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## Working Class Formation in China Since 1920

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Thanks for inviting me! I'd like to summarize my forthcoming book, entitled *A World to Lose*. Marx and Engels closed the *Communist Manifesto* with these time-honored words:

The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains. They have a world to win.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Chinese working class did have the opportunity, and from time to time it looked like they had might be turning the trick. But in the end, they lost. Why?

Chinese workers have been the subjects of a great deal of analysis by scholars, documentation by journalists and activists, and portrayal by writers, filmmakers and artists. Light has been shone on the rich tapestry of economic, social, cultural and political forces driving them into low-paid, dangerous, degrading, alienating, mind-numbing, transient employment, on the obstacles to improvement, on workers' understandings of their world and their lives in it, on their passivity and resistance, and on the effects of their responses. *A World to Lose* seeks the foundation for all this in three questions: what kind of class is the Chinese working class?; what are the historical forces and processes that have formed it?; and how does the pattern of class formation help explain the working class's reactions historically, presently and even prospectively?

An analogy may help. Aficionados of crime literature, drama and film (which many of us watched in earnest to while away the lockdown) will recognize a familiar trope: a mountain of evidence points toward a culprit with the motive, the opportunity, the resources, no alibi, and even the bad looks. But along comes the clever detective who has developed a sense of who the suspect is, and believes they are just not the sort of person who would or could commit the crime. Soldiering on doggedly in the face of disbelief and derision, the investigator,

focusing *not just on the details of the crime but also the nature of the criminal*, finally serves up justice by apprehending the real culprit.

Likewise, scholarship on labor politics in China tends to focus directly on workers' manifest activities: of what do their politics consist? what stimulates them? what forms do they take? who leads? who participates in them (and who does not)? what obstacles do they face? what are their goals, tactics and strategies? do they target employers, the government, or both? what ideological formations do they entail? what results do they achieve? These and related questions can be best approached in the context of a prior set: who are China's workers? what is the Chinese working class? how has it developed since its birth over a century ago? As such, the focus here is on *working class formation*, understood as a noun and a verb: what is the working class *qua* class, and how did it become, over a long period of time, what it is?

My inquiry draws inspiration from scholarship on *political development*, which has contributed so much to understanding American and Western European politics by seeking the roots of present-day outcomes in their historical origins.<sup>1</sup> It pays attention to questions of *path dependency* — the ways in which economic, social, cultural and political *institutions* (including formal and even legal ones but also widely shared norms, expectations and practices) arose and became settled in ways that came to be taken for granted, proved difficult to change, and as such had enormous if often overlooked implications for outcomes ever since. It also focuses on

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<sup>1</sup> Here “political development” eschews the meanings the term took on in the heyday of modernization theory in the 1960s and 1970s, when it referred to processes of capitalist economic growth, social and cultural “modernization” and political democratization and stabilization.

historical *sequences* and *conjunctures* as causal or influencing mechanisms in themselves.<sup>2</sup> As such, *A World to Lose* also aims to begin to fill a curious lacuna in scholarship on Chinese politics: that in the study of so ancient and historically continuous a civilization, country and polity, the past is still deployed mainly as background or context (and an often reified one), but not as itself a dynamic space in which the durability or discontinuity of institutions, and the concatenation of specific forces at specific moments, has actually shaped outcomes in specific ways.

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Already, three major conceptual and theoretical problems have arisen. First, for the past 175 years, Chinese politics have demonstrated significant *path independence* and *radical discontinuity*. The political development approach as applied to China therefore must de-emphasize positive feedback loops and institutional self-reinforcement that are central to its analyses of real-existing democracies<sup>3</sup> and capitalist political economies in favor of the politics of radical change. Yet this can be completely consistent with the political development approach by emphasizing the moments when new pathways began to be forged and then themselves went off the rails after mere decades and had to be replaced with new ones. The very fact of rapid-fire disjunction itself produced important political effects on each new

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<sup>2</sup> "For instance, it arguably mattered a good deal for the trajectory of domestic politics whether left wing or right wing parties happened to be in power at the time when a cataclysmic event, the Great Depression, hit a particular country." Paul Pierson, *Politics in Time* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 11.

