Hegemony and Workers' Politics in China*

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ABSTRACT Workers' protests in the 1980s and 1990s, numerous and widely distributed though they may be, remain spasmodic, spontaneous and unco-ordinated. While the reasons are numerous, this article focuses on the role of workers' hegemonic acceptance of the core values of the market and the state. Data from interviews in Tianjin from 1995 to 1999 are used to explicate the existence of this hegemony. Several of its sources, some general, some specific to China, are then discussed. The findings are situated within recent scholarship on labour politics in China, and the prospects are discussed.

A world to win.

– Karl Marx

Pessimismo dell' intelligenza, ottimismo della volontà.

– Antonio Gramsci

The Puzzle

China's workers have lost their world. It was, by and large, a locus of relative privilege within Maoist state socialism: a zone in which they could enjoy stable, secure income; socially provided housing, medical care and education; guaranteed lifetime employment; a work environment that was far from draconian and that often involved considerable workers' power; and social and political prestige. Starting in the 1950s Chinese workers benefited from a way of life and a standard of living to be envied by their fellow proletarians in other poor countries.

The structural reforms begun in 1978 have slowly but inexorably terminated those prerogatives. Employment security has become a thing of the past: Dorothy Solinger concludes that unemployment is incalculable but "massive."[1] She documents the dire straits in which China's laid-off workers find themselves.[2] For those fortunate enough to have dodged the axe, wages have not kept pace with those of other sectors or with inflation, and poverty – particularly "deep poverty" – is skyrocketing.[3] Workers are increasingly conscious of income inequality: in 1997 44 per cent judged disparities to be "relatively large" and another 46

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1. Dorothy Solinger, "Why we cannot count the unemployed," *The China Quarterly*, No. 167 (September 2001), p. 671.

2. Dorothy Solinger, "Labour market reform and the plight of the laid-off proletariat," in this issue.

3. Azizur Rahman Khan and Carl Riskin, *Inequality and Poverty in China in the Age of Globalization* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 35–40 and 70–75. Khan and Riskin are unable to disaggregate their data by occupation. Since their urban samples include only registered urban residents and not migrants, though, it seems reasonable to conclude that the urban poor must consist primarily of industrial workers.

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per cent "very large."[4] Worse yet, workers' shrinking wages are often not even being paid. In 1997, over 11 million workers were subject to wage arrears averaging 1,900 *yuan* per worker.[5] Almost 20 per cent of those responding to the All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU) 1997 survey reported experiencing wage arrears, and 46 per cent of those said that they were due three months' pay or more.[6] State-supplied housing, medical care and education have declined in quality and availability, and increased in cost to workers.

All this has left the Chinese working class more and more dispirited. One-third of employed workers responding to the 1997 ACFTU survey thought it "likely" or "very likely" that they too would soon be unemployed, and more than one-fourth anticipated that their firm would soon be bankrupt or subject to merger.[7] Nearly a quarter said that they could no longer bear the present delays and shortfalls in medical expense reimbursement.[8] One-fourth said that their position as "masters of the enterprise" had declined from 1992 to 1997, and that was before some of the profoundest changes in the labour market and enterprise longevity took root.[9]

Many Chinese workers have not taken these changes lying down. The fiercest protests during the mælstrom of 1989 came from members of the working class, some of whom violently attacked security forces.[10] Nor were workers as intimidated as other classes by the crackdown. In the second half of 1989, when a political atmosphere of intense surveillance and repression prevailed, hundreds of strikes broke out in most provinces involving tens of thousands of workers. Four Xi'an cotton mills were shut

4. Quanguo zonggonghui zhengce yanjiushi (All-China Federation of Trade Unions Policy Research Office) (ed.), *1997 Zhongguo zhigong zhuangkuang diaocha* (*Survey of the Status of Chinese Staff and Workers in 1997*) (Beijing: Xifan chubanshe, 1999), p. 1240. Hereafter cited as *ZZZD*.

5. *Zhongguo gonghui tongji nianjian* (*Chinese Trade Unions Statistics Yearbook*) (Beijing: Zhongguo tongji chubanshe, 1999), p. 147.

6. *ZZZD*, p. 1239.

7. *Ibid.* p. 1247.

8. *Ibid.* p. 1243.

9. *Ibid.* p. 1250.

10. It is probably no coincidence that, after weeks of indecision, the crackdown came straight after the first stirrings of the self-mobilization of labour. Nor is there anything accidental about the fact that working-class protesters met with much harsher repression than did students, intellectuals and other members of the urban middle classes. As the popular protests climaxed, in Beijing an audacious young man named Wang Weilin, who did not appear to be a worker, made history by stepping, briefcase in hand, in front of a line of tanks travelling down Chang'an Avenue. The tanks stopped. But in Shanghai, when workers with the same bold spirit placed themselves in front of a train, up to 20 were run over. Three of the infuriated workers who attacked the train driver for his brutality were executed. After the crackdown, student and intellectual dissidents were hunted down in nation-wide dragnets, hauled before kangaroo courts and sentenced to jail. But dozens of workers were summarily executed by a state that, in doing so, demonstrated that it feared the power of the working class more than any other. "China has differentiated between intellectuals and workers in its handling of the aftermath of Tiananmen. At least 40 workers were reported executed, while young student leaders have received prison sentences ranging from two to six years." ("China vowed to have no more trials of dissidents," UPI, 19 March 1991 (in *China News Digest*, 21 March 1991)).

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down as early as 6 June 1989.[11] During the second half of the year, over 15,000 workers engaged in over 700 incidents of industrial action in state and collective firms throughout the country, protesting against management's "failure to guarantee basic living conditions"[12] – and that counts only those outbreaks that made it into official reports. The working class thus succeeded in challenging the state even at the moment the state was most intent on intimidating society.[13] As the political situation began to relax after 1992, worker protest intensified. In 1992, official statistics reported more than 540 demonstrations, 480 strikes and 75 assaults on government offices.[14] In 1993, strike activity in Fujian tripled over the previous year.[15] The Ministry of Labour admitted that in 1994:

> the number of large-scale labour-management disputes exceeded 12,000. In some 2,500 cases, workers besieged plants, set fire to facilities, staged strikes, or detained bosses or leaders. Such events directly threatened the personal safety of Party leaders in various factories and mines. In the Jixi Mining Bureau, enterprise leaders did not dare go to the pits for fear that they might be attacked by the workers.[16]

In 1996, the number of protests rose 50 per cent over the previous year.[17] By the late 1990s, demonstrations and strikes had become endemic throughout the country.

