intellectuals' orientations. However, Honghuacao activists' responses to Li indicate the potential disunity between workers' organic intellectuals and leftist intellectuals. Marxist intellectuals founded the Communist Party, which claimed to be the vanguard of the Chinese working class. However, in post-Mao China reforms, the party has betrayed the working class. Accordingly, though worker intellectuals have a Maoist orientation and perceive the post-Mao reforms as the "capitalist restoration" in China, they have become overly-sensitive and sceptical of the elitism and the claim of the vanguard of the working class from any other political parties or groups, which advocate leftist and progressive ideologies but do not come from workers themselves. This is reflected in the tendency in China' working class activism, although worker intellectuals may not explicitly embrace autonomous Marxism. While Maoism is pretty much the oppositional perspective readily available to Chinese workers' organic intellectuals and mass of workers as a whole, the three-decade capitalist path led by the Communist Party has eroded its

legitimacy among the workers. Though workers have not given up the role of Maoism in guiding the labour movement, political currents among the workers at the bottom of Chinese society have been fragmented and influenced by a variety of dissenting theoretical/historical currents, including Marxism-Leninism, Maoism, liberalism and Trotskyism. If leftist intellectuals still expect to depend on the Communist Party to bring China back to the socialist path, workers' organic intellectuals tend to self organize the working masses for the emancipatory transformation into socialism. However, the vigilance against elitism and any self-claimed vanguards of the proletariat does not mean that labour movement will not need any leadership. As one worker intellectual argues,

It seems correct to claim that workers should represent their own interests by themselves and not have their interests represented by any other political forces. However, for sure the labor movements will give rise to the representatives, who may be workers or intellectuals. There is nothing strange about having their interests represented by their own advanced elements of the working class. Whether the representatives are born from workers or intellectuals, it is always possible that they eventually will betray the interests of the class they belong to and convert themselves into opportunists and the proxy of the bourgeois class. Even the bourgeois class has their own representatives elected to govern. It is an illusion for the working class not to have their interests represented by others. The historical process is that during the workers' struggle and self-organization, their own representatives or political party will surely grow up. The vital is that the workers will abandon those betraying working class interests.⁴⁴⁹

It is not pre-determined to foresee whether radical labour movements will rely on Gramsci or taking autonomous Marxism, because it is up to workers' real historical struggles to answer the question. However, working class activism in post-Mao China still needs Gramsci. In Gramsci's Marxism, private ownership of the means of production is a *necessary* but not a sufficient basis of capitalist domination. Conversely, socialism does not mean that "the problems of superstructure should be abandoned to themselves, to their spontaneous development, to a hazardous and sporadic germination."⁴⁵⁰ For Gramsci, what made socialism possible is not just

⁴⁴⁹ My interview with a worker activist in the Workers' Poetry Alliance in 2009 by email.

⁴⁵⁰ John Merrington, "Theory and Practice in Gramsci's Marxism," in *The Socialism Register*, ed. Ralph Miliband and John Saville, 148 (Merlin Book Club, London: The Merlin Press, 1968).

the material conditions of existence, but also the content of existence - the integral development of human potentialities over the whole field of experience. Therefore, Gramsci emphasized the role of consciousness and ideas in the transformation of society. As such, it is important to politicize and mobilize the masses. In making revolutionary initiative possible, it required a conscious political agency, which was based on an ideological and political unity between the “intellectuals” and the “masses.”⁴⁵¹ The two sides comprised the revolutionary bloc. For Gramsci, social revolution is to elaborate the economic structure into superstructure in the minds and consciousness of men. In the transition from purely economic struggle, the combination of ideology, “intellectuals” and the voluntary character of the revolutionary organization was vital.⁴⁵²

Because the working class struggle is not a purely economic struggle, Gramsci had emphasized the importance of “intellectuals”, broadly all of those who have an organizing and educative role in bringing about the transformation of consciousness and cultural renewal at all the level of society.⁴⁵³ In this sense, Gramsci’s propositions on the intellectuals are relevant to the Chinese context. In post-socialist China, as the communicative structures of the state and capital in organizational and technological form is dominant,⁴⁵⁴ the most formidable obstacle to working class activism lies in lack of workers’ autonomous communication strategically and the construction of a broad proletarian public sphere. Therefore, the working class must struggle for a proletarian public sphere to counter and outmanoeuvre the blockage of the state and capital to the articulation of the voices of workers, the messages of their struggle and an alternative vision of China’s future. Clearly, both leftist intellectuals and working class organic intellectuals have

⁴⁵¹ Ibid., 150.

