

China

The Paradox and Possibility of a Public Sociology of Labor

Ching Kwan Lee

University of California, Los Angeles

Yuan Shen

Tsinghua University, Beijing, China

This article examines the predicament and possibility for the development of a public sociology of labor in China. Labor studies that take seriously workers' class experience and capacity have been stymied by a Communist regime keen on censoring and domesticating sociology as a profession as well as fragmenting the interests, identities, and mobilization of the working class. Yet, in recent years, persistent struggles by Chinese workers themselves have created intense pressure on the Chinese state to redefine its position toward labor conflicts. At the same time, global labor and academic communities have infused ideas and resources that help expand the scope and linkages of labor civic activism.

Keywords: *Chinese sociology; civil society; labor NGOs; migrant labor; labor activism*

China now has the world's largest labor force and is the leading recipient of foreign direct investment worldwide. Yet in a country many see as the engine of growth for global capitalism, where labor and capital meet in a historic and massive scale, labor sociology, public or not, arguably did not exist at all until recently. Accounts of working conditions and worker politics in China have come primarily from scholars based and trained outside of China, whereas sociologists in China have largely avoided labor studies as politically too sensitive. Even among those studying workers, they shun class analysis and define away labor issues as those of mobility, migration, and stratification. This paradox—of the paucity of labor studies against the backdrop of momentous working class formation, export-driven industrialization, and influx of capital—becomes even more puzzling if one considers the long ideological and intellectual dominance of Marxism in Chinese official and academic discourses.

In this article, we want to unravel this China paradox through an analysis of the evolving triangular relationship among the Chinese state, Chinese sociology, and Chinese labor. Compared with other semiperipheries considered in this special issue, it is not authoritarianism that distinguishes China but the effectiveness of the one party regime to censor and domesticate sociology as a profession as well as fragment the interests, identities, and mobilization of the working class. Unlike the organic growth and linkages between labor studies and labor movements that have developed in South Africa, Brazil, and South Korea, in China that constitutive and productive tie has for a long time been severed by an extraordinarily resilient and domineering state. Nevertheless, changes are afoot. Since the beginning of the 21st century, even as the heavy hands of the Chinese state remain all too visible and powerful to be ignored, both labor sociology and labor's civil activism have grown by fits and starts. Persistent struggles by Chinese workers themselves have created intense pressure on the Chinese state to redefine its position toward labor conflicts. At the same time, global labor and academic communities have infused ideas and resources that help expand the scope and linkages of labor civic activism. Notwithstanding some serious challenges, engagements between labor activists and labor scholars are, slowly but surely, brewing. It is possible, even in China, that a public sociology of labor can be forged out of testing circumstances.

Chinese Sociology: Seeking Legitimation and Professionalization

Let us begin with a critical appraisal of ourselves: the community of sociologists. The glaring aversion of the Chinese sociological gaze to issues of exploitation, degradation, and dispossession, so foundational to the Chinese working class experience of three decades of economic reform, has roots in the history and political economy of the sociological profession. A particularly significant character of Chinese sociology, one that is often swept under the carpet as a taboo subject, is Chinese sociologists' career dependence on the state and its policy agenda. Sociology as an academic discipline came to China in the early 1920s, but was abolished in 1952. Mao Zedong, following in the footsteps of Vladimir Lenin, denounced sociology as a bourgeois science. Historical materialism and Marxism were the only valid theories of society and history. Sociology departments were shut down and faculties relocated to related disciplines such as ethnology, history, labor economics, and philosophy. In the late 1970s, reform and

opening occasioned the reestablishment of sociology, and the Chinese Sociological Association resumed its activity in 1979. Also established were the Sociology Institute of the Chinese Academy of Social Science (CASS) in Beijing (as well as its many provincial and city-level branches) and sociology departments in major universities (e.g., Tsinghua, Peking, Fudan, and Zhongshan Universities). By the late 1990s, there were more than 100 sociology institutes and sociology departments throughout China, employing some 6,000 professional sociologists.

