

[Lin Chun](#)

## The language of class in China

**Article (Accepted version)  
(Refereed)**

**Original citation:**

Lin, Chun (2015) *The language of class in China*. [Socialist Register](#), 51. pp. 24-53. ISSN 0081-0606

© 2015 Merlin Press

This version available at: <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/59694/>

Available in LSE Research Online: January 2016

LSE has developed LSE Research Online so that users may access research output of the School. Copyright © and Moral Rights for the papers on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. Users may download and/or print one copy of any article(s) in LSE Research Online to facilitate their private study or for non-commercial research. You may not engage in further distribution of the material or use it for any profit-making activities or any commercial gain. You may freely distribute the URL (<http://eprints.lse.ac.uk>) of the LSE Research Online website.

This document is the author's final accepted version of the journal article. There may be differences between this version and the published version. You are advised to consult the publisher's version if you wish to cite from it.

## THE LANGUAGE OF CLASS IN CHINA

LIN CHUN

The post-Mao regime's mantra of *Jiegui* ('getting on the global track'), or willing participation in the latest round of capitalist globalization, has redirected China's development path. The country has now become the world's largest recipient of foreign direct investment, largest trade-dependent exporter, largest energy consumer and largest producer of carbon emissions, mostly at the low end of the global productive chain. As its economy – including its finance and other strategic sectors – becomes ever more open, a deeply problematic national growth pattern based on officially endorsed 'cheap labour' becomes entrenched in the international division of labour, vastly favouring global capital. This pattern also entails a reshaped social structure and reshaped relations of production, above all a renewed validation of the exploitative and repressive power of capital – private and bureaucratic, domestic and transnational – over labour. Fuelling the enormous market expansion of a late capitalism hungry for space, China is also now one of the most environmentally polluted and socially unequal nations on earth. In other words, over half a century after the 1949 revolution, China is again being radically transformed, this time from a variant of state socialism to a variant of state capitalism. The country's double path dependency – on the one hand, from pre-reform Chinese socialism, and on the other, from its newly endorsed globalization – distorts or limits its transition to capitalism, a transition project that is no longer tentative or politically hidden. Yet this project still cannot be openly embraced in official statements due to the enshrined commitment of the People's Republic to socialism and the enduring attachment of the Chinese people to revolutionary and socialist traditions. This peculiar disjunction causes some extraordinary difficulties, not just in the articulation of class politics, but also in the way class politics operate in practice.

The weakness, if not the complete absence, of an independent working-class movement in China cannot be explained by repression alone. Multiple

impediments to class consciousness and stronger labour mobilization arise from contradictory social changes and their confusing messages. For example, a singular Chinese phenomenon is a discrepancy between displacement and dispossession, thanks to the fact that the majority of migrant workers from the countryside retain their rural land rights. It is true that the younger generation is increasingly 'landless', in the sense that the initial redistribution of land in the early 1980s, organized on the basis of a newly introduced 'family responsibility' system, has not kept up with demographic changes in many places. However, insofar as the rural households remain protected by certain rights to land, the commodification and proletarianization of labour is fundamentally incomplete. In people's subjective perceptions, when the ambiguity involved in a 'socialist' state taking a capitalist path is set aside, the contrast between visible gains in material prosperity and past scarcity hampers even the most ardent critics of the market transition. Such contradictions function dialectically to stabilize an otherwise crisis-ridden process, in the context of a formerly (and officially still) communist party undergoing a profound self-transformation. Meanwhile, unprecedentedly rapid economic trends also affect culture and social organization in ways ranging from fervent consumerism and the popularity of new communication technologies, to an extensive financialization that destabilizes everything from macroeconomic policy and institutions to household budgets. As labour processes diversify and the young, the better trained, the self-employed and cosmopolitan careerists pursue more autonomy in work and life, exploitation and control must take fresh forms, and so do class identities and struggle.

The refusal of the language of class, to be discussed below, is a titanic act of symbolic violence on the part of the Chinese state, committed as part of a political strategy to make way for 'reform and opening'. The tactic is also evident in official phrases such as 'socialist market economy', 'primary socialist stage', or 'socialism with Chinese characteristics' – all of them largely devoid of socialist content. By the same token, China's working men and women need an alternative vocabulary as a politico-ideological weapon for articulating their situations and demands. At issue is thus not only the way the concept of class is diluted or muted in China's de-revolutionized polity; it is also about the way in which the lack of a language of class-based counter-hegemony helps to explain the lack of counter-hegemonic organizational capacity.<sup>1</sup>

To say this is not to endorse the views of those who imagine that class conflicts can somehow be overcome outside the realm of political economy. The damage caused by the kind of identity politics which involves discursive political attacks on 'class essentialism' are manifest. The alarming retreat from

both gender equality and ethnic peace in China, following the imposed denial of class, makes this powerfully clear.<sup>2</sup> In that light class continues to be what the renewal of a multi-dimensional, universal struggle for liberation ultimately depends on. As Marx famously put it, the working class as the bearer of human emancipation is a class ‘which has a universal character because its sufferings are universal, and which does not claim a *particular redress* because the wrong which is done to it is not a *particular wrong* but *wrong in general*’.<sup>3</sup> Such a class thus cannot transform its own conditions without transforming society as a whole. A dialectical rather than a mechanical linkage between ‘class’ and its ‘language’, then, has to be constantly made in the very practice of expressing, interrogating and acting on class interests.

The purpose of this essay is to outline the making, unmaking and remaking of the major classes in China since the communist revolution. The communist party and its state and ‘ideological state apparatus’ have played a pivotal role in that trajectory, mediated by an institutionalized system of language and rhetoric. As official discourse was able to penetrate the infra-politics of everyday speech, the way power is exercised is traceable in its evolving political glossary. In the following sections I aim to clarify the class nature of the party’s project in the way it seeks to position China in the global context. I will also trace the changes of class structure in China’s market reforms; changes that are closely linked to the expanding global market and affect not only the relations between capital and labour, but also those between the state and labour, and state and capital. My main focus is the peasants-turned-workers and their plight, and hence the question of the class consciousness of a massively enlarged Chinese working class. The realignment of classes, and the corresponding new class lexicon, that will be needed for the impending development of a new transformative project to recapture state power will be noted for future consideration.

#### ‘TAKING CLASS STRUGGLE AS THE KEY LINK’: REVOLUTION AND THE IDEOLOGY OF SOCIALIST TRANSITION

The party saw revolution as necessitated by the basic contradictions that had to be overcome: contradictions between imperialism and the Chinese nation, and between ‘feudalism’ (referring to landlordism and premodern social forms in general) and the popular masses. The revolution was thus intrinsically and simultaneously national and social in nature. More creative still was its strategy of seizing power by encircling the cities from their rural peripheries through a ‘people’s war’. In the Chinese Marxist conception, this revolution, led by a communist party, is defined as ‘*new democratic*’ because its maximum programme contained a socialist ambition. It is

thus categorically distinguished from the classical bourgeois revolutions which, while having a democratic aspect, only paved the way for capitalist development.<sup>4</sup> The ‘new democratic’ revolution relied on a worker-peasant alliance as well as a ‘united front’ that also included the national bourgeoisie, the progressives and patriots from intermediate social groups, and even an ‘enlightened’ gentry. The united front was seen as one of the ‘three magic weapons’ of revolutionary success, along with party construction and armed struggle.<sup>5</sup>

A ‘land revolution’ in a ‘semi-colonial, semi-feudal’ society appears problematic to anyone who believes that a large proletariat is needed for any socialist transition.<sup>6</sup> But they are mistaken, both empirically and conceptually, in relation to the Chinese case. In the first half of the twentieth century, China’s relatively small working class was significantly larger in size and stronger in political capacity than the weak national bourgeoisie. This asymmetry is explained by the substantial foreign presence in the Chinese economy: workers in foreign-controlled factories were a growing class, while domestic industrialists and merchants were a shrinking one, squeezed by foreign capital. The industrial working class became an independent and vital revolutionary force, taking such tremendously daring actions as the Hunan miners’ movements (1922–25), the Guangzhou-Hong Kong general strikes (1925–26) and the three Shanghai workers’ uprisings (1926–27). Even after the counterrevolutionary slaughter of 1927, despite their devastating losses, workers became the core of the red army and urban underground party work. In addition, as exemplified by the founders of Marxism themselves, the communist intellectuals were an organic component of the proletariat. ‘Petty bourgeois’ intellectuals drawn to the Chinese revolution had to temper themselves through guerrilla warfare and grassroots work. These locally specific class factors, the party, workers and sympathetic intellectuals, were what in turn made it possible to educate and organize the poor and middle peasants, who were crucial in enabling the revolution to recruit soldiers and constantly defend and expand its rural bases.

The class basis of any political party and the nature of any national revolution are also determined by the way the country in question is globally located. The effectively proletarian character of China’s peasant revolution was also due to the position of the Chinese nation in an epoch of global capitalism and uneven and compressed development.<sup>7</sup> Under siege by competing imperialist forces, the exploited and oppressed ‘class’ status of China itself gave its resistance a class-like character. It was this condition of a ‘nation-class’ that allowed the Chinese Communist Party to emerge as an innovative working-class organization, and gave the country’s democratic

revolution a socialist outlook and aim.<sup>8</sup> These developments, as recognized at the time, were on par with struggles and events elsewhere in the international communist movement. 'Class', either in its conventional or in its extended usage, cannot be a positivist category superficially described by occupations, hierarchies or locations. Its connotation must rather be constructed through the application of a locally and globally appropriate political economy.

