

## REVIEW ESSAY / NOTE CRITIQUE

# Writing Chinese Labour History: Changes and Continuities in Labour Historiography

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IN THE 1980S, THE AUTHORS of most historical studies in China began to move in new directions owing to a combination of internal changes and outside influences. Conversely, studies of pre-1949 labour movements in China continue to reflect a perspective that is largely monolithic. While Chinese social historians tend to be, in many ways, innovative and forward-thinking, historians whose primary focus is labour often persist in defending, and even advocating, Maoist jargon. North American New Labour History, together with Women's Studies and Slavery Studies, continue to be shaped by the climate of thought peculiar to the West in the 1960s. Chinese labour historians have been reticent to adopt much from such developments, thus distinguishing themselves both from Western historians generally and Chinese historians focused on other subject matters. This paper offers a tentative explanation for this historiographical anomaly by focusing on three issues.

First, I summarize Western interpretations of pre-1949 Chinese labour and identify broad differences separating Western interpretations of Chinese labour movement trends from those conceived by Chinese scholars. Next, I present a discussion of major debates in labour historiography to shed some light on the different perspectives adopted by Chinese labour scholars relative to other social historians. Finally, I examine a number of factors that contribute to Chinese labour historians' reticence to embrace and adapt newer models, and conclude by noting that beneath the apparent consistency of message characterizing pre-1949 Chinese labour studies in general, political and social changes are having a subtle impact on the ways in which Chinese labour historians depict the working-class.

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## Chinese Workers in the West and Western Scholarship in China

### Marxist Class Analysis and Research Involving the Chinese Working Class in the West

The French Marxist historian Jean Chesneaux published his pioneering research study, *The Chinese Labour Movement, 1919-1927* in 1962. Grounded in the perspective of orthodox Marxism, this ground-breaking work probes the social formation of the working-class as well as its emergence as an organized and class-conscious force in the great wave of strikes culminating in the Shanghai insurrections of 1927. Chesneaux's work, however, reflects stereotypical attitudes prevalent at the time of its publication by focusing exclusively on modern industrial sectors and by giving short shrift to the role of women. In addition, this book overrates the decisive role of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) by stating that the "labour organizations and the movement as a whole developed in close collaboration with the Communist Party and followed the party's lead."<sup>1</sup> Chesneaux's conclusions have come under criticism by a second generation of labour historians, who come primarily from the United States. This younger generation reached its prime in the 1970s, and is heavily influenced both by theories of Cultural Marxism and Feminist Studies.

In the area of labour studies, British Marxist E.P. Thompson's work has revised the orthodox Marxist conception of class. Thompson argues that the conventional Marxist base/superstructure metaphor tends to frame the class struggle in mechanistic terms, as if the process itself invariably transpires in a rigid way, as something frozen within "a static, anti-historical structure."<sup>2</sup> Stressing agency and consciousness, Thompson re-defines class in his influential book *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963). Class, in Thompson's eyes, is not a thing, but a fluent relationship which can only be studied "over an adequate period of social change." It is an economic and social creation largely determined by the productive relations into which men and women are born – or enter involuntarily; but it is also "a historical and cultural formation" arising out of class struggle.<sup>3</sup>

In response to Thompson's theory, North American labour historians shifted their approach away from a once exclusive focus on aspects of labour that are of an essentially institutional nature, and towards a concern with workers' everyday lives and cultural beliefs and practices. The idea of "experience," invested not only with a materialistic, but also a cultural character, is introduced so as to bridge the gap between workers' economic lives and their

1. The English translation of the book was published in 1968. See Jean Chesneaux, *The Chinese Labour Movement: 1919-1927* (Stanford 1968), 386-407.

2. E.P. Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays* (New York & London 1978), 61.

3. E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London 1980), 213.

political consciousness. Class conflict and the formation of the working-class became central themes in a large body of literature, most of which emphasizes the vital role played by cultural traditions, and focuses on the process by which “the working-class made itself...”<sup>4</sup>

In the late 1970s and early 80s, two relevant developments in the social history arena occurred. First, Thompson’s “culturalist” approach received considerable criticism in both Britain and North America.<sup>5</sup> This set off an international debate. In response to this debate, some new labour historians have revised their theoretical framework so as to place emphasis on the total integrity of the workers’ experience; that is, they emphasize the workers’ “culture” as it relates to and reflects their economic existence.

The second development involves the impact of feminist socio-historical interpretations, amounting to what are essentially frontal attacks on classical Marxist theory, inasmuch as classical Marxism regards the oppression of women as an extension of the larger overarching problem of economic exploitation and inequality. Beginning in the late 1970s, many feminists tended to dismiss Marxist analysis as “sex-blind.” They therefore adopted as their primary analytical tool the concept of “patriarchy,” trying to free gender from the changing economic structure, and divorce the concept of sex from that of class conflict.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, stressing the once understated power of language, feminist historians have made much use of discourse theory to deconstruct and reinterpret basic social categories, such as skill and sexuality. In so doing, they seek to downplay the objective and material substance of

4. See, for instance, Herbert G. Gutman, *Work, Culture, and Society in Industrializing America: Essays in American Working-Class and Social History* (New York 1976); Gregory Kealey, *Toronto Workers Respond to Industrial Capitalism 1867-1892* (Toronto 1980); Bryan Palmer, *A Culture in Conflict: Skilled Workers and Industrial Capitalism in Hamilton, Ontario, 1860-1914* (Montreal 1979); Paul G. Faler, *Mechanics and Manufacturers in the Early Industrial Revolution: Lynn, Massachusetts, 1780-1860* (Albany, NY 1981); Bruce Laurie, *Working People of Philadelphia, 1800-1850* (Philadelphia 1980); Sean Wilentz, *Chants Democratic: New York City & the Rise of the American Working Class, 1788-1850* (Oxford 1984).

5. For criticisms by Marxist scholars, see Perry Anderson, *Arguments within English Marxism* (London 1980); David Brody, “The Old Labour History and the New: In Search of An American Working Class,” *Labour History*, 20 (1979), 124; Melvyn Dubofsky, “Hold the Fort: The Dynamics of Twentieth-Century American Working Class History,” *Reviews in American History*, 9 (1981), 245; Ian McKay, “History, Anthropology, and the Concept of Culture,” *Labour/Le Travail*, 8/9 (1981/1982), 188.

6. See, for instance, Anne Phillips and Barbara Taylor, “Sex and Skill: Notes towards a Feminist Economics,” *Feminist Review*, 6 (1980), 79-88; Jonathan Ned Katz, “The Invention of Heterosexuality,” *Socialist Review*, 20, 1 (1990), 6-33; Heidi Hartmann, “Capitalism, Patriarchy, and Job Segregation by Sex,” *Signs*, 1 (1976), 137-168; Barbara Taylor, *Eve and the New Jerusalem: Socialism and Feminism in the Nineteenth Century* (London 1983); “The Men are as Bad as Their Masters...: Socialism, Feminism, and Sexual Antagonism in the London Tailoring Trade in the Early 1830s,” *Feminist Studies*, 5,1 (Spring 1979), 7-40; Sheila Rowbotham, *Women’s Consciousness, Man’s World* (London 1973); Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex: the Case for Feminist Revolution* (New York 1970).

these categories, claiming the decisive role played by social discourse.<sup>7</sup> Thus, the “linguistic turn” in Western academic circles contributes to “a wholesale retreat from class” and suggests the growing skepticism with which many historians now regard historical materialism.<sup>8</sup>

At about the same time as the linguistic turn began to colour much historical investigation, the younger generation of American scholars, sharply critical of Chesneaux, made its presence felt in China studies. Incorporating both neo-Marxist and feminist theories, and generally focusing on localized events as their points of departure, these scholars examined the process of Chinese working-class formation. They reassessed significant elements of worker-associational traditions, such as ritual kinship, regional societies, and labour gangs. Although these worker associations have traditionally been dismissed as “feudal remnants,” or even “feudal shackles,” the new wave of scholars demonstrated that associational elements were instrumental in fuelling daily resistance and political protest, along with the CCP-led labour movement.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, they either documented examples of political radicalism displayed by artisans,<sup>10</sup> essentially ignored in Chesneaux’s work, or detected a correlation between workers’ skill level and their various political leanings.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, these scholars contended that solidarity collapsed for a variety of reasons associated with workers’ gender, skill, and regional loyalties, which, they argue, led to fragmentation among workers.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, they surmised that the reason that revolutionary commitment disappeared (notwithstanding the atmosphere of intense class warfare prevalent in 1925 and 1927 among workers in Shanghai) was that many workers felt moved to take to the street in protest not “as members of a class,” but “as consumers or citizens.”<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, these American scholars challenged the gender bias of

7. See, for instance, Joan Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York 1988); Denise Riley, *Am I That Name? Feminism and the Category of “Women” in History* (London 1988).

