

1949

After the Communist victory, the promises of liberation did not always translate into immediate changes on the ground for China's workers. While the establishment of the People's Republic in 1949 undoubtedly represented a revolutionary break for Chinese labour politics on a symbolic-discursive level, many workplaces initially simply carried on as before. Elements of continuity and change in workers' experiences in those early years of Communist rule varied across regions, industries and social groups. Taking the example of women workers in Wuxi's silk filatures, this essay argues that women were much less likely to benefit from the new opportunities opened up by the emerging order in China.

Continuity and Change: Women Workers in the Early People's Republic of China

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Shen Gendi was a young woman who worked in the Number Five Filature in Wuxi, Jiangsu Province, a silk thread mill operated by the state silk company, the China Sericulture Company (中国丝绸公司). The factory was unusual among filatures (silk mills) as it was one of the few taken over by the Government of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949; most remained in private hands. Different groups of workers in different cities and industries experienced the Chinese Revolution in different ways and, for many, like the young women employed in Wuxi's filatures, little changed in their workplaces and daily lives in the first years after the Communist takeover. Even the 'feudal' management system (封建管理制度) in silk filatures, which included the beating of young women by older male supervisors, continued under Communist management. In August 1951, Miss Shen's supervisor beat her so severely she died in hospital.¹

In the past, this might have elicited a strike wave of women workers engaging in work stoppages, protests and even violence (see Honig's essay in the present volume). But by 1951 the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) was firmly in control in cities like Wuxi, and the unions that all Chinese workers were made to join after 1949 frequently failed to protect their interests. Recognising the need for action, in September 1951, Party leaders launched the Democratic Reform Campaign (民主改革运动) in Wuxi's silk filatures, specifically targeting the feudal management system, along with counterrevolutionaries and agents of the defeated Nationalist Party (Guomindang, or GMD) among the filatures' supervisors. The campaign elicited a flood of complaints and accusations about the brutal mistreatment of women workers at the hands of male supervisors, as well as many other inequities that had remained unchanged in the factory regime since 1949.²

The Communist victory and establishment of the PRC in 1949—known as 'Liberation' (解放) in Communist Party parlance—is often treated as the break of dawn, a decisive moment when everything changed and the

old society gave way to the 'New China'. A key question for labour histories of the PRC is, what difference did the revolution make for China's workers? What difference did it make that the new rulers' goals included liberating and empowering the working class, especially women? The answer is complicated and depends a great deal on which group of workers one studies. In general, workers in high-priority industries like steel and machine-building won substantial benefits and even some degree of control over their working conditions, while changes came more slowly for workers in construction and textiles, especially in smaller cities and in the private and collective sectors of the economy. Although things were not neatly divided along gender lines, male workers were usually better able to take advantage of new opportunities after 1949 than their female counterparts. The revolutionary changes Chinese workers experienced during the two years from Liberation in 1949 to the Democratic Reform Campaign in 1951 developed unevenly across regions, industries and social groups.

Chinese Workers under New Democracy

Efforts at liberating workers in the first years of the People's Republic developed in the context of Chairman Mao Zedong's theory of New Democracy (新民主主义)—a set of policies intended to foster and develop capitalist industry while protecting workers' interests and employment in pursuit of rapid economic recovery and, ultimately, state-led socialist industrialisation.³ The promise was that compromise and cooperation with capitalists in the early years of the revolution would result in economic growth that would benefit the entire population, especially industrial workers, who could then enjoy the fruits of their labour in the form of health care, housing, education and consumer goods. Subsequent events show how difficult these goals were to achieve in practice, especially the promise of making workers the 'masters of the factory and the nation' (工厂与国家的主人翁).

In contrast with the 'dictatorship of the proletariat', theoretically inaugurated in the Russian Revolution of 1917, New Democracy did not include the expropriation of most private firms (excluding businesses in the 'commanding heights' of the economy such as steel, shipping, coal and power generation, most of which had already been nationalised under the GMD).⁴ On the contrary, private industry and commerce expanded

in the early years of the PRC, before the entire economy was rapidly 'socialised' in the winter of 1955–56.

In the context of the devastation of war, rampant inflation and the collapse of trade in 1949, protections for private businesses were entirely necessary and the Communist Party encouraged workers to compromise with employers on issues like wages, working conditions and dismissals. As Communist Party leader Ye Jianying put it to workers in Guangzhou in 1950:

We must be good at uniting our own class, raising our political consciousness, and distinguishing between immediate and long-term interests and between partial and overall interests, and must subordinate immediate and partial interests to long-term and overall interests ... and so, under certain circumstances, it will sometimes be necessary to make some concessions to other classes.⁵