This pattern of protest is important, and it has begun to receive systematic scholarly analysis, including in this issue.[18] This article, by contrast, focuses on the reverse side of the coin. Workers' protests in the 1980s and 1990s, numerous and widely distributed though they may have been, remained spasmodic, spontaneous and unco-ordinated. Strikes and protests

11. Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS), 16 June 1989.
12. FBIS, 19 July 1991.
13. In the autumn of 1990, furloughed workers began to be recalled to their factories even though there was no work for them. According to a Beijing Labour Bureau official, "We're paying to keep them in the factory. They can sweep the floor or attend classes to occupy their time. Just don't let them idle at home for fear that they would become emotionally unstable" (*China News Digest*, 21 March 1991). In the summer of 1996, two long-standing members of the Communist Party – one an intellectual, one a worker, both holders of significant positions of leadership within their respective work units – confided to me that "the government doesn't seriously fear the students; it most fears the workers." Interview, 9 July 1996.
14. FBIS, 10 March 1993.
15. FBIS, 31 March 1994.
16. *Dangdai*, 15 May 1994.
17. FBIS, 22 July 1997.
18. In this issue see Yongshun Cai, "The resistance of Chinese laid-off workers in the Reform Period"; and William Hurst and Kevin J. O'Brien, "China's contentious pensioners." See also Feng Chen, "Subsistence crises, managerial corruption and labour protests in China," *China Journal*, No. 44 (July 2000), pp. 41–63; Ching Kwan Lee, "From the specter of Mao to the spirit of the law: labor insurgency in China," *Theory and Society*, forthcoming 2002. See also Antoine Kernan and Jean-Louis Rocca, "Social responses to unemployment and the 'new urban poor': case study in Shenyang city and Liaoning province," *China Perspectives*, No. 27 (January–February 2000), pp. 35–51; Ching Kwan Lee, "The 'revenge of history': collective memories and labor protests in Northeastern China," *Ethnography*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (2000), pp. 217–237; Ching Kwan Lee, "Pathways of labor insurgency," in Elizabeth J. Perry and Mark Selden (eds.), *Chinese Society: Change, Conflict and Resistance* (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 41–61.

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had not yet produced significant strike waves and protest movements. The vast majority of Chinese workers, including the unemployed, remained politically passive. In the ACFTU survey of 1997, a year of relative political relaxation, 96 per cent of respondents said they had not participated in any sort of labour protest at any time during the previous five years.[19] The several dozen Tianjin workers I interviewed between 1995 and 1999 were unanimous in saying that though labour protests in their city were frequent, only a very small minority of workers participated in them. Mostly, they averred, the protesters were, as Hurst and O'Brien highlight,[20] retired workers whose pensions were not being paid regularly or fully. So far as can be ascertained, local governments have developed a fairly standard and, so far, effective repertoire for dealing with such protests: they conduct an investigation, and, if the protesters' claims seem valid, they find some way of palliating the situation through negotiation followed by promises of remuneration or actual disbursements. Particularly troublesome ringleaders are sometimes arrested, but in general there are no reprisals against most of the protesters.[21] The Chinese economy and the state's radical restructuring of it – for this is no mere "reform" – roll on.

Why is China's working class not mounting a co-ordinated challenge in the face of the fundamental transformations that have so profoundly afflicted so many workers and that threaten so many more? The question is all the more perplexing in view of the working class's power during the Maoist period – power reflected both in the privileged position it achieved and in the fierceness and frequency with which it expressed and defended its interests when it saw the need and had the opportunity. In terms of the former, workers' incomes and standards of living far exceeded those of farmers starting in the 1950s. Moreover, levels of inequality between workers on the one hand and managers and government officials on the other were extraordinarily low in absolute terms as well as when compared with other countries, a situation that actually continued well into the Dengist period.[22] In the Maoist period, workers' social and political status was very high. It was not uncommon for young people offered the opportunity for university education to choose factory work instead.[23] Cadres often treated workers with respect and kid gloves. For example, during the Great Leap Forward, many officials took smaller food rations than those allotted to workers.[24] Moreover, the Chinese working class's power was also manifest in the aggressive forms of collective action that workers undertook to advance their interests in 1957

19. *ZZZD*, p. 1244.
20. Hurst and O'Brien, "China's contentious pensioners."
21. For a textured discussion of the state's response to worker protest, see Lee, "Pathways of labor insurgency."
22. Wenfang Tang and William Parish, *Chinese Urban Life under Reform* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 5, 90 and *passim*.
23. Interview, Hong Kong, 1975.
24. Interview, Tianjin, 1997.

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and again during the Cultural Revolution.[25] Why then has a class that was so well treated, mighty, confident and active in the recent past essentially rolled over or, better, allowed itself to be rolled over, in the last two decades?

There is no shortage of potential explanations: political repression, workers' lack of political resources, a shortage of political opportunities, lack of leadership,[26] political incorporation of would-be leaders and activists, workers' dependence on firms for wages and social services, the fragmentation of the Chinese working class, and the state's skilful use of benefits and other policies and stopgap measures to ameliorate the workers' worst misery. Each of them has some purchase on the problem. This article begins to explore a rather different line of explanation, one that has not received much attention in the small literature on Chinese workers' politics under structural "reform": that workers have become subject to hegemony of the market and of the state.

Hegemony

For Gramsci, hegemony obtains when a politically dominant class has persuaded a politically subordinate class of its own "moral, political and cultural values."[27] At the risk of succumbing to Postmodernism's regrettable tendency to take the Marx out of Gramsci, here I will bracket the question of how class relations may be implicated in workers' hegemonic acceptance of the market and the state – specifically, whether and in what ways this hegemony is a matter of class domination, and whether it has been built by a class or class coalition with inimical interests to those of the Chinese working class. I also want to elide the thorny question of whether the values of the market and the state are in fact inimical to the interests of the working class – an issue that involves serious matters such as comparative referent (inimical compared to what?) and time frame. In adopting the concept of hegemony, I mean at this point only to assert that the values of the market and of the state that many Chinese workers have come to accept over the past 20 years are associated with institutions that have, over that period, already done serious harm to the working class as a whole and to many individual workers – sometimes in absolute terms compared with the past, sometimes only in relative terms compared with other classes and groups – and that the market and the state threaten to continue to do so into the foreseeable future. To put the matter most simply, China's workers are clearly subordinated to the state, and just as clearly subordinated to other classes and groups in society through the market. Both the state and the market have done measurable net harm, in relative and sometimes even in absolute terms, to much of the Chinese working class. Yet over the past two decades, many – probably most – of

25. Elizabeth Perry, "Shanghai's Strike Wave of 1957," *The China Quarterly*, No. 137 (March 1994); Elizabeth Perry and Li Xun, *Proletarian Power: Shanghai in the Cultural Revolution* (Boulder: Westview, 1997).