8. Bryan Palmer, *Descent into Discourse: The Reification of Language and the Writing of Social History* (Philadelphia 1992), 121-122.

9. Emily Honig, *Sisters and Strangers: Women in the Shanghai Cotton Mills, 1911-1949* (Stanford 1986); Gail Hershatter, *The Workers of Tianjin, 1900-1949* (Stanford 1986).

10. Hershatter, *Workers of Tianjin*, 49-63; Linda Shaffter, *Mao and the Workers: The Hunan Labour Movement, 1920-1923* (Amonk, NY 1982), 210.

11. Elisabeth Perry, *Shanghai on Strike: the Politics of Chinese Labour* (Stanford 1993), 239-249. The key argument of Perry’s book is that “different workers engage in different politics.” While the CCP found loyal supporters among skilled craftsmen, the semi-skilled workers tended to follow the Nationalist Party. The protests of unskilled labourers were largely fueled by economic demands, without generating sustained political organizations.

12. Honig, *Sisters*; Hershatter, *Workers of Tianjin*.

13. Perry, *Shanghai on Strike*, 251.

the CCP, judging the Party's preferential policies towards men to be the main cause of political apathy among Shanghai women in the 1920s.<sup>14</sup>

After *Putting Class in its Place*, a collection of articles on East Asian workers edited by Elizabeth Perry, was published in 1996, challenging the primacy of class as the engine of social change,<sup>15</sup> two books have appeared that re-evaluate the way the concept of class is employed in the Chinese context. S. A. Smith approaches class in discursive terms, discovering a "language of class" coincident with the nationalist spirit prevalent during the anti-imperialist wave of strikes of mid-1920s Shanghai.<sup>16</sup> Joshua Howard's *Workers at War* (2004) studies war-time Chongqing arsenal workers. Howard concludes that class is shaped not only by economic, but also by cultural and educational factors, while admitting the ambivalent attitudes to which the worker is prone given the complexity of the working-class experience. Howard observes, moreover, that it is "...through class struggle that [Chinese] workers came to know themselves as a class."<sup>17</sup>

#### Western Scholarship's Impact in China

New Labour History, which originated in the West as a challenge to traditional historical accounts from the left, seems on the surface at least, to have had a minimal impact on Chinese labour historians. The body of work produced by Chesneaux is perhaps the one significant exception, inasmuch as Chesneaux's opus is repeatedly cited, and apparently embraced, by many Chinese labour researchers. Beginning in the 1980s, when many of the generation that came of age in the 1950s attempted to establish labour history as a professional discipline, scholars rarely neglected to pay homage to Chesneaux, acknowledging that they have been significantly influenced either by the theoretical underpinnings of Chesneaux's work, or by his specific analysis. Liu Gongcheng, a researcher based in Northeastern China, for instance, asserts that his own efforts to gain autonomy for the field of labour history, setting it free from the official CCP version of historical events, have been aided by his reading of Chesneaux.<sup>18</sup> Liu Mingkui and Tang Yuliang, perhaps the two most highly esteemed experts in the field of labour in China today, emphasize Chesneaux's

14. Honig, *Sisters*, 206-9; Perry, *Shanghai on Strike*, 133; Christina Gilmartin, *Engendering the Chinese Revolution, Radical Women, Communist Politics, and Mass Movements in the 1920s* (Berkeley 1995), 8, 130.

15. Elizabeth Perry, ed., *Putting Class in its Place: Worker Identities in East Asia* (Berkeley 1996).

16. S. A. Smith, *Like Cattle and Horses: Nationalism and Labour in Shanghai, 1895-1927* (Durham and London 2002).

17. Joshua Howard, *Workers at War: Labour in China's Arsenals, 1937-1953* (Stanford 2004).

18. Liu Gongcheng, *Gongren yundongshi yanjiu wenshu (Research on the Labour Movement)* (Beijing 2003), 73.

conclusions on the economic life and working conditions of Chinese workers in their six volume work *A History of the Chinese Labour Movement*, and Liu and Tang cite Chesneaux repeatedly.<sup>19</sup> Wang Yuping, in a historiographic article, goes so far as to praise Chesneaux's "unforgettable contributions" to the academic dialogue that China maintains with the international academic community.<sup>20</sup>

In addition to Jean Chesneaux, Eric Hobsbawm, Edward Thompson, David Montgomery, and several younger North American labour historians have made their presence felt in China. A number of the works of these Western historians have been translated into Chinese, and they have by and large been appreciatively received by a younger generation of Chinese scholars.<sup>21</sup> Liu Ping, a social historian who has focused much of his attention on the Chinese underworld, translated Perry's *Shanghai on Strike* into Chinese, and then published a detailed review of the book.<sup>22</sup> Liu makes the claim that Western scholars, spearheaded by Perry, are to be congratulated for releasing the Chinese scholar from the narrow but prevailing view that continues to portray the Chinese worker as the passive conduit of party politics and ideology.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, a number of studies originating in China during this period adopt Western theories in order to support hypotheses about worker experiences. These studies partly overturn conventional conclusions.

The most ambitious attempt to revise conventional wisdom and scholars'

19. Liu Mingkui and Tang Yuliang, *Zhongguo gongren yundongshi (The Labour Movement in China)*, (6 volumes) (Guangzhou 1998), vol. 1, 125, 131-2.

20. Wang Yuping, "Risu dengguo dui zhongguo gongren jieji yu gongren yundong de yanjiu," ("A Survey of Writings on the Chinese Working Class and Labour Movement in Japan, Soviet Union, and Other Countries") *Zhongguo gongren yundongshi yanjiu wenji (Collection of Works on the Chinese Labour Movement)* (Beijing 2000), 466.

21. See, for instance, Zhao Shiling, "Ren, wenhua he lishi – yingguo lishi xuejia E.P.Thompson," ("Man, Culture, and History – British Historian E. P. Thompson") *Shixue lilun (History and Theory)*, 2 (1987); Jiang Peng, "Lun E.P. Thompson de lishi lilun," ("On the Historical Theories of E. P. Thompson") *Shixue lilun (History and Theory)*, 1 (1993); Zhao Shiling, "Jianada laogongshi xuejia Bryan Palmer fangtan," ("Interview with Canadian Labour Historian Bryan Palmer") *Shixue lilun (History and Theory)*, 1 (1993); Liu Lihua, "David Montgomery he meiguo xin gongren shixue – du David Montgomery gongren kongzhi: meiguo gongzuo, jishu he gongren douzheng de yanjiu," ("David Montgomery and American New Labour History: A Review Article on his *Workers' Control in America: Studies in the History of Work, Technology, and Labour Struggles*") *Liaoning daxue xuebao (Journal of Liaoning University)*, 30 (2002), 115-117. While Chesneaux's book has never been translated into Chinese, a Chinese translation of *The Making of the English Working Class* by E.P. Thompson was published in China in 2001, and the Chinese version of a number of Eric Hobsbawm's books came out around the same time.

22. Liu Ping, "Huanyuan: gongren yundong yu zhongguo zhengzhi – Elizabeth Perry's *Shanghai bagong shuping*," ("Restoration of the Relations between Labour Movement and Politics in China: Review of Perry's *Shanghai On Strike*") *Jindaishi yanjiu (Studies in Modern History)*, 3 (2003); the Chinese version of Perry's book came out in 2001.

