

# ONLINE ACTIVISM AND COUNTER-PUBLIC SPHERES

## A CASE STUDY OF MIGRANT LABOUR RESISTANCE

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### Abstract

China's state-controlled and commercialised media and Internet ecology has inherent limitations in representing the interests of workers as industrial citizens. Drawing upon Western scholars' theoretical critiques of "the public sphere" and historical literature on workers' struggle for autonomous communication in post-revolutionary China, this paper uses an extended case study to establish a two-pronged analysis that demonstrates the progressively exclusionary and pro-capitalist nature of China's existing public sphere on the one hand and workers' appropriation of available technological means for autonomous communicative practice on the other. It points to the potential constitution of Chinese labour as counter-publics in China's deeply divided class society.

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Chinese workers have been denied popular participation and the right to communication when the Party-state engineers neo-liberal economic reforms and systematically deploys symbolic violence against labour in the post-Mao era (Zhao 2008, 19-21). The central and provincial party organs, which constitute the official “mainstream” media outlets in China’s market-Leninist polity, have neglected, even suppressed, the interests and voices of Chinese workers, whom the Party-state claims to represent. As the commercialisation of China’s media system since the market reforms in 1978 has given rise to the prosperous growth of commercial media outlets and conglomerates (Zhao 1998; 2000), many Western observers begun to assume that it would contribute to the formation of civil society and “public sphere,” through which citizenship rights, freedom of expression and democracy are promoted.

However, it is problematic to make sense of China’s media transformation from a linear logic linking commercialisation with the expansion of freedom of expression. As Zhao (2008, 82) argues, “[C]ommercialisation created new patterns of inclusion and exclusion in accessing the media as a source of political, economic, social, and symbolic power and led to a substantive reconfiguration of social relations within and around the Chinese media.” Therefore, such questions arise: Can Chinese workers as individualised industrial citizens find their own voices in the emerging “public sphere” constituted by the commercial media, urban intellectuals and the internet community’s crusade for civil rights and legal justice? What are the possible venues for Chinese workers to exercise their citizenship rights and struggle for social justice in the process of China’s market reforms and reintegration with global capitalism?

This paper examines the potentials and limitations of China’s burgeoning “public sphere” which takes shape in the process of media commercialisation, in representing Chinese workers and articulating their rights and interests. It then moves beyond negative critique to examine the historical and contemporary manifestations of workers’ autonomous communication in their struggles for social justice and inclusive socio-economic transformation. The research centres on a case study of a rural migrant worker who killed two Taiwanese bosses in a conflict over compensation for an industrial injury in the Pearl River Delta, one of the biggest production and exporting regions of China.

### Questioning the Chinese Public Sphere: Multiplicity and Counter-publics

In Habermas’s original formulation, the public sphere is an arena that exists outside the institutions of the state and mediates between society and the state, in which a range of views and opinions can form in relation to matters of public concern. Habermas’s ideal-typical conception of the public sphere is both an institutional mechanism for rationalising political domination by rendering the state accountable to the citizenry and an ideal of unrestricted rational discussion of public matters through guaranteed access by all citizens (Calhoun 1992, 437). Current scholarship on China has drawn much on this Habermasian conception of the public sphere to identify signs of a nascent civil society and its attendant public sphere in rights-conscious movements and institutions involving students, journalists, lawyers, professionals, elite intellectuals, the urban middle class and environmental activists (Gu and Goldman 2004; Kelly 2006, 183-204; Llargerqvist

2006; Yang and Calhoun 2007, 21, 211; Davis 2007, 61-85). Within this literature, a dichotomous opposition between state and society and the "bourgeoisie" nature of the "public sphere" are both taken for granted.

In her cogent overview of the Habermasian conception, Fraser (1992, 109-142) points to the exclusionary nature of Habermasian "public sphere" at three levels: (1) the "private persons" who assembled to constitute the public and discuss matters of "public concern" or "common interests" were from "bourgeois society"; (2) interests other than "bourgeois society" would be considered as "private" and should be inaccessible to this domain; (3) non-bourgeois strata's access to the public sphere is assumed to erode the clear separation of society and state and make it impossible to achieve reasoned public debate about the common good. For Fraser (1992, 114), Habermas' account "idealised the liberal public sphere" even though "the official public sphere rested on, indeed was importantly constituted by, a number of significant exclusions," such as race, gender, property ownership. The exclusionary nature was concealed as "[A] discourse of publicity touting accessibility, rationality, and the suspension of status hierarchies is itself deployed as a strategy of distinction," and eventually, the norms of the public sphere become "hegemonic, sometimes imposed on, sometimes embraced by, broader segments of society" (Fraser 1992, 114-115).

In critiquing the rationalist and cognitivist theorising of the Habermasian public sphere concept, Schlesinger (1999, 270, cited in Zhao 2009, 187) argues that it is important to "recognise the likely importance of the affective dimensions of collective belongings and social cohesion." For Schlesinger (1997, 387), what "makes collectives coherent" cannot be convincingly understood from a Habermasian rationalist framework, because the latter overlooks non-rational elements, such as political and national culture, which "confers a wider, non-deliberative sense of solidarity and belonging." The less rationalist and "more abstract" understanding of the public sphere enables us to understand it as a form of life in such a way as to "focus on the moral and cultural dimensions of contemporary social transformation' rather than solely on economic and political dimensions" (Madsen 1993, 184, cited in Zhao 2009, 187).

Emphasising the affective dimensions of publicity, Negt and Kluge reformulated the "public sphere" as the central category which organises human experience, mediating between the changing forms of capitalist production on the one hand, and the cultural organisation of human experience on the other (Knodler-Bunte 1975, 51-75). As the transformation of the capitalist production process has its far reaching impact on concrete human experience, Negt and Kluge suggested the consideration of social relationship go beyond historically institutionalised manifestations. By juxtaposing the concepts "public sphere" and "experience," Negt and Kluge (1993, 163) coined "the proletarian public sphere" as a historical counterpart to the bourgeois public sphere. This conception designated a fundamentally new structure in the public organisation of experience, which could potentially oppose the organised interests of the bourgeois public sphere through organising human needs and interests among the working masses into politically relevant forms of consciousness and activity. By reformulating the public sphere as organising human experience, Negt and Kluge's conception opens the possibility for imagining what Fraser (1990, 58) calls a "post-bourgeois" public sphere, i.e. "the subaltern

counter-publics” including the nationalist public, the popular peasant public, the elite women’s public, and the working-class public.

