International Review of Social History (2025), pp. 1–25
doi:10.1017/S0020859025000094

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Accidentally Emboldened: Industrial Workers between Democracy and Despotism on the Shop Floor in Wuhan, China (1984–1985)*

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Abstract

Existing scholarship on China's industrial politics in the early post-Mao era has not paid adequate attention to the tension between two seemingly contradictory tendencies: the reform drives to consolidate managerial despotism in urban public enterprises, and policy endeavors to strengthen formal institutional channels for workers to participate in their enterprises' democratic management. Focusing on the city of Wuhan in 1984–1985, this article examines the policy logic behind these two overlapping tendencies and how workers experienced and reacted to them. It argues that, on the one hand, Wuhan's local authorities merely intended the institutional formalities of democracy to facilitate and build popular support for the inauguration of managerial despotism. On the other hand, workers' very involvement in this façade of democracy accidentally emboldened many of them to air grievances, make subversive demands, assert agency, and even resist managerial despotism. These findings shed light on the nuanced historicity of 1980s China and contribute to a rethinking of the meaning of workplace democracy.

Introduction

In China's early Reform Era, two ostensibly contradictory tendencies coexisted in the realm of policy reforms over the management of public industrial enterprises. On the one hand, prior scholarship has established that industrial reform in the late 1970s and

*The author thanks the archivists at the Wuhan Municipal Archive who made this research possible. A previous draft was presented at the Department of Sociology at Zhejiang University. This article has benefitted from helpful feedback from Mingcong Bai, Elisabeth Clemens, Kyuhyun Han, Ho-chiu Leung, Shiding Liu, Wilson Miu, Mical Muscolino, Jinghong Zhang, as well as the anonymous reviewers and editors at International Review of Social History. The usual disclaimer applies. The research and writing of this article were financially supported by the Esherick-Ye Family Foundation, the Kaifeng Foundation, and various centers and divisions at the University of California, Berkeley. The author dedicates this article to the memory of Michael Burawoy (1947–2025), an intellectual giant, inspiring mentor, caring friend, and fearless comrade whose influence permeates this article.

the 1980s strengthened the despotic power of factory directors vis-à-vis workers, weakened the norm of employment security, and undermined workers' status as "masters" of their enterprises.[1] Jeanne Wilson even went as far as claiming that, by the late 1980s, the management of China's public industrial enterprises had become so despotic that it resembled one-man management.[2] On the other hand, the early post-Mao era also saw a slew of policy efforts to strengthen the *formal* institutional channels for urban industrial workers to participate in democratic management of their enterprises.[3] For example, official stipulations in the early 1980s gave the Staff and Workers' Congress (SWC, *zhigong daibiao dahui*) – the representative body elected by workers within each enterprise – more substantial power in enterprise management beyond what had been allowed in the Mao era.[4] At the same time, shop-floor elections for enterprises' managerial staff – including factory directors – were conducted on an expansive scale across the country in the early and mid-1980s, either directly by workers or by the SWC.

The uneasy coexistence of these two tendencies was particularly evident in what transpired in Wuhan between 1984 and 1985. An important industrial hub in central China, Wuhan was home to a sizable and historically militant working class.[5] In 1984 and 1985, two reforms proceeded in tandem across the city's public industrial enterprises. On the one hand, Wuhan launched a large-scale effort to implement workplace elections of factory directors. The Wuhan Federation of Trade Unions reported that, between May 1984 and March 1985, at least 1,187 public enterprises affiliated with the municipality of Wuhan held elections of factory directors or used other democratic methods to select factory directors.[6] The municipal Party committee's department of economic work further reported that, by September 1985, almost one third of the Wuhan-affiliated public enterprises in industrial and transportation sectors had carried out elections of factory directors.[7] On the other hand, Wuhan closely followed the nationwide directive to aggressively promote the newly formulated "factory director responsibility system" (FDRS) in public enterprises.[8] The FDRS was a policy project to systematically reform how public enterprises were managed by forcefully centralizing managerial powers into the hands of factory directors. Existing literature has pointed out that the rollout

[1]Joel Andreas, *Disenfranchised: The Rise and Fall of Industrial Citizenship in China* (Oxford, 2019), ch. 7; Huaiyin Li, *The Master in Bondage: Factory Workers in China, 1949–2019* (Stanford, CA, 2023), ch. 6; Jackie Sheehan, *Chinese Workers: A New History* (London, 2002), ch. 7.

[2]Jeanne Wilson, "The People's Republic of China", in Alex Pravda and Blair Ruble (eds), *Trade Unions in Communist States* (London, 1986), pp. 219–252, 233.