23. Liu Ping, "Huanyuan," 227.

unwavering allegiance to the Party Line has been proposed by two sociologists, Ren Yan and Pan Yi.<sup>24</sup> Their article, "Viewing Workers as Agents: Rewriting Notions of the Working Class Formation in Modern China," begins with a discussion of E.P. Thompson and Ira Katznelson's conception of class. Notwithstanding the fact that their article is based primarily on secondary sources, Ren and Pan make a tenable case supporting the notion that workers' traditional culture played a significant role in stimulating resistance, and in promoting the growth of early labour organizations. They imply that Chinese working-class consciousness arose prior to the establishment of the CCP.<sup>25</sup> A Chinese economic historian, Ma Junya, echoes Emily Honig in pointing out how regional prejudice produced divisions and animosities among Chinese workers in metropolitan centres along the Yangzi River prior to 1949.<sup>26</sup> These revisionist efforts have been carried out primarily by historians, and especially social historians, whose principal area of expertise is not labour.

In the previously noted historiographical article by Wang Yuping, a labour scholar based at the Chinese Labour Movement College, there is a survey of studies of Chinese workers published outside China. Her survey, nevertheless, contains no references at all to more recently published us and British sources.<sup>27</sup> Do Chinese labour historians such as Wang Yuping deliberately ignore more recent Western scholarship? How do we assess post-Maoist scholarship which deals with Chinese labour? Is it still subject to subtle political pressure exerted by the CCP, as some social historians contend, or has it "rid itself of the long-term constraints of the 'ultra-leftist' line, displaying unprecedented originality," as some Chinese labour historians repeatedly claim?<sup>28</sup> To answer these questions, an examination of historical writings dealing with labour in the post-Maoist era is necessary.

24. Ren completed post-graduate studies in Japan, and currently holds a teaching position at the Zhongshan University in Guangzhou, and Pan lectures at Hong Kong University of Science and Technology.

25. Ren Yan and Pan Yi, "Gongren zhutixing de shijian: chongshu zhongguo jindai gongren jieji de xingcheng," ("Viewing Workers as Agents: Rewriting Notions of Working Class Formation in Modern China") *Kaifang shidai (Opening Era)*, 3 (2006), 107-123.

26. Ma Junya, "Jindai jiangnan dushi zhongde subeiren: diyuan maodun yu shehui fenceng," ("Jiangbei People Living in Jiangnan Cities: Regional Conflicts and Social Stratification") *Shixue yuekan (History Monthly)*, 1 (2003).

27. Wang Yuping: "Risu dengguo," 464-5.

28. See, for instance, Liu Jingfang, "Jiushi niandai zhongguo gongyunshi yanjiu shuping," ("A Review of the Chinese Labour Movement Publications during the 1990s") *Gonghui lilun yu shijian (Theory and Practice of Trade Unions)*, 14 (2000), 53; Dai Wenxian, "Ershi nianlai zhongguo xin minzhu zhuyi geming shiqi gongyunshi yanjiu shuping," ("A Survey of the Last 20 Years' Publications on the Chinese Labour Movement during the New Democratic Revolutionary Period") *Anhui shixue (History Studies in Anhui)*, 4 (2001), 81-82; Liu Gongcheng, *Gongren yundongshi yanjiu*, 73.

### Scholarship Dealing with the Pre-1949 Labour Movement in Post-Maoist China

Before considering contemporary scholarship in labour history, a brief summary of the work carried out in the field during the Maoist period is useful. Published historical accounts of labour during the period of Maoist hegemony fall into two groups, of which the first is composed of “personal” and “factory” histories. These include firsthand depictions and eyewitness accounts of workers’ suffering and collective struggles. These “personal” and “factory” histories are compiled from oral interviews conducted by revolutionary cadres drawn from trade unions, factories, and party organs, and with the assistance of researchers, teachers, and students from research institutes and universities.<sup>29</sup> In addition, these interviews are viewed by the party-state as a form of re-education for professors and students of history conducting the interviews. The second type of historical narrative consists of documentary and popular accounts of significant labour events “in which the CCP played a major role or which are considered milestones in the Chinese communist movement.”<sup>30</sup> Popular literature recounting the history of the labour movement is customarily gathered up in slim volumes replete with party rhetoric, and intended for use as a tool in the political education of the masses.

Chinese-sponsored research on labour flourished in the 1980s, and especially the 1990s. Over 100 monographs and about 500 academic articles were published in the last two decades of the 20th century. Along with these articles and monographs, numerous collections of source material, popular literature, biographies, and reference books were published. Of this total, 70 monographs and 240 articles were published in the 1990s alone.<sup>31</sup>

In 1998, labour historians Liu Mingkui and Tang Yuliang published *A History of the Chinese Labour Movement (A History)* in six volumes. *A History* is a seminal work. It represents both an impressive level of scholarly sensitivity and clarity, on the one hand, and the shortcomings endemic in most 1990s’ histories of the pre-1949 labour movement, on the other. It deserves careful consideration.<sup>32</sup> *A History*, whose publication has been hailed as an

29. Ming K. Chan, *Historiography of the Chinese Labour Movement, 1895-1949: A Critical Survey and Bibliography of Selected Chinese Source Materials at the Hoover Institution* (Stanford 1981), 63-4.

30. Ming K. Chan, *Historiography*, 3.

31. Dai Wenxian, “Ershi nianlai,” 83; Liu Jingfang, “Jiushi niandai,” 53.

32. Liu and Tang, associated with the Research Institute of Modern Chinese History of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, began their careers in the 1950s, and have gathered, over the course of the past five decades, an impressive array of source materials. These materials, mainly dealing with Chinese labour in the 19th and 20th centuries, have been compiled in a collection of 14 volumes, and published under the title *Zhongguo gongren jieji lishi zhuangkuang (Historical Conditions of the Chinese Working Class)* (Beijing 1985—). Publication and printing of the 14 volumes began in 1985, and continues up to the present.



event of political significance, is sponsored by the National Funds of Social Sciences. *China Book Review* invited three experts in modern Chinese history to comment on *A History*. Their reviews have been published collectively under the title, "My Reading of *A History*." The experts are Liu Danian, Wang Jingyu, and Zhang Haipeng.<sup>33</sup>

Significantly, the editor of the review articles, in his Editor's Note, describes the work as a token of "high esteem paid to the Chinese working-class," and an acknowledgement of "the enormous contribution that...Chinese workers made to China's revolution, reconstruction, and economic reforms."<sup>34</sup> Continuing in this same vein, Liu, Wang, and Zhang indicate their respect for *A History*. Liu mentions the authors' thoroughness and perseverance. Wang, for his part, corroborates the "political significance and academic value" of *A History* owing to its in-depth and accurate analysis of the history of the working-class. Zhang, moreover, goes further, venturing to assert that *A History* "not only laid down the foundation for the labour studies discipline, but also fostered...research in Chinese modern history and CCP history substantially."<sup>35</sup>

*A History* addresses the historical period beginning in the mid-19th century and culminating in the Revolution of 1949. Grounded in evidently painstaking research involving wide-ranging source materials, *A History* emphasizes the decisive impact of China's economic transformation on workers' experience. In addition, *A History* offers a comprehensive analysis of the institutional

33. Liu Danian and Wang Jingyu were known and respected in their respective fields internationally before the Cultural Revolution. Liu is a specialist in the field of Chinese revolutionary history, and Wang in economic history. Zhang Haipeng was, at that time, the head of the Research Institute of Modern Chinese History, at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences.

34. "Wo du zhongguo gongren yundong shi," ("My Reading of *A History of the Chinese Labour Movement*") *Zhongguo tushu pinglun (China Book Review)*, 6 (1999), 39.