From the very beginning of its professional revival, the agenda and vision of Chinese sociology came under two major influences: the Chinese government and American sociology. The Chinese government's policy interests informed the first two large-scale sociological studies in the early 1980s. They were on rural industrialization in small towns and cities and on urban families and marriages. These studies were driven by the government's policy needs to find outlets for surplus rural labor after de-collectivization and to deal with changes in the basic family structure in the wake of massive sent-down (expulsion to the countryside) movements and waves of political campaigns. Even though their substantive findings may have become outdated as a result of subsequent development, these two landmark projects ushered in an important tradition in Chinese sociology that persists to this day, namely, the paramount impact of government policy in defining the agenda of sociological research. Theoretical engagement and knowledge accumulation are considered secondary. All in all, however, policy-oriented research in this initial stage of sociology's reemergence legitimized the discipline's existence, provided the necessary funding and personnel to practice and teach sociology, and focused sociologists' attention on burning issues of a rapidly changing society.

If the Chinese government was the patron of Chinese sociology in the 1980s, American sociology nurtured the intellectual and methodological foundations for the first post-Mao generation of aspiring sociologists. In 1981, C. K. Yang at the University of Pittsburgh, together with American-trained sociologists at the Chinese University of Hong Kong and Peter Blau and Nan Lin at the State University of New York in Albany, offered what came to be known as the "Nankai class," the first sociology training course for some 40 college seniors recruited from around the country's leading universities. Quantitative methodology and survey research became the dominant tools for Chinese sociologists eager to define their professional identity in line with what many considered the most developed national sociological profession: American sociology. The specializations of these pioneering interlocutors fortuitously, if also naturally, became the dominant

areas in China as well. Social stratification, mobility, organization, demography, and economic sociology gradually became core areas attracting the most talented Chinese sociologists. At that time, in the early 1980s, the imminent resurgence of critical and Marxian inspired labor studies in the United States was hardly felt in China. Sociology of work and labor did not yet exist in the Chinese sociological imagination.

Emerging from a 30-year period of intellectual isolation, the young discipline of Chinese sociology was in search of models, respect, and identity. The twin and somehow contradictory pressures of legitimization (in the eyes of the state) and professionalization (grounded in independent and international scholarly standards) shaped the orientation of Chinese sociology at both the individual and collective levels. For many, it was a period of experimentation and transformation, yet bounded by a set of institutional and intellectual conditions within China. Among these, two seem to be most decisive in steering sociology away from labor studies: career and political dependence of sociologists on the Chinese government and the bankruptcy of official Marxism.

The two institutions that employed Chinese sociologists, that is, the Academy of Social Science and the universities, are under the ideological control of the Ministry of Propaganda and the administrative and personnel control of the Ministry of Education, respectively. Private research institutions have emerged, but their numbers and influence are too miniscule and insignificant to provide viable alternatives to state employment. Academic publishing is strictly patrolled by the state, executed through layers of editorial vetting and self-censorship with an eye toward eliminating politically sensitive and objectionable topics, arguments, and use of words. Political sociology and the study of social movements, for instance, are extremely marginalized if not totally absent as subdisciplines of sociology because of their palpable political sensitivity. With few exceptions, sociologists who would otherwise be interested in these phenomena avoided these topics because of the lack of publication channels. Those who survived the editorial process may still be subjected to official harassment and intimidation. It is common for officials from the propaganda and education systems to issue warnings to department chairs or institute directors about politically inappropriate publication or research produced by their faculties or research staff. In serious cases, the sociologists and their superiors could be dismissed or demoted. Notwithstanding this general tendency, strong-willed and committed leadership in these institutions could still choose to protect the autonomy of their sociologists and, thereby, allowing sensitive and critical scholarship to see the light of day.

The recovery of Chinese sociology coincided with Marxism's secular decline as an intellectual paradigm in China. On the one hand, the Chinese Communist government dutifully and regularly reiterates its commitment to Marxism and Leninism as guiding political ideologies. On the other hand, the capitalist nature of the Chinese society and economy makes a total mockery of any pretence of China's commitment to socialism or communism. Marxism, having been monopolized as the ruling ideology of the state, and taught as part of university students' political education, has become synonymous with coerced indoctrination rather than a critical intellectual tradition useful for analyzing China's nascent capitalist society. Bereft of one of the most insightful and productive paradigms for the study of work and labor, Chinese sociologists look at labor issues from the perspective of the state: How to manage the migrant population in the cities? How to establish official trade unions in foreign and private enterprises? How to regulate the flow of migration? How to deal with rampant unemployment in old industrial regions? Without venturing into the workplace, or exploring the life worlds or subjectivities of the workers, these accounts of Chinese labor are decidedly apolitical and uncritical. Because these studies were unable to truthfully reflect labor experiences, they also fail to help Chinese workers to be reflexive about their own historical conditions and potentials.

