

1941

Faced with the common threat of the Japanese invasion of China, from 1937 the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)—which since the conclusion of the Long March in 1935 had been entrenched in Yan'an, Shaanxi Province—and the Nationalist Party entered into an uneasy alliance commonly known as the Second United Front. This already fragile relationship was thrown into crisis in January 1941, in the wake of the so-called New Fourth Army Incident, when Nationalist troops ambushed and killed several thousand Communist soldiers. One of the casualties—at least temporarily, as it was soon allowed to resume publication—of the breakdown in the relations between the two parties was the New China Daily, a newspaper that was the sole legal entity of the Communists in the Nationalist wartime capital of Chongqing. Besides disseminating the CCP line and covering international and domestic news, the paper provided literate workers with a forum in which to express their grievances. Through analysis of the workers' letters published in its pages, this essay explores the role of participatory journalism in the process of working-class formation in China.

The *New China Daily* and the Moral Language of Class in Wartime Chongqing

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Prohibiting the more than 50,000 arsenal workers in Chongqing from reading *New China Daily* (新华日报), Ordnance Director Yu Dawei condemned the Communist paper's subversive message:

The thought of *New China Daily* is biased, the writing extreme. It presents a grave threat to the future prospects of the War of Resistance and Reconstruction. We remain vigilant to prevent it from running rampant, but there are many national defence industrial workers. If they come under its sway, the momentum will be difficult to stop.²

One month later, in April 1941, *New China Daily's* director, Pan Zinian, documented the crackdown:

Police, spies, and Three People's Principles Youth League members go everywhere prohibiting the reading of the paper, destroying copies, arresting vendors, and even blocking the transmission of dispatches from the Central News Agency and drafts from the Censorship Inspectorate. Factory security guards have arbitrarily arrested newspaper delivery workers; readers have been arrested; cities and counties throughout the provinces have prohibited sales.³

The wave of anti-Communism that targeted the sole legal entity of the Communists in the Nationalist's wartime capital was due in part to the fallout from the New Fourth Army Incident. To retaliate against the Communist New Fourth Army's refusal to obey Chiang Kai-shek's orders to withdraw from Anhui and Jiangsu, Nationalist troops ambushed and killed several thousand New Fourth Army soldiers in January 1941. The conflict damaged the political alliance between the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the Nationalists that was known as the United Front and

threatened to rekindle the civil war. Formed under the auspices of the United Front, *New China Daily* now fell victim to this broader political conflict.⁴

Within weeks, sales collapsed and the paper was forced to cut down to two pages for a year. Acknowledging that some semblance of the United Front had to remain in place, Chiang Kai-shek allowed the paper to continue publishing until February 1947—a decision he would come to regret as his ‘biggest mistake vis-à-vis the Communists.’⁵ By 1943, the paper had rebounded and achieved widespread popularity among the working people of Chongqing. As one militant worker put it: ‘Xinhua [*New China Daily*] stands on the side of workers and speaks for us.’⁶ Workers appreciated the Communist newspaper for the same reasons it inspired periodic crackdowns. It reported on the suffering brought about by Japanese bombing raids. It described the boom and bust of the wartime economy. It told of the massive influx of migrants and refugees, which doubled the city’s population to over the million mark. It recounted the rapid and forced industrialisation that transformed the city from a commercial entrepot into Nationalist China’s industrial base.

New China Daily reflected and facilitated working-class formation. As well as disseminating the Communist Party line and reporting on both international and domestic news, the paper provided literate workers with a forum in which to assess class relations and express their grievances. Engaging with sociologist Charles Tilly’s observation that storytelling that helps shape people’s identities can sustain social movements,⁷ in this essay, I explore the role of participatory journalism in the process of working-class formation.

