

From the specter of Mao to the spirit of the law: Labor insurgency in China¹

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Hopes for the future are slim. Rather than pushing forward with confidence that we know the way, we see the growing failure of the most visible alternatives, which all seem profoundly flawed . . .

Alvin Gouldner, *The Dark Side of the Dialectic*²

China now confronts the most massive scale of unemployment and peasant labor migration in the history of the People's Republic. This is a potentially volatile time, marked by soaring numbers of labor disputes, petitions, and protests, prompting the regime to warn unambiguously of "new internal contradictions among the people."³ Yet, so far, Communist rule has endured without effective popular challenge. A most intriguing paradox of the Chinese reform is thus the regime's capacity to maintain overall social stability, while market socialism has also intensified labor discontents and radicalized labor activism. This article unravels this paradox by proposing a thesis of "postsocialist labor insurgency." My overall argument is that the transition from state socialism to market socialism occasions a simultaneous radicalization of worker politics and the state's attempt to bolster its regulatory capacity by institutionalizing a "rule by law." Both tendencies, as I explicate below, have to do with the multi-faceted consequences of introducing a market economy. The precarious balance between labor activism and its partial incorporation⁴ by this regulatory regime accounts for current political stability. So far, only some workers are involved in such activism, while many are demoralized and atomized in the wake of massive unemployment. However statistically unrepresentative, labor insurgency in specific locales remains theoretically significant in that it constitutes a "critical case," capable of fleshing out the dynamics, the limits, and hence also the potentials of worker politics in a period of structural transformation. History has shown

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that reform in China has always been the harbinger of revolutionary changes. The political consequences of reform may well depend on whether class conflicts, among other types of social conflicts, can in the long run be contained within the fledgling system of “socialist legality,” in a polity with a widening rift between central and local state power, and in a society rife with a contradictions between entrenched socialist rhetoric and emergent capitalist realities.

Revolutionary potential of socialist labor

One of the most provocative theoretical postulations on socialist working-class radicalism and its fate under reform is found in Michael Burawoy and Janos Lukacs’s *The Radiant Past*.⁵ State socialism, rather than capitalism, they argue, is more conducive to the making of a revolutionary working class in favor of workers’ socialism. The institutional foundation nurturing such potentials is the state socialist regime of production, predicated on the shortage economy and the state apparatus inside the enterprise. The shortage economy creates constant need for worker autonomy to overcome anarchy in production, while the party-state apparatus at the point of production renders transparent the extraction of surplus and therefore a common class exploiter. These conditions forge labor’s critical consciousness, encompassing, on the one hand, a negative immanent critique of state socialism for its failure to live up to its claims of superior efficiency and equality, and, on the other hand, a positive vision for an alternative order based on worker self-management. Market reform, Burawoy and Lukacs further contend, has the tendency to pacify working-class radicalism by providing alternative channels of mobility based on individual rather than group effort. The contrast in working-class movements in Poland and Hungary highlights how in Poland the lack of market opportunity and the presence of civil society organizations combined to make for Solidarity’s revolt against the state. In Hungary, on the other hand, workers were politically demobilized after the failed 1956 revolt and instead invested their energy in exploiting entrepreneurial opportunities in the second economy. If the above argument can be summarized as the “revolutionary socialist working-class” thesis, the Chinese experience analyzed in this article reveals anomalies that compel its reconstruction into what can be called an “insurgent postsocialist labor” thesis. Both theses are concerned with the effect of the lived experience of state socialism and market reform

on worker radicalization in terms of class consciousness and class capacity.

The insurgent worker of postsocialism

The “insurgent postsocialist labor” thesis argues that the passage of state socialism is prone to trigger labor insurgency because market reform seriously compromises working-class interests and throws into sharp relief the lost potentials of socialism. Postsocialism, not state socialism, is the moment of labor radicalization. There are four aspects of change involved. First, against the original postulation that the lived experience of socialism is generative of oppositional class consciousness, I argue that workers’ socialist experience is a necessary but not sufficient condition for its formation. *Critical class consciousness* emerges only under, and not prior to, market reform. The Chinese experience seems to suggest that there are variants of “socialist regime of production” and that socialist production per se is not necessarily conducive to the kind of inherent critique, even antagonism, of socialism found in Eastern Europe or Russia. The Chinese regime of production was configured differently: Rather than anarchic production requiring worker autonomy and improvisation, the emphasis was always on political activism and mobilizational production campaigns under party control in the workplace, which pre-empted worker control or self-management.⁶ Only when economic reform ushers in the exploitative forces of the market, reconstitutes shop-floor production relations, and incites class conflicts do workers activate the cognitive resources buried in received socialist ideology and rhetoric. Then, and only then, do these cultural repertoires make experiential sense and lead to a collective conceptual achievement of “class.” The reconstitution of the material, political, and ideological moments of production occurs in the crucible of a new regime of production. In China, what I call “disorganized despotism” has emerged under reform to replace the former “neo-traditional” system.

Second, the impact of market reform on *mobilization*, rather than always negative as the original thesis suggests, is actually more varied. It is true that market opportunity dissipates collective mobilization – labor protests and demonstrations in China are more concentrated in the northeast and the interior provinces than in the more prosperous south. Nevertheless, market reform can be conducive to mobilization, even without civil society or social movement organizations, if its

uneven development produces collective losers and frees them from state or enterprise control. Where the political and organizational resources necessary for class-specific social movements, cross-class alliances, or civil society associations are not available, insurgent mobilization can still be built on the organizational ruins of state socialism. Chinese workers in bankrupt enterprises or in the rust belt regions, who were previously organized by state socialism into work units, now engage in work-unit activism, the predominant mode of mobilization.

The third argument concerns workers' vision of an alternative social order and labor *subjectivity*. Instead of workers' socialism, Chinese workers' alternative society is not a total repudiation of state socialism. Rather, it is a social order where the state assumes responsibility for guaranteeing a minimum level of general welfare and plays a pivotal role in instituting and enforcing the rules of the market economy, which is deemed necessary to provide the freedom, opportunity, and dynamism lacking in a planned economy. Again, this positive vision of the state and its role has to do with workers' past experience with state paternalism, the intertwined history of state making and class making after the 1949 Revolution, and the sustained political dominance of the party-state in the reform period. I show here that the subject of Chinese labor insurgency has a strong statist orientation, while also being "interpellated" by the state's ideological categories of class, comrade, and citizen.

Finally, *the state* undergoes self-transformation in the reform process. Instead of focusing on the role of the state in production and redistribution, I find a reconfiguration of state capacity in the realm of regulation. "Rule by law" is a new statecraft under one party rule and market liberalization. Although it is still a work in progress, the rudimentary ideology and apparatus of "socialist legality" do have the effect of inciting new forms of popular resistance riding on the call for legality and rights. But "rule *by* law" is an instrument of a repressive state, not tantamount to a "rule *of* law" capable of restraining the state. Workers' seizure of the rights rhetoric ironically means that their activism is at least partially channeled into, and restrained by, the state's new regulatory machinery and its discourse of legality.

A word about what I mean by "insurgency" and "postsocialism" is in order. The "revolutionary" potentials Burawoy and Lukacs find under state socialism refer to workers' opposition to state socialism and their

espousal of a Marxian utopia, i.e., classless communism or workers' socialism. But workers' political aspirations and sensibilities are more wide-ranging and the notion of "insurgency" is used here because it is more open and less teleological in terms of workers' goals of struggle. It allows for politics outside the problematic of emancipation. It also better captures the "ambivalent"⁷ terrain of politics rooted in entrenched dependence of the subaltern classes on a repressive state, a condition generating orientations of both entrapment and solidarity with the dominant power. Thus, following Guha, "insurgency" is "the site where two mutually contradictory tendencies ... – a conservative tendency made up of the inherited and uncritically absorbed material of the ruling culture and a radical one oriented towards a practical transformation of the rebel's conditions of existence – met for a decisive trial of strength."⁸ Finally, "postsocialism" refers to a historical condition in which (1) the centrally planned economy no longer plays a predominant role in the production and redistribution of resources;⁹ (2) and when the socialist state perceives a need to articulate "actually existing socialism" to capitalism, conditioned both by the structure of the former and an avowed attempt to overcome the deficiency of the latter.¹⁰

Fieldwork, comparison, and argument

Fieldwork for this research began in late 1995, the year when labor contract was implemented for the first time since 1949. The next five years of factory visits and worker interviews coincided with a period of rapid deterioration in labor-management relation. Unemployment figures have also soared to historic heights, leaping from 7 million in 1993 to 20 million in 1999. An annual addition of three to four million to the ranks of the unemployed over the next several years has been predicted by the government.¹¹ Incidents of strikes and worker protests, hovering around three to four thousand every year since the mid-1990s, became widespread, especially in interior and northeastern provinces.¹² The postsocialist labor insurgency thesis is formulated with this trend in mind. The most restive workers are those in loss-making or bankrupt state-owned enterprises, which account for some 50 percent of all state firms nationwide. Fieldwork is thus focused primarily on these workers in traditional, labor intensive, low technology and mass production manufacturing in the state sector, or those who bear the brunt of socialism's retreat.¹³ For comparative purposes, especially for illustrating the effect of the historical experience of state socialism, I also

include migrant workers in both state and non-state firms in the study. Born in the post-Mao era, these migrant workers respond differently to market reform than veteran state workers who came of age under Maoist socialism. In terms of regional economy, field data include materials from both Guangdong in the prosperous south and Liaoning in the rust belt in northeastern China. Since the focus here is on labor activism, I concentrate on the case of Liaoning and make occasional references to Guangdong only when they help to highlight the specificity of the northeast.

This article specifies the concrete social processes and institutional mechanisms out of which labor insurgency emerges under market reform. The transformation of labor system and worker life-worlds entails the mutually determining interplay among the state, the shop floor, and workers' political agency, each of which will be taken up in the following discussion. The first part looks at the new institutional apparatus of state domination over labor after the decline of the planned economy and the weakening of the organizational capacity of the party-state. I examine the Chinese state's attempts to forge a new basis for legitimacy based on a so-called "socialist legality" and the staunch resistance at the local level this has triggered. Local state agents and enterprise management share common interests in evading labor law and regulations, resulting in a regime of "disorganized despotism," as discussed in the second part. It is characterized on the shop floor by the ascendance of "scientific management," despotic disciplinary practices, and the demise of the party and the union inside the enterprise. Despotism constitutes worker interests in opposition to management and incites critical class consciousness. This brings me to the third part of the analysis, which turns to labor insurgency and subjectivity as these emerge out of the gap between the state project of socialist legality and the reality of disorganized despotism. Labor insurgency takes the form of "work-unit mobilization," facilitated by the organizational and identity resources bequeathed by state socialism. Labor subjectivity is characterized by a double consciousness of class and citizenship. The former is fostered by worker's community of memories, focusing on the rhetoric and practices of Maoist socialism, and the latter is an unintended consequence of the new state discourse of legality and citizen rights.

