

CHINESE LABOR THROUGH THE EYES OF THE CHINESE MEDIA

BY HU PING

As more and more people in China and overseas become aware of the crisis facing China's workers, the question remains: how can knowledge be translated into action to improve the situation?

Chinese media control: infanticide, contraception and abortion

It is very difficult to gain an understanding of the real situation of Chinese workers by reading the Chinese media. As everyone knows, China remains a one-party Communist dictatorship. In traditional autocracies, the aim of book and press censorship was generally to investigate and punish culprits after the fact. This can be likened to infanticide. In a Communist dictatorship, on the other hand, book and press censorship is a preventive measure, which can be likened to contraception. The Communist government has its own press censorship organizations (including propaganda departments at various levels) and employs the instruments of dictatorship against those declared guilty of publishing "counterrevolutionary" opinions (more recently this charge has been changed to "incitement to subvert state power"). What's more, the government also exerts direct control over all publishing houses and media organizations, and assigns people trusted by the Party to run and monitor them. The regime has thus set up a double insurance for itself. Under these circumstances, news items or articles that might displease the Party have virtually no chance of reaching the public. The odd fish that slips through the net does not warrant arrest and imprisonment. Party discipline and administrative sanctions are usually adequate to deal with such problems.

The invention of the Internet has posed a serious challenge to the Communist Party's preventive approach to censorship. To meet this challenge, the Chinese government has set up the world's largest Internet filtering system. On the one hand, the system performs a "contraceptive" (i.e., preventive) function by filtering out Web sites that contain "sensitive" words. On the other hand, the system performs an "abortive" (i.e., damage control) function by deleting "dangerous" words and texts as soon as it discovers them. Nonetheless, the Internet has

greatly widened the scope for the dissemination of news and opinions disapproved of by the government. Once a piece of news or an article is published on the Internet, the government is forced to find a justifiable reason for punishing its author. Yet because it cannot justify handing down punishment for every single news item or article it dislikes, the government is ultimately forced to tolerate many news articles and opinions it dislikes, and many journalists and writers it utterly detests. The public outcry fomented through the Internet over the death in custody of Sun Zhigang, which ultimately brought about the abolition of the administrative detention system, is an outstanding example of the significant impact of the Internet.

In this context, it is also important to discuss the effect of foreign media and foreign sources of information on the Internet. Foreign media and Internet sources have a twofold impact: First, the Internet allows Chinese people to publish news articles and essays abroad. Second, it contributes to a process known as "export products for domestic distribution," in which mainland writers send essays or news articles that have been censored in China to the foreign media, and which are then disseminated within China over the airwaves or Internet. Although the Chinese government has set up a formidable firewall against foreign information on the Internet and jams foreign broadcasts, its success in this area is limited. Reports about the condition of Chinese workers, and particularly about acts of collective resistance by Chinese workers, are mainly disseminated through foreign media and the Internet.

The "throes of reform" and "sharing hardship"

While it is fair to say that almost everyone benefited from economic reforms during the honeymoon period prior to 1989, the situation has changed radically since then. The post-1989 reforms have generated a huge divergence of interests, with many workers, particularly in state-owned enterprises, becoming the sacrificial lambs of reform as State-owned enterprises reduce staff for the sake of efficiency and even survival.

The official media (including magazines, popular fiction and TV plays) are beginning to carry reports and stories depicting the predicaments of laid-off workers, but in the end they always emphasize the Party and the government's loving concern and efforts to find work for the unemployed, pass on experience on how to become rich, and so forth.

A few years ago a novel that addressed the social problems of the reform period was published in China. Entitled *Sharing Hardship*¹, the novel tells the story of a state-owned enterprise about to go bankrupt. The novel also portrays the impoverishment of ordinary people, the collusion of power and money among the nouveau rich, various offenses against law and discipline, and corruption and internal strife among officialdom. It also describes ordinary people who have been victimized cursing the Communist Party. Yet the novel's central idea is that the suffering masses and Communist Party officials must share hardships together. The author stresses that while reforms are being implemented it is inevitable that some people's personal interests will suffer, but in the end we are all in the same boat and must demonstrate a greater capacity for mutual consideration, communication, harmony and forgiveness. Leadership is also fraught with difficulties, and the injured populace needs to share its hardships with its officials. One of the characters in the novel, a government official, sums up his professional philosophy: "As a legal representative of the government, one must take special care to avoid making any concessions when the masses stir up trouble. Even if concessions are to be made, one must take one's time making them, so the masses don't get into the habit of stirring up trouble on any pretext."