26. Yongshun Cai highlights this in his contribution to this issue.

27. James Joll, *Antonio Gramsci* (London: Penguin, 1977), p. 129.

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China's workers have come to accept the core values of the market and of the state as legitimate. Why and how has this happened, and what are the prospects for this hegemony and for a counterhegemony that would oppose the state and the market?

The values workers have about the market and the state are closely intertwined, of course. The state has, after all, ushered in, legitimated and fostered the market and in turn sought to legitimate and secure itself through the market. For analytical purposes, however, the analysis that follows will treat them as distinct.

The evidence in this article comes from interviews I conducted from 1995 to 1999 with several dozen workers. They are all from Tianjin, a city that has not been at the forefront of industrial "reform" policies such as privatization or globalization compared with the likes of Guangzhou and Shanghai, and whose economic performance has been somewhat ahead of national trends but not extraordinarily so.[28] The workers interviewed are diverse: old, middle-aged and young; male and female; skilled and unskilled; from state, collective, joint-venture and private firms; employed and unemployed; better and worse off. Yet despite their heterogeneity, it is striking that all of them, including even a retired worker and former factory cadre who continues to hold pronounced Maoist sensibilities, evinced a broad acceptance of the values of the market and of the legitimacy of the state.

First, even those who were faring poorly in the new market environment believed nevertheless that competition and market allocation of employment and income were both right and were more effective than the planned economy, even though many had done well under the latter. The following was fairly typical of interviewees' sensibilities: "Enterprises' development should not all proceed the same way. I support reform. It is necessary. Competition is right." This sentiment was surprising coming from a 47-year-old worker whose building materials factory was economically endangered, who was not readily re-employable, and who also had serious complaints:

> Competition is right. But what should we do about the workers in bankrupt enterprises? I think the government should have a policy to guarantee the workers' basic livelihood. There are lots of things about which I am dissatisfied. I go to work every day, and make contributions to the factory, but my wages are so low. My wife goes out to work, and together the two of us try to support our family. But we barely

28. From 1991 to 1999, gross value of industrial output in Tianjin grew 14.2% per year, compared with 10.9% nationally. It is more difficult to find consistent time-series data on household income over this period, but the following may provide a rough guide: in 1999, urban "real income" (*shiji shouru*) in Tianjin was 7,671 *yuan*, which was 368% higher than the average urban "cash income" (*xianjin shouru*) of 2,087 *yuan* in 1991. Comparable national figures are 5,889 and 1,996 *yuan*, a 295% increase. Tianjin's average urban real income in 1999 was significantly below that of Shanghai (10,989 *yuan*), Guangdong (9,206 *yuan* [n.b., this is not Guangzhou, which would surely be higher]), and Beijing (9,239 *yuan*). *Zhongguo tongji nianjian 2000* (*Statistical Yearbook of China 2000*) (Beijing: China Statistics Press, 2000), p. 319; *Zhongguo tongji nianjian 1992* (Beijing: China Statistics Press, 1992), p. 288.

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have enough to eat, and can't save anything. Our life is pretty tight. The factory leaders ought to have some sympathy for the workers, but they're not like that.[29]

One sea-change for workers brought about by marketization occurred when, starting in the middle to late 1980s, their wages and livelihoods became dependent on the economic health of their particular enterprise rather than on the state more broadly. As enterprises became more fully independent economically, for the first time workers in prosperous firms experienced higher wages, better employment security and more ample benefits than those in less successful firms. For workers, the economic health of their enterprise was often a matter of the luck of the draw. If they happened to find themselves in a sector that was faring badly, or in a plant with particularly incompetent management, they would lose out, often seriously, compared with their more fortunate fellows. *Prima facie*, this new economic structure provided an objective material basis for a sense of injustice among workers on the losing end. Yet very few informants had developed such sentiments. When the issue was raised in interviews, most interlocutors developed a puzzled, faraway look indicating that they had not thought about their circumstances quite that way before. It was difficult to get them to understand the changed situation to which I was inviting their reaction, even though they lived it on a daily basis. That itself is evidence of market hegemony. When I succeeded in doing so, which was not always possible (an indication of the depth of this particular aspect of market hegemony), the following responses were typical.

Yes, it's unfair that some people lose out simply because their enterprises are doing badly. I felt this. But I didn't express it. Partly this is because I saw that enterprises all over Tianjin were suffering. Mine wasn't the worst.[30]

The change [from all workers being treated the same to some doing better and some doing worse because of the condition of their factories] happened in 1995. Yes, now that I think of it, this was a big change, and it was hard for workers to accept. Yes, of course it's unfair. But if you don't accept it, you still have to accept it (*ni bu jieshou, ye dei jieshou*). There's no way around it (*mei banfa*).[31]

The last two sentences reflect an important aspect of hegemony: the view that a situation is natural and inevitable – that, in Gramsci's terms, it becomes common sense.

Others grounded their acceptance of the situation in the logic of the market:

Workers' dependence on the uneven economic fate of their factories started for me in 1988. It's fair that factories that can sell their products should do better than those that cannot. But no, I suppose it's not fair that the workers should have to suffer because of these differences.[32]

29. Interview, 28 May 1999.
30. Interview, 10 June 1999.
31. Interview, 7 June 1999.
32. Interview, 25 May 1999 (2).

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Once they began to think about the new enterprise-based inequalities among them, whom or what did workers hold responsible? Many drew a blank.

In the 1970s all workers were paid around the same. Now the differences are pretty large. I feel this is unfair. Some people earn too much money, and some earn too little. They are all workers, so why should the differences be so great? So ordinary people don't understand why the differences should be so great. I can't say whose responsibility this is. There are lots of ways of understanding this …

I don't know why workers who do a good job have to be laid off … Maybe it's that the country is too large and overpopulated – I can't figure it out. There definitely are lots of unreasonable things going on. Ordinary people can't say clearly what's happening.[33]

Yes, of course it's unfair that I worked for a factory that was doing poorly while others did not. I have a classmate who today has 100,000,000 *yuan*.
[Question:] Who has responsibility for this?
I don't blame the government. I just blame the situation (*xianxiang*). But what can you do? Things are still better today than they were before the reforms started. Even those worse off than me would say so.[34]

As these accounts make clear, these workers had a great deal of trouble determining who or what was responsible for the change. Significantly, many interpreted questions about responsibility in terms only of possible ameliorative efforts, not cause. This exchange is typical:

It's not fair that the workers should have to suffer because of these differences.
[Question:]: Who is responsible for this suffering?
The union is useless in this regard.
[Question:]: Is the government responsible?
Yes, the government is responsible for assuring a livelihood for workers.[35]

Like many of my interlocutors, this bright, experienced 30-year-old man simply did not grasp the question about who or what might have brought about the situation in which his livelihood had come to depend on the economic fortunes of his enterprise, or that the state and its policies of structural reform might have done so.

