

The Master in Bondage: A Conversation with Huaiyin Li

Written On 20 March 2024. Posted In [Article](#), [Conversations](#), [Online Only](#).

Author: [Jenny Chan](#) And [Huaiyin Li](#)

In *The Master in Bondage: Factory Workers in China, 1949-2019* (Stanford University Press, 2023), Huaiyin Li reconstructs the realities of worker performance and factory governance under Mao Zedong and after. Drawing from fresh data collected through oral histories, he reassesses the extent to which Chinese workers were becoming ‘the masters’ in the People’s Republic of China. On the one hand, their position as lifetime employees in a planned economy set urban workers apart from the peasantry and other classes in Maoist China. ‘Treat the factory as home’ (以厂为家) was not merely a rhetorical device of Chinese state propaganda, Li argues; on the contrary, many workers—particularly ‘Model Labourers’ and ‘Advanced Producers’—sought to contribute to industrial production and the advancement of the socialist nation,

which gave them a sense of moral superiority and political distinction that made them feel empowered as ‘masters’. Through an array of formal institutions and informal practices, rank and file workers were likewise disciplined to work diligently to achieve collective goals.

On the other hand, Li highlights how, despite the official discourse of ‘democratic’ enterprise management, workers lacked supervisory power over factory cadres and government officials during the Mao era. He also shows that the situation has become significantly worse since the onset of the reform era. From the late 1970s, when Chinese leaders introduced a series of market reforms, the socialist work ecosystem and its labour relations began to drastically change. Clientelism and patronage spread in the 1980s and 1990s as managers gained autonomy in recruitment and promotion. Demoralisation and disappointment became common among the adversely affected workers, especially as tens of millions of state-sector workers lost their jobs in the late 1990s and early 2000s. With the end of lifetime employment and the rise of a competitive job market, younger contract workers became the ‘masters of their own labour’ only.

Jenny Chan: To begin with, let’s discuss your intellectual interest and research trajectory. You have examined the great transformation of rural China across different regimes from the 1870s to the present. How did you decide to write about workers?

Huaiyin Li: In my research on the social history of modern China, I have long focused on how ordinary people lived their everyday lives in the community at times of historical change. For instance, if we consider a village, a production team, a factory, or a workshop, my research has highlighted how people’s personal experiences differed from what organisations or movements imposed on them, and from what the master narratives told us about those events. Before writing about factory workers, I published two books on peasant communities and agrarian changes in China before and after 1949—namely, *Village Governance in North China, 1875–1936* (Stanford University Press, 2005) and *Village China under Socialism and Reform: A Micro-History, 1948–2008* (Stanford University Press, 2009). In those two books, I was interested not so much in the formal, visible institutions operating in local

communities, but rather in how such externally imposed institutions interplayed with the less visible, less formal institutions embedded in the village community to shape villagers' day-to-day experiences.

In *The Master in Bondage*, I adopted a similar approach to studying factory workers. The book pays equal attention to both formal institutions and subtle, less visible workplace practices. Its goal is not to assess whether the formal factory institutions succeeded or failed in executing the official functions assigned to them by the state. Instead, it aims to explain how the imposed policies, systems, regulations, or organisations interacted with local practices and social relations to dictate worker performance in everyday production and factory politics.

Therefore, the approach I employed in this book can be termed as 'substantivist', as it seeks to contextualise formal legal systems within the broader framework of informal relations and practices. It is a departure from the formalist approach that we often find in previous studies, which focuses primarily on formal institutions and interprets individual behaviours as derived from such institutions. For example, the 'egalitarian' nature of the wage system in state-owned factories in the Maoist era has led many to believe that worker performance in production was necessarily subpar and inefficient. Similarly, cadres' extensive power in factory management has led many to deduce that their relationship with workers was one of domination and subordination, with workers either powerless and susceptible to cadre abuses or seeking favouritism from the powerful. I do not deny the existence of issues such as production inefficiency or favouritism in cadre-worker relations; these situations did indeed exist, varying in intensity across different factories and periods. My point is that factory life was much more complex and multifaceted than the formalist perspective suggests. Factory workers inhabited a social environment in which a diverse range of formal institutions and informal practices intermingled, both constraining and motivating them as individuals and as a group; their strategies and actions were far more varied and adaptable than what one would find in the formalist literature or in the discourse prevalent in mainstream media in post-Mao China, which was often influenced by recently imported neoclassical economic theories.