This clarification is necessary because dogmatic misconceptions about the Chinese revolution, though not new, still lead to some implausible and politically detrimental conclusions about the present day. It is a gross factual oversimplification to maintain, without distinguishing between Mao's continued revolution and its post-Mao derailing, that due to its 'petty bourgeois' attributes the CCP leadership has undergone a direct transmutation 'from nationalist revolutionaries into a bureaucratic ruling class'. It is also theoretically erroneous to approvingly classify market reforms as the 'consolidation of the bourgeois revolution', needed before the working class would finally grow to make the next move, in the 'correct' sequence of societal evolution.<sup>9</sup> In these perspectives, Chinese socialism either never seriously existed, or was no more than a doomed and parenthetical episode. However, even fair-minded liberals recognize the depth and significance of the Chinese revolution;<sup>10</sup> and astute Marxist analyses show that a decisive degeneration of the party did not seriously occur until after the reform regime embarked on a 'wrong march'.<sup>11</sup> Dismissal of the authenticity and immensity of the socialist experiment in China, and ignorance of the radical differences between the party lines and state policies of the pre- and post-reform eras, also unintentionally echo much of the familiar Cold War narrative. Evident continuities notwithstanding, the latter era was in fact conditioned by its (partial) repudiation of the former's revolutionary and socialist legacies.

The arrogant view that revolutionary Chinese communists, with their petty bourgeois backgrounds, were unable to prepare for a socialist transformation overlooks the historical evidence. It fails to register how quickly and smoothly the communist modernizers nationalized industries and commerce, and collectivized agriculture, in the 1950s. In most sectors nationalization was preceded by a stage of public-private partnership, and the government introduced a novel scheme to give affected capitalists a fixed percentage of dividends in compensation. Collectivization, too, progressed by and large voluntarily 'with neither the violence nor the massive sabotage characteristic of Soviet collectivization'.<sup>12</sup> Missing from the orthodox critiques of all persuasions is the power of politics to redirect history in defiance of the 'normal' historical sequence of capitalism preceding socialism. Worse still, vulgar economism also offers a 'justification' for capitalist measures,

including state-imposed and at times violent privatization programmes of publically owned enterprises and services. Remarkably enough, neoliberals find themselves supported by Marxists in treating global integration as something natural. Their reasoning is perfectly in line with Beijing's deformed Marxism, euphemistically interpreted as validating an ultimately unskippable capitalist phase.

As though to mock the charge that the communist project in a peasant China could only be substandard, the new regime proudly described itself as a 'people's democratic dictatorship' rather than a proletarian one. As in Eastern Europe, the former description simply signified majority rule for the people against their enemies. In communist terminology this rhetorical invention signalled a popular front style of politics inherited from the broadly based Chinese revolution, in contrast to the Russian revolution and the more industrialized Soviet Union. Although the Chinese did not shelve the notion of the 'dictatorship of the proletariat', it did not prevail in the country's political discourse until the idea of 'continuing the revolution' came to dominate official ideology in the run-up to the Cultural Revolution.<sup>13</sup> The vitality of the initial linguistic choice deserves special attention, however. It reflected China's fundamental socio-historical conditions in which the peasantry could not be sacrificed to modernization. The peasant population instead must be turned into an agent of socialist transformation, both for their society as much as for themselves. Thus the successive revolutionary movements from 'new democracy' to socialism had duly transcended the Marxian law of industrial proletarianization. As such, the 'people', in its specific historical and discursive frame, was unmistakably a primary marker of class power. The same can be said of the term 'mass line', found throughout the constellation of Chinese communist conceptual constructions. In the same vein, the terms 'women' in relation to women's liberation, and 'nationality' in relation to ethnic equality and solidarity, also have an intrinsic class signification.

While 'the people' was positively defined to include multiple classes, and negatively defined against class enemies, the classes included in 'the people' ceased to exist as economic realities after the land reform and the 'socialist transition' that had been accomplished by 1956: class labels no longer denoted membership of a space in the existing socioeconomic structure when landlordism and capitalism had already been eliminated. Yet such capsule designations, affixed to persons and households according to their categorized economic situations, usually up to three years before the liberation, continued to count heavily in determining people's social and political statuses, and in the long run exhausted and soured the population.<sup>14</sup>

As class labelling became materially baseless, the language of class functioned as an ideological mechanism of mobilization in the new regime's struggle for survival and national development. But there were also other, real and serious, class divisions, quite independent of any remnants of the old class system, that were in contradiction with the egalitarian socialist project. At least three such divisions stand out: the structural inequality between the urban and rural sectors of society, with the latter being subject to the extraction of resources to finance industrialization through 'internal accumulation'; the privileges accorded to higher-ranked cadres; and discrimination against those with a 'bad' class background.<sup>15</sup>

Social inequalities and bureaucratic degeneration worried Mao so much that he called for the resumption of the mass class struggles that at the 1956 party congress had been judged to be over. The Anti-Rightist campaign of 1957, catalyzed in part by the events in Poland and Hungary, led him to declare that 'the principal contradiction in Chinese society' was that existing between the proletariat and bourgeoisie, and between the socialist and capitalist roads. Guided by the idea of 'taking class struggle as the key link', the Lushan conference of 1959, instead of launching, as originally intended, a correction of the ultra-leftism that had been responsible for the failures of the Great Leap Forward, embarked on a campaign against the 'rightist tendency'. In 1962, Mao again reminded his mass followers to 'never forget class struggle' so as to prevent 'capitalist restoration' in a presumably 'very long period of transition from socialism to communism'.<sup>16</sup> These calls were answered by an intense run of further political campaigns. Aside from intensified criticisms of the 'bourgeois rights' that Marx had referred to in the *Critique of the Gotha Program* and the 'three great distinctions' (of urban-rural, industrial-agricultural and mental-manual labour divide), the 'socialist education movement' of 1964-65 targeted corrupt local officials. Always 'culturally' vigilant, the Maoist revolution was promoted also in education, literature and the (performing) arts, so as to 'let the workers, peasants and soldiers occupy the ideological superstructure' of campuses, newspapers and stages. Doctors and other elite intellectuals were urged to serve in the countryside. Mao's keen sense of cultural hegemony found expression in a *cultural* revolution which also had an impact on '1968' in the capitalist heartlands.<sup>17</sup>

The extraordinary Cultural Revolution, doing battle with the party-state itself, was officially launched in 1966 to encourage 'the dark side of our work to be exposed openly, completely, and from bottom up' for socialist rejuvenation, as Mao put it. A few years earlier, he had warned the party to 'guard against revisionism, particularly the emergence of revisionism at the



party center'.<sup>18</sup> The theory of the Cultural Revolution especially singled out 'capitalist roaders' from what it saw as a bureaucratized 'new bourgeoisie' within the communist party. Nothing less than a mass counter-movement of the working class and young rebels could bring them down. The methods adopted, known as forms of a 'grand democracy', were specified as 'speaking out freely, airing views fully, big-character posters, and big debates', along with self-organization on legitimate democratic lines. Seemingly an irrational exercise in populist self-destruction, 'grand democracy' aimed to force the ruling apparatus open to popular scrutiny as the only way of rescuing socialism from erosion. But this unprecedented, singular event is not comprehensible without the international context also being taken into account. External contradictions could heighten domestic ones. Among several formidable geopolitical problems, there was a real risk of war. With Vietnam and the Sino-Soviet split in the foreground, China faced both imperialist and 'social imperialist' superpowers.<sup>19</sup>

The inner-party line about the struggle on which the Cultural Revolution was based, theoretically mirroring class struggle in society, turned out to be obscure. The absence of economically definable, exploitative social classes meant a 'categorical breakdown' – i.e. class categories were incapable of identifying the politically most relevant forces in the movement. If the underlining struggle was in reality one between a monopolistic political class and a mass revolt driven by accumulated discontent, the disjunction between class and politics, and between politics and political language, needed to be repaired.<sup>20</sup> Workers (and soldiers) had to be sent to universities, middle schools and many other organizations to stop the turmoil of anarchism and factionalism, with orders that 'the working class must lead in all spheres'. Those who were sent, however, were themselves engaged in quite a few localized 'civil wars' before a 'great unity' could be achieved with the formation of provincial and municipal 'revolutionary committees' in 1967–68. Since the spontaneous organizations were based less on class than on factions, an obvious tension arose between the ideology of class and factional cleavages within the same classes. Ambitious and ambiguous as it was, a Cultural Revolution in search of a yet-to-be-configured target was doomed if only because it came too early, too fast. Indeed, 'while the Cultural Revolution disclosed the problems of socialism, it could not resolve them: the socialist system, such as it was, could not transform the existing power structure without undermining its own foundation'.<sup>21</sup>

The primacy of the friend-enemy antithesis is a political *sine qua non* for a revolutionary people. Revolutions in China, however, consistently inclined to exaggerate *internal* enemies, resulting in excessive purges. The

wrong people were persecuted for the wrong reasons, and the physical and psychological suppression of dissent entailed abuses of civil rights and personal injuries. Consequently, resentment and alienation grew to the point that Deng's subsequent policy reorientation initially had a popular mandate. Even if Chinese socialism was pursued against incredible odds, which posed profound moral dilemmas, there can certainly be no excuse for victimization. The confusion of two kinds of contradiction – those 'between the people and their enemies', and those 'among the people themselves', as delineated in Mao's own *Correctly Handling the Contradictions among the People* (1957) – was unforgiveable. Worse still, the disaster did not stop there. It metamorphosed into a crooked fusion of marketization and bureaucratization as the elites attacked in the Cultural Revolution took a horrendous revenge.

