

1925

*While the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) continued its labour organising work at the national level through the foundation of the All-China Federation of Trade Unions, labour militancy continued unabated at the grassroots level. Jean Chesneaux's pioneering *The Chinese Labor Movement* (1919–1927), first published in French in 1962, had a huge influence in promoting the view of the period between the May Fourth Movement of 1919 and the split between the CCP and the Nationalist Party in 1927 as being a golden age for labour activism in China, an era in which the proletariat achieved maturity as a class, pursuing ever broader and better organised strikes. However, our understanding of the labour movement during that period might be biased by excessive attention to these instances of worker mobilisation. From the 1970s onward, a new generation of scholars began challenging this narrative. By focusing on shop-floor relations and manifestations of worker culture, they put into sharp relief how Chinese workers in that era were still split by profound divisions related to gender, native place, sector, clientelistic networks, and even secret-society affiliation. In this vein, the following essay takes us to the shop floors of Tianjin in the mid-1920s.*

Everyday Politics in Tianjin Factories

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On 11 August 1925, newly unionised workers at the Japanese-owned Yu Da Cotton Mill in Tianjin presented a list of demands to the mill's management, including a wage increase, a shortened workday, and an office for the union. Details about the management's response are murky, but when millhands finished their shift and headed out for an organising meeting in a nearby saltyard, they found their way blocked by a hundred military police deployed by the local warlord Li Jinglin. Workers immediately called a strike and sent for reinforcements from nearby mills. Chasing some of the police and factory security forces into the mill courtyard, they fought the police with pickaxes, cut the factory phone lines, destroyed the factory office, and smashed all the windows. On the factory floor, as the *North-China Herald* reported, 'the cotton milling machinery crumpled up before them like wooden houses in a tornado ... a tangled mass of broken machinery, spindles, and debris'.¹ Damage to the mill was estimated to exceed half a million taels of silver. The next day, armed police ambushed mill workers at their saltyard meeting, killed at least ten and wounded a dozen more, drove some into the Hai River, and arrested more than four hundred. Li Jinglin shut down unions across the Chinese-controlled sections of Tianjin, sent police to surveil unions in the foreign concessions, and closed several factory schools that the fledgling Chinese Communist Party (CCP) had established to recruit and organise workers. That was the end of the episode known as 'Smashing Yu Da' (砸裕大事件).²

To the labour historian, the Yu Da factory-smashing incident is a seductive one. Newly militant workers join forces and take action against a repressive foreign management that is backed by a corrupt warlord state apparatus. The workers' outrage is audible, visible, and leaves a paper trail. Young Communist organisers are involved both inside and outside the mills, drawing the uprising into a larger narrative of protest, party-building, and budding working-class consciousness.³

And yet, in spite of its attractions, tracing militant labour uprisings is not the best way to understand worker history in Tianjin, for at least two reasons: they were infrequent and they involved only a small segment of the city's fragmented workforce.

Instability and Industry

In northern China's most important industrial city during the Republican period, strikes and associated disturbances were rare and brief. The Tianjin economy grew in fits and starts because of constant political instability; workplaces were run by a continuously shifting cast of would-be industrialists and were often in financial trouble. From 1918 to 1926—a fervid period of upheaval and union organising in major coastal cities—Shanghai recorded 638 strikes; Tianjin had only fourteen. Until 1928, successive warlord regimes routinely called in troops to prevent or suppress worker protests, and worker leaders were routinely assaulted, detained, and sometimes tortured.

At the beginning of the Nanjing Decade (1928–37), the Nationalist government moved aggressively to ensure labour peace and limit Communist influence by establishing official workplace unions that emphasised political training. The municipal government, through its Bureau of Social Affairs, attempted to mediate labour disputes to prevent strikes, with some success: in 1928 the city had one strike; in 1929 and 1930, only three each year. In 1922, as the world economic crisis deepened and cotton mills began to close, cotton millhands at every Chinese-owned mill in the city engaged in work stoppages aimed at preventing pay cuts and layoffs, sometimes locking themselves inside the buildings to avoid being ejected. By 1935, forced into an increasingly defensive stance as mills abruptly closed, they appealed unsuccessfully to the municipal government for the restoration of their jobs.⁴ Most mills subsequently were sold to Japanese owners.

During the Japanese occupation of Tianjin (1937–45), the mill workforce initially expanded, but labour organisations were banned, and many factories were garrisoned. The Japanese authorities regarded strikes as politically treasonous acts. The Pacific War drained Japanese military resources in the early 1940s, and worker efforts focused on survival as machinery was melted down to make war materiel and mills closed once again.