The theoretical reflections on the Habermasian framework have expanded our knowledge of the public sphere beyond rationalist, cognitive and institutional focus towards more abstract dimensions, such as the affective, cultural and moral. The rethinking of the public sphere concept enables us to not only recognise “the exclusionary and class-dominated nature of the actually existing ‘bourgeois public sphere’ and its antagonistic relationship with subaltern publics” (Zhao 2008, 13), but also to imagine the potential of counter-bourgeois public spheres.

Market reforms have polarised Chinese society in which “a capitalist class, an old middle class, and a new middle class have emerged side by side with poor peasantry and urban workers” (So 2003, 374). While most scholars have given much attention to the expansion of the private sector and growth of a cosmopolitan middle class and civil organisations for the potential of democratic change, their conceptual framework either neglects or fails to account for the working masses and their conflicts with both arbitrary state power and the seemingly liberating, but exploitative, power of capital. In China’s class-divided society, therefore, it is insufficient to gauge the Chinese “public sphere” against some idealised form without analyzing the processes of state transformation, the reconstitution of class and other forms of social relations (Zhao 2009, 181).

In applying radical critiques of “the public sphere” to the Chinese context, Zhao (2008, 262-280) has demonstrated the limits of media and Internet discourses on civil rights legal justice in guaranteeing Chinese workers’ economic rights and demands for social justice through two comparative case studies. The first case involves Sun Zhigang, a young college graduate. The second case concerns Wang Binyu, a rural migrant worker. Zhao compares the coverage of the two cases by the *Nanfang Metropolitan News* (NMN), one of the most liberal and influential market-oriented urban dailies (Zhao and Xing 2012). In exposing Sun’s story, the newspaper appeared to have displayed professional journalism, citizen consciousness, as well as the social reform ethos of Chinese journalists at its best. It framed the story first and foremost as a citizenship rights case, in which Sun as a university graduate was detained and beaten to death under China’s detention system, which was designed to deal with the vagrant people in cities. By framing “citizen Sun” as a victim of the arbitrary state power, the paper caused a national sensation in the civic-minded media outlets and Internet-based communities. Eventually, urban citizens, liberal intellectuals and lawyers mobilised a crusade for civil rights, personal freedom and security against arbitrary state and administrative power. It is noteworthy that before Sun’s tragedy, many rural migrant workers have been considered as vagabonds to be tortured, forced to labour and beaten to death under the same detention system. However, their sufferings had gained no sensational attention. In the NMN coverage, Sun’s tragedy, framed as an urban citizen’s death under the arbitrary state power, horrified the urban society and echoed their concerns about individual rights under threat by state and administrative power. As Zhao (2008, 264) argues, “[t]heir crusade on behalf of Sun Zhigang was a crusade for the civil rights of urban citizens.”

Eventually, as the national party organs intervened, the provincial and local authorities seriously investigated the case and arrested thirteen suspects blamed for

Sun's death. Under the public pressure for respecting the rule of law and citizens' civil rights, the State Council decided to abolish the retention and repatriation regulation.

Wang Binyu was a 27-year-old rural migrant worker from Gansu province. He migrated to work at a power plant in Shizuishan city of Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region. Like millions of rural migrant workers floating in urban China, Wang suffered a lot from low pay, wage arrears, lack of medical insurance, minimal safety protection, poor living conditions, and urbanites' discrimination. Among them, no more unbearable is wage arrears. In the factory, Wang worked for Wu Xinguo, a subcontractor who often withheld the workers' wages. The employer owed Wang more than 5,000 Yuan (\$616) in arrear wage. Wang urgently need money to pay his father's medical operation and asked Wu for the owed wages. Wu rejected the demand and Wang took the case to the local labour arbitration administration. In the end, the official venues failed Wang in collecting his unpaid wages. One day, Wang went to his boss' home one more time to collect the salary and the two sides quarrelled. The argument quickly escalated into a scuffle, during which Wang killed four people at his boss's side (Xinhua News Agency, September 4, 2005). Wang turned himself in and was sentenced to death in the first trial in June 2005. His case invoked heated and widespread public debate in the Chinese media and internet forums (*New York Times*, December 31, 2005).

Internet opinion overwhelmingly expressed its sympathy with Wang and understood his brutal action as an unbearable reaction to the social injustice that Wang and millions of rural migrant workers were suffering. This sympathetic opinion developed into a large-scale campaign to challenge China's legal justice and rescue Wang from the death penalty. As Zhao (2008, 272) points, Wang symbolised more than 100 million migrant workers, who are suffering from social injustice.

The Internet-based populist opinion, however, was eventually suppressed by the state and refuted by the liberal, civic-minded media and internet communities in the name of criminal justice and the rule of law. The *NMN* condemned the sympathetic public opinion and media of violating the principle of "journalistic professionalism." In an editorial, titled "Pathos Cannot Cover up True Facts, Sympathy Should Return to Professional Principles," the *NMN* criticised the sympathetic media of distracting from Wang's murderous actions *per se*. The liberal newspaper blamed Xinhua News Agency, China's official media outlet which first reported the Wang Binyu case, for triggering the furious public opinion and provoking a potential class conflict.

In its criticism, the *NMN* stressed objectivity and factuality as the principles of the media. However, as Zhao's analysis underscores, the newspaper took a double standard in dealing with the two cases. In reporting Sun's story, it was not only committed to gathering facts, but also reflecting on the broad context of the detention system to gain the favourable public opinion. By contrast, the same newspaper dismissed any journalistic attempt to dig out a broader social context of the Wang Binyu case as "unprofessional." This stark contrast illustrates that the *NMN* argued for the rule of law favourable of China's rising propertied class and elites, and intended to be the institutional vehicle for popular containment.

In short, Zhao's comparative case studies reveal the exclusionary and class-natured Chinese public sphere, nurtured through commercialised media and

economic liberalisation. Although it is historically progressive in containing abusive state power and protecting individual-based civil rights, it has an inherent antagonistic relationship with subaltern publics and has played the role of “an agent of social control and class containment” (Zhao 2008, 274).