The state project of “rule by law”

Recent scholarship has advanced a powerful case for the eclipse of the Chinese party-state as a consequence of the dismantling of the command economy. Departures from central planning, these studies argue, lead to the decline of scarcity-based organized dependence, the weakening of the central authority’s sanctioning and monitoring capacity over local officials, and of local officials over citizens and social groups.¹⁴ Although the aggregate growth or decline of state power remains a contested empirical issue,¹⁵ I want to highlight the apparent tendency of the Chinese state to bolster its regulatory power, even as it relinquishes control over production and redistribution.

China’s transition from a Maoist mobilizational state to a regulatory state has been understood as a necessary accompaniment to the institutionalizing of a socialist market economy. Since economic reform began, laws and regulations have been used to specify a new framework of property rights, to enforce contracts and to organize new market structure.¹⁶ But Chinese leaders have been equally insistent on the law’s political function for maintaining social stability. The President of the People’s Republic Jiang Zemin remarked, “Whether it is market regulation or macro-economic regulation and control by the state, we should constantly sum up our experiences and gradually incorporate them into the law. We cannot possibly foster good order in the socialist market economy in the absence of a sound socialist legal system.”¹⁷ A “public order crisis” of rising rates of crimes and disturbances during the reform decades has aggravated the leadership’s concern for stability.¹⁸

Legalization of labor relations and implementation of new social policies targeting labor take place amidst this system shift toward a regulatory state exhorting “socialist legality” and in a period of explosive growth in law-making activities in general. “Ruling the country by law” (*yifazhiguo*) has been formally incorporated into Article 5 of the Constitution in 1999 and has become part of official lexicon now widely adopted in government, legislature, and party reports. Notwithstanding the fundamental difference between a system of “rule of law” capable of restraining the party-state and the Chinese version of a “rule by law” committed to the primacy of state power, a revitalization of the legal system is evident.¹⁹ Between 1979–1998, some 327 laws were enacted by the National People’s Congress (the corresponding figures were 7 and 122 for 1966–1978 and 1949–1965 respectively) and

750 regulations were issued by the State Council.²⁰ Beyond serving the needs of economic reforms, these laws and regulations define rights and interests of different social groups, and institutionalize the resolution of conflicts. Most consequential for the working class was the promulgation of China's first Labor Law in 1995. A number of supplementary laws and regulations have been passed or drafted, guiding policies related to social insurance, labor safety, labor contract, collective contract, unemployment benefits, and settlement of labor disputes, etc.²¹

These laws and policies envision a sea change in the institutional relation between state and labor. Instead of neo-traditional authority exercised by the party apparatus within the enterprise through its patron-client networks, employment practices and relations are now to be regulated by an external bureaucratic system based on universalistic, abstract legal norms. Welfare, social services, and pension are to be delivered through a centrally administered, societal-level safety net, rather than workers' work units. Workers' personal passbooks recording their insurance and social security funds accumulation symbolize the severance of ties that bind their lives to particular employers. Lifelong employment privileges for some are eradicated while the introduction of contract turns labor into a commodity in the marketplace rather than a factor of production allocated by the state. Finally, by issuing the "Regulations on the Handling of Labor Disputes" in 1993, the government revives the national labor arbitration apparatus and stipulates the legal procedures for local level arbitration and Civil court litigation, allowing workers to bypass informal mediation at the firm level. Therefore, instead of a general waning of the state's reach and capacity, the important change is a shift in institutional emphasis. The state has tried to impose a more legalistic and universalistic relation with the working class as a whole, without regard to enterprise types and worker origins. Worker rights, control, and conflicts are to be regulated within a uniform legal and policy framework.

As the next section shows, "rule by law" exists more as an ideological discourse than an institutionalized reality. But one dialectical outcome of this legalization project, however much it remains unfinished, is the popularization of the notion of rights. The official *Workers' Daily (Gongren Ribao)* sums up the two decades of reform as an era of rights (*quanli*) for workers. A veteran labor law scholar explains that although the Party has always sought to protect labor rights, the means to achieve this have shifted from administrative to legal ones in the

reform era. The Labor Law codifies a panoply of legal rights and interests for workers as contract-based, individualistic, industrial citizens, and not as a collectivity of political subjects, the “people” or the “working-class.” It incorporates workers into a market and contract-driven system by conceding to them certain legal rights and interests. At the same time, social policies about insurance contributions by workers relegate to workers the individual responsibility for and investment in one’s future, altering the past notion of state responsibility in providing for a collective and communal safety net via the work units. As I shall elaborate in a later section, the project of legalistic legitimation has generated an idiom of legal rights as an emergent component in the discursive repertoire used in labor struggle in China. Workers in struggle take these laws seriously, more seriously than agents of the local state whose collusion with the emerging bourgeois class often results in evasion or violation of the law. The point here is that the construction of a rule by law is a double-edged sword, in that it makes hegemony as well as resistance.²² A cursory look at the aggregate rise in the volume of arbitrated labor disputes, the most institutionalized form of labor conflicts, is telling of the consequences of legalization. The annual rate of increase in arbitrated disputes for the period 1994–1999, following the 1993 Regulation on Handling Labor Disputes, was 54.5%, 73%, 45.7%, 48.6%, 31%, and 28.3%.²³ In 1999 alone, there were 120,191 cases, involving nearly a half-million workers.²⁴ However, statistics do not explain the constitution of worker interests and subjectivity prompting this surge in activism. For these, we have to step back into the hidden abode of market socialist production.

The rise of disorganized despotism and critical class consciousness

Production is one arena in which the state realizes its project of legalistic legitimation. The organization of the labor process and the political institutions regulating struggles in the workplace, or what is called a “factory regime,” powerfully shape working-class interests and capacity.²⁵ Under Chinese reform, I have found a regime of “disorganized despotism.” This is an ideal-typical concept that accentuates salient and enduring elements in factory politics. Formulated on the basis of observations across different types of industrial firms under market reform, and with reference to a comparative analytic of “factory regime” in general,²⁶ the concept highlights the institutional consequences for production when the mechanisms that have organized state socialism begin to fall apart. Despite state efforts to institutionalize a legalistic

regime, there is a lack of effective coordination and implementation among diverse reform measures. Such “disorganized” institutional context allows for the emergence of managerial despotism inside the enterprise. “Despotism” denotes three aspects of labor-management relation: workers’ institutional dependence on management for livelihood, managerial power to impose coercive modes of labor control, and workers’ collective apprehension of such control as violations of their interests and rights. My conjecture is that there is convergence toward varying degrees of disorganized despotism across industrial firms of different ownership types. This means that differences observed across firm types and regions are contingent, not essential, and can be explained by the same institutional configuration specified in the concept. For instance, the generally longer working hours and more intensive labor process in private firms than in state firms are due more to the volume and nature of orders they respectively receive, not due to any difference in management’s institutional power and its imperative to impose discipline in these two types of firm. There is evidence to show that given the same kind of erratic production order, state firms are as prone to despotic management as their non-state counterparts.²⁷ One pivotal factor accounting for the despotic form of production politics in Chinese factories has to do with the ubiquitous oversupply of labor. When some 30 percent of both urban and rural labor is considered “surplus,”²⁸ market reform is more likely to enhance managers’ rather than workers’ bargaining power. But there are other institutional forces at work too.

Disorganized reform: Gaps in the societal safety net

The first condition contributing to despotism is reform’s unintended consequence of aggravating worker dependence on enterprise because the new social security system is still very unevenly institutionalized. National legislation has stipulated that enterprises of all ownership types should participate in centralized schemes of old-age pensions, medical care, maternity benefits, unemployment, and industrial injuries compensation funds. Pooling contributions from the local government, the enterprise, and the individual employees, funds are to be administered by local labor insurance departments. A society-wide safety net is to be established in which a three-way contribution system will guarantee the reproduction of labor power at a certain minimum level independent of participation in production and of any single employer. However, many of these funds have been operating in defi-

cits. The retirement pension fund in Guangdong, for instance, registered a 10 million *yuan* deficit in 1996. One important cause of this shortfall in funds is that managers in loss-making state-owned enterprises, now accounting for more than 40 percent in Guangdong, simply refuse to use the enterprise wage bill to meet future or other firm's pay-outs. In Liaoning, where unemployment has reached an alarming level of 40 percent among state workers, the state insurance apparatus is paralyzed by insufficient funds. Between 1995–2000, the enterprise contribution to unemployment funds is estimated to be 46 million *yuan*, falling far behind the estimated 71.5 billion *yuan* needed for the unemployed. In the provincial capital of Shenyang in 1998, 27 percent of participating enterprises in pension funds stopped payment, creating a deficit of 240 million *yuan*. The local insurance bureau had to borrow 110 million *yuan* from the municipal finance and labor departments to make payment to retirees after waves of protests and public demonstrations. Outside the state sector, compulsory participation in social insurance is widely resisted by employers. Only 5.4 percent of foreign-owned firms, 3.2 percent village and township enterprises, and 0.3 percent of private and individual owned enterprises contribute to Guangdong's pension funds. Finally, official abuse of funds in the form of diversions and embezzlement is rampant. With this society-wide safety net so flawed and unevenly realized, state-owned enterprise workers see their long-term security once provided by enterprise paternalism dismantled without viable alternative, and like their younger counterparts in the non-state sectors, they are now vulnerable to total dependence on wage employment for livelihood.²⁹

Ascendance of managerial domination

In the reform blueprint, enhancement of managerial autonomy from external bureaucratic superiors and from Party domination is to be counterbalanced by a strengthened official union and the introduction of labor contract, both of which would safeguard workers' interests and rights. Again, like the social insurance reform, one finds uneven implementation of these inter-related measures as well as powerful resistance from local officials and managers.

Although the state sector is economically unsustainable and at the edge of a monumental crisis, the fact remains that enterprise reform has cumulated in factory directors' autonomy and autocratic power, which finds its most infamous manifestation in the widespread illicit

asset stripping of state firms, or the transfer of public property into managers' private hands.³⁰ Another concomitant development reinforcing managerial dominance is the demise of the Party and the union inside state firms. The role of the Party secretary, who used to be the dominant partner in the triple alliance, has been redefined to assist management to enhance productivity, and therefore rendered subservient to the director. One widely criticized practice indicative of the marginal status of the Party at the firm level is the concurrent appointment of managerial and party personnel. It has become extremely common to find that the posts of party secretary and factory director belong to the same person; or the factory director simultaneously serves as deputy party secretary, and the party secretary wears the hat of the deputy director.