[3]Martin Locket, "Self-Management in China", *Economic Analysis*, 15 (1981), pp. 85–114; Martin Lockett and Craig Littler, "Trends in Chinese Enterprise Management, 1978–1982", in Neville Maxwell and Bruce McFarlane (eds), *China's Changed Road to Development* (Oxford, 1984), pp. 61–82.

[4]I make no claims regarding whether SWCs in the early 1980s actually made factory management more democratic than in the decades before. My sole assertion here relates to the legal powers granted to SWCs by official stipulations. Of course, the extent to which these powers materialized on the ground varied widely.

[5]For more on the militancy of Wuhan's working class during the Cultural Revolution, see Shaoguang Wang, *Failure of Charisma: The Cultural Revolution in Wuhan* (Hong Kong, 1995).

[6]Wuhan Municipal Archive (hereafter WMA), XX000091–WS04–104–5 (19 July 1985).

[7]WMA, XX000005–WS01–29–2 (November 1985).

[8]WMA, XX000246–WS02–6–1 (June 1984).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020859025000094 Published online by Cambridge University Press

of the FDRS was the key policy move in China's early Reform Era, which exacerbated the power imbalance between factory directors and workers and ushered in managerial despotism on the shop floor.[9]

How to make sense of these seemingly paradoxical policy efforts to simultaneously bring more democracy *and* despotism to the industrial shop floor? More importantly, how did workers experience and react to the uneasy coexistence of these two lines of reform? This article answers these questions by drawing upon detailed and newly available materials from the Wuhan Municipal Archive. It examines both the policy intentions behind Wuhan's embrace of the parallel reforms and the grassroots dynamics they triggered among workers, shedding light on the dramatic tension between the two.

In a sense, the story told in this article is one of how top-down policy actions produced unintended grassroots consequences. When calling for the large-scale implementation of workplace elections of factory directors, Wuhan's local Party-state authorities only intended to promote a mere *façade* of democracy, largely as a means to facilitate and build popular legitimacy for the subsequent concentration of managerial powers under the FDRS reform. They endeavored to tightly control the electoral processes from the top down. However, in many enterprises, the electoral processes paradoxically enabled and inspired workers to assert their agency in unexpected ways or take the democratic cause more seriously than the officials had intended. In some cases, elections even endowed workers with the confidence, rhetorical resources, and institutional memory to push back against factory directors' later attempts to centralize power under the FDRS. A top-down effort to create a pretense of democracy "accidentally emboldened" many workers to push for genuine democratic participation.

Historiographically, this study provides a new way to appreciate the 1980s as an important moment in the history of the People's Republic of China. It was a period of ambiguity, amorphousness, and open-endedness. China was transitioning out of the prior model of socialism, but capitalism in its definite form was nowhere to be seen. Many historical actors were searching for ways to reform Chinese socialism, without any clear ideas of what the end point would be. As leading Party politicians did not share a clear and unified vision for reform, China in the 1980s experienced a rare degree of political openness, allowing for a highly diverse range of reform initiatives and policy experiments that often lacked consistency. Whereas existing scholarship has captured how the uncertain, mosaic, and indeterminate nature of this historical moment played out at the level of policymaking and elite politics,[10] this article presents a much-needed account of not only how the patchwork of capricious policy initiatives was experienced at the grassroots, but also how it

[9]See the works cited in note 1. Also see Michael Martin, "Urban Incomes, Workers' Democracy and the Spring Uprising", *Review of Radical Political Economics*, 24 (1992), pp. 136–165; Shaoguang Wang, "Deng Xiaoping's Reform and the Chinese Workers' Participation in the Protest Movement of 1989", *Research in Political Economy*, 13 (1992), pp. 163–197.

[10]Joseph Fewsmith, *Dilemmas of Reform in China: Political Conflict and Economic Debate* (New York, 1994); Julian Gewirtz, *Never Turn Back: China and the Forbidden History of the 1980s* (Cambridge, MA, 2022); Isabella Weber, *How China Escaped Shock Therapy: The Market Reform Debate* (New York, 2021); Gordon White, *Riding the Tiger: The Politics of Economic Reform in Post-Mao China* (Stanford, CA, 1993).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020859025000094 Published online by Cambridge University Press

inadvertently brewed subversive forms of subaltern agency that went far beyond what the official intentions of the policies were able to foresee.

Conceptually, this study addresses a bifurcation in the conventional scholarly understandings of workplace democracy as either stable institutionalized practice or contentious direct action. Existing studies on industrial politics in historical socialist societies look for manifestations of workplace democracy usually in one of the following two arenas: formal organizational mechanisms that allowed workers to exercise decision-making influence in the everyday, or dramatic episodes of workers' contentious mobilization that pressed their demands in confrontation with the existing structure of power. This study, in contrast, shows that neither perspective alone can make sense of the key dynamics at play. While "democratic" formal institutions did not grant workers genuine democratic power, they nonetheless provided openings and justifications for workers to stage autonomous or contentious actions that took the ideal of democracy seriously. This article therefore suggests a way to rethink the concept of workplace democracy, arguing that institutionalized practice and contentious direct action, usually understood as two distinct "faces" of workplace democracy, can form a dialectic whole.

