Exploring Worker Consciousness in China

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Abstract

This paper presents the findings from a study that has explored how the lived experience of everyday Chinese workers has influenced their struggle to change their working conditions. Drawing on Foucault (1980), this study argues that because the consciousness of everyday Chinese workers remains at an embryonic level, their ability to campaign and change their working conditions remains constrained. The study draws on original interview data with 74 Chinese workers gathered across two phases of research conducted between 2011-2013.

Introduction

The research focus for this study has been to assess the potential of labour activism in China to develop into an organised worker movement. This focus is justified by the explosion of China into a ‘world factory’ and a world export leader following the open market reforms of 1978 (Leung & Pun 2009), and the subsequent conversion of millions of Chinese peasants into urban industrial and service workers in order to support this transformation (Schucher 2011). Understanding the political economy of these changes on work has dominated Chinese labour studies, especially in documenting incidents of worker protest action triggered by labour abuses and generally poor working conditions (Lee 2000). Since the first major worker protest in China in the student-led Tiananmen Uprising of 1989, one analysis
estimates that the number of worker protests nationally between 1993 and 2005 has been between 10,000 to 87,000 (Leung & Pun 2009).

Chinese scholars have subsequently claimed that the prevalence of these protests heralds a ‘rising consciousness’ that emerges from the lived experience of workers (Thompson, 1976) to foster class formation and action against capital exploitation (Leung & Pun 2009; Pun & Lu 2010). Exponents of this thesis thus draw on a Marxist understanding to explain worker protest movements by connecting workers’ social being with ‘rising consciousness’ in evaluating protest movements in the post 1979 reform period. In keeping with this analytical lens, Chinese workers are portrayed as victims of capitalism under which their response to their repressive conditions is a result of their nascent class interests (Leung & Pun 2009; Pun & Lu 2010).

However, there is an alternative thesis that suggests that these worker protest movements in China have been relatively small-scale, and have generally targeted subsistence or sustenance matters rather than matters of class (Perry 2001). In 1992, for instance, worker protests were triggered by job loss and reduced income experienced by workers due to redundancies arising from the restructuring of state-owned enterprises (SOEs) and the failure of SOEs to provide minimum living allowances and pensions (Chen, 2000). Similarly, matters such as wage arrears and low wages in foreign-invested enterprises also triggered worker protests from the mid-1990s to the present (Leung & Pun 2009). Thus, worker protests have been targeted at economic needs, and have thus not fundamentally changed the nature of the Chinese worker psyche in moving away from acquiescing to the authority of the state and management (Perry, 2001), and developing a consciousness that is grounded in their commonality as a working class.
The original field data with everyday workers across a range of industries and occupations in various regions of China that informs this study supports this latter thesis. This data suggests that while the *lived* experience of workers may incite them to engage in protest actions at individual levels, this experience is grounded in fundamental survival needs of food, shelter and everyday sustenance rather than class alone. Hence, the protest actions by Chinese workers are generally ‘once-only’, even when they reap only a partial gain in their claims as a result of their protest. The study therefore argues that because the consciousness of everyday Chinese workers remains at an embryonic level, their *willingness* to sustain long-term campaigns and change their working conditions remains constrained.

To present this argument, the study draws on 74 original interviews with everyday Chinese workers that were gathered over three years in two different phases. Framed by an ethnographic approach the study is also partially informed by the concept of grounded theory which Strauss and Corbin (2015) describe as generating new theory from data. This is because the theoretical conceptualisation that has been used to analyse the data has emerged from the data itself. However, unlike grounded theory, this theory is not ‘new’. Instead, we present a preliminary discussion that draws on the power-knowledge framework of Michel Foucault (1980), as this was found to be most appropriate in conceptualising the findings. The paper thus begins by justifying and describing the methodology used, before presenting preliminary findings and concluding with a brief discussion about the conceptual implications of these.