<sup>3</sup> "A 'Real-existing' Democracy (or RED in my terminology) has three characteristics: (1) it calls itself democratic; (2) it is recognized by other self-proclaimed democracies as being "one of them", and (3) most political scientists applying standard procedural criteria would code it as democratic. Its relationship to democracy as advocated in theory or as described in many civics texts is coincidental." Philippe Schmitter, "The Future of 'Real-Existing Democracy,'" *Society and Economy* 33 (2011) 2: 399-428.

pathway, as *A World to Lose* will demonstrate.<sup>4</sup> Finally, political development's focus on the analytical importance of conjuncture and sequence are particularly useful in explaining disjuncture, since they are central to the formation of path dependencies in the first place.

Second is the question of the "working class," which conjures up a thicket of conceptual, theoretical, analytical and political problems. Starting with the first of its elements, should conceptualization focus on the nature of work itself, in which case it would include anyone who engages in manual labor, even if they are self-employed and perform their work outside a factory — as, for example, a woman spinning cotton or working a loom at home on a putting-out basis, or a self-employed gardener bulking up muscles and pouring out sweat beautifying suburban tract homes? Does it include mental or professional work, such as that done by doctors or even professors who write sentences such as this one? Or should it be grounded in the economic, social and political relations of work, so that it features those toiling, together with fellow workers, for a wage in factories? Turning to the second, do large numbers of "workers" however defined always form a "working class"? Or is that better conceived as something greater than merely the sum of its parts — *i.e.*, a large body of workers unified by the kind of work they do, the terms on which they do it, or their relations with each other?

Now add "formation" into the mix. If there is a "working class," how is it formed historically? Should the process be thought of in rather strictly — or, as critics would have it,

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<sup>4</sup> For example, labor activism in the structural reform period is shaped and restricted by workers' antipathy toward any return of Cultural Revolution-style political conflict.

“vulgar” — Marxian terms as a teleology that begins with shared exploitation<sup>5</sup> and punishing manual labor, which produce oppressive social relations with employers and shared bonds among workers, that in turn engender collective “class consciousness”, all of which lead workers to band together politically to do something about it? Or is the process more indeterminate, recursive and complex than that?

Ira Katznelson has developed a conceptual framework to help sort through these issues. At its core is the idea that class has four distinct aspects,<sup>6</sup> which can be denoted in shorthand as economic, social, cultural, and political, and which I've just used. The *economic* is the strictly materialist one rooted in the mode of production. In capitalism, class is a function of the commodification of labor and capital, the wage relationship, and the exploitation of labor through the creation and extraction of surplus value. In state socialism, it is structured by the decommodification of labor in favor of treating it as a “use value”,<sup>7</sup> compensation delinked from actual labor contribution, and appropriation of the product by the state for social distribution and of the surplus for various purposes including reinvestment. Even Marx and Marxists, not to mention analysts and actors of other theoretical and political persuasions, have

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<sup>5</sup> This rhetorically loaded word is deployed throughout in its coolly analytical meaning: the appropriation of surplus by one who did not produce it.

<sup>6</sup>Katznelson uses the term “levels”, and even prefers merely to enumerate rather than name them (level 1 *etc.*). Since, however, his ultimate point is that there is no necessary or underlying logical, historical, theoretical or analytical hierarchy among them, it seems best to adopt the more analytically neutral “aspect.” (A more dialectically-inflected theoretical conceptualization might prefer “moment.” But since that word can also refer to a specific point time, its deployment could add ambiguity to the present, temporally-grounded, empirical approach.) See Ira Katznelson, “Working-Class Formation: Constructing Cases and Comparisons,” in *Working-Class Formation: Nineteenth-Century Patterns in Western Europe and the United States*, ed. Ira Katznelson and Aristede Zolberg (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 1-41. The shorthand terms are mine, not Katznelson’s.