My own study of the Liu Hanhuang case corroborates Zhao’s preliminary findings on the re-engendering of what she calls “the Chinese bourgeoisie public sphere” under the shadow of the Party state and its exclusionary, class-biased nature in its outcry for constitutional governance, civil rights and legal system by neglecting and even suppressing the subaltern publics’ interests, for example, rural migrant workers’ economic and social rights.

Liu Hanhuang is a 26-year-old migrant worker from rural Guizhou province. Among the hundreds of millions of China’s “floating population,” Liu migrated to the booming Pearl River Delta. On September 22, 2008, he found a job in the Taiwanese-run Zhan Ming Hardware Products Co, Ltd in Dongguan City, Guangdong province. Without any training on occupational safety and health, and insurance protection, the factory assigned the unskilled Liu to work on a punch press machine, the most dangerous job in the factory. Six days later, the malfunctioning and unguarded machine tool suddenly came down and severely injured Liu’s right hand. The accident caused the amputation of Liu’s wounded hand. The factory stopped paying wages to Liu, let alone medical and living costs. With a crippled body, Liu lost the ability to work, while his family had urgent financial needs back in a remote and poor village. Liu sued the company over compensation.

The labour arbitration authority negotiated 110,000 Yuan (around 20,000 dollars) as compensation. Liu accepted the agreement but the company refused to pay that much. The two sides went to court. In May 2009, Dongguan No. 2 People’s Court ruled 160,000 Yuan (30,000 dollars) as a once-and-for-all compensation. Liu agreed with the verdict, but the company still did not accept it and bargained for offering 70,000 Yuan (12,000 dollars) instead. During the prolonged negotiations, the court ordered the Taiwanese boss to accommodate disabled Liu inside the factory compound. However, Liu did not get proper care and treatment. His bosses often threatened to kick him out of the factory forever. On June 13, 2009, Liu protested by attempting to jump from a high building inside the factory. But he was persuaded by the police to give up. The boss and his managers tried to prevent Liu from meeting his lawyer. They limited Liu’s personal freedom to go outside the compound. On June 15, 2009, Liu planned to go outside to meet his lawyer. The factory guards blocked him at the compound gate. Liu was arguing with the security guards, when three managers drove a car to the gate. The managers tried to drag Liu back to the factory compound by force. Quarrelling took place and Liu was then under physical attacks. Liu pulled out a knife, fatally stabbed two Taiwanese managers and critically injured the third one.

If the case of Wang, which happened four years earlier, reveals the severity of migrant workers’ suffering from wage arrears, Liu’s case highlights China’s bloody GDP and the inhumane working conditions, under which the vast majority of migrant workers are living. In the Pearl River Delta, industrial injuries, caused by the punch press machine tools, lead to more than 40,000 fingers or hands cut off every year.<sup>1</sup> In dealing with compensation, local authorities and factory owners quite often colluded with each other to prolong the legal procedure. It usually

takes more than three years to go through the whole legal procedure and reach a final settlement. Injured rural migrant workers, who have no time and income to sustain the prolonged legal procedure, often choose to give up the lawsuits and accept whatever compensation offered by the greedy factories. Most disabled migrant workers accepted the meagre compensation and returned to their home in the countryside. Unlike most injured migrant workers, Liu chose to resist and struggle for social justice. However, like Wang Binyu, Liu ended up killing others, and would possibly be sentenced to death under the Chinese criminal law.

Learning lessons from the case of Wang to avoid a national sensation amidst China's intensive social conflicts, the Chinese media coldly treated Liu's case until the *NMN* took the lead in covering the event, which happened in its geographic location. According to the *NMN* account, Liu, upon encountering the Taiwanese managers on June 15, 2009, argued with them for immediate compensation. Although the managers refused to solve the dispute immediately, they agreed to discuss the issue with him later. However, Liu angrily drew out his knife and stabbed them to death. Then Liu ran away from the scene (*Nanfang Metropolitan News* 2009).

The Xinhua News Agency, China's most authoritative Party state organ, only reported the event with two news items in English. Without its own interview and investigation, Xinhua's reporting was actually based on the *NMN* account, although it did not specify its news sources. The first Xinhua story wrote, "Liu came to the general office of the factory Monday morning to discuss compensation with the three administrators. They agreed to continue their discussions in the afternoon, but shortly after midday, Liu attacked the three with a knife. Liu fled the scene but was apprehended not far from the factory later Monday" (Xinhua News Agency 2009). Updating "fatal stabbing of factory managers" in the first news item, Xinhua issued another news item the next day, describing the incident as "a mainland worker's murder of two factory employers from Taiwan." The Xinhua correspondent clearly understood the severity of the term "murder." As the first Xinhua (June 17, 2009) story wrote, "[O]fficials haven't yet specified what charges they will bring against Liu. Under Chinese law, the maximum penalty for intentional injury could be death with a two-year stay. For maximum penalty, a murderer could be sentenced to death with immediate execution." If the prosecutor has yet to decide how to charge Liu, how could Xinhua rush to determine the incident as "a murder?"

The *NMN* reportage, on which the Xinhua coverage was based, proved to be untruthful, compared to the factual investigation by the Intermediate People's Court of Dongguan. Without its own interview and investigation, Xinhua just followed the *NMN* to report the story. Its coverage was biased in favour of the Taiwan businessmen, without reporting the unfair treatment of Liu and the context under which the incident happened. If Liu really "fled" the scene after killing people as Xinhua reported, the chances of giving Liu a lenient sentence by the Chinese legal custom would be greatly reduced. In the case of Wang Binyu, Xinhua had highlighted the economic rights of the migrant workers and the necessity of securing these rights through the legal system (Zhao 2008, 280). However, in the case of Liu, Xinhua, which speaks on behalf of the official position, has swung back to capital. Because the incident involved the deaths of two Taiwanese capitalists and might complicate the relationship between the Taiwan Straits, which is vital to the re-unification of China, the Party-state has chosen to prioritise national interests over class interests.

