

THE MAKING OF THE POST-PROLETARIAT IN CHINA*

WON JAEYOUN
Yonsei University

This paper deals with the question of how unemployed workers in China responded to the imposition of new employment practices, xiagang, which threatened their livelihoods and most of all, their status as workers. The actions of unemployed workers are not one-sided or simplistic — they are diverse, both active and passive, conservative and progressive, violent and nonviolent, and aggressive and defensive at the same time. Based on my fieldwork in Northeast China, I discover two types of actions. Unemployed workers engage in the political action of 1) challengers: who embrace the political notion of “rule of law,” and act to defend their entitlement, 2) evaders: who are non-compliant to the new state policy, but engage in the spontaneous, individualized activity of subsistence survival in everyday life. These actions are not mutually exclusive, but rather situational, contingent upon both the socio-economic context and unemployed workers’ interpretation of the situation.

Key Words: *Xiagang, China, Challengers, Evaders, Proletariat*

More than twenty five years after the initiation of the reform (1978-), China has been deemed as a successful case of transformation from state socialism (Burawoy, 1996). During this period, China has shown rapid economic growth, and has become the fastest growing economy in the world. However, in recent years, a surging problem of unemployment and the demise of old socialist workfare have generated a challenge to China’s political economy.¹ Chinese state owned enterprises (SOEs) have been under much severe financial pressure to cut the welfare benefits to their workers, while they have to undertake organizational restructuring through massive layoffs. The dismantlement of the old socialist workfare in China deprives the workers of their previous entitlement to permanent employment and job security as well as pensions and various welfare benefits. The rapid marke-

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¹ Conventional studies of transformation from state socialism usually contrasts “success” of China with “Failure” of Russia by focusing on the active role of the Chinese developmental state and its remarkable economic growth. However, there emerged attempts to challenge the conventional of view of “miracle” of Chinese transformation from state socialism. For more detail, see the special symposia of “State and Markets under China’s transformation in *Contemporary Sociology* (July, 2000).

tization and the demise of work-unit welfare have produced epochal change — millions of workers without jobs in the workers' state. The recent change in the employment system and the increasing problem of the unemployment in China raises the crucial question about the successful nature of the transformation from state socialism in China.

China is certainly a country with contradictions, a site for the best and the worst of the global economy, and also a space for everything — traditions, a socialist past, a capitalist future, and chaos of current transformation. With a population of more than one billion people, China is emerging as one of the economic great powers in the twenty-first century, but it is also becoming a place of extreme poverty for millions of unemployed workers. Once celebrated as heroes of socialism, workers are now marginalized, becoming redundant, and then laid off without much support from the state. The problem of unemployment has become the Achilles heel of China, which is going through a long, tortuous process of a transformation from socialism to capitalism. The socialist principles of job security and comprehensive welfare are now characterized as reasons for inefficiency, low productivity, poor performance of firms, and the laziness of workers.

Workers are now left outside their work-unit and become merchants, peasants, taxidrivers, or some type of service workers (repairing bikers, hotel workers, hairdressers, cook, etc). The state enterprise ceases to exist as a caring welfare institution (*danwei*) but has been transformed into a profit-making enterprise (*qiye*). The Marxist-Leninist idea of work and welfare has become the ideology of the radiant past. *Xiagang*, the policy that detached workers from their work-unit, means that these ex-workers face the unstable, marketized world outside the factory. The rapid marketization and the demise of work-unit welfare have produced epochal change — millions of workers without jobs in a workers' state.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the responses from these "victims" of Chinese economic miracle — unemployed workers of the transformation from socialism in China. This paper deals with the question of how unemployed workers responded to the imposition of new employment practices, *xiagang*, which threatened their livelihoods and most of all, their status as workers. Do these unemployed workers accept the vision of the marketized Utopian China propagated by the state? If not, how do they react to it? The question of unemployed is one of the most heated debates in regard to the transformation of post-socialist societies (Burawoy, 2001; Eyal, Szelenyi, 2001; Stark, 2001). Here, I share some of the skepticism and questions of Eyal, Szelenyi, and Townsley (2001), "where is the working-class — collective actor? At present, there is nothing but a demobilized, dis-

organized mass or workers." At present, the Chinese unemployed workers are not what Marx expected them to be — a universal class under socialism, but they have become divided and fragmented in the socialist process (Walder, 1984) as well as in the transformation from socialism. Thus, it is highly problematic to assume the essential nature of the "true" consciousness of the workers. This paper attempts to accomplish a more careful non-essentialist analysis based on the different, fluid types of responses of unemployed workers in order to capture the complexity of action to the new state policy.

UNEMPLOYED WORKERS AS POST-PROLETARIAT IN POST-SOCIALIST CHINA

Under the name of a socialist market economy, the Chinese state no longer views full employment as the essential feature of socialism, and deprives workers of their status as socialist workers with permanent employment and social security. Recent studies of labor politics in China (Blecher, 2002; Solinger, 2002; Cai, 2002; Hurst and O'Brien, 2002; Lee, 2002) report mixed findings about working class politics. Ching Kwan Lee reveals (Lee, 2000; 2002) that contrary to Marxist conventional wisdom, unemployed workers have become the most vocal protesters against the state and the reform process. According to Lee, Chinese workers have become most radicalized when they no longer work, when they are kicked out of the factories, and after going through the lived experiences of the underclass outside the "safe haven" of the socialist work-unit. They demand job security and welfare benefits, and these are serious challenges to the legitimacy and stability of the Chinese State because they raise issues about the fundamental characteristics of socialism — permanent employment and job security, as well as the present direction of the reform. However, Blecher (2002) emphasizes workers' passivity, arguing that workers' hegemonic acceptance of values of the market and the state have led to a failure to challenge state domination. Blecher states that "China's workers are clearly subordinated to the state." (p.287) However, his own interview data suggest that we can draw a different conclusion from the one that he makes. From his data, he interprets "workers blamed their managers... some blame local government officials..." These are not clear instances of subordination to the state. Rather this reveals that these responses of the workers are not quite consistent or unwavering, but sometimes are hesitant and ambiguous, going beyond the binary opposition of passivity and militant struggle. In addition, it would also be an oversight to assume that unemployed workers are a

homogenous, monolithic group since the actions of workers are not one-sided or simplistic — they are diverse, both active and passive, conservative and progressive, violent and nonviolent, and aggressive and defensive.