<sup>7</sup> In classical political economy, the senses in which a commodity satisfies a want or need, in contradistinction from “exchange value” — its price in relation to other use values.

long realized, of course, that the economic aspect of class is necessary to conceptualize a working class theoretically and for it to form historically, but also that it can never suffice to explain or even chart the social, cultural or political life of the proletariat.<sup>8</sup> In capitalism, the stark facts of private ownership of the means of production (and the working class's exclusion therefrom), wage labor, and appropriation of the products of labor by capitalists do not by themselves imply anything very specific even about workers' incomes, wealth and economic conditions.<sup>9</sup> Much less do the relations of production and exploitation lead directly to specific patterns of working class social life, "consciousness" or politics. Nonetheless, the latter are bound to be shaped by the basic economic structures and processes of the mode of production in a particular place and time, including income, payment systems, labor recruitment mechanisms, employment security, and the labor process.

The *social* aspect of class is "the social organization of society lived by actual people in real social formations"<sup>10</sup> that affects the ways workers experience the mode of production and their place in it. By contrast with the cold, bare material aspects of class and labor, here the focus is on the existential, quotidian and phenomenological. It includes elements that are not strictly economic or determined by the basic facts of the mode of production, such as the size

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<sup>8</sup> Hence Marx's famous distinction between a class in and for itself. "Economic conditions had first transformed the mass of the people of the country into workers. The combination of capital has created for this mass a common situation, common interests. This mass is already a class as against capital, but not yet for itself." See Karl Marx, *The Poverty of Philosophy* (New York: International Publishers, 1963), 173.

<sup>9</sup> After all, highly-paid baseball players who sell their labor to team owners are, strictly speaking, exploited — an idea that is not so fanciful when it is recalled that they have organized unions and gone on strike.

<sup>10</sup> Katznelson, "Working-Class Formation," 16.

and composition of the working class, the relationship between workplaces and residential spaces,<sup>11</sup> social status, and social and power relations and hierarchies within the factory.

The *cultural* aspects of class refer to workers' shared dispositions — “the ways people construct meaning to make their way through the experienced world,” the “plausible and meaningful [thought] responses to the circumstances workers find themselves in.”<sup>12</sup> Katznelson rejects the term “consciousness” as too deterministic and teleological, preferring more open-ended questions about the kinds of social and political affinities that workers conceive as most important or salient. How and how much do workers think of themselves as having something in common with other workers who are similarly situated within the structures and processes both of the mode of production and of daily life (*i.e.*, the *economic* and *social* aspects)? Beyond class, how and how much do they identify with the nation? Their place of origin? Their gender? Their secret society? Their institutions such as parties or unions? It also takes in the content and tenor of working class political predispositions. Are they forward-looking or atavistic? Optimistic or pessimistic? Accommodative, syndicalist, socialist or something else? How do they interact with other identities?

Finally, for Katznelson the *political* aspects of class refer to organization and collective action. What are the institutions of working class politics: parties, unions, other kinds of associations, and social movements? What are the stimuli, repertoires, and demands? Is

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<sup>11</sup> Ira Katznelson, *City Trenches: Urban Politics and the Patterning of Class in the United States* (New York: Pantheon, 1981). Indeed, he gives particular emphasis to the spatial array of workplace and home, building it into a theory in which it provides an *explanans* for various other facets of working class formation — the construction of hegemonic “trenches” that orient working class politics toward either labor-based issues or community-based ones.



their politics contentious?<sup>13</sup> In what ways does collective action depend on the emergence of political opportunities to create openings?<sup>14</sup> Is it patterned as isolated incidents or waves, or in rhythm with economic upturns or downturns? How politicized is it: do workers target the state, employers, foreigners, or “others”?; do they form unions, parties, movements, or other collectivities?; do they strike, hold political demonstrations, or other political actions? Finally there is the question of the state’s response: how does it mix coercion, coöptation, manipulation and accommodation?