⁴⁵² Ibid.

⁴⁵³ Merrington, “Theory and Practice in Gramsci’s Marxism,” 150-151.

⁴⁵⁴ Zhao and Duffy, Short-Circuited, 230-232.

played important roles in this purpose. The discontinuity and cleavages among Chinese workers, working class organic intellectuals and the leftist intellectuals affect the formation of a proletarian public sphere. In the Gramscian conception of the politicization and mobilization of the masses, an ideological and political unity between the “intellectuals” and the “masses” is a necessary condition for restoring the possibility of revolutionary initiative by a conscious political agency. This unity will build up the revolutionary bloc.⁴⁵⁵

Concluding Remarks

The Chinese market-oriented media, internet-based communities and liberal intellectuals have provided an equivalent of the bourgeois public sphere elaborated by Jurgen Habermas as the formation of a democratic alternative to the authoritarian institutions of the party-state. However, what is flawed is that we see the exclusion of the working class in articulating its interests, as the case study of Liu Hanhuang indicates. However, as Negt and Kluge critique, there is more than one public sphere, and that category is not the exclusive property of the bourgeoisie. Simultaneously, there are counter public spheres formed by different and often competing constituencies. As the empirical evidence in the case of Liu Hanhuang shows, workers and the left have tried to constitute a proletarian public sphere, which operates outside the usual parameters of institutions of legitimation. The officially unrecognized public spheres exist and respond to the contingent needs of all of those groups, while the usual arenas of public discourse has excluded or as Negt and Kluge put it, “blocked” their self-expression.⁴⁵⁶

In constructing a proletarian public sphere, worker intellectuals, with their affinity with the working masses in the workshops and communities, have played a unique role through

⁴⁵⁵ Merrington, “Theory and Practice in Gramsci’s Marxism,” 150-151.

⁴⁵⁶ Negt and Kluge, *Public Sphere and Experience*.

rallying the workers, communicating the messages of their struggles, and raising class-consciousness. Under state censorship and the party's rigorous suppression of organizational and ideological combination between workers and intellectuals, leftist intellectuals have mainly provided theoretical clarifications to empower various displaced and disenfranchised social groups. This does not mean that they are alienated from Chinese workers and working class activism. The debates between leftist intellectuals and worker intellectuals show that the nascent proletarian public sphere is still fragmented, isolated and cellular, parallel to the material struggles empirical in the labour politics. In turn, this highlights the importance of the roles of the intellectuals in forming the virtual communities linking workers' internet-based public space. The potential in the formation of China's proletarian public sphere will provide symbolic and necessary empowerment for the Chinese working class.

CONCLUSION

Much of three decades of market reform in post-Mao China has been committed to domesticating the spectre of Mao and radicalism and re-defining the official ideologies, which are in line with Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong Thought, to dimensions that can justify capitalist development. Since the Party state switched from the class struggles during the Mao era to capitalist-oriented market reforms in 1978, the Party state's political and ideological claims have haunted post-Mao China. The Chinese Communist Party claims to be the vanguard of the working class and the polity of China is a socialist state led by the working class, based on the worker-peasant alliance. As his reforms had been continuously subject to the debate on the nature of socialism versus capitalism, Deng responded to the scepticism of the ideological legitimacy of his reform path by his developmental dictum – “development is a hard truth” and the “no debate” decree.