The untruthful reportage by the *NMN* and Xinhua had led to unfavourable opinion on Liu before he stood for trial. Rejecting popular sympathy to Liu in the internet communities, the *Oriental Morning Post* (Dongfang Zaobao), another commercial media outlet in Shanghai that brands itself as “elite-oriented,” published an article titled “Killing the Evil Capitalists? How Come Did Liu Hanhuang Become Another Internet Hero?” The author Yang Gengshen, claiming himself to be “a senior media professional,” made comments on the sympathetic and favourable public opinion toward Liu as “irrational” and “cold blooded” over the deaths of the Taiwanese managers. Citing the *NMN* narrative of the Liu Hanhuang case, Yang argues that it is Liu who should be blamed for the tragedy as he had been unreasonable, reckless and impatient in the prolonged negotiation for compensation. Ignoring the fact that it was the restrictions on Liu’s personal freedom to meet his lawyer that directly triggered the quarrel and bloodshed, Yang deplors that China has entered an era of “greenwood hero,” in which the uncivilised people at the grass-roots level often cheer up the hatred against the wealthy people (*Oriental Morning Post* 2009).

Echoing Yang’s comments, Dong Baohua, a professor of labour law with the East China University of Political Science and Law in Shanghai, also condemns the popular sympathy with Liu Hanhuang. In his influential blog site on the leading Chinese internet portal Sina.com, Dong also based his arguments on the *NMN* account. Dong insists that the compensation will ultimately be settled through the rule of law. But he ignores the fact that Liu had been seeking a legal solution and the fact it was when Liu was prevented from going outside to meet his lawyer that the quarrel happened and ended up in physical attack and fatal counter-attack. Disregarding the context and details, Dong argues,

*The whole society is shocked by Liu’s killings. But, what is more shocking is that Liu Hanhuang has become an internet hero. It is terrible to see that a killer is considered as a hero in a society. ... If carefully examining the whole incident, the company has done nothing illegal. It is Liu Hanhuang who broke the law by his intentional murder. He deserves a criminal penalty* (Blog.sina.com.cn, June 20, 2009).

In the case of Wang Binyu, the *NMN* accused the sympathetic media of violating the principle of “journalistic professionalism.” However, it was the *NMN* itself that had reported the case of Liu Hanhuang by twisting the truth. The *NMN* emphasised “objective reporting” as much as “social context” in the Sun Zhigang case in its crusade for civil rights. However, it dismissed other media’s foregrounding of “the broader social context” of the Wang Binyu case as “unprofessional.” In the case of Liu Hanhuang, it is worse to see that the newspaper even conducted reportage in a biased and untruthful way. The official Xinhua news agency followed suit by basing its report on the *NMN* stories. Together, these two major powerful media outlets in China – Xinhua as the traditional mainstream and the *NMN* as “new mainstream” of the commercial media, have misled public opinion toward a position that was unfavourable to Liu.

The comparative analyses illustrate that the Chinese bourgeois and the “party-state media sphere” have common grounds in class and popular containment (Zhao 2008, 14, 328-329). The market-oriented media and liberal intellectuals, leading components of the emergent Chinese “bourgeois public sphere,” tend to selectively



interpret their beliefs, such as “journalistic professionalism,” “personal freedom,” “rule of law,” “the right of life” and “human rights” in the Chinese context.

## Autonomous Communication, Counter-publics and Chinese Workers’ Resistance

The Chinese “bourgeois public sphere” takes shape in market reforms and excludes disgruntled workers’ economic and social rights from its popular mobilisation and civil rights’ crusade. However, neither the official party state media sphere nor the market-based public sphere exhausts the existence of a multiplicity of “public spheres” in China’s post-Mao political and economic transformation. Zhao’s (2008, 328) research illustrates the co-existence of “these public spheres, each with their own media outlets, constitute an unevenly structured complex of sometimes overlapping, sometimes antagonistic, discursive fields.” Drawing on the critiques of the Habermasian notion of public sphere, I (Xing 2011) look into urban Chinese working-class leisure culture through a case study of the transformed Workers’ Cultural Palace in Zhengzhou in central Henan province. The research investigates Zhengzhou workers’ cultural and communicative activities, including songs, dramas and political discussions in an urban space. The case study provides hints of a re-politicised space which constitutes a public sphere, attended by the working class to discuss freely on social inequalities and related issues, suggesting contested public spheres in China’s increasingly class-divided society.

Next I provide a historical overview of the working class’s autonomous communicative practice since the Mao era. This historical perspective is helpful to understand my case study of workers’ online mobilisation on behalf of Liu. It highlights the continuity of Chinese workers’ struggle for autonomous communication and the right to communication in labour politics.

### Grassroots Communication and Labour Politics in Post-revolutionary China

The Chinese media system, which has its origins in revolutionary struggles involving the mobilisation of China’s exploited social classes, had operated during the Mao era based upon the “Party principle” and the “Mass Line.” Following the Leninist model, the Party historically designated the role of the Chinese media as its mouthpiece. It is obligatory for the Chinese media to promote Party policies, campaigns and directives (Zhao 1998). To counter elite-orientation and bureaucratic deficiencies, Mao developed the “Mass Line” to govern the operation of the Chinese media. Under this model, the media should collect the opinions, needs and ideas of ordinary people and communicate them up the Party structure to the central level, where policies are formulated on behalf of the people’s interests (Latham 2007, 35-43).

However, in practice, the Party-state media structure had tended to deviate from the “Mass Line” and represent the elite and the bureaucracy at the expense of the masses. During the Cultural Revolution, Mao mobilised the Red Guards and other “organisations of the revolutionary masses” to assault what he saw as the spectre of “revisionism” and the “bourgeois rightists” or “capitalist roaders” within the Party-state apparatuses. As the latter had controlled the Party-state media system, Mao and his popular followers sought alternative communication for achieving their objectives. As such, the various organisations of “the revolutionary masses”

had established their own communication channels with varying degrees of autonomy from the Party-state media structure (Zhao 2008; Schoenhals 2010). From tabloids, *dazibao* (big-character posters) and newsletters sponsored by Red Guards and “revolutionary workers’ organisations,” the alternative communication networks attempted to independently collect, produce, disseminate and exchange information and commentaries with regard to the campaigns of the Cultural Revolution.