The return of the nationalists to Tianjin in 1945 brought a resumption of official unions controlled by foremen and skilled workers, an ideology of cooperation between workers and owners, labour disputes mediated by the government, and government limits on the ability to strike. Government-sponsored unions were not expected to concern themselves with pay and working conditions, but the late 1940s was nonetheless Tianjin's brief high tide of labour disputes. Compared with previous decades,

the workforce was older and less inclined to move back and forth from factories to their villages of origin. The state apparatus was weaker and less able to constrain labour activism. Communist organisers, particularly in the cotton and wool mills, established a consistent presence, and for the first time included women cadres who made headway in mobilising the increasing number of women millhands. Workers agitated, with only limited success, for improved wages, an end to layoffs, and severance pay, in an environment increasingly constrained by high inflation, intermittent martial law, political repression, and the exigencies of civil war with the Communists. Ultimately, working-class protest was of very limited importance to the entry of the CCP-led People's Liberation Army into Tianjin in January 1949.

Working-Class Fragmentation

The second reason labour militancy is an incomplete guide to Tianjin's working-class history is that the Tianjin workforce was fragmented, and many workers never encountered any form of open unrest. In 1929, more than 40 percent of Tianjin workers laboured at ironworking, carpet weaving, and other jobs in the artisanal sector. Many were unpaid apprentices in their mid-teens, connected to the shopowners by kinship or native place. In warehouses and working-class homes, casual labourers and outworkers glued matchboxes, cracked walnuts, spun wool, and wove mats, changing jobs frequently. Most of those who laboured in Tianjin came from rural villages, returning there annually or whenever economically troubled workplaces laid them off. Throughout the Republican period, they remained temporary sojourners in the city, participating little in workplace organising movements. Freight haulers and rickshaw pullers were more likely than other workers to be Tianjin natives, but their rootedness in the city did not lead to class-based action. Their world was divided into territories controlled by individual guilds and bolstered by vertical alliances between workers and transport bosses.

Even in the cotton mills—Tianjin's most organised and militant sector—the workforce was unstable and variegated in ways that constrained labour militancy. Children, for instance, made up more than one-quarter of cotton millhands in the early 1920s and, although the percentage of child workers dropped in the 1930s, it rose again during the Japanese occupation to somewhere between one-third and two-thirds of the mill workforce.⁵ Unlike Shanghai, where women became the majority of the

cotton mill workforce by the mid-1920s, in Tianjin, women accounted for less than 10 percent of the workforce in 1929, rising to 39 percent with the Japanese occupation and barely half in the late 1940s.⁶ Children and women were not necessarily quiescent, of course, but they were hired as part of a search for cheap and tractable labour, and, at the very least, mobilising them inside the cotton mills had to entail different networks and strategies from those centred on adult men.

In this formation of inconstant industrialists and a fragmented working-class operating in an often-violent political environment, organising and strikes were sporadic, dangerous, and frequently unsuccessful. Concentrating on moments of labour militancy or CCP leadership is necessarily going to miss most of what workers experienced in Tianjin's industry and how they coped with circumstances well beyond their control. A more comprehensive approach to labour history must resist the seductive organising device of a labour action timeline and focus instead on the everyday politics of surviving, and attempting to thrive, under conditions of extreme instability. As Ben Kerkvliet writes: 'Everyday politics involves people embracing, complying with, adjusting, and contesting norms and rules regarding authority over, production of, or allocation of resources and doing so in quiet, mundane, and subtle expressions and acts that are rarely organised or direct.'⁷

Patterns of Everyday Politics

In the realm of everyday politics—unlike that of militant labour activism—significant commonalities appear among workers in small-scale workshops and mechanised factories. In the ironworks and machine-building shops of Santiaoshi, boys and young men were hired through family or native-place ties, often working for a relative. In the cotton mills, too, workers entered as members of kinship or geographical networks. Such networks, encompassing foremen as well as workers, might channel them into a particular workshop and offer them protection. Once inside the mills, some workers formed additional associations for mutual aid. Associations were usually single-gender and secret: sworn brotherhood or Green Gang membership for men, sisterhood and religious groups for women.⁸ Sworn brothers watched out for one another in the workplace, but also drank together, watched plays, and attended weddings and funerals outside the strictures of the working day. Gang alliances sometimes led to conflicts with gang factions within or beyond one's own factory,

drawing male workers into violent confrontations with other workers. Sisterhood groups were less formalised and less visible in the historical record, as was membership of religious sects.

Everyday politics included deploying these networks in survival strategies of withholding and concealment, in contrast to the open confrontation and historical visibility of conventionally recognised worker militancy. Regardless of the size of the workplace, exhausted workers engaged in a strategy known in local slang as 'soaking mushrooms' (泡蘑菇), or slowdowns, which were common before and during the Japanese occupation. When supervisors were not around, ironworkers in Santiaoshi and labourers in cotton mills would nap by the side of the machines or turn them off altogether. Sometimes soaking mushrooms was overtly political as when, for example, ironworkers in 1947 engaged in slowdowns in response to managers blocking their union organising efforts. Although it often emerged as a spontaneous shop-floor strategy, soaking mushrooms required a high degree of coordination among workers. Common techniques included smearing oil on machine belts to slow cotton mill machinery, cutting machine belts to be able to rest while the machines were repaired, sneaking off to the lavatories for extended cigarette breaks, and posting lookouts who would wave a cloth or throw a yarn tube into the workshop to warn that a foreman was returning.