Finally, the Chinese enterprise union suffers from further descent in authority and influence in the actual operation of state factories. Despite efforts by the All China Federation of Trade Unions at the central government level to carve out more autonomy and legal power for basic level unions through the passage of the 1992 Trade Union Law, enterprise-level unions are handicapped by their dependence on enterprise for finance and appointments of cadres. Union cadres interviewed in both Guangdong and Liaoning mocked about losing their own iron rice bowls now that enterprises are struggling to survive and the Law defines for them an impossible task of both promoting enterprise productivity and protecting worker rights and interests. Many enterprises suffer from "starvation of meetings" – unions and workers' congresses have remained dormant for years, and union cadres, whose formal existence is required by law, are cross-appointed from among managerial personnel.³¹ The defunct enterprise union has rendered many stipulations of the Labor Law, like the implementation of collective contract between union and management, mere formalities.³²

In non-state enterprises, "disorganized despotism" finds even more fertile soil. Managerial prerogatives are from the beginning unencumbered by these state socialist apparatuses. Local officials, who benefit collectively and individually from the management fees and taxation levied from private and foreign firms, have fostered a permissive regime of labor regulation. The reciprocal need of investors for local official patronage to bend central government regulation to their advantage has given rise to what one sociologist has termed "commercial clientelism."³³ Such collusion is likely to persist with market reform as the state expands its regulatory monopoly and state power becomes com-

modified. A co-owner of a private knitting factory where migrant workers toil standing up for 11 hours a day and can only take one day off every month on pay day, describes a common practice of evading government regulation:

The set-up capital for this factory is 30,000 *yuan*, all private capital between me and my partner. But officially, it's a collective enterprise of the Hongshan District government. If we register as private, we will have to deal with fees and inspections from different departments. But now, we just pay the district government a management fee and they take care of the tax bureau, commerce and industry department, labor bureau and workers' temporary residence permits. (Labor bureau?) No, they don't come....(Insurance?) No, we are not a state owned enterprise. But we have flu and cold medication in the factory, and we give them herbal tea when the weather gets really hot....³⁴

A labor lawyer in Guangdong offers this telling episode that speaks volumes about the extent of collusion between local governments and non-state industrial capital,

At the end of a court hearing, the judge said to me in public, "Lawyer Zhou, if the court adheres to all the laws and regulations of the provincial government, all these factories would move elsewhere and the local economy will collapse. Who would be responsible then? You?" He later on even stated explicitly to my client that the two basic levels of the local courts in Dongguan City have reached a consensus that they could not follow the letter of the law. Judges in the mainland are part of the local government, just like officials of the labor bureau. Their rice bowls depend on the income of the local government and they in turn depend on private and foreign enterprises.³⁵

For joint-venture firms, the Chinese-side managers, usually local cadres, are responsible for handling overbearing bureaucratic "grannies." Even when some larger factories comply with the law and sign one-year labor contracts with migrant workers, and even set up an enterprise union, these measures are mainly cosmetic. Having local cadres on the management team shields the enterprise from external regulation, especially when it comes to labor disciplines. Labor contracts, if signed at all, are kept exclusively by the company, and workers often were not given the chance to read through the terms of the contract.³⁶ Infraction of the Labor Law requirement for labor contracts remains widespread: only 36 percent of private and 63 percent of foreign invested factories in Guangdong sign contracts with workers.³⁷

Despotism and its critique on the shop floors

Despotism on the shop floors thrives on the institutional context of a disorganized regulatory apparatus. The labor process in many industrial firms is marked by punitive disciplinary measures, intensification of work, and “flexible” deployment of worker bodies and labor power. Cloaked under the euphemistic slogan of “scientific management,” these practices turn the shop floor into a wellspring of class conflicts and critical class consciousness, as workers find their material interests compromised in different ways.

The widespread replacement of position wage and time wage by piece-rate wage, in state factories under the planned economy, generated intense conflicts and critique. The introduction of piece rate wages was enthusiastically welcomed by workers in the early phase of reform when state industries still enjoyed near monopoly over China’s vast consumer market. Yet, with unrelenting market competition from township and village enterprises, private and joint-venture firms in the 1990s, state firms began to suffer from slackened order and irregular workloads. The piece-rate system of remuneration, which has previously brought about wage increases for workers, has turned into a tool for management to reduce total wage bills when business contracts. Together with the introduction of economic penalties for rejections and violations of work disciplines like absenteeism and tardiness, the new scientific management system is ubiquitously condemned by state workers as “exploitative.” For instance, one woman worker in a textile mill criticized piece rate for rewarding only “embodied labor,” or labor realized in tangible products. Her implicit point of reference was a past system of time rate wage and position wage that rewarded workers for their labor power, i.e., the sale of the appropriation of labor capacity. She commented:

We don’t get any wage for waiting time when we are forced to wait for raw materials. Sometimes we come to the shop floor at 7:30 a.m. and do preparatory work until 11 a.m. We don’t get paid if there is no output. In the past, we were paid our basic wage rate during waiting hours or when machines broke down.³⁸

More than a few workers volunteered to comment on how they have come to understand the notion of “exploitation,” a notion they have registered passively in their minds through the years of state propaganda about pre-revolutionary capitalist production. Seeing the elimination of welfare and juxtaposing it to the past regime of enterprise paternal-

ism have taught the female worker who comments below what exploitation really means.

In the past, we had many welfare services. For female comrades, the most important were the nursery, female sanitary room and sanitary napkins, the mess hall, the shuttle, the barber shop.... I now understand what “exploitation” really means. We workers are very pitiful now. In the past, no matter how bad production became, if you needed housing, they (the enterprise officials) gave you a place to live. But for years, not one single apartment building has been built in our unit.³⁹

Demoralization plagues state enterprises when “flexible” production takes the form of random assignment of work tasks, irregular workloads, and arbitrary dismissal. Skilled veteran workers, hailed in the past as the technical backbone and progressive producers of their enterprise, now complain vehemently about the degrading treatment of being kicked around by managers who show no respect or need for their technical skills. Veteran mechanics in both Guangdong and Liaoning across a range of industries underscore the devalorization of skill as many state-owned firms struggle to survive by taking out-processing jobs for non-state firms. According to them, only speed, not skills, matters.

I no longer know how my wage is calculated. They call it the confidential wage system. In fact, it's a fuzzy wage system. We dare not ask.... But our seniority does not count any more. A new worker gets paid as much as I do. But if you ask him what size this screw is, he says he does not know. Still he gets the same pay as I do, sometimes even more, if he comes back to take up night shift. In the past, when I was an apprentice, I was paid grade one wage until I proved that I had grade two skills and then I would be promoted, gradually. Now, there is no skill distinction. We are just workers, and the boss is the subcontractor. He has the power to assign you to whatever post he likes, sweeping floors or cleaning the bathroom.... Many migrant workers are paid more than we are because they in the weaving department on piece rate.... Recently he (the director) even dismissed one of my co-workers! I always wonder if he has the legal power to dismiss state workers.⁴⁰

Workers often characterize the shop floor as antagonistic and conflict ridden. Meticulous rules for work procedures, financial penalties for their violation, and overall dwindling of the paycheck trigger spontaneous work stoppages, goldbricking, and deliberate negligence. In one of China's leading machinery plants in the northeast, a veteran worker reports:

We curse at work all the time because all of us are psychologically off-balance (*xinlibupingheng*). Why should we care about quality anymore when the director squanders away our money, having a good time with ladies in the nightclubs or making a business trip to the United States? We deliberately cast a blind eye on defective pieces passing down the assembly line. We say, “let them (flawed products) go.” This is how we release some of our anger and preserve our health. You know, these days we do not have medical allowances anymore.⁴¹

Underlying state workers’ indictments of oppression is a cognitive framework of “class,” as shown in this worker’s spirited critique of the degeneration of the official union into a “yellow union” and the transformation of enterprise cadres into a capitalist class:

Using the language of Lenin and Mao, our union is a yellow union. The union chair is a running dog of the capitalist. He is just a dog! There is no more meeting of the Workers’ Congress. In the past, when my child was sick and we had money problems, I went to the union chair. He would study my situations and then give me hardship allowances. Now nothing. Union only cares about collecting dues, but giving back nothing.... When state enterprises allowed private subcontractors, cadres became capitalists. They now all have cell phones and frequent nightclubs, no different from the capitalists. In the old days, cadres came down to labor on the shop floor with workers.⁴²

Elsewhere in the more prosperous southern city of Guangzhou, state workers likewise deploy Marxian concepts to understand and evaluate market socialism. One worker condemns as unfair the unequal distribution of income by appealing to Marx’s labor theory of value:

Of course, this is not reasonable. Labor creates value. I don’t believe one should earn within one or two days what others have to spend a lifetime to earn, like those star athletes ... or a stamp that was sold for a million. Can you tell me what kind of value they create?⁴³

Workers’ historical experiences of state socialism, and the discursive and ideological frameworks constitutive of that political economy, form the basis for interpreting the institutional changes brought about by market reform as class exploitation. The effects of such former experiences of state socialism can be best illustrated by the different reactions of migrant workers. Migrant peasant workers’ encounter with market and capitalist forces bring about a critique alluding to “alienation,” grounded more in terms of denial of human dignity, loss of personal autonomy, and dishonesty, not in terms of “exploitation.” Their indictment focuses less on the systemic or the institutional but more on the individual and the bodily. In non-state firms, piece rate and the dire lack of welfare also prevail but discontents turn to manage-

ment dishonesty and not the piece rate system per se or the exploitative relation it embodies. Cheating by management takes the common forms of concealing the rates of payment, discounting the volume of worker outputs, and delaying and docking wages. These two workers' accounts of the wage rate systems are typical in Guangzhou:

The boss never tells us the piece rates for different orders. He wants to prevent workers from refusing to work. He would inform us the rates only one month later, on our payday. By that time, we forget which rate is for which job, and how many we have made. Usually, we (workers) know that we should not work too fast, because the boss would cut the rate if we do...⁴⁴

Overtime work here should be paid 3 *yuan* per hour. But our own records of overtime work are always different from the factory records. Their records are always less than our own.... He (the manager) does not post any wage scale. When he pays us, he only tells us the lump sum. He will not give us the breakdown, like how much is basic wage, how much is overtime.... Usually, he docks our wage for three months. So we get paid in December for the work we did in September. Once, we refused to work in January because he did not pay our September wage even after New Year's Day....⁴⁵

Despotism also finds expression in bodily degradation and deprivation inflicted on workers during daily production routines. My findings in non-state firms concur with a number of academic and journalistic reports that corporal punishment is frequently meted out to workers, so much so that a common yardstick for workers to assess an enterprise as good or bad is whether "the boss hits workers." Punishments in the form of public kneeling, standing under the sun for long hours, or incarceration inside the factory premises have become the staple of management practices in private and East Asian invested firms.⁴⁶ Physical exhaustion generates a critique of "inhumane" managers who transform workers into "appendages of machines" or outright "slaves of the boss":

There is no fixed work schedule. A twelve-hour workday is minimum. With rush orders, we have to work continuously for thirty hours or more. Day and night ... the longest shift we had worked nonstop lasted for forty hours.... It's very exhausting, because we have to stand all the time, to straighten the denim cloth by pulling. Our legs are always hurting. There is no place to sit on the shop floor. The machines do not stop during our lunch breaks. Three workers in a group will just take turn to eat, one at a time.... The shop floor is filled with thick dust. Our bodies become black working day and night inside. When I get off from work and spit, it's all black.... In the factory, your entire body is under his (employer's) control. You lose control over yourself. You have to do whatever he wants you to. It's like you're sold to him.⁴⁷

He (the boss) treats workers like machines. As long as we can earn him money, he does not care about workers' health and body.... It's like in the old society, I give you money and you become my slave, a lesser human being. In the countryside, even if you are poor, people look down on you but still as a human being.⁴⁸

In short, I argue in this section that under disorganized despotism, Chinese workers develop collective critical consciousness indicting capitalistic management practices. Working class experience of reform is heterogeneous, a prominent divide being that of state workers and migrant workers, whose discontents are mediated by different idioms and worldviews. The industrial workplace as a whole, however, has turned into a wellspring of labor discontents. Yet, grievances are not actions. To understand the motivational and mobilizational dynamics of labor activism, we have to take a closer look at how these episodes happened.