JC: In 2012 and 2013, you led a team to interview 97 retired workers and cadres from numerous state-owned enterprises across major industrial sectors. Some of the informants were already in their eighties. Looking back, they inevitably see the past through their present lives. Forgetting and remembering are a complex process mediated by sociopolitical, economic, and personal factors. You corroborate oral

narratives with factory archives and government reports. How did you evaluate the twin sources of information: worker memory and official narratives of the state and the corporation? What difficulties did you encounter in the collection and analysis of biographical and official data?

HL: This book is based primarily on interviews with 97 retirees from mostly large state-owned factories in different parts of China (the few exceptions being former workers at locally owned ‘collective firms’), which my collaborators and I conducted in 2012–13. The use of workers’ oral accounts for studying factory politics in contemporary China can be traced to the 1970s and early 1980s, or even earlier, when the availability of refugees and émigrés from mainland China made it possible for researchers to interview them in Hong Kong. In comparison, doing interviews three decades later has its own merits and shortcomings. The shortcomings are obvious: for our informants, factory life under Mao is a remote past, and many details about their experiences on the shop floor have faded from memory and become increasingly inaccurate as time passes. The merit is that, as they have experienced enterprise reforms and restructuring in the post-Mao years, bringing both improvements in living conditions and unprecedented frustrations because of unemployment or livelihood insecurity, some workers hold ambivalent attitudes towards the Maoist past. Their memories are imbued with a mix of nostalgia and resentment. Overall, however, we can expect a more balanced account of their life in state firms in the mainland in comparison with the views expressed by the émigrés of the 1970s and early 1980s, who witnessed huge contrasts between mainland China and Hong Kong, and whose accounts of their recent past tended to be highly selective and dismissive.

This book also draws on documents on factory governance preserved at the Nanjing Municipal Archives. Similar issues of presentation and omission exist with the archives of the Mao era. Most of the files were produced by the management or ‘mass organisations’—such as the trade unions, staff and workers’ congresses (SWCs), and the youth leagues—of state firms. While these documents provide interesting details about the implementation of state policies and the firms’ own initiatives, or about the activities of the mass organisations, they were written primarily to prove the necessity for and effectiveness of certain policies or measures, and the examples included in these reports were often highly selective and one-sided. Therefore, we need to be very cautious when we use these files.

Despite the various flaws in oral histories and official archives, these sources turned out to be immensely valuable and informative for forming a well-rounded interpretation of factory politics in Maoist China and afterwards.

JC: The term ‘substantive governance’, in your words, ‘best characterises the realities in which the institutions governing labour relations and factory production actually operated’ (p. 100). Can you tell us how the SWCs and trade unions worked to facilitate, or to limit, workers’ participation in enterprise management in the Mao era and beyond?

HL: My interpretation in this book revolves around the concept of ‘substantive governance’ that I initially conceived in *Village Governance in North China*. Instead of focusing on the officially defined goals and functions of factory institutions, and evaluating their effectiveness by looking at how the operational realities of those institutions met their officially stated objectives, this concept instead emphasises the real purposes of factory institutions and how their everyday operations fulfilled the factory’s needs in maintaining its functionality. Take the trade unions and the SWCs. By official definition, these two organs were intended to be tools for workers to exercise their rights as the ‘masters’ of the factory, enabling them to participate in the factory’s decision-making process and supervise enterprise management; post-Mao reformers further hailed these two organs as mechanisms of ‘grassroots democracy’, presumably leading China to the future of political democratisation at higher levels. But a close examination of the functioning of these two institutions shows that their only purpose was to satisfy workers’ everyday needs in production and subsistence to ensure the factory’s smooth operation. They had little to do with promoting workers’ social standing or political rights. Thus, while those institutions appeared to be a failure in the eyes of people aspiring to be the masters of the factory or promoting democracy in China, they worked quite effectively in satisfying the real-world needs of both the workers and the factory.

JC: In Maoist China there was generally an equilibrium in labour relations between management and workers, except for moments of economic hardship and political chaos. Cadres faced group pressure to exercise discretion in promotion and the distribution of public goods. Workers were incentivised and surveilled to maintain a decent level of job performance. Rather than attributing it to workers’ simple-mindedness or selflessness, how do you make sense of their conformity at work?