Through his notion of “three represents,” proposed in 2000 saying that the party represents the most advanced productive forces, the most advanced culture, and the fundamental interests of the broad masses of the Chinese people, Jiang Zemin sought an ideological breakthrough to go beyond the constraints of the party's class attribute. As market reforms have brought forth burgeoning private entrepreneurs, most of them Communist elites, Jiang's ideological formulation aimed to endorse the Communist-capitalists and legitimize the admission of the newly born capitalists, China's most dynamic social force, into the ruling party. Drawing on Deng's caveat of “maintaining vigilance against Right tendencies, but primarily against ‘Left’ tendencies,” Jiang continued to apply political and symbolic violence to suppress popular social

protests and leftist perspectives, fearing the potential combination between workers' unrest and the leftist opposition.⁴⁵⁷

During the Hu Jintao era, with continuing rampant official corruption, widening urban-rural disparities, a yawning income gap, and a deteriorating natural environment, public consensus in support of the three decades of market reforms is crumbling. China has moved toward a class-divided society. To mitigate the heightened class conflict and prevent the political instability of the communist regime, the party state has played a proactive role in mediating the emerging class forces in post-Mao reforms.⁴⁵⁸ By emphasizing “putting people first,” the leadership has emptied Chinese socialism of its class attribute. The emphasis on the identity of “people” has deflected any potential mobilization of the working class against the process of China’s reform and opening up. Framing the intensifying class conflicts in the post-Mao market reforms in terms of societal stratification, the Chinese leadership under Hu Jintao is attempting to prevent the re-composition of class identities.⁴⁵⁹

However, through investigating and analyzing cultural and communicative practices of the Chinese working class, this dissertation has raised the question of the Chinese revolutionary and Maoist legacy in making sense of the new dynamism of grassroots political change in post-Mao era. This dissertation centers on communication, culture and resistance in China’s grass-root politics by questioning the political economy of media, culture and information at the national level. I examine the nature, dynamics and trajectory of Chinese workers’ resistance in the post-socialist transformation. I situate the labour movement in post-Mao China in the broad political economy of communication and culture.

⁴⁵⁷ Ibid., 50-55.

⁴⁵⁸ So, “The Changing Pattern of Classes.”

⁴⁵⁹ Xing, “Hu Jintao’s Political Thinking.”

First, the dissertation describes the process in which the redefinition of Chinese socialism displaces class and class struggle and deconstructs the identity of the working class. It highlights the relations between process of communication and the legitimation of the wider social, economic and cultural realities of post-Mao China.

Second, it examines the unnoticed undercurrent of the re-composition of Chinese workers' class-consciousness in the context of China's post-socialist transformation. The study explores autonomous communication and the surge of working class radicalism. This gives rise to the importance of communication, culture and ideology as the site of contestation in the constitution of Chinese working-class-consciousness and the emancipatory renewal of Chinese socialism.

Third, it investigates the autonomous communication networks of Chinese workers and cultural practices of the urban working class in post-Mao market reforms, obscured by the dominant Chinese communication and cultural system. Through comparative analysis of media representation, archival materials and extensive field work on Chinese workers' communication and cultural practices, this dissertation points to the return of radicalism and the resurgence of class politics in post-Mao China, which has re-inserted itself into global capitalism. The findings take issue with conventional interpretations of post-socialist market transition of China from a liberal-democratic approach, presumed on the linear logic of market, assuming the destination of capitalism and liberal democracy is pre-given, natural and inevitable. Instead, the study gives attention to the potential of the Chinese industrial workers to re-compose them as a revolutionary and emancipatory social force to check and push China's post-state socialist transformation in the direction of the democratic renewal of socialism.

The suppressed have come back. The Chinese workers have drawn on cultural and ideological resources from the Maoist past – through the genres of revolutionary songs, dramas and political doctrines – to articulate their concerns and claims regarding class inequalities in contemporary times. In this dissertation, I argue for the importance of autonomous communication and a proletarian public sphere for re-composing working class subjectivity in contemporary China and for the emancipatory renewal of Chinese socialism.