Most workers conceptualized the issue of their dependence on their firms' economic condition not in terms of its underlying causes, but rather by focusing directly on the causes of their firms' particular economic condition. Where it was poor, they tended to blame a number of factors, but usually not the state. Some chalked up their declining situation to fate or bad luck.

Many workers just feel that they have a bad fate (*mingyun*), that they went through

33. Interview, 28 May 1999.
34. Interview, 29 May 1999.
35. Interview, 25 May 1999 (2). Tellingly, even here he let the state off the hook. "But what can the government do? There are so many workers who are doing poorly that there is nothing the government can do about it." I return to the question of the state and hegemony below.

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the wrong door (*zou cuomen*) – i.e., if they had joined another industry when they first started work, things would be all right.[36]

Often they blamed their managers rather than the state.

The main responsibility for the factory's problems is the factory. The government's policy is to let everyone get rich. Whoever is capable will have food to eat. The government doesn't want to see factories do poorly, and doesn't want workers to lack for food. But some [factory] leaders' methods are mistaken. If you're a worker, what can you do? China's workers don't fear exhaustion, but only want to have work to do, to have hope. They don't fear being really tired; they are just afraid that their factory will not do well.[37]

Some workers in my plant did express their dissatisfaction about the factory's economic problems. Mainly it was people whose livelihoods were hurt most by the lay-offs, and whose personalities were such that they would speak out. They sought out the plant leadership [to complain]. No one sought out the government. I didn't feel that the government has responsibility for solving this, since there are enterprises all over the city in this situation. Moreover, the reason for the problem wasn't the government, but the enterprise leadership, which wasn't too smart.[38]

Even those who are doing poorly after being laid off do not hold the government responsible for their welfare. They hold their enterprises responsible, and they think that the government's responsibility is limited only to making sure that enterprises live up to policies. You can't hold the government responsible; there are so many laid-off workers, and the government can't support them all. Workers generally know this.[39]

In the past our leadership helped other districts build small factories. We gave them our technology free of charge. Now these factories' costs are lower than ours, because they have fewer people and because their business methods are very flexible. Whoever sells their products gets a commission; but our leaders never do this. Our leaders are numbskulls (*naozi bijiao jianghua*); they don't think flexibly. So now our products don't have buyers.[40]

Some did blame local government officials, though.

Yes, of course it's unfair that my wages are lower and I have to endure wage arrears just because I happen to work in a plant that is not doing well. Does the state have responsibility? The state's policies are good. It's the implementation that is no good. Sometimes middle-level officials mess things up …
Some people just turn bad after becoming officials.[41]

I still think Deng is good. It's just that many of the people below him are not so good – i.e., they are just out for themselves.
[Question:] But isn't such behaviour an inevitable result of the market, which Deng brought in?
Yes, it's a contradiction.[42]

36. Interview, 25 May 1999.
37. Interview, 25 May 1999 (2).
38. Interview, 10 June 1999.
39. Interview, 7 June 1999.
40. Interview, 25 May 1999 (2).
41. Interview, 28 May 1999.
42. Interview, 25 May 1999 (2).

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Yet holding local officials responsible is a different matter from blaming the state. As several of these accounts make explicit, generally the interviewees did not blame the state for their problems, or even expect the state to solve their problems, whatever the cause. One exception may be older workers – those who came of age in the heyday of the centrally-planned economy oriented to rapid, heavy industrialization.

Many older workers – especially those who worked in the 1960s and 1970s – do hold the state responsible for their livelihood. But many others do not.[43]

This last assertion, uttered by a thoughtful, analytically-minded and rather critical retired worker-*cum*-shopfloor cadre with decidedly Maoist commitments, was borne out by my interviews, as already shown above. To reiterate what one older woman worker who has seen her family income plummet because of her lay-off said:

I didn't feel that the government has responsibility for solving this, since there are enterprises all over the city in this situation … The reason for the problem wasn't the government …[44]

Workers' behavioural responses to the crises they face also evince the hegemony of the market. Many adopted market-based coping strategies.

Yes, of course it's unfair that some workers lose out just because their factories are doing badly. But most workers think that the way to deal with the inequality is to try to make more money for themselves … At first, most workers were afraid of being laid off. But then after it happened most found out that it wasn't so bad; that they could make do in various ways. Many are better off now … Most workers in my old plant found some way to make a living. You have to eat, after all. Some go into petty business, some find jobs on the labour market.[45]

All the laid-off workers in my plant found other work making about what they made before or more.[46]

Others said that workers' dependence on their ailing firms increased labour incentives.

If the plant does badly, people know they won't have work to do. So everyone works hard. When there's a lot of work in the plant, people go all out.[47]

A common response was for workers to develop all manner of advice for turning their firms around, and often to proffer it to their management.

Our factory has two labs, both of which have lots of administrators and experiment personnel; but they have nothing to do. No new products come out of there. We feel that the bosses should make them go do some other work, or at least put them all together so the other building can be vacated and used for a factory or rented out. Our factory has a great location, and the rent could pay some of our workers' salaries … We workers complain to our factory manager about this all the time. We just talk to

43. Interview, 25 May 1999.
44. Interview, 10 June 1999.
45. Interview, 7 June 1999.
46. Interview, 8 June 1999 (2).
47. Interview, 28 May 1999.

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him when we bump into him in the plant. We can speak very frankly. We tell him to close down one of the labs, because the people who are supposed to be doing research there just sit around and play cards. But he won't do it. He likes to have two laboratories around. We workers shouldn't have to pay for this. But the manager runs the factory like a patriarch.[48]

Some workers put their entrepreneurial ideas for their firms into action.

When things are going badly for the factory, everyone thinks of a way to help out – through friends and relatives – to get business for the factory. The plant also encourages people to help the factory to market its products. It gives out bonuses according to how much workers helped out with marketing.[49]

Many aspects of the thinking adumbrated in these accounts – the difficulty workers have conceptualizing a causal or even an ameliorative role for the state, and the way they focus their complaints and market-oriented responses on their enterprises rather than on themselves as individuals – reflect the continuing power of work-unit collectivism in workers' world views.

Finally, workers' views about protest reflect their hegemonic acceptance of the economic, political and existential realities in which they find themselves.

There are so many workers who are doing poorly that there is nothing the government can do about it. There is no point in protesting.

