

17

劳动

Labour

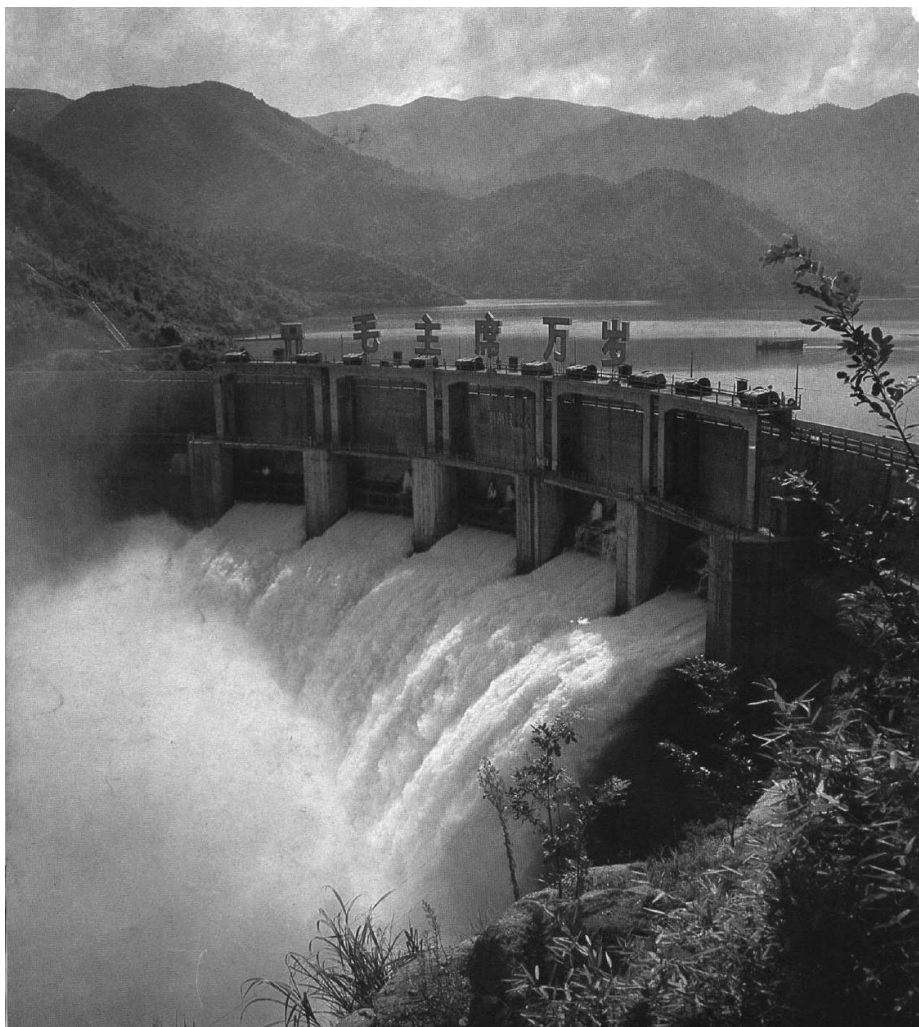
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Images of work were a key genre in Maoist visual culture. There were images of people smiling as they worked to build an industrial base for socialist China, but also of people whose countenance expressed total absorption in work by either focussing completely on the object they were producing or staring intently at their colleagues during meetings or training sessions. In these photos, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) was often not immediately visible—Party members did not wear clothing that distinguished them from ordinary people—but its ‘spirit’ (*dangxing*) was present in the gaze of the workers and energy transmitted through their gestures. The accompanying texts further emphasised that the CCP was always beside them, guiding workers forward into a radiant future.

Since that promised socialist future had not yet come, people expectantly laboured away at laying railroads, forging factories, and bringing new lands under the plough. In visual representations of workers engaged in these practices, there are no traces of tensions between workers of different socioeconomic positions, backgrounds, or competences.¹ The developmental process of transforming China from an agrarian country into an industrial powerhouse appears to involve absolutely no coercion. In the imagined world of Mao era labour, no government official ever forces recalcitrant workers to perform their job against their will. No administrator ever reprimands or punishes workers for being lazy, dragging their feet, or disobeying orders.² In photographs, the CCP and Chinese workers seem to be seamlessly connected. China’s socialist revolution looks to be a complete success, and as Vladimir Lenin dreamed would happen, the division between state and society had withered away.³

