

Proletarian Power Misplaced: The Worker Propaganda Teams in Shanghai during the Cultural Revolution

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Abstract

In 1968, at the height of the Chinese Cultural Revolution (CR hereafter), Mao Zedong mobilized industrial workers to form Workers' Mao Zedong Thought Propaganda Teams (WPT hereafter) and to "occupy" the superstructure. This move empowered the working class in an unprecedented way. Did Mao's move bring about a new model of worker power under communism that was distinct from Lenin's vanguardist model and Rosa Luxemburg's model based on her perception of workers' spontaneity and creativity? In contrast to the workers' spontaneous rebel groups during the first two years of the CR, the WPTs were a quasi-institutionalized form of worker power created by the political elite to serve the CR agenda. It was also the Mao leadership's attempt to realize the leading role of the working class by absorbing workers into the structure of political authority, an attempt which reflected the Party's declared ideological principle. While the WPTs provided workers with opportunities to participate in politics, they were a misplacement of worker power in both social and organizational senses. The article examines the roots of this power misplacement and explores the dilemmas it brought for the Party as well as the working class itself, and why.

Keywords: worker power; power misplacement; Workers' Thought Propaganda Team (WPT); worker rebels; Cultural Revolution; Shanghai

The role of the working class is central to socialism. Marx envisioned the proletariat as the class destined to carry out the historical mission of transforming the capitalist system into socialism/communism.¹ Engels claimed that Marx's identification of the proletariat as the revolutionary agent was the key to distinguishing scientific socialism from utopian socialism.² Their vision, however, was never realized. Lenin did not expect factory workers to spontaneously start a revolution. He stressed that the revolution required the leadership of an organized, self-

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1 Marx and Engels 2008[1848].

2 Engels 2010[1880].



selected political elite of bourgeois origins to introduce revolutionary consciousness to workers.³ Lenin's notion was criticized by Rosa Luxemburg, who contended that the Leninist concept of a centralistic (or vanguard) party ignored "the creativity of proletarian masses," allowing "a little leading minority" to govern "in the name of the class."⁴ Nevertheless, history favoured Lenin. Led by a well-organized vanguard party, the Bolshevik revolution succeeded in creating a state that ruled in the name of the working class.

Following the Leninist model of a vanguard party, all socialist states in the 20th century exercised power on behalf of the working class, even in those states where society was predominantly agricultural. However, although the working class was theoretically the leading class, its political role remained merely symbolic. While demystifying the role of the working class ascribed by Marx, mainstream Western scholars criticized the so-called "worker state" for giving "absolute power to the minority who claim[ed] to represent the proletariat."⁵ Instead of enjoying any substantial power, the working class was subject to the iron rule of *nomenklatura*. The official trade unions served as the "transmitting belt" between the party-state and workers and were far more concerned with the implementation of state policies than with putting workers' claims and grievances before the state.⁶ The relations between the party-state and workers were configured upon a tacit social contract through which workers consented to the political order in return for guaranteed economic benefits.⁷ Western leftist commentators were also critical of the Stalinist state, attacking it for being bureaucratized and detached from the working class.⁸ Despite this criticism, these commentators still viewed a "worker state" as a viable ideal that had yet to be truly realized.⁹

Against this background, this article explores an unusual case that seems to differ from both a typical Leninist vanguard model and Luxemburg's ideal of proletarian creativity and power, a case in which a Leninist party attempted to empower the working class by assigning it a leadership role in society.

In the summer of 1968, during the height of the Chinese Cultural Revolution (CR), as violent conflicts among Red Guard factions spread across university campuses, Mao Zedong 毛泽东, the leader of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), made a stunning decision. He dispatched hundreds of industrial workers, under the banner of Workers' Mao Zedong Thought Propaganda Teams (*Mao Zedong sixiang gongren xuanchuan dui* 毛泽东思想工人宣传队, WPT hereafter), to Tsinghua University to re-establish order. Tsinghua University, one of China's most prestigious universities, was then at the centre of vicious factional fighting.

3 Lenin 1969[1901].

4 Luxemburg 1911.

5 Aron 1955, 75.

6 Pravda and Ruble 1986.

7 Adam 1991; Ludlam 1991; Cook 1993.

8 Bettelheim 1976.

9 See, e.g., Sweezy and Bettelheim 1972.

On 25 August, Mao's decision to enlarge the political role of workers was dramatically reflected in an article by Yao Wenyuan 姚文元, one of the core members of the radical leadership. Entitled "The working class must lead everything" and claiming to be Mao's latest instruction, the article called for the working class to "completely occupy the superstructure," which Mao saw as dominated by bourgeois intellectuals. Immediately after this call, WPTs were formed nationwide and entered into the "superstructure," which comprised institutions of education, culture, sciences and media, etc. The role assigned to WPTs endowed the Chinese working class with unprecedented power. Did Mao's move bring about a new model of worker power different to the models proposed by Lenin and Luxemburg? Previous studies on worker power during the CR focus on rebel groups and their political influences, viewing these groups as either an elite-sponsored instrument or acting independently. This article argues that while the ascendancy of worker rebels in the early stage of the CR prepared the basis as well as justification for the WPTs, the WPTs differed from the rebel organizations, which had largely grown out of workers' spontaneous actions. The WPTs were a quasi-institutionalized form of worker power, created by the political elite to serve Mao's CR agenda. They also formed part of the Party's attempt to substantiate the leadership role of the working class – an ideal proclaimed by the Party since the founding of the PRC – by absorbing it into the structure of political authority. However, as this article will demonstrate, while the WPTs provided ordinary workers with opportunities to participate in politics, they were a misplacement of worker power in both social and organizational senses. The article will examine the root of this power misplacement and explore the dilemmas this extraordinary experiment of empowering workers under the Leninist state presented to the Party as well as the working class itself, and why.

The research takes the WPTs in Shanghai as a case study. At the time, Shanghai was the most important industrial city in China, with the largest working-class population. It had been the site of labour movements before the establishment of the PRC and also witnessed the rise of worker rebels at the onset of the CR. At the same time, Shanghai was also the country's most cosmopolitan and sophisticated metropolis, home to numerous superstructure units. The complete occupation by WPTs of these superstructure units in such a city provides us with an appropriate case study through which to examine one of the most radical dramas in the history of the CR. The availability of archival sources also justifies the selection of Shanghai for a case study. The Shanghai Municipal Archives (*Shanghai shi dang'an guan* 上海市档案馆) has a huge trove of material concerning the WPTs in the city. While these materials are likely censored and selective, they still provide a useful window through which to understand the WPTs in Shanghai. The CR materials collected by the history department in Fudan University, as well as previous research on the CR, also provide important information for this study.