Historiographical Intervention: Workers and China's 1980s

The existing literature on urban industrial workers in China's 1980s primarily consists of two waves. The first wave came in the form of contemporaneous research conducted by social scientists in the 1980s and the early 1990s. It focused on documenting the impact of various policy reforms on workers' experiences over this period. For example, Susan Shirk demonstrated how the changing policies on recruitment, wages, and bonuses affected the way workers related to each other on the shop floor.[11] Gordon White interrogated the effects of the policy to terminate employment security for newly hired workers.[12] Andrew Walder examined how the reforms over factory management changed the relationship between frontline workers and factory directors.[13] Some scholars have also traced workers' participation in the momentous pro-democracy movements of 1989 to their experiences with various policy changes over the 1980s.[14]

The second wave of this literature was produced by historians and historical social scientists in the last couple of decades.[15] This wave of work conceptualizes urban

[11]Susan Shirk, "Recent Chinese Labour Policies and the Transformation of Industrial Organization in China", *The China Quarterly*, 88 (1981), pp. 575–593.

[12]Gordon White, "The Politics of Economic Reform in Chinese Industry: The Introduction of the Labour Contract System", *The China Quarterly*, 111 (1987), pp. 365–389.

[13]Andrew Walder, "Wage Reform and the Web of Factory Interests", *The China Quarterly*, 109 (1987), pp. 22–41; *idem*, "Factory and Manager in an Era of Reform", *The China Quarterly*, 118 (1989), pp. 242–264.

[14]Andrew Walder, "Workers, Managers and the State: The Reform Era and the Political Crisis of 1989", *The China Quarterly*, 127 (1991), pp. 467–492; Jeanne Wilson, "Labor Policy in China: Reform and Retrogression", *Problems of Communism*, 39 (1990), pp. 44–65. Also see Martin, "Urban Incomes, Workers' Democracy and the Spring Uprising", and Wang, "Deng Xiaoping's Reform".

[15]Andreas, *Disenfranchised*; Yige Dong, "From Mill Town to iPhone City: Gender, Labor and the Politics of Care in an Industrializing China (1949–2017)" (Ph.D., Johns Hopkins University, 2019); Li, *The Master in Bondage*; Sheehan, *Chinese Workers*.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020859025000094 Published online by Cambridge University Press

workers' experiences in the early post-Mao era as part of a longer historical arc in which China transitioned from state socialism to capitalism. Whereas the basic institutions of China's socialist industrial workplaces (or *danwei*[16]) remained largely intact in the 1980s, these scholars have pointed out that, over this period, many institutional features of the Mao-era industrial regime began to be undermined and embryonic seeds of capitalistic production relations grew: the gap between mental and manual labor on the shop floor widened; political and ideological incentives were replaced by popular economism; increasing inequalities and competitiveness among workers eroded norms of egalitarianism and collectivism; new labor contract systems directly challenged the convention of lifelong employment security; gender discrimination against women workers deteriorated; and factory management became both more technocratic and more despotic, resembling one-man management. These reforms introduced market-oriented and proto-capitalistic elements to the institutions of socialist workplaces but were still far from enough to inaugurate the demise of those institutions.

While these studies have made important advances in understanding the changing industrial relations in China's early Reform Era, two gaps remain in this literature. First, we know much more about the policy changes shaping workers' experiences than about how workers contested these policy changes. The existing studies have more or less painted workers in this period as unhappy victims who grudgingly submitted to the unpopular policy changes with a sense of resignation. Put differently, workers' historical agency has not occupied the center of analytical attention. This lack of scholarly emphasis on workers' agency and contestation is problematic, given what we know about workers' powerful defiance and militancy in the periods immediately before *and* after the early post-Mao era.[17]

Second, the existing studies have not adequately examined the policy efforts to strengthen formal institutions of shop-floor democracy in this period. While scholars such as Joel Andreas and Jackie Sheehan did note these policies, they treated them either as merely cosmetic or a brief detour before the disciplinary and proto-capitalistic reforms became dominant over the second half of the 1980s. In contrast, this article argues that the democratizing reforms, however formalistic, should be taken much more seriously than they have been. For many workers, experiences with these reforms were as real and profound as their experiences with

[16]Xiaobo Lü and Elizabeth J. Perry, *Danwei: The Changing Chinese Workplace in Historical and Comparative Perspective* (Armonk, NY, 1997); Mark W. Frazier, *The Making of the Chinese Industrial Workplace: State, Revolution, and Labor Management* (Cambridge, 2004).