According to official propaganda, the will of the Chinese people and the CCP had become one and existed together in perfect harmony, as they enthusiastically walked together on an ever-triumphant developmental road towards socialism (see also Franceschini’s essay in the present volume).⁴ Workers broke production records,

national economic output ascended higher and higher, and Chinese socialism grew stronger and more prosperous by the day. The Party-state allocated fairly the fruits of labour, and everyone was content with what they gave and received from socialist China. The mass media, thus, contained no images highlighting the administratively managed urban-rural divide or the preferential treatment given to state-owned enterprises, such as more welfare guarantees.⁵ In my study of Maoist visual culture, I have rarely encountered mass media photos of Party administrators paying workers for their labour-time even though the reception of wages by urban workers and work-points by rural labourers was a managerial ritual that punctuated everyday life.⁶



Dam, 'Long Live Chairman Mao!' (early 1970s)

Compensation, Community, and Socialist Reciprocity

Despite attempts to erase the difference between the Party and the workers, Mao-era images still contained traces of their differentiation. This political divide is perceptible in photos of local Party representatives giving work units (*danwei*, see Kevin Lin's essay in the present volume) material objects, such as an apartment block, a hospital, a cultural centre, or a radio.⁷ More than a wage, these objects, and how they were given, resembled a gift granted to the collective group rather than to one individual or family. The Party did not bestow a work unit with a new apartment block because of a contractual obligation but on the basis of a generalised reciprocity.⁸ There was an expectation that the Chinese people were part of the same shared endeavour, and individual contributions would even out over time like drops accumulated in a vast ocean. The Party presented a group of workers with a new material object, not because of their economic performance but as a symbol of the Party's unconditional concern for their wellbeing and gratitude for their ardent commitment to China's socialist cause.

In line with Maoist China's productivist ethos, most images did not depict consumer goods limited to the consumption of an individual, family, or particular work unit. The Party's gifts were electrical lines bringing power to large undifferentiated areas, stockyards full of machinery laying in wait to raise national productivity, or railroads shuttling around passengers and freight for the good of the entire Chinese people.

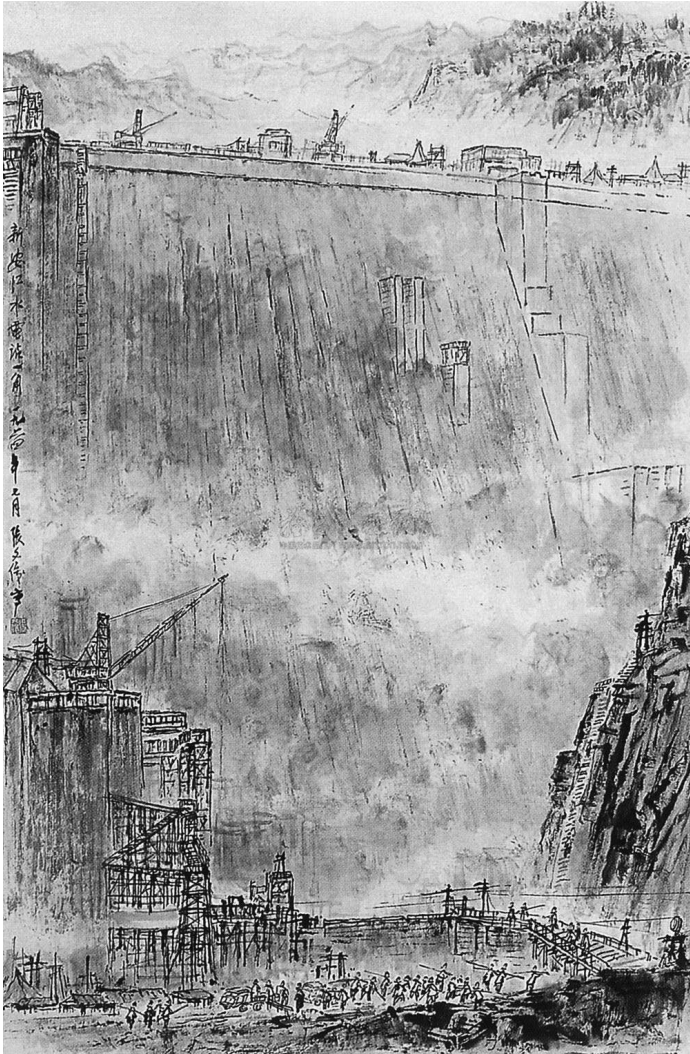
In return for its generosity, the Party demanded altruism. People were not supposed to act like bourgeois subjects who worked only on the basis of material incentives or in pursuit of personal fame. Images in the mass media made it look as if China had already realised the communist ideal of workers motivated by their commitment to the collective good. Within the phantasmagorical realm of Maoist imagery, the disappearance of any contradictions between the Party and labour render the term 'command economy' misleading, since the Party no longer needed to give 'orders' to the Chinese people who already knew in their hearts what needed to be done.