**Using a ‘Guerilla Street’ Method to Gather Data**

An ethnographic approach to explore the *lived* experience of workers in China has been extensively adopted by Chinese scholars (Chan 2001; Pun 2005; Lee 2007) in the field of China’s labour studies. Ethnographic fieldwork is the hallmark of cultural research; its aim
being to discover “another way of life from the native point of view” (Spradley 1980, p. 3). By grasping the insider’s point of view in a particular culture, the ethnographer seeks to understand the daily life of people, and to realise the visions of their worlds. Thus, ethnographic fieldwork involves a study of “what the world is like to people who have learned to see” in their cultural contexts (Spradley 1980, p. 3).

While appropriate in exploring the focus of the study, crucial to the success of ethnographic research is a bond of trust between the researcher and the community under research to enhance confidence in the quality of the data (Brewer 2000). Crafting this bond in the research site presented major difficulties for a number of reasons. Foremost is the fact that conducting research in China is subject to a number of unspecified political restrictions (Thogersen & Heimer 2006). Thus, it was difficult to predict whether or not the research would encounter these. Furthermore, social polarisation and diversification in the Chinese society has constrained access to certain community members in China (Thogersen & Heimer 2006), which in the case of the research, created difficulties in being able to initiate interviews and dialogue with workers for the data collection in China. This prompted the use of two key strategies: the first was spending time with key informants (for example, labour activists and centres of labour activism) to develop an understanding of the research context and cultural and social norms; while the second was to reside in the communities where workers were located. By residing where workers lived, the researcher was able to develop familiarity with workers, observe and engage in their behaviour patterns such as dining at the same eateries, and generally doing what workers did in their setting (Brewer 2000).

Nonetheless, there still remained the dilemma of accessing workers for interviews. As a result it was decided to draw on the technique of a ‘guerrilla street interview’. Gold (1989, p.
180) describes this as “unchaperoned, spontaneous but structured participant observation and interviews as opportunities present themselves” on the streets. Thus a ‘guerrilla street interview’ involves the process of observing people’s daily behaviour and “picking persons for research interviews by spontaneously engaging in seemingly idle, friendly conversation [with] people… on the streets” (Gold 1989; Solinger 2006, p. 161).

To carry out a ‘guerrilla street interview’ in the public realm, the researcher spent many hours walking on the streets in an attempt to speak to factory workers who were recognizable either by their clothing or appearance. Nonetheless, workers were either fearful (naturally), unwilling to talk to a stranger, or were in a rush going to work or on the way ‘home’. Therefore, interviews were initially carried out in employment centres, known as Talent Markets (rencai shichang) by approaching workers who were reading postings about employment opportunities with queries such as, ‘What sort of jobs are you looking for?’, ‘Where are you from?’ or ‘How long have you been here?’ After establishing this minimal level of trust, the researcher presented these workers with the bona fides and then conducted the ‘street interviews’ if they agreed. The researcher also approached other workers outside of the Talent Market with a friendly greeting, such as ‘How are you?’, presented the bona fides and requested an interview. This approach enabled the researcher to recruit everyday workers that included hotel cleaners, waitpersons of the small eateries or cafés, hawkers on the streets, taxi drivers as well as factory workers.

The methodology of conducting ‘guerrilla street interviews’ was dictated to by the research focus for the study, and the circumstances affecting the gathering of data in China. However, the methodology is also in keeping with an ethnographic approach to research (Gold 1989).
This method enabled the researcher to gather a reservoir of rich ethnographic details and uncensored personal opinions and life stories that have subsequently informed the study.

The Research Process

Two phases of data was conducted in multiple locations. The first was in Shenzhen in Guangdong Province; Hefei city in Anhui Province; and Hangzhou in Zhejiang Province between 2011 and 2012. The second was in Dongguan, Foshan and Haizhu cities in Guangdong Province between 2013 and 2014. Figure 1 below depicts the precise locations of these on a map of China:

Figure 1: Field locations in China

Shenzhen was chosen because of the prevalence of special economic zones (SEZs) which attract significant foreign investment (Harvey 2005). A ‘flood’ of peasant workers, nationwide have subsequently migrated here and provided cheap labour for the export
factories (Harvey 2005). Resistance by these factory workers is a documented phenomenon in Shenzhen (Chan & Pun 2009). Unlike Shenzhen, Hefei is an underdeveloped region with a large number of state-owned enterprises (SOEs) and largely local workers (National Bureau of Statistic's Database 2011). However, Hangzhou is one of the most developed regions with the largest number of domestic (or private) enterprises in China (National Bureau of Statistic's Database 2011) that have attracted a mixture of local and migrant peasant workers.