35. Liu Danian, "Fen gaoyou yi jigui, heng wuwu yi qiongnian," ("Day and Night, Working Assiduously and Perseveringly") *Zhongguo tushu pinglun (China Book Review)*, 6 (1999), 39-40; Wang Jingyu, "Fuyou yiyi de yanjiu," ("A Meaningful Study") *Zhongguo tushu pinglun (China Book Review)*, 6 (1999), 40-1; Zhang Haipeng, "Bange shiji de zizi yiqiu," ("Tireless Search of A Half Century") *Zhongguo tushu pinglun (China Book Review)*, 6 (1999), 41. In addition to the reviews mentioned in the text, *A History* drew wide attention in historical circles, and the favourable reviews it garnered were often from highly reputed scholars. For instance, Shao Weizheng, a professor of CCP history at a prestigious institution, considers the book "the first monumental work that approaches the modern Chinese workers' movement from the perspective of Marxism...." See Shao Weizheng, "Zhongguo gongyunshi yanjiu de yida tupuo – ping zhongguo gongren yundongshi," ("A Magnificent Breakthrough in Research on the Chinese Labour Movement: Review of *A History of the Chinese Labour Movement*") *Zhongguo gongyun (Chinese Labour Movement)*, 7 (2000), 38; Mao Lei, a specialist in modern Chinese political history, regards the book as "A Scientific Reconstruction of the Labour Movement at the High Tide of the Chinese Revolution in the Mid-1920s" in his review of volume 3. See Mao Lei, "Kexue de zaixian dageming shiqi gongren yundong de huajuan – du zhongguo gongren yundongshi disanjuan," ("A Scientific Reconstruction of the Labour Movement at the High Tide of the Chinese Revolution in the Mid-1920s – A Review of the third volume of *Chinese Labour Movement*,") *Jiangnan luntan (Jiangnan Tribune)*, 1 (2000).

activities undertaken by workers. In Maoist China, it was virtually taboo to dwell on relationships that link workers with traditional societies. By contrast, *A History* chronicles and analyzes significant relationships between workers and traditional semi-clandestine societies. Therefore, authors Liu and Tang draw criticism from both conservative, dyed-in-the-wool CCP supporters and liberal historians. In addition, *A History* provides a thoughtful analysis of the functioning of trade unions under the Nationalist government, heretofore ignored in Maoist studies of labour.

On the other hand, *A History* does not break much ground at all in the way it treats the question of Chinese working-class formation. In the chapter dealing with the emergence of the working-class, and its characteristics, Liu and Tang repeatedly make use of Mao's favourite expressions, and continue to mouth the revolutionary commonplace that strictly equates the degree of severity of a worker's oppression to the intensity of their revolutionary spirit and class consciousness. Thus, a harshly exploited Chinese working-class is depicted as a tightly-knit unit possessed by "the strongest revolutionary spirit except for an extremely small number of scabs."<sup>36</sup> In addition, while portraying contemporary industrial workers as potential revolutionary vanguards, *A History* downplays the cultural traditions of the workers, referring to them as "feudal relics."<sup>37</sup> Liu and Tang still credit the May Fourth Movement, in which workers first advanced to the centre-stage in national politics, and the establishment of the CCP, as the two milestones promoting the formation of a self-conscious Chinese working-class. Liu and Tang even go so far as to affirm that a class previously defining itself in terms of production entirely, i.e., "a class in and of itself," in the early 1920s undergoes, once the CCP is born, a transformation, and becomes "a class for itself."<sup>38</sup> Liu and Tang embrace Chesneaux's approach and conclusions, despite the fact that at the time they were producing *A History*, both Thompson's work, which re-envisioned the concept of class, and American revisionist studies were readily available to Chinese scholars. In other words, and for whatever reason, Liu and Tang resist much of the impact of recent developments in historical writing on labour in the West.

Liu and Tang's paradigm, emphasizing as it does the foundational role of the CCP in the creation of the Chinese working-class, neglects the complexities of worker experiences, and avoids treating class formation as a historical process. This approach, in fact, is the one that is tacitly approved by mainstream Chinese labour historians as a whole.<sup>39</sup> Mainstream labour historians

36. Liu and Tang, *Zhongguo gongren*, 120-122.

37. Liu and Tang, *Zhongguo gongren*, 122-129.

38. Liu and Tang, *Zhongguo gongren*, 246-248.

39. See, for instance, Wang Yongxi, *Zhongguo gonghuishi* (*A History of Chinese Trade Unions*) (Beijing 1992); Wang Jianchu and Sun Maosheng, *Zhongguo gongren yundongshi* (*A History of the Chinese Labour Movement*) (Liaoning 1987); Shen Yixing, Jiang Peinan, and Zheng Qingsheng, *Shanghai gongren yundongshi* (*The Labour Movement of Shanghai*) (2 volumes)

continue to adopt orthodox Marxist underpinnings, albeit in slightly modified form, as their starting point. In what follows, I document cases to support this observation by referencing three debates in the field. In so doing, I point to some new developments, as well as aspects of continuity in the perspectives of Chinese labour historians.

**Working Class Formation and Solidarity.** While the majority of labour historians in China avoid conceding much to Western scholarship on fundamental issues involving working-class formation and solidarity, a number of significant revisionist voices among younger social historians stand out. Such is the case of Liu Ping, who, in a critical review of Perry's study of Shanghai workers, challenges the traditional Maoist position. For example, Liu disputes the Maoist notion that "anti-imperialism and anti-feudalism are the main directions of the modern Chinese working-class struggle" since, as Perry plausibly argues, many workers who participated in the Three Armed Uprisings of 1927 regarded themselves first as "consumers or citizens, rather than as members of a class." Liu distances himself from the official position by rejecting class consciousness and solidarity as the cause of rebellions among the pre-1949 Chinese workers.<sup>40</sup>

Ma Junya is another social historian who challenges the official Maoist position. His article on workers who cross the Yangzi River in order to make a living challenges Maoist principles. Ma observes that these outsiders from north of the Yangzi were among the worst paid mill hands or dock coolies. They were discriminated against by local capitalists and workers alike, and as a result, often sided with foreign factory owners who used them as scabs during the anti-imperialist wave of strikes that peaked in 1925. They were among the most exploited of industrial workers, who according to Maoist premise, should by all rights have fiercely resisted imperialism and feudalism, but who apparently "hated native workers in Shanghai and other cities all the more vehemently, having the widespread... reputation for being 'unpatriotic'."<sup>41</sup>

In addition to Ren Yan and Pan Yi, Huo Xinbin as well focuses on the key role played by craftsmen in working-class formation. Huo explores how profound social and economic changes during the first two decades of the 20th century led to polarization within traditional guilds in Guangzhou. When artisan journeymen felt their interests were threatened, they instituted annual

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(Liaoning 1992, 1995); Hangzhoushi zonggonghui (The General Trade Union of Hangzhou), *Hangzhou gongren yundongshi: 1876-1992 (A Labour History of Hangzhou Municipality: 1876-1992)* (Beijing 1996); Liu Gongcheng and Wang Yangjing, *Ershi shiji dalian gongren yundongshi (A Labour Movement of Dalian in the 20th Century)* (Liaoning 2001); Yunnansheng zonggonghui and zhonggong Yunnan shengwei dangshi yanjiushi (The General Trade Union of Yunnan Province and Party History Research Institute of the CCP Yunnan Committee), *Yunnan gongren yundong shi: 1872-2000 (A Labour Movement of Yunnan Province: 1872-2000)* (Kunming, 2003).