I have heard that some workers create disturbances. But there's no use in doing so. The workers in our factory have not done so. Every worker is trying to think of a way to make money, to change their position. If you create a disturbance, you can't make much money.[50]

We older workers would not make trouble. If we have opinions, we raise them to the higher levels, and after it investigates the government will take some measures to address the problem.[51]

We were owed six months' accumulated wage arrears – not six months straight, but six months' altogether. Workers were unhappy about this, and some protested to the management – not to the government. But everyone knew that the factory didn't have money, so what's the point? I was too embarrassed to raise opinions about this.[52]

Here is further evidence of work-unit-based thinking: these workers focused their protest on their enterprise, not the government, which owned it. And the energy and expectations brought to the protests by the minority who engaged in them were low, since they knew their enterprise's coffers and its capacity to help them were low.

Protest is understood, probably correctly, as behaviour engaged in by

48. Interview, 25 May 1999 (2).
49. Interview, 28 May 1999.
50. Interview, 25 May 1999 (2).
51. Interview, 28 May 1999.
52. Interview, 7 June 1999.

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people who are desperate and who have no other recourse through the market or through normal channels.[53]

The people who protest down at City Hall are old workers who are not receiving their pensions and who have no other way out.[54]

In some factories retired workers have not received their pension benefits or their medical expenses cannot be reimbursed. Some of these people create disturbances. No one from my factory has done so.[55]

At first my fellow workers were afraid of being laid off, but in general they didn't make trouble. Those with special problems did protest to the management, and generally they were just kept on in the plant. For most workers, though, after they were laid off they found they could do other things, so it was OK.[56]

Confirming a core theme developed by William Hurst and Kevin O'Brien,[57] one said:

Very few workers go down to government offices to make trouble. Those who do generally are either retired workers who are not getting their pensions, or else workers with special problems such as illness, injury or some special problem in their family's livelihood. There are several hundred thousand laid-off workers in Tianjin now, but only a few tens of thousands engage in this sort of thing; it's a tiny percentage.[58]

In other words, protest is an extraordinary response to workers' problems; ordinary responses revolve around the market or appeals through channels. And hegemony is, of course, a way of defining the ordinary.

Moreover, even when political conflict, including contentious politics, does break out, it can reflect and even reinforce hegemony. David Laitin conceptualizes hegemony in terms of the creation of a dominant political cleavage agreed upon by all combatants, including those who stand to lose from battles drawn along such a line:

[Hegemony] involves a concept of culture "not as values which are upheld but, rather, as 'points of concern' which are debated."[59]

A successful hegemony, then, doesn't yield "order"; rather, it yields a set of conflicts that automatically and common-sensically stand at the top of the political agenda.[60]

Chinese workers' protests reflect the hegemony of the market and of the state against which they are protesting. The most common slogans reported at protests demand food, not social change. Even the kind of food demanded can evince workers' acceptance of inequality: in one case, they chanted: "We don't demand fish, meat and eggs – we only

53. Apart from the interview accounts below, this point is also made in Feng Chen, "Subsistence crises."
54. Interview, 25 May 1999 (2).
55. Interview, 28 May 1999.
56. Interview, 8 June 1999 (2).
57. Hurst and O'Brien, "China's contentious pensioners."
58. Interview, 7 June 1999.
59. David Laitin, *Hegemony and Cultures: Politics and Religious Change Among the Yoruba* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), p. 29.
60. *Ibid.* p. 107.

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demand a mouthful of rice."[61] At their most political-sounding, workers' demands are more often focused on the behaviour of and revenge against individuals, not on the policies and structures that underlie that behaviour. "What do we workers hope for? We hope there will be another Cultural Revolution and all those corrupt cadres will be killed."[62] These workers do not associate themselves with the truly radical demands of the Cultural Revolution for economic democracy and equality or for draconian restrictions on markets. Their demands are, rather, well within the hegemony of the state, which itself has been dishing out capital punishment for a handful of notorious cases of corruption.

The Sources of Hegemony

How did the thinking of most Chinese workers, even the most immiserated and politically active ones, become subjected to the hegemony of the market and the state? To give some order to this inquiry, the following discussion is divided into categories of market and state hegemony, and, within those, to explanations rooted in general factors common to many markets and states, and to those specific to China.

Market hegemony To deal first with general factors, markets have well-known structural features that contribute to their acceptance by those who are nevertheless dominated within them. They atomize those they subject, offering the prospect of individual solutions, which in turn undermines the potential for forming collective solidarities that could challenge the market. This certainly is happening in China. The workers I interviewed who had any strategy for coping with the difficulties imposed on them by the market tended to think that their best approach was an individual one: to work harder, to seek out a new job, to get more education. (Such individual market-based strategies were more common than the collectivist, unit-oriented market-based ones discussed above.) Such an approach is, one can hypothesize, more likely to appear in a city like Tianjin (not to mention Beijing, Guangzhou or Shanghai), where the economy offers some realistic prospects along these lines, than in China's more economically decimated rustbelts in parts of Manchuria or the west. Markets also fragment classes, which makes broad class-based coalitions more difficult to fashion.[63] In younger and middle-aged Chinese workers' dismissive reports of protests as mainly a pastime for immiserated retirees, and in middle-aged and older workers' plaintive accounts of how

61. Feng Chen, "Subsistence crises," p. 51.
62. *Ibid.*
63. Elizabeth Perry has argued that in 20th-century China class fragmentation has facilitated mobilization by subgroups or strata of the working class. That may be true, but it may also help account for the working class's ultimate failure to become hegemonic. See Perry, *Shanghai on Strike: The Politics of Chinese Labor* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), and "Shanghai's strike wave of 1957"; Perry and Li, *Proletarian Power*.

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easy it is for younger workers to find jobs if they are laid off – which are echoed confidently by the younger workers – the obstacles to a broad working-class movement come into clear focus.

Markets also divert away from politics the energies of lively, smart people with leadership potential. The most dynamic workers I interviewed were, not surprisingly, those who were managing nicely in China's new economy, by achieving and maintaining good positions in their firms or through private entrepreneurship. Moreover, it is well known that factory cadres are often precisely those best able and most inclined literally to capitalize on the new market opportunities that open daily in China. Perhaps, then, the model developed in this issue by Yongshun Cai, in which laid-off factory cadres become leaders or co-ordinators of collective action, is more the exception than the rule – though of course in politics such exceptions are often precisely what make history when history is made.[64] Among my interviewees those in the direst straits tended to be the dimmest bulbs and the most depressed spirits – decidedly not the sorts capable of fashioning a localized protest, let alone a social movement.

