

Workers at war: class formation in wartime Chongqing

War, as historian Gabriel Kolko notes, has had profound social and revolutionary effects. 'More than any other single factor, the overwhelming and direct consequences of war have shaped the human and political experiences of our century and have become the motor of change within it, creating political and ideological upheavals - revolutions being the most important of them - that otherwise had scant possibility of occurring'.¹

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The War of Resistance against Japan unleashed social changes that set the stage for both civil war and socialist revolution in China. Since the revolution was primarily rurally based, historians have duly explained how the Communists mobilized the peasantry during the pivotal 1937-45 period. This focus has, however, impeded our understanding of social change and conflict in the Nationalist-controlled urban territories, most prominently Chongqing, Chiang Kai-shek's wartime capital between 1938 and 1946. Not even a handful of studies in English exists on the social and political history of Chongqing. With their focus on government elites and institutions, the standard explanations for the Nationalist collapse - government factionalism, hyperinflation, military blunders, and malfeasance - have rendered invisible the role of urban social classes as agents of historical change.

In part, the marginalization of social class and the absence of class analysis derive from the Nationalist government's efforts to exclude class from its language to maintain social order and stifle political dissent. Fearing its subversive quality, Guomindang officials censored any word that resonated with the labour movement. Even the word 'labour' became politically suspect. By 1940, General Yu Dawei, director and architect of the Nationalist arms industry, the largest wartime employer in Nationalist territory, banned the term describing offices dealing with production because, as he warned, 'The word "labour" is a term used to connote conflictual labour-capitalist class [relations]'.² In place of a class-based language, officials substituted a discourse based on patriotism and anti-imperialism. According to Guomindang labour leaders, China's predominantly agricultural economy precluded the formation of distinct social classes, and the country thus did not share the injustices associated with the 'abnormalities' of Western capitalism. Imperialism was the real culprit behind whatever oppression and suffering workers endured. And once the union formed between workers and their employers helped defeat the Japanese, the 'labour problem' would dissipate.

Ironically, Chinese historians have accepted at face value the wartime Nationalist official discourse, according to which the United Front - a multi-class, multi-party alliance committed to resisting Japanese imperialism - rendered issues of class subsidiary to patriotic goals. Labour historians have widely adopted the view that nationalist sentiment subsumed class tensions during the Anti-Japanese War. In the most authoritative work to date on wartime labour, the historian Qi Wu argues that social contradictions did not emerge during the war because of the relative unity between labour and capital in resisting Japan.³ Such an approach

affirms Benedetto Croce's maxim 'All history is contemporary'. China's ongoing market reforms, efforts at rapprochement with Taiwan, and repudiation of the Maoist emphasis on class struggle have reinforced a revisionist trend in mainland Chinese scholarship that has emphasized the Nationalist regime's contributions to the war effort against Japan, the importance of united front work, and the patriotic unity of the Chinese people.

On an experiential level, the devastating air raids on Chongqing no doubt fostered workers' visceral hatred of the 'Japanese devils'. Management capitalized on these sentiments by using patriotic slogans to spur production over the course of gruelling twelve- to sixteen-hour shifts. Qi Wu premises his argument, however, on the relative quiescence of labour during the Anti-Japanese War, compared with the surge in labour militancy during the immediate postwar years. Although persuasive in a general way, this interpretation uncritically takes the ideas supporting the CCP-GMD alliance and the United Front as historical reality and ignores the social dislocation, grievances, and tensions

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created between workers and managers by the war. Demanding greater human dignity and improved social status, workers also engaged in strikes and sit-downs during the Anti-Japanese War. As many as 300 labour disputes occurred during 1944.

Wartime proletarianization

Several factors facilitated working-class formation in wartime Chongqing. By late 1937, the brutal occupation of the industrial and commercial centres of coastal China by Japanese troops had forced an unprecedented mass migration. Several million migrants fled to the hinterland of southwestern China alongside the relocation of industrial plants. The rapid and forced industrialization of Chongqing during the late 1930s changed the river port entrepôt into southwestern China's centre of heavy industry. Large-scale modern factories depended on the labour of thousands of Sichuanese assembly workers and labourers working alongside a core of skilled workers from China's central and coastal provinces. At the same time, mass production and the pressing wartime demand for labour accelerated the process of proletarianization, by which numerous workers without resources entered a class relationship by selling their labour power to survive. This process forged increasingly common industrial conditions and experiences for skilled workers and labourers.

War created a work regime that emphasized discipline, strenuous work, and productivity. Production increases over the 1940s were not simply the result of technological and managerial reforms introduced a decade before, but built on the backs of labour. Sheer exhaustion was one reason so many workers succumbed to disease and injury. 'You ate on the job so that the machines kept running,' one factory director recalled. 'You did not sleep until late at night, or volunteered to extend [your] working hours to over fourteen hours with no rest at all.... Exhaustion spread among those relying on this death-defying, sweat-drenched spirit of dedication to our country'.⁴ Respiratory disease was the most common sickness. Workers grinding and buffing mortar shells on lathes inhaled particles of dust and ran the risk of being hit in the face by metal shavings. Packing cartridges and shells exposed workers to noxious fumes. Accumulation of dust in the lungs caused scarring and increased susceptibility to trachoma and respiratory infections. Tuberculosis, induced by dust, torrid heat, and sudden changes in temperature, caused the greatest number of fatalities in the steel mills.