40. Liu Ping, "Huanyuan," 242.

41. Ma Junya, "Jindai jiangnan," 95, 99.

collective strikes to demand higher wages. The Revolution of 1911 and the 1917 Russian Revolution lent greater impetus to the fervour of these mainly literate craftsmen. Led by a group of machine-shop mechanics, journeymen craftsmen in Guangzhou began to embrace the use of the stock phrase “sacred labour” as an efficacious rhetorical device in their struggle against guild masters and merchants who were often unscrupulous. Subsequently, the craftsmen formed trade unions.<sup>42</sup>

**Traditions Connected with Worker Associations.** Another taboo in the Maoist era involved workers’ pre-industrial associational culture. The influence of a formidable underworld force – the Green Gang<sup>43</sup> – permeated the culture of rank-and-file workers prior to 1949. Membership in the Green Gang and/or other traditional associations (i.e., regional societies, labour gangs, and ritual kinships) became essential in order to secure a job, deal with an authoritarian boss, cope in times of economic hardship, or in the early stages, organize strikes protesting oppressive conditions. On the other hand, aspects of associational cultures served as obstacles impeding the emergence of working-class consciousness and solidarity. Since the Chinese proletariat, according to Maoist rhetoric, is the most enlightened social group and the class base of the CCP, any discussion linking workers with associational cultures is viewed by the party apparatus as an attempt to tarnish the working-class image.

Since the 1980s, numerous labour historians have studied, and acknowledged the persistent influence of worker associational traditions, but these same historians are widely divided in their interpretation of the data. Insisting on the anti-imperialist and anti-feudal nature of the worker struggle, many conservative historians attribute to “these feudal organizations” a harmful effect that, they claim from time to time, “suppressed working-class consciousness, and was incompatible with...modern industrial unions.” *A History* by Liu and Tang, for example, observes how both foreign and Chinese capitalists manipulated these feudal organizations to manage workers, and how the “erosion and poison of such feudal ideology and custom...unavoidably prevents Chinese workers from developing ...class consciousness, class organization, and revolutionary strategies.”<sup>44</sup> The majority of scholars, including

42. Huo Xinbin, “Qingmo minchu Guangzhou de hanghui gonghuihua,” (“Transformation from Guilds to Trade Unions in Guangzhou in the End of Qing and Early Republican Years”) *Shixue yuekan (History Monthly)*, 10 (2005).

43. The Green Gang came into existence in late Qing, and many gang members were secretly involved in the anti-Qing rebellions. Beginning in the mid-19th century, many gang members moved to Shanghai, became involved in organized crime, and came to monopolize the operation of illegal activities in the city. The Red Gang and the Triads were secret societies in China with similar characteristics.

44. See, for instance, Wang Jingyu, “Jindai zhongguo gongren jieji douzheng de dafangxiang – zhongguo gongren yundongshi duhougan,” (“The Main Directions of the Working Class Struggle in Modern China: My Reaction to *A History of the Chinese Labour Movement*”) *Guangdong shehui kexue (Social Sciences of Guangdong)*, 1 (2000), 149-150; Liu and Tang,

many forward-thinking labour union scholars as well as social historians, however, support a more nuanced and less radical position that does not always regard workers' associational culture as an unadulterated example of evil. Occasionally they even portray associational culture as the workers' best defense against exploitation, unfair treatment, and, in general, capitalist depredations carried out prior to the existence of CCP-led labour unions. On the other hand, non-traditional scholars sometimes present the opposing view that regards associational culture as an actual disincentive that inhibited working-class solidarity when the CCP-led labour movement became a significant force in the political arena.<sup>45</sup>

A third position is represented by younger social historians, who rely more extensively on Western scholarship. For example, Cai Shaoqing, a noted researcher who focuses on Chinese secret societies, and Liu Ping, diverge sharply from critics who disapprove of *A History's* revelations of working-class ties to secret societies. In fact, Cai and Liu lament that the authors of *A History* do not go to greater lengths in their disclosures. According to Cai and Liu, *A History* fails to offer an in-depth discussion of "interactions between traditional associations and the unionizing of workers."<sup>46</sup> Embracing New Labour History, sociologists Ren Yan and Pan Yi similarly admonish conservative labour historians for neglecting "the contribution that cultural traditions, especially the guilds..., made to workers' struggles, or for simply dismissing these traditional elements...as obstacles to strikes."<sup>47</sup> Another scholar, Shao Yong, whose research focuses on underground Chinese societies, cites contemporary newspaper reports to demonstrate that Shanghai workers went on strike under the leadership of the Green Gang and the Red Gang during

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*Zhongguo gongren*, vol. 1, 135. Some critics question Liu and Tang's book simply because it explores the relations between the Green/Red Gangs and the labour movement. See Cai Shaoqing and Liu Ping, "Zhongguo gongren yundong yu banghui de guanxi: jianping liujuanben zhongguo gongren yundongshi," ("On the Relations between the Chinese Labour Movement and Gangsters: Also A Review of the Voluminous *A History of the Chinese Labour Movement*") *Xueshu yanjiu (Academic Studies)*, 3 (2003).

45. See for instance, Chen Weimin, "Jiefangqian de banghui yu Shanghai gongren yundong," ("The Secret Societies and the Labour Movement in Pre-1949 Shanghai") *Shilin (Historical Works)*, 2 (1993); Rao Jingying, "Sanshi niandai Shanghai de gonghui yu banghui," ("The Secret Societies and the Trade Unions in the 1930s' Shanghai") *Shilin (Historical Works)*, 3 (1993); Gao Aidi, "Hangbang dui zaoqi gongren yundong de yingxiang," ("The Influence of Labour Gang on the Early Labour Movement") *Zhongguo gongyunshi yanjiu (Studies of Chinese Labour History)*, 6 (2003); Yunnan sheng zong gonghui, *Yunnan gongren*, 18-9; Gu Jiandi and Lin Qimou, "Du Yuesheng he Shanghai gongyun," ("Du Yuesheng and the Labour Movement in Shanghai") *Anqing shifan xueyuan xuebao (Journal of Anqing Teachers College)*, 1 (2002).

46. Cai and Liu, *Zhongguo gongren*, 77-8.

47. Ren Yan and Pan Yi, "Gongren zhutixing," 117.

the May Fourth Movement. He concludes “these gangsters too... had strong nationalist and patriotic sentiment.”<sup>48</sup>

**Party Politics and the Labour Movement.** Another important development involves the relationship between workers and political parties. Until the 1980s, labour history was conveniently regarded as a subset of CCP history, and labour historians adopted the conceptual framework approved by party historians wholesale. In their writings, non-communist or anti-communist union activities were summarily eliminated, and the development of the worker struggle was redefined so as to corroborate the CCP’s version of events.

Post-Mao, significant efforts have been made to establish labour history as an independent, non-partisan discipline. Labour historians take great pride in their contributions in this area. Zhao Yinlin, a labour historian based at the Labour Movement College of Jiangsu Province, weighs Sun Yat-sen’s role in 1924 in promoting the labour movement. The father of Republican China and the Nationalist Party, Sun, though obviously not a Marxist, did in Zhao’s view try to support Chinese workers not only so that he could recruit them into the Nationalist Party, but also as a means of combating both imperialism and the warlords directly. Indeed, according to Zhao, Sun lifted the workers’ movement out of its low ebb.<sup>49</sup>

*A History of the Labour Movement of Shanghai* (1991, 1996) in two volumes, is co-authored by Shen Yixing, Jiang Peinan, and Zheng Qingsheng.<sup>50</sup> This work is less orthodox in its approach than *A History* by Liu and Tang. In *Labour Movement of Shanghai*, Shen, Jiang and Zheng thoroughly examine the seven most infamous trade unions in Shanghai after the anti-communist coup of 1927. They contend that although these “seven big unions” favoured the Nationalist Party and opposed the CCP, they strove nonetheless to defend the economic interests of workers. Thus, the “seven big unions” are depicted neutrally in *A History of the Labour Movement of Shanghai*. Similar unions were numerous in Nationalist Government-controlled regions, and Shen, Jiang and Zheng note that CCP labour organizers failed to ally themselves with them.<sup>51</sup> Economic historian Peng Nansheng and his student Rao Shuili view the Factory Act, which the Nationalist Government promulgated in 1929, in a positive light, claiming it represented a logical extension of Sun Yat-sen’s principle of supporting workers. According to Peng and Rao, it constitutes a reform policy, moreover, with the goal of improving the working and living

48. Shao Yong, “Wusi yundong yu qinghong banghui,” (“May Fourth Movement and the Gangsters”) *Shilin (Historical Works)*, 3 (2005), 66.