### 'NO ARGUING': THE POLITICS OF CLASS DENIAL

In striking contrast with Maoist ideology and the politics of class struggle, Deng Xiaoping's motto was 'no arguing'. It in effect forbade debating the direction of reform in terms of socialism versus capitalism. At first a pragmatic expedient to deradicalize society, the rule quickly hardened into a dogma of economic development as 'an absolute priority'. Ironically, this ideology against ideology was the product of an intense political struggle in 1978 for 'liberating the mind', with a view to delegitimizing any opposition based on socialist moral concerns – a project that anticipated a second round of the 'end of ideology' drive in the reconfiguration of global economics and politics after the Cold War.<sup>22</sup> Central to the process was a tacit refusal of socialist experiments in general, and a frontal denunciation of class struggle in particular. As a key element in the 'depoliticization of the definition of class', the apolitical Weberian language of 'strata' and 'social stratification' was introduced in public communication.<sup>23</sup> The problem, however, is that even if the narrative of class is subverted, the realities speak for themselves. The manifest return of some pre-revolutionary class divisions during the reforms, along with the important formation of some new classes, cannot in the end be concealed. Officially attempted linguistic remedies, from 'common prosperity' and 'harmonious society' to a shared 'Chinese dream', only serve to uneasily epitomize disparities and disharmony.

Hyper growth in China may have contributed to the impressive reduction of abject poverty and a markedly improved standard of living – a feat largely attributable to the infrastructural groundwork that had been laid before. But that growth is also seriously offset by its grave human, social and environmental costs.<sup>24</sup> As the ideology and practice of egalitarianism were 'rationally' condemned for the sake of efficiency, society became more and

more polarized. By 2011, the richest 10 per cent of Chinese families had an annual income that was 21 times that of the lowest 10 per cent; and the top 20 per cent of average urban incomes were 67 times as high as those of the bottom 20 per cent of average rural incomes. Slowly falling inequalities have been claimed in a few areas, but the overall trend persists, and on regional, sectoral, ethnic and gender lines as well.<sup>25</sup> Especially feeling the pain are workers on low wages or suffering from arrears of wages; peasants working in unprofitable farming or suffering from land loss and social insecurity; and migrant workers struggling to cope with residential discrimination and family separation (leaving behind their children and elderly relatives in the dilapidated villages) on top of exploitation or sweatshop conditions at their workplaces. If labour in the new China had once enjoyed access to the means of production and political recognition, its commodification negates those fundamental gains. In today's media, the 'leading class' (according to the Constitution) of industrial workers becomes one of the country's 'vulnerable social groups'.

China has 600 to 700 million loosely identified 'farmers', referring mostly to the smallholding agricultural producers still working (more or less) on the land after decollectivization. They have experienced post-communal differentiation, as well as altered and multifaceted relationships with the state. The umbrella category of 'peasantry' thus requires a class analysis of its changing composition.<sup>26</sup> The coming of age of new middle peasants is an important example; the emergence of a class of parasitic landlords as rentiers living on the proceeds of land compensation, in a breakneck process of urbanization, is another.<sup>27</sup> Class agency is thus a real question for the unfolding rural struggles from below over land, for security, against privatization or against the big agribusiness preferred by government policy, and so on. To the extent that peasants can and do reorganize themselves in production, consumer, marketing and other cooperatives, while adopting machinery and green technologies, pursuing a capitalist transformation of agriculture is neither rational nor practical. Above all, the impossibility of endless rural migrants finding stable employment in the cities, let alone all depending on global markets for their food needs, makes basic national grain self-sufficiency a necessity. Retaining their equal rights to the use of collective land, and their close ties to urban workers, a major section of the peasants could well re-emerge as an anti-capitalist political force. Such a force would have little to do with pre-capitalist conservatism, but much to do with the distinctive Chinese tradition of peasant revolution and socialism.

The peasant, meanwhile, is an ever more plastic identity in a transitional economy. Of the 50 per cent of the population designated as 'urban' in

2014, a large number are unsettled. They keep travelling to attend to their land in busy agricultural seasons. Conversely, many rural residents take non-farming jobs. This ‘floating’ rural-urban dualism has manifold consequences for class analysis. The continuous loss and shortage of farmland due to urban expansion, together with desertification and soil pollution, threaten livelihoods and national viability. This overriding condition solidifies, and demands a clear conception of, the role of land in China, as a means not just of production but also of subsistence. The fact that migrant workers with urban jobs have largely relied on rural resources for their family’s reproduction explains the existence of a very cheap labour reserve in China’s globalizing market. With the countryside as a social safety valve, the reform regime has enabled global capital to keep exploiting Chinese labour at an extraordinarily high rate.<sup>28</sup> The enormous yet hidden contribution of China’s collective land to global capital’s accumulation and expansion still awaits conceptual exposure.

The reshaping of the ruling classes, on the other hand, has transformed the ‘communist’ state. Precisely where the voice of class is shut out, an unholy alliance of private and bureaucratic capital takes an unprecedented form of class rule, incorporating a wing of media and intellectual clients.<sup>29</sup> In recent decades the private sector has grown spectacularly, taking over more than two-thirds of China’s ‘mixed economy’. Along the way its entrepreneurs – investors and managers, traders, bankers, real estate gamblers, party cadres and academics sitting on boards of trustees – have been politically empowered. Unlike the archetypal indigenous bourgeoisie who sought to ‘save the country through industry’, and also unlike the nationalist capitalists typical of the East Asian developmental states, China’s new bourgeois class consists essentially of profit-seekers. Some were initially enriched by grabbing state assets at knockdown prices during successive waves of privatization. Among these, a particularly notorious example of greed is afforded by the law-breaking ‘coal bosses’ of ‘black mines’ who have dared to turn ‘cheap labour’ into ‘cheap lives’, with record levels of industrial deaths. More recently, improvements may have been made here and there in the mining industry, but occupational diseases and other work-related casualties remain shockingly prevalent across industries.<sup>30</sup> It is true that lacking credits from state banks, and facing fierce competition (including competing unfairly with foreign capital, owing to a perverse policy preference for the latter),<sup>31</sup> small enterprises often find it difficult to thrive. However, the generalization that private entrepreneurship in China is subjugated to state capital is grossly and deliberately misleading, put forward to justify wholesale privatization. Giant, patrimonial private firms have in fact benefited hugely from legalized

or customized special treatment, while obtaining crucial political influence as well.

Among the new elites, the most powerful are those who combine political advantage and economic fortunes in a peculiar market where money and power trade and fuse. A segment of the ‘princelings’ has managed to leverage their ‘background capital’ to amass wealth through exceedingly profitable dealings in such areas as energy, utilities, telecommunications, pharmaceuticals, security, insurance, banking, charity foundations and private equity. They also tend to be compradors or agents of global capital, nurtured by a business environment of ‘attracting foreign investment’ at all cost. The inroads of a deregulated and financialized capitalism, with its local pillars and multinationals increasingly gaining shares in the strategic sectors, have dangerously eroded China’s economic independence and capacity. The ‘bureaucratic-comprador bourgeoisie’ recreated in the process resembles that of the family monopolies under semi-colonialism and the Guomindang kleptocracy, but is far greater in size and power. Potentially belonging to the same class are managers of state-owned conglomerates who are treated like capitalist CEOs. With combined earnings of salary, dividends, bonuses (often paid regardless of performance) and countless sources of grey income, they are paid hundreds of times more than their workers. As such, how public the state sector still is becomes acutely questionable. Clearly, the bizarre duality of bureaucratization and privatization must end. This call for reform, however, must not be confused with neoliberal assaults on public control over the nation’s essential resources and commanding-height industries. Such a sector has to be defended (or achieved), not dismantled. Bureaucratic oligarchy is not to be equated with socialist state capital, in which investment decisions can only be authorized democratically.

