Masters of the Nation

Representation of the industrial worker in films of the Cultural Revolution period (1966-1976)

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ABSTRACT: Cinema, an extremely popular and useful cultural form during the Maoist era, played a big role in shaping working class subjectivity. This article argues that despite their highly politicised and formalised content, industrial-themed films made during the Cultural Revolution created a "masters of the nation" subjectivity that still resonates with workers who grew up watching these films. In doing so, this article brings together two bodies of scholarship that rarely make reference to one another: filmmaking in the Cultural Revolution period and post-Mao workers' subjectivity. Post-Mao scholarship has gone beyond simply dismissing films from the Cultural Revolution period as crude propaganda designed to create a highly politicised mass mind. It has drawn our attention to the more complicated nature of this body of filmmaking, particularly the "model play" films. However, new features made during the Cultural Revolution are often seen as "too ideological" to warrant academic attention. This paper attempts to find out how the "masters of the nation" discourse still resonates with workers who grew up watching these films. It argues that, despite the valorisation of workers as the privileged class and an excessive focus on class struggle, these films have indeed endowed the subaltern with the kind of agency that is lacking in contemporary media representations of workers.

KEYWORDS: film, Cultural Revolution, workers, subjectivity, representation, Masters of the Nation.

Introduction [1]

The three decades since the end of Cultural Revolution have seen a sea change in the fate of workers. No longer the "elder brother" (*laodage* 老大哥) of the population or the "advanced force" (*xianjin liliang* 先进力量) among the social classes, workers are increasingly seen as a marginalised group on the social periphery. Life-long employment for workers, referred to as the "iron rice bowl," and various social benefits that made workers' jobs enviable, are now blamed for causing sluggish productivity. A whole generation of workers, mostly in their 40s, was left behind as the price to pay for China's march towards a market economy.

For workers experiencing the throes of marginalisation, however, memories of their glorious past have not faded so easily. In her interview with industrial workers in China's northeast industrial area, sociologist Ching Kwan Lee found that workers could not talk about the present without invoking the past. In particular, workers voiced indignation by making moral references to socialist rhetoric such as "workers are the masters of the enterprise." [2] This shows that the decline in the material conditions of the working class has been coupled with changing representations of working class subjectivities. For a long time, workers and peasants in films and other media forms represented the most politically conscious and morally progressive class subjects, the "mainstream" of society, and the socialist state's political backbone. [3]

While workers' marginalised status in economic, political, and social terms has attracted scholarly attention, [4] the symbolic transformation has received little emphasis. For a long time, films made during the Cultural Revolution (hereafter CR) period were considered propaganda tools designed to cultivate a "mass mind." These assumptions, according to film researcher Wang Zhuoyi, result in three inadequacies in dealing with this collection of filmmaking: first, neglect; second, dismissal; and third, homogenisation. [5]

Post-Mao scholarship on art and culture often treats CR films as crude propaganda unworthy of serious academic attention. Despite the fact that the first three decades produced about 800 feature films, a variety of genres, and an industry of more than a dozen studios and a massive audience, the period went "missing" from the academic radar. [6] Paul Pickowicz's historical overview of studies on Chinese cinema has identified the early state socialist era (1949 to 1976) as one of the three "most ignored periods" in Chinese film studies. [7] In fact, the public perception of the whole period is that "there was no culture." [8] Outside of China, Cold War geopolitics meant no critical engagement by Western academics, [9] while inside of China, Maoist cinema is often viewed as made with the didactic purpose of conveying po-

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2. Ching Kwan Lee, "What was Socialism to Chinese Workers? Collective memories and labor politics in an age of reform," in Ching Kwan Lee and Yang Guobin, *Re-envisioning the Chinese Revolution: The Politics and Poetics of Collective Memories in Reform China*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2007, pp. 141-165.
3. Zhao Yuezhi, "Chinese Modernity, Media and Democracy: An Interview with Lü Xinyu," *Global Media and Communication*, Vol. 6, No. 1, 2010, pp. 5-32.
4. See Dorothy Solinger, *States' Gains, Labor's Losses: China, France and Mexico Choose Global Liaisons, 1980-2000*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2009; and Pun Ngai, *Made in China: Women Factory Workers in a Global Workplace*, Durham, NC, Duke University Press, 2005.
5. Wang Zhuoyi, *Revolutionary Cycles in Chinese Cinema, 1951-1979*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, p. 11.
6. Yomi Braester and Tina Mai Chen, "Film in the People's Republic of China, 1949-1979: The Missing Years?", *Journal of Chinese Cinemas*, Vol. 5, No. 2, 2011, pp. 5-12.
7. Paul G. Pickowicz, "From Yao Wenyuan to Cui Zi'en: Film, History, Memory," *Journal of Chinese Cinemas*, Vol. 1, No. 1, 2007, pp. 41-53.
8. Paul Clark, *The Chinese Cultural Revolution: A History*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2008, p. 2.
9. Yomi Braester and Tina Mai Chen, "Film in the People's Republic of China, 1949-1979: The Missing Years?" *op. cit.*, pp. 6-7.

litical messages. The devastation of political persecution has led intellectuals and common people alike to view the period as one of political excess, and its cultural products as a feudal anomaly.[10] CR films were seen by critics[11] as created within the straightjacket of "three prominences" (*santuchu* 三突出), which requires the central heroic characters to satisfy a number of preferred qualities, summed up in the formula of "loftiness, greatness, and perfection" (*gao, da, quan* 高, 大, 全).[12] The limited works singled out for analysis[13] do not fairly represent the diversity of the genre.

Recently, films made during the Cultural Revolution have started to draw more nuanced analysis from academics. The first round of investigations came from literary scholars who engaged in close readings of the representative works to reveal the multiple meanings embedded in these films.[14] These discourse analyses, while useful, are highly selective and omit much of the cultural milieu. More recently, a historical approach has been adopted to complement the textual analysis. Scholars such as Paul Clark,[15] Tina Mai Chen,[16] and Wang Zhuoyi[17] have attempted to tease out the power struggles between various agents from 1948 to 1978. Researchers have also started to study the formalist turn in the "model play film," which is at the same time innovative and appealing, but also spells its downfall as an effective tool to pass on ideological messages.[18]

Despite the renewed interest in revolutionary films, the interest in industrial themed works remains limited, not least because the subject has been implicated in sensitive ideological debate. Literature dealing with workers' subjectivity has been less successful than that dealing with peasants or intellectuals in creating a complex, rounded figure of a worker writ large for the working class to emulate, even though there has been a push to create a new worker identity since the early days of the PRC.[19]

Apart from the lack of research into the filmic representation of workers during the CR, even less is known about the workers' perception of the cultural construction "masters of the nation." In his pioneering study on collective memory and working class consciousness, Xing Guoxin[20] found that the younger generation could no longer identify with the socialist consciousness of workers in the 1950s. However, Ching Kwan Lee's study[21] of workers' construction of socialism has found that the older workers' memories of the past are constituted in terms related to the official propaganda of the Mao era. The question remains then, how does this group of workers relate to past cultural texts that represent them as politically and socially superior? Does this group of "unbearably propagandistic"[22] films only inculcate a collective, thoughtless mind? Do the ideas they propagate thus become totally obsolete and irrelevant to workers in contemporary society?

