

# 1942

*For a long time in China, the dissemination of stories about heroes had been a mainstay of Confucian education. While in the past it was mostly emperors, military officers, officials, poets and virtuous widows who were upheld as models worthy of emulation, towards the end of the 1930s, the Chinese Communist Party started its own cult of revolutionary martyrs and heroes in Yan'an. Now model workers were the ones worthy of emulation. Taking a page from the Stakhanovite Movement that had recently emerged in the Soviet Union, in 1939, the Communist leaders began to designate labour heroes and model workers. In the following years, especially after 1942, the Party media would publish articles about peasants, workers, cadres and soldiers who had been conferred these titles, often assigning them significant prizes. This essay tracks the spectacular rise and fall of Wu Manyou, one of the earliest labour heroes, who was singled out by Mao Zedong himself for his achievements.*

# The Rise and Fall of Wu Manyou, China's First Labour Hero

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In May 1944, for the first time in five years, foreign reporters were able to visit Yan'an, Shaanxi Province, where the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) was then headquartered.<sup>1</sup> Harrison Forman and Günther Stein, two of the journalists, both noted the enormous prestige that was accorded to China's first 'labour hero' (劳动英雄), Wu Manyou. According to Forman:

His [Wu Manyou's] portrait is hung prominently in the galleries, homes and public places alongside those of Mao Tse-tung, Chu Teh and other high political and military figures ... As a Labour Hero, Wu [Manyou], and others like him, are not only held in high esteem by the people but are invited to attend all public and state functions, at which they occupy seats of honour along with the highest government military officials.<sup>2</sup>

What Forman witnessed was the unfolding of a campaign to improve governance through the dissemination of stories about the actions and attitudes of particularly industrious individuals who were awarded the titles of 'labour hero' and 'model worker' (劳动模范).<sup>3</sup> This was the beginning of a tradition that has continued until the present and over the decades has come to be known by everyone in China through news stories, documentary films, action movies, songs, dances, badges, postage stamps, museums and primary school textbooks. By telling the story of how Wu Manyou was catapulted to fame only to be excised from public memory shortly thereafter, this essay will draw some general lessons about labour governance in the People's Republic of China.

## Creating the Model

The dissemination of stories about heroes worthy of emulation was not an invention of the CCP, but had long been a 'mainstay of Confucian education in the form of stories about great emperors, generals, poets, magistrates and filial children.'<sup>4</sup> Historian Donald Munro has pointed out

that the Party-State's dissemination of model-worker narratives draws on a long pedagogical tradition: 'Much of the historical scholarship for which the Chinese are famous was concerned with unearthing models from the past for the education of the people.'<sup>5</sup> The CCP, however, would bring a new level of purposeful control and intentional design to this process.

The immediate inspiration for selecting model workers for popular emulation seems to have come from the Soviet Union of the mid-1930s, where a young miner from the Donbass region named Aleksei Stakhanov was celebrated in a nationwide campaign in 1935 for surpassing his quota by a prodigious margin. The Stakhanovite Movement was first noted in a CCP publication in 1936 as a useful way of stimulating productivity.<sup>6</sup> From 1939, the Communist Party in Yan'an began to designate labour heroes and model workers and, from April 1942, the *Liberation Daily* (解放日报) began to publish a steady stream of articles about peasants, workers, cadres and soldiers who had been conferred these titles along with significant prizes.

If we are to understand why labour heroes in general—and Wu Manyou in particular—came to feature so prominently in CCP propaganda, it is important to note that Mao Zedong favoured the use of such models as a means of popular education. In an interview with reporter Günther Stein, Wu explained: 'In 1941 Comrade Mao Tse-tung asked the people to find out who among the peasants were model farmers and could be regarded as candidates for the first Labour Hero elections.'<sup>7</sup> Shortly thereafter, in a report presented to the Senior Cadres Conference of the Shaanxi–Gansu–Ningxia Border Region in Yan'an in December 1942, Mao recommended the propagation of knowledge about those who had stood out for their efforts in the CCP-dominated areas, so that others might emulate their achievements.<sup>8</sup> In particular, Mao singled out the achievements of the farmer Wu Manyou, quoting at length extracts about Wu published in the *Liberation Daily*.

Mao's recommendation was turned into reality within weeks. In addition to news reporters, the CCP's cultural apparatus became involved in the celebrations. In early February 1943, the *Liberation Daily* began to publish reproductions of woodcuts featuring the icon of Wu Manyou. Figure 1, one of several woodcuts produced by the young and promising artist Gu Yuan—who would eventually be appointed President of the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing—shows Wu's likeness surrounded by domestic animals and crops below the injunction to 'Emulate Wu Manyou' (向吴满有看齐).



Figure 1. Gu Yuan, 'Emulate Wu Manyou', in *Liberation Daily*, 10 February 1943, 4.