Paucity of Labor Studies

Many sociologists in China are not oblivious to the massive migration that has created a new generation of Chinese workers. Nor are they unaware of the diabolical degradation and exploitation workers confront at work. But they have (mis)interpreted the nature of labor issues through the lenses of job satisfaction, networks, organizations, migration, income, human resource (mis)allocation, and so on. For instance, one of the most researched sociological subjects in the reform period is migrant labor. The Chinese term *nonmingong*, meaning "peasant workers," was coined by a sociologist in 1988. When these young peasants migrated to the cities in response to the boom in industrial jobs in southern China's special economic zones, sociologists were quick to note the rise of a new social stratum that breaks the boundary of China's rural-urban divide. But sociologists see society too much like the state and their research concerns are reduced to the size of the migrant population; the origins, distance, and destinations of migration; workers' skill and education level; crimes; birth control; remittances; job search process; and so on. The government provided massive funding for

the CASS to mobilize its national network of provincial and local academies to implement research. Large-scale, multiprovince and expensive surveys, with samples of 10,000 or more, were conducted year after year. Yet in these expensive fact-finding exercises the analytical framework seldom went beyond the “pull-and-push” model of migration (e.g., Q. Li, 2003; Tan, 2004). Others have depicted the abysmal working conditions in private and foreign owned factories where migrant workers are employed. Yet these empirical studies do not offer any analysis of the structural or institutional reasons (e.g., the role of the state, the regulation mechanism, social reproduction of labor) for superexploitation in China. As a matter of fact, they almost never invoke the term *exploitation*.

In the late 1990s, when American interests in social network began to influence Chinese sociologists, Granovetter's (1974) classic study on how Americans found jobs was applied to the study of migrant workers. Under the influence of rational choice theory, which has also traveled from the United States to China at about the same time, some prominent CASS researchers (e.g., P. Li, 2003) studying state-owned enterprises in heavy industrial districts of northeastern China argued that unemployment was caused by a misallocation of human resource. The predicament of state sector workers, they maintained, was because of their lack of appropriate skills and education; it was the fault of the individual not the government or the enterprise. But the most glaring gap between sociology and working class lives in the reform period exists in the total silence of Chinese sociology in the face of the rising tide of public labor unrest by migrant workers, the unemployed, and the pensioners. The topic was deemed too politically explosive for any Chinese academic to study, let alone write on or get published. In this regard, the taboo of studying collective mobilization and social unrest applies to the working class as much as to farmers and students. Social scientists' self-censorship is often adequate and preempts any need for the heavy-handed intervention of the state.

However, thanks to the hegemony of American sociology that has brought the previous generation of mainstream sociology to China, the recent advent and acceptance of public sociology in the United States has also had an impact on Chinese sociology, albeit slowly and tentatively, given China's politically conservative academia. Deepened interactions between Chinese sociologists and labor sociologists based in the United States, Hong Kong, and Australia have also begun to shape the theory and method of labor studies in China. We will discuss this in the last section.

