The Proletariat Is Dead, Long Live the Proletariat!

Ivan FRANCESCHINI and Christian SORACE

> 'The workers at Changxindian saw us arriving and were very welcoming and cordial to us. We saw them as friendly brothers, too, and there was fraternity among the workers themselves. I was rather fond of the solidarity and unity. I often resent how heartless people nowadays in society can be, cheating and battling each other, so the harmony and solidarity among the Changxindian workers gave me infinite hope.'
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> — Deng Zhongxia, 1920[1]

Deng Zhongxia was twenty-six when he wrote these words. Forged in the fire of the May Fourth Movement, he was one of the earliest student activists to discover Marxism and glimpse the potential of the Chinese working class to bring forth revolutionary change in a country marred by profound social and political divisions.[2] With other young students, he would visit the workers of Changxindian in their workshops of the northern section of the Beijing–Hankou railway. He and his comrades established a night school where they provided literacy classes and more advanced political training for workers. As the workers learned how to read and write and acquired a basic understanding of Marxist politics, the student activists gained first-hand knowledge of the plight of the Chinese working class, its potential and limitations. The exchange was so successful that in the summer of 1921, when Marxist groups from all over the country gathered to establish the Chinese Communist Party, the founding resolution stressed the indispensable role of education in order to raise the class consciousness of workers.

Fast forward to one century later. On the afternoon of 6 August 2018, outside a police station in Shenzhen, a crowd of onlookers watched as workers, university students, retired state employees, and even old Communist cadres, made speeches to protest against the recent arrests of several workers who were involved in a unionisation campaign at Jasic, a welding equipment manufacturer with around one thousand employees.[3] As portraits of Mao Zedong appeared among the crowd and participants

wore T-shirts with black-and-white sketches of their detained comrades accompanied by the words 'Solidarity Is Power' in red, several speeches exalted the importance of the unity between workers and intellectuals. As one of the orators said: 'Today's students are tomorrow's workers.' Unbeknownst to the onlookers, the Jasic unionisation campaign and the ensuing mobilisation was the result of a deliberate strategy by Marxist students who had entered the factory as early as 2016 to operate as underground labour organisers in order to plan confrontational collective action.[4] The response of the Chinese Communist Party was swift and brutal, with students belonging to Marxist groups in several universities throughout the country who had joined the Jasic campaign, or simply expressed support for it, subjected to surveillance, discipline, and intimidation.[5]

As we write from Canberra and Colorado Springs during a global pandemic in 2021, we are brought to reflect on these two anecdotes that mark the origin and present of the Chinese Communist Party in its first one hundred years of existence. This century has seen what is now one of the largest and most powerful political parties on earth transform from a revolutionary organisation whose foundations were built on the promise of the emancipation of the working class and pursuit of an alternative to capitalist modernity, into a capitalist machine decorated with socialist ornamentation that violently crushes any expression of labour organisation and working-class solidarity. How to explain this *volte-face*, and what it has meant, at different moments in history, for the lives of Chinese workers?

Any account, or collection of accounts, of history faces what Rebecca Karl describes as 'the problem of narration': 'Which facts do we use to tell our story? How is the story organized? In whose voice is it told?'[6] In the case of labour history in the People's Republic of China, the politics of representation turn on the question of the relationship between the Communist Party and the working class. Is the Party a conduit of worker voices, which might otherwise be inaudible without its amplification? Or is it a ventriloquist whose script dominates what can be said and who must remain silent? Prior to 1949, what kinds of dreams, longings, and demands animated workers? How were these realised, or disappointed, after workers' supposed liberation in 1949? How does China's role in global capitalism transform, and mediate, the relationship between the Party and Chinese workers?

This book does not attempt to harmonise the polyphonic voices, dialects, and silences of Chinese workers and their interlocutors by providing yet another master narrative. We are not seeking to replace the stentorian

'official' voice of the Communist Party with 'authentic' voices from the grassroots, let alone offer our own non-diegetic voice-over narration. Rather, in editing this volume, our hope is to bring into conversation different perspectives from China's past and present about the central role of the working class and its future in China and the world. But the fraught question of representation and narration raises a much thornier, profound, and fundamental conceptual problem: *who is the Proletariat*?

The Birth Pangs of the Chinese Proletariat

What do workers belonging to different geographies and moments in history share in common? What do weavers in textile mills in the 1940s in Shanghai have in common with today's migrant construction workers building China's gleaming cosmopolitan cities? What does a Communist militant being persecuted by the Nationalist Party in the early twentieth century have in common with a labour organiser being repressed by the Communist Party in the twenty-first century? The common denominator between these very different situations can be found under the signifier of the 'Proletariat'.