This paper represents an initial attempt to fill these gaps. It aims to explicate how working class subjectivity was constructed in four industrial-themed films made during the CR, and how workers growing up with these films respond to the key narrative strategies in them. It identifies the key aspects of the "masters of the nation" narratives and examines whether the discourse still resonates with workers growing up with these films. Despite the myth that there were only eight model operas, the four films were among the new feature films made after 1972.[23] The four films chosen are: *The Pioneers* (*Chuang Ye* 创业, 1975, Changchun Film Studio); *The Fiery Years* (*Huohong de Niandai* 火红的年代, 1974, Shanghai Film Studio), *Mountains Teeming with Dynamic Energy* (*Feiteng de Qunshan* 沸腾的群山, 1976, Beijing Film Studio), and *Iron Giant* (*Gangtie Juren* 钢铁巨人, 1976, Changchun Film Studio). They deal with heavy industries such as mining, machinery, and steel milling, priorities of the socialist economy. In these films the politics of class received up-front, centre-stage dramatic treatment. How these films position the workers and how today's workers perceive this imagery are the keys to understanding the cultural politics of subject production projects during that period of time, and the subsequent reconfiguration of social order in the reform era. Combining a close analysis of the film text with interviews, this paper seeks answers to the following questions: How are workers portrayed as China's political and moral subjects? How do workers who lived through the period interpret the narratives in relation to their own experience, now and in the past? The paper begins by historicising film genre in the CR period. It further identifies the main components of workers' subjectivities and the narrative strategies employed. The paper will concurrently present the responses of some older generation workers to the findings in textual analysis.

Masters of the nation and master of the cultural forms: Workers and cinema

Workers were trusted participants in the political process from the very beginning of China's socialist construction. Unlike peasants, who had to go through full-scale political tutelage to become new socialist citizens, workers' identification with the Party and the state was taken as natural.[24] Literacy scholar Li Yang argues that unfortunately, this simple, transparent relationship between the workers and the CCP meant that there was a lack of convincing and appealing cultural imagery of workers compared to the complex representation of "new peasants" in the literary creations of the 1950s. Literature created in the 17 years before the CR made some inroads in constructing the subjectivity of the working class as the "masters of the nation."[25] However, it proved harder to transfer the mainstream ideology

10. Wang Hui, "Depoliticized Politics, from East to West," *New Left Review*, No. 41, September-October, 2006, pp. 29-45.
11. See, for example, Zhang Yingjin, *Chinese National Cinema*, London, Routledge, 2004, pp. 220-222.
12. Paul Clark, *The Chinese Cultural Revolution: A History*, *op. cit.*, pp. 140-141.
13. See, for example, Cui Shuqin, *Women Through the Lens: Gender and Nation in a Century of Chinese Cinema*, Hawai'i, University of Hawai'i Press, 2003; Meng Yue, "Female Images and National Myth," in Tani E. Barlow, *Gender politics in modern China*, Durham and London, Duke University Press, 1993, pp. 118-136; Stephanie Donald, *Public Secrets, Public Spaces: Cinema and Civility in China*, Lanham, Rowman and Littlefield, 2000.
14. Wang Zhuoyi, *Revolutionary Cycles in Chinese Cinema, 1951-1979*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.
15. Paul Clark, *The Chinese Cultural Revolution: A History*, *op. cit.*
16. Tina Mai Chen, "Textual Communities and Localised Practices of Film in Mao's China," in Tina Mai Chen and David S. Churchill, *Film, history and cultural citizenship: Sites of production*, New York, Routledge, 2007, pp. 61-80.
17. Wang Zhuoyi, *Revolutionary Cycles in Chinese Cinema, 1951-1979*, *op. cit.*
18. Jason McGrath, "Cultural Revolution Model Opera Films and the Realist Tradition in Chinese Cinema," *The Opera Quarterly*, Vol. 26, No. 2/3, Spring-Summer 2010, pp. 343-376.
19. See Li Yang, "Gongye ticai, gongye zhuyi yu 'shehuizhuyi xiandaixing': 'Chengfeng polang' zai jiedu" (Industrial subject, industrialism, and "socialist modernity": Rereading *Braving the Winds and Waves*), *Wenxue Pinglun* (Literary Critics), No. 6, 2010, pp. 46-53. Li Yang points out that none of the core Red Classics works is industrial-themed.
20. See Xing Guoxin, *Living with the Revolutionary Legacy: Communication, Culture and Workers' Radicalism in post-Mao China*, PhD dissertation, School of Communication, Simon Fraser University, July 2011.
21. See Ching Kwan Lee, "What was Socialism to Chinese Workers? Collective Memories and Labor Politics in an Age of Reform," in Ching Kwan Lee and Yang Guobin, *Re-envisioning the Chinese Revolution: The Politics and Poetics of Collective Memories in Reform China*, *op. cit.*, p.143.
22. Paul G. Pickowicz, *China on Film: A Century of Exploration, Confrontation, and Controversy*, Lanham, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2012, p. 208.
23. Paul Clark, *The Chinese Cultural Revolution: A History*, *op. cit.*, p. 155.
24. See Li Yang, *art. cit.*, pp. 46-53.
25. *Ibid.*

of workers as "masters of the nation" into an accepted cultural image. Unlike peasants or intellectuals, the trajectory from a worker of the old society to a worker with all the qualities required by the new regime is not immediately obvious, since workers, as the proletariat class, were already a politically "advanced force" and leading class from the very beginning. (26)

Writers only produced a limited number of works on the working class, and post-Mao critics have rated them quite poorly. Li Yang's research (27) on the representation of working class subjectivity and Cai Xiang's project on socialist literary and cultural imagery (28) are limited examples of serious efforts to restore the legitimacy of the working class representation as a subject of intellectual inquiry. Yet both Cai and Li agree that no matter how crude or formulaic the cultural imageries of workers appear today, these literary works represent sincere efforts to imbue the workers' labour with meaning and purpose, and to endow the working class with dignity. For example, Li points out that some of the figures actually anticipate the popular imageries in the industrial-themed works of the reform era. (29)