Because the Red Guard and workers’ media and communication were used by Mao in the intra-party confrontations to purge “capitalist roaders,” some scholars suspect its autonomy. However, as Zhao (2008) argues, the fact that Mao called upon these social forces to initiate the Cultural Revolution is not sufficient to claim that they were completely manipulated. Instead, Zhao (2008, 197) makes analogous Red Guards and Chinese workers’ brief experience of anarchical “freedom” and communicative empowerment during the Cultural Revolution to the “press freedom” which liberal intellectuals and party-state journalists enjoyed during May 1989 in reporting student demonstrations when the party’s infighting weakened the reins over the Party-state media system. Zhao (2008, 197-198) endorses well-known China scholar Michael Schoenhals’ analysis that Red Guards publications in the early days of the Cultural Revolution constituted “non-state-controlled current information networks” and represented an important case of state-enabled grassroots “information empowerment.”<sup>2</sup> In short, the relationship between the party-state, party-state media and Red Guards tabloids was too complicated to be characterised as “a simple one-way street of top-down manipulation” (Zhao 2008, 199).

While scholars have primarily examined the tabloids of Red Guards, who were mostly students and other young people mobilised by Mao, here I highlight autonomous communication initiated by workers as “the revolutionary masses” during the Cultural Revolution. Under the slogan of “To Rebel Is Justified” and “The Working Class Must Exercise Leadership in Everything,” the working mass movements took off. Using printing machines, mimeograph machines, loudspeakers, and portable microphones, which were the common media technologies of the 1960s, like other mass organisations, Chinese workers’ organisations published tabloids, put up big-character posters, disseminated media materials, printed leaflets, and organised public debates and “mass struggle meetings” (Yang and Calhoun 2008). Among proliferating workers’ publications, the Shanghai-based *Workers’ Rebellions* was the most influential press outlet. Shanghai was the only city in which leaders of workers’ mass organisations actually took power during the Cultural Revolution. The newspaper was published in 1966 by the “Headquarters of the Revolutionary Revolt of Shanghai Workers,” an alliance of many different worker-based groups in Shanghai’s factories. It printed around 30,000 copies per issue at the beginning and increased to 410,000 in 1969. It had even reached 6400,000 in early 1970s, exceeding the Shanghai party organ.<sup>3</sup> If the working masses, as Jackie Sheehan (1998, 103) argues, “were by then prepared and equipped to act autonomously and collectively in pursuit of their own interests and in opposition to party-state authorities in the enterprise and beyond,” workers’ media had contributed to the upgrading of workers’ status and influence. Workers’ publications had substantiated “the Mass Line,” proposed by Mao to counter and prevent bureaucracy and elitism. To be sure, empowerment and autonomy had a long distance from reality and the majority of ordinary workers had not improved their conditions a lot under Mao

(Perry and Li 1997; Schoenhals 2010). Nevertheless, as Sheehan (1998, 103) argues, Chinese workers' experience of large-scale collective action outside normal party control channels during the Cultural Revolution has left an important legacy for labour politics in post-Mao China.

The Beijing Spring or the Chinese Democracy Movement in 1978-1979 began as a *dazibao* campaign in Beijing in November 1978. The movement was distinctive in using *dazibao* and printing non-officially approved journals to call for basic economic rights, civil liberties, more freedom from the Party-state and to fight corruption, official misconduct and cadre privilege (Brodsgaard 1981; Sheehan 1998, 158-160; Goldman 1999). Unregistered journals, which were poorly printed with mimeograph machines and sold openly on the street, sprang up across the whole country, "numbering at least 55 in Beijing and 127 in other cities by one account (comparable to the number of official newspapers at that time)" (Zhao 2008, 199). It is noteworthy that activists of the Democracy Movement of 1978-1979 as a whole included not only workers, but also clerks, young teachers, children of high ranking cadres and those who were active in the Cultural Revolution as Red Guards (Brodsgaard 1981). To be sure, not all the underground journals were published by workers. However, it is certain that worker activists had contributed greatly to the movement and the large numbers of unofficial journals in Beijing and other major cities, including Guangzhou, Changsha, Wuhan, Taiyuan, Tianjin, Qingdao, Harbin, Shanghai, Nanjing, Guiyang and Kunming (Brodsgaard 1981; Chen 1982). For example, the April Fifth Forum, one of the leading organisations and publications in the Democracy Movement, was mainly staffed by workers and young teachers ranging in age from 22 to 36 (Brodsgaard 1981, 764). Members of Chinese established intellectual stratum, including authors, professors and researchers, were almost absent in the Democracy Movement of 1978-1979, probably because they had not yet overcome the shocks of the Anti-Rightist Movement in 1957 and the Cultural Revolution, or because they assumed that Deng Xiaoping would co-opt them into his committed economic development blueprint (Brodsgaard 1981, 763). For Brodsgaard, the working class constituted the active members during the *dazibao* campaign and the Democracy Movement of 1978-1979, posing a serious dissent to the Party state. Worker activists and other democratic groups formed a loose coalition in the movement, demanding for democracy. Wei Jingsheng, who was a worker in Beijing and became one of the prominent figures in the Democracy Movement, argued that China need to achieve "the Fifth Modernisation" which was referred to as a democratic polity. In general, the democratic movement was not to abolish the socialist foundation of China, but oppose the party state's bureaucratic and authoritarian power, the rule of a "new bureaucratic-technocratic class rooted in the party" in China's non-democratic socialism (Brodsgaard 198, 774). Deng Xiaoping took advantage of the Democracy Wall Movement to regain power and purge his "ultra-leftist" opponents. However, Deng relentlessly ordered to crack-down the movement when he thought it had gone too far. Not only were activists arrested and the fledgling independent press banned, but also were deleted the "four great freedoms" (*sida ziyou*), i.e. the right of the people to "speak out freely, air views freely, hold great debates, and write big-character posters" (*daming, dafang, da bianlun, dazibao*) from the Chinese Constitution in 1980. The "Four Greats" were once enshrined by Mao into the Chinese Constitution in 1975. During his trial in

1979, Wei Jingsheng invoked them in his self-defence. What was also removed was a constitutional clause granting workers the right to strike (Zhao 2008, 19).

