

UP FRONT WITH WANG YU

Now living in New York, Li Qiang was an activist in China specializing in organizing workers movements. His activism eventually forced him to flee China. Since 2000 he has been in the United States where he is an advocate for establishing independent workers' unions in China.

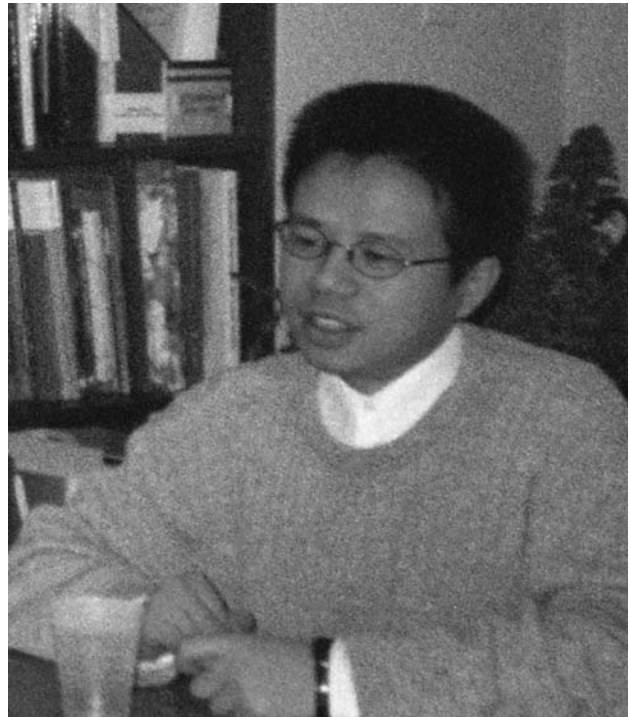
Wang Yu It is so pleasant to see you again. The last time we talked was about two years ago. How do you feel about your life in exile here? Have you had any difficulty adjusting?

Li Qiang Not really, but principally because very soon after my arrival here I set up a China Labor Watch office in New York City. It keeps me busy all the time. Usually I work more than twelve hours a day. I feel twenty four hours a day is not enough. So the problem of fitting into this new environment has never really surfaced.

Well, there is something that bothers me. It is studying English. I do go to school, but I rarely have time to review or study at home. My English reading has improved, but when speaking I can only express myself in a simple way, and I get totally lost when people talk to me. Living in an English-speaking environment sometimes dismays me.

WY I remember you established the China Labor Watch organization several years ago in China. Is the New York City office that you just mentioned related to the one in China?

LQ Yes, it is. When I joined the workers' movement in China I gradually got to know other activists. Then in 1997 we joined to form the organization China Labor Watch, with me as executive director. It was a human rights organization specifically directed at the rights of the working man and working woman. We wanted to have international labor laws and human rights applied to China regarding working hours, adequate pay, sanitary conditions and healthcare. Now, after moving here to New York in 2000, we work with more than one hundred activists from provinces throughout China.



WY What particular aspects of workers' rights did you concentrate on there?

LQ We worked on several aspects. At that time in China we organized the workers to protest bad working conditions. They did not know they had any rights. That was a foreign idea to them. They used to speak out on the streets and hold rallies simply because they were desperate. Our organization told them of the labor laws already existing in China. We supplied information solely through legal means. From there we encouraged them to fight for their legal rights. We also informed them of worker movements not only in other countries but also in their own country. We introduced them to the idea of forming their own independent unions. We also promoted networking to establish a nationwide consciousness. We worked to focus national and international attention on the status of Chinese workers.

WY Your office is now in New York City, far away from China. I would imagine you have changed your strategies now. Have you?

LQ Indeed we have changed our strategies. Our primary concern is to arouse the interest and concern of the international community regarding current labor problems in China. To achieve this goal we have systematically collected an abundance of information and written factual reports, which we post on our website www.chinalaborwatch.org. We also distribute information to the media. Next, we pressure foreign companies investing in China to improve working conditions there. Thirdly, we encourage Chinese workers to organize independent labor unions in order to protect their rights.

WY Is it difficult now to obtain cooperation from workers inside China?

LQ No, because remember I was one of them, organizing demonstrations, protests and strikes not only in my hometown, but also elsewhere. When I was in hiding I contacted workers in different places and built up very close relationships with many activists. Otherwise I would not have been able to establish China Labor Watch in China in 1997. That special experience won me the workers' trust. I know how to work with them. I am familiar with their problems. Abroad, my experience with Chinese workers makes me unique. We have been through a lot together. They are my brothers and sisters. When they are in trouble I feel their sufferings personally.

WY Since China Labor Watch moved here to New York, have you receive any response?

LQ Yes, indeed. We have received more than two thousand letters from all over the world, but mostly of course from China. More than four hundred have come from individuals and organizations in different countries. All of them express appreciation and support for us.

WY Does your organization have contact with media here and in China?

LQ The media outside China have indeed used the news we release. The New York Times has quoted our press releases directly. Others such as the Washington Post, Newsweek, ABC, CNN and NBC have run reports quoting China Labor Watch. Through our news releases and Web site people outside China continue to learn more about the situation of Chinese workers. However, we have no contact with the media inside China, for obvious reasons.

WY What methods do you use to put pressure on foreign-invested companies?

LQ We use different methods, depending on the situation.