Promoting Mass Work

In *New China Daily*’s inaugural issue, editor Wu Min introduced the column ‘Our Mailbox’ (我们的信箱), stating that any reader could also be a writer for the paper. Wu argued that dissolving the aura and hierarchy associated with professional expertise was necessary for journalism to represent the voice of working people: ‘A worker, for example, can write about specific living conditions and work experiences inside the factory, national salvation activities, and all the vexations and hopes accumulated over the years that a professional writer cannot achieve.’⁸ Wu thus made the notion of popularisation appealing: ‘Only when all the people—workers,

farmers, sales clerks, soldiers, and students—write about their production, their work, their thoughts and difficult problems, will our paper accurately reflect developments of the entire country during the War of Resistance.’⁹

On a practical level, by soliciting testimonials and letters from the public, the paper could offset reliance on the Nationalist government’s Central News Agency for dispatches, and could promote ‘mass work’ (群众工作). Even though most CCP members had gone underground by 1939, the fact that *New China Daily* circulated in Nationalist territory reinforced its function as an opposition paper. In contrast to *Liberation Daily* (解放日报), which used propaganda in the Communist base areas to ‘explain policy or to teach cadres how to do things,’¹⁰ *New China Daily* fostered an ‘active sphere’ of news.¹¹ Party leaders recognised that popular participation in the pages of the Communist daily would attract a readership in Nationalist territory.

Undertaken in the name of combating dogmatism, bureaucratism, and sectarianism, the Rectification Campaign (整风运动) of 1942–43 prompted *New China Daily* to deepen its commitment to mass work. While the Rectification Campaign served to muzzle intellectual dissent in the Communist base areas, where mass criticism sessions exerted psychological pressure to enforce Party discipline, in Nationalist China, it had the opposite effect. In Nationalist territory, there were no public campaigns against intellectual dissenters. The need to maintain the discipline of a clandestine underground party, which by 1942 had been reduced from 60,000 to a core of 5,000 members throughout Nationalist China, meant that the campaign perforce could not be prosecuted in public.¹² In the wake of rectification, the paper redoubled its efforts to promote popularisation, use colloquial Chinese, and encourage the printing of letters written by people from all walks of life. In print for more than nine years (from 11 January 1938 to 28 February 1947), *New China Daily* published more than 500 letters (of a total of 700) from self-identified workers. Some 86 percent of these letters were published between 1943 and 1946, after the Rectification Campaign.

The following table highlights the dramatic increase in labour-related coverage during these years:

Number of *New China Daily* Articles Reporting Labour Issues, 1938–1946

Articles	1938	1939	1940	1941	1942	1943	1944	1945	1946
Labour Conditions	17	46	70	27	4	99	153	51	21
Labour movt (domestic)	78	24	32	14	28	19	21	338	414
Labour movt (international)	71	40	47	31	34	120	56	150	232
May First commemoration	28	36	32	20	21	19	14	7	18
Chinese Association of Labour	na	2	3	1	13	14	8	7	126
Unemployment	29	0	0	0	0	17	30	17	11
Total	223	148	184	93	100	288	282	570	822
Worker letters	10	19	37	0	5	47	147	171	69

Source: 新华日报索引编辑组编 [New China Daily Index Compilation Group, ed. 1987.

新华日报索引 [Indices to New China Daily], 9 vols. Shanghai: Shanghai Shudian.

Along with numerous reports about wartime social life, the letters also related stories of injustice, suffering, and aspirations for a better life—all of which helped workers create an ‘imagined community’ of class that fuelled the postwar labour movement that emerged in 1945–46.¹³

A New Community of Class

Although labour historians have often eschewed narratives of class formation and emphasised regionalism¹⁴ or the aim of status recognition,¹⁵ my analysis of worker testimonials highlights how they used ‘rightful resistance’,¹⁶ employing the rhetoric of the powerful to curb the exercise of power, and a language of rights and class. By the mid-1940s, many letters constituted appeals in which workers related their suffering and requested help in their struggle to maintain a livelihood and secure basic worker rights. These concerns with economic and social justice are typical of exclusive notions of class. Demands for human dignity and various freedoms—of mobility, the press, and assembly—are class-inclusive by being grounded in universal human rights.¹⁷ If some letters were openly critical of capitalists and the exploitation of workers, many did not talk about class in such straightforward terms. But, by identifying themselves as ‘we the workers’, the writers assumed a collective political identity that masked differences of personality, region, craft, and education. Moreover, the letters created a community of class by using a highly moralistic language that juxtaposed workers against corrupt authority figures. Indeed, moral and ethical norms informed letter writers’ understanding of class relations. Workers’ moral concerns and the recognition that their precarious existence was based on unjust social relationships were an integral part of working-class formation.