Industrial-themed films did not fare better than their literary counterparts – not only did the numbers remain limited, but they received hardly any attention. The naturalistic nature of film does not lend itself well to the "perfect" and "formulaic" image of workers on the screen. (30) Film critics often categorise the few industrial-themed works released in 1974 as reflecting only the agenda of the ultra-Leftists to snuff out a political enemy. (31)

However, one cannot afford to deny the centrality of film during the CR period, regardless of its artistic achievement or ideological content. Unlike today, when cinema is part of youth culture, film actively participated in transforming the subjectivity of the subaltern, and also provided the populace with modern forms of entertainment. In the early days of the PRC, the government recognised film as a valuable modern medium that provided a useful tool for ideological indoctrination. Modes of consumption and distribution of films were very different from today. In the early 1950s, the government dramatically increased the number of mobile film projection teams in order to bring films to the rural areas, (32) and the effort to broaden the audience continued throughout the CR. In fact, these films played such a central role in people's cultural life that Paul Clark states that the period experienced the "triumph of cinema." (33)

However, the film industry experienced extreme "ups and downs" due to the power interplay among the major users of film, including filmmakers, cadres, critics, and audiences. (34) After 1949, the CCP immediately seized upon cinema as the main medium for educating the masses and invested in the expansion of infrastructure and an ideological makeover of the major studios. (35) The period from the 1950s to 1964 saw the establishment of socialist cinema, with works produced representing the style of "revolutionary realism with revolutionary romanticism." By 1964 and 1965, a major campaign ensued, climaxing in severe criticism and banning of a large number of films made earlier.

With the start of the CR, the authorities put an even tighter political grip on cinema. The focus on cinema shifted to filming perfected versions of Model Works (*Yangbanxi* 样板戏). Factional fighting created chaos and brought feature film production to a halt. While it may seem that it was the ultra-Leftists influencing cinema during this period, actual circumstances were volatile. According to Wang Zhuoyi, (36) as early as 1967, Mao Zedong had already begun to discourage spontaneous radicalism. When the PLA restored order in 1968, revolution had passed its heyday, and 90 new regular features were produced and released after 1973. Using the formula of "Three Prominences," these films were produced with ideological agendas. However, because the outcome of the internal struggle between factions was so unpredictable and policies vacillated so much, ambiguities and inconsistencies did exist. (37) In the case of the four industrial-themed films, despite the strong emphasis on class struggle and stereotypical treatment of characters, the early construction of the workers into the "masters of the nation" continued through the 17-year period. These films still echo the major concerns over the constructions of a working class subjectivity, including the ownership of the enterprise, the relationship between political consciousness and knowledge, etc.

Film as a genre was extremely popular during the CR. Large state-owned enterprises often had their own theatres, and organised viewing of films was a routine affair. Movie tickets cost very little, and collective booking of tickets by work units was common. These films helped shape the subjectivities of the generation of workers growing up in the high socialist era.

The condition and status of workers in China have undergone drastic changes in the 60 years of the PRC. Workers as a class were not a clearly defined category in the early days of the Communist revolution. Despite humble origins, Chinese workers did undergo phenomenal growth in numbers and elevation in social status in the socialist era and acquired consciousness as a historical subject in the process. Under the slogan "The working class must exercise leadership in everything," workers were entrusted with the task of nation-building, as the country went through rapid modernisation. (38)

Modern industry's first and foremost needs are resources and steel. (39) The subjectivity of workers is thus linked to the establishment of national industries and modernisation. The creation of a worker identity was of utmost importance to cultural workers in socialist China. The four films under discussion carried this mandate. In the next section, I will show how the overriding emphasis on workers as "masters of the nation" was pushed to the extreme in these films. Made towards the end of the CR, when the roles of workers, peasants, and soldiers were reified, these feature films portray the workers as "unchanging," no longer in the process of becoming. It did not allow as much ideological elbow room as in the early stage of the PRC. Often created collectively, the works were regarded as a political act, with

26. *Ibid.*
27. *Ibid.*
28. Cai Xiang, *Geming/xushu: Zhongguo shehuizhuyi wenxue – wenhua xiangxiang (1949-1966)* (Revolution/Narrative: Cultural and literary imaginary in socialist China [1949-1966]), Beijing, Peking University Press, 2010.
29. Li Yang, *art. cit.*
30. Paul Clark, *The Chinese Cultural Revolution: A History*, *op. cit.*
31. See, for example, Zhang Yingjin, *Chinese National Cinema*, London, Routledge, 2004, pp. 220-222.
32. Xu Xiaxiang, "Nongcun dianying fangyingdui yu nongmin de 'zaizao'" (the rural film projection team and the "remaking" of peasants), *Twenty-first Century Bimonthly*, Vol. 2010, No. 122, 2010, pp. 47-55.
33. Paul Clark, "The triumph of cinema: Chinese film culture from the 1960s to the 1980s," in Zhu Ying and Stanley Rosen, *Art, commerce and politics in Chinese cinema*, Hong Kong, Hong Kong University Press, 2010, pp. 87-97.
34. Wang Zhuoyi, *Revolutionary Cycles in Chinese Cinema, 1951-1979, op. cit.*
35. Paul Clark, "Artists, Cadres, and Audiences: Chinese Socialist Cinema, 1949-1978," in Zhang Yingjin, *A companion to Chinese cinema, First Edition*, Chichester, West Sussex, Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2012, pp. 42-56.
36. Wang Zhuoyi, *Revolutionary Cycles in Chinese Cinema, 1951-1979, op. cit.*, p.172.
37. Zhang Yingjin, *Chinese National Cinema, op. cit.*
38. Huang Jisu, "Guanyu gongren jieji de guanganyu sikao," (Observations and reflections on China's working class), *Lingdaozhe* (Leaders), 2011, pp. 177-185.
39. Lü Xinyu, "*Tiexiqu:* Lishi yu jieji yishi (*West of the Tracks*: History and class consciousness), *Dushu* (Reading), Vol. 2004, No. 298, 2004, pp. 1-15.

characters' stories overridden by ideology.[40] However, one can still discern some degree of ambiguity in the portrayal of stereotypical characterisation, as illustrated in the portrayal of the relationship between the working class and intellectuals. The important political background to these films is the campaign to "strike against the Rightist deviationist wind to reverse verdicts" (*fanji youqing fan'an feng*) in CR. In 1973, Deng Xiaoping was rehabilitated to correct the radical campaigns that sent both the economy and governance off track. However, Mao soon denounced Deng again and called him a "capitalist roader." The four films thus invariably deal with the "struggle between two lines," referring to the struggle between socialist orthodoxy and capitalism.