The very title of this book—*Proletarian China*—represents a conscious effort to retrieve the concept of 'Proletariat' from the dustbin of history. Although there have always been and will always be workers, the Proletariat is a relatively recent political and conceptual invention, naming an organised working class in revolutionary struggle against the bourgeois, whose historic mission is to bring about a transition to Communism. In Mandarin, Proletariat is translated as 无产阶级—the 'propertyless class'—faithful to Marx and Engels' definition in the *Communist Manifesto* as the class with 'nothing to lose but their chains'.[7] The Proletariat, then, is the name for a subject awaiting its birth. As Jacques Rancière argues in *The Philosopher and His Poor*, 'the Proletariat exists only by virtue of its inscription in the Book of Science'—Marx's *Capital*.[8] In the formation of the Proletariat, empirical workers with varying interests and backgrounds become a class acting for-itself as a political subject. Unable to give birth to itself, the Proletariat requires a midwife, an organised political party to compose, as Hobbes described of the Leviathan, an artificial body from 'the motley crowd of laborers'—an inorganic body constantly threatened with 'decomposition into simple individuals,' doubles, vagrants, and swindlers.[9] Since its birth whose gestation required decades and date remains imprecise, the Proletariat has resembled a powerful agentic body,

a cumbrous prosthetic body, a moribund body, and perhaps, one day a phoenix-like body.[10]

The founding of the Chinese Communist Party in 1921, one hundred years ago from the date of publication of this volume, on a boat in Jiaxing's South Lake, brought forth the emergence of the Proletariat as a political entity in China.[11] Although labour unions, movements, factory struggles, and competing political visions pre-existed the Communist Party, the concept and arrival of the Proletariat in China as a historical and political agent was a programme of the Party.[12] At that time, China's working class was a coastline in a vast sea of agriculture, one rife with divisions related to gender, native place, clientelist networks, and even secret-society affiliation, merely an 'empirical dispersion' of workers.[13] For the first half of the twentieth century in China, the Proletariat remained a conceptual notion, a political aspiration, and birth announcement.

The 1949 Watershed

This identification of the Proletariat with the Communist Party was—and is—rife with contradictions, which became a permanent field of tension when the Party achieved a monopoly over political legitimacy in 1949, and which were further intensified after the nationalisation of industry in 1956. What did the establishment of the People's Republic of China mean for the Chinese working class? According to the official narrative, 1949 liberated workers from their exploitation under previous regimes of nascent capitalism, and semi-feudalism/semi-colonialism. Sounding a less enthusiastic note, some academics have suggested that the sustained worker activism of the Republican era dissipated when the Communist Party came to power, bringing workers to heel under the symbolic promise of their emancipation.[14] Others have argued that the Party's victory subjected workers to a new regime of dependency in and on their workplace that substantially undermined their organised power.[15] Although the idea of worker quiescence in the Mao era has long been exposed for what it was—a myth—and new sociological studies have pointed out the continuity in labour conditions before and after the Communist takeover, 1949 marked a symbolic and discursive watershed for Chinese workers.[16] If workers were now in power through the Communist Party, what possible reason could they have to raise their voices to complain and protest? And yet complain and protest they did, as many essays in this volume demonstrate.

Indeed, one of the vexing questions about twentieth-century communism in China and beyond its borders has been: why would workers be unhappy and accumulate grievances in a workers' state led by a Communist Party? As we will see throughout this volume, despite a relationship of intimate embodiment, in China the Communist Party and workers did not always see eye-to-eye, which is why Mao, among other leaders, entertained and tolerated at various points the seemingly unorthodox right for workers, in a workers' state, to strike.[17] For a long time, the myths of the 'socialist heroism' and 'dedication' of Chinese workers—or their 'passivity' and 'quiescence', depending on one's political perspective—drew attention away from these political debates and the extent of workplace activism in Maoist China. Although the Communist Party claimed to represent the working class, the working class and the Party have never fully coincided without remainder—these 'remainders' being the ongoing targets of the state's disciplinary apparatus and the Party's thought reform.

