1968

In September 1968, the 'Workers' University' was established at a factory in Shanghai. Although it started as a nebulous project with only forty-five students in a unit of 6,000 workers, soon after its inauguration the experiment was publicly endorsed by Mao Zedong, leading to a proliferation of similar initiatives all over the country. This essay examines how workers' universities gained political prominence during the Cultural Revolution and how workers studying at these institutions engaged in theoretical debate over whether China was on the path to communism or simply reproducing aspects of a capitalist political economy.

The Establishment of the First Workers' University

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In July 1968, two years after the beginning of the Cultural Revolution, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) decided to disband Red Guard student associations. This decision was possible only because, in the early months of 1967, workers' mobilisation became the main vector of revolutionary significance. Considering their importance for the national economy, workers exerted substantial influence on local politics, which eclipsed the importance of squabbling students.

Student factionalism raised many questions about how to actualise the goals of the Cultural Revolution in the field of education. Since it was a revolution in the cultural sphere, education should have been a central part of it. However, it was never clear how to transform education according to communist principles. The first steps of economic transition to communism had already been roughly theorised, entailing measures to collectivise the means of production and to submit production and distribution to state planning, but what changes would be necessary in the educational field? This was one of the main questions at the centre of the Educational Revolution (教育革命) campaign, which started during the Great Leap Forward in the late 1950s and was escalated and radicalised during the Cultural Revolution, with the increasing participation of workers. As Zhang Chunqiao, one of the members of the Central Cultural Revolution Small Group (中央文革小组), remarked on the occasion of a visit to the Shanghai Machine Tools Factory (上海机床厂, SMTF) on 22 July 1968:

> Educational Revolution is not only a matter of schools. To lean only on schools to carry it—I will say an impolite phrase—is to do it wrong. It is better to rely on the Party, the workers, on poor and middle peasants, on the People's Liberation Army … So, the Educational Revolution really is not a matter of schools; after its rise in schools, it has to come to the factory and the commune.[1]

The SMTF exerted a substantial influence on Maoist educational experiments in the Great Leap Forward and Cultural Revolution. Mao himself

visited the factory as early as 1957, making it a national example. Machine tools were a fundamental product for Chinese industrial development at the time, as they stood for national independence from Soviet technology and assistance. Promoting political and technical education to workers in this kind of factory meant supporting national technological development at the level of local initiatives. Some workers in the SMTF had actively participated since 1956 in political study groups, which later gained strength during the Cultural Revolution, particularly during 1967, when the focus of political mobilisation shifted from students to workers.

As workers were called on to 'take the leadership in everything' (工人阶级必须领导一切) in a famous article written in August 1968 by Yao Wenyuan, another member of the Central Cultural Revolution Small Group, a team of workers in the SMTF set up the first Workers' University (工人大学). Throughout the university's history, both its form and its content were debated, and different types of organisation were tried, some of which failed. Most importantly, the example of the Workers' University was replicated in different forms all over the country, to such an extent that, in 1974, the CCP calculated that around 330 formal schools had been established inside factories in all provinces.[2] One year later, the number grew to approximately 500.[3]

In this essay, I outline the events leading to the creation of the SMTF Workers' University, show how this initiative resulted in political experiments in production units and, finally, discuss some examples of the theoretical output produced in these universities.

Political Crisis and Invention

The events of the January Storm of 1967 (一月风暴; see also Thornton's essay in the present volume) and the aftermath of the Shanghai Commune unveiled the saturation and subsequent loss of meaning of some political categories then in use, such as 'class' (阶级), 'power seizure' (夺权) and even 'revolution' (革命). This does not suggest that this conceptual network was perceived as outdated or detached from reality, but rather that the complexity and practical contradictions of these concepts were on full display, particularly in a society engaged in what was believed to be a transition to fully fledged communism. Both Party leadership and grassroots militants questioned how to engage in a revolution that required taking over state power from the hands of the Communist Party. In December 1966, Zhang Chunqiao described the situation in

these terms: 'Some people say: "This is revolution … that is revolution." It is too much. These currents of thought are at all times reflected within the Party. This problem needs to be solved from practice.'[4] Zhang was referring to the different understandings of what 'revolution' actually was and how it would be actualised after the Communist takeover of the state. Probably alluding to Mao's 1937 essay 'On Practice', Zhang declared these conflicts could only be solved 'from the empirical experience' (从实践中解决), which meant that only practice, political mobilisation and experience could clearly answer how to carry the revolutionary process towards communism.