Constructing the "master of the nation" narrative

One of the main narrative strategies to construct working class identity is to create a kind of "at-oneness" between the workers and the nation. This narrative strategy is central to films made during this time. This is clearly the case in *The Pioneers*. *The Pioneers* is a story about how workers in the petroleum industry broke the prevailing belief that "China has only very limited oil deposits" and pioneered the first big oilfield. It is loosely based on the story of Iron Man Wang Jinxi, the model worker. In the 1950s, during China's battle to become self-sufficient in oil, Wang, along with his 1,205-man drilling team, struggled to strike oil in Daqing.[41]

Both *The Fiery Years* and *The Iron Giant* are dramatic responses to the political life of China during the CR. *The Fiery Years* was set in a Shanghai Steel Factory. It was meant to be a eulogy for the first generation of PRC steelmakers, who ran up against various obstacles in producing a new alloy urgently needed by the army in the disquieting years of the 1960s. Following a very similar storyline, *The Iron Giant* was based on the successful construction of the first steel mill in the 1960s under very difficult circumstances. The scripts are full of class-conscious dialogue, mostly between workers, revisionist technocrats, and hidden class enemies. Running through both was the workers' determination, wisdom, and effort to build China's pillar industries through self-reliance.

The main theme of *The Pioneers* rests on constructing workers as the masters of the nation. The identity of workers, transformed from slaves into the owners of society, constitutes a major theme that runs through many literary works on social life in the early days of the People's Republic.[42] Literary critic Cai Xiang, in his systematic study of the literary narration of the subjectivity of the working class in the high socialist era,[43] made the point that as the CCP transformed from a revolutionary party to a ruling party, the workers had to re-identify their new subjectivity within the new order. In socialist literature, workers were described over and over again as a class that rises up to transform their fate from slave to master. Cai believed that the imagery of peasants and workers as the owners of society is one of the most valuable legacies of socialism,[44] however big the gap between this imaginary world and actual social practice. Through this transformation of subjectivity, workers gained a sense of dignity as human beings, and participatory modern politics was made possible.

Throughout the film, the imagery of "from slave to master of the nation" surfaces repeatedly. This starts with the act of naming: Zhou Tingshan had been known merely as "5-kilo boy" (*shi jin wa* 十斤娃) when he tended the caravan transporting oil for the Nationalists. When the PLA took over, the first question the Party leader asks Zhou is his proper name. Zhou's full name "Tingshan," which literally means a "tall and straight Redwood, a great, stately tree," functions as a symbol for his noble character. In fact, all of the protagonists in the four films are given names that carry meanings of magnitude.[45] Rectifying a person's name is a symbolic act, signifying Zhou's regained dignity as a fellow human being. Indeed, the structural differentiation between classes is often represented by the offensive terms used by factory owners for their workers. As in *Iron Giant*, the casters are called "black crow" and in *The Pioneers*, oil workers are known as "the mere brake crank annex." The derogatory terms remind workers of their place and require them to keep to it. This is often a source of resentment for factory workers. To be addressed with appropriate names is a metaphor for the newly acquired status as a human. It is the first step towards rising above one's station and becoming a master of society. This symbolic approach to names represents the formalist turn in the film of this period. While the formal shift gives the Model Works in theatre and dance a distinctive style,[46] it works against the naturalistic nature of the film genre in the characterisation of the heroes.

The Pioneers also portrays the relationship between the nation and the working class as natural and transparent. The relationship is shown through the allegory of generational legacy passed on from Zhou's father even before the CCP gained leadership. The workers' identity is predetermined by their class and bloodline. The fact that Zhou's father died saving the Yuming oilfield foregrounds workers' self-conception as the owners of the oilfield, and therefore, metaphorically, as masters of the nation. Compared with peasants in socialist narratives, who often have to be persuaded to break up a closely-knit household, often referred to as "small home" (*xiaojia*) to serve the nation (*dajia*, literally big home), the advanced class status of workers as the leaders of various social forces is quite deliberate and meaningful. It is this transparent relationship that results in portrayals of the working class lacking depth and sophistication compared with the construction of peasants' or intellectuals' identity in the 17 year period (1949-1966).

Workers' elevated political status is also reinforced through the theme of industrial production as a pivotal yet integrated part of nation building. From oppressed labour to progressive force, the workers are shown to be keenly aware of the needs of the nation and its position vis-à-vis various forces in the world. All four films give dramatic attention to the importance of the depicted project for nation-building. In *The Pioneers*, oil production is the key to a nation going through the throes of industrialisation. *The Iron Giant* deals with the manufacturing of the first steel rolling mill, crucial to

40. Hong Zicheng, *A History of Contemporary Chinese Literature*, Leiden and Boston, Brill, 2007, p. 242.

41. The main character, Zhou Tingshan, is born a worker in Yuming oilfield in the Northwest. His father dies protecting the oilfield from being destroyed by the Nationalists just before CCP takes over. Zhou joins the exploration for oil in northeastern China, then mostly uninhabited wetland. The economic embargo from the West and the split with USSR means that the drilling team barely has enough diesel, drilling heads, and expertise to continue the expedition. The hidden class enemy, deputy general director Feng Chao, sows discord between chief engineer Zhang Yizhi and Zhou, and tries to persuade the chief engineer to give up the expedition altogether. At various critical moments, Zhou and his workers persist until eventually the oilfield is found.

42. Cai Xiang, *op. cit.*, p. 267.

43. *Ibid.*, p. 323.

44. *Ibid.*, pp. 284-285.

45. For example, in *Mountains Teeming with Dynamic Energy*, the protagonist Jiao Kun's given name means "big mountain"; in *The Fiery Years*, Zhao Sihai's name means "the whole world," and in *Iron Giant*, the hero Dai Jihong's name means "inheriting the magnitude."

46. Jason McGrath, "Cultural Revolution Model Opera Films and the Realist Tradition in Chinese Cinema," *art. cit.*, made the argument that *Yangbanxi* films during the CR reached an extremity in their stylisation and cinematic formalism. It created such a distance between representation and the viewers' experience that the artworks lost their ideological power.



Image 1 – The contrasting images of the hero Zhao Sihai and the hidden class enemy Ying Jiapei in *The Fiery Years* (1974). © Shanghai Film Studio



Image 2 – The "Socialist realistic gaze" of the hero Zhou Tingshan in *The Pioneers* (1975). © Changchun Film Studio

the founding of the machinery industry. The workers in *The Fiery Years* are commissioned to manufacture a special type of steel urgently needed for the construction of a battleship, while *Mountains Teeming with Dynamic Energy* is about restoring a coal mine soon after the People's Liberation Army takes it over from the Nationalists. The stories are set in the historic context of China facing economic embargo from the West. China's split with the international Communist movement resulted in the USSR withdrawing its material and technological support. China had also run up against shortages of food and other resources in the aftermath of the Great Leap Forward (1958-1960). All this heightens the sense that the workers' cause is the pillar of the nation, and their production is tied to its fate, or even that of the proletariat of the whole world.