Work-unit mobilization

The absence of civil society and autonomous unions puts China in stark contrast with Eastern European and Russian societies, the 1989 Tiananmen demonstrations notwithstanding. Recent studies of the pro-democracy movement concur that the persistent lack of secondary associations and lateral organizational structure have severely limited the potential for either class-specific or cross-class mobilization, even in the opportune moment of elite cleavage. Mobilizations in 1989 turn out to be dependent on ecology-based networks, a local nexus of personal and friendship ties that are fostered within, and hence are also segregated by, official organizations like work units, universities, and student unions.⁴⁹ This section argues that workers resist with the organizational resources left by a retreating state socialism; “work-unit socialism”⁵⁰ engenders work-unit insurgency under reform. When market reform produces conflicts of interest between workers and management, creating a class wedge within a work unit, worker mobilization can build on pre-existing solidarity and shared interests against cadres-turned-capitalists. And as the party and union cells inside work units suffer from institutional decay, more political space is opened up in the interstices of everyday production life. Work stoppages like this one, which took place in a nationally renowned state-owned enterprise in the northeast, have become quite commonplace.

One afternoon (after two months of wage arrears), during lunch break, we were very distressed. We were cursing and spilling out our anger while we ate. Then, at the end of the lunch hour, all two hundred of us on the shop floors simply lost any motivation to resume work. We just stopped, spontaneously, no need to organize (*chuanlian*), without any call from anyone, without any leader. The shop floor director learned about this and immediately came down from his office. He began his thought education, explaining the difficulties our enterprise was experiencing. After one hour, we resumed work. A few days later, we got our paychecks.⁵¹

The erosion effect of market reform on political control is most obvious in crumbling state-owned enterprises. The northeast rust belt⁵² is a prime example of concentrated bankruptcy, suspended and irregular production, collective impoverishment and radicalization of workers. By 1997, 56.4 percent of Liaoning's state-owned enterprises were officially loss-making; 34.8 percent had an asset-debt ratio of over 100 percent and were de facto bankrupt firms.⁵³ Liaoning thus gains the notorious fame of being the leading province of laid-off workers: its 1.7 million unemployed workers accounted for 13.2 percent of the national total in 1998. According to some estimates in internal documents, the real rate of workers without job or pay varies from 30 percent to 40 percent.⁵⁴ Due to the lack of market opportunities in this old industrial base, even working-class family strategies of mutual help, income pooling, and self-provisioning fall short. A 1997 survey on Liaoning's unemployed families reveals that 41 percent of unemployed workers had two or more family members who were also unemployed.⁵⁵

Workers there have responded to their predicament by staging rail and road blockages, sit-ins in front of government buildings, public petitions, and demonstrations, some sustained for several years.⁵⁶ Banners and slogans announcing workers' outrage and desperation are telling: "Down with the Newly Emerging Nobility," "Eradicate the New Bureaucratic Bourgeoisie," "Workers are Masters of the State," "Yes to Socialism, No to Capitalism," "Long Live the Working Class," "Arrears Guilty," "Stop the Loss of State Assets," "We Want to Work," and "We Want to Live." Steeped in the idioms of class and socialism, on the one hand, and labor and subsistence rights (what workers called "*shengcunquan*"), on the other, these public statements dramatically summarize how far workers have been radicalized, in contrast to their passivity under neo-traditionalism before the reform.

Most of these rallies and demonstrations were work-unit based. They began typically with production suspension when workers were sent

home for unspecified periods of long vacation. Management would prepare for bankruptcy, described to workers as a scam and a strategy to relieve the firm of debt so that production could be resumed later. Soon, when word spread about impending sales, or declaration of bankruptcy by the court, workers began to petition, targeting first the local government office, then the provincial and the central governments. When lives became more difficult, workers took more drastic actions like sit-ins, blocking traffic, and staging public rallies. Sometimes police would be sent to quell these revolts by use of violence and detention of worker leaders. But local officials are also wary of attracting the attention of bureaucratic superiors in the provincial and central governments who are insistent on social stability and clean government. Thus, the politics of protest evolves around how much pressure these actions can exert on local officials to concede and negotiate with workers, resulting in either workers' continuous and escalating protests or officials giving workers part of their unpaid wages or legal compensation under the Bankruptcy Law or the regulations concerning laid-off workers. In the meantime, the central authority, riding on popular discontent with local infraction of laws and corruption, has launched waves of anti-fraud and anti-corruption campaigns.

The following is an account of a protest rally by workers in a window frame factory, illustrating how a typical labor struggle unfolds.⁵⁷ The factory, with a workforce four-hundred strong, suspended production in 1995 and workers were sent home without receiving livelihood allowances as required by law. Having argued in vain with enterprise management and the Economic Commission of the city government – the superior bureau overseeing the factory – workers gave up petitioning and focused instead on making ends meet. Then in April 1999, the government announced that a real estate developer would buy the factory premises for five million *yuan* and proposed an unemployment compensation package to the Workers' Council. Workers went back to attend the meeting and rejected the offer, demanding that either the enterprise resume production or pay them severance compensation pegged to the length of job tenure. In view of the imminent sale, and the rumors that the local government would send in cranes and police to clear the premises, workers living in the nearby enterprise housing area began taking turns to guard the factory's main entrance. Some twenty workers were there holding out day and night, with a red banner hanging up at the gate, reading "We vow to protect workers' legal rights and interests" and "Stop the loss of state assets," both of which were current official slogans. Then, a week later, on the night of

June 24, at about 2 a.m., some five-hundred police officers came with dynamite, locked up the dozen workers guarding the premises and in an hour's time demolished the several low-rise buildings making up the factory. The noise awakened residents nearby, and angry workers living further away gathered together early the next morning and began a rally in the city, holding up white banners that said, "We want to live" and "We demand justice." Wang Zhongzhi, an ordinary worker who joined the protest in the final stage, recalled the chaos and workers' explosive anger:

Every inch of grass and every piece of steel in the factory belonged to us workers. They were our sweat and labor. People had tears in their eyes when they saw the fallen pieces of window frames left on the burnt ground. Those were state assets and these officials just squandered them.... Two-hundred workers gathered and everyone was agitated. There were so many different calls to action: block the main highway, block the railroad, march to the police department.... It was really an aimless flow of people at that time, marching forward not knowing where to go, just roaming. I shouted to remind them to stay close together. We didn't want to lose any of them. But frankly, I was very scared on the inside. Such a huge angry crowd.

It was a rainy day, and the rally crowd stopped several times under bridges to rest and wait for the rain to stop. By 6 p.m., they arrived at the last train station on the railway line to Shenyang. Under the cautious eyes and occasional blocking by the police, they decided to walk all the way to the provincial capital eighty kilometers away. By that time, there were 140 people left and they stopped to spend the night in a state-owned barn until daybreak. Around 2 a.m., the city officials came and wanted to negotiate on the spot. But workers said they were too tired and would send representatives to meet with them in the morning. At 5 a.m., all the major leaders of the city government came, and to the workers' surprise, they appeared very sincere and willing to talk about specific compensations and regulations. The government offered to "buy off their tenure" at a rate of 400 *yuan* per year. A worker leader explained:

We accepted, because we knew the policy sets the range between 300 to 400 *yuan* per year. But workers did not trust their verbal promise and so we demanded a written agreement. In the end, there were four clauses in black and white. Three were about worker compensations and the last one was that "workers would never petition to higher level authorities." They (officials) were very afraid that we brought their dirty linen to the attention of their superiors. There were so many illegitimate accounts inside the factory....

As in other cases, one finds a common pattern in which workers claim their legal rights as defined by state policy, appropriating official slogans for their banners. Geographical concentration of some workers living in enterprise housing is critical in monitoring official actions. Fearing that public attention would follow an escalation of the confrontation, and realizing that their actions deviated from central policies, local officials were pressured to make concessions to workers' demands.

The micro-mobilizational conditions facilitating protests like this have much to do with varying accumulation of socialist era resources at the enterprise level. Enterprises with property and marketable assets, and those with their own enterprise compounds, are more protest prone. Enterprise assets like a subsidiary shopping mall or factory premises in good locations fuel worker expectations that they can claim their rightful ownership over these resources. Mass meetings among workers are held in the courtyards of the enterprise residential quarter, consisting of several seven-story apartment buildings in some cases. Smaller scale meetings for the core leaders are held in their homes, which are all within walking distance from each other. Donations and signatures can be conveniently collected to finance worker representatives to travel to Shenyang, the provincial capital, and Beijing to petition. Factories in the same city with more dispersed residential patterns see their enterprise communities disintegrate once production is suspended. Cross-work unit coordination is conspicuously absent in a region teeming with worker demonstrations. A protest leader explained that workers consciously avoid such mobilization because "Our cause is just and legal. There is no need to associate (*chuanlian*) with other units. The state will consider us rioting if we coordinate with others." This comment reveals the moment when potentially explosive, organized insurgency becomes channeled into the more time-consuming and pacifying territory of the administrative system. In the face of real and imminent danger of state repression, workers may find in their faith in the efficacy of the law their most realistic resort. Arrest, beating, and detention of protesting workers have been reported, mostly when there were signs of cross-unit mass participation.⁵⁸ But the dynamics of collective mobilization do not always observe the boundary of law and order, as the rally described above shows. If uncoordinated activism is lacking in organizational prowess, its disruptive capacity will always remain an uncertain threat defying systemic containment.