Around the same time, having been requested to write a long poem celebrating the achievements of Wu, well-known poet—and future father of celebrated artist Ai Weiwei—Ai Qing visited the Wu household for several days to gather knowledge and inspiration.<sup>9</sup> Just as Gu Yuan and his visual art colleagues had done, Ai heeded Mao's call to place the masses at the centre of the arts, and his poem about Wu Manyou marks a point of departure in his work: where the poet had previously represented peasants as objects of pity, Wu was depicted as capable and resourceful.<sup>10</sup> According to Wu, he convinced Ai to change a line about him enjoying good luck in his old age to a new line emphasising his hard work.<sup>11</sup> The finished poem was published in *Liberation Daily* on 9 March 1943 and took up almost the entire fourth page. Roughly at the same time, Wu's life story was also transformed into a *yangge* dance, several short stories and songs.<sup>12</sup>

The cultural artefacts produced to celebrate Wu Manyou show that the artists who became involved with the model-worker campaign of those years were among the first prominent artists to produce art that

responded to Mao's call to make art *for* the masses *about* the masses.<sup>13</sup> These works of art also reveal that, in attempting to create a 'new China' through propaganda, the CCP constantly had to make use of older idioms, as reflected in the adoption of China's traditional *nianhua* motifs by the urban-educated artists who came to Yan'an.<sup>14</sup> Making use of established forms, however, threatened to undermine the ability of the CCP to control the message received by the audience. As Xiaofei Tian has argued, even the story of the most widely publicised model worker of all time, the young soldier Lei Feng, is shot through with Buddhist and Daoist motives that quite probably accounted for its popular resonance.<sup>15</sup>

#### Political and Economic Uses of the Wu Manyou Campaign

Wu Manyou's story seems to have served two functions. First, by focusing on the active role of labour heroes such as Wu, whose name came to figure as a synonym for the production drive itself—for instance, in the phrase 'the Wu Manyou direction' (吴满有方向), which was frequently employed in the *Liberation Daily*—the CCP sent the message that local peasants and workers were at the forefront of policy development. Second—and related to the first point—the CCP sought to make use of the distribution of labour hero titles to gain a foothold in local society. This can be seen in the fact that very few of the individuals selected as labour heroes and model workers in this period were cadres or Party members; rather, the CCP selected its models from residents who enjoyed local prestige and whose life stories fit in with the narrative of socialism overturning the feudal order. Mao himself made clear that this was one of the prime purposes of model workers in a speech at a conference in honour of labour heroes in the Shaanxi–Gansu–Ningxia Border Region in 1945, when he said: 'You are the bridge between the leaders above and the broad masses below. Through you, the opinions of the masses are transmitted to the leadership; the opinions from above are transmitted below.'<sup>16</sup> As such, the model-worker tradition is part and parcel of the CCP's very successful efforts to coopt a broad swathe of social actors into its governance apparatus.

In terms of economic policy, the Communist authorities used Wu to send a very clear message. Again and again, Wu is praised in the *Liberation Daily* for his diligence and for paying his taxes—even exceeding his obligations. What the articles about Wu highlight are the intensely practical and pressing needs of both the general populace and the CCP elite at that time. Under the harsh circumstances facing the CCP with the

tightening of the Nationalist blockade of the area in 1941, the government of the border region sought to make peasants and workers devote more hours to their work and increase their willingness to contribute, through taxation and voluntary schemes, to the building up of the local economy.

The CCP's devotional reliance on model workers is also revealed by the considerable value, in terms of both material handouts and social prestige, of the prizes. In late 1943, the CCP held its first model-worker conference and awarded no less than 185 model workers with certificates of merit autographed by Party leaders.<sup>17</sup> The models also received material rewards, such as money, draught animals and farm equipment.<sup>18</sup> After the conference, woodcut portraits of twenty-five individuals singled out as 'special model workers' (特等劳动英雄) were prominently displayed on the front page of the *Liberation Daily*.<sup>19</sup> At this point, the CCP displayed no qualms about relying on material incentives to motivate the populace to increase production.

There was, however, a vocal minority who felt that this reliance on material incentives did not fit well with socialist ideology. This contradiction became especially glaring as many of those chosen as models were already among those doing best for themselves in their local communities. By Wu's explicit admission, he was by far the richest man in his village, and even hired others to work for him.<sup>20</sup> The fact that Wu made his living by extracting surplus value from the labour of others led some readers of *Liberation Daily* to take exception to giving him the title of labour hero. In response, the newspaper editors repeatedly explained that, although these practices shared certain exploitative aspects with capitalism, they were certainly better than the previous system of feudal oppression.<sup>21</sup> In an internal publication, the editors argued that the development of some economic aspects of capitalism among the peasantry was both 'natural and desirable', resting their defence on the arguments that Mao had advanced in his 1940 essay 'On New Democracy'.<sup>22</sup>

