

Labor History

ISSN: 0023-656X (Print) 1469-9702 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/clah20

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To cite this article: Wen Xie (2024) Generations at the crossroads: biographical experience and working-class politics in China, Labor History, 65:3, 337-351, DOI: 10.1080/0023656X.2024.2319298

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/0023656X.2024.2319298

Published online: 18 Feb 2024.

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LABOR HISTORY
2024, VOL. 65, NO. 3, 337–351
https://doi.org/10.1080/0023656X.2024.2319298

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Generations at the crossroads: biographical experience and working-class politics in China

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ABSTRACT

The study calls for greater scholarly engagement with the generational experiences of the socialist working class in China. Through an analysis of collective actions in response to the reform of state-owned enterprises at the turn of the century, the paper divides the Chinese socialist working class into the Revolution Generation and the Transition Generation. Amid the restructuring of the state sector, workers from the Revolution Generation exhibited a proclivity for civic activism and petitions, while the Transition Generation, though grappling with unemployment, largely refrained from public dissent, instead expressing sentiments of bewilderment and resignation. The study illustrates how the differing lived experiences of two working-class generations played a pivotal role in shaping their interpretation of grievances and contention repertoire. The article underscores the significance of generational perspectives in gaining insight into the destiny of the Chinese working class, advocating for the integration of such perspectives into the broader fields of deindustrialization and labor studies.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 7 November 2023
Accepted 11 February 2024

KEYWORDS
Generation; working class; revolution; market transition; biographical experience

1. Introduction

With the 'reform and opening-up' policy, China shifted from a centrally planned economy to a more market-oriented one, necessitating the restructuring of China's industrial sector. While the reform was gradual, the turn of the century marked a profound transformation of the socio-economic landscape in China. One critical aspect of the restructuring was the privatization and closure of numerous state-owned enterprises (SOEs), deemed unprofitable or inefficient in the new market-driven context. The 'grasping the large, letting go of the small' policy, implemented in the late 1990s, exemplified the shift. A handful of SOEs were deemed the backbone of the national economy and, therefore, 'big,' while the remaining were considered 'small' and slated to be closed or sold to private owners. The move diminished the traditional socialist working class, once the vanguard of the Chinese economy, triggering social protests across the country.

This period of labor history sparked lively discussion at the turn of the century. Scholars deliberated the scope of the protests, the strategies and rhetoric of the workers, the relationship between workers and the state, the plight of the laid-off workers, and the fate of the Chinese working class (Blecher, 2002; Chen, 2000, 2003, 2006; Hurst, 2009; Lee, 2000, 2007; Liu, 2003; Solinger, 2002; Yu, 2006). While there has been abundant research on the episode, my revisiting reveals a generational pattern, which emerged intermittently in the existing literature, but was not seriously addressed. I found that the 'old workers' (*laogongren*) were more likely to have participated in social protests, and not just about their pensions. They were more likely to lead the factory-wide protests both at the time of closure and the post-closure

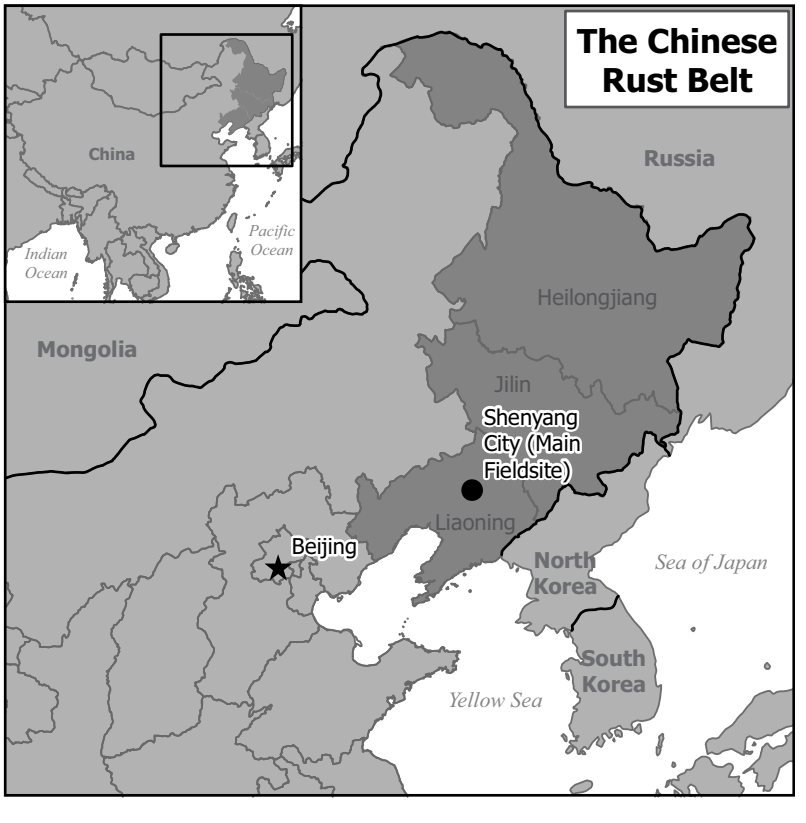
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petition than their younger counterparts. In contrast, younger workers were more likely to keep their heads down in the face of plant closures. And they were more likely to be followers than leaders if they participated in any protests.[1]

The article places significant emphasis on the generational divide. I contend that various historical epochs have effectively demarcated the socialist working class in China into distinct generations, most notably the Revolution Generation (typically born between 1924 and 1954) and the Transition Generation (generally born between 1955 and 1977).[2] The divide is neither absolute nor based on the younger generation's wholesale rejection of collective actions. Instead, it serves as an analytical construct that considers the intersection of historical time and individual lifetimes. The construct aims to highlight how workers who came of age in the depoliticized era had markedly different experiences from those who reached maturity during the revolutionary epoch. The biographical differences played a key role in shaping how different working-class generations perceived the challenges posed by market reform, as well as how they constructed their grievances, and rallied and mobilized members for collective action. Understanding these generation-specific biographical experiences is crucial for comprehending the diverse actions undertaken by 'older' and 'younger' workers facing the restructuring of the state-owned industrial sector.

