

## What About the Chinese Workers?

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A question I am asked from time to time when talking about Chinese Marxism is: what about the workers?

The short answer is that 700-800 million of them have been lifted out of poverty in the last 40 years – the time of the ‘Reform and Opening-Up’ initiated by Deng Xiaoping.

The long answer requires some more detail.

The question with which I began often implies a certain potted narrative: once upon a time, the workers were treated well, with the ‘Iron Rice Bowl’ (not originally a Chinese term) providing full employment and cradle-to-grave support. But then everything was turned on its head with the ‘Reform and Opening-Up’. Workers were treated badly, lost their jobs and the communist party morphed into yet another exploiting ruling class.

The problem with this assumed narrative is not so much its mixture of half-truths and distortions, but more its underlying assumptions and deliberate neglect of crucial facts.

To begin with, it assumes a ‘Eurofied’ Marxism, in which the working class is well-developed in the context of an over-ripe capitalist market economy. Marxism is thus supposed to be all about the working class – the proletariat – and a communist revolution will be driven by them.

The catch is that the successful communist revolutions happened in places that did not have a large or well-developed working class. Instead, they had a vast majority of peasants. What was to be done?

The first real effort can be dated back to Engels’s often neglected piece from 1882, ‘The Mark’. Here he recovers the old practice of subsistence survival economics, in which the land was held in common, reallocated on a regular basis, and in which pasture lands and forests were common land. The trace of all this Engels finds in the German ‘mark’. Crucially, he ends the piece with a call to recover at a whole new dialectical level this version of rural communism. He closes the piece with these words: “Think well on it,

German peasants. Only the *Social-Democrats* can help you' (MECW 24: 456). In other words, the communists are the real friends of the peasants.

Despite this insight, the first successful revolution in Russia struggled to come to terms with the peasants. The revolution happened in the cities, based on the fledgling working class and it was only with significant struggle and not a little disruption (in the 1930s) that the peasants became collective farm workers in the new class formations under socialism.

How is all this relevant for China?

There too the initial communist movement focused on the small number of workers, leading to the failed revolution of early 1927. In reply, it was Mao's breakthrough to pick up some of the emphases from Engels, Lenin and Stalin and focus on the peasants as the core of the communist movement. With the Nanchang Uprising on 1 August 1927 – the first successful armed insurrection of the Chinese Revolution mounted in response to the Shanghai massacre – Mao had already organised a red base with peasants in the nearby Jinggang mountains. The fabled meeting there between him and Zhu De's armed force from Nanchang marks the origin of the Red Army.

Let me push this a little further. For Mao and the others, it was not so much a combination of workers and peasants, but the breakthrough that peasants too are workers, rural workers. As a result, the communist movement massively expanded its base.

Even so, this is only a beginning. The initial phase after 1949 relied heavily on the model of the Soviet Union: planned economy; full collectivisation of agriculture; a socialist offensive that would lift China into an industrial superpower (Great Leap Forward and so on). The catch was that Mao's policies tended to focus on the relations of production, with radical equality for all.

This is all very well, but it is only one half of the equation. The other concerns the means of production. The problem that remained was that the economic condition of the vast majority improved only marginally and at a very slow pace.

It was Deng Xiaoping's insight that the means of production needed attention, that socialism is as much about improving the socio-economic conditions of the rural and

urban workers. Hence the Reform and Opening-Up and the transformation into a socialist market economy.

Along the way, mistakes were made and new contradictions arose (as Mao has already foreseen in 1937). These included the breaking up of the inefficient collective conglomerates (more Owenite cooperatives than full communes), some workers losing their jobs, protests by workers against conditions and law-breaking management, the absence for a time of adequate medical care in rural areas, parents leaving children under the care of grandparents in order to work in cities. But the mistakes and contradictions were not insuperable. Workers have been compensated, protests listened to (since they routinely invoke the communist tradition) and managers who break the law punished, all people now covered by medical insurance as well as old-age pension. Above all, a concerted and well-honed effort continues to deal with rural poverty.

All of this brings me to the final point: during the time of the Reform and Opening-Up, between 700 and 800 million have been lifted out of poverty. The Chinese prefer the lower figure, since the standard required is higher than international standards.

Not only has this been designated as the greatest human rights achievement in memory, but it is precisely workers – urban and rural – who have been lifted out of poverty.

As they like to say, without the Community Party there would be no new China.