

What About the Chinese Workers?

Part Two: How Workers Control China's Socialist Path

Roland Boer

2021

In an earlier piece on the Chinese workers, I tackled a number of questions: the expansion of the category of workers to include rural workers (formerly known as peasants); the relation between ownership and liberation of productive forces so as to understand the 'wild gos'; and the extraordinary improvements in the lives of workers due to the resolute poverty alleviation program that has lifted about 800 million people out of poverty.

Here I would like to address a further question: how do Chinese workers control the direction of China's path? The answer has three main parts: 1) the right and duty to work; 2) the mass line; 3) China's socialist democratic system. To anticipate my overall answer to the question, Chinese workers control China's direction through the mass line that is manifested today in the many integrated components of China's socialist democratic system.

The Right and Duty to Work

Let us begin with article 42 of the Constitution: 'Citizens of the People's Republic of China have the right as well as the duty to work [劳动的权利和义务]'. This type of clause – not found in any capitalist Constitution – has become a standard socialist item ever since the Soviet Union. But note well: work is both a right (*quanli*) and a duty or obligation (*yiwu*). Even more, 'Work is a matter of honour [*guangrong*] for every citizen who is able to work'. Thus, work is not only a right and duty, but it is also regarded as honourable and respected.

But what word is used for 'work' in the Constitution? It is 劳动 (*laodong*), which may be translated as labour or work. Thus, a 劳动者 is a 'labourer' or 'worker'. But who can be defined as a labourer? It is everyone who has the ability to work and is involved in the many types of jobs that are a reality in China. Thus, there are many types of labour and the practice is to maintain a constantly revised list of the more than 300 different forms of labour.

While *laodong* covers all types of work, from scientific research, through management, to rural work, we may wonder what has happened to the industrial worker. This is one particular category of *laodong* and is known as the 工人 (*gongren*). This is a worker with certain skills who works in the many types of industrial and construction projects. In the earlier definitions of classes during the construction of socialism, it was common to speak of industrial workers (*gongren*), farmers (*nongmin*), and intellectuals

(*zhishifenzi*) as the three main groups. We find these in the Soviet Union's Constitutions, and they appear also in the historical preamble to the Chinese Constitution. These days, however, there are many more types of worker alongside these three groups.

Mass Line

With this in mind, I would like to tackle the question as to how workers control the forces of production and determine the direction in which China is going. A key is the 'mass line [群众路线]', and in explaining how this works I draw on some research undertaken for my book, *Socialism with Chinese Characteristics – A Guide for Foreigners* (Springer, 2021).

The mass line was initially developed during the process of land reform in pre-1949 liberated Red Areas. We find early elaborations on the practice and theory of the mass line in the works of Mao Zedong, Deng Xiaoping, Zhou Enlai and others. It was, of course, Mao who coined the slogan 'from the masses, to the masses', but this arose from concrete practices of integrating the will of the non-Party masses with the policies of the CPC.

We need to understand the terminology used here. To begin with, the term 'masses [群众 – *qunzhong*]' has a rich semantic field: it designates the rural and urban workers who formed the bedrock of the CPC. At the same time, the term 'masses' overlaps significantly with the term 'people [人民 – *renmin*]'. In this light, expressions such as 'the Party leads the people' or 'taking the people as centre [*yi renmin wei zhongxin*]' also mean 'the Party leads the masses' and 'taking the masses as the centre'. Further, 'mass organisations' play a crucial role in China's political system. They are neither social organisations of the sort found in bourgeois civil society and in tension with the state, nor are they Communist Party organisations. Instead, mass organisations are distinct and have a 'mass character [群众性 – *qunzhongxing*]', with deep political roots and a long history. In short, they represent public concerns that are not directly connected with the structures of governance.

How does the mass line work? As Ma Yide (2017) puts it, the mass line 'is inclusive, as the opinions of the broad mobilised masses are listened to; it is guided by reason, as the views of the masses are studied and become the views of the central system; it achieves balance through reflection, as opinions are constantly tested through the actions of the masses; and it links consultation and decision-making, as the views of the masses are elevated into action'.

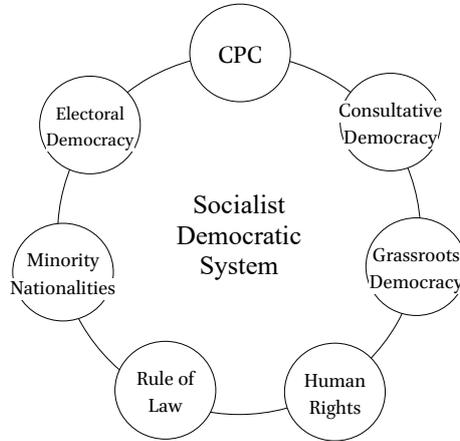
It was precisely the mass line that provided one of the impetuses for the development of China's socialist democratic system, especially consultative democracy and the leadership and indeed continued legitimacy of the CPC.

Socialist Democratic System

Thus far, we have seen that workers exercise control through the mass line, especially the workers who are not members of the 100 million-strong CPC. But this is only

part of the answer. The most comprehensive control over productive forces and China's policy direction is through the socialist democratic system.

A full description of this system is not possible here (see the book), so let me provide a diagram to show its many components.



You can see that the overall democratic system has seven components. Let me summarise how they work:

1. Electoral democracy entails – as the name suggests – elections to the five levels of people's congresses. These congresses operate from local levels all the way through to the National People's Congress, which meets every year and is the supreme legislative body. Every citizen over the age of 18 has the right to vote and there are strict regulations concerning the number of candidates and number of voters required for an election to be valid. Candidates may be nominated in a number of ways, such as by any political party (there are 9), mass organisation, or group of ten citizens. Elections to the lowest two levels of people's congresses are direct, and at the higher levels they are indirect – meaning that delegates are elected from the lower levels.