In 1966 and 1967, Red Guards disseminated political debates and examined the historical records of many cadres. This resulted not only in the dismissal of some officials, but also in violent acts during public criticism sessions. Another consequence with profound political meaning was the instilment in the population of the habit of scrutinising the Party leadership—both their words and their actions.[5] What Mao in 1967 called 'the Red Guard broom' (红卫兵扫帚) breached the separation between 'inside' and 'outside' the Party, paving the way for unprecedented grassroots supervision of and participation in the Party-State's agenda.[6]

These developments notwithstanding, the workers were the ones who started to actualise political inventions from within their units, while at the same time attempting to maintain production output.[7] In declaration after declaration, Mao, Zhou Enlai and the members of the Central Cultural Revolution Small Group emphasised the importance of consolidating a positive political direction to the uprisings—in this case, the criticism of the 'Seventy Articles', a particular document that regulated industrial management (see Hirata's essay in the present volume)—so that the revolutionary current would not be undermined by factionalism. Fundamental to the Cultural Revolution was the question of the construction of the 'new'—what Zhou called 'inventions' (创造) and Mao referred to as 'newborn things' (新生事物).[8]

Seven days before the meeting that officially dismissed the Red Guards on 28 July 1968, the *People's Daily* published a report about some experiments developed at the SMTF with a personal comment from Mao promoting the example to the whole country.[9] The article explained that, in that factory, there was a project to train technicians from among the workers, focusing in particular on four aspects: 1) engineers agreed to

share technical information with workers; 2) engineers were working a few hours per week in the production line; 3) workers had joined the technical commission and were taking part in meetings regarding production management; and 4) there were committees comprising workers, cadres and technicians set up to manage sectors of the factory. The report stated that an engineer who had no direct experience on the production line was more susceptible to make mistakes; conversely, a worker who did not understand how to read a project, or the theory behind it, would be more likely to do something wrong in their practice. Moreover, efforts to keep manual labourers from participating in planning activities were to be considered a waste of resources and limitation on technological innovation. The report also declared that workers trained as technicians tended to have a degree of political consciousness and sense of collectivity that made it possible for them to consider productive labour as a contribution to society, while engineers may cultivate an 'individualistic' character, tending to work for profit or power.

On the occasion of his visit to the SMTF in July 1968, Zhang Chunqiao gave a speech in which he traced a 'historical line' connecting that moment in 1968 to an earlier visit Mao had paid to the factory, in 1957: 'At that time, we were in the middle of the Anti-rightist Campaign, and based on that debate, it became clear that workers should be trained and form a new class of intellectuals, otherwise the Dictatorship of the Proletariat could not be consolidated.'[10]

By relating the experience of 1968 with Mao's visit, Zhang attempted to combine popular initiative with the leadership of the Party—in other words, to present the experience of the SMTF as a democratic experiment with the imprimatur of authority. Zhang continued to argue that the experiments in the factory could be a prototype for a national revolution in education because they combined manual and intellectual activities, alternating workers, students and professors in positions of productive labour, study and teaching.

By including the experiments in the SMTF in the Educational Revolution, this and other speeches by prominent Party leaders promoted the rise of a new project: the Workers' University, which would be formally announced in September 1968 by a group of workers in the SMTF. The decision to use the word 'university' was particularly consequential, as would become clear in the following years.

Experiments and New Questions

In its first report, published in July 1969, the SMTF Workers' University declared it had started its activities with fifty-two students chosen from among the 6,000 workers in the unit.[11] Of this group, 'the majority had completed only primary education, the minority had finished high school, and eight have not finished primary education'. The word 'university' did not imply the existence of a building or even a specific room for the classes; in SMTF, as in most other work units, classes were simply held inside the factory, promoting political studies and literacy as much as technical knowledge.[12] Most professors in the workers' universities were experienced workers and intellectuals from conventional educational institutions.[13]

The experience of setting up a university in a production unit raised many questions. Should it have the same type of pedagogy as other universities? What defined its 'proletarian' or 'revolutionary' character, its students, its methods and its results? These and other topics were debated at least until the death of Mao and the imprisonment of the remaining members of the Central Cultural Revolution Small Group in 1976, and continued even until workers' universities were changed into common technical schools in 1978.[14]

When the first cohort of students graduated from the three-year course in engineering in 1971, part of the leadership of the SMTF Workers' University advocated that, after graduation, worker-students should go back to the production line instead of occupying positions as engineers or managers in the factory. Their aim was political: to discontinue a system in which the privilege of studying led to leadership positions and to prove that mental and manual labourers could work together in all spheres of production. Moreover, the clear implication was that anyone, proletarian or not, could make mistakes and act as capitalists if their political role reproduced old social structures. As one SMTF worker declared: 'The political environment of the Workers' University is good, but it is not a "red security box". I have the deepest consideration for Mao Zedong's policies and towards the Party, but a simple "class feeling" does not substitute the consciousness of the line struggle.'[15]

Nonetheless, the request that worker-students come back to the production line after graduation was not welcomed by all participants. Some questioned: 'This new type of graduate, is new in what way, exactly?'[16] Others asked: 'Some people ask what kind of "position" do I have [当一

个什么“员”]?’[17] The answers to these questions were idealistic: ‘I believe it is not to forget I am a worker … Every day, after class, I go back to the factory shed and work with all comrades … when there is a problem, we solve it together.’[18] The objective was personal and political: to be able to take part in production and political mobilisation, to ‘go up and go down’ (能上能下)—that is, occupy positions in the leadership and in manual labour—and to ‘be able to write and fight’ (能文能武).[19]

Wang Defa, one of the leaders of the SMTF Workers’ University, mentioned that some had criticised the institution as being a ‘primary school with secondary school books and a “university” sign on the front door’.[20] Critiques like this were common even among workers and, in response, university members started to write reports with examples of graduated workers who devised technological innovations, highlighting their contribution to enhancing production output.[21] In fact, these reports were marred by deep contradictions. They attempted to prove the economic advantages of forming new technicians from among workers, however, output numbers could not reveal the political and social advantages of the program of study. The real breakthrough of the workers’ universities was in their reconfiguration of the relations of production, which did not map easily into technical and economic language.