[17]For research on labor unrest and workers' militant collective actions in the early and mid-1970s, see Keith Forster, *Rebellion and Factionalism in a Chinese Province: Zhejiang 1966–1976* (Armonk, NY, 1990); Elizabeth Perry, "Labor Divided: Sources of State Formation in Modern China", in Joel Migdal, Atul Kohli, and Vivienne Shue (eds), *State Power and Social Forces* (New York, 1994), pp. 143–173; Andrew Walder, "The Chinese Cultural Revolution in the Factories: Party State Structures and Patterns of Conflict", in Elizabeth Perry (ed.), *Putting Class in Its Place: Worker Identities in East Asia* (Berkeley, CA, 1996), pp. 167–198. For research on labor unrest and workers' militant collective actions in the 1990s, see, for example, Yongshun Cai, "The Resistance of Chinese Laid-off Workers in the Reform Period", *The China Quarterly*, 170 (2002), pp. 327–244; Feng Chen, "Industrial Restructuring and Workers' Resistance in China", *Modern China*, 29 (2003), pp. 237–262.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020859025000094 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the disciplinary and proto-capitalistic reforms enacted in the same period.[18] More importantly, given that the unfolding of democratizing reforms coincided with the rollout of disciplinary policies, a particularly interesting question to ask is how workers related and reacted to the *tension* between these parallel developments.

These two gaps in the literature raise a more fundamental question of how the 1980s has been conceptualized. Existing studies on urban workers' experiences in this period have not fully taken into account how the 1980s marked an ambiguous crossroads and a moment of uncertain in-betweenness for China. As many historical actors sought ways to reform Chinese socialism but failed to present a systematic and unifying agenda, disparate reform initiatives – sometimes pointing towards contradictory policy directions – were often launched and pursued simultaneously. Interestingly, the implementation of these overlapping but incongruent reforms sometimes opened up interstitial spaces at the grassroots level, where subaltern actors' subversive agency could emerge and grow. The eruption of such agency was not the intended consequence of any reforms themselves, and even obstructed the rollout of some of these measures. It is these subtle dynamics, which speak to the character of the 1980s as a historical moment, that this article seeks to convey.

This study remedies the historiographical gaps in the existing scholarship by zooming in on one empirical case: the city of Wuhan in 1984–1985. It asks how and why the large-scale promotion of workplace elections for factory directors proceeded side by side with the inauguration of managerial despotism, how the Party-state officials and enterprise leaders sought to manage the twin reforms, and how workers navigated the crosscurrents. Crucially, it puts workers' agency front and center, highlighting how workplace elections unexpectedly catalyzed workers' grassroots actions, which ran counter to the official agenda and even posed trouble for the FDRS's rollout.

Conceptual Intervention: Rethinking Workplace Democracy

The broader literature on industrial politics in historical socialist societies has deployed the concept of "workplace democracy" in two distinct ways. Joel Andreas, when discussing Mao Zedong's approach to industrial democracy, coincidentally provided one of the clearest and most succinct articulations of this duality: according to Andreas, Mao's approach was characterized by "his broader indifference to *institutional* forms, including those designed to be formal mechanisms of democratic participation […] Instead, Mao was drawn to more *tumultuous* forms of political participation and contention".[19] Here, two conceptualizations of workplace democracy are juxtaposed: the first as stable institutionalized practice, and the second as contentious direct action.

Those who conceptualize workplace democracy as stable institutionalized practice look at how formal mechanisms on the shop floor enable (or fail to enable) workers to participate in managerial affairs and shape workplace decision-making according to

[18]This should not come as a surprise in light of Jeanne Wilson's work documenting workers' collective actions in the early 1980s, specifically, demanding more democracy in the workplace. Jeanne Wilson, "The Polish Lesson: China and Poland 1980–1990", *Studies in Comparative Communism*, 23 (1990), pp. 259–279.

[19]Andreas, *Disenfranchised*, pp. 162–163. Emphasis added.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020859025000094 Published online by Cambridge University Press

their preferences through regularized, everyday activities. In addition to scholars who have studied formal institutions of workplace democracy in China, such as SWCs, a robust literature has examined the functioning of institutionalized practice under the Yugoslavian system of "workers' self-management". This body of work has investigated the workings of such institutions as workers' councils and factory management committees in Yugoslavia, how exactly workers' participation bore upon enterprises' decision-making, which groups of workers participated most actively and whose preferences prevailed, and the inequalities and side effects produced by workers' practices.[20] When applied to the empirical case studied in this article, this conceptualization shows its limitations. For sure, the object of study here is an institution ostensibly supposed to foster workplace democracy: shop-floor elections of factory directors. But as we scrutinize how these elections were conducted on the ground, it becomes clear that the official authorities sought to manage them every step of the way and the election results represented workers' preferences in a very limited sense at best. If we follow the conceptualization of workplace democracy as stable institutionalized practice, we might well stop at denouncing these elections as sham and cosmetic rather than authentic democracy, and overlook the more interesting dynamics underneath.