The article is grounded in fieldwork interviews I conducted with workers in Shenyang, located in Liaoning Province, as part of a broader research project focused on China's socialist industrial heartland, the Northeast Region. The region encompasses the provinces of Liaoning, Jilin and Heilongjiang and has often been referred to as 'The Chinese Rust Belt' due to the pronounced concentration of unemployment there during the market reform of state-owned enterprises. Over the course of 14 months of fieldwork, I gathered data from various primary and secondary sources. Given the retrospective nature of the interviews conducted for the project, I also reference meticulously documented case studies of workers' protests in different regions of China.[3]



The remainder of the article is organized as follows. First, there is a review of existing literature on the restructuring of state-owned enterprises and the landscape of research pertaining to related labor protests. The subsequent section examines the impact of certain historical events, as well as the life course trajectories of both the Revolution and Transition Generation. Following this analysis, I proceed to investigate how biographical experiences played a pivotal role in shaping the meaning that workers ascribed to the closures or restructuring of state-owned enterprises. Additionally, I explore the influence of these encoded biographical experiences on strategies and methods of contention. In conclusion, the article underscores the significance of generational perspectives in gaining insight into the destiny of the Chinese working class, advocating for the integration of such perspectives into the broader fields of deindustrialization and labor studies.

2. The restructuring of the state-owned sector and subsequent discontent

In 1949, following the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC), the nation confronted formidable economic challenges characterized by a devastated economy, widespread physical destruction, and acute macroeconomic instability. The new government swiftly implemented fiscal and monetary policies to restore fiscal balance and curb hyperinflation. After intense campaigns which seized the assets of urban and rural elites, the PRC embarked on the implementation of a socialist planning framework, drawing inspiration from the Soviet Union.

Following the Soviet approach, China's planning system aimed to nurture and expand a self-sufficient, military-industrial complex. Rapid industrialization became a national priority for the nascent regime. This necessitated elevated savings rates to promote investment, particularly in heavy industry, alongside an intricate planning apparatus to mobilize resources and direct them toward prioritized investments. Concurrently, in rural areas, collectivization and stringent controls on individual mobility via the *hukou* residential permit system facilitated channeling limited resources into urban industries and state-owned enterprises (Brandt et al., 2014). The establishment of the danwei system in the urban areas served as a critical mechanism for facilitating industrialization. Within the danwei system, a comprehensive welfare structure was put in place, offering workers 'cradle-to-grave' benefits and lifelong employment (Lv & Perry, 1997). Once the danwei system was fully established, workers became closely tied to their specific danwei, and labor markets and job mobility were basically eliminated.

The 1980s brought changes to the urban industrial economy, encouraging increased labor mobility and reshaping the fundamental economic foundations of the danwei system. Subsequently, during the 1990s, China's state sector experienced a series of more radical reforms. These reforms entailed the elimination of compulsory planning, the restructuring of traditional SOEs into corporations, and the introduction of market-driven competition for state-owned firms. A notable policy shift during this era was the adoption of the 'grasping the big and letting go of the small' policy (*zhuada fangxiao*). After 2003, the state sector began to stabilize, and the pace of corporate restructuring decelerated significantly (Naughton, 2015).

Market transition and the restructuring of the state sector led to massive worker layoffs in China. Through reforms such as corporatization, privatization, mergers, bankruptcies, and associated large-scale layoffs, the traditional socialist working class lost its special socio-economic status. In a decade, the number of employees at state-owned enterprises dropped to 66.2 million in 2003 from 109.2 million in 1993, a 39 percent decrease (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2010). Workers, who under the socialist system had enjoyed secure employment and a range of social benefits tied to their workplace, suddenly found themselves unemployed and without a social safety net. Regardless of whether they were still working for SOEs or other enterprises, or were unemployed, the labor relations they were engaged in and their dependency on the labor market had transformed them into wage laborers. The dissolution of the SOEs led to labor protests.

The restructuring and transformation of the socialist working class has generated significant interest among international and domestic scholars. Scholars have noted the puzzling nature of labor's response

to massive unemployment. On the one hand, protests occurred in many locations across the country (Cai, 2002; Chen, 2000; Hurst & O'Brien, 2002; Lee, 2000). Lee (2000) characterizes workers' resistance as a form of 'revenge of history,' wherein collective memories of Maoist socialism served as motivators for their actions. The legacy of state socialist egalitarianism and Maoist radicalism offered ideological, linguistic and strategic frameworks for workers' actions during the economic reform era. Chen (2000) highlights the subsistence challenges encountered by laid-off workers and the corruption within managerial ranks. Workers facing the dire need to secure their livelihoods exhibited a heightened incentive for protest, particularly when they perceived that their economic struggles stemmed from managerial corruption within their workplaces. Cai (2002) emphasizes that within the Chinese political system, the government-society relationship provides an opportunity for laid-off workers to engage in non-institutionalized forms of action. The opportunity arises due to the constraints placed on local governments, which cannot use force arbitrarily when dealing with dissatisfied citizens.