I call these Chinese unemployed workers the Post-Proletariat emerging from the process of reform. The term *Proletariat* originally had two definitions, 1) the working class, or the citizens of the lowest class who do not own means of production, 2) and who thus have to sell their labor power for their daily survival. My usage of the concept *Proletariat* emphasizes its second meaning, and “*post*” means that they are not the working class under capitalism, but a newly emerging lower class, who were thrown out of the factory and forced to sell their labor power in post-socialism. They are the ones who went through the lived experiences of “socialism betrayed” (Lee, 1998) or “downward mobility” (Solinger, 2002) after being laid off from their state enterprises. These workers might not be the aggressive agents to overthrow capitalism in the strict Marxian sense, but they are struggling for the socialist principle of “to each according to their labor,” the right to be a worker, and have become serious challengers to the legitimacy of the state in post-socialist China.²

Prior to reform in China, these unemployed workers were formerly revolutionary socialist workers under the protection of paternalist state workfare: they did not have to face the forces and the tyranny of capital. Now, however, they have become mere employees; they have lost their privileged status as state workers and had to face cruelty of the market alone, without the protection of the state. Of course, the Chinese working class has certainly become divided and fragmented, after being unemployed or self-employed; working on a probationary, temporary, and part-time basis or as the industrial reserve army outside the state enterprises. However, this process of a seemingly unmaking of the Chinese working class has a flip side — increasing inequality and class polarization, go hand in hand with potentials for the “making” of a new, marginalized post-proletariat outside the industrial factory, not necessarily as the traditional working class in the manufacturing sector. My use of the term “post-proletariat” tries to capture this complex process of both the unmaking of old classes and the making of new beings. This is why I use the term “post-proletariat” since they are not traditional manufacturing workers in the strict Marxist sense.

The term “making” is borrowed from E.P. Thompson’s pioneering work,

² For the stories of workers at the factory, Anita Chan (2001)’s *China’s Worker Under Assault* and Feng Tongqing’s *The Fate of Chinese Workers* (*Zhongguo Gongrenda Mingyun*), have excellent descriptions of their hardship and struggle.

The Making of the English Working Class (hereafter MEWC), which is considered to be one of the best examples of historical sociology in the interpretive tradition (Skocpol, 1984). Thompson writes about the unfolding of the English working class from 1780 to 1832. Thompson's concept of "class" only makes sense in the context of class struggle, the actual historical process of making classes. From Thompson's perspective, class does not lead to class struggle, but rather class struggle leads to the making of class. By rejecting the structuralist argument of class as a bearer of big structure, Thompson makes an effort to find agency in the working class, and to understand how the working class makes history. As he criticizes other historians and tries to give a voice to the working class:

Only the successful are remembered. The blind alleys, the lost causes, and the losers themselves are forgotten (MEWC, 12).

Similarly, I will attempt to find the "voices" of people who are the victims of transformation from socialism to capitalism in China,³ and who have become marginalized during the reform process. I am not able claim, nor would I wish to, that my work represents the "correct" or "right" view of the working class in China. Rather, my intention is, while observing the Chinese transformation from socialism, to simply raise the question: "What about workers? (Clark, 1993)."

Just like Thompson, my use of the term, "making" reflects that my investigation focuses on the process of "becoming" or "happening," rather than a simple correlation or causal relationships. "Making" also indicates that something is in fact taking place in the society by shedding lights on the aspect of human agency, the lived experiences, and the daily struggle of people. As Thompson argues, "... we can not understand class unless we see it as a social and cultural formation, arising from processes (ibid, 11)... the making of the working class is a fact of political and cultural, as much as of economic, history... the working class made itself as much as it was made..." Thompson finds the "subject" and "experience" in the formation of the English working class, from political, cultural, and historical relationships. My aim is to grasp the unemployed worker's collective lived experiences and their nuanced, subtle form of action.

³ A sociologist Charles Ragin (1994: 83) discusses "Giving Voice" as a major contribution of qualitative research. He points out "...By emphasizing close, in-depth empirical study, the qualitative approach is well suited for the difficult task of helping uncover subtle aspects and features of these groups, who lack voice in society."

SOCIALIST WORKERS IN TRANSFORMATION: FROM "MASTERS" TO VICTIMS

This paper is based upon ethnographic fieldwork in Changchun, Shenyang, and Beijing from fall 2000 to spring 2001 and during the summers of 2002, 2004, and 2005, which includes more than 90 in-depth interviews with unemployed workers, state officials, and managers, as well as archival documents. My ethnographic fieldwork offered data to understand the new policies and how these new policies affects the lives of millions of unemployed workers (Gupta, 1989).⁴

A new vision of society, with modern, efficient, rationalized welfare system, was discussed extensively during the recent 16th party congress, when the Chinese president Jiang Zemin retired, and Hu Jintao was chosen as a new leader. In particular, the rule of law was heavily emphasized. The Constitution of the Communist Party of China was amended and revised at the 16th National Congress on November, 14. 2002. This was an effort to improve and establish a more scientific, modern legal system. In the first paragraph, the Constitution clearly affirms that the CCP is the party of both the working class and the general population of China, and that Marxism-Leninism, Mao Zedong Thought, Deng Xiaoping Theory, and the "Three Represents" are the key components of its ideology. As Jiang Zemin stressed in his speech,

"We should strengthen employment management in accordance with law, safeguard the legitimate rights and interests of workers, pay great attention to safety at work and protect the safety of state property and people's life... We should improve the socialist legal system, We must see to it that there are laws to go by, the laws are observed and strictly enforced, and law-breakers are prosecuted.... We must see to it that all people are equal before the law..."