The Leninist paradox that China inherited from the Soviet Union is that the logic of worker emancipation depends on the Communist Party to give it political form in the dictatorship of the proletariat (无产阶级专政). Under these conditions, the working class can only achieve self-identity and sovereignty by way of its mediation through the Communist Party, which installs a permanent gap at the heart of representation. The amorphous category of the Proletariat acts like the Holy Spirit which fuses together the Party (the Father) and the working class (the Son) in a Holy Trinity. This trinitarian structure explains both how workers could experiment with insurgent democratic forms during the Cultural Revolution and how the Communist Party could later shed the skin of the Proletariat in its metamorphosis to capitalism.

Since it is not an empirical given, the Proletariat is bestowed flesh in aesthetic representations of glowing workers, tools in hand, immersed in the strenuous activity of building the future. Cultural production and aesthetic education are required for workers to see themselves as belonging to the Proletariat. Thus, the worker is doubled, yet again, in the aesthetic luminescence of the Proletariat, which both magnifies and diminishes her power. Although such proletarian dreamworlds are by now faded slogans on abandoned factory walls, sold as capitalist trinkets, or studied by the dispassionate gaze of academics, their spectral presence continues to haunt the imagination of the present.

These underlying paradoxes and doubles constitutive of twentieth-century communism would occasionally irrupt in the political debates that took place at times of crisis (for instance in 1951, 1956, and 1966).[18] For these reasons, the Chinese Communist Party under Mao maintained strict control over who was admitted to the Proletariat and who was its enemy. The revolutionary goal to emancipate the working class reinscribed and reified their identities in the dossier (档案), or personnel file.[19] Although dossiers and the household registration system (户口) functioned as the tiered basis of social organisation and work in Maoist China, one of the defining features of Maoist thought was an unease and suspiciousness of the reduction of the political to the sociological, which is why one's political standpoint (立场) or attitude (态度) could atone for one's class background, under certain conditions.[20]

As Joel Andreas has pointed out, the Chinese experiment stands out from all variations of the twentieth-century communist project in several respects.[21] First, under the work unit system (单位), the Chinese Communist Party managed to make employment relatively permanent (for some), going as far as to promise workers an 'iron rice bowl' (铁饭碗) of lifelong employment.[22] Second, due to the centrality of the work unit system, workplaces were turned into sites of worker participation, fostering strong norms of industrial citizenship and participation in spite of the workers' lack of autonomy. Finally, the Party in China adopted a radical programme of social levelling, which Mao Zedong episodically extended to include the political power and privileges of Party cadres.[23]

To its credit, at various moments in the early history of the PRC, Maoism—as a political project—also sought to break down the rigid sociological hierarchies and barriers, which consigned workers to their functions in the factory. Workers were encouraged to read, speak, philosophise, engage in politics, write poetry, paint, and expand their capacities as human beings, which is among the reasons which made Maoism so inspiring globally.[24] Although many of these experiments were episodic and short-lived, they ought to be recognised as meaningful attempts in China to create a 'rupture in the order of things … in the traditional division assigning the privilege of thought to some and the tasks of production to others.'[25]

One of the central paradoxes of labour in Maoist China, torn between developmental and political imperatives, is that the Communist Party both sought to tie workers to their place and set them free.

The Death of the Chinese Proletariat

Although the workplace in the Maoist years was definitely no paradise, the reform era saw a growing gap between the rhetoric of the Communist Party and the lived reality of the workers. While millions of workers in the state and collective sectors were laid off as the 'iron rice bowl' of lifetime employment shattered, wave after wave of migrants from the countryside with no other choice than to work in awful conditions in sweatshops arrived in the cities. Even as the Party attempted to rein in the worst labour rights abuses through the promulgation of detailed labour legislation, new forms of precarious labour entailing different dynamics of exploitation mushroomed.

Discursively, after the exhaustion of Maoism as a political project of 'class struggle' (阶级斗争), the sociological (and a-political) understanding of class defined as 'strata' (阶层) has become the hegemonic framework of analysis within and outside China. Since reform and opening, new sociological categories have proliferated, such as 'vulnerable groups' (弱势群体), 'floating population' (流动人口), 'second generation of migrant workers' (新生代农民工), 'ant tribe' (蚁族), among numerous other classifications—the 'class antagonism' that structures society through division, according to classical Marxism, has become an anamorphic blur in a 'moderately prosperous society'.[26] Similarly, the discourse of the working class as the 'master' (主人翁) of the country and the enterprise has been displaced by an anodyne language of detailed individual rights rooted in a set of labour laws that systematically undermine collective rights.[27] This new emphasis on the law has been interpreted by scholars as a means through which the Communist Party has re-created its hegemony over labour politics, while re-defining the meaning of work.[28] As demonstrated by the anecdote about the Jasic campaign at the beginning and by numerous chapters in this volume, attempts by Chinese workers and intellectuals to resurrect the body of the Proletariat as a political subject have been met unflinchingly with repression sanctioned by the Communist Party.[29]