Those who conceptualize workplace democracy as contentious direct action look at how workers directly push their demands and claims through activities that disrupt the everyday functioning of shop-floor institutions and challenge the ability of the socialist Party-state to govern. Strikes, slowdowns, protests, marches, sit-ins, and spontaneous mobilizations are the most familiar sites of investigation for scholars employing this conceptualization. In addition to those who have studied episodes of workers' contentious direct action in the history of Chinese socialism – most notably in 1957, during the Cultural Revolution, and in 1989 – researchers have also analyzed the manifestation of workplace democracy as insurrectionary labor movements at other fateful moments in socialist histories: for example, in Hungary in 1956,[21] Czechoslovakia in 1968,[22] and Poland in 1980–1981.[23] This body of work understands workplace democracy as a process of rupture and struggle, in which workers seek to transcend existing top-down power structures and assert their

[20]Wlodzimierz Brus and Kazimierz Laski, *From Marx to the Market: Socialism in Search of an Economic System* (Oxford, 1989); Ellen Comisso, *Workers' Control Under Plan and Market* (New Haven, CT, 1979); Susan L. Woodward, *Socialist Unemployment: The Political Economy of Yugoslavia, 1945–1990* (Princeton, NJ, 1995); Sharon Zukin, *Beyond Marx and Tito: Theory and Practice in Yugoslav Socialism* (Cambridge, 1975). For a recent scholarly examination of workplace democracy as anti-capitalistic institutionalized practice under capitalist society, see Katherine Sobering, *The People's Hotel: Working for Justice in Argentina* (Durham, NC, 2022).

[21]Bill Lomax, "The Working Class in the Hungarian Revolution of 1956", *Critique: Journal of Socialist Theory*, 12 (1980), pp. 27–54; Mark Pittaway, "The Revolution and Industrial Workers: The Disintegration and Reconstruction of Socialism, 1953–1958", *Hungarian Studies Review*, 34 (2007), pp. 115–154.

[22]Pete Dolack, "Workers' Councils in the Prague Spring", *Socialism and Democracy*, 32 (2018), pp. 32–55; Peter Heumos, "Workers under Communist Rule: Research in the Former Socialist Countries of Eastern-Central and South-Eastern Europe and in the Federal Republic of Germany", *International Review of Social History*, 55 (2010), pp. 83–115, 92.

[23]David Ost, *Solidarity and the Politics of Anti-Politics: Opposition and Reform in Poland since 1968* (Philadelphia, PA, 1990); Michael Szporer, *Solidarity: The Great Workers Strike of 1980* (Lanham, MD, 2012).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020859025000094 Published online by Cambridge University Press

autonomous power through militant actions. While this conceptualization importantly informs the analysis in this article by emphasizing workers' subversive agency, it alone is not sufficient to make sense of why, in the curious case of Wuhan in 1984–1985, workers' autonomy and direct action were enabled and inspired by a flawed formal institution in the first place.

Instead, the empirical case presented here powerfully demonstrates the analytical utility of a more holistic understanding of workplace democracy that fully integrates the two conceptualizations. It shows that the relationship between stable, institutionalized practice and contentious direct action can be dialectic. Formal mechanisms are important for workplace democracy, not necessarily because they realize democratic decision-making in any meaningful sense, but sometimes because they provide interstitial openings and legitimating discourses that make workers' direct action possible. Correspondingly, workers' subversive and autonomous activities do not necessarily have to frame themselves as efforts to challenge or transcend existing institutions of power; they can instead seek to make workers' voices heard *within* formal institutions that promise democracy to workers but fail to deliver. From this perspective, stable, institutionalized practice and contentious direct action form an unending iterative process, in which democracy as an ideal is never fully realized in practice but always motivates workers' behavior. This holistic approach highlights how flawed institutions can nevertheless give birth to workers' democratic struggle, and how workers' struggle can in turn transform the democratic character of formal institutions from a mere appearance into something more substantive.