This stress on law-abiding behavior, in this Chinese context, must go hand in hand with the rule of virtue — a good, moral, responsible action. The socialist spiritual civilization is still as significant as the rule of law with an reinvention of ideological and ethical education Some of the concepts

⁴ This is a tradition from Verdery's ethnography of the state, "a close examination of the daily routines and practices of the state (1996: 209-10)." The ethnographic data is helpful in disclosing the detailed practices, actions, and resistance taking place in everyday life during the process of post-socialist transformation. In this paper, I do not intend or claim to glorify old days of socialism nor to speak for the workers. Rather, most of the quotations from my interviews are efforts to makes sense of worker's devastating situation.

and language, such as self-reliance (*kaoziji*), challenges (*tiaozhan*), and self-confidence (*zixin*) are dominant in state discourse and propaganda.

In the process of reform, China institutionalized various new laws — the Bankruptcy Law of 1986, the Enterprise Law of 1988, the Statistics Law of 1993, and the Labor Law of 1994. These new laws provided legitimacy to private economic activities and protection for private property. At the same time, the new laws have granted opportunities and space for self-regulating, independent actions to enterprises and to every citizens. As clause 27 of the Labor Law states, “Employing units on the verge of bankruptcy and undergoing rectification according to the Law, as well as those facing severe business difficulties, can dismiss workers if necessary.” Individual responsibility becomes a good virtue for each citizen; and for enterprise, this implies the slow demise of soft-budget constraints, and that enterprises now have to survive on their own without a dependence on the state to bail out their debts (M.K. Lee, 2000: 69). That is, state enterprises must “enterprise themselves” in the principle of self-management (*ziwo jingying*), self-responsibility for profits and losses (*zifu yingkui*), self-development (*ziwo fazhan*), and self-regulation (*ziwo yaoshu*).

A few successful ex-worker-turned entrepreneurs are good, model examples of the new employment policy, “workers finding employment on their own initiative.” In 2001, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) made a decision to admit capitalists and private managers into the party and even to name them “model workers.” In addition, in 2002, four business men were given May Day medals and another 17 businessmen in Shaanxi province were named “model workers,” for other workers to emulate. Party General Secretary Jiang Zemin announced that people in the private sector can be good, model citizens of China by obeying the law and contributing to the economic growth of society. In his theory of “three representatives,” Jiang insists that the Party must represent advanced productive forces, the most advanced culture and the broad interests of the masses, not just workers. The “Three Represents” ideology holds that the party must represent the foremost production forces, the most advanced culture (like Western European countries), and the broad interests (*guangdao*) of the masses (not just workers, but everybody). The productive forces encompass technology, knowledge, labor, management, and capital. That is, there are multiple ways to produce value and surplus value, of which labor from workers is only one way. Capital, technology, and management are meaningful elements in the production of wealth and the development of the forces of production in China. Unlike the past, it is not fair or appropriate to give a privileged status only to state workers. Thus, the party must represent the interests of

other social groups in China — engineers, professionals, entrepreneurs, managers, as well as the old classes of workers, peasants, and intellectuals. The base for the CCP must be extended to welcome capitalists, the enemy of the past, since they are also the contributors to socialism with Chinese characteristics.

The significance of the “Three Represents” lies in the scientific justification of an adaptation to neo-liberal reform — the new direction that the CCP has to take for greater integration with the global economy and entry into the WTO, which deviates markedly from the past. In 1989 after the Tiananmen Massacre, Jiang Zemin did not allow capitalists to become members of CCP. The new direction of the CCP indicates that it is not just a workers’ party anymore, but aims to become a party for all citizens regardless of their class background. It also prepares to revise the constitution to admit more of the new rich as members at the November party congress of 2002. Likewise, the Trade Union is also an organization for all people, including employers. According to the official website of the All China Federation of Trade Unions, it is stated (www.acftu.org.cn/about.html), “The fundamental task of the Chinese Trade Union is to carry out the various social functions of the trade unions in line with the guiding principle of reflecting and safeguarding concrete interests of the workers and staff members in a better way while safeguarding the overall interests of the people throughout the whole country.” Even the vice-chairman of the All China Federation of Trade Unions, Li Qisheng praised capitalists by saying,

“These entrepreneurs, who operate legally, and work honestly, are also contributors to socialist construction. The awards of “model workers” have to keep pace with time and tide. The fact that private businessmen win honours just as workers confirms that they are also the builders of socialism, and private businessmen are also laborers and those who have made contributions to the nation are also eligible for the title” (*Financial Times*, May 1, 2002; Reuters, May 1, 2002).

The “good” workers in the past were the politically pure, revolutionary ones who were willing to help other workers. Now, the Chinese Trade Union, just like the state, is also promoting the idea of the productive “Homo Economicus, “ who is innovative, and forward-looking to advance economic development in marketized China. Capitalists — formerly a “bad” class — the exploiters in the past, are now accepted as “model workers” and contributing “citizens” to be loved and respected in newly marketized China.⁵

To build capitalist institutions in China requires a change in ethics, behav-

iors, and attitudes of people who have experienced the period of socialism, and of those, who retain the old socialist “habitus” of institutional dependency. People who are over forty’s, particularly those who experienced the political turmoil of the Cultural Revolution, are not really fit to understand and to contribute to the new logic of profit, efficiency, and the market. That is, from the state’s perspective, the socialist habitus in Bourdieu’s sense has to be modified to a new mind and soul that are more appropriate for the responsible, rational, self-reliant capitalist man.⁶ Some reasons for the state’s ideological campaign for successful stories of entrepreneurs can be found in Dickson’s (2002: 262) argument that these private business men could be “good” citizens to the government because they belong to a “non-critical” sphere of civil society.