Katznelson’s major conceptual and methodological point is that there is no simple or straightforward theoretical or historical relationship among these four aspects of class. He seeks, for example, to undermine simplistic “base-superstructure” theories, according to which, implicitly or explicitly, economic factors lead to certain forms of working class life (*e.g.*, the way capitalism brings workers together in factories and subjects them to increasing homogenization, impoverishment and exploitation) that in turn foster burgeoning class consciousness leading to organization and action. He argues that the process of class formation is “the conditional (but not random) process of connection” among the four aspects of class.<sup>15</sup> The explanatory arrows can run in a number of directions and even be recursive. For example, following E. P. Thompson,

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<sup>12</sup> Katznelson, “Working-Class Formation,” 18-19.

<sup>13</sup> Sidney Tarrow distinguishes between “collective action” and a subset he calls “contentious collective action.” The former “can take many forms — brief or sustained, institutionalized or disruptive, humdrum or dramatic. Most of it occurs within institutions, on the part of constituted groups acting in the name of goals that would hardly raise an eyebrow. Collective action becomes contentious when it is used by people who lack regular access to institutions, who act in the name of new or unaccepted claims, and who behave in ways that fundamentally challenge others or authorities.” Sidney Tarrow, *Power in Movement: Social Movements and Contentious Politics*, second ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 3.

<sup>14</sup> See the discussion of [Tarrow’s theory of political opportunity structure](#) in chapter 1.

<sup>15</sup> Katznelson, “Working-Class Formation,” 21.

working class consciousness can grow out of contentious collective action as well as bring it about in the first place, and there is evidence of this in China.<sup>16</sup> The political can also shape the cultural in other profound ways, though. For example, the existence of the franchise and the organization of parties in American urban neighborhoods induced workers to focus on issues of community rather than class.<sup>17</sup> Likewise, of course, collective action reshapes the economic and social structures of capitalism that affect workers.

The four aspects of class do not form a theory of class formation. Katznelson's argument is that there cannot be a robust theory that explains working class formation always and everywhere. Rather, he offers a conceptual and analytical scheme for explaining and comparing particular cases. First, it helps pose important questions by deploying working class formation as a noun. How fully and coherently developed was working class formation in a particular time and place, and what were the political implications? For example, was the working class politically organized and active even as it did not fully share economic conditions, experiences or discourses (as happened to some extent in Maoist China)? Or did it have the opposite problem of being unable to build a political movement on its shared exploitation, experiences or thinking (as happened to some extent in China under structural reform)? And if so, which obstacles were most important, and how did they interact? Second, conceptualizing working class formation as a verb, how did the working class form over time? For example, can changes in its political activity be explained by shifting levels of immiseration or exploitation? By reorganizations of social life (brought about, for example, by developments in urban,

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<sup>16</sup> Elizabeth J. Perry, *Shanghai on Strike: The Politics of China Labor* (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1993), 8.

housing, transport and communication infrastructures)? By systematic changes in workers' thinking? And were any such "cultural" changes produced by shared economic and social experiences or by political efforts such as literacy campaigns and cultural activities?<sup>18</sup> Turning matters around, did the material lives of workers change due to concerted political action? Many more meaningful lines of inquiry can spin out in potentially revealing, fascinating and, ultimately, recursive ways that explain working class formation in a particular time and place as both a thing and a process, neither of which is random or overdetermined but, rather, is contingent on the specificities of particular times and places.

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*A World to Lose* is organized according to this analytical scheme. It is divided into three parts. First, before 1949 working class formation in China took place amidst the crisis of the *ancien régime* and, after 1920,<sup>19</sup> the protracted struggle between two hegemonic projects:<sup>20</sup> one to build a Republic on the foundations of the nascent capitalist economy, and the other for socialist revolution. Second, from 1949 to 1978, the victory of the revolution led to titanic, contradictory exertions of the Party/state to construct a new hegemony around radical yet also developmental state socialism. Third, beginning in 1978, the Party/state sought

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<sup>17</sup> Katznelson, *City Tranches*.

<sup>18</sup> Elizabeth Perry has emphasized their importance in China. See Elizabeth J. Perry, *Anyuan: Mining China's Revolutionary Tradition*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012.

<sup>19</sup>1921 is the year commonly given for the birth of the Chinese Communist Party. In fact, Party organizations began to form the previous year in at least six Chinese cities as well as Paris. See James Pinckney Harrison, *The Long March to Power: A History of the Chinese Communist Party, 1921-72* (New York: Praeger, 1972), 30-31.