On the other hand, scholars have observed that the labor unrest in China during the late 20th and early 21st centuries was primarily sporadic and localized, lacking the coordination to form significant strike waves or sustained movements (Blecher, 2002). Only a fraction of the laid-off workforce engaged in activism, often motivated by immediate concerns such as unpaid pensions or specific personal hardships (Hurst & O'Brien, 2002). Consequently, while the protests presented challenges to social and political stability, they did not signify the emergence of a labor movement capable of persistently advocating for workers' long-term interests (Chen, 2000). Scholars have pointed out a few reasons for the lack of a cohesive, large-scale, working-class movement in the face of SOE restructuring and closures. Blecher (2002) highlights workers' unhesitating acceptance of the core values of the market and the state. Other scholars emphasize the division created by danwei-based segmentation. Despite the ongoing market transition and the gradual breakdown of the danwei system, the inherent characteristics of the system persisted. Workers' actions and demands were often confined to issues within their respective enterprises and rarely extended to broader societal claims (Chen, 2000). Even within each danwei, workers' identity and status differed, further dividing them and preventing solidarity (Wu, 2010).

The retrospective interviews and archival studies I conducted in Shenyang reveal remembered activism among 'old workers.' The older workers' activism has three distinct characteristics. First, early instigation. Older workers became active during the initial stages of market reform, often galvanized by the financial challenges faced by local state-owned enterprises. Pensioners, dependent on danweis for their retirement income, mobilized in response to the financial struggles of these enterprises. Second, militant tactics. Older workers often resorted to more forceful and violent protest methods than other workers. Their actions included road blockages, factory entrance blockades, railway blockades, and extreme measures like physical confrontations with factory officials. Third, leadership roles. Senior workers frequently took on leadership roles in protests and collective petitioning, exemplified by the establishment of groups like the Retired Employees Joint Committee in some factories, which spearheaded numerous protests and petitions to local governments. The political passivity of most (younger) workers contrasted sharply with the active class consciousness of older workers. Similar patterns were also observed in the port city of Tianjin in eastern China (Hurst & O'Brien, 2002), Zhengzhou in the center of the country (Chen, 2008; Tong, 2006; Zhu, 2005), and the southeastern city of Pingxiang (Yu, 2006).

The paper seeks to demonstrate that the differences were the result of generational divisions. In the next section, I will establish a generational lens for understanding the abovementioned pattern. The generational lens will help us better comprehend why the workers' protests always embodied elements from the past.[4]

3. Two generations of the socialist working class

Generational distinctions are a recurring topic in research on China (Bonnin, 2013; Chan, 1985; B. Xu, 2021; Yang, 2016). While intellectuals and political leaders are often categorized into successive

generations, each influenced by unique historical and political contexts (Cheng, 2000; Cherrington, 1997; Dittmer, 2020; Li & Schwarcz, 1983; Yahuda, 1979), there is limited scholarly exploration of generational dynamics among workers. I contend that the rich political and social history of the Chinese socialist working class provides a fertile ground for exploring generational aspects within this group. This approach aligns with the broader 'cultural turn' in working-class studies, a perspective that can be traced back to E.P. Thompson's seminal work *The Making of the English Working Class* (Thompson, 1963). Thompson's perspective posits that the formation of the working class is a multifaceted historical process that cannot be simplified to a mere outcome of economic interactions.

Karl Mannheim's influential generation theory states that the historical context of a generation crucially molds their perspectives and actions (Mannheim, 1952). He writes that generations are different because the different birth years, 'limit individuals to a specific range of social and historical processes, and expose them to different historical worlds, predisposing them to characteristic modes of thought and experience, and a characteristic type of historically relevant action' (p.291). This initial exposure gives individuals a particular historical consciousness that leads them to experience later social phenomena differently. And they carry it throughout their lives. After the establishment of the initial consciousness, 'all later experiences then tend to receive their meaning from this original set, whether they appear as that set's verification and fulfillment or as its negation and antithesis' (p.298).

Drawing upon existing historical research on the working class and insights derived from empirical fieldwork, I contend that two distinct historical epochs in Chinese history, namely the revolutionary era and the transitional era, serve as defining 'locations' for the delineation of working-class generations. Endeavors to cultivate a revolutionary tradition had been an inherent aspect of the Chinese revolution. Following the establishment of the PRC in 1949, these efforts took on increased significance and urgency. The revolutionary tradition extolled martyrdom and revered revolutionary heroes, exalted class struggle and violence as indispensable tools of revolution and idealized the sacrifice of life for the revolutionary cause. Moreover, since the Communist Party historically relied on youth to be the vanguards of revolution, in the decade following the communist victory, cultivating 'revolutionary successors' also assumed unparalleled urgency, garnering substantial attention from the socialist state. Youth education in the seventeen years preceding the Cultural Revolution, which encompassed both formal schooling and informal exposure through film, art and children's literature, was permeated with these themes of heroic martyrdom (Yang, 2016). By the eve of the Cultural Revolution, China had embarked on a sacred mission to safeguard the nation and the world from the perceived perils of Soviet 'revisionism' (Perry, 2012).