49. Zhao Yinglin, “Wannian Sun Zhongshan de gongyun sixiang,” (“Sun Yat-sen’s Theories on Labour Movement in His Late Years”) *Gonghui luntan (Trade Union Tribune)*, 7 (2001), 63.

50. All three historians began their studies of the Chinese labour movement in the 1950s. Shen became a CCP member perhaps as early as 1927.

51. Shen Yixing, Jiang Peinan, Zheng Qingsheng, *Shanghai gongren*, vol. 1, 458-470.

conditions of labourers, promoting harmony between workers and capital, and appeasing the increasingly disaffected population.<sup>52</sup>

Since the 1980s, therefore, appreciable changes have occurred in the field of labour studies. On the other hand, it appears that when labour historians challenge the status quo, they do so only cautiously. More audacious, authentically revisionist voices are primarily heard among scholars who are deemed outside the mainstream of the labour research community. The work of these “outsiders” more frequently references theories of Western historians. Even so, one rarely discerns the same degree of intensity in the East-West labour history exchange as one routinely detects in other fields.<sup>53</sup> Inasmuch as revisionist works have been openly published in China in a wide array of publications and journals, party-state authoritarian control of historical writings can probably not fully explain why labour historians have adopted such a conservative stance with such persistence, while historians specializing in other fields have not. We need to look elsewhere, therefore, for reasons explaining the apparent tendency of Chinese labour historians to cling to the official party narrative.

### Hypotheses

First let us look at the highly politicized legacy of the Chinese labour historians relative to other types of social historians. It seems likely that as a result of a longstanding tradition in labour historiography, conservative, mostly older labour historians as well as younger, often more forward-thinking scholars whose specialization is labour unions, have continued to feel a sense of accountability to the Chinese worker in the post-Maoist period. This sense of accountability might, moreover, in part explain some of their reluctance to adapt to changes in the academic world. Observing the increased economic burden on Chinese workers that Western-inspired neo-liberalism appears to be responsible for, Chinese labour historians have been unwilling to embrace Western labour scholarship’s methods and conclusions unreservedly. Other

52. Peng Nansheng and Rao Shuili, “Jianlun 1929 nian de gongchangfa,” (“A Brief Discussion of the 1929 Factory Acts”) *Anhui shixue (Historical Studies in Anhui)*, 4 (2006), 82-3.

53. For instance, influenced by the total history pioneered by the *Annales*, social historians such as Zhao Shiyu and Chang Jianhua turn to inscriptions, steles, and genealogies for their sources, examining every aspect of Chinese society in the Ming and Qing dynasties. See Zhao Shiyu, *Kuanghuan yu richang – mingqing yilai de miaohui yu minjian shehui (Carnival and Daily Life – the Temple, Market and Folk Society in Ming and Qing Dynasties)* (Beijing 2002); *Qingdai chengshi shenghuo changjun – fuxiu yu shenqi (Elaborating Urban Life in Qing Dynasty: Decay and Marvels)* (Hunan 2006); Chang Jianhua, *Qingdai de guojia yu shehui yanjiu (State and Society in Qing Dynasty)* (Beijing 2006). In the field of Chinese economic history, scholars in both China and the West have simultaneously revised the traditional conclusions about the industrial growth in pre-1949 China. See Tim Wright, “The Spiritual Heritage of Chinese Capitalism: Recent Trends in the Historiography of Chinese Enterprise Management,” Jonathan Unger, ed., *Using the Past to Serve the Present: Historiography and Politics in Contemporary China* (New York 1993), 213-5.

social historians, in contrast, adopt a more flexible approach, identifying themselves with the official policy of “reform and opening.”

#### Party Politics and the Labour History Research Team

In China, the labour studies field developed in a significantly different way from social history, which began to become an autonomous field around the turn of the 20th century. At the time, a perspective challenging the conventional value of recounting events only from the points of view of emperors, kings, and other elites, and of focusing exclusively on political developments and related intellectual currents, emerged.<sup>54</sup> The new view of history called for a more inclusive approach, concentrating on common people as well as elites. It deemed worthy of historical analysis a wide range of subject matter, and it relied heavily on interdisciplinary approaches developed in the West. About a decade later, the impact of Marx’s historical materialism begins to be felt in China. With its emphasis on economic change as the driving force of history and on the masses as shapers of civilizations, historical materialism fuelled the trend that favoured greater inclusiveness.<sup>55</sup>

While the relatively autonomous Chinese social historians sought mentors among “New Historians,” who shared their focus on inclusion and integration, the foundations of Chinese labour studies were political. The few works of labour history published in the pre-Mao era were largely inventions of political figures who sought to mobilize the labour movement in support of either the CCP or the Nationalists. From 1949 to the late 1970s, several additional factors politicized the field. First, after the CCP came to power, the use of a political form of rhetoric, highly complimentary of the working-class, was instituted. After the Chinese working-class had been idealized, only revolutionary loyalists with a “strong proletarian consciousness” were considered qualified to write the history of the labour movement. Unlike most other historians, labour historians were first of all revolutionaries who became CCP members prior to, or shortly after, 1949.

Secondly, the field of labour studies has been highly susceptible to political changes. Power struggles within China’s Politburo, political campaigns, which are frequently destabilizing, and promotions or dismissals within the ranks of the party elite, often have had palpable impact on labour research. For instance, when one of the leaders of the General Trade Union of Shanghai was appointed to a leading position in the International Union Federation in the

54. Zhao Shiyu and Zheng Qingping, “*Ershi shiji zhongguo shehuishi yanjiu de huigu yu sikao*,” (“In Retrospect of and Thinking about Chinese Social History Studies in the 20th Century”) *Lishi yanjiu (Historical Studies)*, 6 (2001), 158; Jonathan Unger, *Using the past*, 3.

55. Some Chinese historians claim that today’s social history in China still aligns itself with the inclusive view championed by philosophers and practitioners of the New History in the 1930s and 1940s. See, for instance, Zhao Shiyu and Zheng Qingping, “*Ershi shiji*,” 159, 162.



early 1950s, he vigorously promoted a research program on pre-1949 Shanghai workers. The project involved approximately 100 cadres, teachers, and students, interviewing nearly 1,000 informants from seven leading industries. They produced a collection of oral material on the Shanghai labour movement that they transcribed and compiled in 27 volumes. The anti-rightist movement, begun in 1957, however, terminated the program, as a consequence most likely of the fall of Lai Ruoyu, the Chairman of the All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU). As a result, the eagerly awaited oral history went unpublished.<sup>56</sup>

Moreover, the status that the CCP imparted to workers tended to create obstacles for those wanting to speak or write frankly about labour history. According to Mao, the new China must be under proletarian leadership "...because the working-class is the most insightful, selfless, and thorough-going revolutionary class."<sup>57</sup> On the other hand, and contrary to Mao's claims, Chinese workers did not virtually single-handedly bring about the revolution. Rather, it was the state that remade the working-class in its own image in the 1950s, and in so doing reduced the ACFTU to a virtual appendage of the CCP, assigning to it the relatively inconsequential roles of organizing recreational activity and arranging financial subsidies.<sup>58</sup> Labour history, as we understand it now, and as distinguished from the way it was previously viewed (that is, as a mere cheerleading exercise), is one of the most under-supported and under-nourished of all the academic disciplines.