Although market reform has also initiated a new generation of workers into activism, migrant workers' factory-based strikes are usually less sustainable episodes of resistance staged by some subgroups of workers inside the firm. More importantly, these struggles aim at immediate economic compensation from employers without political engagement with the state, local or central. For example:

Our boss as a rule docks our wage for one-and-a-half months, and we did not have any say over this policy. Once, we waited for two more days beyond the one-and-a-half-month period, and still no payment. In the morning of the third day, in the dormitory, people just refused to get up to work. All stayed in the dormitory, lying on our beds, talking light-heartedly about how the boss would panic.... (Who organized this?) No one organized or led anything. Just naturally and spontaneously, we just did not feel like going to work. We wanted to give him pressure to pay us. Later in the day, he came and asked us to return to work. We did not respond, and the next day, we got our pay.... Strikes like this happened several more times when I was there. Whenever he delayed our payment, we struck.⁵⁹

Small groups of workers connected by native-place ties form the basis for many of these collective actions. Most migrants have relied on native place ties for their initial travel and sojourn at the beginning of their migrant work career, and both academic and union studies have underscored the role of native place solidarity in strike mobilization.⁶⁰ One young migrant worker, who worked as a junior technician in a state factory producing optical instruments, recalled a strike sparked by allegedly discriminatory distribution of workload by the management. A group of workers, all natives of Shaoqing working in the same mechanics department, decided to stop working one afternoon and just went back to rest in the dormitory. "For several days, a dozen of us just refused to come back to work. All were from our hometown (Shaoqing).... We were not afraid, because there were so many of us, and we have skills. We know that once away from home, we should be prepared to hop from job to job." Management came to talk them into resuming work the next day, and later the few worker leaders left for another factory. Here as elsewhere, localistic networks are tenuous and locals' mutual obligations often end with finding a first job, with room and board provided by the employer. The volatile labor market further atomizes workers, dispersing locals and kin who might have begun their migration together.

Brief and sudden outbursts of collective resistance like these are commonplace. The majority of migrant workers I interviewed in the study have had personal experiences in one or more of such spontaneous

acts of disobedience. Charles Sabel has observed more generally of peasant labor's politics in Western Europe in the 1960s and 1970s: "At first a group of peasant workers may tolerate what it understands to be breaches of the contract by the employer. But if abuse continues the group reaches an unspoken consensus to suffer no more. The peasant workers are then likely to explode in rage at the slightest additional provocation, belying in an instant their reputation for docility."⁶¹ The absence of independent unions and the ephemeral and mobile nature of migrants' localistic networks, coupled with the staunch state repression of political association advocating the cause of workers in China, prevent the emergence of labor movements among the massive migrant workforce.⁶² Last but not least, even though they are all subject to the same Labor Law, migrant workers' activism seldom involves making claims against the state, local or central, reflecting very different collective perceptions of and experience with the state apparatus from those of state workers.

Labor subjectivity: Comrade, class, or citizen?

Critical labor history has challenged the universal category of abstract labor assumed in orthodox Marxian labor studies. Postcolonial thought, for instance, opens up the possibility of another "mode of worlding" among third-world laboring classes in societies without "liberal baggage," while feminist analyses point to the heterogeneity of gendered labor subjects.⁶³ What kind of working class subject emerges under state socialism and postsocialism? State socialism does not provide the bourgeois liberal order producing the juridical, individualist, contract-based, citizen-like labor subject found in Marx and Marxian theories of working class formation. Existing works on the socialist working class either deny workers their subjecthood or fall back on the proletarian subject embedded in a universalist and teleological narrative of emancipation. For instance, Katherine Verdery argues that state socialism (in Romania) produces a "dependent" subject position "rather than the agency cultivated by citizenship or the solidarity of ethnonationalism."⁶⁴ Burawoy and Lukács, on the other hand, argue for an oppositional class consciousness against the state and state socialism. Both the dependent subject of the state and the oppositional class subject diverge from a third theoretical possibility, that of Gramsci's notion of the proletariat as "comrade": "Collaboration in effective and useful production develops solidarity and multiplies affective bonds of affection and fraternity... a joyous awareness of being an

organic whole, a homogeneous and compact system which, through useful work and the disinterested production of social wealth, asserts its sovereignty, and realizes its power and its freedom to create history.”⁶⁵ What is interesting in the Chinese situation today is that all three subject-positions – class, comrade, and citizen – are articulated one way or the other by Chinese workers, but with a distinct state-centered orientation.

Marxist analysts have trenchantly argued that ideology both subjugates and constitutes subjects, making actors recognize what exists, what is good, and what is possible. The power of ideology works less as texts or ideas possessed, but more as “interpellation” – a dialectical, social process of subjection and qualification. And although they “become qualified by ideological interpellations, subjects also become qualified to ‘qualify’ these in turn, in the sense of specifying them and modifying their range of application.”⁶⁶ If in the Maoist era, the state absorbed the subaltern discourse of class struggle into state ideology, under market socialism the repressed has returned with a vengeance. I have already discussed how the class rhetoric of socialist propaganda assumes moral and cognitive validity today as reform brings about deteriorating livelihood and increasing oppression on the shop floors. Socialist concern in the past with the “social question,” or the attempt to eliminate hierarchy and material inequality, is now appreciated more than before. For instance, the power of the masses and the egalitarian strains in the Maoist factory order, no matter how limited, perfunctory and at times violent in the past, have become prominent themes of mass nostalgia of socialism⁶⁷ and of recognition of class exploitation by cadres:

You must have heard this already. Everyone here (this enterprise) says this: our lives would be so much better if there were still struggle meetings and political campaigns.... Back then, we the masses had a weapon against corrupt cadres. Many people miss mass campaigns. People always say these cadres would have been criticized and executed many times over now for the amount of their grafts.⁶⁸

I really miss the time of Chairman Mao. We all got the same wage, 50 *yuan*. At that time, there was no pain and no worry. Children got parents’ jobs when they graduated from school. Now, it’s all capitalist.⁶⁹

If “class” rhetoric makes critical subjects, the same happens to “comradeship.” The concept of “comradeship” was popularized after the revolution to emphasize not only loyalty to Communism but also the universal and fundamental equality among people in their role as

fellow citizens under the state. Although the ethic of comradeship was a tool of the state to intrude into, if not banish altogether, private social relations (e.g., friendship) outside the purview of official surveillance, it did create in Chinese society an ethos and expectation of mutual help, commitment to the collective, and egalitarianism.⁷⁰ Today, the loss of community and such ethos of mutual help is often mentioned, with workers lamenting the disappearance of home visits (*chuanmen*) among co-workers and the decline of camaraderie and helping behavior among people both in production and in public places. Their nostalgia is not so much an unequivocal embrace of the past but a considered reassessment of that history with the wisdom of hindsight and in the light of current reform. For instance, when they reflect on their everyday production life, quite a few workers have rediscovered the superiority of moral incentives over material ones:

We did not care about reward or pay. We simply had faith: the more difficult the task, the harder we tried to accomplish it.... I am not saying that the planned economy is good; I'm saying in Mao's time, "Serve the people" was a reality.

Even during the hungry year of 1960, I did not complain, and went to work every day religiously as usual. At that time, we had to do voluntary labor. Perhaps because we were young, we were all high-spirited, without any complaint, thinking that was our duty. My dad was the same. I saw him working continuously for two weeks during the Great Leap, never came home, and with no extra pay. At that time, earning 30 *yuan* was enough to support a family. Eating out of one big pot may not be good for our country's development, but spiritually and psychologically, people felt more balanced. I find political campaigns disgusting, but at that time, interpersonal relations were genuine and the social climate was pure and clean. Now, it's all about money. That's when people became calculating and lax at work. It's after the Cultural Revolution, when they began to give bonus. Workers refused to work when there is too little bonus. And then conflicts also came with the competition for bonus. Actually, money has side-effects.⁷¹

The politics of collective memories have less to do with accurate reconstruction of reality than with the shared vision of history that memories invoke, or the challenge memories pose against history.⁷² Narratives like these retrieve from history kernels of truth and achievement in Chinese socialism that workers have come to recognize and miss. What is common in these subject positions of class and comrades is the entrenched identification of workers with the state, or what they repeatedly refer to as "*zhongyang*," the central government, or simply "*guojia*," the nation-state. Even though workers are vehement in accusing enterprise managers and their conspirators in the local state

bureaucracy as “enemies of the people” or “worms” in society, their faith in the moral and political integrity of the central state remains unwavering. Time and again, workers declare their conviction that “*guojia*” will not allow all state enterprises to go down the tube or that “*zhongyang*” has designed good policies to protect workers, that the problem is local failure to implement them. This “state-centered” labor subjectivity has historical and institutional roots, as well as empowering and self-limiting consequences for labor insurgency.

The intertwined history of state formation and class formation in China, reinforced by an encompassing structure of organized dependence binding workers to the state for four decades, has bestowed complicated legacies on the collective mentality of Chinese workers. Although Walder’s fascinating analysis captures the institutional dependence of workers on the state, his refugee interviewees and his rational choice analytic might have led him to an oversimplified image of workers as *only* utilitarian, interest-maximizing, individualistic participants in the patron-client networks spun by the state. Workers in my study tend to portray a more nuanced, contradictory, and ambivalent movement between feelings of entrapment and solidarity.⁷³ Indeed, state workers in my study report genuine if also partly coerced commitment to the revolutionary, nationalistic, and modernization cause of the regime. When they recall how “red-heartedly” they worked day and night during the Great Leap, living out the slogan of “our enterprise our home,” without any demand for extra pay, they find themselves to have been believers in the ideal of socialism and the project of nation-building led by the Communist Party.⁷⁴

Overtime work was the norm. Normally, we had half an hour of lunch time and would turn off the machines. But when campaigns came, we wanted to overshoot the production target, say to finish a yearly quota several days earlier than planned, so we had to work extra hard. We gave up that half hour and kept the machine running. We also extended our shift for a more hour.... No one ever complained, everyone was the same. We looked at it as our duty and for the good of the country. It’s like when our enterprise fulfilled the quota, I felt it’s my own honor too.... Now there are people who said our pension and medical expenses are burdens to the state, but they do not see that we were like cows ploughing new fields. For years, we gave our blood and sweat, and only received 40 *yuan* a month. The rest was saved up in the state. We are only drawing on our own savings today.⁷⁵

Workers are not oblivious to the fact that the Chinese party-state brought the working class into being by launching large-scale industrialization after the revolution and actually guaranteed them a secure

and stable livelihood and relatively high political status. Compared to the massive peasantry, urban workers in the state sector formed a privileged “labor aristocracy,” enjoying a real rise in levels of wage and food consumption throughout the pre-reform period, not to mention job security, training and educational opportunities, and welfare benefits.⁷⁶ One indication of how deep the state has penetrated worker subjectivity is the way they construct their life history. In these personal accounts, biographical time (life course events like graduation from high school, marriage, and childbirth) is often remembered and experienced as national time (political campaigns or state policy initiatives). Yet, rather than being alienated by such “etatization of time” and experiencing it as immobilizing persons, eroding sociability and religious community, or ruining national character, as Katherine Verdery has pointed out in Romania,⁷⁷ Chinese workers imbue that history with nationalistic meanings. Exactly because of this sense of having contributed to national development, being “let go” collectively by their enterprise triggers a moral indictment of state betrayal:

Our generation has really suffered a bad fate. As kids, when we were growing, [there was not enough food as] it happened to be the Three Difficult Years. When we were in primary and secondary school, it was the Cultural Revolution. Then, at 17, we were made to leave our parents to go up to the mountains or down to the fields. Just when we were back to the city, there was the “diploma craze.” Now, at our age, with neither strength nor skill, we become the first target of reform [and are rendered] unemployed and redundant.⁷⁸

In short, instead of an “us versus them” model found more often in externally-imposed state socialism, a mutually constitutive historical experience underlies the relation of the Chinese state to the Chinese state workers. For the latter, the state has been and should be the guardian of national and collective interest, justice, basic needs, and development. Such envisioning is empowering to the extent that workers hold the state responsible and are emboldened morally and politically to appeal to it – based on their contributions in the past – when state policies are violated at the local level. The same collective subjectivity, however, also imposes limits on how far workers go in claiming their interests and rights: state policies and the law are the limits beyond which they do not want or dare to tread. Hence, insurgency and its containment by the state’s discourse of legality.