Data Sources and Method

This study draws upon archival materials accessed at the Wuhan Municipal Archive in 2022. The bulk of these materials became available for academic use only recently. In particular, the central component of the narrative presented in this article – on how tightly controlled electoral processes nevertheless emboldened workers to assert their agency – hinged mostly upon documents located in the following dossiers at the Archive: 1) the Wuhan municipal Party committee's department of economic work; 2) Wuhan's Municipal Federation of Trade Unions; 3) Wuhan's general company of textile industry; 4) the municipal bureau of chemical and medical industry; and 5) Wuhan's company of automated equipment and instrument. Together, these materials detailed (to various extents) the electoral processes in more than a dozen factories under the jurisdiction of the Wuhan Municipality. Particularly useful documents include real-time updates submitted by enterprise-level Party and union committees or work teams to higher-level overseeing authorities on the unfolding of the electoral processes, summary reports, and internal bulletins compiled by bureaus and commissions on the progress of the enactment of factory elections in specific sectors with concrete examples, as well as speeches given and reference materials shared at internal work meetings. I have also consulted a small number of documents accessed at the Hubei Provincial Archive[24] to corroborate accounts. By reading archival documents carefully, critically, and

[24]Wuhan is the capital city of Hubei Province.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020859025000094 Published online by Cambridge University Press

reflexively, I follow established historiographical practice to construct a narrative highlighting grassroots workers' agency even though the available materials on which this narrative is based were predominantly produced by official authorities.

National Contexts on Wuhan's Parallel Reforms

Before delving into local dynamics in Wuhan, it is necessary to provide some relevant national contexts for the parallel reforms being implemented there in 1984–1985. Workplace elections of factory directors were codified as national policy in the early 1980s. The Provisional Regulations on SWCs in State-Managed Industrial Enterprises, issued in 1981, explicitly stipulated that enterprise-level SWCs are entitled to the power to elect factory directors. On 2 January 1982, the Party's Central Committee and the State Council jointly promulgated a policy guideline on enterprise management, which also included the following clause: "conditions shall be proactively created for democratic elections of factory directors to be gradually implemented".[25] As existing research shows, this national-level endorsement for workplace elections of factory directors was part of a policy response to pacify a nationwide wave of labor unrest that swept China in 1980–1981.[26] As the labor unrest unfolded, leadership of the All-China Federation of Trade Unions insisted that strengthening institutional channels of workplace democracy was one of the most effective ways to defang workers' contentious organizing.[27] This argument eventually gained purchase within the Party's top echelon. For example, during an internal deliberative session of the Party's central secretariat in June 1981, China's Vice Premier Wan Li remarked that, "if the [key] decisions are made by the SWCs, who would you [workers] protest against?"[28]

This official openness to elections inside urban factories also indicated something broader about the political climate in China's early 1980s. It was a moment when the Chinese Party-state was somewhat receptive to diverse efforts to foster democratic experiments at the grassroots level.[29] In some localities, contested elections for representatives of the local People's Congress were allowed to take place.[30] Some senior leaders – particularly Peng Zhen, vice chairman of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress – encouraged direct elections of leading cadres at village and township levels.[31] These politicians certainly did not desire Western-style liberal democracy, but they nevertheless saw grassroots elections as a useful way to increase public trust in the socialist Party-state, hold local leaders

[25]"Decision by the Party's Central Committee and the State Council on Comprehensively Rectifying State-Managed Industrial Enterprises", 2 January 1982, in *Selected Compilation of Documents about the Workers' Movement Issued by the CCP Central Committee after the Founding of the PRC* (Second Volume), pp. 1358–1368.

[26]Yueran Zhang, *Whither Socialism? Workers' Democracy and the Class Politics of China's Post-Mao Transition to Capitalism* (Ph.D., University of California, Berkeley, 2024), ch. 2.

[27]WMA, XX000091–WS02–134–17 (10 October 1980).

[28]Hubei Provincial Archive, SZ001–8–423–2 (13 June 1981).

[29]I thank the anonymous reviewer for reminding me of this point.

[30]Brantly Womack, "The 1980 County-Level Elections in China: Experiment in Democratic Modernization", *Asian Survey*, 22 (1982), pp. 261–277.

[31]Joshua Hill, *Voting as a Rite: A History of Elections in Modern China* (Cambridge, MA, 2019).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020859025000094 Published online by Cambridge University Press

somewhat accountable to their constituencies, as well as to facilitate the ongoing endeavor nationwide to force older and under-educated Party-state cadres into retirement and replace them with younger and supposedly more entrepreneurial personnel.[32] Compared with the tempo of national policymaking, Wuhan's full-blown embrace of factory elections in 1984 was a couple of years late. Indeed, this move was partly motivated by a realization that Wuhan was "lagging behind" many other localities in promoting elections of factory directors and a desire to eventually "catch up", as Wuhan's vice municipal Party secretary Xin Fu acknowledged in an internal speech.[33]