Dead Labour and the Socialist Pastoral

But workers' power is also augmented by the prosthesis of machinery and technology. What Karl Marx called 'dead labour' are the material objects of production that are used to achieve even higher levels of economic output.⁹ Monumental dead labour, such as factory complexes and hydroelectric dams, was a recurrent motif in Mao-era visual culture as a testament to China's rise as an industrial power (see the image on page 104). Thanks to labour's collective efforts, new railroads were traversing mountains and linking the totality of the nation into a cohesive whole. Dams were looming high above riverbeds and pumping electricity into power grids. Factories were sprouting up all over, and assembly lines were churning out ever-larger quantities of standardised industrial goods.¹⁰

Some images of monumental dead labour just showcased the machinery. Others depicted different relationships between labour and machinery. One kind of image staged the moment when workers began to use a machine for the first time, such as a tractor, and locals gathered around and gazed with joyous wonder at the new industrial world emerging before their very eyes. Other human-machine images depicted workers

at home in their new machine-bodies and technologies. There were no intimations that the industrialisation of work was an alienating process that subjected labour to a disciplinary regime in which administrative personnel regularly monitored workers, evaluated both their political and economic performance, and compiled dossiers on their activities that often determined their future career trajectory.¹¹ Visual language rendered the socialist machine-human nexus as a source of empowerment, efficiency, and productivity.



Zhang Wenjun, The Xin'an River Power Station (1964)

But there are also more ambivalent images in which labour was dwarfed by a large piece of machinery that took up most of the visual field. The diminutive size of the workers might seem to suggest their insignificance compared to industrial machines, which tower over them and have productive powers far beyond their bodies. Yet, these images could also imply the potency and ingenuity of human labour to invent such mammoth industrial creations. Though the latter was probably the meaning the Party intended at the time, the images also registered the feeling of being crushed beneath immense industrial embodiments of dead labour.

In classic mountain-water paintings, massive mountains and rushing rivers soar above small homes and puny people, suggesting the relative triviality of human endeavours compared to the spatial awesomeness and temporal durability of the natural world.¹² In contrast, many Mao period photographs were of construction sites in which the natural environment did not soar over labour. Instead, workers were in the foreground, as they ‘worked hard to move forward’ (*lizheng shangyou*) Chinese development. Photos of this sort were saturated with the Maoist view of industrialisation as a heroic militarised process in which workers were fearless soldiers whose industriousness and spirit of ‘self-reliance’ (*zili gengsheng*) enabled the Chinese people to dominate the natural environment (see the essays by Yang and Lora-Wainwright in the present volume). Even in the images of nature conquered and industrial modernity achieved, there was no tinge of the industrial gothic aesthetic, so pronounced in Western art, which revels in portraying humanity’s technoscientific inventions as prying open Pandora’s box and unleashing uncontrollable monsters.¹³

In the painting of the Xin’an River Hydropower Station (see the image on page 106), hydroelectricity is not a jarring alien force whose introduction does violence to the natural order and strikes fear into the viewer. Instead, the painting is an example of the Mao era’s industrial pastoral aesthetic in which industry was not a destructive imposition on nature but a beautiful improvement, undertaken by what Zygmunt Bauman has called a ‘gardening state’ which removes unwanted impediments to progress from society and the natural world and cultivates what state agents see as best for the whole national community (see Sorace’s essay in the present volume).¹⁴ Maoism’s industrial pastoral aesthetic permeated paintings of factories too. For instance, in Xu Xingzhi’s *Steel Forests* (see the image on page 109), smokestacks emit exhaust without causing concern. Not only was there no indication that air pollution was harmful, but factory exhaust was even seen as a visually pleasing mist that added colour to the skyline.

Tightly connected to this positive view of industrialisation was imagery of CCP leaders. Photographs in mass media figured leaders as a special kind of worker: they were the diligent political shepherds of Chinese socialism.¹⁵ Normally, central-level officials fulfilled their role as guardians of the Chinese nation from a distance and interacted with work units through the medium of documents, newspaper columns, radio addresses, and news clips. The mass media, however, made the public aware that though CCP leaders might be far away, the Chinese people were always on their minds, and they were at every moment tirelessly working to advance socialism. Newspapers and magazines were awash with photos of CCP leaders serving the socialist project. They held meetings to discuss issues of national import and hammer out policies that would improve the lives of every citizen. Another common picture of the Party-leader-as-worker was a top official going on an inspection tour of different parts of the

country. On inspection tours, high-ranking officials incarnated the ideal of the mass line (see Lin Chun's essay in the present volume). Visiting the grassroots showed that the centre still strived to be close to the people and held the masses' interests in their hearts, despite their busy meeting schedules.