After the Cultural Revolution, there was a noticeable depoliticization of Chinese society, marking a significant shift in the collective mindset after an era dominated by revolutionary fervor. In China, the landscape of 20th-century politics, which encompassed various movements and political experiments, underwent a transformation towards paradigms of marketization and globalization (Wang, 2006). The transition was rooted in the ascent of neoclassical economics, which envisioned a depoliticized and seemingly natural expansion of the market economy, reinterpreting non-capitalist systems and divisions of labor as vestiges of political intervention. The focus shifted towards economic modernization as revolutionary ideology waned, with an aim to enhance societal well-being in China. China entered a new transition epoch.

Against this historical backdrop, it becomes possible to establish distinct working-class generations. Consequently, the socialist working class can be categorized into two generational groups: the Revolution Generation and the Transition Generation. China's prolonged revolutionary epoch extended from the Communist Revolution to the Cultural Revolution. The inception of the PRC heralded a new paradigm in which the state sought to synchronize rapid industrialization with the rising status and living standards of the working class. The Maoist danwei system provided permanent employment and comprehensive benefits, including housing and healthcare, and created a sense of 'industrial citizenship' among workers (Andreas, 2019). The regime's commitment to cultivating the workers' participatory role in industrial management marked a decisive shift towards

democratized factory governance, exemplified by the Anshan Iron and Steel Corporation Constitution (Angang Constitution) and the 'two participation, one reform, and three combinations' (*liangcan yigai sanjiehe*) initiatives.[5]

During the tumultuous period of the Cultural Revolution, the Chinese working class achieved unprecedented political ascendancy. On 25 August 1968, the *Red Flag* magazine published an editorial titled, 'The Working Class Must Lead Everything'(*gongren jieji bixu lingdao yiqie*). Workers emerged as the de facto leaders in various regions, transcending their nominal status. With the establishment of Workers' Mao Zedong Thought Propaganda Teams, workers occupied various sectors of the 'superstructure,' including education, culture, sciences, and media (Chen, 2022).

Hence, a critical component of the Revolution Generation was comprised of individuals who encountered the Communist Revolution (1949) during their formative years and had already joined the working class before the onset of the Cultural Revolution in 1966. Scholars have argued that late adolescence and early adulthood are 'the formative years during which a distinctive personal outlook on politics merges, which remains essentially unchanged through old age' (Rintala, 1968, p.93; Schuman & Scott, 1989). As such, the formative years, typically ranging from 17 to 25, serve as a marker for delineating this demographic. Consequently, those who experienced the Communist Revolution in 1949 during their youth would have been born between 1924 and 1932, establishing 1924 as the lower age boundary for the Revolution Generation.

Another important component of the Revolution Generation were the individuals who were not yet workers during the Cultural Revolution, but still participated in the Cultural Revolution actively, namely as Red Guards.[6] This group entered the workforce in socialist factories after they experienced the sent-down movement[7] and returned to the cities. I place those who were once part of the Red Guard movement in the Revolution Generation because their age group was positioned as 'revolutionary successors.' The Red Guard movement lasted from 1966 to 1968, and the main participants were students at middle school, high school and college. The Red Guards encompassed individuals aged 12 to 24 years old in 1966, translating to those born between 1942 and 1954. Hence the upper cut off for the Revolution Generation is 1954.[8]

Among the Revolution Generation, many began working in the 1950s and 1960s. The newly established Communist regime brought improved lives marked by stable incomes and better working condition. For those who experienced the Communist Revolution in their formative years, gratitude for the Party's contributions prevailed. They often saw their relationship with the state as 'returning favors,' saying, 'New China gave me the job' (SYINT-10, born in 1933). This generation played an important role in building factories from scratch and otherwise overcoming tremendous hurdles while striving for a shared goal of nation-building. Industrial democracy on the shop floor minimized status differences, fostering dedication and sacrifice among both leaders and regular workers (SYINT-35, born in 1935). The workers remembered the absence of hierarchy and egalitarianism between workers and cadres. The Cultural Revolution was significant, with many actively participating in factions between 1966 and 1968. The tumultuous atmosphere of armed struggle during the period was an exciting memory for some of them (SYINT-6, born in 1947; SYINT-20, born in 1941; SYINT-27, born in 1946).

The Transition Generation, born between 1955 and 1977, experienced relative political stability during their youth. Most of the Transition Generation were not directly involved during the most volatile years of the Cultural Revolution, with the oldest of them only 11 years old or fourth-year students in elementary school when Cultural Revolution commenced. They largely missed participating in the political turbulence that marked the Red Guard era.[9]

When the Transition Generation of workers started working in the 1980s, the socialist workplace arrangements, or the danwei system, were full-fledged. When they entered the workforce, China's market reforms were underway, and factories were thriving, boasting robust production and profits. The economic climate imbued these workers with a strong sense of pride in their danwei membership, particularly in Shenyang, where industrial production was booming. The workers enjoyed benefits like welfare, urban *hukou* status, and marriage prospects (SYINT-9, born in 1957). Many

initially envisioned lifelong careers within their danweis and thus adhered to its internal rules, focusing on political honor and performance (SYINT-3, born in 1966). The danwei system continued to shape their lives until its dissolution and subsequent state-mandated unemployment. Furthermore, the manner in which the Transition Generation bore institutional reform holds significance for the discussion of other facets concerning the working class and their associations with local development. A more comprehensive examination of this topic will be presented elsewhere due to space constraints.[10]

When the massive layoffs began in 1997, workers in the Revolution Generation were roughly 43 to 73 years old, while the Transition Generation was about 20 to 42. Please note that these age groups were not absolute predictor of workers' attitudes, strategies, and actions. The generational divide serves as an analytical construct, facilitating our understanding of the nuanced responses of the workers.