HL: At the core of the concept of substantive governance lies my analysis of the mechanisms of dual equilibrium in regulating worker performance in everyday production and power relations. Contrary to the prevailing narrative in China's mainstream media that assumes widespread inefficiency of production in state firms because of egalitarianism in labour remuneration, most workers were neither fully dedicated to production, as suggested by the Maoist representation of them as masters of the factory, nor as slack and negligent as the pro-reform elite made people believe after Mao's death. In fact, how workers performed in production was subject to the functioning of two distinct sets of interwoven factors that constrained as well as motivated them. On one side were the formal institutions of lifetime employment guarantees, the wage system, labour discipline, workshop regulations, supervision by group leaders, daily political study meetings, and the appointment of advanced producers and model labourers, among others; on the other side were informal structures on the shop floor, such as peer pressure, group identity, and work norms among co-workers. These two sets of factors converged to form a social context in which workers developed their strategies for everyday production.

As our interviewees repeatedly confirmed, those who aspired to be model labourers and those who overtly shirked their duties were few; rather, most worked hard enough to meet the minimum requirements of factory regulations and discipline to avoid being openly censured or criticised by supervisors. At the same time, they also managed to conform to the informal norms and attitudes that prevailed on the shop floor to avoid being ridiculed or maligned by their peers. An equilibrium thus prevailed in labour relations, which explains why industrial production at the micro level was neither as terrible as portrayed in the post-Mao discourse nor as efficient as the Mao-era state propaganda claimed.

JC: Your book shows that clientelism was far less prevalent in the Mao era than has previously been assumed. Ordinary workers did not strongly feel the need to cultivate patron-client networks as they received wages, health care, and retirement benefits in accordance with state standards and factory regulations. In the post-Mao era, cadre-worker relations changed fundamentally. How would you explain the increase in cadre corruption and favouritism during enterprise restructuring in the 1980s and 1990s?

HL: Before explaining the shift in the reform era, let's attend to the equilibrium that had long prevailed in power relations between cadres and workers in state-owned factories. Here again two sets of factors worked together to dictate their relationship,

giving rise to an equilibrium. On one side were the formal institutions of the SWCs, trade unions, the petition system, as well as the factory management's lack of power to fire workers and change their wage grades, workers' guaranteed lifetime employment and wage grades pegged to seniority, workers' superiority in political discourse, and the recurrent political movements that targeted corrupt cadres. On the other side were informal practices such as personal loyalty and friendship, cadres' concern about personal reputation among subordinates, their dependence on worker collaboration to fulfill production targets, and workers' taken-for-granted rights to subsistence. It was in this context of both formal and informal institutions that workers defined who they were and how they dealt with cadres.

Contrary to the conventional wisdom that assumed the predominance of patron-client networks in factory politics, cadres' favouritism was limited in nominating workers for honorary titles or recruiting new Party members, and even more difficult in determining wage rises, bonus distribution, and housing allocation. In fact, not only was it difficult for the cadres to openly practice favouritism, given the huge risk of doing so under immense pressure from both above and below, but also most of our interviewees believed it was unnecessary to seek cadres' favour and protection given the security of their jobs and livelihoods. Instead of workers' personal dependence on cadres, what prevailed between the two sides was a balanced relationship, each having their own strengths and leverage in dealing with the other.

This equilibrium in production and power relations suffered severe damage and, in many state firms, disappeared altogether during the early years of the Cultural Revolution, due to the chaos in or stoppage of production and the paralysis of factory management as workers engaged in Red Guard rebellions and most factory leaders stepped down. It emerged again in the early 1970s when political disorder subsided, and most factories rebuilt their leadership, restored production, and reinforced labour discipline. It eventually collapsed in the 1980s and early 1990s as a result of economic reforms, which granted individual enterprises the power to hire and lay off workers and increase their wages or bonus payments. It was during this period of enterprise transformation, rather than in the years before it, as many of our informants observed, that cadres' favouritism became prevalent due to their greatly increased power in labour management and workers' weakened position in relation to them. Similarly, it was also at this time—not before—that workers' slacking off and negligence in production became a severe problem, as many of them began to seek opportunities outside the factory for extra income and as bonus payments became the only tool to incentivise them.

JC: Reform-minded leaders criticised the old generation of workers as ‘inefficient’ and ‘unmotivated’ to work. But the fact was that between 1953 and 1978, the state-owned and collectively owned sectors were responsible for the 12 per cent growth rate in Chinese industry (p. 20). Anti-privatisation protests by aggrieved workers in the 1990s and 2000s failed. Can you give an example to illustrate this contestation among protestors, managerial elites, and government officials?

