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The new Chinese working class in the globalized world: a response to Ngai Pun

Simeng Wang

Ngai Pun gives us a fascinating historical reading on the formations of the Chinese working class. She focuses on how the working class in contemporary China has been reconfigured over last few decades. By distinguishing the generations of the working class, her analysis sheds light on several central questions that have emerged in contemporary Chinese society since 1980s: the evolution of employment in public/private sectors; agrarian reforms; the democratization of education; individualization; political voices and fights for social justice among subordinate people; as well as social inequality exacerbated by rural-urban dichotomy. As described by the author, deep mutations in the composition of Chinese working class are the result of the shift from “Made in China” to “innovation in China” . Linked to the shifts across the globe to an increasing focus on services and less on industry, in China this means encouraging both labor-intensive manufacturing and scientific innovation. Workers in this new economy are required to be more skilled and highly educated people.

Given such characteristics of new Chinese workers, the collective action and political claims they make will also be modified accordingly. Ngai Pun illustrates these modification by focusing on a variety of mobilizations carried out by the new laboring class: strikes, defiance, suicides, street actions, demonstrations, often “accompanied by a strong anti-foreign capital sentiment” (p.12). I wonder here if the author would like to talk about specially the “anti-foreign capital sentiment”, or more broadly the “anti-capitalism sentiment”. Also, during these collective actions of the new Chinese working class, are there any links and networks between the latter and foreign syndical associations, international NGOs or foreign media? She might address how these connections change the ways in which the new Chinese working class is able to mobilize and voice their demands? More generally, with the democratization of smartphone, what is the role played by the new media in the radicalization and collective actions? In capturing recent collective actions of the new Chinese working class, Ngai Pun might also offer some insights on whether there are any geographical differences, in terms of locality of struggle (North vs. South China, as well as other areas in the vicinity of special economic zones)

Through the case studies carried out and reported in this article, Ngai Pun highlights the formation of an alliance between the new Chinese working class and young scholars - students and intellectuals. The coalitions formed by workers and left-oriented intellectuals mark a new era of Chinese workers' political awakening, in the continuity of the "early Chinese communist radical leftist movement tradition of student-worker solidarity" (p. 15). To fully understanding the formation of this student-worker solidarity, it would be interesting to know more about the social trajectories (Bourdieu, 1974) of these left students born in the 1990s who are Core Jasic Support Group. Analyzing social trajectories of left students would reveal how particular dispositions are incorporated and sustained amongst individuals during the processes of socialization. This processual analysis in terms of social trajectory allows extending our understanding of the political positioning of students beyond a social class position-based explanation. It also indicates any links between the socialization and the action/practice or more broadly the dialectical relationships that might prevail between knowledge and power; and between the individual and society. In her statement, Ngai Pun compares the new Chinese working class with English working class. In the same vein of an historical approach, that is also comparative, it would be thought-provoking to compare the new Chinese working class with the worker-student action unit during the May 1968 events in France, and more extensively, to investigate the legacy of the left in French intellectuals and the multiple ways in which they defend the interests of the working class¹.

Generally speaking, the genealogical analysis of the Chinese working class offered by Ngai Pun shows the subjectification experienced by this social group over time and how through the body, individualized suffering articulates with social suffering. Here she shows how the body mirrors the dynamics and the results of the everyday micro-politics of labor regime. In this sense, the approach of an anthropology of the body and the psyche appeared to be relevant to deeper our understanding on one of the central theoretical thesis of social sciences: individual/society relationships.

My second general remark is related to the future of the Chinese working class faced with dynamics of global market capitalism. If capitalism still dominates, the new international division of labor will induce - a "factory of the world" that is delocalized in other developing countries or regions such as South Asia or Africa. How would these global dynamics change

¹ Scientific publications on this question are numerous. See among others: Noiriél, 1986; Beaud and Pialoux, 1999; Chevandier, 2009; Lomba and Mischi, 2013.

the composition of the Chinese working class? Also, the question of how interactions with movements of would alter-globalization reconfigure the Chinese working class and their political projects? Here, the perspective presented by the author, offers an opening to analyze the reconfiguration of the Chinese working class in the global context of social movements initiated by other “workers of the world”.

Finally, faced with the intensification of transnational flows of knowledge, information and ideas, as well as the international mobility and migrations, I wonder what role is played by the Chinese overseas especially the Chinese intellectuals and students living abroad in the struggles of the Chinese working class, in the student-worker solidarity formation, and more broadly, in the social and political democratization of contemporary China. In other words, the study of contemporary China through the analytical prism of “out of China” could also provide us much of information.

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