Take Reebok for example. When China Labor Watch learned how Chinese workers were being maltreated through long working hours and being underpaid, we started to collect facts and then released detailed reports. The result was good. Reebok reacted and changed working conditions for the better, cutting working hours and paying more for overtime. Hong Kong Vtech is another example. It is a factory that produces toys for Wal-Mart, K-Mart and others. On December 12, 2000, its Chinese factory fired 847 workers without compensation. Chinese law actually requires employers to compensate fired workers with one month's salary for each of their years of employment. This means a fired worker who has held his job for one year gets one month's severance pay. If the worker has held the job for two years he gets two months' salary and so on. In cooperation with the National Labor Committee of the U.S., China Labor

Migrant workers are strangers to city life. When something bad happens to them they usually put up with it and say nothing. They are absolutely powerless. Their situation is the worst.

Watch made Vtech's clients put pressure on Vtech to compensate the fired workers. China Labor Watch also encouraged the workers to take legal action. At last the workers won their lawsuit and the fired employees received their proper severance pay. This lawsuit had a big impact, encouraging more and more Chinese workers to turn to the law when being unfairly treated.

WY What has your organization done to encourage Chinese workers to form their own independent unions?

LQ We use our web site to provide information about how the workers here in the U.S. organize their unions and how through the unions they fight for their rights. Even when the Chinese authorities block our web site, other web sites continue to post our articles. In addition, when activists get in trouble we do something to help them. For example, in November 2000 the labor activist Cao Maobin was arrested because he tried to organize an independent workers' union. After several protests supported by China Labor Watch, Cao Maobin was eventually released on July 10, 2001.

WY Although you have been here more than two years, you are in constant contact with Chinese workers. Compared to the past what do you think about the present situation?

LQ I think the workers' situation is getting worse. Unemployed workers are everywhere. The rate of unemployment is unprecedented. It is a major social problem. Since the workers don't have their own independent union, they have no power to negotiate with the authorities. Without monitoring, the Chinese authorities

can do whatever they want. Therefore the government makes all the decisions. The workers are always in a disadvantaged position. In foreign-owned factories, when worker are maltreated they can neither protect themselves nor make any appeal. No one represents them.

WY There are many rural people coming to the cities to find work. What do you know about them?

LQ Before leaving China I went to many cities and became acquainted with many local activists, so I am familiar with these migrant workers. They are strangers to city life. When something bad happens to them they usually put up with it and say nothing. They know they can't do anything. If someone does try to take some action, the authorities quickly clamp down on them, keeping them always under control. They are absolutely powerless. They can't protect themselves. Their situation is the worst.

WY Here in the U.S. have you found other Chinese people willing to work with you at China Labor Watch?

LQ No, not many. Our organization is very different from the Chinese democracy movement groups. Many intellectuals identify with them, and of course in recent years, many democracy activists have come over here. By contrast only a few labor movement activists have come to the States. Luckily, we now have more than a dozen volunteers, mostly

students. I am very grateful to those who volunteer their time to help us.

WY Who is funding your organization here? Do you receive donations from individuals?

LQ Please understand we began very small. There was no one to even apply for funding. It was not until last July [2002] that we received any substantial help in the form of a grant from the National Endowment for Democracy. I hope we will get more funding so we can expand our organization. At present we rarely receive money from individuals.

WY Do you take part in the activities of American workers here?

LQ Yes, I do. As a matter of fact this afternoon [December 11, 2002] I am going to join a rally in midtown [Manhattan]. First we will meet in front of the Disney Store on Fifth Avenue and 55th Street. Then we will march to Rockefeller Center and rally there. This gathering is sponsored by the National Labor Committee, the Workmen's Circle, the Students Committee Against Labor Exploitation, the United Students Against Sweatshop Exploitation and several other organizations. We are demanding an end to sweatshops and child labor. And we will hold companies accountable for any worker abuse. This year we are asking the Disney Company for a guarantee that the rights of its workers will be respected.

New Books in Brief

China's Developmental Miracle: Origins, Transformations, and Challenges

Edited by Alvin Y. So

M.E. Sharpe, January 2003

329 pp., cloth \$66.95, paper \$25.95

This collection of articles examines factors that have made China's economic reforms more successful than those in Eastern Europe, and the profound social and political changes the reforms have brought with them. Topics covered include massive temporary migrations to the cities, a consumer revolution by the newly-emerged middle class, the revival of religious movements, the rise of Chinese feminism, and impetus towards democratization along Western lines.

A History of Modern Shanghai Banking: The Rise and Decline of China's Finance Capitalism

By Zhaojin Ji

M.E. Sharpe, February 2003

320 pp., cloth \$69.95, paper \$25.95

With old Shanghai providing a historical context, this book describes the rise and fall of China's traditional native banks, the establishment of foreign banks, and the creation of modern state banks, while focusing on the colorful world of banking, finance, and international relations in modern Shanghai. The author provides detailed coverage of market-oriented international trade, banking associations, the management of foreign exchange, joint venture banks, wartime banking and finance, hyperinflation, corruption, and banking nationalization.

How Migrant Labor is Changing Rural China

By Rachel Murphy

Cambridge University Press,

October 2002

306 pp., cloth \$70, paper \$25

Based on extensive field research, this book examines the changing effects of labor migration on the countryside of post-Mao China. The author looks at how

the return flows of money, people and information from the cities to the villages affects rural inequalities, rural spending patterns, agriculture, family relationships, the position of women, and the interactions between villagers and officials.

Red Capitalists in China: The Party, Private Entrepreneurs, and Prospects for Political Change

By Bruce J. Dickson

Cambridge University Press,

January 2003

198 pp., cloth \$65, paper \$23

This book observes the evolving relationship between the Chinese Communist Party and private entrepreneurs as entrepreneurs are recruited into the party. Although many foreign observers expect economic change to lead inevitably to political change in China, this book suggests that China's "red capitalists" are willing partners with the state rather than an autonomous opposition force.