In the next section, I examine the flip side of this making of “new” citizens, the promotion of economically independent, entrepreneurial, self-caring non-workers by the state. This disciplinary aspect of the economic citizenship is not one way street, but can also be employed as a contentious arena between the state and unemployed workers, though not as an intended consequences of the state policy. Unlike common stereotypes, power relations are not merely spaces for total domination or social control, but are simultaneously arenas for possible contentions as well as resistance. This is similar to the notion of “contentious politics” (McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly, 2001), which “overlaps with a regime’s prescribed form of political participation, often falls into the area of political expression tolerated by the regime.” Where there is power, there always is resistance (Foucault, 1978: 95), and they are two sides of the same coin. The disciplinary practice of the state provides both constraint and opportunities for adaptive responses in various forms. In addition, unlike Blecher’s claim, the unemployed workers are not really the passive recipients of the state practice or the mystified who just support the CCP.⁷ Victims are not quite the same as supporters.

⁵ In the past, workers, poor and lower middle peasants, revolutionary army men belonged to the “good” class while landlords, rich peasants, capitalists, and rightists belong to the “bad” class (Zang, 2000; Wortzel, 1987). Now, the Chinese state does not “permit the workers to weep, refuses the workers’ demands, and even tramples upon the workers’ right to organize their own trade unions.” (Reuters, 09-20-02)

⁶ As Eyal, Szelenyi, and Townsely pointed out (1998: 9),

...the individual who is able to reshuffle their portfolio of ‘stocks’ and alter their habitus is indeed a part of a process of social evolution, adapting to meet social change... [The] habitus they carry from the immediate past [socialism] is not appropriate to altered circumstances, and [they] look for other models of behavior and society which are accessible to them.

⁷ As Perry (1993: 5) argues in the past, “...Chinese workers were not a tabular rasa on which Party cadres could write whatever political messages suited their designs. Workers were heir

In the case of China, the state practice of making “modern” Homo Economicus is constantly challenged and resisted by unemployed workers, as cases of protests and court litigations have been widely reported. Being laid off means that workers become ordinary people outside the factory, as opposed to workers of an enterprise. Does this provide chances for new political actions against the state practice? Under tight state control where a strike is illegal and extremely dangerous, and where political rebels are sent to the total institutions such as labor camps and psychiatric asylums, do unemployed workers just accept the vision of the marketized China propagated by the state? Do they feel their situation is justified? Are they merely victims of the “mystification” of the thought work? Based on my fieldwork as well as recent documentary reports on the protests and litigation, I discovered two types of responses to the state practice of making workers “modern” Homo Economicus in Northeast China. I argue that these two types of actions are not mutually exclusive, but rather situational, contingent upon both the social context and unemployed workers’ interpretation of the situation. Unemployed workers in Northeast China engage in the political actions of 1) *challengers*: who embrace the political aspect of “rule of law,” and creatively reinterpret it and act to defend their old social entitlement from the past; and 2) *Evaders*:⁸ who are non-compliant to the new state policy, but rather engage in the spontaneous, individualized activity of subsistence survival in everyday life.

POST-PROLETARIAT: FROM VICTIMS TO CHALLENGERS

Most unemployed workers in China do not enjoy wealth and prosperity of the market after being laid-off. On the edge of economic destitution and poverty, some engage in political action by protesting, writing petition letters, and litigating. These actions remain mostly within the boundary of the law and allow these workers to claim to be “good, responsible citizens” (Lee, 2002; 2000; O’Brien, 2002). They claim to be political, juridical citizens with legal rights and entitlements to state welfare. As a matter of fact, work-

to their own traditions of protest, rooted in native-place cultures and workplace experiences.” Studying labor fragmentation under the Republican Period, Elizabeth Perry (1993) argues that labor is fragmented along the lines of skill, regional origin, gender and native-place.

⁸ This is somewhat similar to the notion of everyday resistance. According to James Scott (1989), the examples of everyday forms of resistance are foot dragging, dissimulation, feigned ignorance, false compliance, manipulation, flight, slander, theft, arson, sabotage, etc. These actions should not be ignored because they are the most vital means by which subordinate classes manifest their political interests.

ers' collective action is mostly carried out peacefully and challenges primarily the abuses and illegal activities of the local government. Workers are generally very cautious not to engage in 'illegal' activity in order to avoid direct confrontation and brutal oppression. They confront numerous cases of inappropriate behaviors of local state officials and managers, such as unfair dismissal, delaying payment, insufficient severance pay, injuries suffered on the job, stealing money, and running away with workers' pensions. Unemployed workers became agitated, and radicalized when such corrupted activities take away their livelihoods and entitlements. Angered by injustice, mistreatment and corruption, these unemployed workers demand that labor laws be honored and that the legal rights of unemployed workers be protected. For their survival and protection, workers adopt the concepts and the language of "modern citizens" and the "Rule of Law" from the central state to legitimate their actions. The new regulations and documents from the central state become useful weapons to tackle local officials and businessmen. The employment of citizenship can be a good example of "Rightful Resistance" which operates within official norms; "1) operates near the boundary of an authorized channel; 2) employs the rhetoric and commitments of the powerful to curb political and economic power; 3) hinges on locating and exploiting divisions among the powerful." (O'Brien, 1996)

Much of the industrial rustbelt in northeast China has experienced labor unrest and protest by unemployed workers. In 2002, almost 100,000 unemployed workers in northeast China participated in a sustained protest to demand their "legal" right to work and compensation in the cities of Daqing and Liaoyang (*Shijie Ribao* 3-5-02; NYT 5-17-00). They demanded payment of overdue pensions, and sufficient unemployment severance fees. Carrying the poster of the late Chairman Mao Zedong and citing the speeches of central authorities such as Jiang Zemin and Zhu Rongji, these workers sought the right to work, to be paid, to eat and to survive. For example, the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* (July 8, 2002) reported that "To workers in Daqing, the bad guys are the local officials or bosses, not the central policies that allow those officials to get away with withholding paychecks or possibly even lining their own pockets. Their only demand is to have enough to eat." However, as the protest intensified and some workers were arrested, unemployed workers started to push toward more "radical" agendas such as removal of corrupted officials,⁹ the release of workers,¹⁰ even