The everyday politics of Tianjin workplaces also entailed removing some of what one produced from the factory—stealing, from the management's point of view. During the latter years of the Japanese occupation, cotton mill workers routinely stuffed yarn into their clothing and lunchboxes to sell outside the factory to supplement their increasingly inadequate wages. Individual pilfering was common, and mill owners responded with increasingly elaborate inspections and even body searches as workers exited the mills. As with soaking mushrooms, however, the most effective stealing required organisation: lookouts, coordinated efforts to remove thread from spindles, men bringing goods to women to conceal under their jackets, guards who were induced to slough off on their searches with the promise of a payoff. When managers erected partitions so that guards could not see the faces of the workers they were searching, workers put signals on their socks and shoes. Outside the factory, buyers acquired the stolen yarn for resale in the countryside. Everyone involved took a cut, and millhands did not get rich from stealing, but they did manage to bring their incomes up beyond the margin of subsistence, risking beatings, firing, imprisonment, and even sexual assault to do so.

Political Agendas

All of these social networks and activities, even if they had no initial connection to labour organising, could be deployed to advance political agendas. During the Japanese occupation, for instance, the Communist base areas across northern China were desperate to acquire goods blockaded by the Japanese, including paper, ink, salt, sugar, metals, medical supplies, cigarettes and matches, kerosene, machines and machine parts, and tubes, capacitors, and resistors needed for telecommunications. When the Jinchaji base area, which encompassed parts of Shanxi, Chahar, and Hebei, sent people to Tianjin to purchase these goods, they worked with mechanics, staff members, and workers of various factories to forge papers and procure the goods, which were then smuggled out to the base areas, concealed in double-bottomed boats, under cartloads of manure, or in piles of coal.⁹ When the Japanese built northern China's largest power plant near Tianjin, the underpaid workers stole everything, from batches of red copper to bottles of turbine oil. Two boiler workers stripped the lead coating from the plant's electrical cables and removed it from the factory. A shipment of several tonnes of iron disappeared overnight. Workers gathered in the plant repair shop at noon, when Japanese supervisors went home to eat, and broke up iron rods, copper plates, and anything else that could be taken out of the factory and sold. The line between everyday politics in the service of survival and deliberate political sabotage blurred in the course of these activities.¹⁰

The everyday politics of workplace networks also made labour organising possible. Yu Da, the cotton mill that was 'smashed' in the summer of 1925, was the last Tianjin cotton mill to unionise after a spring and summer of intensive Communist organising activity, and the breakthrough was based on family and native-place networks. The mill was Japanese-owned and tightly controlled by the chief foreman, who was a member of the Green Gang. Workers at other mills suggested that one of the chief Communist organisers could make use of a family network at Yu Da: a millhand named Xiang Ruizhi and his three brothers, along with his father, who cooked in a nearby canteen. Known as the Five Tigers of the Xiang Family, they had close connections with many fellow natives from Baodi County who were also employed at Yu Da. The Communist organiser challenged Xiang Ruizhi by suggesting that perhaps Yu Da workers could not organise because they were afraid of the foreman. Xiang flushed, vowed that he could organise the mill, and within a few weeks had

mobilised his brothers to sign up workers for the union as they ate in the kitchen run by his father. This activation of a family network, augmented by a native-place network, was the prequel to the union demands that resulted in the smashing of Yu Da.

Two decades later, when women CCP organisers found employment in Tianjin's cotton and wool mills to conduct underground organising, they integrated themselves into the lunchtime leisure activities of girls and women—teaching them to read, telling stories, and performing Beijing opera. Slowly, by means of activities that had no obvious connection to labour conditions, they built networks that could be activated to express the dissatisfaction of workers with their wages and government-sponsored unions. Although women were excluded from some of the networks that could be used to mobilise men, they were perhaps less constrained by the patronage of powerful foremen than some of their male coworkers, and thus easier to organise.

When workers developed a range of 'quiet, mundane, and subtle expressions and acts' centred on the workplace, it was not necessarily because they were attracted to communism or even unionisation, nor because they had a stable sense of themselves as part of an emergent working class. Activities such as soaking mushrooms, pilfering, or organised smuggling, along with the demonstrations, riots, and strikes that we recognise as the signal events of labour history, were not neatly arranged on a linear continuum. Tianjin workers sometimes began, as E.P. Thompson described it, to 'feel and articulate the identity of their interests as between themselves, and as against other men [and women] whose interests are different from (and usually opposed to) theirs'.¹¹ But the networks they created could be used to secure cross-class protection as well as to forge alliances for change. Labour activities developed in contingent and unpredictable formations, as workers created an everyday politics of the workplace that offered the possibility of ameliorating the difficult immediate conditions of working lives in Tianjin.