4. Generations at the crossroads

Individuals witness critical historical events, engage in intricate social networks, and respond to various societal influences throughout their life journeys. The experiences inscribe a particular era's cultural norms, ideologies, values, and societal conventions into the very fabric of individuals' minds and bodies. Collective experiences reshape individuals with regards to identity, mindset, physicality, and memory. This cumulative repository of shared experiences at any given time creates a framework of possibilities and limitations that influence the choices and actions of individuals in the present (Abbott, 2005, p.10). It forms an organized structure of inclinations in their current circumstances (Mead, 1932). Their present circumstances, actions, attitudes, and interpretations stem from their experiential framework or life journey (Chamberlayne et al., 2000). Social movement scholars have examined the impact of life histories on activist formation, emphasizing biographical experiences in understanding resistance (Blee, 1996; Chen, 2008; Della Porta, 1992; Hart-Brinson, 2014; Jasper, 1997; Klatch, 1999). Keeping this perspective in mind is critical in dissecting the dynamics of the working-class movement, particularly for comprehending the genesis of their interpretation of grievances and the array of tactics the workers deployed in their struggle.

4.1. Interpretation of grievances

Scholars in the field of social movements have stressed the importance of prioritizing the interpretation of grievances rather than solely considering their perceived or relative severity (Simmons, 2014; Snow et al., 1986). The decline in the economic well-being of the working class, while significant, was not in itself adequate to trigger worker protests. Meanings associated with the restructuring of state-owned enterprises differed across generations based on the relationship that each generation had with state-owned enterprises and their memories of these enterprises, leading them to interpret the restructuring in distinct ways.

When the Transition Generation entered the workforce, typically after the market reform had commenced, they were more likely to behold a shift in factory priorities, with an increasing emphasis on profit accumulation and economic efficiency. Their factories were primarily regarded as economic entities. Consequently, the prevailing market analysis, which categorized the property rights of state-owned enterprises as inefficient, gradually gained credibility. The notion of the market was presented as a natural outcome within a binary framework of transition. This binary transition discourse became deeply entrenched in academic and public discourse. Rooted in a progressive assumption, this discourse posited that the shift from a work-unit-based society in the planned economy or 'communist neotraditional society' (Walder, 1986), to a market-based society characterized by the refined social division of labor, institutionalization, and legalization signified a path toward a more 'modern' society.

The Transition Generation grappled with complex ideologies concerning the Communist Revolution in the past, and the ongoing market transition in the present. National propaganda aimed to instill a new market-oriented ideology among these state employees, encouraging them to embrace the market sphere and strive for success as self-made individuals. A poignant song from the 1997 reflects this sentiment:

> All the honors of yesterday have become distant memories. I have dedicated half a lifetime of hard work. Tonight, I venture into the storm once more. I cannot drift with the tide. For the sake of my loved ones, no matter how challenging, I must stand strong, for the eyes watching me from behind. (Song lyrics, Starting Anew)

'Marketization' was perceived as an inevitable development akin to a natural evolutionary process. Hence, given the myriad challenges faced by enterprises and the ambiguous nature of property arrangements, they were susceptible to failure in the competitive market environment. As Song Bing expressed,

> The entire country's environment is like this, not just our local plant. We watched TV and followed the news, and gradually adapted to this [possibility that our factory was going to be closed]. Nearby factories, such as the W Factory, the C Factory, and the P Factory, almost all of those large factories were having difficulties. It's the reality of the entire country, and it was not just the Northeast. We just waited to see if there were any potential job opportunities elsewhere. (SYINT-55, born in 1967)

In contrast, the Revolution Generation did not view their factories simply as economic entities driven by profit maximization. They held that profit erosion and factory downturns were not just a simple economic matter. They staunchly adhered to socialist and communist ideologies, making them more critical of the developments unfolding in the 'market reform' era, especially as their factories faced imminent closure and restructuring. Their grievances extended beyond economic reforms, encompassing profound concerns about the potential failure of their factories, given the factories' indispensable roles in nation-building. They scrutinized the current cadre leadership and were often nostalgic about the bygone cadre-worker relationship. They frequently attributed factory closures to new management or the current local government. In their view, the incompetence and corruption of the current cadres were to blame, leading them to lodge petitions both with local district authorities and the central government, outlining various unethical practices within the factories (SYINT-36, born in 1929). They also strongly criticized management's property sales, which they believed were ill-advised and had occurred without proper consultation with the working class.