Rebels, the WPT and Power Misplacement

Workers, together with Red Guards, played a central role during the first two years of the CR in Shanghai. The extant literature on the role of workers in the rebellion movement falls into two perspectives. One is that radical leaders at the top used worker rebels as an instrument to eliminate veteran cadres. This view contends that the power seizure campaign that first swept through Shanghai in 1967 and then rolled out to other provinces was ordered by the regime.¹⁰ Rebels' actions were facilitated by Mao's fiat or authorized by the Great Leader.¹¹ The second school of thought views the worker rebellions as a form of labour activism responding with independent initiatives to opportunities created by the CR.¹² It depicts the CR as a "big democracy" that spurred workers to challenge the bureaucratic behaviour of China's new officialdom and increased workers' power in workplaces.¹³ Despite their differences, however, both perspectives agree that at that time, the working class demonstrated a power that had never existed before the CR.

While both views capture important elements of the truth, they offer limited explanations for the WPTs. To be sure, we cannot separate the rise of the WPTs from the workers' rebellion movement of 1966–1967. It was the workers' aggressive role at that stage that convinced Mao of the working class's potential to transform the superstructure and inspired him to form the WPTs. Building upon the momentum of worker mobilization during the rebellion movement, the WPTs recruited many members from among worker rebels. However, they differed from rebel groups in that they were not spontaneously formed by workers themselves. Although Elizabeth Perry and Li Xun describe them as a "vehicle for expanding the political influence of worker rebels,"¹⁴ the WPTs were not of the workers' own making. They were created by Mao and his radical colleagues to accomplish certain political goals as well as fulfil the Party's ideological commitment to enhance the role of the working class.

Politically, with the intensification of Red Guard rebellions and the resultant paralysis of the Party's organizations, universities and schools were out of control. To achieve the immediate goals of filling the leadership vacuum, ending the anarchy and restoring order, Mao turned to the workers as well as the soldiers, as they were considered as politically reliable. Yet Mao's move should not be seen as purely an ad-hoc measure to take back control of a chaotic situation. Following sweeping political reshuffles at the top of the Party since the beginning of the CR, Mao and his radical colleagues were eager to push forward their agenda at a societal level, especially in superstructure units they perceived to be awash with "unreformed intellectuals." Mao believed that changing the

10 Lee, Hong Yung 1978, 140.

11 MacFarquhar and Schoenhals 2006, 115; Harding 1991, 159–160.

12 Perry and Li 1997.

13 Andreas 2019.

14 Perry and Li 1997, 157.

composition of superstructure units – a fundamental long-term goal of his continued revolution – entailed the permanent presence of the working class in these units. He metaphorically termed this policy as “mixing the sand” (into the hardened soil) (*can shazi* 掺沙子). According to Mao:

To achieve the proletarian educational revolution, it is necessary to have the leadership of the working class ... The workers’ propaganda team must stay in the school for a long time, participate in all struggles, criticisms and transformation in the school, and lead the school forever.¹⁵

The WPT movement also embodied Mao’s ideological vision for the role of the working class. As a revolutionary populist, Mao had deep faith in the enormous potential of the masses.¹⁶ Concurrent with the Marxist doctrine on the sublime role of the proletariat, Mao regarded the working class as the most far-sighted, most revolutionary and most selfless class.¹⁷ Even though the Chinese revolution was reliant on peasants, Mao maintained the view that the working class was the most advanced class.¹⁸ Yet post-revolutionary China was witnessing a widening gap between the state’s ideological promises about the status of workers and reality, a gap that engendered workers’ resentment and triggered protests in 1957.¹⁹ Mao attributed the workers’ unrest to bureaucratism and to Party officials losing touch with the workers.²⁰ As the CR dramatically unfolded from 1966 onwards, Mao rediscovered the revolutionary potential of workers, revealed in their proactive participation in power seizure campaigns, and brought them to the political forefront. Believing that China’s continuous revolution entailed the proletariat’s incessant struggle against the bourgeoisie, Mao saw the working class as the decisive force to break up the bourgeois intellectuals’ domination of the superstructure and eradicate their influence. Mao’s view of the working class also paralleled his anti-intellectualism and his strong conviction that intellectuals were an appendage of the old traditions, which needed to be reformed, re-educated and controlled.²¹ His mobilization of the masses, especially the workers, was driven by his ideological mission to “minimize the consequences arising from the division between domination and subjection” and “chang(e) the pattern of participation of the dominated in the political process.”²²

The WPT significantly as well as symbolically underlined the Party’s intention to empower the working class. It channelled the spontaneous power of the workers, unleashed from the rebellion movement, into an official format that would make the leadership of the working class a reality, producing “a peculiar system of governance” that performed oppressive, supervisory and transformative roles.²³ Such an experiment empowered the working class in a way that had

15 Quoted in Yao 1968, 3.

16 Meisner 1982.

17 Mao 1991[1949], 1749.

18 Knight 1998.

19 Perry 1994; Chen 2014.

20 Mao 1977[1957], 73.

21 Lieberthal 1995.

22 Tsou 1969.

23 Andreas 2015.

never existed in any other Leninist state. All such states, including China prior to the CR, while claiming to represent the working class, had suppressed workers' collective role in society. Nevertheless, the worker power created by Mao differed fundamentally from labour movements in other social contexts, where the power of workers was rooted in economic relations and based on workers' autonomous association. Contrived by political elites and disassociated from workers' own interests, the WPT was a misplacement of worker power that only served Mao's CR agenda. The attempt to use workers to control and manage the superstructure brought insurmountable challenges for the Party as well as the WPTs themselves.

