

## Mao's Worker Aristocracy

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In his book, Joel Andreas describes how “industrial citizenship” of urban workers in the People’s Republic of China (PRC) was built in the early 1950s and finally destroyed in the 1990s. According to him, this social contract between the party-state and the urban workforce included life-long employment (a *de facto* decommodification of labor) and entitlements to welfare within the work units. While Maoist China did not live up to any socialist definition of “workers’ democracy,” Andreas argues that the labor relations could be labeled as “participatory paternalism”. This means that while workers were not the “masters of the factories,” cadres could not ignore their wishes and demands. Andreas characterizes the relation between cadres and masses as “mutual reliance.” Workers relied on cadres for bonuses and promotions, while “supervision by the masses” limited abuse of power and corruption by cadres. Andreas is critical of Andrew Walder, who strongly emphasized in his research workers’ dependence, and downplayed social benefits and job security that came with being a member of a work unit (p. 225-226).

Andreas’ book builds on archival research and field work in China that he undertook for over a decade. His goal is to present the system of work units in a more positive way than most previous scholars. In the following, I will give the book a “German treatment,” meaning I will focus on the critical aspects.

### *A Dual Society*

Andreas is aware of the fact that “industrial citizenship” did not include everyone. In the cities, temporary workers were excluded from this social contract. In the countryside, the peasantry remained “outside the system” (*tizhiwai*) of the socialist welfare state and official rationing of food. This had deadly consequences for millions of villagers during the Great Leap Famine (1959-1961).

Andreas argues that every organization from small associations to nation states provide certain rights and entitlements only to its members (page 11). Inclusion and exclusion have to be defined and enforced. In my view, it was indeed very unlikely that a poor country such as China in the 1950s would have been able to provide full welfare and food security to all its citizens. Nonetheless, only a very small minority could enjoy “participatory paternalism.” During the Mao era, the urban population always remained below twenty percent of the whole (Felix Wemheuer, *A Social History of Maoist China: Conflict and Change, 1949-1976*, Cambridge University Press, 2019: 269).

Great social mobility was experienced by the generation of new urban workers, who became part of the permanent workforce during the First-Five-Year Plan (1953-1957). The workers who

moved to towns and cities during the Great Leap were less fortunate. In order to reduce the pressure on the urban supply system, the government sent 26 million people back to the countryside between late 1960 and 1963 (Wemheuer, 2019, p. 165). This was the most radical policy of “austerity” ever enforced under a system of state socialism.

We should therefore be aware that Andreas is focusing on the “worker aristocracy” of Maoist China. The other side of the coin was that the vast majority of people were forced to stay in the villages. Hence, Maoist China was no “egalitarian society.” Mao criticized some aspects of this system, but he was never willing to question distribution by ranks or the household registration system that turned the peasantry into vulnerable “second-class citizens.” To look at cash incomes only to understand inequality is misleading, because almost all daily life goods, housing, or medical care were provided by the state to the urban population for highly subsidized fees or for free. Within the urban supply systems, ranks regulated the quantity and quality of the rationed goods one was entitled to. A well-informed person in Beijing could guess the rank of someone’s parents, for example, by looking at the brand of cigarettes their children were smoking. Drivers and domestic workers of high-ranking cadres were also paid by the government and these entitlements were not reflected in their cash income.

In the Soviet bloc, no communist party dared to destroy “industrial citizenship” and job security for the permanent workforce. A regime change or “counter-revolution” was necessary to enforce privatization in the early 1990s. The CCP under Jiang Zemin and Zhu Rongji closed many state factories between 1998 and 2002 and approximately 60 million workers were laid off. This radical “reform” faced relatively little resistance outside the old industrial areas. One reason might be that over 80 percent of the Chinese had never enjoyed the “iron rice bowl” of state socialism to begin with.

### *Worker Rebels in the Cultural Revolution*

The strongest part of the book is the chapter on the Cultural Revolution. Andreas works out the limits of the workers’ rebellion very clearly. In the winter of 1966, Mao encouraged workers to rebel and to establish their own mass organizations. However, he could not imagine allowing these independent organizations to exist permanently. In the newly founded Revolutionary Committees that replaced state organs at the local level, Mao imagined a division of labor according to which “old cadres” would run daily administration, while the “new cadres,” recruited among rebels, would supervise them, preventing them from taking the “capitalist road.” However, this arrangement was fragile. When their mass organization were dissolved in 1968/69, the rebels lost their strongholds at the grassroots (page 115). Then, after the restoration of the party

apparatus, "old cadres" regained the advantage, because they knew better how to use their networks and to play games of power than the young rebels.

Andreas argues that Shanghai was the only city where the radical faction took charge (page 131). We should be careful to generalize from our local cases studies. In Qingdao, one of the few industrial cities with over four million people at that time, the rebels "seized power" and they were even recognized by the *People's Daily* on January 30, 1967. The young rebel worker Yang Baohua became the new leader and later the chairman of the Revolutionary Committee. It is a very interesting fact that he was not even a party member at this time. Since 1949, only the Cultural Revolution provided an opportunity for young workers, who were non-party members, to rise to such leading positions. The common career tracks before 1966 would be much slower and party membership was required.

#### *How to Deal with Memories*

In order to understand the experiences of the rebel workers, Andreas interviewed eighty-one individuals in Hubei and Henan provinces. He explains that it was much more difficult to get access to eyewitnesses from factories than from universities, who formed his interviewees for this first book project. The number of rebels that Andreas interviewed is very remarkable. However, he presents quotations from the interviews in order to underline his arguments without analyzing memories in a critical way. These memories were narrated decades after the events. For example, one former worker rebel claims proudly that the new Revolutionary Committee liberated all "old cadres" and restored production (page 139). Doing interviews since 2014 with former rebels in Shandong, I heard these kinds of stories over and over again: "I treated the old cadres very good, I tried to prevent all violent factional struggle, I focused on the restoration of production and wanted just to show loyalty to chairman Mao." While it seldom can be checked whether or not these individual stories from the local level are true or not, it seems obvious that eyewitnesses try to present themselves in the best ways to the interviewer. We have to understand what kind of narratives were considered legitimate today in order to analyze memories of the past.

All in all, Andreas's book is an important contribution to social history and industrial relations in Maoist China and it should be widely discussed.