These 3 sites covered a spectrum of industry type, size and worker occupation, enabling exploration of the research focus with everyday workers. However, the findings suggest that workers in these sites were relatively quiescent, as they appeared to have consented themselves ‘voluntarily’ to their exploitative conditions. Given the focus of this study has been to examine how everyday workers’ lived experience has influenced them to campaign and change their employment conditions, it was decided to interview two groups of workers. In so doing, workers who had participated in protest actions were thereby deliberately contacted in the second phase of data collection to explore the difference between those engaging in protests and those who had not. This latter body of data was gathered in Dongguan, Foshan, and Haizhu districts in Guangdong Province. Due to the sensitivities of workers engaging in protests in China, these workers were primarily organised through contacts with non-government organisations (NGOs).

Sample

A total of 74 interviews were conducted across the two phases of data collections. Figure 2 summarises respondent details:
Figure 2: Profile of Respondents

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<tr>
<td>Interviews</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>74</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>26 females; 27 males</td>
<td>10 females; 11 males</td>
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<td>Age</td>
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The findings are divided into two groups. Group One consists of 52 interviewees who had never participated in protests while 22 had is in Group Two. All interviews were transcribed and analysed using Nvivo 10 software.

Findings

**Group One**

Rather than class formation and action to change the status, our findings suggest that poverty encouraged a strong ‘sense of fatalism’ that workers were destined to remain impoverished in the discourse of those in Group One:

> I already knew my future – I will be poor for the rest of my life. Once we’re poor, always poor…” (Security Officer A, Shenzhen, 2011)

The above interviewee along with other respondents linked their lack of education to their poor working conditions:
I didn’t even complete primary school… because I am uneducated; I’ll never get a better job in my life… So I must put up with anything I am not happy about; I have to do my living – all of us have to put up with our poor conditions…”

(Security Officer A, Shenzhen, 2011)

As a result of their education status, most worked in ‘sweatshop-like’ conditions, where hours varied between 8-13 per day without a fixed rest day, despite Chinese labour laws stipulating an 8 hour work day, 6 days a week, and no more than 36 hours overtime per month (Lehman 2008). At a garment factory in Hangzhou, respondents reported working 13 hour days; Workers sometimes cut short their lunch hour to catch up on sleep in order to be able to work extra hours at night: “I work overtime every night… [and] my work is so tiring… I don’t even get enough of sleep…” (Garment factory line-leader, Hangzhou, 2011).

It was clear that these long hours of exhausting work left little time for workers to do anything other than ensure their (and that of their family’s) basic sustenance: “Our overtime hour finishes at 9.30pm – some of us may finish our tasks before 9.30pm – but we must complete the required overtime hours and leave together.” (Head of sewing division at garment factory, Hangzhou, 2011)

It is suggested that the phrase ‘we must complete the required overtime hours’ used in the above description was one of many examples which exposes a hidden form of forced labour across all types of ownership in China. All interviewees described that they must work overtime when needed because they feared potential wage cuts to their already low incomes if they refused to do so:
“…we rarely refused doing overtime work because our work leaders had made the arrangement for us already… so we must obey our leaders… otherwise three days of our wages would be deducted”. (Jewellery worker A, Haizu, 2013)

In addition, companies also used humiliating measures to control the behaviour of workers:

“Apart from paying the fines for the mistakes we made, our work leaders wanted us to stand at the door and read out the company’s rules and policies, such as the types of mistakes we were not allowed to make, in front of other workers… so we always remember to do our tasks properly…” (SOE manufacturing worker, Hefei, 2011)

However, rather than viewing these punitive measures negatively, most interviewees suggested that they deserved to be controlled in this way to ensure that the job tasks were performed correctly:

“… I understand that our work leaders wanted to make us work faster and more accurately… I rarely made mistakes at work… but our work leaders kept deducting some money from my wages every month…. I don’t know why… I didn’t ask… because I’m sure they have their reasons to deduct my money so it’s okay…” (Foxconn Worker, Shenzhen, 2011)