The pro-democracy movement in 1989 provided the working class with the third historical moment in their struggle for autonomous organisations and communication. The Western media usually described the Tiananmen Incident in 1989 as a student movement for democracy, capitalism and market reforms. This perspective has greatly neglected Chinese workers' involvement and their influences on the direction of the movement. Just a few days after university students in Beijing demonstrated in memorial to the former party chief Hu Yaobang who died on April 15, 1989, a small group of workers founded the Beijing Workers Autonomous Federation (WAF). On April 22, 100,000 people assembled in Tiananmen Square and one million took to the streets for Hu's funeral. Most of them were workers. On that day, the WAF distributed leaflets, condemning the wealth of Deng Xiaoping's family, cadre privileges and the flaws of Deng's market reforms. The WAF emerged as the organising centre of the workers' movement by mid-May. They urged the government to drop prices and make public the personal wealth of the top Chinese leaders. Not only in Beijing, but also in other cities workers began to take action. For example, many workers in Shanxin quite often gathered together before the provincial Communist office to discuss the political situation, prices, wages and housing. Thousands of workers, not only in Beijing but also in other Chinese cities, joined the WAF. Eighteen provinces reported large-scale protests. Workers joined the students' hunger strike and occupation of Tiananmen Square. The WAF was publicised and had chances to recruit new members, visit factories and agitate more workers. Worker activists also demanded the official recognition of the WAF. The authority had to hold dialogues with workers' representatives because it worried about workers' massive unrest, particularly in Capital Iron and Steel in Beijing with almost 200,000 workers.<sup>4</sup>

Workers' activism dramatically changed the direction of the pro-democracy and pro-capitalist movement initiated by students. Radical students shouted new slogans of "No victory can be achieved without the support of the working class."<sup>5</sup> Students and workers gathered together and sang the Internationale, in front of the world media. The WAF issued a declaration, calling for workers' takeover of their factories in all peaceful means, including strikes, and asserting that "With our blood we will reconstruct the walls of the Paris Commune."<sup>6</sup> While the liberalised Party-state sector and the emergent liberal intellectual elites in the official media had promoted the 1989 movement through the party organs, workers still used handbills, wall posters and old technologies, including mimeograph machines, portable loudspeakers, and handheld megaphones, to express their opinions and demands, and to mobilise the masses (Yang and Calhoun 2008). Unlike the liberal intelligentsia advocating democracy and capitalism, the workers expressed hostility to the CCP's betrayal of its revolutionary and socialist promises. A leaflet issued a WAF statement on May 26, declaring:

*We [the working class] are the rightful masters of this nation. We must have our voices heard on national affairs. We absolutely must not allow this small band of degenerate scum of the nation and the working class [the Stalinist leadership] to usurp our name and suppress the students, murder democracy and trample human rights (Walder and Gong 1993, 12).*

One of the WAF's leaflets stated, "[W]e have conscientiously documented the exploitation of workers. The methods of analysis given in Marx's *Das Kapital* provided a basis of the method of understanding exploitation ... We were astonished to find that the 'people's public servants' have devoured all surplus value created by the people's blood and sweat" (cited in Meisner 1996, 446). In a wall poster expressing workers' hatred of Deng's market reforms, the WAF proclaimed, "[W]e must unite to sweep Deng Xiaoping from the historical stage."<sup>7</sup>

Workers' resistance and struggle for autonomous communication in post-1989 market reforms have resurged against the backdrop of China's neo-liberal economic agenda. Since the 1990s, the party state's regime of censorship has incorporated and worked hand in hand with the regulatory role of the market in suppressing working class voices when it started off commercialisation, commodification and conglomeration of Chinese media and cultural industries (Zhao 2008, 19-64). The space for unofficial publications, which proliferated in the various movements until 1989, has become precarious under harsh state repression. Though enormous numbers of urban workers have been laid-off and the cadre-capitalists have stolen state assets in the process of neo-liberal privatisation, workers' dissatisfaction are muffled in the party organs and the flourishing commercial media. As revealed by Zhao (2008, 202), when workers resorted to unregistered publications, such as working class newsletters, to disclose official corruption and demand social justice and protection, the party strictly suppressed the workers' protests. For example, several laid off workers in Northwest China were put into jail in 1999 because they published a newsletter Chinese Workers' Monitor (*Zhongguo gongren guan*) unearthing the official corruption and misconduct in managing the SOEs. By the early 2000s, the party-state had even suspended registered leftist political and literary periodicals, including *The Pursuit of Truth* (*zhenli de zhuiqiu*) and *Midstream* (*zhongliu*), for their criticisms of its neo-liberal agenda and its official incorporation of capitalists into its rankings (Zhao 2008, 52).

Next, I will continue my case study of Liu Hanhuang to illustrate how migrant workers and worker intellectuals at the grass roots level appropriate the internet to construct their communities and safeguard their rights and interests. The communicative practices, however limited and precarious, are nevertheless autonomous of both state regimentation and the Chinese "bourgeois public sphere."

### Workers' Internet Community and Crusade for Social Justice

The first hearing of Liu's case was held on September 7, 2009. Soon after the first hearing, a Chinese website called honghuacao.com in Shenzhen, Guangdong, initiated an internet mobilisation for rescuing Liu Hanhuang. Honghuacao is a medicinal herb with pretty flowers, which means Chinese milk vetch. The grass-roots internet community uses the metaphor to express its dedication to serving Chinese workers. All the worker activists are educated migrant workers. The website includes two virtual communities, Honghuacao Rights Protection Mutual Aid Network and Honghuacao Workers' Rights - Protection Consultation Network. It provides consultation free of charge to migrant workers via face to face, phone call or internet-based service. Worker activists attempt to encourage solidarity among worker fellows. As the website clearly states,

*The objectives of setting up Honghuacao Network are to engage ourselves with the working class indefinitely, grow up with them, become members of them and dedicate ourselves to promoting the progressive cause and self-awareness of the working class. We primarily discuss with workers the way out of their plights, in other words, the issue of future. Through our work, we will do our best to raise our class-consciousness, integrate ourselves with the working class and increase worker fellows' understanding of the future of the working masses as a class.<sup>8</sup>*

The grassroots labour community organises reading groups among workers and provides a library, sports and entertainment facilities for workers to spend their leisure time. It invites scholars and lawyers to inform migrant workers of “rights-protection” (weiquan) and China’s labour law. In its petition letter, the workers’ internet community called for donations to pay the families of the killed Taiwanese businesspeople. During the first trial, the immediate family members of the killed Taiwanese managers asked for a big sum of money for each victim as civic compensation, in addition to Liu’s criminal penalty. According to the ongoing death penalty system reforms in China, a satisfactory civic compensation may increase the chances of a little bit lenient penalty. To strive for exempting Liu Hanhuang from death penalty, the workers’ internet community urged ordinary worker fellows and sympathetic social groups to reach out for donating money to compensate the victims. Through this campaign, Honghuacao also hopes to promote mutual aid, generate workers’ solidarity and raise class-consciousness.