Popular antipathy is fuelled also by the political corruption of bribery and patronage networks in appointments and promotions. The communist party’s class basis has undergone a major conversion since it formally welcomed private entrepreneurs into its ranks as ‘advanced elements in the new social strata’ in 2002. The national and local People’s Congresses have gradually been filled with wealthy and well-connected notables. Governmental and legislative positions – such as party secretaries, NPC deputies and/or representatives of the People’s Political Consultative Conference – have been almost overrun by the super rich, who are not only the beneficiaries of a freewheeling ‘civil society’ of asymmetrically powered ‘interest groups’, but are also conspicuously advocates, advisers and indeed decision-makers in the policy process.<sup>32</sup> The extent of the rot is revealed in the scandal in Hunan in 2013 (where 56 delegates from Hengyang region were found to

have bought their way in the provincial People's Congress with big money), on which the media coverage has been loud.<sup>33</sup> Indeed, the party and its disciplinary organs have finally taken on corruption. Its anti-graft campaign remains highly selective, however, being used as a tool in political and power struggles.<sup>34</sup> Rather than solving the problem of corruption, the party-state has turned it into a regular organizational mechanism of bureaucratic capitalism.<sup>35</sup>

In hindsight, then, we can say that since the capitalist market, which has catalyzed a 'peaceful evolution' of regime change in China, was absent at the time of the Cultural Revolution, that revolution was misconceived and premature. Yet, as the 'cadre lords' sitting on the common people's backs have indeed grown in the marketplace and have overwhelmed resistance, the cultural revolutionary theory about a new bourgeoisie forming within the party has been vindicated. The hybrid formation of a monstrous bureaucratic capitalist class is genuinely tragic from a socialist point of view, in the sense that just as such a class is in the process of consolidating its power, another cultural revolution – this time with an actually existing target – is simply not in the cards today.

The ideological suppression of class politics by renouncing the language of class is thus a sign of the ruling order's fear and sense of crisis. Class awareness and mobilization must be averted. The party, after all, has an intimate experience of arising from workers' and peasants' movements, not to mention the terrifying memory of Maoist anti-bureaucratic campaigns. The positivist chimera of a 'normally' modernizing social stratification represents the pressing need for a collective amnesia in face of a capitalist integration that is tearing Chinese society apart. Successive governments have thus tried hard to muffle social criticism and maintain stability by promoting economic booms as much as by using force. Looking at the history of Chinese communist rule, then, one of the most visible and greatest ironies is that class politics and discourse were taken to an extreme when the country was relatively egalitarian, and thoroughly stifled at a time of intense class polarization and conflict.<sup>36</sup> The latter episode, however, is inexorably prompting its own demise, as the return of class is no longer avoidable.

Interestingly, the baffling category of 'middle class' is exempted from the politics of class denial. The imaginary of such a class is associated with the official slogans of modernization, development and social stability, goals that are made absolute and employed to silence or disarm the exploited classes. Conceptually, the middle class is elusive as a fuzzy constitution without clear boundaries. Sociologists disagree on its defining factors, including income, education, occupation, lifestyle and aspiration, and hence

also on any assessment of its size in any given socioeconomic structure. Theoretical difficulties focus on the ‘contradictory class locations’ (in which some find themselves at the intersection of different classes) as well as on spatial disjunction between domination and exploitation in contemporary capitalism.<sup>37</sup> The classical riddles also persist about whether the lower levels of the ‘salaried bourgeoisie’ of lawyers, doctors, managers and the like, or non-manual ‘brain workers’, such as white-collar employees and high-tech professionals, should actually constitute a part of the working class rather than the middle class. The mostly uncritical image of a desirable ‘middle class’ – fluid, obscure and a by-product of basic class positioning in capitalist modernity – compromises the politically charged subtext of class itself.

In a China where capitalist and post-socialist conditions mingle to erode public belief in equality, and to allow policies that produce inequalities, optimism about a middle class is especially problematic. First, such a class is ‘more a discourse than social structure’.<sup>38</sup> Even if middle income earners are all lumped together, they are still proportionally too small to produce any shift towards an ‘olive-shaped’ society. With traditionally protected state workers losing out in the labour market, and with the unrelenting displacement of peasants, the prerequisite for the expansion of a middle class – deproletarianization – is not there. Secondly, any alleged middle class will be too dependent on the state and state-led development to be expected to be politically active. Its identity, if any, can hardly be of a steady class nature, if only because most of the elements assigned to such a class are tied to the establishment. Thirdly, the moderately wealthy can be arrogant and indifferent toward labour and, for that matter, towards the aggrieved rural poor or ethnic minorities. Their lack of a sense of solidarity with other classes has been shown by case after case of urban homeowners demanding that polluting factories should be moved elsewhere, or of gated residential communities asking that ‘low *suzhi*’ (culturally defective) migrants, such as garbage collectors, street vendors and prostitutes, be ‘cleaned up’.<sup>39</sup> And, finally, middle-class models of civil society, citizenship and democracy are often not relevant to, or compatible with, the concerns of the lower classes.<sup>40</sup> In this connection, China’s liberal and neoliberal intellectuals share many biases and weaknesses with an arguably burgeoning middle class. Any projected ‘class power’ of intellectual politics would be illusory or self-deceptive if its ultimate class dependency is forgotten.

## ‘IT IS RIGHT TO REBEL’: LABOUR’S AWAKENING AND THE QUESTION OF CLASS CONSCIOUSNESS

Marx’s two-class theory, previously challenged by a peasant communist revolution, is becoming belatedly resonant in China’s export-manufacturing development, powered by partial proletarianization. The partially proletarianized consist of both traditional state sector workers and the two generations of new workers who have migrated from the countryside. The former have lost both their ‘iron rice bowl’ and their social esteem as hallmarks of Chinese socialism, experiencing in particular privatization-induced unemployment. The latter became the protagonists of assembly factories linked to the global market.<sup>41</sup> In hard times, the ‘petty bourgeoisie’ of technical personnel, small business people and job-hunting college graduates can also be part of the story. *Dagong*, literally ‘selling labour’, is the common (self-)depiction of a commodified labour force and its multilayered members. From 1991 to 2013 there was a huge increase of 269 million in the urban workforce, 85 per cent of which was accounted for by rural immigration.<sup>42</sup> Precarity through ‘informalization’ is preferred in the labour market, and through the ‘casualization’ of employment in the formal economy as well. This has resulted in a swelling pseudo-class of the proletarian ‘precariat’.<sup>43</sup> Consider the case of young unmarried women workers as a transient yet substantial component of migrant labour in both the industrial and service sectors (public and domestic, formal and informal).<sup>44</sup> Exploitation and domination multiply by the intersected class, gender and rural-urban differentiations.

Many other cleavages exist, caused by various differences between public and private firms, contracted and ‘dispatched’ (i.e. subcontracted) jobs and more or less skilled positions. The institutional barriers of residential bifurcation, or work unit-based pay and fringe-benefit differentials, continue to separate workers. Workers also socialize by regional connections and dialect. The changed social contract between workers and a ‘workers’ state’, however, is a common and superseding experience across the board. Particularly worth noting is how China’s educated, healthy and dedicated industrial workforce, nurtured by a high level of human capital investment relevant to a low-level national income before economic reform, has been subjugated. This workforce, rather than anything else, is the country’s truly great comparative advantage and key to explaining its economic growth.<sup>45</sup> But the failure to appreciate this central contribution to industrial policy and public culture is manifested in the way labour is brutally cheapened in a ‘race to the bottom’ to reduce labour costs. Appalling conditions have predictably followed, in terms of long hours, meagre pay, missing or incomplete or



fake contracts, unfulfilled legal requirements by employers to contribute to pension and other welfare funds, unpaid regular work and overwork, job insecurity, workplace hazards and, not least importantly, lack of respect for workers' dignity. Things have been improving in a few aspects under the pressure of labour shortage in coastal regions, and wages are rising. But violations of labour rights remain rampant.

A ruthless pattern has formed in the private sector of working 11 or 12 hours a day, six or seven days a week, lengthy periods of night shifts, restricted living plus routine bullying from harsh shop-floor managers. The pattern has even entrapped student interns and occasionally child labour. A shocking string of suicides at Foxconn in 2010 exposed the extent of abuses and the crimes of a savage labour regime based on collusion between the state and private and foreign capital. The latest surge of labour protests has implicated many more multinationals in an age of global outsourcing. Apart from the Japanese-owned Uniden, a Walmart supplier in Shenzhen, which earlier saw a sporadic five-month strike in 2004, also involved, among others, are Apple, Dell and IBM suppliers (e.g. the Taiwanese-owned Foxconn and Hong Kongese-owned Biel Crystal), Honda plants, Samsung and Flextronics International contractors and Pepsi factories.<sup>46</sup> The Yue Yuen complex in Dongguan, where 40,000 workers went on the largest strike in recent memory in April 2014, supplies products to such footwear giants as Nike, Reebok and Adidas. Conditions in the hidden corners of mining, retailing, construction and service industries tend to be even worse.<sup>47</sup> Even in the public sector, workers are not free from capitalist exploitation and humiliation when the market operates everywhere by the logic of profit.

Class struggle has come to be waged in reality. A once-popular Maoist slogan in line with the ancient idea of the just rebellion against tyranny, 'to rebel is rightful' has returned to vindicate striking workers, revolting peasants and many other protesters and petitioners. Even censored official news outlets admit rising 'mass incidents'. Workers are also getting better organized and more informed about movements elsewhere, near and far, through cell phones, text messages and microblogs (a version of Twitter). In 2012-13, strikes took place in various production sites of Foxconn and Honda. Most recently, workers in a sister factory in Jiangxi acted in solidarity with fellow shoe-making workers on strike in Yue Yuen. Thousands of bus drivers in Shenzhen walked away from work at the same time, as did workers in the China Operations of International Business Machines.