These accounts highlight not only a sense of fatalism amongst workers about their living and working conditions, but also an internal acceptance of the ‘right’ of their work superiors to subject them to this treatment. In other words, these findings show that workers appear to have internalised a power regime that leads to their acceptance as subordinates to their work
supervisors. As a result, workers appeared to be willing to abandon any sense of reclaiming any rights against matters such as long working hours, forced overtime, or even deductions from their subsistence wages for mistakes that are not conclusively attributed as being their mistake. When coupled with their sense of fatalism that they remain ‘captive’ within a particular societal position due to their lack of education, it is suggested that these workers exhibit a ‘passive’ disposition in terms of exhibiting any willingness to engage in protest activity.

In investigating these findings further, it appears that this passivity is compounded by a sense of ‘relativity’ about their state of impoverishment (Javeline 2006). That is, while recognising they are living at a subsistence level, respondents clarified that they were accustomed to these conditions because of what they had endured in their original village home life, and that – compared to these – the conditions they were currently experiencing were better than those:

“…it’s tough to work in the cities but it’s tougher to live in my poor village in Anhui… I got injured [at work] very often… but it doesn’t matter… it’s nothing compared to my life back in my village… as long as I can make some money… so I can do my living… and to improve the living conditions for my family… other thing is not important…” (Construction Worker, Hangzhou, 2011)

Finally, respondents had little time for anything other than work:

“I earn like $2000… [and] I work 12 hours a day… I don’t have time and I can’t afford anything like catching up with friends for a dinner or something in my leisure time… if I go out with friends then I’ve to spend at least $100 for a meal… I can’t
afford it… I can only hang out in my dormitory when I’m not at work…” (Security Officer B, Shenzhen, 2011)

In summary, their daily lives and lived experience of work militated against the willingness of these workers to be involved in worker protests to change their status. While grounded in their work conditions, we further suggest that these conditions cultivated a mindset within workers that this was ‘all that they were entitled to’:

“Being a worker is not good… we’re just a bunch of uneducated people… we can’t do any other things apart from work and stay in our dormitory because we don’t earn much… we must put up with whatever hardships we have in order to make a living… we don’t have time and we don’t have the energy to think about any other things except for our subsistence – this is our only right – and as long as we make enough money to subsist”. (IT worker, Shenzhen, 2011)

**Group Two**

A recurring theme to emerge in explaining why this group of workers engage in resistance activity was protest about their minimal subsistence or sustenance levels rather than class. Workers described this as Yayi, which is similar to the Korean word Han, and which refers to emotional feelings of contradictions and injustice that involves both the passive acceptance of one’s situation as a destiny and a desire to overcome or to work against that situation (Koo 2001):

“The day before the work strike we started talking about how much we hated the job and how low our wages were. You know with our little money we could barely do a living… can you image I only earn $1,170 yuan each month since 3 years ago and our
leaders keep deducting our wages from $0.01 to $8 yuan each time they found rubbish in the areas we handled? We’re feeling very yayi, we didn’t know what else to do to get a pay-rise for our subsistence so we stopped working”.

(SOE street cleaner A, Foshan, 2013)

Thus – and similar to Group One - yayi rather than a sense of being a member of a class, acted to unite workers to protest. A sense of ‘justice’ was another factor evident in motivating worker protest:

“…we only want to get a raise to do our basic living – we didn’t ask for that much – and that’s because we’re uneducated… but even we’re uneducated and illiterate, the work leaders should at least allow us to have ‘full bellies’…”.

(SOE street cleaner B, Foshan, 2013)

However, while acting as motivating forces for worker protest, further probing of the findings revealed that like their colleagues in Group One, Group Two workers also demonstrated a willingness to accept a power regime that enabled superiors to treat them inadequately in return for a livable income:

“I don’t mind the work leaders yelling at me or insulting me if I could earn enough to do my living…” (SOE street cleaner B, Foshan, 2013)

Again – and similar to Group One workers – Group Two workers also showed fatalism that they were destined to this treatment because of a lack of education:
“We, street cleaners, do not have ‘culture’ in us – we are illiterate, extremely grassroots, extremely dirty, we should not expect much because we are at the bottom of the society…” (SOE street cleaner D, Foshan, 2013)