Chinese State: Burying Class Analysis

The Chinese state maintains a tight grip on Chinese sociology in terms of personnel appointment, promotion, project selection, screening, approval, and funding. In politically sensitive areas, the state also dictates what analytical frameworks are valid and appropriate. The absence of Marxian analytical categories in Chinese studies of labor has to do with the official position toward Marxism, especially class analysis. Once the only discursive framework sanctioned and enforced by the Communist state, the discourse of class and class struggle fell from grace in 1978 when the CCP officially launched its program of economic reform and announced the end of class struggles. Because of the tainted connotations of “class struggles,” associated historically with the political violence of Mao’s Cultural Revolution, the reform leadership from Deng Xiaoping onward tried to set themselves apart from that chaotic period. Although official Marxists at the Institute of Marxism and Leninism of CASS are preoccupied with formalizing the ideas of Deng Xiaoping, Jiang Zemin, and Hu Jintao into the cannon of Chinese socialist thought, sociologists collectively avoid “class analysis” in favor of allegedly “neutral” perspectives of social stratification and mobility studies. In a landmark study, explicitly commissioned by the CCP to survey China’s “modern” social structure, CASS sociologists identified 10 major social strata in the reform period. In a long footnote explaining why we should think in terms of “strata” and not “classes,” they argued that the latter term has roots in Marxism that emphasize conflict of interests, antagonism, and struggles among social groups. They chose to use the term *strata* because academics and the general public would find *classes* emotionally upsetting (Lu, 2002).

In many Chinese sociological studies, workers become an income group rather than a collective agent sharing similar social relations of and in production. The social and political structures shaping their power and life chances disappear from sociological analyses, which generally treat the worker as an individual income earner. Labor studies in China then has suffered from a fatal depletion of theoretical inspiration and conceptual repertoire for understanding working class experience, just when unbridled commodification of labor proceeded at an astonishing pace and ravaged many workers’ lives, and when class analyses would be most necessary and valid.

The Chinese state also has at its disposal not just the one and only legal trade union in China but also a higher education institution for producing and transmitting knowledge about workers and workplaces. The All China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU) today still boasts a membership of

193 million, the largest in the world, and more than 1.5 million grassroots (enterprise-level) unions (China News, 2008). Its teaching institute, the Labor Movement College (recently renamed as the China Institute of Labor and Industrial Relations), has evolved from a union cadre training school to a 4-year degree granting university focusing on human resource, labor law, and employment issues. As Chinese workers experienced epochal transformation in their work and lives, ACFTU made an attempt to document those changes by conducting a national survey every 3 years from 1991 to 1997. Funding problems have put an end to this project after the last survey was concluded in 1997. The three published surveys, while providing empirical support for government policies and union strategies, merely confirmed the obvious: declining role, membership, and worker satisfaction with the official union; aggravating living and working conditions of workers in the state industrial sector; rising trends of unemployment; arbitrated labor disputes; and nonpayment of wages and pension arrears. The ACFTU researchers (e.g., Feng, 2002; Qiao, 2006) write about types of labor disputes (e.g., wages, insurance, injuries), workers' sense of loss, and personal adjustment to reform but rarely about their collective and public resistance.

Despite academic silence on the rising trend of worker protests, egregious violations of labor rights and labor unrest have soared, sending a powerful political signal to the government that something has to be done if social stability is to be maintained. In response to this pressure generated by workers as well as by other aggrieved citizens such as villagers and middle class homeowners, the Chinese leadership has initiated a paradigm shift in terms of development priorities. From a singular emphasis on efficiency and growth, the Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao leadership turns its attention to justice and harmony in society. Rather than strengthen workers' associational power, the Chinese state now champions workers' "legal rights" as an institutional solution to bolster labor's power vis-à-vis employers. The legal revolution, and its concomitant ideology of legality and rights, endorsed by the state has created the possibility for the emergence of a public sociology of labor in China.

Chinese Labor: Forcing Change

Even as Chinese sociologists and the Chinese government are late to recognize working class plight, Chinese worker activism in the past decade has become an unmistakable political problem too serious for the regime to ignore. These agitations and activism, which are visible, public, and persistent, have forced the government and academics to change their

attitude toward the realities of labor. As the Chinese government began to realize the need for social stability for both reform and regime to continue, the top leaders made a marked shift in development priority. Now the emphasis is not just on efficiency but also justice; not only growth and wealth but also harmony. Reorientation at the top opens up space for civil society activists and sociologists to explore and promote labor issues in new directions. A new synergy may be taking place between academics, civil society, and workers, with a more justice-sensitive state bureaucracy. But until very recently, rather than labor sociology feeding or inspiring the growth of labor activism, it is workers who undertook their lone struggles and in the process reorient government positions and inspire research among the younger generations of academics.

