

## **The (Post-)Socialist Work Ethic in China:**

### **A Case Study of Healthcare Workers during the Covid-19 Pandemic**

By Chang Liu, PhD Candidate, Sociology Department, The New School for Social Research

#### **Introduction**

During the beginning of the outbreak of Covid-19 in Wuhan, a large number of medical workers, social workers, civil servants, and volunteers etc. died for overworking on testing and other various medical and administrative tasks needed for implementing government's various restriction policies. However, instead of recognizing them as the victims of overworking or work accidents, the state renders them as "model workers", heroes and martyrs for the nation and the people; instead of improving the working conditions of these paid or unpaid "covid-workers", the unnatural deaths of them are depicted as glorious deeds. This serves as a case of demonstrating how the state deploys a nationalist discourse to impose the socialist work ethic on workers. In this context, my research project aims to investigate the work ethic in post-socialist China. Specifically, I intend to demonstrate how the state enhances and "remakes" a (post-)socialist work ideology, and how workers respond to it in China today, by taking a case study of the healthcare workers during the Covid-19 Pandemic in China.

Based on the pilot study supported by the ICI summer research award, I argue that in contrast to the work ethic under capitalism which tends to romanticize work as something individual and even "social necessity debt", socialist work ethic romanticizes work by invoking a strong attachment of the value of work to the national interests and thus justifying the "sacrifice" of workers by seeing it as contributing to the grandiose plans of the country. In a sense, despite its self-claim to be pro-worker, socialist work ethic, is pro-work and even pro-overwork, yet against workers' rights of not to work. In the meantime, such work ideology endorsed by the state has brewed an anti-work activism of "passive refusal" among the younger generation in China, as a response to the overwork culture and socialist work ethic.

#### **Capitalist and Socialist (reproductive) Work Ethic**

The work ethic under capitalism tends to imbue workers with a delusionary belief that working is the only way to achieve the autonomy, independence, and "ultimate freedom" of yourself (Taylor 2004: 39). The term "social necessity debt" proposed by Heather Berg reveals how "workers are evaluated based on the perceived necessity of their work to the reproduction of society" (2014, 161) and how the work ethic in turn prevent the workers, especially the reproductive workers from refusing work. Moreover, Berg terms the work ethic which "assumes that social reproduction is self-evidently good and necessary and subordinates disruptive desires and

practices to it dictates” (ibid, 162) as “(re)productivism”. As a critique and response to (re)productivism, Berg argues that the reproductive workers should be as rightful as factory or productive workers to refuse work, rather than being seen as antisocial or unethical.

In comparison, the socialist work ethic romanticizes work as well, but it romanticizes the value of work in the opposite way: instead of projecting the consciousness of self-realization and independence, it praises the virtues of selflessness, or forgetting yourself, and invokes a strong attachment of the value of work to the national interests, justifying the “sacrifice” of workers by seeing it as contributing to the grandiose plans of the country. A famous socialist slogan “serve the people” especially reveals the core of the socialist work ethic, which “is primarily an ethical demand. It names a requirement for pure selflessness and individual sacrifice, ideally through death, for the already constituted revolutionary collective. ....” (Karl 2019: 247-250).

However, very little research compares the different configurations of the work ethic under capitalism and socialism. In this project, I make a tentative comparison of the work ethic in post-socialist China and in the late capitalist Western Societies. With a new culture of what I term “passive refusal” emerging in China in recent years, it is tempting to ask what a politics of refusal and a post work imagination would be for Chinese society today.

### **A Case Study of Healthcare Workers**

This project mainly draws on a combination of discourse analysis and interview research methods. As a pilot study, I have conducted interviews with two medical workers in Shanghai over the phone, one is a general practitioner in her mid-late twenties, Yi, who worked in “Fangcang” hospital (“square cabin” mobile field hospital) from April to May in 2022 in Shanghai; the other one is a medical volunteer, Chen, who worked at a temporary Covid-19 vaccination center in Shanghai for a few months.

When asked if she and other medical workers she worked with in Fangcang received any honors, Yi said:

“I don’t know about the others. We don’t have the honors anyway. The work unit let me to go there (fangcang) to work so I went there, because I certainly cannot say ‘no’, so I just went and work there, as for not to get a what honor, it does not really matter. These days, it is fine as long as there is no underpayment of our subsidies. ....But if they just give me an honor without paying the subsidy, that’s certainly not OK.”