⁹ Gong Shangwu, a leader of Liaoyang's representatives to the People's Congress told the media that Liaoyang simply does not have an unemployment problem on March 11th. In the next days, angry unemployed workers in Liaoyang demanded the resignation of Gong and support for their livelihood.

the freedom to organize an independent trade union through sustained, constant protests. Under the Chinese constitution, an independent trade union and strikes are illegal because Chinese socialism supposedly eliminated the contradictions between the workers and the employers under the name of "all people's enterprises." The 2002 protests in Daqing and Liaoyang suggest that workers are mostly acting within the existing legal boundaries, but the boundary is challenged and pushed throughout these actions.¹¹ The protests in northeast China during the spring of 2002 were new watershed for political citizenship in China because unlike in the past, these actions were massive, well-organized among different factories, and sustained for more than ten weeks.

These protests are only a tiny percentage of actual events that took place in China. For examples, in the year 2003, in Shanghai, Nov 5, 2003, protesters gathered outside the municipal government building to demonstrate against the layoffs, and in Changsha, Dec 13, workers demanded government aides and help after the looming layoffs. The events at Xiafan city in November, 13, 2003 had the largest numbers of demonstrators with about 7,000 workers protesting against the layoffs. The year 2004 was also marked with numerous protests in Xian (Sept 13), Baoding and Tangshang (Sept 15-18), Xiangyang (Sept 14-Oct. 22), Qiqihar (Oct 11), Baotou (Oct 12-18), Wanzhou (Oct 18), Jinning (Oct 18), Funing (Oct 20), Bengbu (Oct 22), and Luzhou (Dec 21). Workers blocked traffic, occupied the factory, surrounded the government offices, went on strike against the layoffs, corruptions, unpaid wages, and for government responsibility for social welfare and job security.¹²

Furthermore, there has been a rapid upsurge in litigation, and in 2001, 155,000 labor disputes were filed (Gallagher, 2002). According to an official report from the Ministry of Labor and Social Security, by the end of 2001,

¹⁰ For the more detailed stories of the arrest and detainment of workers, see Amnesty International Report (April, 2002) "Detained and Imprisoned Labor Rights Activists" and Reuters report (May, 13, 2002), "Chinese Workers protest over detained leaders," (May, 9, 2002) "Northeast China workers resume protest and threats," (March 22, 2002) "China Party keen to keep worker protests calm," also Far Eastern Economic Review (April 4, 2002), "Nothing to Celebrate," Washington Post (March 22, 2002) "With Carrots and Sticks, China Quiets Protesters." NYT (March, 18, 19, 26, 2002) "Leaner Factories, Fewer Workers Bring More Labor Unrest to China," "Chinese Protests Ebb as Officials Talk Tough, but Give Ground," "Where Workers, Too, Rust, Bitterness Boils Over."

¹¹ *China Labor Bulletin* June, 4, 2002 reports a conversation with workers in Daqing; "we are not worried. What should we be afraid of? We have nothing left, what can we be scared of? We have nothing, we fear nothing. We are doing this for our own right."

¹² These information are from *China Rights Forum*, No. 1, 2005.

China had established 3,192 labor dispute arbitration committees at the county-level or above, consisting of nearly 20,000 full-time and part-time arbitrators. The central state granted each citizen rights to sue local officials as guaranteed in the Administrative Litigation Law in 1990. In July, 1987 the State Council revitalized the national labor dispute arbitration system and the 1995 Labor Law expanded the scope of arbitration and legal action (Lee, 2002). The number of civil litigation cases doubled from 1,455,130 cases in 1988 to 2,718,533 in 1995, and workers' lawsuits increased from 17,000 in 1992 to half a million in 2000 (*Seattle Times*, 07-02-02). There have been stories of alliances between lawyers, law students and workers, or about workers studying the labor law by themselves to go to court to fight. Mostly, workers use litigation to press claims against corruption and injustice, and the increase in law suits can be understood as workers' utilization of the social space given by the state.¹³ These political actions of protest, litigation, writing petitions, or visiting the central authority in Beijing are economically based acts of desperation for people with no other alternative. To challengers, there seems to be no alternatives to improve unemployed workers' livelihood and subsistence without these political actions. Economic desperation and increasing polarization are also crucial and the corruption of local state officials without central supervision has also played a critical role. Some describes these situations as the change of economic grievances into political disputes (Sheehan, 1998). "Give me my job back," or "Workers need to eat," "We need money" are the most common slogans. In spite of the recent upsurges of the collective resistance in the old rustbelt of north-east China, most of time these actions are still very localized, and economic

¹³ For example, recent scholarship of the Chinese law points out the social space granted by these recent legal changes,

"The Law of the PRC on State Compensation, promulgated in May 1994, requires that if state agencies or members of their personnel infringe on the lawful rights or interests of a citizen, they should compensate him or her. Since the implementation of this law, people's courts at the intermediate and national levels have set up compensation committees, which have settled hundreds of cases claiming state compensation. Effective since October 1, 1999, the Administrative Reconsideration Law of the PRC allows citizens to bring lawsuits against various policy documents issued by government agencies at different administrative levels, if they feel that such documents have encroached on their rights." (Yu Xingzhong, 2002: 302)

"The Chinese state is encouraging the use of courts, which it sees as integral to a stable society and consistent with its goal of reining in local bureaucrats. In 1996, the Supreme People's Court decreed that Chinese courts should "further improve the work of trying civil cases, protect the civil rights and interests of citizens and legal persons according to the law, and promote the just, safe, civilized and healthy development of society." (Margaret Y.K. Woo, 2002: 318)

in character. The employment of legal, judicial, political citizenship by unemployed workers has become a serious contestant to the state. In a strange sense, these challengers can be regarded as “true” citizens of China since the Chinese constitution still claims China to be a “socialist state under the people’s democratic dictatorship, led by the working class.”