Two segments of the working class are at the forefront of labor unrest: migrant workers in export-driven coastal cities and pensioners and unemployed workers in the rustbelt. Two sets of official statistics demonstrate the pervasiveness and intensification of labor conflicts. The numbers of officially arbitrated labor disputes, according to the annual reports published by the Ministry of Labor and Social Security, which form only the tip of an iceberg of labor conflicts, have increased steadily from about 20,000 in 1994 to more than 440,000 in 2006. The numbers of mass demonstrations and incidents of disturbance recorded by the Ministry of Public Security reached 87,000 in 2005. About 40% of these were organized by unemployed, retired, and current workers (Tables 1 and 2).

Reports about sporadic worker protests and strikes in bankrupt state-owned and foreign-owned factories emerged in the overseas dissident press as early as the late 1980s. But it was not until the mid-1990s that working class unrest became widespread and visible. It was then that the reform of state-owned enterprises in the rustbelt took a sharp turn toward *de facto* privatization. State-owned enterprises, previously kept afloat by policy loans and subsidies, were allowed to go bankrupt, or they were sold or leased to private or foreign investors. Only large state-owned enterprises in strategic "pillar" industries remained wholly state owned. Unemployment rapidly worsened, and the population of those unemployed or laid off increased by several millions every year. Although it was impossible to count the exact numbers of unemployed workers, Chinese and international scholars estimated a total of 55 million people had been shed from the state and collective sectors by the late 1990s. Bankruptcy and production suspension in rustbelt provinces plunged many workers into financial crisis, and their communities, which had been previously organized by state work units, declined precipitously. The socialist social contract that had previously secured the political acquiescence of the working

Table 1
Labor Disputes Arbitration, 1994-2006

| Year | Arbitrated Labor Dispute (Cases) | Arbitrated Collective Dispute (Cases) | Number of Employees Involved |
|------|----------------------------------|---------------------------------------|------------------------------|
| 1994 | 19,098 | 1,482 | 77,794 |
| 1995 | 33,030 | 2,588 | 122,512 |
| 1996 | 47,951 | 3,150 | 189,120 |
| 1997 | 71,524 | 4,109 | 221,115 |
| 1998 | 93,649 | 6,767 | 358,531 |
| 1999 | 120,191 | 9,043 | 473,957 |
| 2000 | 135,206 | 8,247 | 422,617 |
| 2001 | 154,621 | 9,847 | 467,150 |
| 2002 | 184,116 | 11,024 | 608,396 |
| 2003 | 226,391 | 10,823 | 801,042 |
| 2005 | 314,000 | 19,000 | 740,000 |
| 2006 | 447,000 | 14,000 | 680,000 |

Note: The first column indicates the totals for both individual and collective disputes. Collective disputes are cases involving five or more workers.

Source: Labor and Social Security Statistical Yearbooks, various years (2005-2006 data are from summary statistics released by the Ministry of Labor and Social Security).

Table 2
Volume of Mass Incidents: Ministry of Public Security

| Year | <i>N</i> |
|------|----------|
| 1993 | 8,700 |
| 1995 | 11,000 |
| 1999 | 32,000 |
| 2003 | 58,000 |
| 2004 | 74,000 |
| 2005 | 87,000 |

Source: Tanner (2005), French (2005), and Watts (2006).

class toward the Communist regime collapsed. Pension arrears, nonpayment of wages, housing, medical services, and water and electricity supplies sparked numerous incidents of collective petitions, road and rail blockages, protests, and sit-ins in front of government buildings.

The new generation of young migrant workers employed in industries, services, and construction in the dynamic southern provinces also has its share of grievances. Estimated to be about 130 million strong, migrant workers hail from the Chinese countryside, their secondary citizenship