Markets also create experiences that mitigate against opposition to them. Where and when they work well, they create a pool of consumer goods that, while not lifting all ships, can have a decidedly soporific effect.[65] They can persuade even those who are sinking that the palpable tide may eventually lift them. Among the workers I interviewed, many who were suffering nevertheless had the general economic development of the past two decades in mind when they averred that "reform" was still a good thing, and that there could be no return to the Maoist period, no matter how fondly they recalled the stability, camaraderie, high public-spiritedness, and clean government of those days (which many did). They saw the "success" of the market in the prosperity and rapid growth that is so palpable all around them even if it is out of their reach. Some expected that they would benefit by way of enhanced opportunities for spouses or children; others thought growth was robust enough to hold out a reasonable hope of something coming their way, such as the much-hoped-for foreign buyer for their enterprise.

Turning to China-specific factors, many Chinese workers brought high hopes and spirits to the triumph of the revolution in 1949 and to the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s.[66] And many still hold fond (if selective) memories both about the past and about its relevance to solving some of today's problems, such as the workers who want to deal Cultural Revolution-style with their corrupt managers and local officials.[67] By and large,

64. Cai, "The Resistance of Chinese laid-off workers in the Reform Period."

65. Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964).

66. See Stephen Andors, *China's Industrial Revolution* (New York: Pantheon, 1977); Perry and Li, *Proletarian Power*.

67. See above. In another example, in March 1997, an angry "mob of workers waited at the factory gate. They loaded [their factory manager] Huang onto the back of a flatbed truck and forced him into the painful and demeaning 'airplane position' – bent at the waist, arms straight out at the sides. Then they marched 10 kilometres through the rain to downtown Nanchong [Sichuan] and paraded him through the streets. 'It was just like the Cultural

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though, the Cultural Revolution did not fulfil their hopes, and even those who still think it a noble experiment generally also regard it as a failure because of its overwrought politicization, its perversions of class-based political struggle, and its social and economic havoc. This view still helps fuel the hegemony of both the market and the Dengist state, producing both a palpable sense that there is no alternative to the "reforms" as well as some favourable comparisons of the present with the worst of the past to balance the more positive memories of days gone by.[68]

Likewise, national (and nationalistic) comparisons, made only more apposite by the coincidence of Dengism with the age of rapid globalization of information technology that have brought glittering images of prosperity abroad before the eyes even of China's poorest, have helped foster support for market-based development in China. The fact that Japan, South Korea and Taiwan have prospered so well under capitalism – never mind that they in fact adopted a heavily statist variant – was specifically used by the Dengist leadership to mobilize support for its "reforms" in the early 1980s. And the fact that China is doing so well compared with Russia and much of Eastern Europe and Central Asia is, for many workers, the proof of the market pudding.

The hegemony of the market over even those suffering from it in China should not, perhaps, come as a surprise. For market-oriented values and social networks showed extraordinary resilience throughout even the Maoist period. Despite the vehemence with which the state attacked them, especially after 1956, markets repeatedly and irrepressibly sprang back to life even in Mao's day. In the wake of the disasters of the Great Leap Forward, many villagers returned land to those, including many "class enemies," who owned it before collectivization, sometimes having preserved exact knowledge of the old boundary markers and holdings. Although many of those who quickly became active merchants and entrepreneurs in the early 1960s were criticized for "speculation" and other capitalistic activities in the Cultural Revolution, the suffering and repression heaped on them did not discourage them from going straight back into business in the early 1980s. The market was a potent and durable institution that proved capable of withstanding everything the Maoist state could throw at it for three decades. This resilience may help explain, however undialectically, why Chinese workers laid low by the market can nevertheless see it at least as inevitable.

State hegemony. Nicos Poulantzas has explicated the complex ways that the capitalist state acquires hegemony out of the structural separation of the economic and the political, and, accordingly, the state's relative autonomy from the bourgeoisie.[69] In China, the state surely has drawn strength and longevity from the fact that it has persuaded many workers

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Revolution,' says a Nanchong journalist who was forbidden to run the story." Matt Forney, "We want to eat," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 26 June 1997.

68. Feng Chen ("Subsistence crises," p. 44) also mentions workers' sense that there is no alternative to the structural reforms.

69. Nicos Poulantzas, *Political Power and Social Classes* (London: Verso, 1973).

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that it is no longer responsible for their specific economic situations or even capable of doing much to ameliorate their problems. As shown above, insofar as they blame anyone or anything, the workers I interviewed generally tended to attribute their problems to their firms' management or to local leaders rather than to the state as an institution. Many also apprehended China's high level of unemployment as a problem that overtaxes the state, rather than as one caused by the state.

Yet the state's autonomy from the economy is only relative, in two senses. First, while the workers I interviewed do not regard the state as responsible for their specific vicissitudes, they do give it credit for the overall prosperity and growth that China has achieved since 1978. They also view the state generally as offering a modicum of protection from the worst effects of the market, through the lay-off allowances, unemployment benefits and subsidies to the poor that it routinely, if unevenly, dispenses directly or funds indirectly through enterprises, as well as the special allotments it arranges to mollify protesting workers.

Specific to China, the state has worked to reinforce the structural bases for its hegemony with a drumbeat of ideological interpellation. Hegemony operates most profoundly, of course, at the level not so much of what people think as of the categories in which they think. The press induces China's workers to think in terms of relatively harmless categories. In one very common example, a *Gongren ribao* story on state enterprise "reform" tried to appear objective by presenting survey data. But all the questions were framed in terms of the specific characteristics of enterprises:

> When asked to choose whether they preferred to work in state-owned, private, joint venture, or stock companies, 58% chose state-owned … They were then asked whether they would approve if their factory were doing pretty well and were made to take over a money-losing plant. 55% said they would approve, 30% disapproved, and 15% said they would have to look at the situation to decide.[70]

Such a story induces workers to think about their problems in terms of the ownership forms or the economic fortunes of their firms and not in terms of the market or of state policies themselves. Another typical story directed at workers blamed their plight in part on the unwillingness of enterprises to provide training, which directs workers' thinking to human capital rather than to capital or to the capitalistic state.[71]

Likewise, the state works hard to persuade workers that their problems come not from the state but from the market and their own failure to adapt to it. This same survey "found" that workers thought the second leading cause of enterprises' (and therefore, workers') problems, after

70. "Zhigong poqie qiwang jiakuai guoqi gaige budai gaohao guoyou qiye qicheng zhigong chongman xinxin" ("70% of workers urgently hope for the acceleration of state-owned enterprise reform to lead to incremental improvements in state-owned enterprises"), *Gongren ribao* (*Workers' Daily*), 14 January 1997.