Imagining workers as the masters of the nation has to be grounded in the notion of belonging to a nation. In the films discussed, the master narrative is constantly sustained by the protagonists' awareness that they are part of the nation and that their sector is closely connected with other sectors, which work together to ensure the smooth running and modernisation of the nation.

The "master" imagery is crucial for the Party to create new social cohesion and secure domestic, social, and political support. In all these films, workers are often portrayed as a class able to overcome self-interest and lead the cause of nation-building. Their interest is portrayed as completely aligned with the interests of the nation and in turn, the cause is totally supported by other sectors such as agriculture. The personal is integrated into the national modernisation program. The "master" narrative focuses on China's nation building project, which constantly runs up against problems such as lack of resources and technical support. Co-operation between different sectors is extremely strong in each of these films, and the nation's divisions between trade and location are removed through the constant material and spiritual support the workers get from other industries. Unlike in a capitalist mode of production, where workers can be seen as alienated from their products and existing in individualised isolation, the films in this period stress that their labour is essential to the survival of other industries and to being connected as a whole. This is particularly important because the products of heavy industry do not seem to be immediately relevant to workers' everyday life. *The Pioneers* is full of anecdotes underscoring the cooperation between seemingly unrelated sectors. In one scene, Zhou stops a female worker from using precious diesel to wash the oil off her hands, and urges her to use caustic soda instead. The worker reminds him that caustic soda burns the hands, to which Zhou replies: "Diesel is the blood and sweat of all of the people of our nation. It is imported from foreign countries in exchange for our goods."

The start of *The Fiery Years* defines a temporary and spatial dimension of the nation: the opening scene is in the Shanghai Steel Mill, where steel workers hear the arrival of the New Year through the speaker on the wall and anticipate the arrival of their colleague Zhao Sihai. Meanwhile Zhao Sihai is on his way back to his factory after a visit to a sister steelwork company. Riding on the train, Zhao hears the radio announcement of the dawning of the New Year and a summary of the international and domestic situations in the past year, and appears to be lost in thought. Here the nation is an imagined community [47] that has been created and strengthened through the act of listening to the radio and through a unified national calendar. In the next scene, Zhao meets a Navy official in the carriage and is told about the urgency of manufacturing the special alloy. The connection between different locations across the nation is established, and the Shanghai Steel Mill is integrated into the nation's modernisation project. At the end of the story, Zhao and colleagues are invited to watch the maiden voyage of the fleet made from the alloy they manufactured, and partake in the pride and glory of their achievement. Instead of being alienated and divided, the workers get to see their labour materialise and celebrate their contribution to other sectors and nation building.

While the theme of workers as the backbone of society runs through all four films, their legitimacy as the advanced class derives from many other fields. Unlike the money-making motive that drives rural migrants' entry into the labour market in the liberalised market, in these films manual labour is performed by workers with pride, dignity, and sublime devotion for the sake of national strength. And unlike rural migrants, whose value in the neoliberal market is mostly framed in terms of "cheap" labour, in all these early films, the labour of workers is endowed with a value that has a symbolic as well as a material dimension. The message is that apart from building a self-reliant and strong nation, China needs oil, steel, and

47. See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London, Verso, 1991.

minerals produced by the most politically progressive forces, consisting of the workers.

The new features were mostly directed by reputed directors. The special expertise required by filmmaking meant that political radicals needed to rely on artists who may have been seen as politically questionable. Consequently, the cinematography of these films was of reasonable quality. *The Pioneers*, for example, has very effective visual design. The contrast of white snow and the black drilling machine and the massive structure of the well tower in the middle of the desolate northern plain provide the perfect backdrop for the scale of the productive activities. The stylised, formulaic representation of positive heroes, typical in *Yangbanxi*, is still present in these features. For example, the central heroes were always put in the centre of the frame in contrast with the enemy (Image 1). Theatrical poses such as the typical "socialist realist gaze" are often employed as well [48] (Image 2).

Workers and intellectuals

Another important way of examining workers as a social construction in socialist cinema is to study how they are positioned vis-à-vis other social groups, such as peasants, soldiers, and intellectuals. Among the various class compositions, workers' relationships with intellectuals are especially intriguing in the four films. I argue that while class enemies – landlords, capitalists, and imperialists – were often constructed as the antitheses to the positive, heroic ideal of the workers, the representation of intellectuals often serves as a foil to bring out a relatively rounded characterisation of workers. Qualities such as the workers' persistence, unshakable faith in the Party line, boldness in putting new ideas into practice, fraternity, and so on, are often demonstrated not through their direct confrontation with class enemies, but more through interactions with intellectuals in the films. Without the role of the intellectuals as contrast, these qualities might be hidden.

The ubiquitous presence of intellectuals in the films of the CR period is not a coincidence. With the official categorisation and organisation in the 1950s, Chinese intellectuals remained a highly visible category. [49] In analysing a popular 1960s musical, *Third Sister Liu*, Eddy U argues that film representation has been an important aspect of the CCP's exercise of symbolic power in mobilising the anti-intellectual movement in the Great Leap Forward. [50] Insofar as the themes of these films are about the industrialisation and modernisation of China, the intellectuals and the symbolic power they hold over knowledge have to be addressed, particularly in relation to the workers as a group that does not hold cultural capital. That is, the viability of workers as the masters of a socialist society rests heavily on the narration of workers as the masters of technology and knowledge.

The four films studied invariably revolve around the solution of a problem that is technological in nature. Each worker has one or more roles that can be identified as intellectual, such as engineer, technician, or factory director. Despite the fact that none of them is the perfect prototype of the socialist hero, most of them are portrayed as going through a "growth" stage through a narrative pattern that portrays them turning from politically backward to advanced. *The Pioneers* has three characters that can be broadly identified as intellectuals – engineer-in-chief Zhang Yizhi, the deputy engineer-in-chief, Zhang's student, and technician Xiao Wei. Each is portrayed as sharing different degrees of affinity with the workers. Among the three, the role of Zhang has more engagement with protagonist Zhou Tingshan, and the dynamic between the two often drives the plot.