status marked conspicuously by their rural household registration. They can establish legal presence and employment status in the urban areas only after appropriate official approval is secured. Although, according to the National Labor Law, they have the same rights as employees with urban household registration, in reality, local governments and employers often take advantage of their “outsider” status and refuse to accord them their rights to social security schemes and educational opportunities for their dependents. The most rampant and explosive issue is the nonpayment of wages, a trigger for many strikes and protests, even collective suicide attempts. The severity of labor rights violations prompted the State Council to launch a “comprehensive, systematic, and in-depth” investigation in 2005 on China’s migrant labor force. The subsequent 2006 *Research Report on China’s Migrant Workers* (*Zhongguo Nongmingong Diaoyanbaogao*) provides an authoritative if also shocking portrait of precarious labor in which the rule of law is conspicuously absent. A paltry 12.5% of migrant workers had signed a labor contract according to a 40-city survey conducted by the Labor and Social Security Ministry in 2004, only 15% participated in a social security scheme, and only 10% had medical insurance (State Council Research Office Team, 2006). Less than half (48%) of the migrant workforce get paid regularly whereas 52% reported regular or occasional nonpayment of wages (State Council Research Office Team, 2006). Sixty-eight percent of migrant workers work without any weekly rest day, 54% of migrant workers have never been paid overtime wages that the law requires, and 76% do not receive legal holiday or overtime wages (State Council Research Office Team, 2006).

Expressing their mounting discontent and their rights consciousness through either legal and bureaucratic channels (e.g., labor arbitration committees and the court) or direct action and civil disobedience (e.g., street demonstration, blocking traffic), workers’ mobilizations clearly signal to the government their collective political agency. These actions have increased in numbers but have not escalated in scale or scope. Most of them remain localized and cellularized, with little lateral, cross-work unit or cross-regional coordination, or stable organization. This pattern of working class formation among both the unemployed in the state sector and the migrant workers in the private sector is because of the decentralized accumulation strategy of development in China, which has fragmented the interests of the working class. It is also the result of many layers of social and policy divisions based on work-unit membership, workers’ rural versus urban household registration, industrial sectors, or length of tenure. Finally, the state’s repressive stance toward cross-workplace mobilization, but relative tolerance toward cellularized protests, also steered workers away from lateral organization (Lee, 2007).

The Chinese government was compelled by the sheer force of discontent and unrest to try remedying the root causes of Chinese workers' abysmal conditions. They looked to legal reform and the promotion of labor's legal rights instead of strengthening workers' associational power. The latter route would have risked creating a force of organized dissent that might slip out of state control. A politically secured strategy is to channel disputes into arbitration committees and the court system and to individualize and demobilize worker discontent through the legal procedure. More than a decade after the landmark 1995 National Labor Law was put into effect and having seen how workers were still not protected by its stipulations, thanks to the widespread collusion of the local state and investors, three major national labor-related laws were passed in 2007, all intended to augment the rule of labor law in China. These are the Labor Contract Law, the Employment Promotion Law, and the Labor Dispute Mediation and Arbitration Law. Whereas the first of these three laws imposes the universal requirement of a written contract for all employment relations, the second facilitates access to the arbitration system by removing arbitration fees, streamlining the process of arbitration, and extending the time limit for workers to bring their grievance to arbitration. The third law makes local government responsible for guaranteeing equality in employment and devising measures to eradicate discrimination based on disability and gender. The law-making process also reveals a more pro-labor stance of the Chinese government. During the contentious and protracted drafting process of the Labor Contract Law, the Chinese government pushed through the law despite high-profile objections by all major foreign Chambers of Commerce, which threatened to withdraw investments from China if the law was passed.

Skeptics might argue that legislation on the books itself does not guarantee labor rights. The problem in China has always been one of implementation. Yet as scholars who have studied the processes of labor conflict, legal mobilization, and official methods of resolution have found, laws and regulations matter even in China where rule of law is notoriously weak and the judiciary is anything but independent. First, because Chinese workers cannot organize their own independent unions, and official unions are politically constrained to confront employers, the law becomes a major institutional leverage for workers defending their interests. Second, the law matters because aggrieved workers take the law seriously and invoke the specific legal stipulations in pressing employers and local officials to abide by the law in matters of wages, hours of work, termination compensations, and insurance contribution. The unpredictability of the outcome of the arbitration and legal process often turns an otherwise bureaucratic and legal procedure into political mobilization.