From jumping to kill oneself to collective action for change, what does this development signify? Is it a likely 'historic turning point' for the Chinese working class after decades of defeat, retreat and silence? Is China on its way

to be ‘the world’s class-struggle capital’?<sup>48</sup> While pondering these questions, one must keep in mind the major fact that although official trade unions and government arbitration commissions sometimes side with workers or adopt conciliatory approaches, local authorities often also deploy police to beat and arrest ‘troublemakers’, as they consider labour organizing a major menace to be suppressed, even on occasion preemptively. Thugs are also frequently hired to violently dispel gathering workers. A necessary concern is thus the altered nature of the state apparatus. In a now outmoded but all too apt terminology, Mao predicted that the communist decay would lead not to bourgeois democracy, but to a capitalist and fascist dictatorship.<sup>49</sup>

But despite the new dynamics of popular struggle, the labour movement in particular is caught in a remarkable post-socialist dilemma. The influences from the socialist past interfere in the present, blurring or blending support and control, consent and coercion, on both sides of industrial relations. The state and its corporatist arm, the All China Federation of Trade Unions, require by law a union branch in every minimally sizeable workplace. Such unions are supposed to act on their workers’ behalf and they indeed do, half-heartedly and intermittently, even winning concessions from management.<sup>50</sup> But under a policy guideline that prioritizes a ‘good investment environment’ such unions cannot be the workers’ own, and not just because they hold few democratic elections and barely advance working-class interests. The ambiguity over independent unionization lies in the understanding that it would let a socialist state forgo its moral and material responsibilities for the wellbeing of its workforce. As already evident on the ground, any fair settlement in labour disputes is unlikely, given the sheer imbalance of power between labour and capital. Workers are learning to fight through legal channels only because they have lost a state committed to their fundamental right to both economic security and political recognition.

Most telling is China’s reform of labour legislation in relation to the ‘rule of law’ (which is indispensable for a market economy). The 1994 Labour Law was revised in the 2008 Labour Contract Law, a landmark text for the government’s refusal to side with labour on a moral ground beyond legality. Industrial relations are now straightforwardly a matter of legal and procedural, rather than social, justice. Under the current circumstances, a positive upshot of the law is that it requires the formalization of employment through a labour contract. Such requirement could intensify certain forms of discrimination against those considered less economic to employ (e.g. avoiding the cost of maternity leave by not hiring women), but the majority find the requirement beneficial. However, the law as stipulated on paper is not the same as its enforcement. Without the necessary political will to

enforce the 1994 law, two decades on, China's legal eight-hour workday is still scarcely followed in the low-end private sector. A large number of urban workers remain not formally contracted. In 2013, no less than 82 per cent of forty million construction workers, for instance, had not signed any labour contracts. Their legal appeals to the relevant government agencies were denied consideration precisely on the ground that without detailed rights specified in a contract they were not covered by the protection of the law!<sup>51</sup> The rights of workers in the large informal economy are similarly excluded from the scope of the law. The legalization process itself has also been accompanied by market greed and corruption, which curb the effect of the resulting law.

The problems with a solely legal approach still go farther. Legality is after all also instrumental of containing contentious politics. Insofar as a strike is not really lawful – the clause on the freedom to strike was removed in the 1983 constitutional amendment – strikers can be coerced and their leaders can be sacked or even criminalized or otherwise punished. More subtly, since the legal framework is based on individualized rights, it functions to trim the formation and expression of collective class interests. The Labour Law incorporates workers as atomized contract-takers and market actors essentially subordinated to capital accumulation. Equally problematic is '*weiquan*', or the protection of the right to civic activism. This has attracted much attention from international circles concerned with labour and human rights, but it remains 'a hegemonic discourse propagated by the political and social elites' of middle-class liberals. The campaign for such rights confines disputes and arbitration to an individualistically and reactively framed legal manner. The result 'constitutes a decisive constraint on unions' claims, options, and strategies in their representation efforts'.<sup>52</sup> Just as depoliticized proceduralism treats as inferior the people who ought to be lawmakers themselves (which is after all a fair definition of democracy), unionism or syndicalism cannot be the consciousness of class liberation. A unionized movement for labour rights through 'collective bargaining' may facilitate minor reforms while defusing conscious class struggle.

As workers' outlooks, abilities and militancy in different situations and places develop unevenly, it is difficult to generalize about class consciousness in China. Traditional workers, having lived through class wars and social revolutions, and benefited from honoured entitlements, oppose privatization and its long and painful aftermath. Their nostalgia for the socialist past may involve some romanticization, but mainly they are aware that, beyond individual companies or capitalists, a presently triumphant capitalism has to be countered.<sup>53</sup> This standpoint was made clear, for example, in the 2009

strike in the state-owned Tonghua Steel in Jilin, a major northeastern base of new China's industrialization. New workers, on the other hand, have yet to grasp their own class position independent of the influence of the liberal intellectual 'protectors' of their civic rights. The personal and job mobility and hence fluid identity of younger workers could also be an obstacle to class consciousness, if the classical pattern of working-class formation remains viable at all: class is not fixed at the point of production or distribution. It is formed and transformed culturally as well, and the organization and structure of workers' feelings are fostered by their concentration in shared working and living communities. Three decades into intense market integration, migrant workers have begun to transcend their spontaneous protests over immediate material concerns. The Shenzhen Hengtong rubber factory strike in 2013 was triggered by the installation of cameras to put machine operators under close surveillance without their prior consent. The two groups of workers, traditional and new, are merging in a common search of class subjectivity. The conjuncture of 'state meets capital' – as a worker's poem accurately captures it – necessitates resistance.<sup>54</sup>

At the theoretical level, the long debate in the Marxist canon over Lukács's *History and Class Consciousness* cannot engage us here. Suffice it to note the ongoing relevance of the language of class, of 'commodity fetishism', 'exploitation', 'alienation' and 'surplus value'. It is a conceptual vehicle that workers could employ in surmounting their atomization, dependency and falsely perceived powerlessness. The existing social order is certainly not 'natural' or impossible to resist. China's positioning in the capitalist world does not have to be what it is. And class struggle is the only decisive way for the working class, in 'conscious actions', to defy 'the fate of history'. Whether class consciousness is 'imputed' from within or injected from outside, it is in the practice of class politics that a working class engages in its own making, that it 'historically happens'.<sup>55</sup> However, if class consciousness is both contingent and dependent on the ideological rhythm of class struggle, questions concerning the party and party-class relations remain pivotal. Any new 'modern prince' must still clarify its relationship with the 'popular state' on one hand and the working class on the other.<sup>56</sup> This is highly relevant because of Chinese particularities – the communist party's world historical defeat in its voluntary or suicidal surrender to global capitalism. Yet in light of the party's ability to contrive a unique and brilliant answer to these questions in the earlier revolutionary practices of party construction and the mass line, it is fair to ask whether it really has terminally exhausted its internal and external resources of renovation.

‘POLITICS IN COMMAND’: THE STATE, DISCURSIVE POWER  
AND THE RETURN OF CLASS POLITICS

It would be a serious error to treat the question of class and class consciousness in China as something new, forgetting its invaluable national and local histories. That is, at issue in the current Chinese context is not only a ‘retreat from class’; it is also the overturning of class power itself. This power was brought into being, in however limited ways, by the communist revolution. Its dismantling is measured by the destruction of the party-state’s popular base. This loss of a socialist state, along with the party and its cultural capital and ideological supremacy, is catastrophic for the labouring classes. For a hitherto oppressed people, losing a hard-won state of its own – real or perceived – is losing the whole lot. Differences among modern states, or between variously socialist or variously capitalist natures of a state, have a huge impact on society and the conditions of existence of social classes. Globalization may have generally impinged on the autonomy and capacity of national states; the domestic labour regime under state purview is still what affects workers most.

The notion of state manipulation or management of class is part of a broader theoretical consensus that modernity in general and capitalism in particular have needed state sponsorship from the outset. The territorial state was the ‘ultimate linchpin’ of capitalist development, not least because capital expansion required a unified national market as well as political power to survive class antagonism.<sup>57</sup> The structural versus instrumentalist interpretations of the state is the focus of several influential debates among Marxists. Concerning the ruling communists as modernizers more specifically, the competing conceptions of state socialism and state capitalism are both pertinent, and the thesis concerning the social democratic state’s ‘structural dependence on capital’ might be borrowed as well.<sup>58</sup> Whatever the theory, empirical observations strongly support the claim that to a large degree the communist party-state controls class differentiation or reconstruction through directing class designations, regulating class relations, containing class conflicts and indeed suppressing class foes.<sup>59</sup> Also likely is a dialectical interaction between a state ‘determining’ the compass of class, and a class ‘ruling’ by its embodiment in state machinery and policymaking. The state is ‘coloured’ accordingly by the dominant class. The awesome power of the post-revolutionary state is part of the story of ‘socialism and backwardness’ defying the standard contours of history. That such a state has mutated into a comprador-bureaucratic tyranny in China is an indicator of the impact states can have on class structures. But allowing conceptually for a far-reaching state role in class formation and relationships, and rejecting the notion that

the state is a neutral force above classes, should not lead to substituting the state for the relations of production. The autonomy of the state remains relative. What recent Chinese history does underline is the expansive reach of the PRC state, aided by its ideological discourse of either class struggle (in the Mao era) or class evasion (in post-Mao reactions).