Many articles and newspaper reports discuss how laid-off workers can overcome difficulties and gain the experience necessary to succeed in a new field. In these articles, laid-off workers are sometimes quoted as saying: "We must overcome the mentality of dependency and must not rely on the state to provide for us all our life. We must rely on and support ourselves. Chinese workers are the masters of the nation, and as such they must develop a spirit of responsibility and self-reliance." You can just hear the mockery in these words.

The essence of China's labor problem

The Chinese official media very rarely report labor resistance. One has to turn to the foreign media and to Chinese Web sites to learn about labor resistance in China.

At first glance, the demands made by Chinese workers are very modest. All they ask for is a living wage, sufficient unemployment assistance, payment of wages in arrears and so forth. To all appearances, the Chinese government is also making every effort to solve these problems, with incessant discussion of need to protect the disadvantaged and establish a social security system. But the truth is that China's labor problem is far more serious and complex than this.

Let's take the unemployment problem. In a market economy it is inevitable that some businesses should fail and some workers lose their jobs, and as a developing country China still lacks the resources to provide the welfare benefits that are the rule in the West. But that's not the point. Workers are fully aware that in a privately owned company, if you are the boss and I am the employee, you have the right to fire me. But if a factory is owned by the state, both you, the factory manager, and I, the worker, are the rightful owners. Or else neither is the owner. In either case, what right do you as factory manager have to fire me? A socialist country is one big enterprise founded by the whole body of the people in common partner-

ship. In a socialist country, the differences between factory managers and workers, as well as between the head of state and ordinary citizens, are simply divisions of labor (or job assignment). As long as a worker or ordinary citizen does not make serious mistakes, neither a factory manager nor the premier has the right to stop paying his salary or lay him off.

We fully agree that China's economy needs to be reformed, and that this reform comes with a price tag. The crux of the problem is, who will pay the price? Or more precisely, who will be the first to pay the price? As the old system was established single-handedly by the Communist Party, the price for reforming the old system ought to be paid first of all by the Communist Party. The Communist Party should take the blame and resign or, at the very least, accept a system of checks and balances and popular supervision and control. Instead, the Party has shifted the burden of the disastrous effects of its previous policies to the common people, who bear no responsibility for them. Moreover, it has taken advantage of the reforms to make staggering profits by devious means and to embezzle the wealth it took the people decades to produce. Inevitably, the people feel put upon and resist, which invariably elicits brutal repression from the Communist regime. Is there anything more unfair in all the world?

An essay posted on the Internet points out that the government professed concern for "disadvantaged groups" is designed to mislead the common people while it continues to shirk its responsibility to them. The fact is that retirees and laid-off workers have not been impoverished through any fault of their own or for any good reason. They have fallen into destitution because the government has plundered their labor insurance. In the past, the Communist Party enforced a low pay scale system, which was tantamount to making workers pay a high labor insurance contribution (including a housing development fund). Since the government has unlawfully seized this wealth, it ought to pay compensation for it. Instead, it has the nerve to tout its loving concern! If workers' demands are modest, it is only because they fear government reprisals (in fact, even extremely modest demands often elicit repression).

Ever greater numbers of workers are becoming aware of the deprivation they are obliged to suffer, and that China's so-called reforms are a barefaced plunder carried out under the protection of a brutal dictatorship. Many people say, "We are no match for them, there's nothing we can do." Many also say that if 1989 had come a year later, the workers would have risen up and the democracy movement would have suffered a different fate.

This is the essence of China's labor problem.

Translated by Paul Frank

EDITOR'S NOTE

1. *Fenxiang Jiannan*, by Liu Xinglong, was first published in the January 1996 issue of *Shanghai Wenxue*.