In the reform period when the state promotes socialist legality and declares a series of regulations and policies targeting state workers, workers graft onto the spirit of the law and frame their demands in a

rhetoric of legal rights. In a protracted three-year labor struggle in the northeast against the local authorities regarding the bankruptcy procedure of a textile mill, workers were adamant in their legalistic claims. Every time the central government announced on television new regulations guaranteeing livelihood allowances for state workers or re-employment arrangements, workers would organize petitions in the Mayor's office. A typical petition letter these workers presented to the city, provincial, and central governments reflected thorough knowledge of specific clauses in the Bankruptcy Law or the policy of minimum livelihood guarantee. Here is an example:

With our deepest indignation and a strong sense of responsibility towards the Party, the enterprise and ourselves, we the entire workforce had sustained a hundred days of petition to the city government, demanding thorough investigation into the handling of bankruptcy of our enterprise. There was never any satisfactory reply. Therefore, following the stipulations of the Petition Regulations, we submit this jointly signed petition to you the Provincial Government.... Here are the discrepancies between the Bankruptcy Law and the situations of our enterprise. First, the procedure of the bankruptcy was illegal. According to "Instructions on Bankruptcy of State Owned Enterprises" passed by the Liaoning People's Government Office ... there must be approval by the Workers' Congress.... None of this is true in our case. Second, workers received absolutely no livelihood allowance and this is a violation of Clause Four in the Bankruptcy Law....

Subjectivity of migrant workers is much less state-oriented. In describing their present work conditions or future plans, they seldom invoke the state or the central government, which seem amorphous and distant. For the minority of migrant workers who have experience interacting with local labor bureau officials or public security officers, the state is predatory and discriminatory against their sort. But even these younger workers, whose worldview and "career at work"⁷⁹ are almost always more rooted in the rural society and oriented to the prospect of returning to the countryside, show signs of turning to the law, although on a more individual basis. In Shenzhen, Guangdong, for instance, increases in industrial injuries and the subsequent lawsuits filed by migrant workers and their lawyers indicate a gradual popularization of legal rights consciousness. Interviews with injured workers reveal how bodily trauma entailing the permanent loss of labor power often triggers a process, first of negotiation with employers for compensation on the ground of compassion and justice, and then of a search for legal resolution involving the local and then the higher level state judiciary.⁸⁰

The strategic deployment of a language of legality and rights does not imply that workers attain the status and consciousness of “citizenship” à la western liberal democracy. It means, however, that they struggle to perform and thus realize a legal status, bestowed by the central government’s law and regulations but denied them by local state agents. Riding on the ideology of legality, they bolster their bargaining power and legitimate their public activism in defense of their material interests. This is a site of insurgency, not revolution, where one finds a conservative tendency to accept as legitimate the existing order (central state power remains unchallenged) but also a radical one of practically transforming one’s conditions of existence given new institutional resources. Finally, although the labor subject of such insurgency (at least the one by state workers) fuses identities of class, comradeship, and citizenship, all in the context of a strong statist orientation, that subjectivity is no less political or potent.

Conclusion

In this article, I have tried to specify the concrete social processes and institutional mechanisms leading to labor insurgency in postsocialist China. To explore the theoretical payoff of an analysis of the Chinese experience, I frame it as a series of anomalies vis-à-vis the thesis of the “revolutionary socialist worker” grounded in production politics in other state socialist transitions. My overall argument is that the passage of state socialism, not state socialism per se, offers the potential for labor radicalization in terms of critical consciousness and mobilizational capacity. First, the state attempts to rebuild legitimacy through a “rule by law,” but this remains abortive due to collusion between local officials and enterprise owners. Second, disorganized reform fosters the emergence of despotism at the point of production, which seriously compromises workers’ material interests and their standard of justice. Worker mobilization is thus fueled by survival needs and moral outrage, their demands incited and channeled by the state’s discourse of legality and citizen rights. Interestingly, worker solidarity is also partially founded on collective memories of Maoist socialism and its class rhetoric. Among veteran workers in declining industries in rust-belt regions bereft of the much touted but ever elusive market opportunities, the propensity to stage mobilization targeting the state is particularly prominent. I have found that even in the absence of civil society associations or broad-based social movement unionism, market reform creates collective losers forging locality-

based, work-unit activism. The Chinese material also indicates that postsocialist labor insurgency does not imply the total rejection of state socialism or passive embrace of the market. State workers' political aspirations challenge the state to retain its self-proclaimed role as the guardian of universal interest and to safeguard the socialist ideal of securing a basic livelihood for all, even under a market-driven economy. This statist orientation has roots in institutional and moral relations between the state and the working class under state socialism. But it also has to do with the quite unique capacity of the Chinese party-state to remain intact under postsocialism, when it also promotes accumulation and incubates market mechanisms.⁸¹ Therefore, one can expect that as long as the state monopolizes political power, worker struggles will also tend to enlist state involvement, thus generating a precarious mode of political stability.⁸²

Through tracing some of the dynamics of labor radicalization under postsocialism, I also want to underline its limits and openness. One reading of the above analysis casts doubt on the political potential of such patterns of working class insurgency. After all, the most restive workers are those in declining industries and bankrupt state enterprises, and their radicalism occurs at the moment of exit from the working class, i.e., when they become unemployed, thus permanently losing their status as "worker." In other words, the Chinese working class is made only at the moment when it is unmade by reform! With time, and without sustained organization, such localized, enterprise-based labor insurgency will lose steam as workers become more demoralized and unemployment is normalized. In addition, unrelenting state repression against any form of organized dissent, coupled with the entrenched exclusionary elitism of the Chinese intellectuals, makes cross-class social movement à la Polish Solidarity an unlikely outcome of Chinese reform.⁸³

But there is potential for an alternative scenario. Because postsocialist labor politics fuses class solidarity with claims for workers as citizens with legal rights, it can galvanize broader political resonance. There are already clear signs that peasants are increasingly using the rhetoric of law and legal rights in their protests, rallying around policy slogans promulgated by the central government in their struggles against local level taxation and corruption.⁸⁴ The convergence of unorganized popular activist groups that share similar cognitive repertoires, and perhaps institutional targets (local state officials) as well, can be politically unsettling. Sociologists have noted the powerful political impact in

state socialist systems of the “large numbers” phenomenon: the centralization of power and uniformity of social institutions creates large number of individuals with similar behavioral patterns, interests, and demands targeting the state. In China, widespread but uncoordinated collective action (or inaction) by peasants and rural cadres, for instance, has even vetoed or shaped state policies as fundamental as the de-collectivization of agriculture.⁸⁵ The same political potential applies to the postsocialist period and to the mode of locality-based labor radicalization analyzed in this article, not the least because such agitation dovetails with the central government interest in establishing a robust regulatory state apparatus based on rule by law. As one looks ahead at China’s further integration into global capitalism, formally marked by its accession to the World Trade Organization, worsening urban and rural unemployment and intensified labor insurgency loom large in the horizon. Can the government manage to keep at bay the eruption of a large number of local protests by doling out emergency subsistence funds and launching anti-corruption campaigns? Or will the politics of legal activism initiate a process of nurturing society’s self-organizing capacity so much that more sustainable efforts emerge as part of society’s demands for citizen’s legal rights? In any case, the irony is that rather than the entrepreneurs or the rising middle classes, whose interests reside in evading the law rather than promoting it, it is the popular classes, viz., workers and peasants, who champion the cause of “bourgeois” legal rights!⁸⁶ In short, the demise of state socialism is compatible with a wide range of political outcomes.⁸⁷ Scholars of Chinese politics who focus on the new middle classes or the local state elite have respectively postulated the rise of “civil society,”⁸⁸ “corporatism,”⁸⁹ “symbiotic clientelism,”⁹⁰ and “local state corporatism”⁹¹ as the possible directions of Chinese political development. Taking an alternative perspective and looking at one massive group of losers produced by market reform, this article suggests an alternative path of political change. Legal activism, and the concomitant and simultaneous rise in class and citizen consciousness, whether collective or individual, may chart a significant course of political development under market reform.

Finally, I have tried in this analysis to restore a critical perspective on the limits of reforms by excavating labor’s standpoint and experience in the reform process. Many of the most influential studies of Chinese reform have offered us insightful analyses of institutional and organizational changes prompting high growth rates in the Chinese economy. At the same time, a “metaphysical pathos” celebrating the Chinese

experience as a historical success story underlies many of these studies. But it is an optimism that flies in the face of working-class realities. The latter reveal a world of deepening class conflicts, moral confusion, economic dislocation, and decay. I do not suggest that the standpoint of labor is a privileged one, offering a more comprehensive or a “truer” view of reality than that of the bourgeoisie or the state. Yet, it is an opportunity for critical knowledge, based on workers’ objective structural location in society and their practical engagement with those local realities. Living through two historical alternatives, i.e., state socialism and postsocialism, generates a sense of historicity of the current social order, and the contradictions between appearance and reality. Workers’ collective nostalgia of certain aspects of the Maoist past (e.g., moral incentives, more egalitarian shop floor, camaraderie, revolutionary idealism, mass participation in national development) coexists with critique of the more tyrannical and dehumanizing aspects of that past history. This present analysis selects only those elements of their mentality that focus on what they consider lost achievements of socialism. Workers’ lived experience under reform also points to the gap between the appearance and reality of a market driven society. In contrast to the pervasive neo-liberal ideology celebrating the rationality of the market, workers have found that opportunity, prosperity, freedom and legality are limited, elusive, and uneven in their availability. This embedded critical perspective can be a departure for understanding postsocialist society and for constructing postsocialist theory. At least, it sensitizes us to an alternative agenda of inquiry to that of “neoclassical sociology,” characterized by an emphasis on strategic action in the deployment of capital, property forms, elite circulation, and optimistic assessments of the potentialities of capitalism as the end of history.⁹² What this latter research program, including the most prominent works on the Chinese transition, has downplayed and what this article only begins to address instead is the *dialectical* interplay of elite and subaltern transformation, market formation and class formation, institution building and popular resistance, economics and politics.

