



Locating labor and class in contemporary capitalism: historical comparison and spatial analogies in the Chinese politics of place

A commentary on Pun Ngai's "The new Chinese working class in struggle"

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In this evocative call to arms for worker solidarity and collective action, Pun sketches conditions of contemporary exploitation and the contours of resistance among an emergent working class in China. At an analytic level, the story unfolds as an instance of labor contesting, confronting, and fighting capitalist exploitation under coercion of global neoliberal dominance in collusion with the Chinese state. The workers and students involved in the Jasic Technology factory conflict draw on an arsenal forged by activists in the fires of the industrial revolution and sharpened during decades of welfare concessions, now repurposed for twenty-first century experiences of capitalism in the Global South. Pun describes events that provide welcome lessons for worker activism worldwide, explicitly written against tropes of the demise of the working class and the arrival of the end of history. Concretely, industrial workers and idealistic students join forces and struggle to start a union and fight against unacceptable working conditions through a new left politics. Pun contextualizes these actions within a staggering increase of Chinese protests, in the form of sit-ins, strikes, and litigation, citing larger numbers, size, and frequencies of occurrence.

I would like to comment on how class is located, both temporally and spatially, in this account. On the one hand, there are the specificities of politics in China, where rural-urban dichotomies entangle with reimagined Maoist motivations. As such, these contemporary conditions go beyond nostalgia for Maoism among industrial and urban workers and its youth movement, instead forging a new way forward in late capitalism. On the other, there are the temporal analogies with industrialization in the West, now displaced onto the global South, with an ensuing relocation of investment and accumulation through a new transnational division of labor. Here, the account relies

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on a double homology, between the theory of class mapped onto the Chinese rural-urban dichotomy and class relations reshaped through a West-South axis of globalization.

This would be highly problematic if left as an unqualified polemic. Yet Pun delves deeper, articulating how consciousness, subjectivity, and action enrich this politics of place with the particularities of circumstance and the coincidences of context. This is where class disappears as a “group” and emerges as a relational, incomplete, and ongoing process. Moreover, it is here that Pun’s emphasis on forging alliances, taking collective action, and seizing opportunities, while creating a political awakening of consciousness of a class for itself, becomes charged with transformative potential. Yet the account remains closely tied to the Jasic encounter in a class analysis that focuses “on the production lines, in the workshops, at the workers’ dormitories,” the most relevant locations for labor union politics. And this, I argue, is where a broader approach would not weaken but strengthen the revolutionary possibilities of these events and acts.

This characteristically localized form of class analysis may suffice for the Jasic case, where workers living in dormitories and with fixed factory workplaces ally with leftist students who fought, and sometimes worked alongside them, as comrades-in-arms. Yet, where did these solidarities come from? This is crucial for the potential to repeat, develop, and potentially escalate the collective action as an effective tool against exploitation and extraction. Specifically, this begs the question: what do second-generation *nongmingong*, literally peasant-workers, have in common with the students with high levels of education and training? Arguably, both groups struggle to find a place in the contemporary labor market and experience intransience, precarity, and dislocation in their search for livelihoods. These struggles form part of a larger transformation in which rural-urban solidarities, student-worker alliances, and global activism become embedded.

Broadening the focus on collective action beyond production lines, workshops, and dormitories, contemporary experiences appear as not just shaped in the mold of previous epochs of labor protests at the workplace. Instead, more encompassing struggles for livelihoods, often glossed as the work, labor, and care of reproducing life-worlds, are gaining pace. Indeed, mass incidents in China, and the world, frequently revolve around livelihood protests that seek access to housing, land, energy, pensions, health provisions, environmental resources, and so forth, in cities and countryside alike.

Pun brings these issues into the frame in her insightful discussion of experiences and subjectivities of second-generation rural workers, facing precarious conditions as continuously disadvantaged residents in cities and the simultaneous devaluation of rural livelihoods in the countryside. Although the students’ worldview remains opaquer in this particular account, we may still ask: What happens if we focus more explicitly on livelihoods as the common denominator and potential site for resistance? If we dwell on sites of livelihood disruption and the politics of world-making? These are crucial for how solidarities are forged, as digital and global interactions permeate the horizons of activism, dynamics Pun has explored in detail in relation to Foxconn and Apple elsewhere. These sites are important not just for considering what remains, but what emerges, in contemporary left politics, and reveal what is *new* about these new left politics. Especially as collective action proliferates beyond the workplace and dormitory.

I am thinking here of emergent struggles appearing globally, for instance in rebellions of consumption, where livelihoods are explicitly at stake. Demands for housing, for food, for fuel, come to mind as struggles for reproduction writ large. In my field site in Shanxi Province, a deindustrializing coal region in central China, a population upended by continuous economic upheaval and exploitation makes itself at home in a landscape marred by extraction. Here, the issues of work, labor, and subsistence loom large, as airborne pollution wafts across the sky, groundwater supplies dwindle, and toxic dust settles on agricultural land. Workers draw on their own histories of resistance, often building on the lessons of Maoist excess as well as socialist

heroism to formulate claims for redress. These emerging working-class solidarities can be understood as unrests of reproduction, with consequences for the politics of resistance, both analytically and pragmatically.

A new left politics must address these struggles of reproduction, especially as accumulation and its corollary resistance conspicuously emerge beyond points of production, often manifesting in riots of consumption. Joshua Clover (2016) describes the features of the classic riot, where skirmishes over the prices of market goods occur among participants who have little in common but their dispossession. Here, he argues, consumption becomes a main arena for struggle, often through strategies of disrupting the pricing, sale, or distribution of goods.

Value theorists point out that as capital generates capital, the extraction of surplus value from sites of production gains pace, and the tendency for capital to accumulate elsewhere intensifies, notably at the points of realization or through networks for the circulation of value (Pitts 2017). As rent-seeking flourishes, labor is devalued, and “fictitious” value skyrockets (Harvey 2018). Sites of struggle multiply and morph to keep pace with the states, corporations, and elites profiting from this amplification. Those positioned at crucial points along these value chains, from online retailers and media moguls to audit consultancies and real estate tycoons, are particularly well placed to enrich themselves. Technology companies, in particular, sit at many nodes that capital passes through to extract, mobilize, and accumulate profit, often from the point of production through to the realization and even circulation of value.

As China attempts to shift from industry to innovation as part of economic rebalancing and global respatialization, spheres of production and reproduction collide and conflate. Simultaneously, the appearance of spheres “outside” of capitalism are dwindling and disappearing, begging the question whether they existed in the first place. Moreover, capitalism’s totalizing logics, that anything can be for sale, meant that original enclosures and primitive accumulation already set the scene for all subsequent accumulation by dispossession. Struggles of reproduction and confrontations over livelihoods must be written into this story, as these are particularly pertinent in the dispersed, interconnected world of work today, so that we may join Pun in locating “the new laboring subject and a class force.”

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