First, the WPT movement was a social misplacement of worker power in that it positioned workers in a domain far removed from their education, experiences and interests, and assigned them duties to which their capabilities and knowledge could not adapt. In his theory on socialism, Marx had anticipated that the proletariat would be able to take control of the industrial system that it would inherit following the inevitable socialist revolution.²⁴ Mao went further to assert that the working class's revolutionary character and consciousness warranted its leadership in social domains beyond industry. However, placing ordinary workers in leadership positions within the superstructure units, which had long been run by experienced cadres and bureaucrats as well as experts and trained professionals, constituted a grave disruption of the former routines of governance. It pushed anti-intellectualism to the extreme by completely negating the difference between mental and manual labour. Many WPT members themselves were frustrated by their own inability to work comfortably in this unfamiliar environment and by the intellectuals' dissatisfaction with them. This study shows that the WPTs tried to overcome the predicament of social misplacement by taking an approach that accentuated "red" over "expert" and fiercely attacked any doubts about workers' capability in ideological terms. However, the approach to defending social misplacement by justifying anti-intellectualism only exacerbated the WPTs' predicament.

Second, the WPTs signified an organizational misplacement of worker power as its leadership role in superstructure units conflicted with the Party's Leninist organizational principle of centralized control. Mao's anxiety about the bureaucratization of the Party and government motivated his drive to reorganize the party-state through mass mobilization. Workers were called upon to take over the superstructure where Party organizations had been dismantled in the mass movement. Yet, while asserting the leadership role of the working class, Mao as a Leninist never intended to dismantle the Party's monopoly on power. Thus, when he re-emphasized the imperative of asserting "the Party's unified leadership" (*dang de yiyuanhua lingdao* 党的一元化领导) to normalize the functions of political institutions, the WPTs became confused about their relationship

24 Gregor 2019.

with Party leadership. It also caused an operational mess that plagued the WPTs. The Leninist party organization was fundamentally centralist, operating through a monolithic unity and a clear hierarchy of authority.²⁵ However, the WPTs operated outside the Party's structural framework and had no clear organizational affiliation. There was also a lack of any corresponding agency to manage the numerous WPTs with clearly defined operational rules and procedures.²⁶ This study demonstrates that while maintaining its rhetoric on the leadership role of the working class, the Party addressed the problem of organizational misplacement with Leninist logic by incorporating the WPTs into, and subordinating them to, Party organizations.

Occupying the Superstructure: From Rebels to Enforcers

When the CCP Central Committee issued the notice dispatching WPTs to all universities and schools on 25 August 1968, the Shanghai Revolutionary Committee (*Shanghai shi geming weiyuanhui* 上海市革命委员会, SRC hereafter) responded quickly and decided to send WPTs first to all the universities and then to “all places where intellectuals pile up,” as Zhang Chunqiao 张春桥, the chairman of the SRC, put it. Zhang asserted that the CR must settle the problem of the intellectuals, for “if it is not resolved, the CR will not be considered a complete victory.” By March 1969, 90,000 workers had entered 1,971 work units, including 28 universities, 513 middle schools, 1,249 primary schools and all public health agencies, cultural entities, publishers, newspapers, science research institutes, financial institutions and trade agencies (see [Tables 1 and 2](#)).²⁷

The WPTs were subordinate to the SRC, while the Workers' General Headquarters (*gong zong si* 工总司, WGHQ hereafter), the city's only legitimate worker rebel organization absorbed into the municipal authority as a replacement for the abolished Shanghai General Trade Union (*Shanghai shi zonggonghui* 上海市总工会, SHGTU hereafter), was responsible for organizing the WPTs and selecting its members.²⁸ Political loyalty was emphasized as the primary criterion. Rebel activists would be given priority. As appropriate educational levels and work skills were considered necessary for those who would head the WPTs, some “revolutionary cadres” and technicians from factories were also recruited.²⁹ According to a report submitted to Mao by the SRC, thousands of “liberated” factory cadres were recruited to the WPTs, accounting for 3–4 per cent of all members in Shanghai. The same report showed that many of those

25 See, e.g., Nelson 1988.

26 Li 2015.

27 Ibid., 1173.

28 For the origins, evolution, mass base and leadership of the WGHQ, see Wu 2014; Perry and Li 1997.

29 The Central Committee of the CCP and the Central Cultural Revolution Small Group forwarded the notice of the Shanghai Revolutionary Committee's “Report on the situation of recruiting some cadres to participate in the WPTs” (“Zhonggong zhongyang, zhongyang wenge zhuanfa Shanghai shi ge wei hui ‘guanyu xishou bu fen ganbu canjia gong xuan dui de qingkuang baogao’ de tongzhi”). Available at <https://banned-historical-archives.github.io/articles/flcbb8639c/>.

Table 1: **Statistics of WPT Members in Universities and Colleges, 1970**

Unit	No. of Students	No. of Staff	Total No. of Schools	No. of WPT Members
Fudan U. 复旦大学	1,923	2,594	4,517	1,075
Jiaotong U. 交通大学	2,771	3,349	6,120	1,012
Tongji U. 同济大学	2,035	2,535	4,570	505
East China College of Chemical Engineering 华东化工学院	1,913	1,899	3,812	1,002
East China Normal U. 华东师范大学	1,563	2,052	3,615	494
East China College of Textile Engineering 华东纺织学院	1,246	1,489	2,735	960
First Medical School 第一医学院	1,106	4,571	5,677	1,420
Foreign Language College 外语学院	508	1,166	1,674	604
Railway Medical College 铁道医学院	371	1,038	1,409	360
Physical Education College 体育学院	208	423	671	186
Maritime College 海运学院	384	411	795	198
Machinery Engineering College 机械工程学院	848	1,099	1,947	158
Railway College 铁道学院	414	1,660	2,074	218
Fisheries College 水产学院	605	670	1,225	204
Foreign Trade College 外贸学院	729	711	545	200
Industrial College 工学院	1,032	942	1,974	303
Science and Tech U. 科技大学	683	1,560	1,627	485
Second Medical College 第二医学院	1,239	5,046	6,285	1,632
Chinese Medical College 中医学院	322	1,650	1,972	176
Normal College 师范学院	1,168	2,166	3,334	824
Finance and Economics College 财经学院	401	495	896	190
Theatre Academy 戏剧学院	140	598	738	186
Music College 音乐学院	141	617	758	256
East China College of Politics and Law 华东政法学院	207	226	473	116