<sup>20</sup> The systematic effort to construct hegemony, which itself involves the exercise of power through the active or passive consent of the ruled. Its modern usage in political science derives from the work of Antonio Gramsci. For a brief summary, see Philippe Schmitter and Marc Blecher, *Politics as a Science: A Prolegomenon* (New York and Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2021), 48.

to rebuild its hegemony around a new foundation of deep structural reform<sup>21</sup> of the economy and demobilized politics centered on the preservation of its power.

For each period, *A World to Lose* conceptualizes working class formation in terms of the myriad interactions among the four aspects of class. How, for example, did changes in the mode of production and degree of exploitation reshape social life? And how did working class social life contribute to coping with or even reinforcing economic relations? How did the economic and social aspects of working class life find cultural expression (and, in turn, how did working class cultural formation reinforce or undermine material or social life)? How did the economic, social and cultural shape labor politics (and *vice versa*)?

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Working class formation has proceeded both in terms of particular dynamics within each period as well as some that transcended them. On the one hand, the “long century” since the dawn of China’s industrial working class has been a time of radical discontinuity. On the other, distinctive features, sequences and conjunctures of working class formation in one era

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<sup>21</sup> The commonplace term for the vast changes that have taken place in China since 1978 is “reform.” It is appropriate insofar as it refers to aspects of the process by which these transformations have occurred. Change has been pursued gradually and mostly peacefully. But “reform” can hardly capture the depth and breadth of the substance of the changes. Since 1978, China has not merely been tinkering with, perfecting or toning down Maoist state socialism. Something far more thoroughgoing is afoot. The country has been seeking, often successfully, to excise, root and branch, the basic elements of its Maoist polity, economy, society and political culture. It has questioned almost everything that went before. Its leaders and people have sought to create new forms of political authority, economic activity, social organization and cultural expression that have no precedent in China or indeed the world. If revolution is defined as a “basic transformation of a society’s state and class structures” (Theda Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979): 4), then, what China has been undergoing is no mere “reform,” but rather something that would more aptly be called a “peaceful revolution.” Another, perhaps less oxymoronic term to capture China’s gradual and peaceful process toward “basic transformation of the state and class structures” would be “structural reform.”

created path dependencies both within it as well as for the succeeding one(s). Yet they also brought the first two periods to their ends in path independent climacterics.

Chapter One covers the Republican/revolutionary decades (c. 1920-1949).

- Labor exploitation was intense throughout.
- To cope, workers elaborated a complex set of social relations and organizations.
- And to express their misery and shock, they developed and articulated ways of thinking that combined themes of class, nation, and ardent humanism.
- Across much of this period, the working class took the initiative to organize itself in powerful but locally and regionally bounded waves of strikes and protest. This experience continued to propel labor activism in the radical state socialist and structural reform periods that followed.
- The Communist Party was founded in 1920 by radical intellectuals, not workers. It endeavored to provide political leadership to the working class, which did enable the labor movement to begin to transcend those boundaries in the early and middle 1920s and again the latter 1940s when the Party could operate in some cities.
- The “White Terror” of April 1927, when Nationalist forces betrayed the working class and the Communist Party with which it had been allied, leading to subsequent defeats through the autumn, proved a watershed — a nonergodic moment the effects of which

could not subsequently be canceled out.<sup>22</sup> It drove the Party into the countryside, separating it and the working class over the next two crucial, formative decades for both.

- That period was conjunctural with the rise of autocracy in urban China under the proto-fascist Nationalists and the Japanese occupation. As Aristede Zolberg has suggested, “the single most important determinant of variation in the patterns of working class politics ...is simply whether, at the time this class was being brought into being by the development of capitalism..., it faced an absolutist or liberal state.”<sup>23</sup> In China this had two effects.
  - It reinforced radical class-based labor politics by preventing the development of a reformist or community-based working class politics.<sup>24</sup>
  - It inclined the working class toward hostility to political authority more generally, though this would not become apparent until after 1949.
- At the same time, the working class lost its left-wing activists and Party leadership which were necessary for developing any capacity for organization and mobilization on regional, much less national scales.