At the beginning of the film, we are reminded that intellectuals such as Zhang are not class enemies. A geologist, Zhang Yizhi comes to the desert in search of oil for the country after graduating from university. The American technical aide offers to bring Zhang out of China before fleeing the oilfield, but Zhang refuses. He still cherishes the dream of finding big oil resources for China. He also puts his foot down when the American, on leaving, demands the geological data that Zhang holds. This intended ideological moment places Zhang, and by implication intellectuals, as patriotic agents. This is highly significant, and to a degree runs counter to Eddy U's findings that anti-intellectualism was common to the cultural products of the 1950s. The theme that intellectuals share the same vision as the workers is set forth emphatically in the first few scenes of the film. Thus intellectuals were part and parcel of the patriotic narrative of nation-building. The tensions between the workers and intellectuals are not as antagonistic as friend and foe, but the intellectuals' weaknesses serve to bring out the positive characters of the heroes. In *The Pioneers*, these positive traits include the following aspects:

Firstly, the workers' courage and innovation is contrasted with the intellectuals' conservative attitude and blind belief in geological theories and technological practices developed in foreign countries. Chief engineer Zhang Yizhi, although enthusiastic about finding a big oilfield for his nation, proposes a plan based on conventional drilling methods that test drill a small area step by step. This plan is challenged by Zhou Tingshan and other workers, who push for a new method of large-scale exploration drilling.

Secondly, Zhou Tingshan's trust in workers' ability to bring about technological innovation and solve key problems is contrasted with Zhang's faith in knowledge and expertise. When the first test drilling fails to produce signs of a rich deposit, Zhou's suggestion is to organise a worker's task force to re-examine the design, measurement, and geological conditions as well as the class struggle situations in order to find out the reason for the failure. Zhang, who has full confidence in his own design, is quite taken aback by the suggestion. He gives a surly reply: "I'm a chief engineer, not a work team member. I'll provide a self-criticism for the waste caused by the initial drilling. But you need to pull out the operation now!" In this attempt to assert his authority, he distinguishes himself from the rest of the ordinary workers as the one who is accorded privilege.

Thirdly, unlike Zhou and other workers who maintain a high level of class consciousness, Zhang the intellectual is politically naïve, which sometimes makes him susceptible to the manipulations of class enemies such as Feng Chao in this film. Zhang secretly harbours the suspicion that China does not have rich deposits of oil, as determined by the geologist in the West. To him, it is a technical issue, not a political or ideological one. Commissar Hua reminds Zhang that he has a tendency to treat technological issues and worldview as separate issues. Moreover, workers in this nation-building project must maintain the upper hand in their struggle against "class enemies," who lurk in the dark but always seek out opportunities to sabotage the overall project of construction and nation-building.

The relationship between workers and intellectuals in the films embodies the tension between the logic of industrialisation and the socialist ideal,

48. The socialist realist gaze typifies many images in socialist films. It is "a fixed stare out to a horizon," (Stephanie H. Donald, *Public Secrets, Public Spaces: Cinema and Civility in China, op. cit.*, p. 62). The gaze could "indicate the superior ideological vision of the socialist romanticist hero" (Jason McGrath, "Cultural Revolution Model Opera Films and the Realist Tradition in Chinese Cinema," *art. cit.*, p. 28).

49. Eddy U, "*Third Sister Liu* and the making of the intellectual in Socialist China," *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 69, No. 1, February 2010, pp. 57-83.

50. *Ibid.*

often expressed as the contradictions between technological expertise and political consciousness, or mass leadership and bureaucracy. This paradox was captured in the literature of the pre-CR period. However, the conflict between workers and intellectuals has been framed as internal, and fails to address the inherent tension in the creation of an imaginary enemy as the Other for the worker's subjectivity. [51] The films under discussion invariably construct a class enemy. Often these are depicted as Nationalist spies. In both *Mountains Teeming with Dynamic Energy* and *The Fiery Years*, the protagonists end up catching the enemy red-handed in their sabotage, and in doing so they reinforce the political and moral legitimacy of the class struggle theme that dominates these socialist narratives.

The workers: Remembering the past for the present

Despite the ultimate importance of cinema and the popularity of the new features in ordinary people's lives during the CR, very little is known about how these films were received then, much less now. Recent scholarship has attempted to dispel the myth that viewers were a homogenous mass easily duped by propaganda, and notes that they were individuals with their own interests and agendas, and were widely dispersed in terms of time, space, and experience. Even during the CR, the audience could respond to the films in a way that emphasised their own self interest. [52] While a historical investigation on how these industrial-themed films were received is in dire need, this paper focuses more on how workers remember industrial-themed films. Specifically, the paper looks at whether the "master of the nation" narrative is relevant to workers in the post-Mao environment.

The economic reform in the 1980s resulted in the drastic downsizing of state-owned enterprises (SOEs). The process was devastating, with around 40% of former industrial sector jobs lost from 1993 to 2006. [53] Along with the loss of 650 million jobs went the social and political status of the workers. While workers' marginalised status in economic, political, and social terms has attracted scholarly attention, [54] the symbolic transformation has attracted little. Ching Kwan Lee's research [55] shows that the concept of "workers as masters of the nation" was used as a standard by workers to compare the past and present, and to critique the government for failing to deliver what it had promised. My interviews with workers growing up with these movies echoes the themes identified by Lee. While the films projected the subjectivity mostly as a political consciousness, the interviewees rarely resort to the "advanced class" discourse anymore, a sign of repudiation of the class-status system. [56] Nevertheless, nostalgic memories were invoked on many levels as a way to "speak not just to the past out of the present but also to the present out of the past." [57] Nostalgic memory of the past is selective, as it "expresses not the love of the past, but a vital vision against a reigning historical narrative in the present." [58] In examining workers' response to the films, I find Rofel's discussion of workers' socialist nostalgia extremely useful. Like the weavers cohort in Rofel's research, my interviewees gave "selective genealogies of socialist subjectivity, insistently fashioned against a current of marginalization in the post-Mao era." [59] This has led to different responses to the two themes discussed above: the "master of nation" narrative and the relationships between the working class and intellectuals. The former narrative, despite its rather extreme and hollow imagery that lessened its persuasiveness, seems to resonate more with the workers, although the workers were also strategic in choosing what part of the narrative to respond to. The workers did not make much reference to the politics of class, but singled out identification with the nation, the ownership of the enterprise, and the value of labour. The workers' superior political consciousness over intellectuals, however, has lost its currency, indicating that workers now mostly identify with the post-socialist valorisation of science, technology, and intellectuals as the embodiment of knowledge and power.