Table 2: Statistics of WPT Members in Other Units, 1970

Unit	No. of Subordinate Units	No. of Staff	No. of WPT Members
Publication sector 出版系统	49	6,144	929
Cultural sector 文化系统	47	5,956	1,554
Movie sector 电影系统	11	3,220	732
Public health sector 卫生系统	32	12,562	1,520
Total	139	27,882	4,735

cadres were of worker origin and had been veteran workers before being promoted to workshop directorships.³⁰ These workers were usually given leadership posts in the WPTs. However, as the WGHQ noted, some factories were not keen to send key members of their workforce and instead used the opportunity to get rid of older workers and those with health problems or poor shopfloor relations.³¹

Having been granted substantive power, the WPTs were used as a political tool by the Mao leadership to restore order, eradicate dissent and force through political campaigns within the superstructure.³² Within the first few months of their entry into the university campuses, the WPTs aimed to end the factional conflicts among students. They held numerous compulsory study sessions for Red Guard activists. Faction leaders were forced to engage in “criticism and self-criticism” and to renounce factionalism; one-to-one thought work was also conducted to mediate conflicts between student activists from rival factions.³³ The WPTs were also instrumental in policing campuses, ordering Red Guard groups to hand over weapons used in violent clashes, punishing vandalism and preventing conflicts. Eradicating dissent among students and faculty members was another important goal. Ever since Zhang Chunqiao became the head of the SRC, there had been anti-Zhang sentiment and activity among university students who accused him of taking power without the will of the people.³⁴ In response, Zhang accused those who opposed him of “bombarding the ‘proletariat command’” and hinted that a strike was necessary. The WPTs carried out searches for anti-Zhang materials, first at Shanghai Normal University on 4 September 1968 and then at Fudan University the next day. Over 1,000 WPT members were involved in the so-called “9-5 revolutionary action” at Fudan, which targeted 5,000 faculty members and students.³⁵ The WPTs’ third task was to wage political campaigns. In 1968–1970, two major campaigns – “Cleaning the

30 Ibid.

31 Li 2015, 1186.

32 Andreas 2006.

33 The Cultural Revolution Database, <https://ccradb.appspot.com/post/548>. Accessed 6 January 2020.

34 Wu 2014, 134.

35 “Dazhang wuchanjieji de zhiqi, damie zichanjieji de weifeng” (Boosting the ambition of the proletariat and destroying the prestige of the bourgeoisie). *Fudan zhanbao*, 6 September 1968.

class ranks” (*qingli jieji duiwu* 清理阶级队伍) and “One strike, three fights” (*yida, sanfan* 一打三反) – were enforced throughout the superstructure under WPT supervision. At Fudan University, for example, the WPTs launched numerous “struggle sessions” across departments. *Fudan zhanbao* 复旦战报, the-then campus newspaper, regularly reported on which “bad apples” (“class enemies”) were uncovered in what department as evidence of the WPTs’ achievements.³⁶ A large number of faculty members, including some of the country’s most famous scholars as well as Party functionaries, were identified as enemies of different categories.³⁷ In the meantime, the WPTs were instrumental in implementing the government’s radical educational policies, such as class background-based university admissions and school-run factories.

The WPTs were crucial to Mao’s CR agenda for the superstructure. They ruthlessly enforced the CR policies throughout the superstructure in a style somewhat informed by workers’ previous experience of rebellion, victimizing many innocent people as well as implementing radical policies. Although the WPTs’ actions were not the workers’ own initiative or driven by their own interests, they gave workers a strong sense of empowerment.

Social Misplacement: Pride and Frustration

The founding of the PRC has been portrayed as the moment when workers were liberated from the oppression of the capitalist system. They were designated not only as the masters of their enterprises but also of the country. However, as noted earlier, aside from being the principal beneficiaries of the employment and welfare system, workers’ political influence was marginal. Thus, when Mao declared that “the-working-class-must-lead-everything” and sent them to “occupy” the superstructure, workers were exhilarated and felt that, at last, they were taking on a real leadership role. Such sentiments were reflected in the words of WPT members:

We workers have never been to universities ... Now we come to Fudan University following Chairman Mao’s instruction ... Workers enter and lead universities, has this ever happened in history?

– Mr Zhang, the head of the WPT at Fudan³⁸

In 1968, Chairman Mao issued a great call for the working class to lead everything. Delegated by the working class, I entered *Jiefang ribao* 解放日报. I was so excited about this. The old society regards workers as the roots, whereas the new society regards the workers as a treasure and makes them the leaders of the superstructure.

– Mr Shao, WPT member in *Jiefang ribao*³⁹

36 “Jianjue zhenya fangeming” (Resolutely suppressing reactionaries). *Fudan zhanbao*, 22 October 1968.

37 On 25 February 1969, *Fudan zhanbao* reported that the WPT held a mass rally to criticize bourgeois academic authorities, including well-known scholars Su Buqing, Zhou Gucheng, Tan Jiazhen, Zhou Yutong and Jiang Xuemon.

38 The speech of Zhang Jiakou, the head of the WPT at Fudan University, as reported by *Fudan zhanbao*, 27 August 1968.

39 File B246-3-17.

My mother died when I was only three years old. I fled famine with my father, and we became beggars. After the liberation, not only did we have enough to eat and warm clothes to wear, I was brought up by Chairman Mao and the Party to become a Party member. Now, Chairman Mao is dispatching us to the superstructure and has given the WPTs the power to lead “struggle-criticism-reform.” This is something I really did not dare to dream of in the past ... The superstructure needs the working-class to “mix sand.”

– A WPT member in the Shanghai *pingtan* balladry troupe⁴⁰

Workers’ pride in their WPT membership seems to imply that it was only then that they felt like they had truly become the leading class, a political status promised by the regime since 1949. Moreover, they had never dreamt that they would be given the power to exercise control over the superstructure. Nevertheless, running the superstructure was different from rebelling against capitalist roaders in factories and the street. Assigning ordinary workers a significant leadership role within superstructure units challenged the common-sense assumption that running modern institutions requires educational credentials, expertise, specialist knowledge and administrative experience. The educational profiles of WPT members exposed the gap between their capabilities and their assigned roles.