2. Consultative democracy operates alongside electoral democracy and emerges from the practices of the mass line (see above). Institutionally, consultative democracy is embodied in the many levels of People's Political Consultative Conferences and includes all representative groups such as minority nationalities, religious bodies, mass organisations, and new social groups such as migrant workers. However, consultative democracy is much wider than the consultative conferences, since it operates in CPC meetings, planning and policy development, and is integrated with electoral democracy in the workings and decision making of the people's congresses. Importantly, compared to the thin and sporadically practised 'deliberative democracy' in some capitalist countries, consultative democracy has deep roots in China's socialist system and is therefore quite mature.

3. Grassroots democracy is an element of consultative democracy and a practice in its own right. Again, grassroots – or ‘base level [*jiceng*] – democracy has a long history, going back to pre-Liberation Red Areas. In the last 20 years it has moved to a whole new level, with local practices tailored for local conditions and functioning in many, many areas of China. They deal with all local matters, ranging all the way from budget planning, through land use, to health and aged care. And they have significant autonomy in decision-making. In my book on socialism with Chinese characteristics, I provide an overview of a few examples of how grassroots democracy works, as well as copious references to the many studies of such practices, but we should note that here as well workers have a direct say in all manner of policy decisions and the enactment.

4. Minority nationalities (民族) number 55 in China and they have from the very beginning been integral to the development of China’s political system. Minority nationalities receive preferential treatment in terms of economic development (since many live in remote areas), governance, education, culture, and religion. And they are a vital component of China’s socialist democracy (in contrast to capitalist democracies). Not only are they represented as distinct groups in the People’s Political Consultative Conferences, but they are also members of the CPC and are elected to the People’s Congresses.

5. Human rights in China take socio-economic well-being as the core human right. This is a distinctly Marxist approach to human rights, and it is founded upon the anti-colonial struggle for national liberation (seen by Marx and Engels as integral to class struggle). Thus, sovereignty is distinctly non-hegemonic and functions in terms of mutual non-interference and peaceful coexistence. And when you have such sovereignty, you can foster human rights. A Chinese Marxist approach sees human rights as historical, granted by society, and constantly in development in light of national conditions. We can see how the core right to socio-economic well-being is enacted in all manner of policies, such as poverty alleviation, liberating the forces of production, the Belt and Road Initiative, and in improving the well-being of workers. From this core human right flow civil, political, cultural, and environmental rights.

6. Rule of Law (法治) has developed into a distinctive feature of China’s socialist democratic system. To be clear: while the development of rule of law in China has a long history (see my book), it is not the same as capitalist rule of law. Instead, it is a socialist rule of law that arises from China’s socialist system and reinforces that system. Crucially, rule of law is embodied in the practice of ‘ruling the country according to law [依法治国]’, which brings me to the final component.

7. Leadership of the Communist Party. This is arguably the most distinctive feature of socialist democracy, and the whole system is seen to strengthen the CPC’s leadership, while that leadership strengthens the socialist democratic system. It also means that the CPC leads *indirectly* (contrary to what some misguided Westerners might believe). How

so? The CPC leads through the ‘statutory processes [法定程序]’ of socialist democracy. It is through these statutory procedures that the will of the CPC becomes the law of the land and is owned by the people. Or, as Xi Jinping puts it, this is the reality of democratic centralism as a country-wide practice.

This has necessarily been a summary of the socialist democratic system, but I have provided the summary so as to show how workers in China control decisions concerning the forces of production and China’s policy directions. This is known as ‘taking the people as centre [以人民为中心]’, or simply a ‘people-centred’ approach to every dimension of the Chinese project. As mentioned earlier, this also entails that it is a ‘mass-centred’ and thus ‘worker-centred’ approach.

Remaining Questions

There is a distinct confidence in China concerning the inherent superiority of its socialist democratic system, especially in contrast to the crude and now inept practices of capitalist democracy that restricts its definition to elections. There is also a strong emphasis in China that the development of the whole system is always a work in progress and can always be improved through careful study, testing, pilot projects, and implementation.

However, a couple of questions remain. First, the Chinese Constitution stipulates in article 6 that the principle of socialism is ‘from each according to ability, to each according to work [按劳分配].’ This principle goes back to the Soviet Union of the 1920s and became part of the Soviet Constitution in 1936. Indeed, it has become a core definition of socialism. But it seems to me that some of us have not yet quite understood the implications of ‘to each according to work’. Yes, work in a socialist system is a right, duty, and honour. From my own experience, I can say that I have never worked as hard as I have done in China. I have tackled tasks of which I did not think I was capable. And by far the majority of people in China work very, very hard. Why? One works not merely for oneself, for one’s pay-packet, to enable holidays and leisure. To be sure, some do so, seeking to advance their own careers. But for the vast majority the ultimate duty of work is to contribute to the greater or common good.

Finally, what about the role of trade unions? Those from capitalist contexts cannot avoid seeing trade unions as antagonistic organisations that are engaged in constant struggle with capitalist bosses for the sake of workers. However, when a Communist Party – representing all workers – is in power the question arises: what is the role of trade unions in the construction of socialism? There is plenty of material on the Chinese trade unions as worker representatives, and in every workplace I have been there is a trade union office. To examine this topic would require another study, seeking insights as to how trade unions function in the context of socialist construction. But it seems to me that

at least in capitalist contexts we have not yet really examined or understood properly how trade unions should work when a Communist Party leads a socialist democratic system.