



Red Silk: Class, Gender, and Revolution in China's Yangzi Delta Silk Industry. (Harvard University Press 2020).

Red Silk

A Conversation with Robert Cliver

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In *Red Silk: Class, Gender, and Revolution in China's Yangzi Delta Silk Industry* (Harvard University Press 2020), Robert Cliver reconstructs the history of Chinese silk production in the Yangzi River Delta during the wars, crises, and revolutions of the twentieth century. Based on extensive research in Chinese archives and focussed on the 1950s, the book tells the stories of male silk weavers in Shanghai factories, who enjoyed close ties to the Party-state and benefitted greatly from socialist policies after 1949, and the young women toiling in silk thread mills or filatures, without powerful organisations or ties to the new regime. Both groups of workers and their employers had to adapt to rapidly changing circumstances, and their actions compelled the Party-state to adjust its policies, which in turn produced ever-new challenges. The results, though initially positive for many, were ultimately disastrous. By the end of the 1950s, there was widespread conflict and deprivation among silk workers and, despite its impressive recovery under Communist rule, the industry faced a crisis worse than either war or revolution.

Ivan Franceschini: Since the publication in the 1960s of Jean Chesneaux's seminal book on the Chinese labour movement, there has been a burgeoning literature on the history of labour in China. How has the field of Chinese labour history changed over the decades and how does *Red Silk* fit into this scholarly tradition?

Robert Cliver: It has been such a pleasure to participate in the field of historical studies of the People's Republic of China (PRC), which has become so vibrant and exciting over the past 30 years. When I first applied to graduate schools in 1992, I contacted Frederick Wakeman at Berkeley to ask about studying PRC history there. He replied that this was a field for sociologists and political scientists and that I should go into one of those departments. But I love history and historical methods, and some of my favourite political scientists who study modern China, such as Elizabeth Perry, write like historians. So, I went to the University of Hawai'i at Manoa to study with Stephen Uhalley in the history department there. Years later, in 2004, when I was first researching my dissertation, I participated in a workshop on PRC history at UC San Diego and Professor

Wakeman was a participant, writing on the transition to Communist rule in the Shanghai police. Of course, he did not remember my letter, but we remarked on how far the field had come in a decade, especially the ability to conduct archival research in the PRC.

This is really the key development in this field—access to archival documents in China. Considering the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) proletarian pretensions, there is surprisingly little scholarship on industrial workers in the PRC. A few works produced in the 1970s and 1980s depended on either published sources like newspapers or interviews with Chinese out-migrants in Hong Kong. From the 1990s, however, as access to Chinese sources for social history opened up, Western scholarship expanded beyond studies of ideology and international relations to include social and business history, and histories of workers.

Two of my favourite recent books on Chinese workers are *Workers at War* (2004) by Joshua Howard, and *Eating Rice from Bamboo Shoots* (2009) by Jacob Eyferth. I was very fortunate to have these two excellent labour historians working as reviewers for my manuscript with the Harvard University Asia Center. Their efforts made this a much better book than I could have produced on my own and I am very grateful to them. Where my book differs from theirs, and other scholarship on Chinese workers, is the focus on gender and women workers. While I look to Chesneaux and Dirlik and other pioneers in this field, I am really following in the footsteps of scholars like Emily Honig, Elizabeth Perry, and Gail Hershatter, whose studies of Chinese workers focus on gender as an important axis of analysis. Delia Davin’s *Woman-Work* (1976) was an excellent starting point for me, and I hope that I have continued to explore the same themes through archival research. One of the most important conclusions I came to in writing *Red Silk* is that gender was hugely important in determining the experiences of different groups of workers in China’s Communist revolution. I hope that my book pushes the boundaries of labour history in China and encourages us to look at the intersectionality of people’s experiences in China’s mid-century revolution.

IF: In the book, you look into the lived experiences of workers in the silk weaving industry in Shanghai and silk thread production in Wuxi. What are the main axes of your analysis?

RC: The main axes of analysis in *Red Silk* are class, gender, industry, and locality. Obviously, these are all interconnected, so the intersectional approach is key. In this book and an earlier article on ‘democratic management’ (民主管理), I found that one of the most important factors in determining which workers

were able to gain access to the benefits of revolution—such as improved working conditions and welfare—and to participate in management was gender. Male workers were generally better able to achieve these benefits than women workers, even in the same industry or the same factory. Gender discrimination was—and is—built-in to Chinese systems of labour management, and proved very difficult to overcome even in the revolutionary context of the 1950s. There was successful resistance to CCP policies by the brutal, violent male supervisors in silk filatures, who managed to perpetuate their position well beyond the moment of Liberation.

It is not as simple, however, as male workers benefitted while female workers did not. About half of the silk weaving workforce in Shanghai was comprised of women—mostly employed in the poorer-paying jobs but also including many weavers. These women workers, and women employed in Shanghai filatures (thread mills), won much the same benefits as their male counterparts because they belonged to the same unions, which enjoyed close ties to the Communist Party, a strong position vis-à-vis their employers, and the political and economic resources of the city of Shanghai, which was able to provide much better welfare benefits for women workers than the city of Wuxi, where the majority of filature workers lived. Similarly, although many male workers in steel or textiles industries in Wuxi were able to gain welfare benefits and participatory forms of management, female filature workers were not, even in thread mills administered directly by the Party-state from 1949. Although it can be difficult to generalise about the experiences of Chinese workers during the revolution, we can draw some conclusions from these kinds of comparative case studies. In general, men and women experienced different revolutions, as did workers in different industries and different localities. Obviously, proletarians and capitalists experienced the revolution in different ways also—although under some circumstances, such as the ‘socialist transformation of industry and commerce’ in 1956, they could find common cause in challenging the Party-state.