The fact the government-sponsored adulation of labour heroes could be controversial is probably also part of the reason Mao, in his speech at the 1945 conference mentioned above, warned model workers:

[Y]ou must always remember not to become conceited ... if you are not modest and cease to exert yourselves, and if you do not respect others, do not respect the cadres and the masses, then you will cease to be heroes and models. There have been such people in the past, and I hope you will not follow their example.<sup>23</sup>

This and many similar injunctions to maintain good relations between model workers and their surrounding community point to the fact that, while models might serve to boost social governance and control for the CCP, they could also provoke animosity in local society.<sup>24</sup>

### And Then It All Went Wrong

Judging from the continued dissemination of news stories about Wu Manyou in the *Liberation Daily*, the CCP leadership must have found the campaign useful. In July 1946, the newspaper announced that a movie about Wu was being produced and, in August, a new film studio was established in part to realise this project.<sup>25</sup> Well-known filmmaker Chen Bo'er—who had herself been named 'labour hero on the cultural and educational battlefield' (文教战线上的劳动英雄)—was charged with writing the script for *Working Hero in the Communist Base: Wu Manyou* (边区劳动英雄: 吴满有).<sup>26</sup>

The movie would trace the events of Wu's adult life and, in so doing, describe the land reforms in northern Shaanxi in 1935, the reorganisation of the Communist army, the fight against the Japanese invasion, the great production drive and other major historical events and movements.<sup>27</sup> In other words, the film would link the personal history of Wu with the teleological march of socialism in China—a link between personal and political history that the CCP has often made to legitimate its policies.<sup>28</sup>

With the resumption of armed hostilities between the CCP and the Nationalist Party, Chen left the area to take up other responsibilities. A committee of writers—which included Jiang Qing, the former Shanghai actor who married Mao—took up the task of revising the script ahead of production, which began in September 1946. Before the movie was released, however, catastrophe hit: Wu was taken prisoner by the Nationalists and appeared in a radio broadcast to publicly denounce the CCP. A telegram from the Northwest Party Bureau put an effective end to the film's production by noting that 'Wu Manyou has been taken prisoner. Appears to have lost all integrity ... Do not recommence shooting on the film concerning him.'<sup>29</sup>

Following this public relations disaster, the CCP had to decide what to do with the public memory of Wu. Interestingly, they responded not by casting aspersions on Wu, but rather by erasing him from history. To this end, woodcuts of Wu were left out of published selections, Ai Qing's poem was not included in his collected works and the movie about Wu

does not figure in the published catalogues of early CCP movies.<sup>30</sup> In the 1950 edition of Ding Ling's award-winning *The Sun Shines Over the Sanggan River*, a novel originally published in 1948, the two references to Wu were replaced with references to Liu Yuhou, another well-known labour hero.<sup>31</sup>

Memory can, however, be recalcitrant, and Wu did eventually re-emerge from captivity, claiming it was a voice-actor, not he, who had disparaged the CCP. Unable to provide any proof of this claim, Wu, however, was never able to clear his name. To this day, his descendants are still fighting to clear their family name by publishing rebuttals and appealing to politicians and historians. At times, they have been successful, such as when the influential CCP member Li Rui—a former secretary of Mao's who had personally known Wu Manyou—published an article in the influential historical journal *Yanhuang Chunqiu* (炎黄春秋) in 1995 in which he claimed Wu was innocent of the charges against him.<sup>32</sup>

#### Model Workers Today

The CCP has continued to select model workers and propagate their stories ever since, with thousands of individuals selected annually at local, provincial and national levels. The most celebrated model worker of recent years is Guo Mingyi, a worker at a well-known steel factory in Anshan, whose exploits have been publicised widely by China's national media in the form of books, a play, a biopic and hundreds of articles and news reports since 2010. In the somewhat more open first decade of the 2000s, influential voices criticised the practice of selecting model workers. Most notably, perhaps, Qinghua sociology professor Sun Liping recommended retiring the institution of the model worker, comparing it to old holiday stickers peeling off government office doors because no-one could be bothered to take them down.<sup>33</sup> In recent years, the Party-State has been more forceful in its attempts to quell such criticism, as civil rights lawyer Pu Zhiqiang found out in 2015 when he was charged with, among other things, ridiculing model worker Shen Jilan.<sup>34</sup>

There are probably many reasons the CCP continues to propagate stories about model workers. In recent decades, celebrating model workers has become a way of sprinkling celebrity stardust on the CCP, such as in 2005 when the famous athletes Liu Xiang and Yao Ming were thus honoured at the Thirteenth National Conference of Model Workers in Beijing. Selecting model workers is a low-cost way of rewarding industrious and

compliant individuals and a means of creating inspirational stories for use in Party-State media and school textbooks. Perhaps most importantly, continuing the tradition has enabled the CCP to signal that it remains the guardian of China's working class through a period when many workers have had reason to doubt this.