> If the working class had been involved in decision-making, the casual disposal of aluminum presses, acquired at great, cost as scrap metal would never have happened. . . Decisions that should have been thoroughly deliberated upon and decided by the Workers' Representative Assembly were manipulated by a select few in the district government . . . Some leaders can only be described as opportunists, trampling on democratic principles. (Shenyang C Factory Retired Workers Committee Petition Letter, personal communication, 8 June 2017)

Workers from the Revolution Generation were heartbroken when their factories went into bankruptcy, were torn down or sold into private hands. When factories were closed or sold, they gathered and questioned the transparency of the privatization and property annexation procedures. For example, the Shenyang C Factory office building was appropriated as a government building for the Tiexi District Government. Old workers at the factory were angry about this because they thought the government had acquired the building for unjustified reasons. They asked the government to move out and make room for the factory's technical staff. The government officials responded, 'Because your factory owed the banks money, you workers are not entitled to even a nail of the factory.' When the interviewees recalled the episode, they were still emotional, asking, 'We built the factory from scratch; why were we not entitled to a single nail?' (SYINT-51, born in 1935).

The Revolution Generation felt they could rightfully claim the factories as 'theirs' because they had dedicated most of their lives to working in there. They had poured their youth, sweat and life into building the factories, which justified their strong sense of 'ownership' over factory property.

Given the profound symbolism attached to their physical accomplishments, the old workers fought passionately for the facilities, treating them like bunkers in a war.

4.2. Contention repertoire

Charles Tilly's concept of a 'contention repertoire' is defined as 'the ways that people act together in pursuit of shared interests' (Tilly, 1995, p.41). This notion of a repertoire initially involves a set of collective action tactics such as machine breaking, terrorism, sit-ins, hunger strikes, petitions, and demonstrations that are accessible to a specific population within a particular context. Subsequent scholars have expanded the concept to include a cultural repertoire characterized by conflicting symbols, values, ideologies, and traditions that are available for appropriation by participants in social movements (Zhao, 2010, p.36). Distinct generations may possess unique sets of contention tactics. While they have the option to incorporate elements from the repertoires of other generations, they are most adept at drawing from the contention repertoire shaped by their own life experiences.

When the factories shuttered and millions of workers were told to go home, the process went relatively smoothly. Many workers from the Transition Generation did not participate in large-scale protests and some later expressed regret about not doing so. Wang Yan, a former employee of the Shenyang G Factory, recalled the moment when the factory declared bankruptcy and workers were instructed to collect severance pay. 'Strangely, everyone seemed cheerful at the time,' according to Yan. 'On that day [there was a distribution of buyout monies], so many of us were present. The crowd crammed into the Cultural Palace's entrance when it began and even cracked the glass door.' She asked, 'What would have occurred if we had instigated turmoil (*nao*)? What if we all had refused to sign the document? If we did that, would the result have been different?' (SYINT-2, born in 1965)

The Transition Generation accepted state policies less hesitantly than their older peers. Qiu Changhong said, 'This was the policy from the Communist Party. We should follow it strictly. It might not have even been possible for me to disobey it even if I had wanted to' (SYINT-42, born in 1969). Over time, the industrial democratic institutions within factories diminished in significance, resulting in decreased autonomy for workers (Andreas, 2019). Former arrangements granting workers authority gradually eroded, as evidenced by instances where 'nitpicker' workers were excluded from crucial decision-making meetings (SYINT-1, born in 1960). Factory managers, meanwhile, sought to rally support for their decisions by persuading key personnel and employees of their validity (SYINT-39, born in 1957).

The younger workers were afraid of 'being political' since the current climate was not like the Cultural Revolution era when it was 'good' to be political. When Zhou Qidong recalled the time when his factory was about to close, he mentioned that some protests lasted about two years. But the young people did not dare to take to the streets. When I asked why, he stated that 'the police would catch you if you were young. The local police were more likely to control young and middle-aged adults but were more lenient towards the elderly' (SYINT-50, born in 1955).

When labor retrenchment commenced in the late 1990s, workers in the Transition Generation were subject to the power of the cadres in their danwei regardless of whether they were contemplating remaining in their post or retiring properly. Being on the layoff list meant that the factory could no longer guarantee salary payments, and that those on the list should prepare to seek employment elsewhere. Also, some of these workers hoped to keep their jobs. Management informed employees that participation in demonstrations would result in termination of employment. Younger members of the Transition Generation even pressured their parents, who belonged to the Revolution Generation, not to protest (Yu, 2006, p.286).

In contrast, the Revolution Generation, especially the pensioners, started protesting early on. Shenyang M Factory began incurring losses in the 1990s. In May 1998, retirees continued to petition the factory office, demanding back pay for owed pensions. On 1 June 1998, approximately 500 retirees took the drastic step of holding the factory manager hostage and obstructing a major

passenger train for two hours and twenty minutes – an incident that was promptly reported to the central government. By September 1998, Shenyang M Factory had accrued losses amounting to 359.4 million yuan and owed its employees and retirees a staggering 60 million yuan in unpaid wages. On 16 September 1998, the government agreed that the state-owned X Factory in a nearby city should merge with the Shenyang M factory. However, after the merger, the M Factory's situation did not improve much, prompting a decision by the X Factory to abandon the deal in 2000. The decision triggered another collective action organized by retired workers. On 28 November 2000, the party secretary for X Factory was subjected to a violent assault when he visited Shenyang M Factory to address the issue (Shenyang M Factory Gazetteer, personal communication, 19 May 2017). The workers' actions harkened back to the militant traditions of the working class observed during the Cultural Revolution.