Although Chinese workers in post-Mao era have suffered the most miserable form of exploitation in the development of global capitalism, they have rarely taken any political action in a militant way. Alvin Y. So attempts to apply the concept of a state-mediated class-divided society to explain a pacified working class and the absence of working class struggle in post-Mao China.⁴⁶⁰ This emphasis on the decisive role of the Chinese state in mediating class relations has neglected the formation of subjectivity and agency of the Chinese workers underway at the bottom of China’s class-divided society. The state mediation itself may not be adequate to resolve fundamental class conflicts. As the case study of Zhengzhou workers in chapter three indicates, the re-politicized sphere constitutes a public sphere of free discussion and expression on class inequalities and related issues, one that is attended by the working class and that nurtures a working class-consciousness as distinct from the middle-class domain of leisure, entertainment and discussion.

In such an emergent proletarian public sphere, groups of Chinese workers, exploited and marginalized in the market reforms, have internalized and popularized the Chinese revolutionary legacy and socialist ideals. As the Chinese state has been devoted to abandoning class politics, Chinese workers are bringing it back. This dual movement is manifest in Zhengzhou urban

⁴⁶⁰ So, “The Changing Pattern of Classes.”

workers who apply Mao's notion of a "two-line struggle" as a framework to make sense of post-Mao market reforms and designate it as restoring the capitalist road. The unwavering historical legacies have become an indispensable component of our understanding of contemporary working-class culture and formation of the working class in China. It is impossible to make sense of urban workers' everyday lives, struggles and class-consciousness in contemporary China by considering the discourses of class and Mao Zedong Thought solely as a tactical weapon taken by workers in their resistance to the privatization of SOEs. Therefore, Chinese workers' protests today are neither a mere sign of nostalgia nor just a weapon of workers but are expressions of class-consciousness with an oppositional language as well as a class-based identity.

A carefully choreographed parade passed by Tiananmen Square in central Beijing in 2009 glorifying 60 years of Communist Party rule. A flamboyant squad titled "*Mao Zedong Thoughts*" paraded. This phrase appeared at the national gala for the first time in the three decades of the market reforms initiated in 1978 by Deng Xiaoping and concomitant, the de-Maoisation campaign. This indicates that the Party-state has realized that the historical legacies are vital for its legitimacy amidst mounting social tension and instability. In theorizing the formation of the Western working-class in the nineteenth-century, Katznelson and Zolberg argue that we should take into account traditions in pre-industrial and pre-capitalist society, such as social relations, political system, lifestyle, culture and ideologies.⁴⁶¹ Similarly, we should take into account the historical legacies of the Chinese revolution in understanding the re-composition of Chinese working class in post-Mao reforms. Disregarding the Communist revolution and Maoism as no more than a cultural symbol in the working-class formation will misconstrue the

⁴⁶¹ Katznelson and Zolberg, *Working-Class Formation*.

complexities of what is actually happening in the post-Mao Chinese labour movements and China politics in general.

The empirical evidence I have collected has pointed to the flawed theses in current scholarship on urban workers' resistance to the SOEs restructuring in post-Mao China, which primarily suggest that Maoism and broadly, the Chinese revolutionary and socialist legacies, have become either a sign of nostalgia or a weapon of workers, rather than class-consciousness.⁴⁶²

The resurgence of class politics has directed our attention to the post-socialist transformation in China and the renewal of socialism in China. A few China scholars have made efforts to understand the post-socialist transformation of the Chinese state as an alternative to capitalism and liberal democracy. In her book *The Transformation of Chinese Socialism*, Lin Chun tries to make her case for socialist renewal in China. As Lin argues, there are “signs of a resumption of reform socialism” in China since the 17th Party Congress, and “Insofar as this collective effort [of searching for a socialist alternative to capitalist modernity] has persisted, the chance of the Chinese model to succeed cannot be ruled out.”⁴⁶³ Inside China, “New Left” intellectuals have been seeking the democratic renewal of Chinese socialism. The revolutionary and socialist legacies are not merely hollow rhetoric. They have rendered post-revolutionary transition to capitalism “not only a highly contested, but an unfinished project.”⁴⁶⁴ Therefore, Zhao warns against any hasty conclusion about the nature and trajectory of the Chinese state transformation. As Chinese workers rise up and hold the party state accountable for its revolutionary and socialist promises, the path for China's social transformation is not pre-

⁴⁶² Lee, *Against the Law*; Lee and Yang, (eds.), “Re-envisioning the Chinese Revolution”; Chen, “Industrial Restructuring,” 237-62.