To achieve clarity about class politics in today's China means, then, seeing popular struggle to restore socialist fundamentals as requiring a phased and probably lengthy process of recreating the party and recapturing the state. The reality is that vested interests have grown so entwined with a still nominally socialist party-state that the latter becomes their best guarantor, even their hostage. On the one hand, the ideology of the 'free' market masks or 'rationalizes' private looting of public assets. On the other, more than a matter of compatibility, neoliberal policies depend on a dictatorial power to be implemented. China's ever more sweeping economic neoliberalization (as shown in Beijing's latest policy package announced in early 2014) only reconfirms this pattern of 'growth' and the class essence of the regime. If reform was initially validated by the crisis of Chinese socialism, the present crises of Chinese capitalism are forcing a reorientation, discarding the imposed rule of 'no arguing'. Such a reorientation would in turn necessitate a reappropriation of the language of socialism. It would naturally begin with an accurate articulation of class conditions and positions since 'it is the discursive structure of political language which conceives and defines [class] interest'. To the extent that language 'as a process of signification' is itself a form of social being, and that the struggle over the 'ideological state apparatus' is necessarily communicative, class analysis is bound to be discursively contentious.<sup>60</sup> Not surprisingly, 'discursive hegemony' has been a catchphrase in Chinese internet complaints since the turn of the century. The renaissance of a class vocabulary must abandon all accumulated baggage of arbitrariness or 'left infantilism'. But for the education and organization of workers, it has to be reutilized since the 'materiality of language itself' has been so powerfully demonstrated throughout China's modern transformations.<sup>61</sup>

'Politics in command' must also be reappropriated. The Maoist idiom was spelled out by the centrality of class struggle, and premised on a decisive role of the party line and cadres. It was also intimately associated with the 'mass line' as a most creative and successful method of the revolution.<sup>62</sup> The usual perception of the mass line as either a condescending elitist tool or a form of populist voluntarism is misguided. It is instead based on a conviction in the agency of the common people and embedded in the project and language of class liberation. It thus cannot be transferable without these contextual references. Since the communist party no longer has any distinct ideological

position, and the traditional party-mass relationship no longer exists, the 'mass line' verbally picked up by Xi Jinping sounds merely hollow. It contradicts the corruption-tainted images of officials head-on, and is entirely alien to an all-pervasive monoculture of money and political cynicism. It is also incompatible with the vulnerability of labour and the glamorized hegemonic notion of an all-virtuous market.

To reaccentuate politics is then to seek a counter-transformation of society as much as of perceptions. Just like the formation of conscious classes, the remaking of the masses as a political subject is a process of political struggle, one which would necessarily involve channelling energy and skills toward rebuilding the party with the goal of giving power to the people. This is feasible as a democratic project since the rank-and-file party members are themselves among the masses who need to rise up, although sympathetic elements at all levels of the party would need to be engaged. This would of course have to entail unpacking the meaning of 'democracy' in the shallow and complacent discourse of the mainstream framing of 'political reform', based as it is on capitalist integration. Democracy in China, perhaps more than in those countries which lack a revolutionary socialist experience, needs to be closely guided by the ideas of equality and social justice. Especially in view of the existing state-capital coalition, which could well survive or even control an electoral political process, formal democracy alone will be useless for the working classes concerned with the means of production and surplus retention. The only meaningful measurement instead is whether and how well collective preferences of the common people are articulated and translated into state power and policies.

If neither capitalism nor socialism is teleological, and if class identities and alignment are also open ended, then winning the battle for ideas is where a transformative politics could attract popular agents. Notwithstanding unsolved conceptual issues of unprecedented class differentiations in the 'knowledge economy', the more complex new division of labour in today's 'cognitive capitalism' may be 'changing the balance of forces back in favour of producers'.<sup>63</sup> As a 'hi-tech proletariat' and a 'biopolitical' and 'cyber-productive' labour force grows, the ever more digital and immaterial nature of production and management erodes capital's ability to exploit this new workforce in the way it does with traditional wage labour. More broadly, the inclusive concept of 'classes of labour' comprises all of those who depend directly or indirectly on selling their labour power for their own daily reproduction. A similar Chinese term is the 'labouring people' (*laodong renmin*), which encompasses the vast majority of the population, including the large sections of the 'semi-proletarianized petty bourgeoisie'.<sup>64</sup> Another

comparable but also distinct identity is ‘commoners’ as producers and consumers as well as democratic agents, which presupposes the construction of the commons.<sup>65</sup> This could be the closest to the Marxian generic identification of ‘direct producers’ reworked against a backdrop of advanced productive forces and socialization of production. Politically, the vast and plurally constituted mass of ‘plebeians’ do not necessarily undermine class analysis and strategy, since class provides a ‘compass of orientation – towards the classes of the people, the exploited, oppressed and disadvantaged in all their variety’.<sup>66</sup> The theoretical question is whether or where ‘class’ ends in such articulations. The conceptual fact that in Maoist discourse ‘class’ is core to the ‘masses’ should be instructive. If Marx privileges the working class in terms of its acquiring consciousness, it is possible to argue that certain other subject positions, such as women facing patriarchy or minorities confronting majority chauvinism, can be privileged in their own ways. Such social groups acquire the consciousness of their suppression in a similar way to workers. That is, their identities may possess a class feature or multiple class features – women, ethnic minorities or migrants could be proper classes understood in their respective relational positions in the given political economy.<sup>67</sup> The point specific to China is then that capitalism is pushing the exploited and oppressed people together into a gigantic political force for reclaiming socialism.

China’s landscape of class has twice been transformed since 1949, through a sequence of socioeconomic and political upheavals that have also been marked by a shifting discourse of class. While in the official rhetoric the term ‘socialism’ is ever emptier, it makes real sense as a protest language in labour and other resistance movements. However, as certain formal commitments and provisions to the labouring classes under the rubric of socialism have not been totally repudiated, they should be defended in the interest of reinstating or establishing class power. The remaking of the state and party must begin with winning back their original constituencies. The fact that the state, despite being aggressively interventionist, can hardly contain mounting social unrest indicates the inevitable return of class identities and politics. The latter is necessarily transformative for an alternative social order in which political power serves the people, and needs dominate profit. This would be a ‘war of position’ by the common people around organized labour and in alliance with their counterparts in other countries. The tragic course of capitalism with Chinese characteristics and its vicious human and ecological impacts must and can be reversed.



## NOTES

- 1 Eli Friedman, 'China in Revolt', *Jacobin: A Magazine of Culture and Polemic*, 7-8, 2012.
- 2 Among many discussions on the retreat of gender equality in China, the works cited below focus on women workers who embody both gender and class identities. For the worsening ethnic relations in recent years, see Lin Chun, 'Modernity and the violence of global accumulation: the ethnic question in China', forthcoming in Breno Bringel and Mauricio Domingues, eds., *Global Modernity and Social Contestation*, London: Sage, 2015.
- 3 Karl Marx, 'Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right', in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Selected Works in One Volume*, London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1968, p. 219.
- 4 As Marx observed, bourgeois revolutions always advance backwards, breaking into the future with their eyes turned to the past. With an illusion of liberty, it could only liberate men from feudal relations, and then subject them to a new, bourgeois-capitalist mode of exploitation. See Louis Althusser, *Machiavelli and Us*, London: Verso, 1999, pp. 49-50.
- 5 See especially Mao Zedong, 'An Analysis of Classes in China' (1926), 'The Strategic Questions of the Chinese Revolutionary War' (1936), 'The Chinese Revolution and the Chinese Communist Party' (1939) and 'On New Democracy' (1940), in *The Selected Works of Mao Zedong, vol. 1 and 2*, Beijing: People's Publishing House, 1991.
- 6 Most recently, for example, see Neil Davidson, *How Revolutionary were the Bourgeois Revolutions?*, Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2012, p. 252; and Neil Faulkner, *A Marxist History of the World: From Neanderthals to Neoliberals*, London: Pluto, 2013, p. 256. Both fail to recognize what was fundamentally new about an otherwise 'bourgeois' revolution in China.
- 7 As Trotsky explains, 'the privilege of historic backwardness ... permits, or rather compels the adoption of whatever is ready in advance of any specified date, skipping a whole series of intermediate stages'. Hence, this 'leads necessarily to a peculiar combination of different stages in the historic process'. Leon Trotsky, *History of the Russian Revolution*, Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1961, pp. 4-5.
- 8 Ernest Gellner, in a different theoretical context, once observed that 'only when a nation became a class ... did it become politically conscious and activist ... [as] a nation-for-itself'. Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, Oxford: Blackwell, 2006, pp. 116-7.
- 9 Faulkner, *A Marxist History of the World*, p. 257; Davidson, *How Revolutionary were the Bourgeois Revolutions?*, pp. 252, 621.
- 10 See the established scholarship in China studies represented by the leading experts since John King Fairbank.
- 11 Maurice Meisner, 'The Wrong March: China Chooses Stalin's Way', *The Progressive*, 26 October 1986.
- 12 Mark Selden, 'Cooperation and Conflict: Cooperative and Collective Formation in China's Countryside', in Mark Selden and Victor Lippit, eds., *The Transition to Socialism in China*, Armonk, NY: ME Sharpe, 1982, p. 85.