At the Z Factory in Zhengzhou, a notable incident unfolded during the factory's privatization process, catching the attention of international media and scholars. The case stemmed from the merger of the former state-owned Z Factory with a private company, H. It featured two prominent leaders from different generations. Mr. Li Guoqing, who was born in 1942 and worked at the factory from 1972 to 2004, belonged to the Revolution Generation. Ms. Liu Xinyu, born in 1959, was from the Transition Generation. She joined the factory in 1988 and ventured off to start her own business in 1993. The distinct backgrounds and life experiences of the two worker leaders influenced their unique approaches to labor mobilization. The pair diverged not only in how they framed the discourse, but also in their actions. The case highlights a significant moment in the Transition Generation's involvement in protests, with one of its members assuming a prominent leadership role. Ms. Liu's leadership was built on her empathy for workers' struggles and her unwavering advocacy, which earned her trust and respect.

In June 2000, after Company H's failure to adhere to the merger contract, the Staff and Workers Council made the decisive decision to wrest control and initiated a 'campaign to save the factory and protect our home.' Approximately 200 employees, led by Mr. Li, orchestrated a last resort factory takeover, after all institutional and other moderate avenues for exerting influence had been exhausted. Chen (2008) observed that the forceful occupation of the factory shared similarities with the 'seize power' (*duoquan*) campaigns of the Cultural Revolution in a few distinct ways: (1) workers wore red armbands in the 'Factory Defending Team'. They forcefully entered the factory premises, removing its nameplate and expelling all managerial staff representing the private company. The offices were sealed off as part of their takeover. (2) Placards were prominently displayed at the factory gate, with the largest one boldly stating, 'Reform Does Not Allow Privatization!' (3) Following the seizure, the activists issued three official 'announcements' asserting their control over all the factory's physical assets, financial resources, contracts, cash, and legal documents. (4) To disseminate their views, they widely distributed leaflets and posted them within the factory, intending to promote their ideas to a broader audience (p.101).

Mr. Li's assertive and resolute approach and his choice of language to articulate worker grievances bore the indelible marks of his experiences during the Cultural Revolution. These experiences significantly shaped how the worker leaders of his generation organized protests, as well as their leadership style and mobilization tactics. Distributing leaflets, convening group meetings, staging mass rallies, displaying placards and slogans, wearing red armbands, and orchestrating factory takeovers, can be seen as a legacy of the 'rebellious' spirit of the Cultural Revolution (Chen, 2008).

Following Mr. Li's arrest after the factory takeover, Ms. Liu was elected union leader. Her approach was grounded in contemporary rights-based and market-based principles. She emphasized the workers' legal rights to regain control of the factory, and how the factory could later be merged or further developed in suitable ways. Her proposed solution aimed to collaborate with the government and secure employment for the workers. Ms. Liu criticized her predecessor's rhetoric and methods, deeming him 'somewhat extreme, reminiscent of the "rebel faction" (*zaofan pai*) during the Cultural Revolution.' While Mr. Li advocated for 'carrying the revolution through,' Ms. Liu emphasized the importance of confronting the current economic reality and the workers' primary

goal of liberating themselves from Company H (Tong, 2006, p.70). Mr. Li's subsequent arrest and Ms. Liu's ascendancy marked a strategic shift in labor protests at the factory. The conflict began to be articulated more in terms of legal discourse rather than in the language of class struggle (Chen, 2008, p.102). With Ms. Liu assuming the role of union leader, the prospects for cooperation with the government and for constructive dialogue increased (Zhu, 2005, p.22).

5. Concluding remarks

The process of industrial restructuring and plant closures did not transpire in isolation but unfolded within a complex arena characterized by conflicting values, disparate worldviews, and intricate moral foundations. The article aims to decipher the generational divide in response to state-owned enterprise restructuring in China at the turn of the century. Workers from the Revolution Generation, born mainly between 1924 and 1954, exhibited a higher degree of political engagement and mobilization compared to the Transition Generation, born between 1955 and 1977. The difference can be attributed to their biographical experiences. This paper further elucidates how past life trajectories, recollections, and embedded life experiences influenced the construction of grievances and contention repertoires for the two generations when confronted with the challenges of industrial restructuring in the late 1990s.

The Revolution Generation embodied the revolutionary tradition the Communist Party had sought to instill in the populace. They viewed the factories they had toiled to construct as integral components of the nation-building project, thereby justifying their 'ownership' and strong attachments to factory property and shaping their interpretation of grievances. Moreover, the Revolution Generation's participation in the Cultural Revolution, notably between 1966 and 1968, was particularly impactful and formed their contention repertoire thereafter. Individuals who actively participated in the Cultural Revolution acquired 'skills' such as criticism, argumentation, rhetorical mobilization, and the initiation of collective actions. In contrast, the Transition Generation grew up in an era marked by the routinization of revolutionary ideals and the goal of economic development based on market principles. These workers witnessed the decline of industrial democratic institutions within factories, which reduced their autonomy and capacity for collective action. The Transition Generation often avoided large-scale, collective actions due to fears of official repression for being 'political' as China entered a depoliticization era.

While the Revolution Generation workers were better equipped with Maoist discourse and a Cultural Revolution-style contention repertoire, they also faced limitations in the political means available to them. Their protests had to be carefully navigated within the confines of a factory-based framework rather than a broader working-class-based scale. The availability of political ideas and means became increasingly constrained as political resources were further depleted during the market transition, leaving the Transition Generation with limited ideological sources. The decline of 'class struggle' rhetoric and the rise of individualism and precarious working conditions complicated the pursuit of collective rights and organization. Moreover, the constrained public sphere and the state's control over socialism's interpretation weakened the once-potent ideology, potentially shaping the trajectory of labor conditions in China's future.