Tables 3, 4 and 5 show that the majority of WPT members had only received a very basic education. But since WPT membership was not only politically selective but also required a certain level of educational attainment, it can be assumed that those selected were considered to be the “most qualified” among the worker population. WPT members had felt comfortable carrying out political campaigns but now felt increasingly out of their depth with their new role, which was at odds with their educational level and background. Their frustrations were recorded in some WPT documents and briefings:

I am not able to deal with intellectuals. I’d rather return to the factory to produce. It’s more straightforward.

– A worker, cited in an official report⁴¹

My educational level is very low. I don’t even understand some articles in *Hongqi*, let alone Marx’s or Lenin’s works.⁴² Sometimes, I spend a long time reading a sentence, but I still don’t understand what it means.

– Mr Zhi, WTP member in the First Medical College⁴³

I am worried because I am only an ordinary worker, with a very low educational level. I cannot write, nor can I speak clearly. I really did not understand what the superstructure meant when joining the WPT. I thought that it was a construction company. How am I supposed to lead the superstructure?

– WPT member in a publishing house⁴⁴

I was assigned to a school in September 1972. Initially, I felt honoured, but then I began to feel stressed. In particular, because of my low educational level, it is difficult for me to deal with intellectuals, and I am afraid that I cannot complete my task.

– Mr Zhao, WPT member in the Railway College⁴⁵

40 File B244-3-1202-24.

41 File 168, Report of the Cultural and Educational Section, the Revolutionary Committee of Shanghai, March 1969.

42 *Hongqi* is the official magazine of the CCP.

43 File B 244-3-1202-24

44 Ibid.

45 File B244-3-1212.

Table 3: **Educational Level of WPT Members in the Shanghai Cultural Bureau, 1974**

Primary School	Middle School	Technical Secondary School	University
45	150	7	4

Source:

File B244-1-466-48.

Table 4: **Educational Level of WPT Members in the Education and Health Bureaus, 1974**

Primary School	Middle School	University
312	598	36

Table 5: **Educational Level of WPT Members at Fudan University, 1972**

Primary School	Middle School	University
32	54	1

As one official document indicates, the feeling of incompetence was prevalent among WPT members. Even some WPT leaders grew tired of their duties. For example, the head of the WPT at Shanghai First Medical College openly expressed his opinion that the superstructure was not a place to stay for long and that it was his intention to leave as soon as possible.⁴⁶ In January 1969, the Municipal No. 3 Office of the WPT reported that team members felt dispirited and that morale was low. The report revealed that more and more people were requesting to return to the factories – for example, 30 per cent of the team members of the East China Research Institute of Computer Technology WPT submitted written requests to return to their factories.⁴⁷ Some wished to do so because it was only the workers on factory duty who were eligible for a 13-yuan monthly bonus.⁴⁸

While it was rare for intellectuals to openly challenge the WPTs, from reading between the lines of some official reports and documents, it is clear that they were sceptical about the ability of workers to function effectively in superstructure units. Intellectuals' dismissive attitude towards the WPTs can be detected in their criticisms as reported in official documents:

46 File 168.

47 File B247-2-71.

48 File 168, "Report of the Cultural and Educational Section, the Revolutionary Committee of Shanghai, March 1969."

Bourgeois intellectuals jeered that the WPTs' three axes are over; they do not understand education [they said], so what can they do [next]?⁴⁹

Those who stick to the bourgeois worldview oppose the entry of the WPTs into the superstructure and spread the view that "the laymen cannot lead the experts" (外行不能领导内行) and that the WPTs know nothing about medical science, the arts, education, and so on, and so cannot lead in these areas.⁵⁰

Some unreformed intellectuals are unhappy with the WPT leadership. They spread rumours that WPT members have low-level, poor abilities, that they can't play an effective role within the school and that the school can't do well while they remain in charge.⁵¹

Some bourgeois die-hards in the school madly cursed and slandered the WPT and used all kinds of despicable tactics in an attempt to kick us out of the school.⁵²

The WPTs employed three strategies to overcome the predicament of social misplacement and rebuff intellectuals' criticisms. First, they attempted to frame such tensions in terms of ideological conflict. In late 1968, *Fudan zhanbao* carried a series of articles criticizing the view that laymen cannot lead experts. In its annual report of 1973, the WPT headquarters of the culture and education sector in Shanghai also fiercely attacked this view and depicted it as anti-WPT and a manifestation of the two-line struggle in the domain of culture and education. It asserted that "we should not fail to lead because we do not understand the professions" and "if we cannot win in professional domains, the working class will lose the leadership of the superstructure it has just gained."⁵³ The WPT in Fudan even held a rally to "fight back against the anti-WPT countercurrent" on campus.⁵⁴

Second, the WPTs promoted propaganda highlighting cases of workers who had been able to adapt to their new role in the superstructure through their own personal efforts. One such case described Ms Shen, a middle-aged worker of very limited education (she had attended night school for several years) who was dispatched to the Shanghai Calligraphy and Painting Publishing House. According to an official report, Ms Shen worked hard to improve her theoretical understanding, reading Marxist classics as well as the works of Mao. It particularly highlighted her extraordinary efforts to read Marx's *On Capital (Vol. 1)*, which was supposed to be very hard for workers with low levels of education to understand. Ms Shen was endorsed as a model WPT member by Ma Tianshui 马天水, the-then municipal Party secretary.⁵⁵ Similar stories of exemplary WPT members were publicized to showcase how they had endeavoured to overcome educational barriers and had read "six Marx, Engels and Lenin classics." Reading these theoretical texts enabled them to "equip themselves" to properly carry out their assigned political duties.⁵⁶

49 File 246-3-17.

50 File B244-3-1212.

51 File B13244-3-1213-1.

52 File B244-3-1202-24.

53 File B244-3-1202-24.

54 "Yingtou tongji zhegu fandong sichao" (Attacking this reactionary trend head-on). *Fudan zhanbao*, 26 November 1968.

55 File B1585.

56 File B244-1-458-97.

Third, the WPTs also promoted the narrative that revolutionary consciousness was more important than professional knowledge when running the superstructure. The personal experience of a WPT member in the foreign language section at Shanghai Railway College was highlighted as evidence of workers' capability to lead the "revolution in education":

I don't read English and asked teachers to translate the English textbook into Chinese. I was really shocked to find that most of the texts focused on bourgeois lifestyles, love stories and Western literature; none of them reflected proletarian or socialist content. How could we continue to use such a textbook in a socialist university and proletarian educational sector? So, I reported this to the Party committee, and we decided to remove this textbook. We produced a new textbook that covers the subjects of class struggle, heroic figures, socialist construction and Mao's revolutionary diplomatic lines.