71. Zhou Ningguang, "Qinggong, jiangong, wei nar chuan?" ("Young workers, lightweight workers, where should they sail?" *Gongren ribao*, 20 June 1996.

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"poor leadership," was "poor conditions in the market."[72] The state also continues to hector workers about how they ought to accept market-based logic in their own lives. For example, *Gongren ribao* published a readers' debate over a story it had published about a model worker named Ren Jianye, who turned down a cash prize that accompanied his honour. One of Ren's critics argued:

> For him not to accept it reflects a spirit of not asking for anything. But it has bad side effects. Not to accept it plays into the spirit of eating out of the same pot, in which some people rest easy on the fruits of others' work, in which some people work more but don't get more, all of which depresses the labour activism of many people. If people like Ren are paid more, this protects the people who work and contribute more, which in turn disturbs the people who waste their days.[73]

Here can be seen a more insidious rhetorical approach that divides the working class. For another example, *Gongren ribao* depicted young workers as lazy "good for nothings" (*mei chuxi*), lacking pride in their work, and unwilling to upgrade their skills. In a fascinating twist, it blamed other mass media for promoting an ethic of high living.[74] Many other accounts blame (male) urban workers' problems on rural migrants and women, who are frequently urged to return whence they came. In an extraordinary combination of subtlety and twisted brashness, *Gongren ribao* has even tried to divide employed from unemployed workers. For example, it published another "debate" in which one reader argued that while unemployment may be unfair to the unemployed, efforts to prevent unemployment for some, especially those for whom there is no work, would be unfair to the employed![75]

The state makes at least two other kinds of ideological appeals to the working class. First, it argues that the current situation facing workers coincides with modern international norms. For example, Britain's "workfare" programme was cited favourably in support of a plan to deny any benefits to workers who do not join training schemes.[76] Likewise, the 1995 Labour Law is justified on the grounds that it is similar to legislation of other industrial countries.[77] Secondly, it has argued that there is no alternative either to the "reforms" or to the problems that they have brought for workers. "At some stages of development, unemployment represents and is a necessary stage for social progress," a *Gongren ribao* reader wrote in its pages.[78]

72. "70% of workers urgently hope."
73. *Gongren ribao*, 18 January 1996.
74. Zhou Ningguang, "Young workers."
75. "Jiuye nan zai nar?" ("Where are the difficulties in employment?"), *Gongren ribao*, 10 July 1997.
76. "Weishemme yao jianli laodong yubei zhidu?" ("Why should a labour preparation system be established?"), *Guangming ribao* (*Enlightened Daily*), 16 July 1997.
77. Interview with trade union officials, Kunming, 4 December 1995.
78. Yet to the paper's credit it also printed a riposte from another reader on the question of history: "These days the newspapers and television are always saying that the reason workers are unemployed is that they don't have enough skills and enough ability to make a living. I say that a phenomenon cannot be separated from its historical conditions. For many decades, our country advocated 'if you have a line of work, you should love it and become

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Apart from ideological appeals, a number of political factors have helped the state develop and maintain its hegemony over the working class. Its bold and decisive reversal of the overbearing political radicalism of the Cultural Revolution remains important, especially to those who lived through it. The state's willingness to respond positively or at least not aggressively in the face of many local protests both mollifies flash points and helps persuade other workers that it can play a positive role for them. Likewise, its willingness to open up limited space for grumbling and even criticism – some of it, as above,[79] published in the official press – helps workers let off steam and is meant to persuade them that the state is not an utterly implacable enemy. Finally, the fanfare with which the state publicly attacks corruption may actually help place it in common cause with workers angry at their shady bosses and complicit local officials. Workers I interviewed seemed to believe that corruption was systemic, and thus largely beyond the capacity of the state to ameliorate. That position can, paradoxically, contribute to hegemony insofar as it helps relieve the state of significant responsibility for eliminating corruption in workers' eyes. As in their views of the market, they did not hold the state responsible for creating the political economy that lies at the root of corruption.

Conclusion

The Chinese working class – those who work in industrial settings for a wage, or who did so for most of their working lives until they were laid off or terminated – is an extremely diverse group that is, moreover, in rapid flux. China's workers are responding to their experiences in a wide variety of ways. Many are participating in various forms of collective action, some of which are documented in articles in this issue. Cai emphasizes the structural opportunities for protest provided by workers' and local leaders' knowledge that workers can appeal to local leaders' superiors for relief which, if granted, would undermine the local leaders. He also stresses the importance to successful collective action of effective grassroots leadership. Chen traces the roots of worker protest to subsistence crises, thereby echoing a major theme in the peasant moral economy

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good at it.' Well, I am an automobile worker. I don't want to boast, but my skills are first-rate, and in the past I was named a good worker. Now suddenly they say that if you only have one skill you can't be counted as a good worker. You have to learn lots of skills to ward off the danger of unemployment, they say. So, should I regard my work as my rice bowl, or as a way to lose my rice bowl? If a society doesn't acknowledge history, if it doesn't encourage honest workers, if it fails to acknowledge that unemployed workers gave their all to contribute to today's flourishing society, if it just tells them curtly to drop out, to get laid off, is this fair? Can this convince us in our hearts?" ("Jiuye nan zai nar?" ("Where are the difficulties in employment?")). The reasons why *Gongren ribao* chooses to print this sort of complaint are impossible to gauge. Surely, though, the fact it that does so cannot but help encourage down-and-out workers to read the paper, where they are exposed to its generally, if sometimes subtle, pro-reform drumbeat.

79. See n. 78.

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literature pioneered by James Scott.[80] Hurst and O'Brien focus on the special circumstances that impel pensioners to protest and provide the resources and opportunities for them to do so. Elsewhere, Lee, taking issue with Burawoy and Lukács' analysis of the soporific effect of post-state socialist market transition, argues that in China the legacies of state socialist egalitarianism and Maoist-era radicalism provide ideological bases, linguistic discourses, and repertoires for proletarian protest.[81]

Balancing all this ferment is a set of countervailing forces identified in various literatures that dampen working class collective action. Scott has argued that in general workers are more subject to the ideological hegemony of the state than peasants, because they are more easily saturated with the state's discursive and symbolic messages.[82] Burawoy and Lukács focus on the atomizing effects of the market transition, which holds out the prospect of individual rather than collective solutions to workers' problems. They also highlight the way the transition undermines state socialist shopfloor regimes, associated with the shortage economy, that reinforced worker solidarity.[83] Cai mentions the obstacles to the emergence of grassroots protest leadership, the problems workers have co-ordinating collective action across enterprises, and the state's skill in phasing in lay-offs so as to disperse the shock over time.[84] To all this can be added, of course, the repressive apparatus of the state and its denial of any space in civil society for working-class self-organization – a not wholly convincing argument, since, as shown above, many workers engaged in bold forms of collective action in the second half of 1989, when the state was at its most repressive.