The nine interviewees are all workers, and the majority started working before the 1980s. The interviewees were recruited through four provinces and one municipal city in China, including Henan Province in central China, Shandong in the east, Chongqing in southwest, and Heilongjiang in the northeast. The factories that the workers used to work in are also diverse, ranging from the defence industry to heavy industry to light industry. The interview was informal and conducted over the phone. Each lasted about an hour. All the interviews were loosely-structured, with the aim of covering the same broad area of issues but at the same time allowing interviewees to talk about things of interest to themselves. Table 1 is a summary of interviewees' background information:

Of the four works listed above, the one that workers remembered more clearly is *The Pioneers*. The interviewees invariably expressed strong identification with the protagonist, chiefly his devotion to work, sense of responsibility for the nation, and personal sacrifice. Qin LF, a 65-year-old worker who spent most of his life working in the Qianjin Chemical Factory (or 965 Third Front Factory, using the internally coded name within the military system), [60] held such a view: "I remembered the protagonist jumped into the mud when the mixer stuffed up. The first generation of oil workers truly set a model for self-reliance and working hard for the prosperity of the country." [61]

Qin's admiration for the first generation of workers is echoed by nearly every interviewee. Most of the workers interviewed were proud of the factories they worked in, and of the fact that they were state-owned and played an important role in national economy. The interviewees often fondly addressed these enterprises as "old SOE" (*laoguoying* 老国营), "big SOE" (*daguoqi* 大国企), and "old work unit" (*laodanwei* 老单位), etc. A sense of loss is prominent in the diverse narratives about their expe-

51. Li Yang, "Gongye ticai, gongye zhuyi yu 'shehuizhuyi xiandaixing': 'Chengfeng polang' zai jiedu" (Industrial subject, industrialism, and "socialist modernity": Rereading *Braving the Winds and Waves*), *art. cit.*
52. Wang Zhuoyi, *Revolutionary Cycles in Chinese Cinema, 1951-1979, op. cit.*, p. 181.
53. William Hurst, *The Chinese Workers after Socialism*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2009.
54. See Ching Kwan Lee, Sarosh Kuruvilla, and Mary Gallagher, *From the Iron Rice Bowl to Informalization: Market, State, and Workers in a Changing China*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2011; William Hurst, *The Chinese Workers after Socialism, op. cit.*; Ching Kwan Lee (ed.), *Ethnographies of Labor and Workplace Transformation*, London, Routledge, 2007; Dorothy Solinger, *States' Gains, Labor's Losses: China, France and Mexico Choose Global Liaisons, 1980-2000, op. cit.*; Pun Ngai, *Made in China: Women Factory Workers in a Global Workplace, op. cit.*; Lisa Rofel, *Other Modernities: Gendered Yearnings in China After Socialism*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1999.
55. Ching Kwan Lee, "What was Socialism to Chinese Workers? Collective Memories and Labor Politics in an Age of Reform," in Ching Kwan Lee and Yang Guobin, *Re-envisioning the Chinese Revolution: The Politics and Poetics of Collective Memories in Reform China, op. cit.*, p.143.
56. Lisa Rofel, *Other Modernities: Gendered Yearnings in China after Socialism, op. cit.*, pp. 96-127.
57. *Ibid.*, p. 129.
58. Wang Ban, *Illuminations from the Past: Trauma, Memory, and History in Modern China*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2004, p. 5.
59. Lisa Rofel, *Other Modernities: Gendered Yearnings in China after Socialism, op. cit.*, pp. 128-129.
60. The Qianjin Chemical Factory is a product of the 1964 massive project to construct military-industrial complexes in remote, yet strategically secure interior areas of the country, in preparation for possible foreign attacks. The factory is tucked into the mountainous region south of Luoyang, capital of central China's Henan Province. Its main products include explosive materials, detonators, fuses, grenades, etc.
61. Telephone interview with Qin LF, conducted in Chinese, 16 August 2013, Perth.

Table 1 – Interviewees' background information

Name	Province	City	Age	Education	Industry	Job role	Pathway	Length of Employment as Worker
Xu XJ	Shandong	Qingdao	65	High School	Machinery	Metaller	Took father's place in factory	19 years
Song XT	Shandong	Qingdao	54	High School	Cotton Mill	Weaver	Took mother's place in factory	27 years
Qin LF	Henan	Yima	65	University	Chemistry	Grinder	Assigned after serving in the Army	22 years
Li YC	Heilongjiang	Anshan	61	High School	Iron Pipe Casting	Caster	Direct recruitment	8 years
Zhu RL	Chongqing	Chongqing	74	High School	Steel Mill/Knitting	Caster	Direct recruitment	34 years
Zhou GS	Jiangsu	Taixing	73	Apprenticeship	Machinery	Machinist	Return from Shanghai	42 years
Zhou MC	Jiangsu	Taixing	62	High School	Machinery	Turner	Recruited from township	40 years
Ren H	Jiangsu	Taixing	43	University	Machinery	Engineer	Assigned by government	24 years
Mr. Zhang	Shanghai	Shanghai	60	High School	Media	Printer	Assigned by government	42 years

riences across time and place. The sad, painful, and sometimes angry tones in my interviewees' narratives of a bygone era can hardly be missed. Even though reform took different forms for each industry and factory where these workers were once employed, the workers' stories were marked by the same concern and anxiety that what was once "ours" was now "theirs." They were no longer the masters of the nation or owners of their work units, as emphasised by the film, and the process was not transparent or justified. The workers were clearly aware of the highly romanticised representations of the working class in the films. Mr. Zhang, for example, said he realised the valorisation of working class had "gone too far" as early as 1973, when he had just joined the newspaper printing team. (62)

Zhou MC, who worked in Taixing Machinery Factory for 40 years, clearly recalled the time when the identity of this state-owned enterprise changed, and still finds it incredible:

> The factory director went on a trip to Shandong Province to learn from their [reform] experience. He called a meeting after he came back. And this what he said: "I'll sell this factory to whoever has money. If nobody puts up an offer, I will give it away." How could a director of an SOE speak like that? (63)

According to Zhou, the factory was then turned into a share company, with most of the shares assigned to a few "active members" of the management. It then went through a merger with a bigger company, until it was eventually completely privatised. At each stage, workers' benefits and rights were stripped away in exchange for a one-off payment, usually the equivalent of a few years' salary.

In all the movies, work is taken as the inalienable right of the workers. The value of work is echoed by the majority of interviewees. They cherish the skills they acquired, even though some think they are not sophisticated. They also believe their work was important in the overall production of their factories and nation building. There is no strong feeling expressed that they were assembly line robots with only the managers and engineers at the helm. Technical innovations were encouraged, and ordinary workers were invited to contribute, just like engineers or technicians, as narrated by Li YC from Anshan Steel Corporation, one of the largest steel mills in Northeast China's heavy industry precinct:

> We were concerned with the quality of pipes, and production teams were also competing hard against each over productive efficiency. There were before-work meetings and after-work meetings on how to improve quality and increase the quantity of things. Workers often stayed till midnight to try to solve technical problems. (64)

However, most of the workers described their work as extremely physically demanding. Nearly every interviewee made references to the toughness of his/her job. Some completely identified with the protagonists in the films, who are totally absorbed in their work. The consuming passion of work, as romanticised in the films, is in reality often mitigated by narratives of the physical strain and toil and poor working conditions of day-to-day existence, coupled with material scarcity. When I asked an acquaintance to help

62. Telephone interview with Mr Zhang, conducted in Chinese, 7 January 2015, Perth.
63. Telephone interview with Zhou MC, conducted in Chinese on 11 September 2013, Perth.
64. Telephone interview with Li YC, conducted in Chinese on 28 September 2013, Perth.

recruit workers who joined the workforce before the CR at the Anshan Steel Mill, I was told those workers rarely live past their 70s. Many died of pneumoconiosis, known as black lung disease, due to the pollution in the steel workshop. At times, it could be traumatising. Li YC, who worked in the piping workshop, quit his job after an accident in which liquid iron at 1,500 degrees spilled out and nearly melted his toes.