Labor Nongovernmental Organizations (NGOs): Legal Rights Activism

In the main, throughout the reform period, worker protests took place without civil society participation or connections to the academic communities, for all the aforementioned reasons. But the state's promotion of workers' legal rights has opened a new albeit still precarious space for labor NGOs and concerned academics to build bridges to ordinary workers. Funded by international advocacy groups, foundations, and development agencies (e.g., Ford Foundation, Oxfam, Asia Foundation, International Labour Organization, World Bank, Development Commissions of foreign embassies) in the name of fostering the rule of law, labor, and women's rights in China, labor NGOs have become active agents in inculcating rights consciousness and legal knowledge among aggrieved workers, exploiting the Chinese state's declared goal of becoming a "law-based" government and the global movement for legal rights. Their activities usually include legal counseling, hotlines, labor law classes, health education, basic English and computer skill classes, representation of workers in lawsuits, assisting workers to collect unpaid wages, and injury compensation. These have become standard features of NGOs in many developing countries as international donors make them conditions of funding. Like worker centers in the United States, these labor NGOs serve mostly migrant workers, who are traditionally shunned by trade unions as unorganizable and peripheral to the labor movement. But unlike their American counterparts, which also emphasize organizing in addition to serving and educating workers, Chinese labor NGOs are constrained by the political situation in China not to emphasize worker solidarity but workers' individual legal rights. We estimate that there are about 30 labor NGOs now operating in different Chinese cities, registered as commercial entities.

The Chinese government has been ambivalent about these organizations, recognizing workers' needs for these nonunion organizations, while also concerned to limit their independence, growth, and possible politicization. From time to time, the government cracks down on selected NGOs that it considers have stepped out of line. For instance, 2 years ago, a miniscule labor NGO in Shenzhen launched a successful signature campaign to urge the government to remove the fee for labor dispute arbitration. Having collected more than 10,000 signatures, the organization was banned from operation, even though the government later on indeed made labor arbitration free of charge. It is easy to romanticize the contribution of labor NGOs in

a formidable political environment like that of China. What we have observed is that there is real risk for many labor NGOs that they become commercialized (to tap the growing market for foreign-sponsored labor research or to run NGOs as a company), on the one hand, or co-opted by the government as an arm of their mass organization apparatus on the other. Given the infancy of Chinese civil society and worker organizing, activists are hard pressed to remain committed to the cause of labor rights in the face of a state offer of patronage or the market opportunity to turn NGOs into business ventures (Lee & Shen, 2008).

Despite these obstacles, labor NGOs are active and growing. Many NGOs were set up by former blue-collar and white-collar workers, whereas several established ones were founded by academics. The law schools at Tsinghua University, Zhongshan University, and Wuhan University all have legal clinics run by students and faculties providing pro bono legal counseling to workers. The Social Work Program at Peking University has just launched a social enterprise project targeting construction workers. By setting up a restaurant in a suburb of Beijing where construction workers congregate, the faculties and students hope to create a self-organizing community among workers. Last but not the least, the Sociology Department and the Law School at Tsinghua University, without forming any NGO, sent faculties and students to Baigou, a rural township in Hebei known for its production of leather bags and luggage goods. For 3 years, from 2002 to 2004, Tsinghua faculties and students offered weekly labor law and English classes to migrant workers employed in Baigou's many "family run workshops." About 400 migrant workers have received 2 to 6 hours of legal, skill, and language training. Tsinghua Sociology is also experimenting with a new form of dialogue between academic and labor NGOs.

In the past 2 years, we have organized several week-long training workshops for labor NGOs from different parts of China. Tsinghua's campus offers some degree of relative freedom and protection from the tight surveillance of the state. Besides providing a platform for networking an otherwise dispersed civil society sector, these workshops also invited international and domestic labor scholars to introduce labor studies and labor organizing experiences (e.g., worker centers) to Chinese NGO activists. In return, academics are appraised of new on-the-ground development of workers' conditions. These exchanges have proven very stimulating for both sides. In the near future, we would broaden the scope of "training" to include audiovisual techniques so that workers and NGOs can document their histories through films and photos. Commanding this medium will allow Chinese labor to reach out to a larger and more global virtual community.