Analyses from the Factory Floor

As part of the adult education initiative that took off thanks to the newly established workers’ universities, many writing manuals aimed at adults were published, starting in 1968. The increased literacy also resulted in innumerable collections of workers’ articles, some of which were published in local and national journals.

A good example of this new editorial phenomenon can be found in an article published in 1975 about the production quota mechanism—one element of the socialist planned economy, by which production output and quality were predetermined by the government and assigned to each work unit.[22] This text attempts to distinguish between ‘true and false’ Marxism—that is, political practices that actually lead to communism and capitalist policies ‘disguised’ by Marxist-Leninist terminology.[23] It starts with a quotation from a factory worker named Wang Gongxiao, who in a letter to a colleague allegedly asked whether the production quota was, in fact, a capitalist or a communist policy.[24] On the one hand, he avers that production quotas help to advance backward technology

and production output, which can be useful to the socialist construction. On the other hand, he continues, the system homogenises the labour capacities of different individuals, subsuming labour into abstract capital, thus acting as a capitalist dynamic.

The article continues in the form of a letter written by another worker, named Ye Baile, in reply to Wang. It starts with a common argument of the period, declaring that if capitalists have been defeated in the revolution, there are no exploiters who could 'take away' added value and perpetrate class exploitation, and therefore 'the quota system has gone through a fundamental change of its character and role' within socialism. This notwithstanding, Ye further elaborates the contradiction proposed by his interlocutor, declaring that the quota system also sets a specific time for production output, virtually equating the capacity of each worker, calculating it as time, not as labour, and thus reinforcing the division of labour. In his words: '[The quota system] uses a unified unit to measure each labourer, and does not consider the level of technical knowledge or physical force of each individual. Thus, in this aspect, it acts as capitalist legal power.[25]

The text continues by situating this contradiction within the communist aim of bringing forth a society in which each person receives according to their needs and gives according to their abilities, proposing that if 'each gives according to their abilities', thus reinforcing the communist character of the contradiction, workers themselves might be able to restrain the capitalist aspect of the production quota system. Ye affirms that if the quota system is set without direct political control from the workers, it could reinforce capitalist policies such as the use of material incentives: 'Some people … use the quota system as an excuse to promote material incentives and awards—this is a way to reinforce the capitalist character of the quota system.'

To prevent this capitalistic resurgence, Ye proposes that production be directly managed by the workers: 'Production development and advances need to go through public debates, formulating new quotas, setting new strenuous targets.' This proposition is coherent with a coeval debate on the internal contradictions of socialism. These questions did not crop up overnight but developed throughout discussions that took place over the previous two decades. By 1975, there was a clear directive from the CCP to all study groups to analyse empirical situations and distinguish, in local and national policies, the contradictions between 'capitalist and communist vectors'—that is, policies that could lead the political economy

back to capitalism or forwards to actual communism.[26] Accordingly, the way to limit capitalist structures remaining in socialism would be to reinforce communist policies and inventions—in particular, by strengthening the direct participation of workers in the spheres of administration and education.

Filling a Gap

The mobilisation campaigns carried out during the Cultural Revolution brought up important theoretical questions about the coherence and effectiveness of socialist policies. At times, the crises and even failure of some political campaigns triggered new theoretical debates, as was the case with Red Guard factionalism.

The brief history of the workers' universities and the debates to define their form and aims are important topics through which to comprehend the events of the Cultural Revolution from a grassroots perspective. This essay lingered in particular on two aspects of these institutions: the difficulty of defining their programs and role in the political economy, and the significance their members assigned to political experimentation, which was considered as important as theoretical and technical study. Studying in a workers' university actually entailed theoretical analysis of practical experiences.

Workers' universities, together with other study groups set in rural and urban production units, filled a social gap for individuals who previously were not considered apt to engage in political debates or set forth new theoretical hypotheses. However, there was never any consensus in Chinese society about the social and political economy value of these institutions, as shown in the persistent reports attempting to 'prove' their effective contribution to the national economy. Yet, those engaged in the project persisted and produced interesting and complex political analyses.

In the example of the article criticising the production quota system examined in this essay, we can see that workers who engaged in these universities were far from convinced about any ideas of a predetermined 'triumph' of socialism. This is in line with the belief—widely disseminated during the Cultural Revolution—in the persistence of the line struggle within socialism, based on the conviction that socialism was not a 'secure' society that would automatically lead to communism. Accordingly, the only chance to actually accomplish the transition to communism was to maintain an open space for political experimentation and for the direct

participation of workers in the management of production and also in the educational field. This would be the only way to establish policies that would blur and eventually overcome class inequality. Yet, these articles were ripe with doubts, as befitted their experimental character and political ideals.