POST-PROLETARIAT AS EVADERS

In my fieldwork in Changchun, the majority of unemployed workers represented the other type of response, people who are busy with improving their subsistence level rather than politically challenging the state and leaders with protests and litigation. A few stories of political protests and legal actions can be heard, but overall, unemployed workers were demystified, and did not have much confidence in political, juridical, legal institutional processes. Political action does not seem to be possible or inevitable to these people. The ideas of unemployed workers are a defensive notion of survival (*shengcun*), eating (*chifan*), and getting by in contrast to the state ideology of the risk-taking economic citizen, the private entrepreneurs or political, social entitlement of protesters and litigators. However, like Challengers, they also miss the stable and safe period of the past, under Mao Zhedong in their selective reconstruction of memories and become really stressed about the uncertain market economy (C.K. Lee, 2000; Rofel, 1999). One noted,

“Under Maoism, everybody was basically the same and it was the best time for workers. Not much money, but not much pressure either. However, nowadays, there are wide gaps between the rich and the poor, and it is just too much pressure to get by.”¹⁴

The economic ‘security’ (*anquan*) and ‘stability’ (*wending*) are important concepts to the this type of people. They do not want to move to other cities for jobs or to get jobs in the private or foreign sector of the economy because they fear the uncertain labor conditions, such as the greater labor intensity without job security or welfare benefits. As a result, they look for jobs in their neighborhoods, such as repairing bikes, watching bike lots, or selling some small things in the street market. One unemployed worker said,

“I know everybody here, I grew up here, and my child goes to the school here. I have ‘feelings (*ganqing*)’ for this place where I also have friends and family. I have somebody to rely on in case of emergency.

¹⁴ Interview, Changchun, May 2001.

However, how can I give up everything and start all over in my age? It's not realistic to get a new job in a new place. I am too old for that."¹⁵

In addition, they do not have trust or belief in the 'fairness' of the political, and legal processes to openly defy the state. The need to survive, and to eat and take care of children and parents, educate children and provide health care for parents are unemployed workers' main concerns, but they do not have confidence in the political action against the state. As with *challengers* in this paper, these unemployed workers are upset with poverty and corruption, but there is not much time to build 'solidarity' with other unemployed workers nor trust in the fairness of the legal, political system. Furthermore, immediately after being laid-off, these workers avoided meeting friends, relatives and other co-workers because this kind of social relationship requires money to eat and drink, and they do not want to talk about their unemployment. Comradeship among unemployed workers is not easy to build given the situation under which the trade union does not play the role in organizing workers. In stereotype, unemployment is identified with incompetence, shame, pain, worries, and fear. They believe that direct confrontation and challenge of the state may generate severe, brutal oppression and violence. In their situation, both economic entrepreneurship and political actions are too risky.¹⁶

Unlike challengers, this type of evaders employs a rather non-confrontational, and individualized way to vent their frustration and anger. Some even expressed a kind of people's consciousness (*laobaixing yishi*), not a notion of citizenship. One worker was rather annoyed by my questions regarding his take on the government policies and leadership, and stated,

"Why do you keep asking about MY opinion? Do you really believe what I think matters here? What kind of question is that? What I think does not count in China. Only managers and political leaders have voices. The government does not care about us, and does not listen to us. Even when they do, their resolution is only temporary, and can not really solve the fundamental problem. Basically, we are abandoned by the state and leaders, and our fate is really miserable (*feican mingyun*). The key for me is, I have to make a living day by day for my family no matter what. There is nothing that the state and leaders can do for my family."¹⁷

¹⁵ Interview, Changchun, May 2001.

¹⁶ This is similar to what Dorothy Solinger (2001: 76), calls the "passive responses" or "political inaction." She quotes from an unemployed worker "We have no time for demonstrations, we have to work." However, I would like to emphasize on the more subtle or nuanced type of noncompliance by not engaging in the state project of making "citizenship."

A cynical, demystified perspective of the state, the party, and leaders can be also found in their views on the protests and litigation. These workers heard about labor protests in other cities, but they do not believe that collective action would be able to bring about the consequences they wanted. They are keenly aware of the limits of their ability to directly challenge the hegemonic central state without inviting brutal oppression. There seems to be little faith in the legal process that deals with workers' requests or the general fairness in the system. New institutional regulations to support workers seemed to be 'irrelevant' to these unemployed workers. The uncertainty of winning, and the slow process of the court decision, discouraged workers from filing legal complaints. One worker, Mr. Zhang, angrily shouted,

"The law might be modern, rational, and good but it simply does not work. We don't live in the society with "rule of law". (*fazhi shehui*) Why? Look at us! Do you really think the law solves our problem? If it does, why do I live like this now in the first place? The reform has not been good to us, and I know every official is corrupt. Otherwise, why were some laid-off, while some were not. Is this based on the rule of law? Unemployment is not based on regulation (*xiagang meiyou shenme biao zhun, bu guifan*). If you have connection with leaders, you are OK, but if you do not, you are going to be laid-off, and you will be doomed. There is always a backdoor for everything. Of course, we want some changes, but it is not realistic at this stage. We have to face the reality, and our reality is not quite the same as those in *xiagang* workers in TV (*dianshili xiagang zhigong gen women taiyuan le*). They are just myths (*shenhua*)."¹⁸

In their pessimism, they are not willing to accept the state's propaganda of the new, modern, Homo Economicus of the marketized China. Some unemployed workers asked managers of help for several times, but it was of no use. All they heard was "no way out" (*meiyou banfa*) again and again. Furthermore, in some cases, some are not even aware of the state's preferential treatment for *xiagang* workers,¹⁹ nor do they see any benefit in joining the state-sponsored reemployment project. Demystification of state practice and legal process is not rare among unemployed workers, and these lead to several "small" incidents of resistance. Rather than participating in state-

¹⁷ Interview, Changchun, July 2001.