The analysis presented here can be grouped with this second set of factors. It shares in a general way Scott's argument about workers' susceptibility to ideological hegemony, but expands it by emphasizing the hegemony of the market as well as the state. It has something in common with Burawoy and Lukács' argument about Hungary, though it does not focus on the shopfloor[85] and it emphasizes that Dengist-era market and state hegemony is rooted as much in a dark as in a radiant view of the past.

The argument of this article is most definitely not meant to minimize, much less refute, scholarship that focuses on and emphasizes the importance and potential of worker protest. Such collective action is all too real,

80. James C. Scott, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976).

81. Lee, "The 'revenge of history'"; Michael Burawoy and János Lukács, *The Radiant Past: Ideology and Reality in Hungary's Road to Capitalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

82. James Scott, "Hegemony and the peasantry," *Politics and Society*, Vol. 7, No. 3 (1977), pp. 267–296.

83. Burawoy and Lukács, *The Radiant Past*.

84. Cai, "The resistance of Chinese laid-off workers in the Reform Period."

85. In future work I expect to do so. My preliminary hypothesis is that the kinds of "hegemonic" shopfloor practices identified by Burawoy as characteristic of Fordist capitalism also prevail in reform-era state enterprises in Tianjin, with the attendant hegemonic effects discussed by Burawoy in his pioneering scholarship on the Fordist-era workplace. See Michael Burawoy, *Manufacturing Consent* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), and *The Politics of Production* (London: Verso, 1985).

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and, particularly in a crisis, it could develop into a far more potent force than it has proven to be to date. The point of this article, though, is to attempt to explicate one set of factors that appear to be arrayed against such a development. They are not insurmountable by any means.

These findings of about the forces of hegemony over Tianjin workers and their effects in producing general working-class political passivity can be squared, at least in a preliminary and hypothetical way, with scholarship that focuses on protest. Tianjin is no economic avatar, but it is doing a good deal better than the towns in which Lee and Hurst were able to do their impressive fieldwork. The subsistence crises identified as key by Chen did not obtain in my sample of Tianjin workers. There are such workers in Tianjin, but far fewer in relative and probably even absolute terms than can be found in the hard-hit Liaoning or Shanxi rustbelts. Likewise, my sample did not include pensioners deprived of their benefits, though they too exist, of course, in Tianjin; and, as Hurst and O'Brien would predict, the old-timers protest there as well.[86]

How durable is the hegemony of the market and of the state over the thinking of the working class? One issue raised above is the continuing power of work-unit collectivism over the thinking of many workers. It is true that the material bases of work-unit life are eroding: workers are being laid off, housing markets are rising, many enterprises are no longer paying social benefits (and some benefits are beginning, haltingly and incompletely, to be provided by city governments), and labour markets are developing. Over time, then, the capacity of work-unit collectivism to shape workers' *weltanschauungen* may well erode.[87] Even if it does, though, the hegemony of the market and the state may find new defences and forms. Collectivistic forms of market hegemony, especially those that fail, can readily metamorphose into individualistic ones. As for state hegemony, work units are only one of many possible institutions that can legitimate the state or insulate it from society; others include the rule of law, new forms of intermediate organizations and the market itself.[88]

The stunning rapidity with which hegemony of the market and the Dengist state emerged over the past two decades could affect that hegemony's future either way. On the one hand, it might suggest that working-class thinking is capricious, responding primarily to the immediately preceding crisis (in this case, of the Maoist period) and/or to the positive aspects of the macro-economic and political changes of the Dengist period. If this is so, then the hegemony of the market and the state might be fragile, particularly in the event of a serious and sustained economic crisis. On the other hand, the fact that many of the core political and economic values of the Maoist period were tossed aside so quickly might suggest that they had not really taken root. In this case, market and state hegemony would appear more durable.

86. Personal communication with a source who must remain anonymous.

87. See also Lü Xiaobo and Elizabeth J. Perry, *Danwei: The Changing Chinese Workplace in Historical and Comparative Perspectives* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1997).

88. Lee emphasizes the centrality and implications of the "rule of law" in the state's present approach to the working class. See "From the specter."

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For Gramsci, hegemony and counter-hegemony are built by political movements, a project requiring extraordinary patience, skill and determination, as well as a civil society in which to grow. So long as the People's Republic continues to survive as China's state in anything like its present form, there seems almost no likelihood that a robust working-class political movement capable of building a counter-hegemony against the market or the state could emerge. And if the state falls, the ensuing political situation would, in all likelihood, be confused and unstable enough to provide a poor environment for a durable, vigorous anti-market social movement of the kind that, for example, the Italian Communist Party aspired to be, and in some ways was, from the 1950s to the 1980s.

Of course, as a Marxist Gramsci also knew that economic crisis could undermine hegemony and create opportunities for the development of counter-hegemony. The state's hegemony is built upon its ability to guarantee and claim credit for China's stunning economic expansion since 1978. Were that economic growth to end in a serious, sustained economic crisis, workers might respond with outbursts that could threaten the survival of the People's Republic of China. But even in that scenario, it is difficult to see how the hegemony of the market would be undermined. In the last days of the Soviet Union, striking coal miners saw the market as their salvation from the grips of a corrupt state and a political economy that had failed them.[89] While the comparison with China is inexact, since Chinese workers are already living in – and many are suffering under – an established market system, the tendency under capitalism for economic crises to find expression primarily as political crises can be observed in a wide variety of countries and contexts. In China as elsewhere, a deep economic crisis would be far more likely to incubate a movement against the state – which is, after all, an overt, palpable target – than against the market itself. The latter is, after all, far more diffuse and amorphous an object of political struggle. Mobilization against the market also requires a robust left in command of considerable political resources, something not at all likely in the context of a China that has been moving against its own left and which, in the scenario being adumbrated here, would just have thrown out its communist party. That that party had presided over a systematic transition to capitalism would probably make little difference even to immiserated workers: they would, at a moment of crisis, be more likely to blame it for being too left than too right. In short, even if state hegemony were to fail, market hegemony would probably survive, and might even be strengthened, at least in the short or medium term.

For a latter-day Gramsci interested in elaborating a working class political movement, then, China today provides good cause for the "pessimism of the intellect" professed by the master, and a sore test of the "optimism of the will" he strove so nobly to affirm.

89. Stephen Crowley, *Hot Coal, Cold Steel: Russian and Ukrainian Workers from the End of the Soviet Union to the Post-communist Transformations* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997).

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