By giving voice to workers’ concerns, *New China Daily* attracted literate workers, who could have made up to 70 percent of its readership, according to the publication’s own internal survey.¹⁸ Workers became an important constituency of the paper, because it paid attention to their needs. Even the Nationalist propaganda English-language journal *China at War* had to admit: ‘[T]he life of students and workers is more fully reported in the newspaper [*New China Daily*] than in any other.’¹⁹ The CCP recognised that it could attract an existing mass audience among labouring people in Chongqing. The implementation of factory literacy campaigns, coupled with workers’ quests for education, which reflected their demands for dignity and status in an effort to combat the stigma associated with manual labour, contributed to higher-than-expected literacy rates. One reason Yu Dawei was so concerned that the paper would hold sway over arsenal workers was their relatively high literacy rate. Surveys conducted of some 6,760 arsenal workers found 82 percent were literate.²⁰ Owing to limited schooling opportunities, women workers had lower literacy rates,

but factory relief teams operating in Chongqing's textile mills organised literacy classes that were attended by 30,000 participants. Instructors indicated that, on arriving in 1939, illiteracy rates were as high as 90 percent, but had dropped to 42 percent by the spring of 1943.²¹

The Communist press found a ready audience among numerous reading societies, which proliferated in Chongqing factories. Police reported that, by the late 1930s, reading societies and other cultural associations had gravitated towards the CCP: 'Their method of action is to organise National Salvation groups—reading societies, wall newspaper societies, theatrical groups, choruses—and in this way gradually attract leftist-inclined workers to read their outline and become acquainted with Communist ideology.'²²

Just as reading societies assumed a political bent, the act of writing letters to *New China Daily* became political. These letters served as a status marker for workers wanting to be treated with respect and swayed public opinion and the government to recognise worker demands. It remains difficult to authenticate the letters since the originals were destroyed on publication to avoid retribution. But, despite some editing by the Communist daily, certain redundancies, simple direct language, the use of Sichuanese dialect in quoted dialogues, and grammatical mistakes do suggest that the letters were written by less formally educated writers. A few letters even served as pedagogical texts by the editors keeping an incorrect character in place and putting the correct character in brackets.²³ The specificity of the content, even when exaggerated, and the parallels one can draw between the issues raised in workers' letters and petitions and strike demands indicate the letters were not fabricated by Communist propagandists.

Rhetoric of Gendered Sacrifice

Given the wartime context and the CCP's strategy of rendering all interests, including class interests, subservient to national interests,²⁴ workers often employed a rhetoric of sacrifice for the nation:

We are a group of young women workers. For our livelihood, for our national liberation and in keeping with the mission 'everyone has a responsibility for the rise and fall of the nation', we have left our beloved families and small children to participate in production work. We resolved not to stop working on account of

family affairs. Although we receive low wages, as long as we can maintain ourselves we haven't complained, but now with the daily rise of prices how can we survive on just 60 cents a day? Because of inflation male workers received an hourly wage increase of 2 cents but we women workers have not received any raise. We feel aggrieved, because we work hard and put in just as many hours as male workers. During this war of national liberation the factory divides men and women, but is the War of Resistance only for men? We selected a few representatives to present our demands to the factory director but he responded: 'Women workers are temporary. If they want to work they should work, if they don't, they can get lost.'²⁵

The letter is a combination of bold, assertive demands for gender equality and calculated appeals to nationalism. As a form of rightful resistance, the letter references the government's slogan of collective responsibility for the fate of the nation. It highlights how this group of young women has placed the public good over personal interests, by leaving their families and loved ones to work in a factory. The authors indict the factory director for his callousness, but the factory goes unnamed—a form of self-censorship that would have avoided any confrontation with factory authorities while remaining in line with the Communists' United Front tactic of forging cross-class alliances. Ultimately, the women workers sought recognition for their contribution to the war effort and demanded gender equality.