In the eyes of the older generation of workers such as Qin, many themes depicted in the film, such as workers' devotion to their work and their skill with technological innovation and leadership are true to their life experience. This is in sharp contrast to the description of how it has been received by workers currently employed. In an online blog, an engineer named Hou Fudou who works for a big petroleum company described how *The Pioneers* was received by his younger colleagues when the company's trade union organised a viewing in September 2009 to commemorate the 60th anniversary of the founding of the PRC and the 50th anniversary of the discovery of the Daqing Oilfield:

> Fair to say, this industry-themed film indeed inspired a generation of Chinese, especially workers (…). However, last night the film met its Waterloo when shown to an audience comprised of our new generation of workers born in the 1980s or 1990s. In sharp contrast to the cheers and applause it got when aired in the open-air theatre in the past, waves of laughter filled the luxurious cinema yesterday. Many young people made the comment that this was the "comedy of the year." [65]

Hou also picked up on four lines that got laughs. First, when they encounter problems, Zhou Tingshan and others do not seek scientific solutions, but rely on Chairman Mao's seminal works. The close-up of Zhou reading Mao's works during his lunch break was the biggest punch line – many young people took it as a spoof in the style of Hong Kong comedian Stephen Chow. Secondly, the positive characters have exaggerated expressions and postures and were presented as too perfect. Thirdly, Zhou's villager mother and wife spoke in a highly literary style. Lastly, Zhou, as head of the drilling brigade, often goes to general headquarters to make indiscreet criticisms about the strategic plan.

Hou's description highlights the key ideologies and aesthetic principles promoted in the film that have become obsolete and anachronistic. First is the idea that political thoughts and consciousness are essential in everyday problem solving. With a market economy, the core value of "politics in command" has given way to the "economic centre of gravity." Utilitarianism has replaced political ideology. Secondly, the aesthetics of representing role models as morally perfect has become parodic. Thirdly, the belief that peasants and workers are capable of acting as the leading force of national construction is no longer accepted. Lastly, the principle that ordinary workers have the right to participate in the management of the enterprise along with cadres and technocrats, a system enshrined in the Angang Constitution [66] that ensures a form of economic democracy, [67] has been rejected. [68]

Nevertheless, it is interesting to note that, faced with social conflicts and mass protests from retrenched workers, the current CCP leadership has been rearticulating the socialist discourse on industrial workers. Official media such as *People's Daily* [69] parade role models such as Sun Bo, a contemporary Zhou Tingshan type of leader in the petroleum industry, whose life was cut short by a stroke caused by overwork in his capacity as head of a state petroleum company in China's overseas explorations. Zhou Tingshan's deeds, spirit, and traits were replicated in the commendation for Sun Bo. Sun, however, was a corporate manager with engineering expertise acquired in the United States. Whether this renewal of the "iron man" spirit appeals to contemporary workers remains highly debatable.

Conclusion

This paper aims to help fill a gap in the study of Chinese cinema by looking at a much neglected group, the working class, in a much neglected period of time, the CR. The paper argues that films created during this period of time cannot be completely cut off from their forerunners before the Cultural Revolution. Industrial-themed films produced during the CR period were shot with the same concern about what will happen "the morning after revolution." Elements that constitute working class subjectivity in the earlier industrial-themed works [70] were continuously explored in these films, including managerial bureaucracy, democratic participation in leadership, the working class's sense of ownership and dignity, the value of labour and the role of knowledge and expertise. The films also rely on constructing the contrasting, sometimes conflicting relationships between workers and intellectuals and class enemies. Interviews with workers have shown that the "masters of the nation" narrative, despite losing currency in the general trend of departure from the ideological past, still provides the language of articulation for workers to critique its lack in the reform era. Workers' memories of these films did not dwell on how hollow the images are, but use these as a referent to criticise the marginalised status of workers in the reform era. Concurring with Ching Kwan Lee's findings, the act of remembering the past is more about the present. Keenly aware of their diminishing self-worth as social subjects, workers invoke these images as powerful testimony to what was a possible alternative to the market economy, and thus reveal the "historicity of the 'market' economy." [71] The "master" narratives, however archaic and absurd they appear these days, may still provide a moral and emotional resource for workers to regain a sense of solidarity.

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65. Hou Fudou, "Dianying 'Chuangye' yuan he cheng xiju?" (Why has the film *The Pioneers* become a comedy?), 2009, http://blog.ifeng.com/article/3130004.html (accessed on 21 October 2012).
66. The Angang Constitution is the constitution of Angang Steel Company devised in the 1960s to break the rigid vertical, top-down enterprise management model and to actively involve workers in corporate management and technological innovation.
67. See Cui Zhiyuan, "Angang Xianfa yu hou Fute zhuyi" (The Angang Constitution and post-Fordism), *Dushu* (Reading), Vol. 1996, No. 3, pp. 13-23.
68. Zhao Yuezhi pointed out that the spirit of the "Angang Constitution" is not "abandoned," as stated in an earlier version of the paper, but "rejected."
69. "Zhongyang Zuzhibu zhushou Sun Bo Tongzhi 'quanguo youxiu gongchandangyuan' chenghao" (Comrade Sun Bo posthumously awarded the "national outstanding CCP member" by the Organisation Department of CCP), *Renmin ribao* (People's Daily), 21 February 2013, p. 8.
70. See discussions in Cai Xiang, *Geming/xushu: Zhongguo shehuizhuyi wenxue – wenhua xiangxiang (1949-1966)* (Revolution/Narrative: Cultural and literary imaginary in socialist China [1949-1966]), *op. cit.*; Li Yang, "Gongye ticai, gongye zhuyi yu 'shehuizhuyi xiandaixing': 'Chengfeng polang' zai jiedu" (Industrial subject, industrialism, and "socialist modernity": Rereading *Braving the Winds and Waves*), *art. cit.*, and Hong Zicheng, *A History of Contemporary Chinese Literature*, *op. cit.*
71. See Ching Kwan Lee, "What was Chinese Socialism to Workers," *op. cit.*, p. 163.