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<sup>22</sup> Pierson, *Politics in Time*, 18.

<sup>23</sup> Aristede Zolberg, “How Many Exceptionalisms?” in *Working-Class Formation: Nineteenth-Century Patterns in Western Europe and the United States*, ed. Ira Katznelson and Aristede Zolberg (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 397-455.

<sup>24</sup> In the United States, by contrast, the residential separation of workplace and residence, combined with the wider context of “real-existing democracy”, gradually shifted working class politics from focusing on labor to community. See Katznelson, *City Trenches*.

- Yet the working class continued to mobilize itself in various if limited ways under even the unfavorable conditions of Nationalist autocracy, Japanese occupation, and civil, anti-imperial and, indeed, world war.
- These three developments — separation from the Communist Party, the autocratic context, and political deficits at the regional and national levels, produced a working class politics after 1949 that was active, spontaneous, radical, and hostile to political leadership and authority.
- Meanwhile, the Party became consolidated and battle-hardened in relative isolation from the working class over the same the two decades after its expulsion from the cities.
- Thus the working class emerged into the state socialist period with considerable political experience. Yet it also had definite autonomy from and disillusionment with political authority generally, born not just of the failure of the Communist Party to lead it forward but, even worse, the working class's decimation as a result of following Party's leadership and the Party's inability to protect it from slaughter at the hands of the Guomindang (GMD). Moreover, thereafter it was left with little in the way of left wing leadership or membership, and it suffered for two more decades under the Guomindang and Japanese.
- And as it came to power the Party faced the prospect of ruling with little if any base in the working class.
- The attenuation at best, and estrangement at worst, of ties between the Party and the working class during their formative decades had major, yet qualitatively different,

consequences for labor politics in China in both the radical state socialist and structural reform periods that followed — the Party encouraging but then deserting it in the former, and suppressing it in the latter. It is an example of what Arthur Stinchcombe called “‘historical causation,’ in which dynamics triggered by an event or process at one point in time reproduce themselves, even in the absence of the recurrence of the original event or process.”<sup>25</sup>

Chapter Two explores the radical state socialist period of the People’s Republic from 1949-78.

- The new Party/state was founded before any institutional or political incorporation of the working class. It did not significantly increase working class representation, much less power, within its ranks — a path-dependent effect of its separation and alienation from them after 1927 as well as a product of newer élite-level conflicts over the role of workers in industrial management and politics itself.
- Put in terms of political development, the Party was an “early arriver”<sup>26</sup> in creating and filling the new and radically expanded political space starting in 1949. To be sure, early arrival does not guarantee success in holding that space over the medium, much less long term.<sup>27</sup> And the Maoist wing’s penchant for fomenting instability and, indeed, actual (“Cultural”) revolution provided political opportunities which the working class

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<sup>25</sup> Pierson, *Politics in Time*, 11.

<sup>26</sup> Pierson, *Politics in Time*, 72 and *passim*.

<sup>27</sup> Kathleen Thelen, “Timing and Temporality in the Analysis of Institutional Evolution and Change,” *Studies in American Political Development*, 14.



took to assert itself.<sup>28</sup> Yet the Party's profound Leninist organizational, ideological and political DNA, combined with its long experience with managing revolutionary politics and internal fissiparousness, as well as with the working class's long estrangement from the Party and its lack of organization and leadership of its own, made the working class unable to overcome the Party's early strategic advantages in building and occupying political space.

- Moreover, early on the sidelining of labor was not necessarily a conscious move by the Party so much as an unconscious effect of the path-dependent alienation of the Party and the working class in revolutionary times.<sup>29</sup> Yet by the start of the First Five-Year Plan, many in the Party did suppress working class self-assertion around the "East China" system of participatory management and shopfloor democracy. And that crackdown, along with the path-dependent effects of the cultural and political aspects of working class formation — *i.e.*, the legacy of spontaneous working class politics before 1949 — can in turn help explain the eruption of radical working class contention during the Cultural Revolution a decade later.
- Despite all this, the Party significantly improved wages, benefits and labor conditions, exalted workers' social status, and concentrated them in all-encompassing factory-run communities. But these were not just gifts *from* the new government; they were very much the products of working class activism over previous decades, which could now

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<sup>28</sup> Again, see the discussion of [Tarrow's theory of political opportunity structure](#) in chapter 1.