Although both male and female workers couched their demands in terms of national salvation, gender-specific experiences led women to highlight their oppression as women, and to condemn the factory's control over their bodies. Textile mills, the main employers of young women, were notorious for conducting body searches and banning pregnant women—in some cases, causing the abandonment of babies or infanticide. Hui Ying recounts how, after losing her husband in an air raid, she sought employment at a cotton mill because she had to 'feed the little treasure in my stomach'. She then narrates the cruel irony of sacrificing for a job that likely would take her life:

Soon after joining the factory, the baby in my stomach began to get bigger by the day. Up until I went into labour I kept working hard and didn't tell the foremen for fear that if they found out they would have me fired. I then asked for a five-day

sick leave and gave birth. It was a plump baby boy! As soon as I saw him, I thought of his father and I couldn't stop from crying.

Five days of leave went by very quickly. On the fourth day after my delivery, I was carrying around the baby while thinking about my job. The factory had already fired many women workers for bearing children. Could I hide my child? Could I raise my child without working? A thousand thoughts ran through my head. I don't know where my cold heartedness came from but I decided to abandon my child. That evening as I was sobbing I placed the child in a latrine pit. In a crazed like state I fled without looking back.

Over the past five years, I have worked every day inside the factory. The cotton that flies around the workshop settles on my hair and eyebrows. On hot days the cotton mixed in with my sweat drips into my eyes, nose and mouth. As I breathe, the cotton filaments penetrate my nostrils and lungs. Five years of work has cost me my life and the only thing I have gained is tuberculosis.²⁶

In narrating the decline of her health, Hui Ying's account is typical of the textile industry, in which a large percentage of workers contracted tuberculosis. In 'A Woman Worker's Personal Account' (一个女工的自述), author Bing Bing tells of her initial excitement at seeing an advertisement recruiting young women from the countryside to join a cotton mill. The ad promised an eight-hour workday, eight hours of education, and eight hours of sleep. She became disillusioned on realising that the already long twelve-hour work shifts were lengthened up to an hour by manipulating the clocks in the workshops. She recounted the abuses on the night shift and lack of dignity accorded to workers. In referring to her 'life in hell' (地狱的生活), Bing Bing creates a morally charged mood that juxtaposes good against evil. Her letter, published in 1940, when Communist United Front policy still stressed the multi-class alliance, is noteworthy for being directly critical of capitalists:

[A]s the night deepens I get a headache and blurred vision. When I can't stand it any longer, I'm tempted to go to the workshop director and ask for leave, but he'll say that I'm 'faking illness'. Some workers who are denied leave the first time often ask again and then get kicked or slapped in the face. Because of this, even if I get sick and don't have the strength to breathe, I still don't dare ask for leave and prefer to have my illness drag out. I shed my bitter tears at this inten-

sity and heartless life that is even worse than for a beast of burden.

When I have my period, there is no chance for a brief rest ... I do need to rest a minute when I get cramps and panic stricken, but it's impossible. It's as dark as hell here without a trace of human sympathy ...

I have endured life in hell for so long. Society can't imagine that among us there is this pitiable group of animals. We have been hoodwinked by the capitalists' slogan of the 'eight-hour system' and thus I accurately describe our lives in the hope of gaining assistance from public figures of society and from women's circles. I hope that the factory owners can make at least some minimal improvements to our lives.²⁷

Inequality, Divisions, and Corruption

Bing Bing's letter uses the metaphor of beasts of burden, evoking workers' demands for human dignity—the most frequent subject of their letters. The quest for dignity coincided with descriptions of inequality and deep divisions between production workers and technical and administrative staff, resonating with longstanding cultural biases against manual labour. During the war, this antagonism increased because the ratio between staff and workers rose rapidly as industries sought to rationalise production systems and oversee factory communities numbering in the thousands. In addition, worker–staff tensions were overlaid with ethnic tensions as 'downriver people' (下江人) from central China and coastal areas monopolised administrative and managerial posts. These divisions are evident in the following condemnation of corrupt factory officials and staff for betraying the nation's trust and for their indifference to workers' plight:

Mr Editor,

I am a labourer working in the defence industry. Upon joining this factory, I discovered that the officials and the staff gentlemen often compete against each other. Both sides seek personal fame and gain without any regard for the work of the nation and going so far as to arbitrarily oppress workers. The high-ranking officials and staff spent several tens of thousands of yuan to build a new Western style villa for themselves while we workers live in thatched sheds that they built without concern for our safety. The state provides them with over 100 yuan in salary in addition to subsidies for coal, water and electricity, while they turn a blind

eye to the suffering we workers [endure]. If this continues for long, it will have grave effects on the War of Resistance. We have failed to persuade them to change course. Please listen to our appeal!²⁸

By the mid-1940s, letters addressed factory-based disparities and state policies that affected the entire city. Workers expressed their grievances in terms of the unjust treatment they received relative to supervisory personnel—for example, with regard to food rationing, which they said favoured staff personnel.

Whereas management used the term ‘treatment’ (待遇) to refer to benefits other than wages, workers associated the word with their quest for higher social standing and respect. For example, a machinist demanded a more egalitarian workplace after being criticised by the manager’s wife for inviting a friend to the factory canteen. The privilege of having a guest at the canteen was reserved for staff officers: ‘Why is the status of workers lower than [that of] staff? We reject this kind of thinking! What could you do without workers? We demand equal treatment and oppose this injustice!’²⁹ Workers intermingled status recognition with a language of class and rights. Here, the anonymous writer questions the monthly rationing of food after being informed that only staff members could purchase a catty (500 grams) of sugar:

I’m also human and also Chinese. Why does even the appreciation of food have to be divided by class? Is it possible that workers are constitutionally different from staff officers? Staff are people just as workers are people. Why does one have to make such distinct class divisions? That workers have no rights to purchase sugar is just one of numerous forms of unequal treatment between ‘staff’ and ‘workers.’³⁰

Advancing the Labour Movement

New China Daily’s participatory journalism had consequences in both the short and the long terms. Besides shaping class consciousness through the reading, writing, and sharing of the paper, the Communist press facilitated the advance of the labour movement. Reports on the labour movement in Nationalist China and abroad served to foster a sense of common cause among workers. By 1945, under the guidance of the CCP’s Southern Bureau, the paper pivoted from its wartime policy of

'justification, advantage, and restraint' (有理, 有利, 有节) to a strategy of mobilising students and workers in social movements. Contributing to workers' politicisation, *New China Daily* publicised worker demands with sympathetic reporting, and enlisted public support for labour.

Demands for dignity, economic justice, and human rights that had been expressed in letters resurfaced in the labour movement. In one of the first episodes of labour protest, the Hu Shihe Incident (胡世合事件), named for the electrician gunned down by Nationalist military intelligence in February 1945, 80,000 residents viewed his body lying in state in a Buddhist temple.³¹ Workers adopted the same moral language of rights and class in their elegiac couplets as they had in their *New China Daily* letters. Spies were described as 'demons and monsters' (九妖十八怪) who helped prop up the power of the privileged. Workers cried out for justice and the rule of law: 'Theft of electricity and murder, where is the law of the land? Sacrifice for the public, honour despite death.'³²

Many of the issues that workers raised in their letters had an impact on the social policies and political campaigns of the Communist regime during the early 1950s. Maoist policies and factory campaigns were not merely a 'revolution from above' that 'would at all times be guided by, and serve the interest of, the Chinese Communist Party'.³³ Rather, the campaigns and social policies that sought to bridge the divide between mental and manual labour and to impart workers with human dignity were responses to the grievances and aspirations workers had expressed in the previous decade.

Finally, one should consider the legacy of *New China Daily* on the press of the People's Republic of China (PRC). Participatory journalism flourished during the initial phase after 1949. Indeed, the political language promoted by the PRC through its propaganda and press in the 1950s built directly on the language of class the workers had so richly pioneered in *New China Daily*.