Since the 1980s, numerous institutions of higher education, research centres affiliated with regional trade unions, and party cadre training colleges have been established. The Labour Research Centre has established sites at a number of regular universities such as Beijing Normal University and Shandong University. Nationally, the ACFTU reconfigured its cadre training school in 1984 under a new name, the Chinese Labour Movement College. At these newer centres of higher learning, historians regularly offer courses to

56. The tangible results of the project include a four-volume chronicle of the Shanghai labour movement from 1919 to 1949, and a handful of accounts depicting factory workers' experiences. Produced in mimeographed form, these works circulated within limited circles only. See, for instance, Shanghai gongyun shiliao weiyuanhui (Shanghai Committee on Historical Materials for Labour Movement), *Shanghai gongren yundong lishi dashiji (A Chronicle of Shanghai Labour Movement)* (4 volumes) (Shanghai 1957), mimeo; Shanghai gongyun shiliao weiyuanhui (Shanghai Committee on Historical Materials for Labour Movement), *Guomian shichang gongren douzheng lishi ziliao (Historical Materials on Workers' Struggle in the No. 10 Cotton Mill)* (Shanghai 1956), mimeo; Shanghai gongyun shiliao weiyuanhui (Shanghai Committee on Historical Materials of Labour Movement), *Shanghai guomian shier chang gongren douzheng lishi ziliao (Historical Materials on Workers' Struggle in the No. 12 Cotton Mill)* (Shanghai 1955).

57. Zhonghua quanguo zonggonghui, zhonggong zhongyang wenxian yanjiushi (ACFTU and Document Research Institute of CCP Central Committee), *Mao Zedong, Deng Xiaoping, Jiang Zemin lun gongren jieji he gonghui (Mao Zedong, Deng Xiaoping, and Jiang Zemin on Working Class and Trade Unions)* (Beijing 2002), 20-1.

58. Andrew G. Walder, "The Remaking of the Chinese Working Class, 1949-1981," *Modern China* 10 (1984), 3.

union cadres, and conduct research. In older research centres,<sup>59</sup> many scholars, now generally free of party meddling, exhibit – to all appearances – an unprecedented zeal and desire to engage in labour studies.

Two publications, *Research in Labour Movement* and *Theory and Practice of Trade Unions* have functioned as virtual national forums wherein scholars can voice opinions on labour-related issues. In many provinces, academic journals on the labour movement have also emerged.<sup>60</sup> The younger faculty of research centres are professional scholars, many of whom received graduate degrees during the Deng era. These younger scholars are often drawn to the study of the post-1949 period, the most controversial and hotly debated period in Chinese labour studies. Work by these scholars deals with such issues as the trade unions' social responsibilities, collective bargaining practices, and government labour policies. They are committed to promoting worker welfare and union interests. It is not uncommon for them, therefore, to turn to historical analogy as a means of promoting change to a current policy that they regard as unfair.

#### Leftist Labour Historians

Major works dealing with labour prior to 1949 are predominantly the brainchildren of an older generation of scholars who identify themselves first and foremost as revolutionaries, and only secondarily as intellectuals. A highly prolific set of writers as a whole, they have carried on the old academic tradition well into the post-reform years. During the chaotic 1960s, when most of what remained of a scholar's freedom of expression was eliminated by Mao's ultra-leftist policies, many of these scholars were forced into exile in the countryside. The repressive ten years of the Cultural Revolution however do not appear to have altered significantly the basic convictions of the majority.

In the early 1990s and in the rush to capitalize resources and labour, the average yearly income of the Chinese intellectual suffered a decline. Moreover, notwithstanding the phenomenon that has led some younger scholars to actually abandon academia so as to "take a stab at hitting the big-time" among the small minority of members of the newly wealthy and elite "management corps of private enterprises," committed scholars have remained bent on "burning the midnight oil," in order to document, often apparently impervious to personal cost, the real history of the Chinese worker.

In the 1990s, suspicions regarding the motives underlying Chinese government adoption of a globalization policy supported by the US surfaced among

59. Older research centres include, for example, the Research Institute of Modern Chinese History of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and the Research Institute of History of the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences.

60. For instance, *Labour Movement in Anhui*, *Labour Movement in Hebei*, *Labour Movement in Fujian*, just to name a few.

members of the Chinese intelligentsia. These suspicions helped generate a wave of nationalism with an aura of anti-Americanism. Some Chinese scholars presented frank criticism of those they believed to be propagating a romantic image of the West. This nationalist sentiment with traces of xenophobia climaxed when a number of Chinese scholars censured film director Zhang Yimo (*Raise the Red Lantern*) and author June Chang (*Wild Swans* and *Mao, the Unknown Story*), among others, accusing them of fixating on the shortcomings of Chinese society solely in order to amuse and entertain a Western public. In the words of these scholars, the “success [of Zhang, etc.] is built on pandering to Western images of China.”<sup>61</sup>

To an extent, it is certainly possible to attribute to nationalism the cautious response to Western scholarship by leftist Chinese historians. Many of these historians are at pains to emphasize the anti-imperialist role of the working-class, claiming to discern a political motive in the alleged “deliberate... misrepresenting of the Chinese workers’ movement” by so-called American revisionists.<sup>62</sup> Nevertheless, if the nationalism exhibited by Western-educated Chinese scholars results from a better understanding of both the virtues and flaws of Western societies, the nationalism of home-grown leftist historians is rooted in orthodox Marxist assumptions that they were induced to adopt half a century earlier. Hence, leftist labour historians are often reluctant to take the work of their Western colleagues seriously. Some go so far as to shut out the West completely, ignoring all potential contributions from that part of the world.

#### The Current Generation of Labour Union Scholars

Many younger labour scholars seek to promote a less rigid and autocratic relationship between the party-state and the ACFTU so as to promote union autonomy and the long-term interests of workers. In the post-Maoist era, the ACFTU regained some of its prior autonomy, and functions, at least to an extent, as an authentic guardian of the interests of the Chinese worker, rather than simply its cheerleader. Evidence of a revitalized relationship joining the goals of ACFTU to those of the Chinese worker can be detected in a number of recent writings centering on major ideological clashes which pitted ACFTU leaders against the party-state in 1951 and 1957.

In 1951, the ACFTU, headed by the veteran CCP labour organizer, Li Lisan, ventured to agitate for a more independent trade union. Li was accused of insubordination and replaced by veteran party member, Lai Ruoyu, who had no prior experience working on labour-related issues. In 1957, Lai fell into the same trap that brought Li’s fall from power when he agitated for the functional autonomy of the ACFTU in order to better represent the interests of the

61. Joseph Fewsmith, *China Since Tiananmen: the Politics of Transition* (New York 2001), 115.

62. Zhang Haipeng, “Bange shiji,” 41.

working masses. The result of the loss of Lai's faction was that the ACFTU was relegated to the role of "nothing more than [the] subdued mouthpiece of the party and an arm for worker control."<sup>63</sup>

In post-Maoist years, Li and Lai's legacies have been re-examined and their reputations re-evaluated. Numerous publications defending them as trail-blazers have been printed and circulated. Labour union scholars, putting to use lessons of the past to respond to the needs of present-day power struggles, applaud the significance of Li and Lai's contributions, praising them as "outstanding leaders of the Chinese labour movement...who laid down the foundation for the new China's labour movement theory."<sup>64</sup> More and more, union cadres are once again beginning to represent workers, and labour historians are permitted more freedom of expression. It is ironic, however, that it is precisely during this period when some scholars claim, perhaps a bit hyperbolically but not entirely inaccurately, that in post-Maoist China, "China's workers lost their world."<sup>65</sup> In the new China, which has become capitalist almost overnight, the economic distress of great numbers of Chinese, as well as the social instability that arises as a result, is generating a certain spirit of disaffection and cynicism among intellectuals, as well as among workers.