In a sense, Yi’s attitude towards honors at work reveals her rejection of a work ethic which emphasizes the symbolic value of work. Moreover, Yi is very critical of the propaganda about socialist work ethic. She recalls her conversation with her supervisor about preparing the propaganda materials for May 4 Youth Day as,

“To prepare the propaganda materials for May 4 Youth Day, our work unit asked me if I had any “touching stories” in fangcang hospital, and I said I had no touching stories, and he said, “Think again, are you sure?” I said, “No, I really don’t.” He said, “Then just write a paragraph saying that when you arrived at fangcang hospital how panic you were,

and then you experienced what to overcome the difficulties, and then what you did after...", so I just wrote a paragraph following this template and sent it over.”

Rather, Yi tends to hold a “passive refusal” attitude towards work. She talked about her colleagues who chose to give up their jobs at “big hospital” and came to her work unit as,

“There are many people from the big hospital coming to the community hospital, they do not want too “involved”, and just muddle through their work.....I am muddling through as well, I don’t even want to achieve the work target, as long as the supervisor will not scold me about that.”

In a sense, the work ethic of Yi and her colleagues affirms the emergent anti-work culture on Chinese social media. In 2019, a digital anti-overwork activism—Anti-996 Movement, was initiated by a group of Chinese tech workers to make a public claim denouncing the overtime-working culture. Compared to the traditional labor movement and unrest, the online movement was not centered on the streets or physical workplace but a code-sharing website GitHub and has kept spreading its activist discourse digitally to more social media platforms. This autonomous and anonymous form and approach of activism shows the new possibilities of anti-work politics in post-socialist China.

And this anti-(over)work activism has brewed a new culture of “passive refusal” which is often called as “mo yu” (catching fish) and “tang ping” (lying flat) in Chinese on the social media. Both terms are used as a figure of speech for slacking off or doing as little as possible at work, which indicate a passive way of refusal while justifying and encouraging a positive attitude towards work less or to be lazy. Despite the passiveness in its strategy, the new culture voice the grievances and discontent of the workers of new generation very loudly. By practicing and using such terms in the daily discourse of workers, it not only forms the solidarity based on the recognition of the value of anti-work but also reinforces the anti-work ideology among workers

## **Discussions**

Today, with the global neoliberal turn, only very few workers have the privilege to be secure enough to not work hard. More and more horrifying and precarious living conditions put workers of more kinds in a position of “work or die”. And laziness is not even any closer to be seen as a virtue. Rather, it is commonly stigmatized as a justification of poverty, especially in the cases of the homeless and the unemployed. If the pre-neoliberal welfare states once gave workers the delusion that they do not have to work hard, neoliberal regimes today have poured cold water on their head and made workers sober enough to be eager to work and desperate for a stable job more than ever. With the boundaries between work and nonwork, productive work and reproductive work under late capitalism are both getting blurred and cannot be even distinguished, it might be a timing to ask if the work ethic is only just about work. As work has dominated different aspects of our life so thoroughly, has not the ideology of work become the life ethic? As Lafargue says, “but how should we ask a proletariat corrupted by capitalist ethics, to take a manly resolution...” (2012, 21). This makes us rethink if the capitalist ethic has been so entrenched in our mindset that it is even hard for us to imagine an alternative way of living?

Given this, more research on workers' evaluation of work and their job choice-making process might be needed. For example, what is good job and bad job, good work or bad work for workers? If a good job for workers is necessarily a higher paid one, or are there any other factors to be considered? What are the dream jobs for workers? And how would the answers to these questions vary among different social groups of workers?

With the help of the ICI's student research award, I managed to collect the relevant archives and media reports, as well as to purchase the relevant materials and supplies such as the books and equipment. Part of the fellowship was also used for hiring a local research assistant who helps me to collect relevant research materials.

## References

Berg, H. (2014). An Honest Day's Wage for a Dishonest Day's Work:(Re) Productivism and Refusal. *Women's Studies Quarterly*, 42(1/2), 161-177.

Karl, R. E. (2019). Serve the People. In *Afterlives of Chinese Communism: Political Concepts from Mao to Xi*. ANU Press.

Lafargue, P. ([1883] 2012). *The right to be lazy*. The Floating Press.

Taylor, S. (2004). The right not to work: Power and disability. *MONTHLY REVIEW-NEW YORK-*, 55(10), 30-31.