A workers’ internet community, called Workers’ Portal (*gongren menhu*) with *chuisi.net* as the URL of the main site, echoed Honghuacao’s initiative for collecting donations. The name of the site *chuisi* means hammer. The homepage of *chuisi.net* has several sub-sections in addition to separate sections listed alongside it, some leading to sections of *chuisi.net*, some other sections to other websites. The confusing layout indicates that worker activists are fighting an internet-based “guerrilla warfare” against the Party state’s blockage and shutting down of their virtual communities. The main sections listed on the homepage are: Workers’ News, Workers’ Forum, Workers’ Rights-Protection (*honghuacao.com*), Workers’ Photos, Workers’ Blogs, Mutual Aid Q and A, Workers’ Web (*maopai.net* – this means “Maoist” and the site is also called “Mao Portal”) and Special Section for Liu Hanhuang, the latest sub-section for the case of Liu. Worker activists established the Workers’ Portal in 2006. It is a non-profit website created by a group of “youth in society” (*shehui qingnian*) and “independent scholars” (*minjian xuezhe*). A few volunteers maintain the website with the mission to “serve workers and promote the workers’ spirit of solidarity, mutual aid and perseverance.”<sup>9</sup> As a sub-section of the *chuisi.net*, the Workers’ Forum functions as “an internet-based platform of garnering information with regard to the Chinese working class.” Its fundamental tasks are to “promote the working class understanding of the socialist system, advocate understanding of theories by linking to practices, and emphasise class position.”<sup>10</sup> This workers’ internet community also published blogs and posts, expressing their protests against the *NMN*’s reportage of Liu Hanhuang.

The sub-section of Workers’ News primarily reports workers’ ongoing struggles in foreign countries, including South Korea and Western countries. It also briefly updates domestic workers’ struggles. The Workers’ Forum provides the place to

discuss Chinese workers' worsening working and living conditions, greedy bosses and corrupt officials. Through a Bulletin Board System (BBS), the workers' portal website has set up 36 sub-sections for workers in different provinces and cities across China (by when?). The BBS primarily reports and discusses local workers' ongoing struggles and conditions. Labour activists think they are worker intellectuals hailing from workers. Their jobs are to facilitate mutual aid and raise class-consciousness among worker fellows. They perceive the interests of the working class from a worker's position other than partisan doctrines. The Workers' Portal prescribes the ideal objectives of liberating Chinese workers in terms of economic and social rights as "Five Major Guarantees"—secure employment, affordable medical care, accessible housing for labourers, children's education, and decent life after retirement.<sup>11</sup>

Shiqiu is a worker intellectual activist in Chuisi.net. Shi argues that the "five major guarantees" represent Chinese workers' down-to-earth, immediate material demands. Although the future of the Chinese working class lies in socialism, Shiqiu warns against empty talking about political ideology and elitism in labour politics.<sup>12</sup>

The third internet-based worker community, which actively responded to the Honghuacao campaign for saving Liu Hanhuang, is the Workers' Poetry Alliance (*gongren shige lianmeng*), a worker intellectuals' forum. This worker cyberspace is to collect and compile written materials with regard to working class literature and art, and classical works in labour movements in China and the rest of the world. The website also collects poetry, literature and articles written by migrant workers who narrate their plights in Pearl River Delta. Through the literature collecting campaign, worker activists believe that they are striving to mobilise and organise Chinese workers and prepare themselves for what they anticipate explosive labour unrest in China. As the forum claims, it is forming "an alliance of labour through collecting workers' literature and art works. Our strongholds are in the workshops, in the construction sites and wherever workers are."<sup>13</sup>

This workers' forum attempts to inform migrant Chinese workers of labour laws and support them in safeguarding their rights via legal means. However, worker intellectuals argue that it is naïve to believe that the "rule of law" and the civil rights movement in China would fundamentally improve Chinese working class conditions as much as what the market-oriented media and liberal intellectuals promise. For them, the legal means is no more than an instrument which can be used to safeguard workers' rights. They argue that the self-organisation of the Chinese working class is vital to its future. As an activist argues:

*In order to maintain their regime, the ruling class will possibly make reforms to alleviate the suffering of the exploited. For our part, we should inspire the workers themselves to struggle for their emancipation by self organisations. From now on, as advanced elements among Chinese workers, we hope to raise the awareness of the exploited: all of the ruling classes are parasites; therefore, their bestowed benevolence is undependable. Above all, there has been little space for reforms in China, because Chinese capitalists believe that any reduction of the survival pressure upon workers and peasants would mean lower efficiency and less profit for them. The current capital-labour tensions have anticipated the intensity of forthcoming class conflicts.<sup>14</sup>*

The worker activist believes what he calls “the Chinese bourgeois and capitalists” are unwilling to give up even tiny concessions to meet workers’ meagre demands, let alone major concessions to pacify workers’ struggles. For him, the case of Liu Hanhuang has revealed the greedy nature of Chinese capitalists and their unwillingness to make compromise. In my interview, the worker activist predicts that China will see fierce and implacable class conflicts, in his words, “you die and I live.” Being pessimistic about harmonious capital-labour relations in China’s post-socialist transition, he argues,

*It is inevitable to see the development of class conflicts and the working class struggle. This would begin with reformist struggles. However, the reforms by the ruling class will never address the worsening working class conditions. If Chinese workers expect the ruling class to give concessions, they will end up benumbing themselves and causing calamities for themselves. There would be explosive labour unrest in China in the future. Unless the ruling class decapitates millions of workers, the labour movements will not be suppressed or begin to ebb in China.<sup>15</sup>*

On November 2, 2009, the Intermediate People’s Court of Dongguan made a primary verdict on Liu’s case. The court acknowledged that it was the Taiwanese bosses that had treated Liu unjustly in the first place. Liu did not take the initiative in killing them nor escaped the scene. The court decided to give Liu “death sentence with two years’ probation,” instead of “an immediate death sentence.” The “suspended” death sentence is generally reduced to life imprisonment after two years. This meant that Liu’s life was saved. However, the penalty was still more severe than Liu and his supporters had anticipated. Liu said in the court after hearing the sentence, “this is excessive, I will appeal.”<sup>16</sup> On November 8, 2009, Liu’s former co-workers, workers’ internet communities, sympathetic netizens and labour activists from China and overseas launched a second petition to call for an immediate release of Liu Hanhuang. However, on April 23, 2010, the Guangdong Provincial Higher People’s Court made a final verdict, maintaining the primary verdict of giving Liu “death sentence with two years’ probation.”