In the 1990s, Chinese intellectuals grew far more critical of globalization and westernization than previously. In the late 1970s, many had begun to advocate a policy of "cosmopolitanism," claiming that openness and detente with the West held the solutions to China's problems. But by the 90s, the consequences of economic reform, including the increasing income gap between classes, and regional income differences, became a gnawing question. In the estimation of many scholars, achieving globalization, and improving conditions for the poor and disadvantaged, are simply two incompatible goals. During the period of economic liberalization, wages and benefits of those employed in state-owned enterprises shrank, and many state employees lost their jobs. Others were forced to seek work in sweatshops, built and run indiscriminately by Chinese and/or international firms. In many cases, no union existed to protect workers' legal rights. In addition, in order to survive, the CCP is undergoing a major

63. Paul Harper, "The Party and the Unions in Communist China," *The China Quarterly*, 37 (1969), 114.

64. Lu Xiangxian, "Gonghui yao baohu gongren qunzhong de liyi – jinian Li Lisan danchen yibai zhounian," ("Trade Unions Must Protect the Masses of Workers: the 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Li Lisan's Birth") *Zhongguo gongyun (Chinese Workers' Movement)*, 12 (1999), 16; also see Wang Yongxi et al., *Zhongguo gongyun jianshi (A Concise History of the Chinese Labour Movement)* (Beijing 1992), 207-218, 233-244; Wang Yu et al; *Dangdai zhongguo gongren jieji he gonghui yundong jishi (Chronicle of Contemporary Chinese Working Class and Trade Union Movement)* (Beijing 1997), 256-7; Wang Yang and Fu Qiu, "Lun wushi niandai dui zhongguo gonghui daolu de tansuo" ("Search for A Chinese Trade Union's Route in the 1950s"), *Liaoning daxue xuebao (Journal of Liaoning University)*, 3 (1995).

65. Marc Blecher, "Hegemony and Workers' Politics in China," *The China Quarterly*, 170 (2002), 283.

structural transformation, turning to intellectual, professional, and entrepreneurial elites for support. This transformation is encapsulated in former party secretary Jiang Zemin's "three represents" slogan,<sup>66</sup> which expands the party's social base to include the groups whose interests run directly counter to those of the workers.

Labour union scholars constitute perhaps the principal group within Chinese academic circles who understand most clearly how workers suffer from economic and social changes. They are therefore perhaps in the best position to sympathize with workers,<sup>67</sup> and have begun more and more to play down the unions' traditional allegiance to authority. Some labour scholars employ a discourse critical of the government, and seek a voice in policy-making for themselves. They seem to have reached the conclusion that the unions no longer need to be accountable to management, and that the only responsibility of the union is to put the worker first and foremost. Focusing on the need to balance the social scales by coming to the aid of the disadvantaged members of society, many labour union scholars vigorously advocate democratization of the unions. Democratic, autonomous unions, they assume, may help to counteract pro-capitalist biases of the current Communist authorities who are "often...manipulated by...social elites."<sup>68</sup>

On the other hand, in response to Jiang's "three represents" slogan, labour union scholars, not unlike leftist labour historians, continue to assign value to empty Maoist phrases trumpeting the "glorious image of the workers." Their choice to do this is governed by the frequently expressed view that the discourse associated with the working-class is not an abstract, theoretical issue. It has "very complicated practical significance" as well.

In an article commissioned by the ACFTU, Zhao Jianjie, chief editor of *Theory & Practice of Trade Unions*, acknowledges that in the reform years, factory workers have experienced great economic hardship. During these periods of change, he concedes, the working-class tends to become diversified owing to an influx of new members. However, extolling working-class solidarity and

66. In 2000 Jiang Zemin put forward his so-called "three represents" theory to justify the party's new relationship with society: this theory claimed the CCP represents, simultaneously, emerging entrepreneurs, professionals, and high-tech specialists (advanced productive forces), advanced culture, and the interests of the majority of the Chinese people.

67. Anita Chan, "Revolution or Corporatism? Workers and Trade Unions in Post-Mao China," *The Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs*, 29 (1993), 49-50.

68. Xu Xiaojun, *Zhongguo gonghui de shehui zeren* (*The Social Responsibility of Chinese Trade Unions*) (Beijing 2006), 7-8, 181; Ma Zifu, "Jiaqiang gonghui neibu minzhu zhidu jianshe – jinian Li Lisan danchen bainian," ("Promoting the Democratization of the Trade Unions: the 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Li Lisan's Birth") *Zhongguo gongyun* (*Chinese Workers' Movement*), 12 (1999), 16; Chen Bulei, "Lun gonghui gongzuozhe de jiaose chongtu he yiwu cengji," ("On the Conflicting Roles and Duties of the Union Cadres") *Zhongguo laodong guanxi xueyuan xuebao* (*Journal of Labour Relation College of China*), 1 (2006), 5-11; Hong Anqi, "Gonghui shi shehui gongping de fama," ("Trade Unions as A Weight on the Social Equity Scales") *Gonghui lilun yu shijian* (*Theory and Practice of Trade Unions*), 5 (2003), 80-3.

virtues, Zhao echoes the claims of revolutionary leaders, concluding that the working-class remains “the class base of the party, the backbone of the party, the master of our country and society, whose ideal characteristics never erode.” In contrast to party secretary Jiang Zemin who highly values the critical role of private entrepreneurs, Zhao admires the contributions of workers who migrate to the cities and industrial zones, remarking that this “floating population” promotes social progress.<sup>69</sup>

### Conclusion

In 1978, the Dengist regime essentially discarded Mao’s class struggle crusade, giving priority to economic development. From 1978 until the mid-1990s, inner-party conflicts between leftists and reformers dominated China’s political landscape. Leftist party elders emphasized the role of ideology and had their stronghold within the propaganda outlets of the Communist system. Along with the relative autonomy enjoyed by the ACFTU and a more tolerant political atmosphere, the leftist dominance of the ideological front led to a profusion of scholarly works concerned with pre-1949 workers during the last decades of the 20th century. The influence of leftist elders, however, waned after 1992, and nearly disappeared after 1997, due to the death of influential revolutionary leaders. Some China observers declared that China’s revolutionary era ended with Deng Xiaoping’s death, and that although the country is still governed by an authoritarian regime, it has operated with a legalistic rather than revolutionary foundation.<sup>70</sup> The multi-volume *A History* by Liu and Tang, with all its virtues and shortcomings, also probably marks the end of a significant period in the field of Chinese labour history. The period still glorifying the workers’ revolutionary movement and class struggle will probably end soon as a consequence of China’s expanding role on the world stage, and the passing away of influential leftist labour historians.

The signs of a shift are perceptible, and include a restructuring of the Chinese Labour Movement College, and new trends in labour studies. No longer a training base for ACFTU cadres, the college, whose name has recently been changed to the College of Labour Relations of China, is being transformed into an educational institution specializing in social work, labour law, and business management. Along with the closing down of its Labour Movement Department, the college opened its doors to regular high school graduates. In addition, following the party’s move from a class-struggle perspective to a call for the establishment of a harmonious and implicitly multi-class society,

69. Zhao Jianjie, “Woguo dangdai gongren jieji xianjinxing tezheng jiqi biaoqian yanjiu,” (“On the Advanced Nature of the Working Class and its Manifestations in Contemporary China”) *Gonghui lilun yu shijian (Theory and Practice of Trade Unions)*, 6 (2003), 9-11.

70. Carlos H. D. Lo, “Legal Reform in the Quest for a Socialist Market Economy,” in David C.B. Teather and Herbert S. Yee, eds., *China in Transition* (London 1999), 70.

several labour union scholars have claimed that the Marxist concept of class is no longer relevant. They claim that current working-class consciousness is marked by an attitude favouring “collaboration between labour and capital,” and have published surveys suggesting that the majority of workers (56%) in China believe that a union should represent both workers’ and management’s interests.<sup>71</sup>

In China the link between historical interpretation and politics is direct and readily apparent. The emerging market economy in the post-Maoist years led to a loosening of state control over society. Labour historians nowadays have relative freedom to write what they please. On the other hand, the political commitment of both leftist labour historians and socialist labour union scholars seems to undermine their creativity because of their fears that revelations regarding the ambivalence of the working-class experience may bring about adverse consequences, resulting in a further deterioration of both the image and the economic circumstances of Chinese workers. Behind the inflexible and unchanging values that seem to characterize much scholarship by Chinese labour scholars, we may nonetheless discern clear evidence of political, social, and intellectual ferment.

71. Xu Xiaohong, “Dangdai zhongguo chanye gongren de jieji yishi wenti yanjiu,” (“On the Class Consciousness of Contemporary Chinese Industrial Workers”) *Beijingshi gonghui ganbu xueyuan xuebao* (*Journal of Trade Union Cadre College of Beijing*), 1 (2006), 4-9.