Notes

1. I thank Marc Blecher, Howard Kimeldorf, Mark Selden, Dorothy Solinger, Vivienne Shue, Victor Nee, and three reviewers of *Theory and Society* for stimulating comments and suggestions on an earlier version of this article. I am most indebted to Michael Burawoy and Jeff Paige for their inspiration, encouragement, and criticisms.

2. Alvin Gouldner, *The Dark Side of the Dialectic* (Dublin: Economic and Social Research Institute, 1974), 25.
3. Organization Department Project Group of the Chinese Communist Party, *China Survey Report, 2000–2001: A Study on Internal Contradictions Among the People Under New Circumstances* (Beijing: Central Compilation and Translation Press, 2001) in Chinese.
4. I borrow this notion from Ruth Berins Collier and David Collier, *Shaping the Political Arena* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991). In their study of Latin American state-labor relations, “incorporation” refers to the attempt by the state to create channels for resolving labor conflicts, superseding the ad hoc use of repression. The state comes to assume a major role in institutionalizing a new system of class bargaining, and in shaping an institutionalized labor movement. In China, the state has from the beginning controlled the labor movement by recognizing only the official union. In the reform period, although repression is still applied to unofficial unionizing, labor conflicts are explicitly recognized and new regulatory mechanisms are put in place, in addition to reforming the role of the official union.
5. Michael Burawoy and Janos Lukacs, *The Radiant Past: Ideology and Reality in Hungary’s Road to Capitalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).
6. Andrew Walder, *Communist Neo-traditionalism: Work and Authority in Chinese Industry* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986). Tak-chuen Luk, “The Bureaucratization and Informalization of Working Class Lives: A Case Study of South Wind in State Socialist China, 1949–1996,” Ph.D. Thesis, University of Chicago, 1998. Katharyne Mitchell, “Work Authority: the Happy Demise of the Ideal Type,” *Comparative Study of Society and History* 34 (1992): 679–694.
7. The theoretical importance of “ambivalence” is elaborated in Neil Smelser, “The Rational and the Ambivalent in the Social Sciences,” *American Sociological Review* 63/1 (1998): 1–16. Conditions of dependence, he argues, breed ambivalence. Ambivalence entails entrapment and solidarity, opposing and unstable affective orientations, all of which go against the usual assumption of rationality and choice under conditions of freedom in sociological theorizing.
8. Ranajit Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 11.
9. In China, the state sector now accounts only for about one-third of total industrial output. The workplace-based welfare system is almost totally dismantled and replaced by a contribution-based system.
10. Arif Dirlik, “Postsocialism? Reflections on ‘Socialism With Chinese Characteristics’” in *Marxism and the Chinese Experience*, ed. Arif Dirlik and Maurice Meisner (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 1989), 364.
11. Hu Angang, “Zhongguo Chengzhenshiyehzhuangkuangfenxi” [“Analysis of China’s Unemployment Situation,”], *Guanli Shijie [Management World]* 4 (1998): 47–63.
12. Ching Kwan Lee, “Pathways of Labor Insurgency” in Elizabeth Perry and Mark Selden, editors, *Chinese Society: Change, Conflict and Resistance* (London: Routledge, 2000), 41–61.
13. Labor conditions in high tech, capital intensive or strategic industries may be very different from the one described here. see for instance, Corina-Barbara Francis, “Reproduction of Danwei Institutional Features in the Context of China’s Market Economy: the Case of Haidian District’s High Tech Sector,” *The China Quarterly* 147 (1996): 839–859.
14. Andrew Walder, editor, *The Waning of the Communist State* (Berkeley: University

- of California Press, 1995); “The Decline of Communist Power: Elements of a Theory of Institutional Change,” *Theory and Society* 23/2 (1994): 297–323; Burawoy and Lukacs offer a similar argument about the decline of bureaucratic power over labor.
15. Richard Baum and Alexei Shevchenko, “The ‘State of the State,’” in Merle Goldman and Roderick Macfarquhar, editors, *The Paradox of China’s Post-Mao Reforms* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 333–360.
 16. Victor Nee, “The Role of the State in Making a Market Economy,” *Journal of Institutional and Theoretical Economics* 156/1 (2000): 64–88; Stanley B. Lubman, *Bird in a Cage: Legal Reform in China After Mao* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), chapter five.
 17. Jiang Zemin, quoted in Stanley Lubman, *Bird in a Cage*, 127.
 18. Zheng Yongnian, “From Rule by Law to Rule of Law?” *China Perspectives* 25 (September–October 1999): 36.
 19. Pitman B. Potter, “The Chinese Legal System: Continuing Commitment to the Primacy of State Power,” *The China Quarterly* 159 (September 1999): 673–683.
 20. Zheng Yongnian, “From Rule by Law to Rule of Law?”
 21. For details about the Labor Law, see Hilary K. Josephs, “Labor Law in a ‘Socialist Market Economy’: The Case of China,” *Columbia Journal of Transnational Law* 33 (1995): 559–581. Ng Sek Hong and Malcolm Warner, *China’s Trade Unions and Management* (London: Macmillan Press, 1998), chapter four.
 22. Mary Gallagher, “‘Use the Law as Your Weapon!’: The Legalization of Labor Relations in China and the Role of FDI,” unpublished manuscript.
 23. *Laodong Zhengyi Chuli Yu Yanjiu (Labor Disputes: Handling and Research)* 1995–1999, various issues, Beijing, in Chinese.
 24. *China Labour (Zhongguolaodong)* (2000) no. 4: 55–56.
 25. Michael Burawoy, *The Politics of Production* (London: Verso, 1985).
 26. For theory and typology of factory regimes under capitalism and socialism, see Michael Burawoy, *The Politics of Production*, and Michael Burawoy and Janos Lukacs, *The Radiant Past: Ideology and Reality in Hungary’s Road to Capitalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992). Walder’s neo-traditionalism is also a type concept and many critics have mistakenly based their charges on empirical data indicating deviations from those described in the book. The real issue is the institutional sources of shop floor realities, not variable realities. In a previously published article (“From Organized Dependence to Disorganized Despotism,” *The China Quarterly* 157 (March 1999): 44–71. I formulated the concept of “disorganized despotism” on the basis of state-owned enterprises in Guangzhou only. Since then, fieldwork in non-state firms as well as in the northeast has led me to an expanded hypothesis elaborated in this article.
 27. Zhao Minghua and Theo Nichols, “Management Control of Labor in State-owned Enterprises: Cases from the Textile Industry,” *The China Journal* 36 (1996): 1–21. On the convergence of labor practices among state and foreign firms, see Mary Gallagher, *Contagious Capitalism: Globalization and the Politics of Labor in China*, Ph.D. dissertation, Department of Politics, Princeton University, 2001.
 28. Jeffrey R. Taylor, “Rural Employment Trends and the Legacy of Surplus Labor, 1978–1986,” *The China Quarterly* 116 (1988): 736–766. Xin Meng, *Labour Market Reform in China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 189.
 29. Even with land redistribution in the countryside, many peasant workers do not have their own land to fall back on in their home village. Variation in income and land ownership in China’s vast countryside and rural economies account for the

- varied conditions of dependence of migrant workers. But many reported abject poverty at home as the primary reason of coming to cities and more importantly of holding on to low-paying jobs under extremely labor-intensive conditions.
30. X. L. Ding, "The Illicit Asset Stripping of Chinese State Firms," *The China Journal* 43 (January 2000): 1–28; "Who Gets What, How? When Chinese State-owned Enterprises Become Shareholding Companies," *Problems of Post-communism* 46/3 (May/June 1999): 32–41; "Systemic Irregularity and Spontaneous Property Transformation in the Chinese Financial System," *The China Quarterly* 163 (September 2000): 655–676.
 31. Field data. See also, Feng Tongqing, "Workers and Trade Unions Under the Market Economy: Perspectives from Grassroots Union Cadres," *Chinese Sociology and Anthropology* 28/3 (1996): 15, 72. For a discussion of similar predicaments of unions in Zhejiang province, see Seung Wook Baek, "The Changing Trade Unions in China," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 30/1 (2000): 46–66. In the latest national survey conducted by the ACFTU, only one-third of worker respondents found that enterprise unions can protect their rights and interests, and only 18.8 percent found that enterprise unions can represent workers by participating in management. See ACFTU Policy Study Bureau, *Survey of the Status of Chinese Staff and Workers in 1997* (Beijing: Xiyuan Chubanshe, 1999), 218, in Chinese.
 32. Ngok Kinglun, "New Collective Labor Relation Mechanisms in the Workplace: the Collective Contract System in Mainland China," *Issues and Studies* 35/6 (1999): 119–143.
 33. David Wank, *Commodifying Communism: Business, Trust, and Politics in a Chinese City* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).
 34. Interview in Guangzhou, June 28, 1996. Interviews with owners and managers of other private and joint-venture firms in Guangzhou between February 1996 and April 1999 obtain similar results, indicating the persistence of such practices.
 35. Interview in Shenzhen, Guangdong, December 25, 2000.
 36. Fieldwork in a Taiwan-Mainland joint venture producing footwear for exports. Factory visits and interviews to four other joint venture factories, involving Taiwanese and American investments were conducted between 1996 and 1999 in Guangdong.
 37. *Nanfang Gongbao* (*Southern Workers' Daily*), August 11, 1999. Elsewhere, according to the ACFTU, only 28 percent of private enterprises nationwide have established enterprise unions as of September 1999, in *Zhongguo Gongren* (*Workers*) 90 (June 2000), 9.
 38. Interview in Guangzhou, Guangdong, February 3, 1996.
 39. Interview in Liaoning, June 1999.
 40. Interview in Guangzhou, Guangdong, April 1997.
 41. Interview in Shenyang, Liaoning, May 18, 1999.
 42. Interview in Shenyang, Liaoning, May 19, 1999.
 43. Interview in Guangzhou, Guangdong, February 3, 1996.
 44. Interview in Guangzhou, Guangdong, June 29, 1996.
 45. Interview in Shenzhen, Guangdong, December 25, 2000.
 46. Anita Chan, *China's Workers Under Assault* (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 2001), and Special Issue on "The Conditions of Chinese Workers in East Asian-funded Enterprises," *Chinese Sociology and Anthropology* 30/4: 3–101.
 47. Interview in Shenzhen, Guangdong, December 25, 2000.
 48. Interview in Shenzhen, Guangdong, December 26, 2000.
 49. Craig Calhoun, *Neither Gods Nor Emperors* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994); Dingxin Zhao, *The Power of Tiananmen* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001); Jeffrey N. Wasserstrom and Liu Xinyong, "Student Associa-