Interestingly, research on the U.S. Rust Belt has revealed a racial divide in the response to factory closures, with African Americans and Latinos assuming prominent roles in confronting shutdowns (Walley, 2013, p.71). In China, political experiences were distributed across generations of workers, while in the United States, race played a pivotal role in channeling political energy. This tells us that workers are not abstract entities; they are individuals with unique, holistic histories embedded in rich social fabric. Therefore, examining their past political experiences and socialization is essential for understanding their current interpretations and political actions.

By exploring the lived experiences of workers throughout the processes of industrialization and deindustrialization, we gain valuable insights into our contemporary circumstances and future

trajectories. The working-class politics witnessed during the deindustrialization of the 1980s in North America also prefigured the subsequent emergence of populism. The Fordist era profoundly shaped work, welfare, family dynamics, and ideological conceptions of the American Dream for the baby boomer generation. The era of globalization intensified the grievances of those left behind in the industrial heartland, contributing to the rise of populism. A parallel generational analysis of political experiences and actions would significantly enhance our comprehension of global populism and consequential shifts in the capitalist landscape.

Notes

1. The study identifies a visible generational pattern that deserves our attention, but this does not preclude the involvement of younger workers in protests. However, their involvement typically occurred later, involved less violence compared to their older counterparts, and younger workers were more inclined to assume follower roles than take leadership positions. Moreover, if they ascended to leadership roles, younger workers often adopted different tactics than those employed by older workers.
2. Here the socialist working class refers to those who were employed in the state-owned industrial sector and experienced the full-fledged work-unit (danwei) system, which promised lifetime employment and 'cradle to grave' welfare. The diminishment of the socialist working class refers to labor retrenchment in the state-owned industrial sector during the most tumultuous era of restructuring in the late 1990s and early 2000s.
3. I would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for bringing the Zhengzhou case to my attention. All the factories and interviewees mentioned in the article have been anonymized.
4. In addition to Lee's (2000) concept of 'revenge of history,' other scholars have emphasized the manifestation of the past in workers' protests facing SOE restructuring. Chen (2003) argues that while the workers were proactive, the concept of rights that workers resorted to in their protests was still rooted in the past, and their labor actions were of a 'moral economy' type. Their class consciousness was restrained because they sought to re-address current day injustices by resorting to planned economy norms. Tong (2006) highlights how workers' adverse experiences under market economy conditions strengthened their identification with socialist cultural traditions. They sought legitimacy and the possibility of realizing their group interests by leveraging the cultural traditions of the Maoist era.
5. 'Two participations' meant that cadre participated in production activities, and workers participated in enterprise management. 'Three combinations' meant that cadres, technicians, and workers worked together in leadership and innovation. Within the factory, the political status of workers was raised to a level similar to cadres and technicians.
6. The Red Guard Movement in China emerged as part of the Chinese Cultural Revolution. It was characterized by a mass mobilization of young people, primarily students, who ardently supported the political ideology and leadership of Chairman Mao Zedong. In 1966, escalating conflicts between cadres' offspring emphasizing 'bloodline' (*xuetong*) and those from non-official backgrounds within Tsinghua Affiliated High School ultimately gave rise to the 'Red Guards.' This movement rapidly proliferated nationwide with the endorsement of Mao Zedong.
7. During the Cultural Revolution era, China enacted the sent-down movement, also referred to as the 'Up to the Mountains and Down to the Countryside Movement' (*shangshan xiaxiang yundong*). Between 1968 and 1980, approximately 17 million young, urban Chinese were compelled to relocate to rural areas following their completion of secondary school. This significant and organized migration constituted a central component of one of the most extreme political campaigns ever witnessed in the PRC (Bonnin, 2013).
8. Based on the standard enrollment age at the time, the youngest Red Guards were expected to be first-year middle school students aged 13, while the oldest were university graduates who were 24 years old. While the entire educational system was halted during the Cultural Revolution, in certain regions, elementary school students continued to progress to secondary school even after the Cultural Revolution commenced, so they likely became Red Guards as well. Consequently, as Y. Xu (1999) suggested, the youngest Red Guards were not first-year middle school students in 1966 but rather fifth-year elementary school students, who were approximately 12 years old (p.63).
9. Some individuals from this generation (typically those born between 1955 and 1959) did experience the sent-down movement, albeit not in the ideologically-charged first wave. Red Guards were sent down to the countryside in 1968 and 1969. In 1969, the national economy recovered and developed, and in 1970, the country drew up the fourth Five-Year Plan and began to recruit new workers. The number of sent-down youth dropped significantly in 1971 and 1972. In 1973, the state reinvigorated the sent-down movement. The second wave encountered less enforcement; it often felt more like a routine formality for urban youth. See Gu (2009).

10. It is conceivable to consider the existence of a Market Generation consisting of individuals born after the initiation of market reforms, namely after 1978. However, since the Market Generation was born after when market reform started and when they started working, the socialist workplace institutions were basically replaced by market-based institutions. Hence, the Market Generation does not authentically align with the concept of the 'socialist working class' as defined in this paper.

Acknowledgments

The author thanks Steven High for the invitation to the "Politics of Industrial Closure" conference during the summer of 2023. She extends her gratitude to Dingxin Zhao and two reviewers for their feedback on preliminary versions of this article.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Funding

Research funded by the National Social Science Fund of China (23BSH017).

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