In response to low wages, oppressive work conditions and the exodus of thousands of employees, wartime factories instituted elaborate social welfare measures to secure their workers' loyalty. Promotion of industrial welfare - compensation plans, savings schemes, subsidized housing, medical care, rationing of staple goods and low-priced food, cultural and athletic programs - reached new heights during the war period. The distribution of these services and benefits to factory employees, however, privileged management. Intended as a form of social control, welfare programs backfired by polarizing the factory community. These provisions reinforced the social divisions between staff personnel (*zhiyuan*) and production workers (*gongren*), a social gulf premised on the division of mental and manual labour. Daily reminders of their subjugation and segregation brought production workers from different skill levels into the labour movement. The extreme range of material and symbolic disparities heightened workers' sense of injustice and united workers against their social superiors. Workers in large-scale industries, where staff members were a substantial minority and social welfare practices were more extensive, frequently voiced grievances over unequal access to reading rooms, rationing, housing, consumer cooperatives, and entertainment; separate use of canteens and latrines; and disparities in salaries

and bonuses, all of which pitted the two groups against each other.

Class consciousness, demanding dignity

For certain workers, moral injustices translated into consciousness of class. Workers expressed their grievances in terms of a producer consciousness, stressing the moral value of labour and using the language of rights and class. One anonymous worker questioned the monthly rationing of sugar after being informed that only staff members could purchase a catty. 'I'm also human and also Chinese. Why does even the appreciation of food have to be divided by class? Is it possible that workers are constitutionally different from staff officers?... The lack of workers' rights to purchase white sugar is only one [form of] inequality between staff and workers. There are countless others...'⁵

Paradoxically, non-class relations served to heighten workers' sense of class polarization between themselves and staff members. Although ethnicity has usually been viewed as a barrier to class formation, regional rivalries between extra-provincials (often referred to as 'downriver people') and Sichuanese shaped workers' perceptions of class. Throughout much of the 1940s, 'downriver people' played the dominant role in Sichuan society, anticipating the quasi-colonial relationship between mainland Chinese and Taiwanese during the late 1940s and 1950s, when mainlanders occupied elite positions in Taiwan's economy and political system.

Repression in the form of severe military discipline, the intensity of the Nationalist political program (workers in the defence industry were subject to factory cell meetings), and its total separation from the reality of workers' daily life struggles further alienated workers from Nationalist ideologues. While the Guomindang lost support among workers, both underground Communist Party members and non-Communist working-class activists consciously pursued and shaped workers' class consciousness. Communists moved from mobilizing workers en masse during the National Salvation Movement, a patriotic movement that swept urban China during the mid to late 1930s, to developing a clandestine force. By the early 1940s, underground networks, reading societies, and the Communist press had become crucial links between workers and the CCP. The Communist daily, *Xinhua ribao*, in particular, served as an important forum in which to criticize social relations within the factory and to question the legitimacy of the Nationalist government. Workers' grievances and demands for better treatment, or *daiyu* - a term implying higher pay and social status - stemmed from their own work experiences and the prevalent social stigma associated with manual labour. As a former labourer in the

telecommunications bureau recalled, 'I was ridiculed, and this hurt me both physically and psychologically. I often wondered, was I not a person? I also wanted to enjoy people's rights. Why did I have to do corvée labour like a beast of burden and be yelled at to work?'⁶

Arguably, only a militant minority, those who envisioned a radical restructuring of society, promoted the Communist press in wartime Chongqing. But the popularity of *Xinhua ribao* among workers indicates that their ideas did resonate with many workers' sense of injustice and desire for equal treatment. By the mid 1940s, the impulse toward a class movement and class organization among Chongqing workers underlay this process. Through the dynamic of the labour movement, workers' view of the world increasingly made class their point of reference. This was most evident in the concentrated, violent, and often coordinated struggles of workers in the aftermath of the Anti-Japanese War. It was also apparent in workers' increasing demands for unionization and the leftward push of corporatist labour organizations, most notably the Chinese Association of Labour.

At the very least, bringing class back in may cause us to rethink our view of politics in wartime Chongqing, and by extension Nationalist China. From the very first press reports issued from the hilly city, journalists described the Nationalist regime's inexorable decline as a result of its own endemic sicknesses - corruption, bungled fiscal policies, and factionalism. Conversely, while historians continue to debate how the Communists mobilized peasant support in their ascent to power, they have unwittingly minimized the CCP's popular appeals in urban China prior to 1949. To be sure, Chongqing was not 'Red Chongqing,' but its political colours were undoubtedly more vivid than its infamous grey fog. ◀

Notes

1. Kolko, Gabriel. 1994. *Century of War: Politics, Conflicts, and Society Since 1914*. New York: New Press, 220.
2. Howard, Joshua H. 2004. *Workers at War: Labor in China's Arsenal, 1937-1953*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2. Most of the following discussion is based on my research of labour in China's wartime defense industry, which was representative of Chongqing's heavy industry.
3. Qi Wu. 1986. *Kang Ri Zhangzheng shiqi Zhongguo gongren yundong shigao* [A draft history of the Chinese labour movement during the War of Resistance against Japan]. Beijing: Renmin chubanshe.
4. Howard, *Workers at War*, 134.
5. *Ibid.*, 160.
6. *Ibid.*, 244

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