Creating a Public for a Public Sociology of Labor

The challenge for a public sociology of labor in China is that the public sphere, vibrant at times, has a feeble existence. The Chinese state, central and local, has reacted with periodic crackdowns on labor NGOs, or it harasses and intimidates individual activists to deter them from pursuing certain projects. Alternatively, the government co-opts NGOs and grooms and steers their development into service rather than advocacy. A more encouraging trend in the last several years is that academic–labor engagements has coincided with legal reform and government policy changes and have energized Chinese labor sociology. Visits and seminars by international labor scholars (Michael Burawoy, Anita Chan, Pun Ngai, Ching Kwan Lee, among others) to Chinese universities have raised the profile of labor studies in the sociological community in China and inspired young graduate students and sociologists to study labor in a way that take seriously workers' experiences, labor processes, and labor struggles. At Tsinghua University, for instance, recent doctoral and master's degree research have covered a broad array of labor issues: work regimes on construction sites, age and gender inequality in service workplaces, generational differences in working class experiences and consciousness, labor NGOs as civil society, among others. The wide adoption of ethnographic and qualitative methods by these young scholars has brought the worlds of labor and of sociology much closer together. The participation of students in the Baigou night school and our labor NGO workshops means that at least we are in the process of creating a public among college students for labor research and labor activism.

A public sociology of labor in China is not an easy undertaking and its future is uncertain. As participants in this effort, the best we can do is to sustain an optimism of our will, even as the pessimism of the intellect leads us to see ever more clearly the political and economic challenges that continue to prevail.

References

- China News. (2008). *ACFTU Chair: 80% employees signed labor contract*. Retrieved March 5, 2009, from <http://www.chinanews.com.cn/cj/kong/news/2008/0315/1192815.shtml>
- Feng, T. (2002). *The fate of Chinese workers: Social action by workers in the reform era*. Beijing, China: Social Science Literature. (In Chinese)
- French, H. (2005, August 24). Land of 74,000 protests. *New York Times*. Available from http://www.nytimes.com/2005/08/24/international/asia/24letter.html?_r=1
- Granovetter, M. (1974). *Getting a job: A study of contacts and careers*. Cambridge, UK: University of Cambridge Press.

- Lee, C. K. (2007). *Against the law: Labor protests in China's rustbelt and sunbelt*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Lee, C. K., & Shen, Y. (2008, September). *The anti-solidarity machine: Labor NGOs in China*. Paper presented at the conference on the Changing Face of Chinese Labor and Employment, Cornell School of Industrial and Labor Relations, Ithaca, NY.
- Li, P. (2003). Out of the shadow of predicament: A study of human resource misallocation among unemployed and laid-off workers. *Chinese Social Science*, 5, 86-101. (In Chinese)
- Li, Q. (2004). *Migrant workers and Chinese social stratification*. Beijing, China: Social Science Literature. (In Chinese)
- Lu, X. (2002). *A research report on the social stratification of contemporary Chinese society*. Beijing, China: Social Science Literature. (In Chinese)
- Qiao, J. (2006). A brief discussion on the evolution and characteristics of Chinese labor relations. *Journal of the Chinese Institute for Labor Relations*, 4. (In Chinese)
- State Council Research Office Team. (2006). *Research report on China's migrant workers*. Beijing, China: Zhongguo Yanshi.
- Tan, S. (2004). Family strategy, or individual autonomy: A gender analysis of migrant workers' decision making patterns. *Zhejiang Academic Journal*, 5, 210-214. (In Chinese)
- Tanner, S. M. (2005). *Chinese government responses to rising social unrest*. Testimony presented to the US-China Economic and Security Review Commission on April 14, 2005 (Rand Corporation Testimony Series). Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corporation.
- Watts, J. (2006, February 22). China vows to create a "new socialist countryside" for millions of farmers. *The Guardian*, p. 16.

Ching Kwan Lee is a professor of sociology at the University of California, Los Angeles. Her areas of interests include work, labor politics, citizenship, law and society, comparative and global ethnography, and China. Her latest book is *Against the Law: Labor Protests in China's Rustbelt and Sunbelt* (2007).

Yuan Shen is a professor and associate chair in the Department of Sociology at Tsinghua University. His research interests include labor, economic sociology, postcommunist transition, and citizenship. His latest book is *Market, Class and Society: Critical Issues in the Sociology of Transformation* (2008 [in Chinese]).