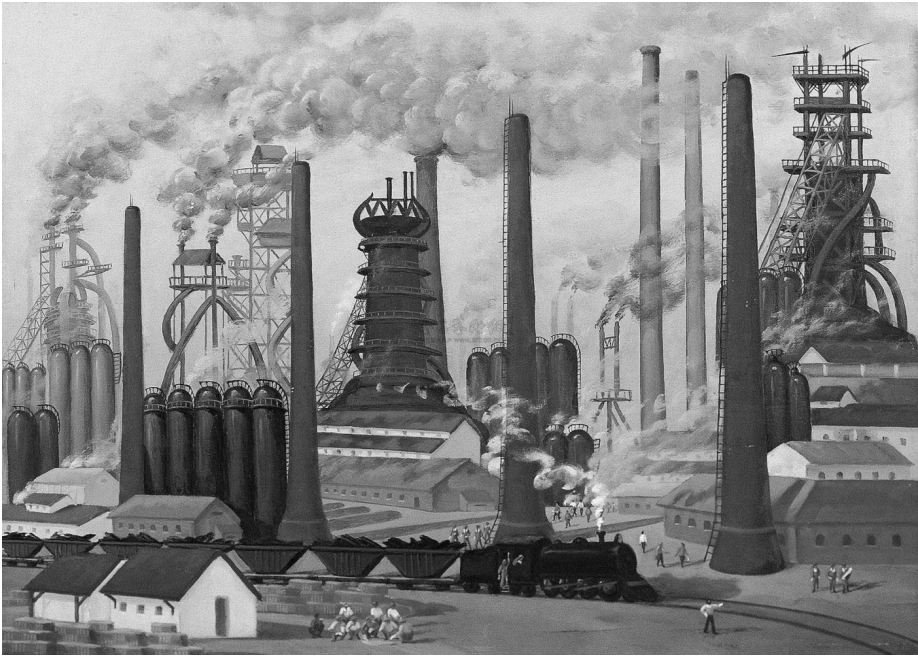
The Afterlives of Maoist Labour

With the passing of the Mao era, new ways of depicting labour emerged. One emblematic example is the photograph of a tile-making factory distributing televisions to individual workers in 1984 (see the image on page 109). Like images from the Mao period, nearly everyone in the photo is smiling and content with how Party officials are compensating the Chinese people for their labour. Mao-era slogans also still line factory walls and exhort workers to 'work hard on moving forward' the Chinese economy. But like the letters that compose this slogan the meaning it held in the Mao period was beginning to fade as China entered the reform era.

The other contents of the photo foreshadow what hard work would come to mean in postsocialist China. The viewer's eye is not drawn to the collective, as the faces in the background are blurred. The spectator's attention is instead pulled toward the individual man at the centre of the scene confidently walking forward. Local Party representatives are also not distributing goods that will be available for use by all the members of the work unit. Only the individual man is receiving a television as material compensation for his hard work. If the man wants to allow his coworkers to enjoy together the pleasures of the silver screen, it is up to him and his family because the television is theirs—it does not belong to the collective.

Here, we can see the decomposition of the public life of Mao's China, as work units transformed into capitalist companies concerned about not just maintaining their bottom line but outperforming their competitors and turning a profit in emerging markets. With this transition, work units expended fewer funds on group cultural events to fill the non-working hours of Chinese labourers. With such collective activities gradually becoming passé in the post-Mao era, the social life of labour became more privatised and centred on the family and individual.¹⁶ The man at the core of the photograph walking off with his own personal television also signals the advent of a new capitalist regime of social stratification in which it is viewed as normal that some Chinese workers earn higher wages which enable them to accumulate more material goods and attain a higher socioeconomic position than their compatriots.

The television at the heart of the photograph, however, is not only a sign of the new capitalist times coming into view in China. As a Chinese-made television, it is also a marker of what the CCP had accomplished under Mao. It had acquired the ability to mass produce televisions, and that feat depended on a variety of industries. Mines were required to extract metals needed for electrical circuits and wires. A petrochemical industry was necessary to generate plastic coverings to encase wires and enclose the television. A body of technicians and engineers was also vital to the design and manufacture of the television. This photo of a man carrying off a television to his home can thus be read as both visually representing the fruits of the Maoist developmental state, while pointing towards a future in which Chinese labour would produce the miracle of economic reform and further erase itself from the picture.



[1] Xu Xingzhi, Steel Forests (1962)

[2] A worker receives a television at a tile-making factory in 1984

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