In contrast, Wuhan welcomed the FDRS reform much more promptly, merely a few months after it emerged on the national policy agenda in early 1984. The central Party-state's decision to launch the FDRS reform marked a watershed moment in the trajectory of how China approached enterprise reform in the 1980s. As existing research has documented, a consensus had surfaced among policymakers in the central Party-state by 1984 that the FDRS should help rein in workers' "excessive" power and control in urban public enterprises,[34] and the FDRS's implementation indeed generated a visible and immediate anti-democratic effect on the shop floor.[35] Peng Zhen, who spearheaded the working group tasked to draft a blueprint for the FDRS, remarked in January 1984 that "state-managed enterprises were owned by the entire people, not by their workers, and therefore their directors should only be appointed by and responsible to the state" and lamented that democratic elections, however well-intended, made factory directors feel they were "caught between a rock and a hard place" (*zuoyou weinan*).[36] This working group subsequently proposed in mid-1984 in their internally circulated policy draft to get rid of workers' right to elect factory directors altogether. It seemed that, with the coming of the FDRS, the political support for factory elections was quickly waning.

Although a shift to the FDRS superseded the receptiveness to shop-floor elections of factory directors on the national policy arena, Wuhan's local rhythm of policy implementation created a temporal mismatch. Its status as a belated embracer of factory elections and a vanguard adopter of the FDRS meant that Wuhan was trying to simultaneously roll out two reforms featuring contradictory policy objectives. The management of these parallel reforms, seemingly moving in opposite directions on the question of workplace democracy, posed a dilemma in 1984–1985. Official authorities in Wuhan therefore had to take special care to articulate why these two reforms did not actually contradict each other and how they formed a compatible whole. As shown in the next section, they accomplished this task by explicating an instrumentalist view of workers' democracy and coming up with methods to tightly control workplace elections of factory directors.

[32]Even though the archival evidence does not directly attest to this, there is reason to suspect that this broader policy discourse around grassroots democracy (*jiceng minzhu*) might have made workers more confident to pose demands in the electoral processes in ways detailed below.

[33]WMA, XX000091–WS03–27–4 (24 August 1982).

[34]Zhang, *Whither Socialism?*, ch. 4.

[35]Sheehan, *Chinese Workers*, p. 201.

[36]*The Memoir of Yuan Baohua* (Beijing, 2018), pp. 394–395.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020859025000094 Published online by Cambridge University Press

A Heavy Hand: The Official Approach to Elections

An Instrumentalist View of Workers' Democracy

Even though workplace elections of factory directors had been sporadically conducted in Wuhan between 1980 and 1983, the city's official push for the large-scale implementation of these elections started only in the spring of 1984. On 17 April 1984, Wuhan's municipal Party committee issued The Four Provisional Regulations on Reforming the Cadre and Personnel System.[37] One of the regulations stipulated that direct elections of factory directors by enterprise-level SWCs should be "universally implemented". Direct elections by all rank-and-file workers were also permissible in small- and medium-sized enterprises.

Wuhan's policy pronouncement was striking in a few ways. First, it did not frame the promotion of factory elections as an effort to advance workers' democracy. Instead, this initiative was included in a policy package to reform *the cadre and personnel system*, the fundamental goal of which was to "select those cadres who are reform-minded, capable, energetic and innovative into leadership teams at all levels".[38] Second, the Four Provisional Regulations included specific guidelines regarding who was eligible to stand as candidates in such factory-level elections: the candidates for factory directors must "have finished all secondary education and preferably have received some tertiary education" and must "not be older than fifty-five in large factories and fifty in small and medium-sized factories".[39] These stipulations made it clear that, consistent with how the policy was framed, Wuhan's municipal authorities cared less about whether workers would be able to exercise democracy than about making sure that a cohort of young, educated cadres are selected as factory leaders in the end.[40]

This prioritizing of the concern with selecting "right" cadres over the concern with workers' democracy per se was also evident in the types of enterprises chosen to implement elections first. At the work conference announcing the Four Provisional Regulations, Sun Wenying, director of the Wuhan municipal Party committee's department of economic work, outlined a roadmap for step-by-step implementation. According to him, three types of public enterprises should be prioritized for implementing workplace elections: "those enterprises which have long been running deficits, those that are expected to contribute more profits but have not, and those which have not seen improvement for a while because of lack of dynamism".[41] In other words, the enterprises chosen to implement elections first were those that had been economically underperforming. The municipal leadership hoped that, once these enterprises replaced old directors with new ones deemed more "capable", their economic performance would soon improve. As Sun himself explained a year later, "an entire enterprise could be vitalized by putting a 'capable

[37]WMA, XX000046–WS02–428–1 (17 April 1984).

[38]*Ibid.*

[39]*Ibid.*

[40]This policy focus was consistent with the nationwide reform measures in the early 1980s to promote relatively young and educated cadres to key positions in government agencies and enterprises. See Richard Baum, *Burying Mao: Chinese Politics in the Age of Deng Xiaoping* (Princeton, NJ, 1996).