– Mr Hua, WPT member of the Railway College ⁵⁷

In another case, a WPT member assigned to a publisher was praised for demonstrating his ability and political sensitivity when identifying problems with a manuscript under review:

Some WPT members were able to ensure the correct political direction of work units and attain leadership in professional fields. For example, Mr Yao spent several years improving his reading ability and was able to review manuscripts. In his review of the book, *The Story of the People of Dazhai* 大寨, he was troubled by the book's portrayal of Dazhai's first mutual aid group as being initiated by affluent middle-class peasants. Following a field investigation, he was able to show that Dazhai's first mutual aid group was formed not by rich peasants but by poor peasants. He corrected this error, which had been circulating for many years.⁵⁸

In sum, the WPTs used ideology to overcome the predicament of social misplacement. Nevertheless, using ideological judgement as the sole standard for academic and professional work only indicated that the barriers facing the WPTs in the superstructure were insurmountable. Actually, during the "educational revolution" in the early 1970s, when universities and schools were compelled to rewrite textbooks and redesign courses, even those that were largely ideologically based, WPT members found it hard to engage owing to their limited educational level.⁵⁹ In a report to the municipal leadership, Ye Changming 叶昌明, vice-chairman of the SHGTU, conceded that although the WPTs had played an important role in political campaigns, they were unable to deal with matters related to the professions, technology and education, and actually had no say in decision making related to these matters.⁶⁰

Organizational Misplacement: Who was to Lead?

WPTs entered superstructure units during the most chaotic period of the Red Guard rebellion. They were mandated to exercise authority that had previously belonged to Party organizations and were tasked with restoring order and carrying forward various political campaigns. In the beginning, the WPTs' power and

57 File B244-3-1202-24.

58 Ibid.

59 Cheng 2001.

60 Li 2015, 1185.

authority were undisputed. Mao's "working-class-leads-everything" mantra provided the most powerful justification for the WPTs' leadership role, while the paralysis of Party organizations seemingly necessitated the exercise of their authority. However, while some workers interpreted Mao's words in a literal sense, tensions quickly emerged over the role and power of the WPTs in light of the CCP's absolute power in the political system. There was a sentiment among WPT members that Party organizations were no longer necessary now that the WPTs were in charge: "without the leadership of grassroots Party organization in the past few years, everything was working as well as before." In the winter of 1969, *Gongren zaofanbao* 工人造反报, the official newspaper of the WGHC, published a set of articles rebuffing the literal interpretation of "working-class-leads-everything." One article reaffirmed Leninist theory on the relationship between the Party and class.⁶¹ Another argued that the leadership of the working class could only be effectively realized through the actions of the Party leadership and asserted that "the-working-class-leads-everything" mantra ultimately meant Party leadership:

Some people regard "the-working-class-leads-everything" as meaning the same thing as "workers-lead-everything." This is wrong. It is a manifestation of "polycentrism." The-working-class-leads-everything ideal is realized by relying on the revolutionary actions of the entire class under the leadership of the Party ... Without Party leadership, the class has no power ... Workers-lead-everything amounts to factionalism ... and damages the solidarity of the working class and Party leadership.⁶²

However, despite these attempts at a rhetorical clarification of the relationship between the working class and Party leadership, in practice the WPTs' relationship with Party organizations was considerably more complicated within the workplace. Initially, since the Party organizations had been dismantled, the WPTs were fully in charge. As a former Party secretary of one university recalled:

At that time, power was concentrated in the hands of the WPTs ... Party organizations ceased to function. Party members did not even dare to admit their membership ... As the WPTs assumed leadership, not everyone was convinced, but they did not dare to voice their misgivings, they could only complain privately.⁶³

From late 1969 to 1971, following three years of turbulence, Mao appeared to decide that it was time for a return to some degree of political normalcy. With his re-emphasis of the importance of the Party's "unified Party leadership," Party organizations began to be re-established at workplaces. A sarcastic saying circulating among WPT members reflected their frustration: for workers, "the grand coalition is to seize power, the triple combination is to decentralize power,⁶⁴ and the establishment of the new Party committee is to hand over

61 "Zai jiandang wenti shang Lienin tong Maertuofujihuizhuyi de douzheng" (Lenin's struggle with Martov's opportunism on the issue of party building). *Gongren zaofanbao*, 23 November 1969.

62 "Gongrenjieji de lingdao bixu tongguo dang lai sixian" (The leadership of the working class must be realized through the Party). *Gongren zaofanbao*, 23 November 1969.

63 Han 2014.

64 The triple combination refers to the formula for membership of the revolutionary committees, which includes representatives from mass organizations, old cadres and military cadres.

power.”⁶⁵ In order to stay on track with Mao’s new emphasis on the Party, *Gongren zaofanbao* published another series of articles in early 1971, this time criticizing the idea that the working class had an independent role to play and linking that view to Liu Shaoqi’s 刘少奇 revisionist line.⁶⁶

Nevertheless, since WPTs had been the de facto authorities, their relationship with the newly re-established Party committees was unclear and became a delicate issue. For example, some WPT members at Shanghai Jiaotong University complained that it was not easy to manage their relationship with the Party organization; they were not sure what meaningful role they would have once the Party organizations had regained authority. At the same time, the Party committee at the university admitted that it had never concerned itself with the activities of the WPT as the WPT had been sent in by the leadership and was not organizationally subject to the school’s Party committee.⁶⁷ In addition, the Party committees in factories which had dispatched WPTs no longer felt that it was their responsibility to take care of those workers.⁶⁸ Also, tensions arose when the WPTs disagreed with the Party organizations over certain specific issues. In 1974, an anonymous letter to the authorities accused the then Party secretary of Shanghai Foreign Language College of being “anti-WPT.” The Municipal Party Committee sent a work team to the college and conducted a 70-day investigation. The team found that friction had arisen owing to a suggestion by the Party secretary that students be given more academic training; some WPT members criticized this as heading in the wrong direction.⁶⁹ Ye Changming’s report pointed to the dilemma that WPTs were faced with amid the restoration of Party organizations:

First, after Party organizations have been re-established, WPTs have to accept the Party’s unified leadership and can no longer work independently ... Afraid of being viewed as overriding Party organizations, some WPTs have stopped operating and have virtually disintegrated. Second, Party organizations generally do not take WPTs seriously, while in some work units, old cadres who have resumed leadership do not dare to concern themselves with WPT affairs.⁷⁰

Ye’s report also complained that the lack of any clear organizational affiliation undermined the authority of the WPTs. They had virtually no supervisors: they were not subject to the factories that dispatched them nor the Party organizations in the work units to which they were sent, nor any other superior agency. Indeed, as the Party leadership was reinstalled in superstructure units, WPTs were put in an awkward position and ended up being sidelined as a leadership group. For example, the Party Congress of Jiaotong University in 1973 declared that

65 “Ping qunzhong zuzhi wuquan lun” (Comment on the theory of mass organizations without power). *Gongren zaofanbao*, 25 February 1971.

66 See *Gongren zaofanbao*, 25, 28 November 1971.

67 File B244-3-1219-49.

68 File B244-1-468-39.

69 Ibid.

70 See Li 2015, 1183–84.

“the WPTs will play a political role under the leadership of the Party committee so that the Party’s unified leadership will be guaranteed.”⁷¹

However, since the top leadership had no intention of withdrawing the WPTs, it chose to reconcile the Party’s unified leadership with the leadership role of the working class. The strategy was to incorporate WPT members into Party organizations and revolutionary committees. On the one hand, this strategy could be seen as evidence of the Maoist leadership’s continued commitment to the role of the working class – as the right way to maintain working-class leadership, according to official ideology. On the other hand, it allowed the Party to address the problem of organizational misplacement by reinstalling Leninist organizational principles, which subordinated the WPTs to the Party. It brought a change in the status of the WPT – from an organization that had once exercised power in its own right with a mandate from Mao, to one that was losing its semblance of political primacy.

According to a report submitted by the SHGTU to the Municipal Party Committee, by the end of 1973, 731 of the 1,538 WPT members in 18 universities were appointed to Party and revolutionary committees at both university and departmental levels. Jiaotong University reported that 75 per cent of its WPT members had been incorporated into the Party organization in this way.⁷² By 1974, of 10,713 WPT members across 1,935 superstructure units, 731 had been absorbed into Party leadership bodies. With the incorporation of their members into Party committees, the WPTs came to be subsumed by the Party establishment and no longer operated as independent leading bodies in superstructure units. One of the direct results of this change was a dramatic reduction in the size of the WPTs, from a membership of over 100,000 in 1968 to around 10,000 in 1974. The majority of those who were not Party members or who failed to secure appointments within Party organizations despite being Party members returned to their factories, while the remaining WPT members not taking Party leadership posts were largely marginalized. Some were even assigned to do logistical and clerical work.⁷³

The drastic downscaling of the WPTs indicates two things. First, as a political tool created to control superstructure units and force through various political campaigns, the WPTs had largely accomplished their immediate goals. Second, at a time when the Maoist leadership was seeking to return to the politics of normalcy, the misplacement dilemma loomed larger. The WPTs gave way to Party organizations. Nevertheless, while the incorporation of members into the Party establishment reduced the autonomy of the WPTs, their continued existence did have important implications: it enabled the Maoist leadership to at least appear to be abiding by its ideological commitment to the role of the working

71 <https://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:I-EGqc89hYIJ:https://sjtuhistory.sjtu.edu.cn/fj/03.doc+%&cd=5&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=hk>. Accessed on 17 February 2021.

72 Ibid.

73 Li 2015, 1186.

class as the leaders of society, and it allowed workers to retain at least some degree of political influence in the superstructure.

Despite their diminished role in superstructure units, the WPTs did not entirely lose their relevance as a political force. This was because, in the mid-1970s, radical leaders dragged the Shanghai WPTs into the power struggles being waged in Beijing. At that time, as Mao's health deteriorated, the factional conflict in Beijing over the leadership succession was intensifying. Shanghai was the birthplace of the "Gang of Four" (*si ren bang* 四人帮) – three of whom came from the city, including Wang Hongwen 王洪文, the-then vice-chairman of the CCP who had risen to power as a worker rebel leader in 1967. Wang Hongwen maintained enormous influence over the city's industrial workers, and many of his friends occupied key positions in the municipal leadership. To consolidate and expand their power base in struggles with veteran cadres, radical leaders supported by Mao contrived to promote workers to key positions in both Party and government. The WPT members were regarded as a reserve army of cadre candidates. In a speech in December 1974, Wang Xiuzhen 王秀珍, the deputy secretary of the Shanghai Municipal Party Committee who had also risen to power during the worker rebellion, indicated that Shanghai would select more cadres from among WPT members and recommend them to the centre. She implied that this was the intention of the Maoist leadership: "Before the Fourth National People's Congress, the centre needs cadres and asks Shanghai to provide more vice-ministerial level cadres ... We have thousands of WPT members and can provide cadres for the centre ... Mao trusts Shanghai workers very much."⁷⁴ In his 2015 memoir article, Ye Changming confirmed that Mao personally approved the plan to recruit worker cadres from Shanghai for central and local governments; he also recalled that in Shanghai many cadres at municipal and lower levels were selected from WPTs.⁷⁵ But again, as mentioned earlier, the promotion of individual workers into the Party and government establishment was not so much a process that increased the actual power of the working class as a byproduct of the elite politics of the time.

Conclusive Remarks: The Lessons of the WPT Experiment

The leadership role of the working class remained as ideological rhetoric rather than a reality in all countries that ruled in the name of workers. Mao's attempt to empower workers during the CR indeed created a unique form of worker power under the Leninist system. Through the WPTs, the Chinese working class gained great power during the period from 1968 to 1976, wielding levels of political influence unprecedented not only in China since 1949 but also unheard of in all Leninist states. However, the experiment was, ultimately, circumscribed by the Party's Leninist doctrine concerning its relationship with the

74 File B-2-92-1.

75 Ye 2015.

working class. According to this doctrine, the party-state fully represented the interests of the working class via the official trade unions and hence workers no longer needed their own independent organization. Therefore, despite the Party allowing workers to mobilize at the beginning of the CR and then later organizing them into WPTs, it had no intention of endorsing a workers' autonomous organization that could represent and defend the workers' own interests. Instead, the Party empowered workers to achieve the Party's own particular goals. The worker power created in this context eventually suffered from both political and economic failures.