- 13 John Starr, *Continuing the Revolution: The Political Thought of Mao*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979. Mao's concern with the consolidation and development of socialism through a continuing revolution can be seen as another version of seeking 'the Machiavellian moment', as discussed in Althusser, *Machiavelli and Us*.
- 14 Jonathan Unger, *The Transformation of Rural China*, Armonk, NY: ME Sharp, 2002, pp. 29, 223.
- 15 See especially Richard Kraus, 'Class Conflict and the Vocabulary of Social Analysis in China', *The China Quarterly*, 69(March), 1977.
- 16 Mao's thoughts as recounted in this paragraph are systematically annotated and analyzed in Stuart Schram, *The Thought of Mao Tse-Tung*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989, part 2.
- 17 Mao's ideas might have directly influenced the Foucauldian critique of 'knowledge/power', but certainly went deeper for their distinctly class oriented insight.
- 18 'Speech at the Extended Central Work Conference', 30 Jan 1962, *Selected Writings of Mao, vol. 8*, Beijing: People's Publishing House, 1999.
- 19 John Gittings, *Survey of the Sino-Soviet Dispute: A Commentary and Extracts from the Recent Polemics, 1963-1967*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968.
- 20 Alessandro Russo, 'The Probable Defeat: Preliminary Notes on the Chinese Cultural Revolution', *Positions*, 6(1), 1998, pp. 185-6.
- 21 And, 'in terms of the socialist promise of liberation, a revolution orchestrated by those in positions of absolute authority is a contradiction in terms'. Arif Dirlik, 'Back to the Future: Contemporary China in the Perspective of Its Past, circa 1980', *Boundary 2*, 38(1), 2011, pp. 24-5 (written in 1981).
- 22 Michael Burawoy, 'Neoclassical Sociology: From the End of Communism to the End of Classes', *American Journal of Sociology*, 106(4), 2001, pp. 1099-1100.
- 23 Dirlik, 'Back to the Future', p. 16. See also Wang Hui, 'The Crisis of Representativeness and Post-Party Politics', *Modern China*, 40(2), 2014, p. 238; and Ann Anagnost, 'From "Class" to "Social Strata": Grasping the Social Totality in Reform-era China', *Third World Quarterly*, 29(3), 2008, pp. 497-9.
- 24 Minqi Li and Dale Wen, 'China: Hyper-Development and Environmental Crisis', *Socialist Register 2007*, London: Merlin Press, 2006. Questionable is development itself, an internalized assumption in both capitalism and socialism of overcoming 'the anguish of backwardness'.
- 25 *China News Net*, 18 January 2013; Wang Xiaolu, 'Measuring the Width of the Wealth Gap' and 'The Wealth Gap: Identifying the Problem, Proposing Reforms', *Caixin*, 23 and 27 September 2013. The Gini coefficient data (approaching 0.5 throughout the years in the new century) published by the National Bureau of Statistics and analyzed in the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences annual blue books 'tend to be underestimated because of uncounted grey income and raging corruption statistics'. Ma Jiantang, Bureau Chief, 'The Real Problem with those Gini Numbers', *Caixin*, 5 February 2013.
- 26 This formulation disregards any conceptual difference between 'peasants' and 'farmers', and indeed both would need further discussions in class terms. A more relevant point is their attachment to the land due to a hard demographic constraint in China on conventional modernization.

- 27 The level and sources of income could be most indicative of the structural locations in production and productive relations. See He Xuefeng, 'Who are the Peasants?', *Economic Guide*, March 2014; Henry Bernstein, "'The Peasantry" in Global Capitalism: Who, Where and Why?', *Socialist Register 2001*, London: Merlin Press, 2000.
- 28 The share of 1.2 million Chinese workers in the 2012 profit report on Apple iPhones was only 1.8 per cent, for example. Joint University Student Investigation Team, 'Foxconn, Have you Righted your Wrongs?', *References*, Beijing Huayan Research 11, 18 March 2014.
- 29 'As political families move into business, private tycoons are entering the political sphere'. James Areddy and James Grimaldi, 'Defying Mao, Rich Chinese Crash the Communist Party', *The Wall Street Journal*, 26 December 2012. See also Bruce Dickson, 'Integrating Wealth and Power in China: The Communist Party's Embrace of the Private Sector', *China Quarterly*, 192(December), 2007.
- 30 See for example *China's Work Safety Yearbook 2012*, Beijing: China Coal Industry Press, 2013; and Ann Herbert et al., 'National Profile Report on Occupational Safety and Health in China', Geneva: ILO, 2012.
- 31 This is seen in 'the tax system, subsidies, trade regulations, and access to finance' to the extent that 'domestic and foreign capital effectively operated within different legal parameters' with 'the more favorable laws applied to foreign, not domestic capital'. Leo Panitch and Sam Gindin, *The Making of Global Capitalism: The Political Economy of American Empire*, London: Verso, 2012, p. 296.
- 32 Seven of the nation's richest multibillionaires attended the 18<sup>th</sup> party congress in 2012. In the same year, one-third of China's quasi-capitalists were party members, while many also assumed the position of party secretary in their own companies. See the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, *Blue Book*, 2013; *The Southern Metropolis Daily*, 20 December 2012; Tyler Cowen, 'China Fact of the Day', *Marginal Revolution*, 27 February 2012; John Garnut, 'The Rot Inside', *The Age*, 14 April 2012; David Barboza, 'Billions in Hidden Riches for Family of Chinese Leaders', *New York Times*, 25 October 2012; Stephen Aldred and Irene Jay Liu, 'The Princeling of Private Equity', *Reuters*, 9 April 2014. In rural China, too, business people took party posts in villages and townships through votes for abilities or bribes. Yan Xiaojun, 'To Get Rich is Not only Glorious: Economic Reform and the New Entrepreneurial Party Secretaries', *China Quarterly*, 100(2), 2012.
- 33 Zhang Lu, 'Hengyang Bribery Not an Isolated Phenomenon', *Caijing.com.cn*, 25 February 2014.
- 34 The Bo Xilai case is a good example. See Yuezhi Zhao, 'The struggle for Socialism in China: The Bo Xilai saga and beyond', *Monthly Review*, 64(5), 2012.
- 35 Maurice Meisner, *The Deng Xiaoping Era: An Inquiry into the Fate of Chinese Socialism, 1978-94*, New York: Hill & Wang, 1996, pp. 300-45. In addition, 'patrimonial capitalism' and 'crony capitalism' focus on personal and family networks of the system. According to reports by the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists, the Chinese political and corporate elites, including

- relatives of top leaders, have used offshore companies to secretly store their fortunes. An estimated one to four trillion dollars in untraced assets has been moved out of China since 2000. Oliver Campbell, *World Socialist Web Site*, 30 January 2014.
- 36 Zhao Yuezhi, 'Communication, the Nexus of Class and Nation, and Global Divides: Reflections on China's Post-Revolutionary Experiences', *Nordicom Review*, 30(Jubilee Issue), 2009, p. 97.
- 37 Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, London: Routledge, 1986, ch. 2; Erik Olin Wright et al., *The Debate on Classes*, London: Verso, 1989, pp. 4-6, 24-8.
- 38 David Goodman, 'Dreams and Aspirations', *Journal of Chinese Political Science*, 19(1), 2014, p. 49; Yingjie Guo, 'Farewell to Class, except the Middle Class: The Politics of Class Analysis in Contemporary China', *The Asia-Pacific Journal*, 26(2), 2009.
- 39 On *suzhi* as a discursive operator in the neoliberal governance of labour migration, see Yan Hairong, *New Masters, New Servants: Migration, Development, and Women Workers in China*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008, ch. 3. Treatises based on a class analysis of prostitution in China for and by migrant workers are still lacking. In a recent popular television show, middle-class professionals openly lectured workers to not complain – 'do not use the word "exploitation" so easily, and learn to be thankful to your bosses who give your jobs'. The audience applauded approvingly, leaving the few workers who managed to tell just a tiny bit of their misery speechless, almost in tears.
- 40 As Maurice Meisner puts it, 'any serious impetus for democratic change will more likely come from the victims, not the beneficiaries, of state-sponsored capitalism'. 'Capitalism, Communism, and Democracy in China: A Review Essay', *The Progressive*, 71(11), 2007, p. 41.
- 41 Forty million state workers were laid off during 'urban restructuring' in the 1990s. See Thomas Gold, William Hurst, Jaeyon Won and Li Qiang, eds., *Laid-off Workers in a Workers' State: Unemployment with Chinese Characteristics*, London: Palgrave, 2009. The parallel processes of old and new workers in the declining industrial base and a new manufacturing sector respectively are captured in structural overview and personal details in Chin Kwan Lee, *Against the Law: Labor Protests in China's Rustbelt and Sunbelt*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007.
- 42 State Council news conference reported in the *People's Daily*, 21 February 2014. Manufacturing employment has begun to shrink as shown in the newest trend of migrants landing in service jobs more than in factories.
- 43 Eli Friedman and Ching Kwan Lee, 'Remaking the World of Chinese Labor: A 30-Year Retrospective', *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, 48(3), 2010. As Bryan Palmer argues, precariousness cannot be taken to found a separate and distinct class formation. 'Reconsiderations of Class: Precariousness as Proletarianization', *Socialist Register 2014*, London: Merlin Press, 2013. For the debate, see a useful discussion of 'job classes' versus 'jobless classes' by Philippe Van Parijs, 'A Revolution in Class Theory', in Wright, *Debate on Classes*, ch. 6.