<sup>29</sup> As Pierson points out, "an understanding of path-dependent dynamics may suggest alternative explanations for arrangements that are too easily attributed to power relations." Pierson, *Politics in Time*, 47.

begin to be realized at last *through* that government. But those gains were short lived. By the time of the Second Five-Year Plan and the Great Leap Forward in the late 1950s, compensation and living standards began to stagnate; Chinese workers did not receive a raise after 1957.

- In terms of the social aspects of class formation — workers' lived experience — the working class expanded significantly with the rapid industrialization. It was broadly homogeneous: workers mostly hailed from the cities in which they worked and in which they had been settled for some time, they were paid according to fairly uniform scales (and they opposed wage differentials), they lived together in factory communities, and rural emigration was tightly restricted. Yet the limited incorporation of farmers during the Great Leap Forward (and then forced back home), and of contract workers sent subsequently to urban factories by rural communes, and the extrusion of urban workers to remote cities or rural projects, did produce inequalities and frictions that became major flash points in the Cultural Revolution.
- Working class "social capacities" — "the stock of available [material, technological, organizational, and ideational] resources in social life" — also increased sharply.<sup>30</sup> But those of the state developed even more.
- Culturally, the working class evinced a "workerist" sensibility, political self-confidence, and sheer gumption *vis-à-vis* the Party. These were grounded in its experience of self-directed activism in the Republican/revolutionary period, its hostility to Guomindang

proto-fascism and Japanese colonial fascism, and its attenuated links with the Party during that time.

- The previous three points help explain the puzzle of rising levels but also increased politicization of labor politics in the early years even despite improving material conditions at that time. Workers mobilized early, spontaneously, repeatedly, and, in contrast with their previous focus on material issues, often for radical political changes, especially within their factories many against the Party/state and many stimulated by the Maoist left.
- But this politics also explains the working class's ultimate defeat. Sequencing matters: radical working class political offensives in the early years of the People's Republic were defeated before the rise of Maoist radicalism in the runup to the Great Leap and then in the Cultural Revolution which gave renewed voice and official *imprimatur* to those early concerns. Context was also crucial: the Cultural Revolution proved too chaotic a cauldron for the working class to be able to press its concerns effectively. And finally, the fact that the social capacities of the state grew more than those of the working class proved significant when push came literally to shove in ringing down the curtain on the popular mobilization phase of the Cultural Revolution in 1967-68 and in preventing it from returning during the rest of the Cultural Revolution decade.

Chapter Three turns to the structural reform beginning in 1978. In industry it remained tentative and contested through 1993, when it began to take off and powered the

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<sup>30</sup> Pierson, *Politics in Time*, 74.

rest of the economy to do the same. The working class formation approach can help explain the shifts both overall and also between the first 15 years and the subsequent ones.

- In the 1980s, labor radicalism of the Cultural Revolution remained fresh in the minds of workers, managers and officials, cowing the latter two groups and delaying structural reform.
- By the early 1990s, though, labor “reform” broke through alongside “reforms” of prices, planning, ownership and management. The Party/state began to dismantle factory communities and the housing, services and benefits they provided. It also carried out massive layoffs in the service of closing “unprofitable” enterprises.
- Thus, wages and economic life waxed and waned, while the working class was knocked off the social and cultural pedestal on which the Party/state had placed it decades earlier.
- The most massive and rapid wave of proletarianization in world history occurred with the addition to the working class of hundreds of millions of farmers hired into burgeoning low-wage private firms.
- Thus, the working class became far more socially heterogeneous and widely distributed across the country. Yet within industrial areas, it grew both more dispersed in one sense (with the end of factory-provided housing) but also more concentrated in another with the rise of gargantuan factory towns and the return of the pre-1949 practice of dormitory housing for single young workers.