¹⁸ Interview, Changchun, May 2001. Names are pseudonyms to keep subjects anonymous.

¹⁹ Generally, this is called, "eating fragrance (*chixiang*)."¹⁹ That is, *xiagang* workers are eligible for more benefits than other types of unemployed workers and migrant workers. For example, employers who hire several *xiagang* workers can receive tax exemptions, but in spite of these regulations, still not many *xiagang* workers become beneficiaries.

sponsored training programs, they economize their individual spending, eating only one or two meals per day, eating the same thing over again without meat, not buying any new furniture or clothes, and receiving some free leftovers from street markets. Their spending is mostly on eating and daily survival. Nevertheless, workers have serious doubts on the effectiveness of the state- initiated reemployment project since the projects involve too many ideology education classes and lack substantive skill training for the future jobs, as one unemployed worker, Mr. Chen, pointed out,

“You know, there are more unemployed workers in those reemployment service centers than my old factory. They did nothing for me, and I am sick and tired of these ideology (*sixiang*) classes. I have filled out so many applications for jobs, but I have not heard anything from them. Enough is enough. I know there is nothing the state can do for us. (*guojia ye meiyou banfa*). I do not want to waste any more time, I have a family to feed...”²⁰

As a matter of fact, the reemployment rate for unemployed workers was only nine percent in the first half of a year 2002, according to the report from the Ministry of Labor and Social Security (*caijing* interview). In fact, most unemployed workers stayed unemployed for extended periods of time. Disillusioned and embittered, unemployed workers are looking for a way to avoid any direct involvement with state discipline. According to the official statistics, seventy-three percent of unemployed workers do not want to participate in the state-sponsored training at the reemployment service centers and seventy percent do not actually participate in any kind of training (Yu, 2000).²¹ There have been reports that workers refused to enter the reemployment service centers after being laid-off, and refused to receive *xiagang* Identification for their evidence of unemployment. This is a somewhat anonymous, quiet action of refusal and noncompliance to the state in daily

²⁰ Interview, Beijing, June 2001.

²¹ Solinger (2002: 318) provides the reasons for the failure of reemployment centers, “Training projects often miss the mark: instruction was offered without regard to market demand, the official funds don’t arrive.” In addition, in a city of Moshan, where more than fifteen thousand workers are laid off, only seventeen hundred workers entered the reemployment service centers, just ten percent of all laid off workers. They are even refusing to receive the *xiagang* ID, because they regard the reemployment service centers as the one which eventually terminates their labor relations with the work-unit, not the one providing welfare benefits. Even when they know about the reemployment service centers, often time they refused to enter them due to fear of terminating labor relations with work-unit. I was even told of stories of workers who refuse to receive any training because of fear that it might jeopardize any chances of going back to the original work-unit. This is especially true to those workers on involuntary long vacations (*fangjia*), and still maintain labor relations with work-unit.

life. Even though these are 'small' events, this kind of action can deflect the state's disciplinary practice of making "economic" citizens — Homo Economicus.

COMPARISON: CHALLENGERS VS. EVADERS

"Our conditions are not quite the same (*qingkuang buyiyang*)" was one of the most common sentences I heard from the unemployed workers in my fieldwork. These two types of reactions, — collective protests, litigation vs. individualized refusal, non-compliance — are to some extent time-space contingent, depending on both structural conditions and subjective interpretation, both on the configuration of various forces such as political control, and opportunity structures, as well as on the unemployed workers' reading of the situation, though they both are based on anger, frustration, and even rage against the state and leaders.

Challengers can be more easily found in medium, and small cities in Northeast China such as Daqing, and Liaoyang where political control is less tight and economic opportunities are more rare than in the bigger cities such as Changchun, Shenyang or Harbin. In a recent report on worker unrest in Daqing, Liaoyang, and Fushun (HRW, 2002), unemployed workers felt that there was no alternative to receive their due other than collective demonstration. There are few job opportunities to make a living outside their original work-units. The non-state sector and the service sector of the economy are not growing sufficiently to absorb the unemployed in these cities. However, capital cities of provinces in the region, such as Changchun, Shenyang, and Harbin are centers of the service economy in northeast China, and they do not usually allow open protests to take place with more tight political control. Even if it occurs, the state quickly reacts to pacify workers by employing both stick and carrot tactics- police crackdown, detainment of workers as well as assurances that it will solve unemployed workers' problems such as payment of unpaid wages, pension and compensation. In fact, it is often much harder to remain challengers in big cities. In Changchun, unemployed workers from a local tractor factory joined a rally to demand unpaid compensation for two days, but they went back to their routine everyday life once local state officials promised and paid the money.

The major difference between the two is whether they embrace or reject the notion of "rule of law" for the new, modern citizens in, rational, marketized China. Against the imposition of economic rationality by the state, challengers demand their social entitlement of welfare benefits, and for political, legal, juridical rationality of the state, in addition to state's eco-

conomic logic. As they see it, the rationality in the economic arena should go hand in hand with the rationality in politics, and the law. In this sense, they play within the game of modern, rational Chinese citizenship by asking for “inclusion” in the political, and legal decision-making process. However, victimized by economic rationality and the logic of efficiency, evaders do not have confidence or belief in the game of modern, rational citizenship, and eventually they become very cynical and demystified by the whole process, by the game itself. They are the ones who refuse to join the game of modern, rational, marketized citizenship, and resort to remaining outsiders. For them, the game is reserved for state officials, managers, and new rich people.