- 44 They are 'triple coerced by global capitalism, the "socialist" state, and familial patriarchy'. Pun Ngai, *Made in China: Women Factory Workers in a Global Workplace*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005, pp. 2, 12-15. See also, Yan, *New Masters, New Servants*.
- 45 Lin Chun, 'What Is China's "Comparative Advantage"?', in T. Y. Cao, ed., *The Chinese Model of Modern Development*, London: Routledge, 2005.
- 46 There were 202 industrial relations disputes or conflicts in the first quarter of 2014 alone, a 30 per cent increase from the same period in 2013. See Pun Ngai and Jenny Chan, 'Global Capital, the State, and Chinese Workers: The Foxconn Experience', *Modern China*, 38(4), 2012; Jenny Chan, Pun Ngai and Mark Selden, 'Apple et al Create New Working Class', *Asia Times Online*, 29 August 2013; and regular analyses in the *China Labor Bulletin* and on the *World Socialist Web Site*.
- 47 Pun Ngai et al., 'The China Dream of a Contract: Investigation in the Situation of Labour Contract for Construction Workers in 2013', *References*, 20 Feb 2014; and 'The Living Conditions of Miners in a State Owned Coal Company', *21com.net*, 27 March 2014.
- 48 Mike Davis, 'Spring Confronts Winter', *New Left Review*, 72(November/December), 2011, p. 15; Minqi Li, 'The Rise of the Working Class and the Future of the Chinese Revolution', *Monthly Review*, 63(2), 2011.
- 49 Mao, 'Speech at the Extended Central Work Conference', and 'A Comment on Cadres Participating in Manual Labour in Zhejiang', in *The Writings of Mao Zedong since the Founding of the People's Republic, vol. 10*, Beijing: Central Wenxian Publisher, 1998, pp. 297 and 293.
- 50 China's Trade Union Law (crafted in 1992 and revised in 2001 and 2009) confirms that the unions represent voluntarily associated workers. Its requirement on elected unions has made Walmart among others comply. Among the most optimistic observations, Wadi'h Halabi sees China as a 'union risen to state power' vis-à-vis world capitalism and Chinese unions as a genuine working-class organization and a 'subcommittee of this union in state power'. 'Question of Unions: Understanding China and its Unions', *Political Affairs*, 27 March 2014.
- 51 Pun et al., 'The China Dream of a Contract'. According to Philip Huang, full time, formally contracted labour is less than 10 per cent of China's combined workforce, urban and rural; and the country's formal economy accounts for only 16.8 per cent of total employment. 'Misleading Chinese Legal and Statistical Categories: Labour, Individual Entities, and Private Enterprises', *Modern China*, 39(4), 2013.
- 52 Ching Kwan Lee, 'From the Specter of Mao to the Spirit of the Law: Labor Insurgency in China', *Theory and Society*, 31, 2002, p. 197; Anita Chan and Kaxton Siu, 'Class Consciousness of Chinese Migrant Workers in the Pearl River Delta', *Forum Arbeitswelten*, April 2011; Kevin Gray, 'Labour and the State in China's Passive Revolution', *Capital & Class*, 34(3), pp. 450, 459-60.
- 53 See a case analysis by Lu Xinyu, 'Ruins of the Future: Class and History in Wang Bing's Tiexi District', *New Left Review*, 31(January/February), 2005.

- 54 'We miners toil to dig out black coal, in the dark; darkness betrays the sun'. 'Long live the miners', quoted in Pun Ngai, 'Miners in the Historical Tunnel: Back to the State or Forward to the Market?', *References*, 18, 25 April 2014. An even more politically explicit poem found in a factory dormitory in 1995 reads:  
 We are a mass of *dagongzai* [young men who sell labour]  
 Coming from the north, coming from the west  
 At first we didn't know what *dagongzai* meant  
 Now we know, toiling from the sunrise to the sunset  
 Toiling with drops of blood and sweat  
 Selling our labour to the boss, selling our bodies to the factory  
 Do what they dictate to you, no negotiation, no bargaining, but obey  
 Money is the magic, and what the capitalists bestow on you  
 A commodity, a commodity (quoted in Pun, *Made in China*, p. 23).
- 55 Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, London: Merlin, 1971, p. 178. E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968, pp. 35–6, 213. A focal point of debates centres on Lukács's 'idealist' horizon in relation to Lenin's unity of class consciousness and the party. For a summary of the critiques, see Terry Eagleton, *Ideology: An Introduction*, London: Verso, 2007, pp. 94–104. See also John Rees's introduction to Lukács, *A Defense of History and Class Consciousness: Tailism and the Dialectic*, London: Verso, 2000.
- 56 For Antonio Gramsci, the proletarian political party is 'the first cell containing the germs of collective will which are striving to become universal and total'. But when such a party is 'no longer recognized as the proper expression of their class', a crisis of opposition between 'represented and representatives' occurs. The bureaucracy of the party then becomes 'the most dangerously habitual and conservative force; ... standing by itself and feeling independent from the masses, the party ends by becoming anachronistic'. Antonio Gramsci, *The Modern Prince and Other Writings*, New York: International Publishers, 1959, pp. 137, 174–5. This turns out to be rather accurate about the Chinese situation today.
- 57 Henry Heller, *The Birth of Capitalism: A Twenty-First-Century Perspective*, London: Pluto, 2011, p. 4. The early modern state in Europe provided an essential container for the emergence of capitalism, as seen in the British state's mediation between the landed and manufacturing bourgeoisie against workers (ch.1 and pp. 210–13). See, more generally, Perry Anderson, *Lineages of the Absolutist State*, London: Verso, 1979. Critical of 'class determinism' at the expense of state, Ellen Wood argues that that the state, understood broadly as an institution of public power, 'has not emerged from class-divisions but has, on the contrary, produced class-divisions and hence also produced the state in the narrow sense'. Ellen Meiksins Wood, *The Ellen Meiksins Wood Reader*, Leiden: Brill, 2012, p. 195.
- 58 Adam Przeworski and Michael Wallerstein, 'Structural Dependence of the State on Capital', *American Political Science Review*, 82(1), 1988.
- 59 Ivan Szelenyi, 'A Theory of Transition', *Modern China*, 34(1), 2008.

- 60 Gareth Stedman Jones, *Languages of Class: Studies in English Working Class History, 1832-1982*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983, pp. 21-2; Joan W. Scott, 'On Language, Gender, and Working Class History', *International Labor and Working Class History*, 31(Spring), 1987, pp. 4-6. It was Maoist politics that pioneered the revolutionary practice of translating ideology into the local lexicon and everyday communication in mass mobilization for social change.
- 61 Scott, 'On Language', p. 5.
- 62 Jack Gray, 'Politics in Command: The Maoist Theory of Social Change and Economic Growth', *Political Quarterly*, 45(1), 1974; Maurice Meisner, 'Leninism and Maoism: Some Populist Perspectives on Marxism-Leninism in China', *China Quarterly*, 45(January/March), 1971.
- 63 Heller, *The Birth of Capitalism*, p. 209. Hardt notes how 'rent' increasingly replaces conventional 'profit' in the hi-tech sectors, where the producers could subvert capitalism ('Production of the Common', in Costas Douzinas and Slavoj Žižek, eds., *The Idea of Communism*, London: Verso, 2010, p. 137). More generally, any rigid defence of private property is flawed due to the trend of socialization of capital and market. See Jeremy Rifkin, *The Third Industrial Revolution: How Lateral Power is Transforming Energy, the Economy, and the World*, London: Palgrave, 2013, pp. 218-21.
- 64 Henry Bernstein, *Class Dynamics of Agrarian Change*, Sterling, VA: Kumarian Press, 2010; Philip Huang, 'Re-knowing China's Labouring People: Historical Evolution of Labour Legislation and the Present Informal Economy', *Open Times*, 5, 2013.
- 65 Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Declaration*, New York: Argo-Navis, 2012, p. 104. Their more influential and controversial concept is the 'multitude': whereas 'the people' is formed as a unity by a hegemonic power, 'the multitude is formed through articulations on the plane of immanence without hegemony'. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Commonwealth*, Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2011, p. 169.
- 66 Göran Therborn notes especially the largely extra-capitalist, critical force made up of the hundreds of millions of landless peasants, casual labourers and the slum populations as destabilizing for capitalism in his 'Class in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century', *New Left Review*, 78(November/December), 2012, pp. 26, 29; and 'New masses?', *New Left Review*, 85(January/February), 2014.
- 67 As Henri Lefebvre puts it in *The Production of Space*, 'the forms of the class struggle are now more varied than formerly', which 'implies the mobilization of differences in a single moment'. Quoted in Neil Smith, *Uneven Development: Nature, Capital, and the Production of Space*, Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2008, pp. 227-8.