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Dignity of Labour

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In socialist China, working people did not view their jobs as merely a means of making a living. A job meant an honourable vocation, and workers were endowed with dignity. In the 1920s, socialist thinkers Li Dazhao and Cai Yuanpei proclaimed that labour was sacred, because the working class would take control of their destiny in forging a society free from exploitation and oppression. But a look at the working conditions in China today will convince anyone that labour has fallen from grace to become a curse and a nightmare. Jia Zhangke's film *A Touch of Sin* (2013) offers a vignette of labour in the hellhole of a Foxconn factory. Rows and rows of workers bend over the task of assembling iPhones and submit to repetitious movement for long hours. The employees hardly have any breaks, communication, or social life. Living in a dormitory like a labour camp, roommates do not get to see each other as they work different shifts. Vibrating with jarring electronic sounds, the whole factory seems to be a huge device swallowing up workers—body and soul. This dystopia explains the despair of young workers, who jump, one after another, from the building to their death (see Pozzana's essay in the present volume). By contrast, in the socialist past, films often depicted factory workers taking pride in their work and being committed to their community. But in Zhang Meng's postsocialist film *The Piano in a Factory* (2010), the proud workers of a socialist steel plant disperse after the factory is shut down, scraping out a miserable living by performing in a gig band, or by trafficking or peddling.

The Dream of Non-alienated Labour

Although literary and film works depict the new wretched of China's contemporary industrial wasteland, it is difficult to find outrage or outcry. Critics and workers seem to be resigned to dehumanising labour as the norm of capitalist production. I think this resignation stems from the lack of an alternative vision, and from the forgetfulness about

the veneration of labour in socialist China. In her fieldwork on the industrial rustbelt of northeast China, Ching Kwan Lee compares today's labourers with the working class in the past.¹ The workers interviewed recall, in protest and anger against today's precarious conditions, their fond memories of socialist labour. Regarded as the leading class, factory workers enjoyed job security, relatively equal income, medical care, and a pension. Working together to solve concrete technical problems in collective projects, they developed comradeship and solidarity. The workers were equal with technicians and managers, and participated enthusiastically in work processes. Everybody was eager to contribute wisdom, experience, and energy. Equality and participation meant the sharing of power and fostered pride in being masters of the new society. Most importantly, the workers were able to see the purpose and meaning of their work. They were passionate in the belief that they were creating a new economic and social order in which individuals would thrive with all others. It is this type of meaningfulness that has the potential to give labour beauty and dignity.

Working with a purpose is distinct from alienated labour. It is not just work to feed oneself, and the fruits of this labour do not result in profits for capitalists. We can take a page from Edgar Snow's *Red Star Over China* to see the glimmers of what labour could be under revolutionary conditions.² In a chapter entitled 'They Sing Too Much,' Snow depicted the workers as full of pride and joy working in factories in the township of Wuqi in Yan'an. Mostly young women from impoverished villages, the workers had little to warrant any joyful smiles: their pay was very low and living conditions primitive, their meals consisted of millet and vegetables, and their dormitory was a cave house with earthen floors. But working under the principle of 'equal pay for equal labour,' they appeared to be the happiest and proudest people the journalist had encountered. Lacking in cultural resources, they treasured the rare opportunity of learning and education. They valued their 'two hours of daily reading and writing, their political lectures, their dramatic groups.' Everybody competed vigorously for the small prizes in sports, literacy, writing, and productivity.

Puzzled by the incongruity between material squalor and mental happiness, Snow found answers by recalling child workers in foreign factories in the China ruled by the Nationalist Party: 'You have to contrast their life with the system elsewhere in China' to understand the joy of labour in Yan'an. In hundreds of factories elsewhere, 'little boy and girl slave workers sit or stand at their tasks twelve or thirteen hours a day, and then drop, in exhausted sleep, to the dirty cotton quilt, their bed, directly beneath their machine.' A Western-educated engineer, who quit his foreign firm in Shanghai to come to Yan'an, expressed similar bewilderment. Dedicated to productivity and efficiency, the engineer complained about so much 'horseplay going on' while everybody was happy, and wondered why the young women workers spent so much time singing. Constant singing, Snow writes, sums up 'a great deal about the youthful bravado of these young women workers.' The workers felt they were working for themselves and nobody was exploiting them. Compared with their past lives, the new working life was one 'of good health, exercise, clean mountain air, freedom, dignity, and hope.' It is no wonder that singing, joy, and laughter are the natural and spontaneous expression of this work ethic. Revolutionary culture aimed 'to shake, to arouse, the millions of rural China to their responsibilities in society; to awaken them to a belief in human rights, to combat the

timidity, passiveness and static faiths of Taoism and Confucianism.’ The revolutionary labour ethos encouraged the workers to work for the ‘reign of the people,’ a life of justice, equality, freedom, and human dignity.