Since worker power, as a tool of the political leadership, derived from the mandate of the political leadership, it was vulnerable to changes in power politics at the top. With Mao's death and the fall of the Gang of Four in 1976, the CR came to an end. The role of WPTs was immediately questioned. In a discussion with the minister of education in September 1977, Deng Xiaoping 邓小平 emphatically expressed his opinion that "the WPT problem should be resolved." In November, the CCP approved a report by the Ministry of Education that requested the withdrawal of WPTs from all universities and schools. Soon after, the WPT presence in other superstructure units was also dismantled. To avoid the potential political repercussions of this dramatic reversal while the post-Mao leadership was still consolidating its power, the Ministry of Education report praised WPTs for "having contributed to the restoration of order in universities and schools and socialist education" and for having "completed the special tasks given to them by the Party." However, as the purge of radicals and the dismantling of the CR's legacy accelerated in the following years, the WPT was vehemently criticized for "creating antagonism between the Party leadership and the working class, and between the working class and intellectuals," spreading "disturbing teaching and scientific research" and "turning the universities into the base camp for the persecution of intellectuals."⁷⁶ Major WPT leaders were investigated and punished to varying degrees. The demise of the WPTs demonstrates that they were a political tool and their role was entirely determined by how elite politics played out at the top.

In addition, owing to its social misplacement, the worker power in the CR failed to represent and pursue workers' economic interests. While workers assumed power in multiple social sectors, they had no say in policies involving their own well-being. For instance, in the earlier stages of the rebellion in 1966, some contract and temporary workers, who had long been excluded from permanent urban residency, lifetime employment and various benefits reserved for formal state workers, took the opportunity to seek redress for their grievances. They made radical economic demands, such as a request for Shanghai *hukou* 户口, more subsidies, higher wages and regular employee status. Their actions were quickly suppressed and condemned as "the evil wind of

76 "Chongxin renshi 'gongrenjieji lingdao yiqie'" (Rethinking "the working class leads everything"). *Renmin ribao*, 30 October 1984.

economism” (*jingjizhuyi yaofeng* 经济主义妖风).⁷⁷ After that, worker rebels never again raised economic demands in connection with their activities. Indeed, the WGHQ’s founding declaration contained no economic programme; rather, it declared the overthrow of capitalist-roaders to be its sole mission. Even after the WGHQ officially replaced the Shanghai General Trade Union, under the new name “Workers’ Representative Congress” (*gongdaihui* 工代会) in 1972, it did little to address workers’ economic grievances in areas such as wages, subsidies, housing and labour policies. Workers in Shanghai had endured an eight-year wage freeze, while the monthly starting salary in factories had been reduced from 48 to 36 yuan. The livelihood of Shanghai’s working class had, at best, been stagnant and in many ways had deteriorated during the CR. Former rebel leaders who assumed important government positions made no effort to improve workers’ economic conditions.⁷⁸ The WPTs’ mission was unrelated to what workers were concerned with in the workplace. Worker power, in other words, was separated from workers’ interests.

The distorted nature of worker power during the CR can be further understood in the context of China’s economic transition. From the 1990s onwards, industrial reform brought massive layoffs of state workers. The working class that had looked so formidable just a decade or so before now stood almost powerless in the face of this attack on its economic interests. More than 20 million workers lost their jobs across the country. In the first five years of industrial restructuring from 1991 to 1996, more than a million workers were laid off in Shanghai, the city that had been the stronghold of “proletarian power” in the Maoist era. Scattered protests against the removal of previous entitlements took place in various factories across Shanghai as well as in other parts of the country. As some studies have shown, workers’ experience in the CR shaped their repertoires of actions, discourse and leadership.⁷⁹ Worker resistance sometimes managed to extract concessions from the government; however, such resistance remained cellularized and factory based. The working class as a whole was unable to effectively stand up to policies that eroded its socioeconomic status.⁸⁰ Workers’ weakness in this situation stood in stark contrast with their political role during the CR. Their plight amid the industrial reforms suggests a paradox: although Chinese workers had gained extraordinary political experience and enjoyed great power during the CR, they remained incapable of organizing themselves into collective power groups to protect their economic interests.

To conclude, while the WPT movement was an experiment under the Maoist leadership to empower workers which somewhat challenged the Leninist organizational principle, it fell far from embodying the “creativity of proletarian masses” as envisioned by Luxemburg. The political mobilization of the working

77 Perry and Li 1997.

78 Li 2007.

79 See, e.g., Chen 2000; 2008; Lee, Ching Kwan 2000.

80 Chen 2016.

class during the CR did not after all bring about workers' "associational power."⁸¹ As China's labour relations have undergone a profound change in the country's transition to a market economy, the party-state has swiftly preempted the emergence of worker power in the factory – the very place where such power is necessary for workers to fight for their own interests and rights. The role of the working class remains a conundrum under the Leninist system.

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Biographical note

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Conflicts of interest

None.

摘要: 1968 年中国文化大革命的高潮时期, 毛泽东动员了大批产业工人, 以工人毛泽东思想宣传队的形式“占领”了上层建筑。这一举措前所未有地赋予了工人阶级巨大的权力。这一举措是否带来了共产主义制度下一种新的工人权力模式, 与列宁的先锋党模式和罗莎·卢森堡基于工人自发性和创造性而构想的模式形成对照? 与文革初期工人的自发造反组织不同, 工宣队是一种由政治精英为服务于文革议程而创造的一种准制度化的工人权力形式。这也是当时的领导层通过将工人吸纳到政治权威结构中来实现工人阶级领导作用的尝试, 体现了党宣称的意识形态原则。虽然工宣队为工人提供了政治参与的机会, 但在社会意义和组织意义上, 它都表现为工人权力的错位。本文探讨了这种权力错位的根源, 并探讨了它给党和工人阶级本身带来的困境以及原因。

关键词: 工人权力; 权力错位; 工宣队; 工人造反派; 文化大革命; 上海

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81 Wright 2000.

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