At the same time, the new regime also established protections for workers to prevent mass unemployment and social unrest. The CCP was, after all, the 'vanguard of the working class' (工人阶级的先锋队) and could not risk alienating its urban base. Two of the most important symbols of workers' newfound power under New Democracy were democratic management (民主管理) of the enterprise and the enrolment of industrial workers into union organisations established in every factory, city and industry. It was hoped that establishing a degree of worker control over production through organs for democratic management would obviate the need for workers to engage in more radical actions like strikes, walkouts and 'methods of struggle which harm production'.⁶

'Liberating' Women

Women workers were one group that stood to benefit from the Communist revolution, which promised not only the liberation of China's working class, but also gender equality and the transformation of traditional gender roles. As Delia Davin put it:

More importance was attached to the mobilization of women factory workers than of any other group, in part because they

were members of what the Party taught was now to be the leading class in China, and also because they had an immediate role to play in the restoration of the economy.⁷

Unions played an important role in the mobilisation of women workers. In the early 1950s, the CCP rapidly established or reorganised industrial unions in cities throughout China and, by 1952, about ninety percent of industrial workers were enrolled in union organisations. These unions were not always under CCP leadership, however, nor did they always protect or represent workers' interests effectively. Many unions were controlled by criminal gangs or holdovers from the old regime and remnants of organisations created under the GMD. Many unions were controlled by employers and management, while others were loyal to and appreciative of CCP policies but wanted to preserve their autonomy.⁸

Many women workers had no existing union organisations—less because these had been prohibited than because they had proved too easy to coopt or suppress—so many female proletarians, such as silk filature workers, preferred to protect their interests through informal networks and direct action rather than establishing union organisations.⁹ When the CCP insisted that all workers join the new unions, this frequently resulted in labour organisations that did not represent their constituents effectively, or even unions dominated by management, as was the case for Wuxi filature workers in the early 1950s.¹⁰

Even in unions that were both loyal to the CCP and effectively represented their members' interests, women faced an uphill struggle to achieve effective representation and advance their interests as workers and women. The fact is that, despite the Party leadership's emphasis on women's liberation, many CCP cadres in villages and factories harboured sexist attitudes towards women and ignored or downplayed the specific needs and problems of women workers. Even high-ranking women labour leaders disparaged women workers' roles in the labour movement and in production, ignoring the important role women had played in strike actions and protests throughout the first half of the twentieth century.

For instance, Cai Chang, a national leader in 'woman-work' (妇女工作) in the unions, stated in a 1950 report that it was especially difficult to mobilise Chinese women for union work because they had to defer to their parents or husbands and could not be 'their own masters'.¹¹ She stated that it was necessary to carry out education work among women in industry to 'raise their consciousness' and eliminate the mentality of

‘relying on men to carry out union work’. Such passivity was thought to be a product of women’s double oppression under the old society. Older workers, although praised as ‘veterans on the production front’, were considered ‘ideologically confused’ because they had been raised in a ‘feudal’ society. Younger workers, on the other hand, were characterised as more active and enthusiastic about politics and union activities, but union reports criticised younger women as vain, liking to ‘make themselves pretty’ and lacking in ‘character’ (个性), such that they feared hardship, did not value labour and had certain ‘*petite bourgeois* characteristics’. This is but one example of the Communists’ penchant for defining anything corrupt, decadent or feminine as ‘bourgeois’—a prejudice with obvious negative consequences for ‘woman-work’ in Chinese unions.

One means put forward for addressing the specific needs of women workers—so important symbolically and practically to the new regime in 1949—was the establishment of women workers’ departments (妇女部) in union organisations. The first Trade Union Law of the PRC, implemented in 1950, required that unions in enterprises employing more than fifty women create a women’s committee and those employing more than 300 women employ a full-time union official in charge of ‘woman-work’.¹² Although often underfunded, sidelined and ignored by male union leaders, women workers’ departments were essential in addressing some of the specific difficulties women faced in Chinese factories in the early 1950s. Health care and maternity leave were just two important issues the women workers’ departments addressed. Marriage reform, domestic violence, unequal pay, childcare and working conditions were other problems the departments struggled to address, often facing opposition from Party and union cadres more concerned with the economic demands of New Democracy than with the liberation of working-class women.¹³

As with the unions, the organs for democratic management in Chinese factories were also less accessible for women workers than for their male counterparts. This was the case in both state-run and privately owned factories. In privately owned factories employing mostly women, like the silk filatures of Wuxi, the organs for democratic management (called ‘labour–capital consultative conferences’; 劳资协商会议) were not established at all or were simply an empty façade, despite being legally required in all large enterprises.¹⁴ Even in government-administered factories in which the majority of workers were women, such as the Tianjin Third Cotton Mill, it proved almost impossible for women to participate in the organs for democratic management given the prevailing prejudices.¹⁵