However, analysis of the protest actions staged by workers further highlighted a lack of unity about their goals in protest actions:

“I joined the work stoppage… because I wanted to get a pay-rise too… we didn’t ask for a particular amount… we didn’t know how much we should ask for… so everyone was giving an amount on behalf of our own selves – everyone was saying different things… some of us wanted [a raise of] $300; some wanted $500; some wanted $600”. (Plastic board manufacturing worker, Foshan, 2013)

Thus, workers often failed to act collectively in these protests:

“…some work leaders broke down our action by offering benefits to individual workers – such as giving them a raise or promoting them to become line-leaders. Those workers took the offers and walked off from the protest.” (Plastic board manufacturing worker, Foshan, 2013)

Ultimately, this disunity was a major cause that led the protest actions to become insignificant:

“If I could start it all over again I wouldn’t want to go against my employer… I don’t think work protest is an appropriate strategy – I don’t think anyone should participate
in work strikes at all – it’s very tiring process and it’s very difficult to get everyone to stay on the same boat because everyone is selfish” (Jewellery worker B, Dongguan, 2013)

In summary, although these workers had engaged in protest action, there is evidence of a similar power regime as in Group One workers, which made their protest actions ineffectual in changing their status in the long term.

Discussion & Conclusion

The empirical evidence of both groups presented in this paper indicates that worker consciousness amongst everyday Chinese workers is hovering at an embryonic level. Rather than characterising the increased protests as reflecting a ‘rising class consciousness’, we argue that their main concern has been to maintain an economic status necessary for subsistence. This is because they showed little willingness to continue to engage in protest actions, and at times retreated from the protest actions without even redressing their grievances. Their gains also remain minimal and did not change their employment conditions to any great degree.

A common catchphrase that repeatedly emerged in workers’ discourse when asked about engaging in protests was that “we must obey our leaders” (Group One, Jewellery worker A, Haizhu, 2013) and “I wouldn’t want to go against my employers” (Group Two, Jewellery worker B, Dongguan, 2013). The findings suggest that this was due to the perception that open and direct confrontation with superiors and authorities is considered a disgraceful act in Chinese culture.
We propose that a key influence in distancing worker protest from a Marxist expectation that class and consciousness act to influence their actions, is the centuries-long Confucian ideology. This ideological indoctrination places great emphasis on the hierarchical order of super-inferior relationships, and is highly influential in how individuals behave towards their superiors and authorities (Whyte 1988). ‘Proper’ conduct (or orthopraxy) describes the resulting effect of how the positions of individuals within a hierarchy of a Confucian society is determined by these ideas rather than class alone (Fouts & Chan 1995).

This analysis provides some support for Foucault’s argument that ‘normative’ behaviour is predominately defined by socio-cultural history. Foucault suggests that historical knowledge is a thing that constitutes the ‘conditions of possibility’ for individual agency (O’Farrell 2005). This ‘possibility’ is confined by the existence of various forms of constructed historical knowledges to then direct individuals in conducting proper behaviour without engaging in critical reflection. Historical knowledges thereby normalise and control thoughts and behaviours of individuals. Foucault refers to this as the power-knowledge framework (1980), which we internalise and which – consciously and subconsciously – influences our everyday actions. In the case of Chinese workers, we suggest that there is a centuries-long tradition of power-knowledge about their hierarchical status that militates against these everyday workers from engaging in sustained and vibrant movements of worker protest that can effectively change their work and hence living conditions. The findings indicate that this regime is linked to the non-work life of Chinese workers wherein that aspect of their lives is significant in constraining the development of worker class-consciousness in China.

There are many limitations to this study. The smallness of the sample, and the methodology used to recruit the sample of workers and the randomness therein are two. Nonetheless, we
propose that understanding worker consciousness in China is not simply a matter of workers coalescing to act, but one that is indelibly influenced by matters of culture and history. Developing detailed accounts of these influences is important to then do as Foucault (1980, p. 83) tasks us: “establish[ing] a historical knowledge of struggles and to make use of this knowledge tactically today”. 
Bibliography