HL: The equilibriums in production and power relations were completely gone in the late 1990s and early 2000s, when most state-owned factories were incorporated and turned into private businesses. Instead of being the masters of their factory—a political status that they had enjoyed in the Maoist past, at least rhetorically—workers became the vulnerable ‘master’ of only their own labour, subject to enterprise management’s complete control and reckless abuses in the absence of an effective labour law and the protection of autonomous trade unions. Interestingly, it was during the privatisation of state firms, when workers were confronted with the immediate danger of losing their privileges of lifetime employment and security of livelihood, that for the first time they used the SWCs as a legal weapon to defend their rights—as best seen in the case of the Zhengzhou Paper Mill. In October 1999, when the mill was to be sold to a private firm, workers occupied factory buildings. They convened an SWC meeting to pass a resolution that demanded the termination of the merger. On that occasion, the workers succeeded as the city government stopped the merger to prevent the situation escalating, even though the authorities had refused to restore the paper mill to a state-owned enterprise as the workers had originally requested. Instead, the mill was eventually transformed into a shareholding company, with its management board members elected by the company’s SWC.

But such cases of successful resistance were rare. Millions of workers of former state firms suffered unemployment after their factories were privatised and they were compensated with only a one-time payment by the new owners of the factories to ‘buy out’ their seniority and the pension plan that came with it. Those who were lucky enough to be re-employed in the newly restructured firm became simple wage workers, and the trade union and the SWC became further marginalised, if not non-existent. Even more miserable were the millions of migrant workers who were hired as an informal and temporary labour force and lacked the protection of the labour law and any welfare benefits. While enterprise reforms propelled China’s industrial expansion and economic growth, workers’ income levels and living conditions, while improving over time, lagged steadily behind the growth of the wealth they created.

JC: On reflection, what was the significance of ‘socialism’ and ‘democracy’ in the workplace and what is their legacy in China today?

HL: In recent years, China has made huge efforts to upgrade its manufacturing industry and narrow its technological gap with advanced industrial nations. Key to this task, as many in China believe, is to maintain a large, stable rank of skilled workers. Cultivating ‘the spirit of craftsmanship’ (工匠精神) among the workers thus has been a popular slogan that the Party-State has vigorously promoted in its quest for China’s rise as an ‘advanced manufacturing power’ (制造业强国). Increasing workers’ wages and providing them with legal protection are no doubt effective tools to incentivise the workers. However, to make them not only technically competent but also fully dedicated to the workplace, the new generation of the Chinese working class must be instilled with a shared sense of belonging to the workplace and pride over their workmanship. Only when workers are treated more as members of a community than as simple wage-earners will there be the potential for a new type of equilibrium to surface on Chinese shop floors—even though there is still a long way to go before this happens.



Jenny Chan

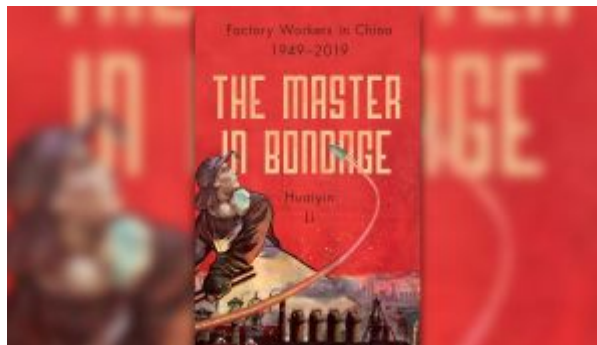
Jenny Chan is an Associate Professor of Sociology at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University and an elected vice-president (2018–23) of the International Sociological Association’s Research Committee on Labor Movements. She is the co-author, with Mark Selden and Pun Ngai, of *Dying for an iPhone: Apple, Foxconn and the Lives of China’s Workers* (2020), which was translated into Korean (2021) and awarded CHOICE’s Outstanding Academic Title on China (2022) and Outstanding Academic Title in Work and Labor (2022). She researches labour and state–society relations in China’s global transformation.



Huaiyin Li

Huaiyin Li, PhD (UCLA), is Professor of History and Asian Studies at the University of Texas at Austin. He is the author of *Village Governance in North China, 1875–1936* (Stanford University Press, 2005), *Village China under Socialism and Reform: A Micro-History, 1948–2008* (Stanford University Press, 2009), *Reinventing Modern China: Imagination and Authenticity in Chinese Historical Writing* (University of Hawai'i Press, 2013), *The Making of the Modern Chinese State, 1600–1950* (Routledge, 2020), and *The Master in Bondage: Factory Workers in China, 1949–2019* (Stanford University Press, 2023). He is also editor of the Brill book series 'Rethinking Socialism and Reform in China' and 'Historical Studies of Contemporary China'.

Latest Articles



The Master in Bondage: A Conversation with Huaiyin Li

[Read more](#)