If anything, private employers seem to have been more responsive to women workers' demands for implementation of legislated improvements like health insurance and medical care, especially after the reform campaigns from the autumn of 1951 to the summer of 1952. In Wuxi's silk thread mills, for example, the kinds of changes that workers in other industries enjoyed from 1950 only began in the summer of 1952. These included literacy education, provision of medical care and childcare, protections for women workers and improvements in working conditions in the city's filatures, especially improved ventilation and temperature and humidity control.¹⁶

The Impact of Patriotic Production Campaigns

One of the more ubiquitous changes to appear in Chinese industry in the early 1950s were the patriotic production campaigns (爱国增产运动) of the Korean War (1950–53). Production competitions of various kinds had appeared sporadically in both private and state-run factories in the 1930s, but in the 1950s the practice spread throughout Chinese industry (see Sørensen's essay in the present volume). Modelled largely on Soviet practices such as 'shock work' and Stakhanovism, Chinese production campaigns were initially limited to state-run factories, but by the end of the war in Korea had become a common feature throughout Chinese industry. Production campaigns were one of the few CCP initiatives in private industry that capitalist employers were enthusiastic about implementing. Even if factory owners resented the high taxes and compulsory 'donations' to the war effort, having the strength of Communist Party propaganda behind a movement to get workers to improve productivity and quality was a potential benefit.

In the context of Wuxi's silk filatures, the wartime production campaigns were one of the few revolutionary initiatives implemented by unions dominated by managerial personnel hostile to women workers' liberation. The filature unions were mostly controlled by management and many factories managed to avoid their legal obligations to establish health insurance provision or organs for democratic management, but they nonetheless launched patriotic production campaigns. The women employed in Wuxi's silk mills were reminded how important their product was for the war effort, as the PRC exchanged silk thread and cloth with the Soviet Union in return for steel and petrol. Workers were told to 'sweat a bit more to help the Volunteer Army bleed a bit less'.¹⁷ Of all the CCP's initiatives

affecting women workers in the early 1950s, the production campaigns were the most widespread and successful, as output and product quality saw impressive, if short-lived, improvements in 1951.

By the autumn of 1951, however, the shortcomings of the unions described above—ineffective representation, sometimes due to control of the unions by management or even criminal elements hostile to the revolution—had produced problems serious enough for the Party-State to launch a nationwide campaign to reform the unions. The Democratic Reform Campaign, as it was known, entailed investigation of union leaders and, if necessary, their replacement with more reliable activists.¹⁸

Controlled Class Struggle through Mass Campaigns

Despite the dramatic changes in Chinese factories resulting from the Communist takeover, the fact that Shen Gendi was beaten to death by a supervisor in a state-run silk filature in August 1951 reveals how little had really changed for this group of women workers more than two years after Liberation. The Wuxi labour authorities' response was to focus the Democratic Reform Campaign on removing 'counterrevolutionary elements' from union leadership and reforming the 'feudal' management system in place in the city's silk thread mills. Party cadres carefully controlled the process, first meeting with workers in small groups to identify the worst offenders, then organising mass struggle meetings at which women were encouraged to voice their accusations, and ultimately punishing the perpetrators. The last part of the process was disappointing and frustrating as very few of these men were, in fact, punished, and some even kept their jobs at the factory. But this was less important to Wuxi's Communist leaders than the opportunity to 'cleanse the class ranks' of the union organisation and elect new leaders who were more representative of the filatures' workers, but also more loyal to the Party-State.

This form of controlled class struggle, which under the Democratic Reform forbade criticisms of capitalist factory owners or government policy, was only somewhat successful in achieving the Party's goals, and in fact failed to eliminate or replace the 'feudal' management system in factories, with complaints about the treatment of workers continuing to surface at least until 1953.¹⁹ Nonetheless, it was not until after the Democratic Reform and the Three Antis and Five Antis campaigns (三反五反运动) in 1952 (aimed, respectively, at corrupt officials and law-breaking capitalists) that the city of Wuxi began to implement the improvements

in welfare provision and working conditions described above. The Party-State might be blind to the difficulties many workers faced, but it was not impervious to influence and could achieve many positive benefits for workers once moved to action.

As the country's transition to socialism accelerated from the publication of the *General Line for the Transition to Socialism* (社会主义改造总路线) in October 1953 to the proclamation of the Socialist High Tide (社会主义改造高潮) in January 1956, China's women workers continued to see rapid changes in politics, society and the economy, even as many things—including unequal pay and representation, male chauvinism and the sidelining of women workers' interests—remained unchanged. China's New Democratic experiment was revolutionary in its scope and ambition, but the contradictions between liberation and democracy, on the one hand, and the state's overarching goal of economic development and industrialisation, on the other, posed immense challenges for women workers' efforts to advance their interests. As the Chinese economy plunged into the frenzy of production and destruction known as the Great Leap Forward (大跃进) (1958–62), women found themselves working harder than ever before and losing many of the protections they had won in the interim, while watching their hopes for liberation and empowerment recede over the horizon.²⁰