- The working class also became more heterogeneous culturally, evincing patterns of atavism (especially in rustbelts), acquiescence (generally among urban residents in functioning industrial areas), and attraction/repulsion (among rural migrants in the new export hubs).
- Labor protest became endemic — China is now home to more of it than any other country — but also, in contrast to the Maoist period, defensive and apolitical. The quantity continues the working class's long traditions of self-organized protest. Qualitatively, depoliticization and deradicalization were grounded in
  - the political defeats of, and disillusionment with, the radicalism of Maoist-era labor politics;
  - the gradualism of labor reform, itself attributable to lingering effects of radicalism in the 1980s; and
  - the tidal wave of rural entrants into the working class.
- In the end, workers came to accept broadly the hegemony of capitalist and market relations, and of aspects of state rule (especially its use of law<sup>31</sup>).

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Amidst this complex admixture of continuity and discontinuity, of path- dependence and path-independence, working class politics demonstrated a key commonality that repeatedly drove it to heroic activism and tragic defeat. On the one hand, the working class

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<sup>31</sup> Elaine Sio-leng Hui, *Hegemonic Transformation: The State, Laws and Labour Relations in Post-Socialist China* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018); Ching Kwan Lee, *Against the Law: Labor Protests in China's Rustbelt and Sunbelt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

took the initiative to mobilize itself politically in each era. It acted frequently and spontaneously (rather than in a manner produced within or by developed institutions) to resist the depredations being visited on it and, in the Maoist period, to advance its vision of a better world. It was not generally the tool of élites, and, with the exception of three moments in the mid-1920s, mid-1940s and the mid-1960s, it did not take advantage of them to provide the energy, organization, discourse, tactics or strategy for its political interventions. But on the other hand, *it engaged in politics very differently in each period because its resistance was fundamentally shaped by the economic, social, cultural and political hegemony of the time.* Thus, in the Republican/revolutionary period, it struggled hard to protect itself from the despotism of China's nascent capitalism, developing its own spontaneous tactics, wildcat unions and associations, and a discourse that wove together themes of class and nation. In the mid-1920s and latter 1940s it relied on the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) mainly to help it coördinate its fragmented local efforts into wider movements. In the Maoist era, much of the working class, exalted at least early on materially, socially and culturally by the new radical state socialism, went on the political offensive to press the new state socialist political economy even further leftward, advancing a powerful syndicalist program grounded in a "workerist" sense of extremely bold self-confidence, even as it did so within but also against *ad hoc* organizations created by shifting groups emerging out of the Party/state and the intellectuals, students and politicians who drove the left forward. During the transition to structural reform, it reverted to a generally defensive but still highly active pattern of resistance, while still succumbing to the

new hegemony by not criticizing the new capitalistic<sup>32</sup> economic and social forces or deploying lenses and language of class. In short, *over more than a century of dizzying, path-independent change, working class formation in China has proceeded in a dialectic in which it has resisted the hegemonic forces acting on it in ways fundamentally stamped by those very forces.*

The consequence is that *this helps explain why the working class ultimately lost out in each period, albeit in very different ways.* In the Republican/revolutionary period, the revolution won, but the working class was never incorporated significantly into the Party or able to drive or even underpin revolutionary politics. That ultimately left it in a weak position *vis-à-vis* the new Party/state, and therefore vulnerable when the deep contradictions of Maoist politics erupted into crisis during the Cultural Revolution. That defeat of the working class opened the door for the structural reforms which, in turn, knocked the working class off its Maoist-era pedestal and subjected it to new depredations redolent of pre-revolutionary factory despotism and labor markets. Ultimately, and more in line with Gramsci's theory of hegemony than the revolutionary optimism of Marx and Engels in their concluding battle cry of *The Communist Manifesto*, Chinese workers, despite their best efforts, lost the world they might have made.

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<sup>32</sup> This term is meant to elide the debate about whether structural reform — with its adoption of private capital, wage labor, and markets — amounts to capitalism or, because of the heavy role for the Party/state, something else.

# Contact

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