⁴⁶³ Lin, *The Transformation of Chinese Socialism*, 5.

⁴⁶⁴ Zhao, *Communication in China*, 344.

ordained and we cannot rule out the possibility of the emancipatory renewal of socialism in China.

Based on the hypotheses of a proletarian public sphere, and working class and socialist politics, this dissertation has advanced three propositions with regard to the Chinese working class, the possible renewal of Chinese socialism and labour movements in China, which has experienced Communist revolution and socialist practice:

First, Chinese workers must struggle to retake working-class culture and the proletariat public sphere. Drawing on Mattelart's class analysis for popular communication practices, the dissertation argues that the reconstruction of working-class culture and the proletariat public sphere is vital to Chinese workers. The public sphere dominated by the logic of either state or capital will create no opportunities for Chinese workers to liberate themselves.

Second, a proletarian public sphere accommodating the Chinese working class would achieve the unity among the working masses, working class organic intellectuals and leftist intellectuals. The emancipatory renewal of Chinese socialism and the destiny of the working class depend on Chinese workers' capabilities of re-building a proletarian public sphere, which will ultimately empower the Chinese working class. Chinese workers should not just struggle for improving their own lot (merely economic struggles), but also for their rights to communicate (autonomous communication) and an alternative culture to counter the symbolic violence, either from the state or from capital.

Third, the Chinese labour movement will become more a political campaign for holding the Party state's constitutional commitments accountable than for independent trade unionism. In other words, Chinese workers are committing themselves to renewing Chinese socialism and become the leading social force in China's socialist movement. However, labour politics and

movement in the post-Mao era is contested and full of contestation. As the case study of workers in the Zhengzhou urban park shows, segmented groups of Chinese workers believe in trade unionism and echo liberal intellectuals' crusade for labour-citizenship. Despite conflicts and contending streams within labour movement, it is misleading to ignore the fact that sections of Chinese workers rise up against capitalist rulers (elites within the Party state) more than against the capitalists. In what Beverly J. Silver calls "Polanyi-type unrest,"⁴⁶⁵ Chinese workers will resort to demands for the state protection. However, state protection is not sufficient for Chinese workers who have suffered from the failure of Maoist socialism. What is important is to subordinate the post-revolutionary Chinese state. Therefore, a proletarian public sphere is important for achieving the emancipatory renewal of Chinese socialism.

Through analyzing autonomous communication and cultural activities among segmented groups of the Chinese working class, this dissertation points to the continuing relevance of the Chinese revolutionary and Maoist socialism in making sense of the new dynamism of grassroots labour politics in post-Mao transition. While current scholarship on workers' resistance primarily suggests that Maoism and broadly, the Chinese revolutionary and socialist legacies, have become either a sign of nostalgia or a weapon of workers, other than class-consciousness, my findings argue that they still provide an ideological and cultural resource for class-consciousness and re-composition of the Chinese working class subjectivity. The unwavering historical legacies have become an indispensable component of our understanding of post-Mao labour politics and movement. As Perry argues, both the Party state and the resistant citizens realize that the revolutionary legacy is still relevant in China politics. Accordingly, both sides know how to "put

⁴⁶⁵ Beverly J. Silver, *Forces of Labor: Workers' Movements and Globalization*, 13-20 (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

the genie of mass protest back into the bottle of state socialism” in their tug of war,⁴⁶⁶ - while mass of protesters hold the state accountable for its revolutionary and socialist promises, the party state justifies its legitimacy by claims of having fulfilled or working hard to fulfil its such promises. Therefore, disregarding the revolutionary legacy and Maoist past will misconstrue the complexities of workers’ everyday life, struggle and class-consciousness and neglect the underlying radicalism in labour politics during China’s post-socialist transformation.

⁴⁶⁶ Perry, “Studying Chinese Politics,” 22.

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