IF: While focussing mostly on the 1950s, you also look into the decades that preceded the Chinese Revolution. Was the year 1949 really a watershed moment for the workers in the industries you examine? Was there any change in how they perceived their position in the workplace once they supposedly became the ‘masters of the enterprise’?

RC: This is a very complex question that is hugely important for the field of PRC studies. The CCP has emphasised the utter transformation of everything, like the break of dawn, with Liberation in 1949. Even the archives are organised around this principle—pre-Liberation and post-Liberation—and scholars in

China and abroad have focussed on the radical changes brought about under Communist rule, or the limitations of such changes. These days, we tend to emphasise continuities across the 1949 divide, as in a marvellous conference I attended in London in 2018 titled ‘How Maoism Was Made’. In my presentation, I looked at continuities in government administration of the silk industry from the Japanese occupation of 1937 to 1945, through the post-war Guomindang years and into the 1950s. Although there were strong continuities, there were also some dramatic changes, such as the expansion of state administration to all parts of the economy and the penetration of the Party-state to the level of the village, neighbourhood, and factory. We thus see a complex mix of change and continuity, and great divergence in the outcomes of the revolution. For example, while Shanghai silk weavers won institutions for democratic management, health insurance, and job security, Wuxi filature workers got production campaigns and stricter workplace controls, mainly because the same brutal supervisors were still in charge for years after 1949. For those workers, it was like Liberation was something that happened to other people and they saw little improvement in their own situation until 1953 or even later.

Some fascinating examples of how these workers perceived the revolution in their own contexts appear in archival documents, mainly union reports on workers’ attitudes during the 1950s. These reports quote workers making statements such as: ‘Mao Zedong and Chiang Kai-shek are pretty much the same—whoever gives me a higher wage is better.’ Or a statement recorded during the Great Leap Forward in 1959: ‘In the past, working 12 hours was exploitation. Now what do we call working 12 hours?’ The question remains at the centre of historians’ studies of revolutionary change—what changed and what remained the same, and why? Where were revolutionary initiatives successful and where did they fail? One of the answers that *Red Silk* offers is that conditions varied in different industries and localities, and among different groups of people. Outcomes of revolutionary policies varied similarly, indicating that we need to look beyond the ideology of the leaders or the decisions made in Zhongnanhai to understand the Chinese revolution.

IF: The topics you explore in *Red Silk* are of interest not only to historians, but also to anyone who follows issues related to labour and gender in China today. In the book, you briefly mention how contemporary social divisions have grown out of those of the Maoist period. Can you elaborate on that?

RC: I mentioned some of the Chinese labour historians that have inspired me. The same is true of my colleagues in anthropology, sociology, and political science who also study

Chinese workers—scholars like Pun Ngai, Ching Kwan Lee, Anita Chan, Leslie Chang, Bill Hurst, and Steve Phillion. Their studies reveal the same divisions within the Chinese working class as we find throughout the twentieth century. Privileged male workers in ageing state industries use different tactics for protest than young women workers in the capitalist export industries serving the global economy. There are differences in locality between township enterprises in the hinterland and international firms based in South China. Another important divide today is between groups of workers who enjoyed substantial benefits under socialism and now see those benefits threatened, and those who must struggle to achieve any kind of fair treatment under restored capitalism. These divisions not only pre-date the restoration of capitalism in China in the past 40 years, but even predate the 1949 revolution. Perhaps this is an indication that divisions according to locality, industry, and gender are common among all modern workers, but this may be too much of a generalisation for this context.

IF: I was also intrigued by another analogy that you touch on but do not fully elaborate, that between the experiences of Chinese workers in the 1950s and those of their Soviet counterparts in the heyday of the Russian Revolution. What does such a comparison tell us?

RC: Another important influence on my work is S. A. Smith, one of the premier social historians of China and Russia. I wish I could have made these kinds of comparisons more prominent in my book, but I had so much rich material just on Chinese workers, with all of their diversity, that introducing another axis of comparison seemed overly complex. Some important differences just off the top of my head include standards of living (Soviet workers were richer than their Chinese counterparts and had better access to consumer goods), efforts to implement political production campaigns and democratic management were stronger and more sustained in China (I think partly due to China's relative poverty—political incentives are cheap, as is having workers do the work of administrators and engineers), China's position in the global economy was different (more isolated) than that of the Soviet Union, and, as much as Chinese production technologies developed in the 1950s and 1960s, China continued to make use of traditional technologies (such as medieval iron smelting furnaces) much more than the Soviet Union. There are many other comparisons worth making, but I am straying beyond my specific area of expertise and will instead point readers to the works of Professor Smith and others who are more proficient in both of these fields. ■

This text is taken from *Made in China Journal: Volume 5, Issue 2, 2020*,
edited by Ivan Franceschinim and Nicholas Loubere, published 2020 by ANU Press,
The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.

doi.org/10.22459/MIC.05.02.2020.32