- tions and Mass Movements,” and Elizabeth J. Perry, “Labor’s Battle for Political Space,” in *Urban Spaces in Contemporary China*, editors, Deborah Davis et al. (Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 1995).
50. The term “work unit socialism” comes from Brantly Womack, “Transfigured Community,” *The China Quarterly* 126 (1992): 313–332. I use it here as a short hand to underscore the pivotal role of the work unit in the urban social structure of China, a point that many China scholars have emphasized. See, for instance, Bian Yanjie, *Work and Inequality in Urban China* (Albany: New York University Press, 1994); Lu Xiaobo and Elizabeth J. Perry, editors, *Danwei: the Changing Chinese Workplace in Historical and Comparative Perspective* (Armonk: M. E. Sharpe, 1997).
 51. Interview in Shenyang, Liaoning, May 19, 1999.
 52. Exhorted as the “eldest son of the nation” or the “emperor’s daughter,” Liaoning boasted superior natural resource endowment, strategic location, early development of basic and heavy industries under Japanese occupation in the early 1900s, and was a primary target of state investment and Russian financial aids in the 1950s. By 1957, the province contributed 71 percent of iron production, 63 percent of steel production, and 58 percent of steel products to the national economy. Geared toward the need of the planned economy, it was the site of 10 percent of the nation’s large and medium SOEs, an industrial structure that has proved crippling for the province’s development under the market economy.
 53. Xu Pinghua et al., *Guoyouqiye Xiangangzhigongzaijiuyeyunzhoushewu [Practical Handbook on Reemployment of SOE Laid Off Workers]* (Shenyang: Shenyang Chubanshe, 1998), 261–262, in Chinese.
 54. Liaoning Urban Employment Research Team, “Conditions and Strategies of Liaoning’s Urban Population and Employment,” *Guanli Shijie (Management World)* 5 (1998): 69–76, in Chinese.
 55. Ibid.
 56. For recent samples of the many journalistic reports on worker protests in Liaoning, see, for example, Richard McGregor, “Sitdown Demos Keep Chinese Authorities on Their Toes,” *Financial Times*, December 30/31, 2000; “Angry Workers Besiege City Hall,” *South China Morning Post*, May 17, 2000; “Crumbling Northeast Industry Breeds Despair,” *South China Morning Post*, June 13, 2000.
 57. I collected data on this and other protests in the summer of 1999 and winter of 2000 in Liaoning. I have reported this case together with two others in “The ‘Revenge of History’: Collective Memories and Labor Protests in Northeastern China,” *Ethnography* 1/2 (2000): 217–237. See also, Chen Feng, “Subsistence Crisis, Management Corruption and Labour Protests in China,” *The China Journal* 2001.
 58. International media have reported incidents of armed police, even armies, being sent in to arrest protesters or using force to clear blockage of highways and railroads. For examples, Reuters, “Angry Workers Besiege City Hall,” May 17, 2000; Deutsche Presse-Agentur, “Angry Steelworkers Block Rail Line in Southwestern China,” November 2, 1998; Agence France Presse, “Striking Workers in North China Block Railway Over Unpaid Wages,” December 5, 2000; Kyodo News Service, “More Worker Strike in China’s Sichuan Province,” December 5, 1997.
 59. Interview in Shenzhen, December 26, 2000.
 60. Zhao Shukai, *Zongheng Chengxiang (Across the City and the Country)* (Beijing: Zhongguo Nongyechubanshe, 1998), 65; Lin Zhengong and Chen Yulin, “Sanziqiye Gongren Daigong Bagong de Tedian he Duice” (Characteristics and Handling of Slow Downs and Strikes by Workers in Foreign-invested Enterprises) *Zhongguo Laodong Kexue (China Labor Science)* 89 (May 1993): 33–35.

61. Charles Sabel, *Work and Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 133.
62. In the post-Tiananmen decade, several underground unions have surfaced: the Free Trade Unions of China, the League for the Protection of the Rights of the Working People, the Hired-hands Workers' Federation, and The China Development Union, among others. The majority of organizers were students and dissident intellectuals, and many of these individuals were arrested and imprisoned. See, Trini Leung, "The Politics of Labour Rebellions in China, 1989–1994," Ph.D. thesis, University of Hong Kong, 1998. Efforts to form independent unions in SOEs were also met with suppression. See, for instance, Erik Eckholm, "Silk Workers in Standoff With Beijing Over Union," *The New York Times*, December 15, 2000, and "China Seizes Worker Seeking Independent Union," *The New York Times*, December 16, 2000;
63. This question follows in the footsteps of critical scholarship in labor studies that rejects the universal, individualist, and abstract subject in orthodox Marxian labor history. Feminist analyses have unveiled the gender of the "universal" worker presumed in orthodox labor history while post-colonial critique has pointed to the "pre-bourgeois" matrices of social relations that third world workers are born into, conditions that defy mechanical application of Marxian class formation theories. See respectively, Sonya Rose, "Class Formation and the Quintessential Worker," in John R. Hall, editor, *Reworking Class* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), and Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Rethinking Working-Class History: Bengal 1890–1940* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989).
64. Katherine Verdery, *What Was Socialism, And What Comes Next?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 63.
65. Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from Political Writings (1910–1920)*, edited by Quintin Hoare, translated by John Mathews (New York: International Publishers, 1977), 100–101.
66. Goran Therborn, *The Ideology of Power and the Power of Ideology* (London: Verso 1980).
67. For similar campaign nostalgia in rural China, see Kevin J. O'Brien and Lianjiang Li, "Campaign Nostalgia in the Chinese Countryside," *Asian Survey* 39/3 (1999): 375–393.
68. Interview in Liaoning, June 1999.
69. Interview in Liaoning, June 1999.
70. Ezra Vogel, "From Friendship to Comradeship: the Change in Personal Relations in Communist China," *The China Quarterly* 21 (1965): 46–60.
71. Interview in Liaoning, January 7, 2000.
72. Arif Dirlik, "Revolutions in History and Memory," chapter two in *Postmodernity's Histories* (Lanham: Rowan and Littlefield, 2000).
73. Neil Smelser, "The Rational and the Ambivalent in the Social Sciences," *American Sociological Review* 63/1 (1998): 1–16.
74. Such generational sentiments about Chinese socialism in the pre-reform era are quite widespread in Chinese society today, as noted by the editors of personal memoirs in *Mao's Children in the New China*, ed. Yarong Jiang and David Ashley (London: Routledge, 2000).
75. Interview in Guangzhou, November 8, 1997.
76. For example, despite occasional setbacks in a low wage system, worker real wage levels in 1970 represented a 35 percent rise above those of 1952. See Charles Hoffman, *The Chinese Worker* (Albany: New York University Press, 1974). For indica-

- tors of the “urban bias” in food consumption, see Mark Selden, *The Political Economy of Chinese Socialism* (Armonk: M. E. Sharpe, 1993), 21.
77. Katherine Verdery, *What Was Socialism, and What Comes Next?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), chapter two.
 78. *Nangang Ribao*, June 3, 1996.
 79. Charles Sabel defines “careers at work” as those ideas of dignity and ambition, stylistic canons underlying acceptance of hardships or outburst of rage at management, which together form a “compressed cosmology” of the worker. *Work and Politics*, chapter three.
 80. Interviews with about 50 migrant workers involved in industrial injury compensation lawsuits show the tortuously long and difficult judiciary processes for most migrant workers lacking the resources, power, and legal knowledge to assert their legal rights against employer harassment and corruption of local law enforcers.
 81. Michael Burawoy, “The State and Economic Involution: Russia Through a China Lens,” *World Development* 24/6 (1996): 1105–1117.
 82. Elizabeth J. Perry, “Challenging the Mandate of Heaven: Popular Protest in Modern China,” *Critical Asian Studies* 33/2 (2001): 163–180.
 83. See analyses by Elizabeth J. Perry on these issues in “From Paris to the Paris of the East and Back: Workers as Citizens in Modern Shanghai,” *Comparative Study of Society and History* (April 1999): 348–373; “Casting a Chinese ‘Democracy’ Movement: the Roles of Students, Workers and Entrepreneurs,” in *Popular Protest and Political Culture in Modern China*, ed. Jeffrey N. Wasserstrom and Elizabeth J. Perry (Boulder: Westview, 1994).
 84. Thomas Bernstein, “Farmer Discontent and Regime Responses,” in *The Paradox of China’s Post-Mao Reforms*, ed. Merle Goldman and Roderick Macfarquhar (Harvard University Press, 1999), 197–219. For more recent reports, see Erik Eckholm, “Spreading Protests by China’s Farmers Meet With Violence,” *The New York Times*, February 1, 1999; “Farmers Seek Lawyer’s Release,” *South China Morning Post*, August 12, 2000. On peasants’ nostalgia for political campaigns directed against cadre corruption, see Kevin J. O’Brien and Lianjiang Li, “Campaign Nostalgia in the Chinese Countryside,” *Asian Survey* 39/3 (1999): 375–393.
 85. Zhou Xueguang, “Unorganized Interests and Collective Action in Communist China,” *American Sociological Review* 58/1: 54–73; Daniel Kelliher, *Peasant Power in China* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992); Dali Yang, *Calamity and Reform in China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996).
 86. Thanks to Jeff Paige who shared this observation with me.
 87. Andrew G. Walder, “The Decline of Communist Power: Elements of a Theory of Institutional Change,” *Theory and Society* 23/2 (1994): 297–323.
 88. Thomas Gold, “The Resurgence of Civil Society in China,” *Journal of Democracy* 1/1 (1990): 18–31; David Strand, “Protest in Beijing: Civil Society and Public Sphere in China,” *Problems of Communism* 39 (1990): 1–19.
 89. Gordon White et al., *In Search of Civil Society* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996); Anita Chan, “Revolution or Corporatism?” *Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs* 29 (January 1993): 31–61.
 90. David Wank, *Commodifying Communism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).
 91. Jean Oi, *Rural China Takes Off* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); Andrew Walder, editor, *Zouping in Transition* (Harvard University Press, 1999); Nan Lin, “Local Market Socialism: Local Corporatism in Action in Rural China,” *Theory and Society* 24/3 (1995): 301–354.

92. Michael Burawoy, "Neoclassical Sociology: From the End of Communism to the End of Classes," *American Journal of Sociology*, 106/4 (January 2001): 1099–1120.