T.H. Marshall’s classic definition of citizenship — civil, political, and legal citizenship — is an interesting and powerful analysis of emerging citizenship in the European context. However, it has limitations when directly applied to the Chinese case. T.H. Marshall has a rather evolutionary view of three citizenships. The first one is the individual right to property, freedom — civil citizenship. The second one is the right to participate in the political process of the decision-making such as voting behavior — political citizenship. Finally, the last one is the right to welfare and social security — social citizenship. However, my view in this paper is a more interactive perspective of citizenship, as an arena for contentious politics, both granted by the state and gained by the population. Thus I do not assume any evolutionary stages of development of citizenship between these two types of responses. In other words, challengers are not “Modern” — radical, progressive, courageous, and evaders are not “traditional” — passive, pliable, apolitical.²² It is very problematic to assume that there is one “correct” or “best” way to resist the domination and power of the state.

THE CHINESE POST-PROLETARIAT: DIVIDED AND FRAGMENTED

Unlike Marx’s vision of “Workers of the world united,” unemployed workers in China are not a would-be-revolutionary class of the future. The unity of the unemployed workers does not seem to be plausible, but at the same time, they are not blind followers of the CCP. Their resignation is not quite the same as acceptance. In this paper, I discuss two subtle types of political action taken by unemployed workers in China that go beyond the

²² For the more detailed discussion of the strong organizational control over society, and consequent collective inaction, see Xueguang Zhou (1993)’s “Unorganized Interests and Collective Action in Communist China.”

TABLE 1. COMPARISON BETWEEN CHALLENGERS VS. EVADERS²³

	Challengers	Evaders
Major form Of political action	Protest, Litigation	Refusal, non-compliance
Political Control	Less Tight	Tight
Economic Opportunities	Rare	seldom, but exist
Attitude	Angry, frustrated, raged But embrace the notion Of "Rule of Law"	Cynical, demystified reject the notion of "Rule of Law"
Mode of Action	Formal, Open, Political, Collective Rituals	Informal, disguised Individualized Routine

binary stereotypes of violent, militant struggle and blind submission. They do not accept the state practice of making "economic citizen," but find various ways to contest and challenge the state's new unemployment policy and its implementation.

According to an empirical report on classes in the *Chinese Academy of Social Science* (2002), which was banned from circulation due to its critical tone of the recent reform, unemployed workers have become the lowest class among ten classes²⁴ in the bottom of the class hierarchy in Chinese society, the truly disadvantaged who are facing exclusion from labor relations, not exploitation within labor relation. This kind of exclusion is more devastating and brutal than exploitation. In this sense, the notion of

oppression needs to be broadened to incorporate the devastating situation of unemployed workers, and to grasp the politics outside the point of production, for instances, the practices and lived experiences of everyday life (de Certeau, 1988) or the politics of unemployment. Workers are no longer permanently located within the relations of production, and have been pushed into society.

²³ O'Brien (1996: 34) makes a distinction between these two types of resistance. The major differences lie in their forms: noisy rather than quiet, public rather than disguised, open rather than anonymous. "...unlike everyday resisters, rightful resisters seek rather than avoid the attention of elites... Rightful resistance is thus a product of state building and of opportunities created by the spread of participatory ideologies and patterns of rule tooted in notions of equality, rights and rule of law."

²⁴ They are state officials, managers, entrepreneurs, technicians, office clerk, small business owners, service workers, industrial workers, peasants, and unemployed workers in the order of social hierarchy.

In addition, the “correct” way of class thinking is institutionalized and monopolized by the state and through the official media propaganda in China. Anyone can be considered to be good, model workers who obey and are loyal to the new marketized practice of the state. In this situation, it is hard to expect well-organized nation-wide collective action directly against the Chinese state in the old Marxist sense, and unemployed workers’ actions are very quirky, and sometimes unfixed. In this context, the reform and changing practice of employment, *xiagang* have provided both opportunities and constraints for the unemployed workers. For most unemployed workers, the state practice of creating “normal,” rational, economic citizens stigmatizes the rest as “abnormal,” incapable, lazy, inefficient and irrational to rely on the “excessive” state welfare.²⁵ Against the new practice of citizenship, most unemployed workers are frustrated and resentful. Some workers embraced the notion of “good, responsible (political) citizens” to defend their entitlement and engage in the collective action while some chose not to accept the state practice of citizenship, and become very cynical and demystified. These responses reveal the various ways to deal with the imposition of “normality” by the state. Rather than accepting their situation as “abnormal,” or “shameful,” some try to improve their situation by utilizing the prevailing notion of “citizenship,” while some others seek alternative ways to improve their subsistence other than the direct engagement with the practice of the citizenship. These two types of political action entail that the state practice of making “economic citizens” has unintended consequences by opening the possibilities for multiple issues in post-Socialist China.

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²⁵ Interestingly, this stereotype is quite similar to the original meaning of ‘proletariat,’ which was a derogatory concept related to ‘rabble’ and ‘knave.’ For example, “In Samuel Johnson’s 1755 Dictionary, the proletariat was described as ‘mean, wretched, vile or vulgar’, and later, in the Granier de Cassagnac described it as a sub-human class formed of a cross between robbers and prostitutes. Haussman characterized the proletariat as a ‘mob of nomad,’ and in 1850 Thiers spoke of ‘this heterogenous mob, this mob of vagabonds with no avowed family and no domicile, a mob of persons so mobile that they can nowhere be pinned down (Thoburn, 2002: 439).” The Chinese Post-Proletariat may have lost its status as workers, but its derogatory perceptions still persist.

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WON JAEYOUN holds a Ph.D. in sociology from the University of California, Berkeley, and was an APDR postdoctoral Fellow at the Institute of Asian Research, University of British Columbia. He is currently an assistant professor of sociology at Yonsei University. His research focuses on labor and citizenship in East Asia, particularly post-socialist transformation in China and North Korea.