At the same time, however, the Chinese Communist Party still holds on to its legitimating claim to represent 'the vanguard of the working class', which to this day features prominently in the opening line of the Party Constitution. As Alessandro Russo has argued, this is 'an assertion with a precise organisational thrust—an injunction that the CCP remains the only legitimate political organisation in China, and that no independent

political organisation of wage-earning slaves can be tolerated. The category "working class" is an essential component of the government's discourse, albeit shorn of its political value.'[30] This hegemony, however, is increasingly contested, as workers defy the risk of state repression to stage strikes and protests, and a contentious civil society dares to help workers advance demands that go beyond the narrow boundaries permitted by Party-State legalism in the reform era—or at least this was what was happening until Xi Jinping's crackdowns on labour nongovernmental organisations in the mid-2010s.[31]

In these circumstances, does it still make sense to talk about the Proletariat in China today, when the Party who supposedly gave it life has abandoned its creature? We believe it does, at least as a political aspiration. The common sense of post-socialism has been to dismiss the Proletariat as a political Frankenstein—a monstrous, distorted body—whose shadow eclipses the lives of actual workers. In our post-ideological and de-politicised age of positivist fundamentalism, people have eagerly sloughed off 'the fatal weight of words without bodies, of these phantoms, called the people, the proletariat, equality, or class struggle'[32] in the utopian search for *reality as it is*, for the ordinary worker shorn of revolutionary illusions. The problem with this account is that the ordinary worker, like the Proletariat, does not exist apart from the political and epistemological frameworks which inscribe its concept and representation. Again, Rancière is a helpful guide through the perils and paradoxes of representation. He does not critique the socialist celebration of labour in the name of an 'authentic' working class reality beyond the distorted mirror of propaganda but in order to deconstruct the pernicious binary between representation and reality altogether: 'We are not going to scratch images to bring truth to the surface, we are going to shove them aside so that other figures may come together and decompose there.'[33] Following Rancière, a goal of this volume is to allow a multiplicity of figures of labour to appear, the configuration remains open-ended, contestable, and ongoing. We still need to talk about the Proletariat today, because we still live under capitalism.

In China, as else and everywhere under late capitalism, we are witnessing an unrelenting process of *proletarianisation*—masses of people whose survival is dependent on aridifying trickles of capital— without the coming of the Proletarian as the political subject who was promised would dig capitalism's grave.[34] Even without the Proletariat, the world is indeed proletarian. We decided to title this book *Proletarian China* first

as a commitment to the core Marxist insight into one of the main contradictions of capitalism: workers are dispossessed from the world that they make and depend on for survival. We also chose *Proletarian* in particular due to its ambiguous occupation of the space between adjective, noun, and subject, in which the composition and decomposition of political worlds takes place.

At the same time, while accepting the fact that Proletariat as a political aspiration still has value today, it is important to admit that the Proletariat, in China as elsewhere, is dead. Separated from the Party, the Proletariat once again has become disembodied and returned to its spectral status. Whether there will be incarnations of it in China or globally is a question of political composition. The Chinese Communist Party's new body is adorned with the costumery of 5,000 years of civilisational progress and gilded through the last several decades of capitalist accumulation. Today, what remains of the Communist Party's embodiment of The Proletariat is Mao's sallowish, embalmed corpse on Tiananmen Square, which may in the end, be only a wax figurine from Madame Tussauds.[35] As Alessandro Russo puts it: 'If the main barrier against the political existence of workers is the reference to a mummified working class enshrined in official discourse, nothing that is politically novel will be able to come into being unless there is an explicit, conscious effort to keep this fiction at bay.'[36] Even after its political de-throning and mummification, the phantom of the Proletariat continues to haunt the working class.