The Joys of Collective Labour

Fast forward to today. Zhang Meng’s *The Piano in a Factory* recalls similar joy and beauty in collective labour. Like thousands of his coworkers, the protagonist Chen Guilin has been laid off from the state-owned steel plant. During his divorce, he seeks to build a piano with scraps of steel, so that his daughter will stay with him. The piano is more than a musical instrument. Chen’s wife has ample means to purchase a piano for her daughter, who will go with whoever offers her this possession. Although the laid-off coworkers have each gone their disparate ways, they answer Chen’s call and look forward to working together again. They come in order to exercise their own ingenuity and creativity, and to reconnect emotionally. An ambiance of *jouissance* and warm feeling suffuses the process of building the piano. In creating something new and deploying their talent and skill, the workers are rediscovering a collaborative ethos that had been previously fostered in the socialist steel plant but has since lain dormant—wasted. They experience camaraderie and solidarity. In socialist labour, workers are masters of the production process and free from alienation, a condition of estrangement from one’s body and mind. They are able to exercise the essential powers, capacity, and creativity worthy of a productive human being.

In Marx’s analysis, private property makes people one-sided because it exists as capital and commodity. In commodity exchange, the structure of feeling is very much truncated, confined to a one-dimensional sphere of existence. A life based on private property is about seeking possession and enjoyment of private property. Such a life has little social and emotional resonance with fellow human beings. In *Grundrisse*, Marx mocks Adam Smith’s claim that the producer of the piano has nothing to do with the piano player: ‘The piano would be absurd without the piano player.’³ If the piano as a commodity ‘reproduces capital’ and if ‘the pianist only exchanges his labour for revenue,’ where are the piano’s aesthetic functions that ‘produce music and satisfy our musical ear?’ Marx is invoking the essential link between piano maker and pianist, worker and artist, alienated labour and the labour that fulfils the spiritual and bodily potentials of a human being. *The Piano in a Factory* picks up Marx’s hints. The piano being built by the workers escapes the fate of being a mere commodity and a sign of capital. In its creation, the labour is unalienated, self-directed, and voluntary. In labouring, the workers rediscover their essential creative powers—their intelligence, knowledge, passion, and skills previously acquired as steel workers. Their minds and bodies are activated and emancipated from their entrapment in private possession and in labouring for capitalists. The building of the steel piano becomes a process by which the workers come together to form a new working community and to realise their human and artistic potentials. The piano is no longer a thing, but an aesthetic, affective focal point into which the workers pour their emotion and camaraderie.

Working together unites piano maker and piano player in *The Piano in the Factory*, which echoes Snow’s episode of female workers singing at work in *Red Star Over China*. The film presents extended episodes of singing, dancing, and performance, intimately

associated with the technical as well as emotional tenor of piano building. The socialist labour involved in this endeavour envisions workers with well-rounded personalities transcending the one-dimensional individual confined to a narrow sphere of activity through the capitalist division of labour, efficiency, and productivity. The socialist worker has the potential to become accomplished in any branch of the technical and cultural spheres. While the same Chinese word *gang* (steel) is present in both *gangqin* (piano) and *gang de qin* (a piano made of steel, as the original title of the movie reads), making steel and making music are after all very different activities. But this combination is what the workers ought to be. They are not only producers of material goods but also creators of culture: the piano maker should be a piano player.

Workers as Artists

The unity of worker and artist, of mind and body, of mental and manual work in the mix of steel and music entails a socialist motif: art is to serve working people—workers, peasants, and soldiers. It is to enrich their cultural life, foster a collective ethos, and raise their consciousness. The workers, instead of being passive consumers, should have the opportunity to actively participate in cultural activity and creation. It is by no accident that Chen Guilin, his girlfriend, and other workers are excellent amateur artists. They might have been on the steel plant's art troupe or propaganda team engaged in mass cultural activities on a regular basis.

By highlighting the workers' artistic performance, the film suggests that the socialist workplace is a site for manufacturing material as well as cultural goods. Cultural activity provides for and nurtures an ambiance that meets the emotional, aesthetic, and intellectual needs of workers. By extension, socialist culture is to serve and educate the working people by forging and spreading new ethos, new knowledge, and new artistic forms. The film gives testament that factory workers in the past had access to musical education and actively participated in music events. In the film, the workers team up with a Soviet-educated engineer, and apply book knowledge and foreign language proficiency to piano research and building—proof of power sharing on the factory floor and cultural accomplishment. In light of this, it is worth pausing to think about factories in the present. One wonders how many of these factories have a library like the one in the film, how many talented workers have a chance to perform and sing in the workplace, and how many can tackle high-tech engineering problems and read foreign languages? Culture and education in today's China are becoming a prerogative of the privileged few, not an equal right open to all citizens, much less to labourers. The film's director Zhang Meng complained that while he made this film for unemployed and laid-off workers, they could not afford to go to the cinema to watch it.

The Piano in a Factory conjures up images and scenarios of the socialist workplace and the dignity of the workers. Swept under the rug by the neoliberal market imperative, these images stage a magical comeback in the midst of the industrial wasteland and against the ruinous effect of capitalist labour. They are a source of critique, and a gesture of protest. This invocation of the imagination alerts us to what labour could be like in a world where workers enjoy equality and dignity, possess a well-rounded personality, and are producers of material products as well as creators of artworks.

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