Workers’ internet community and worker activists failed to collect enough donations and generate popular pressure for reducing Liu’s sentence. However, the rescuing campaigns indicate that disgruntled workers are conscious of social injustice inflicted on them. Hearing the primary verdict, even Liu Hanhuang protested in the court by saying that “this verdict is not just upon me, but upon the entire socially marginalised stratum!”<sup>17</sup> Most importantly, workers’ online activism on Liu’s case suggests their political agency in safeguarding labourers’ legitimate rights through taking initiatives in their own communicative practice. This case study illustrates the existence of workers’ counter-bourgeois public sphere through the formation of internet-based communities.

## Concluding Remarks

While still under the shadow of the state, China’s market-oriented media and liberal intellectuals have given rise to an equivalent of the bourgeois public sphere, which can be understood in a Habermasian formation of a democratic alternative to authoritarian state power. Nevertheless, just as the Party-state media sphere has



failed to promote workers' interests, it is clear that this quasi-independent bourgeois public sphere cannot be counted to represent Chinese workers' economic and social rights. The case studies of Sun Zhigang, Wang Binyu and Liu Hanhuang indicate the exclusionary and class nature of the this Chinese bourgeois public sphere. Still, in however limited ways, Chinese workers have developed autonomous communicative practices to constitute a counter-bourgeois public sphere, which operates outside the usual parameters of the institutions of legitimation by the Chinese political, economic and intellectual and media elites. The existence of these officially unrecognised public spheres, which respond to the contingent needs of the marginalised and disenfranchised Chinese working class, highlights what Mosco (2009, 95-96) calls "resistance, opposition, and efforts to create counter hegemonic alternatives."

As Internet and digital technologies become affordable and accessible, they are closely integrated with everyday work and life of workers' communities, providing a critical seedbed for the potential rise of "working-class network society" (Qiu 2009). However, my case study is neither to celebrate technological empowerment nor to understand Chinese politics from a technological determinist perspective. As my historical overview indicates, Chinese workers have been struggling for their rights and interests and the formation of their own class-based subjectivity. From the Cultural Revolution, the Democracy Movement in 1978-1979, and the Tiananmen incident in 1989 to workers' counter-hegemonic struggles in opposition to China's neo-liberal reform agenda in post-1989 labour politics, we can see their opposition to the dominant bureaucratic establishment, the ruling Chinese elites and the capitalists. Workers' online activism on behalf of Liu is one of the latest forms and patterns in their struggles. It indicates the continuity of Chinese workers' struggles for the right to communication and the interests of the working class through the appropriation of available technological means. Although the Internet is structured in favour of the dominant hegemonic bloc of state officials, capitalists, and the middle class strata, it has also become an instrument of Chinese workers in constituting themselves as counter-publics in China's deeply class-divided society.

## Notes:

1. See "Zai Shijie Gongchang Shenchu: Zhusanjiao Mingong Shengcun Zhuangkuang Tiaocha" (Deep into the "World Factory": The Investigative Reporting of Migrant Workers' Conditions in the Pearl River Delta), *China Youth News*, August 22, 2007.
2. This is recited from Yuezhi Zhao, *Communication in China*, who made the citation based on Michael Schoenhals' lecture at the Institute for Asian Research, UBC, on September 13, 2005. Also see Elizabeth Perry and Li Xun, *Proletarian Power: Shanghai in the Cultural Revolution*. Boulder, Co: Westview Press, 1997.
3. See Chen Donglin, "wenge qunzhong zuzhi baokan yanjiu" (Studying Newspapers and Journals Published by the Masses during the Cultural Revolution), *China Elections and Governance*, [http://www.iccs.cn/detail\\_cg.aspx?sid=36](http://www.iccs.cn/detail_cg.aspx?sid=36).
4. This passage is primarily based on John Chan's observations. See John Chan, "Origins and Consequences of the 1989 Tiananmen Square Massacre," *World Socialist Web Site*, 4 June 2009, <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2009/jun2009/tien-j04.shtml>.
5. Ibid.
6. See Rob Lyon, "15th Anniversary of Tiananmen Square Massacre," *In Defense of Marxism*, 4 June

2004, <http://www.hartford-hwp.com/archives/55/855.html>.

7. Beijing gongren zizhi lianhe hui [the WAF], “Renmin de haoling” [Command of the People], wall poster dated 29 May 1989. It is reprinted in Zhongguo minyun yuan ziliao [China Democracy Movement Data], No. 2, 48.

8. See “About Us,” Honghuacao organisation, <http://honghuacao.com/thread-56-1-1.html>.

9. This is from honghuacao organisation website, link to <http://bbs.chuizi.net/thread-2905-1-1.html>.

10. This is from honghuacao website, <http://bbs.chuizi.net/thread-3620-1-1.html>.

11. See honghuacao website, “Guanyu wuda baozhang de shixian” (On How to Achieve the “Five Guarantees”), <http://bbs.chuizi.net/thread-2679-1-1.html>.

12. See Qiushi’s blog at the Workers’ Portal, <http://chuizi.net/space.php?uid=23&op=bbs>.

13. See the Workers’ Poetry Alliance website, [http://tw.netsh.com/eden/bbs/713969/html/tree\\_27336715.html](http://tw.netsh.com/eden/bbs/713969/html/tree_27336715.html)

14. This is from my interview with a worker intellectual from the Workers’ Poetry Alliance by email.

15. This is from my interview with a worker activist from Workers’ Poetry Alliance in 2009 by email.

16. See China Labour Bulletin, “Migrant Worker Appeals Death Sentence for Murder of Factory Managers,” <http://www.clb.org.hk/en/node/100590>.

17. See husunzi’s blogs on Liu Hanhuang at China Study Group, <http://chinastudygroup.net/2010/02/liu-hanhuang-update-new-petition>.

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