Nurturing Utopian Dreams

After so many disappointments, it is difficult to avoid the nihilistic gaze under which all attempts to build a better world appear doomed to failure. As Peter Sloterdijk wrote: 'The historical world was nothing but a graveyard of enthusiasms.'[37] Glancing at the remnants of past utopias from the perspective of today conjures an eerie feeling, as if we were looking at, and being looked at by, the ruins of a dreamworld. As the late Mark Fisher pointed out, gazing at ruins opens a series of questions about agency: who built and inhabited what are now ruins? What happened to produce these remains?[38]

In the case of the People's Republic of China, what is eerie is the sense of incommensurate worlds superimposed on each other. In the Great Leap Forward, people laboured and sacrificed themselves for a 'utopia of material plenitude' which turned out to be a deadly mirage;[39] during

the Cultural Revolution, people's labour was given meaning by the 'utopia of proletarian power';[40] after the abandonment of Maoist utopias, labour chased after the pragmatic utopia of wealth and modernity; in the Xi era, while pursuing 'private paradise', Chinese people's labour is enlisted in the utopia of national rejuvenation and glory on the world stage—personal interests being enmeshed in, while not entirely reducible to, the ideologies of their time.[41] And this does not even touch upon all the utopias that workers attach to their work, and their lives beyond it, in private reveries. From the mass utopias of the past, utopia in China has been de-collectivised, individuated, and then re-incorporated into the glory of the national body politic. As the writer China Miéville so beautifully puts it: 'We live in a utopia: it just isn't ours.'[42]

About This Book

In its attempt to retrieve the shards of broken utopian promises, this volume builds on our previous editorial endeavour, the book *Afterlives of Chinese Communism*, published by Verso and ANU Press back in 2019. While *Afterlives* revisited the complicated and contested legacies of Chinese Communism through a series of essays focusing on keywords and concepts in the political vocabulary of the Chinese Communist Party, this volume adopts a different approach. Here, each chapter is linked to a specific event, so that on the whole the volume is structured as a timeline of the development of Chinese society from the early twentieth century to this day, which is not meant to construct but rather disrupt notions of teleological historical development.

Some of the episodes chosen for inclusion in this timeline can be considered landmark events in contemporary Chinese history—for instance, the Anyuan strike of 1922, the Shanghai uprising and massacre of 1927, the January Storm of 1967, the worker protests of 1989, among others—but most episodes are drawn from occurrences and situations that rarely feature in history books. These range from a boat trip up the Yangzi river in 1898 to a long-forgotten strike for rice in the early 1930s; from the temporary closure of a communist propaganda newspaper in wartime Chongqing in 1941 to the establishment of the first workers' universities during the Cultural Revolution; from the passing of laws that criminalised sex work in the late 1970s to a tragic fire that killed dozens of workers in 1993; from kiln slaves in the 2000s to the prospect of workerless automation of the future. Geographical diversity adds another layer of complexity

to the book, as the essays engage with different places in Greater China, including Hong Kong and Taiwan, and globally to the trenches of Europe in the First World War, as well as Mongolia and Tanzania.[43] Finally, while the Chinese Communist Party plays an important role in the volume, especially in the years that make up the Maoist era, it is far from the only actor on a crowded stage.

Although this style leads to a certain, unavoidable episodic nature—which we tried to address by adding to each chapter a short introduction to provide some context—this was a deliberate choice. As mentioned earlier, this volume does not attempt to construct yet another grand narrative about Chinese labour history, to track the supposed rise and fall of China's working class, and predict its future. Without claiming to provide a comprehensive overview of Chinese labour history, the book is composed of different voices, perspectives, and interpretations of what constituted the experience of working in China in the past century. Each chapter of this book is a record of proletarian existence.

Like *Afterlives of Chinese Communism*, the volume that preceded this one, published by Verso and ANU Press back in 2019, this volume is also rooted in the work that we are doing with the open-access publication *Made in China Journal*. The ethos of the *Made in China* project is rooted in accessibility. We believe in the need to go beyond the insular confines of academia and reach a general audience. This entails a commitment to open access and the democratisation of knowledge. This book is written with a general audience in mind and made available simultaneously for sale with Verso Books and for free download on our website. As we pointed out in the introduction to *Afterlives*, this is also our way to think outside the confines of traditional academic publishing as we want our readers to imagine new political possibilities beyond capitalist models.

In the end, one might wonder what utopias do we, the editors of this volume, strive for? Our aspiration here is to rekindle passion for the project of finally overcoming the alienation of labour and gaining democratic control over the economic decisions that condition our lives. By looking at what animated workers at various moments throughout Chinese history to transform the cramped space of their conditions of possibility through political agency, unlikely solidarities, refusal of the given, and rebellion for the unrealised, we hope to revive some of the ideals that pushed them forward.

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