[41]WMA, XX000005–WS01–10–2 (20 April 1984).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020859025000094 Published online by Cambridge University Press

person' (*nengren*) in charge. 'Select the right people, an enterprise flourishes; select the wrong people, economic performance drops'".[42]

But why did Wuhan's municipal leadership find it necessary to resort to workplace elections to select "capable" factory directors, rather than simply having Party-state agencies appoint those they deemed capable? A telling answer was provided in an internal work report in May 1984 written by the Wuhan Federation of Trade Unions, which was closely involved in devising this policy. The report praised workplace elections for providing a mechanism to "*rely on workers* to remove the 'iron chair' of leaders whose tenure was supposed to be lifelong".[43] In the factories, promoting "capable" cadres – who were expected to be younger and more educated – to be in charge would entail forcing incumbent cadres into early retirement or the "second front" (*erxian*).[44] This was anticipated to trigger resistance from those old cadres to be replaced. It was this anticipated resistance, as the above quote suggests, which made it necessary to "rely on workers" and resort to elections to stage cadre replacement as a result of democratic will.

In addition to expediting cadre replacement, Wuhan's officials also believed that workplace elections of factory directors could facilitate the subsequent centralization of managerial power into the hands of the elected factory directors as dictated by the FDRS reform. Workers were believed to be more likely to accept an expansion of the factory director's managerial power if an election took place first. "The factory director elected by the masses could legitimately and confidently demand their support for and compliance with managerial orders", writes a summary report authored by a work team supervising a factory election.[45] This perspective was echoed in another report submitted by the leadership of the Wuhan Federation of Trade Unions to the municipal Party leadership: "democratic elections allow elected factory directors to garner workers' trust and support, which provides a foundation and condition for [subsequently] strengthening the system of managerial command".[46] In other words, Wuhan's local authorities tried their best to frame the promotion of factory elections and the rollout of the FDRS as a holistic and mutually reinforcing package of policy reform, with the former laying the necessary groundwork for the latter. This further betrayed an instrumentalist understanding of workers' democracy.

With these instrumentalist intentions, the scale in which factory elections were conducted across the city was unprecedented in Wuhan's history, as documented in the article's introductory paragraphs. The only time in the previous decades when grassroots elections for factory management were held somewhat systematically in the city was during the Four Cleans Campaign between 1964 and early 1966. However, as those elections took place amid a highly centralized and directed mass campaign, they left little room for workers to express their preferences.[47] In

[42]WMA, XX000005–WS01–29–5 (25 March 1985).

[43]WMA, XX000091–WS03–88–2 (20 May 1984). Emphasis added.

[44]The "second front" refers to those leadership posts supposed to serve symbolic and/or consultative functions, without entailing real managerial power.

[45]WMA, XX000185–WS02–315–2 (27 May 1984).

[46]WMA, XX000091–WS04–84–1 (May 1984).

[47]Andreas, *Disenfranchised*, pp. 93–95. Elections for factory management were also held sporadically in the early Cultural Revolution years (1967–1968) as revolutionary committees were being formed, but their

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020859025000094 Published online by Cambridge University Press

1984–1985, even though official Party-state and/or enterprise authorities also sought to control electoral processes from the top down (as explained in the following paragraphs), the absence of a tumultuous mass campaign meant that workers had more leeway to make interventions of their own volition.

Managing Elections from the Top Down

Given the instrumentalist motivations behind the promotion of workplace elections, it is no surprise that official authorities generally sought to exert tight control over how these elections were conducted. The authority managing an election could be the enterprise-level Party committee or the upper-level Party-state organ responsible for overseeing a given enterprise, or a combination of both – especially when the upper-level Party-state organ sent a work team to oversee the election in the enterprise.

Among all stages of an election, nomination of candidates received particular attention from the official authorities. The Wuhan Textile Dyeing Factory was a case in point. With 2,600 employees, it was one of the most strategically important factories in Wuhan, accounting for five per cent of the total taxes and profits remitted to the municipal government by all industrial enterprises in the city. There, the electoral process ran from 13 April to 27 May 1984. Even though a period of open nomination in the beginning resulted in seventy-six nominees, it was the presidium of the SWC, comprised disproportionately of cadres holding leadership posts in the factory, which was tasked to generate a longlist of ten. The factory's Party committee then arranged an enlarged meeting of the SWC presidium to narrow the longlist down to a shortlist of five. The overseeing Party authority, finally, picked from the shortlist two final candidates to stand in the election, after "weighing the eligibility requirements" and "consulting with the masses".[48] Both of the two final candidates were alarmingly young, one twenty-nine and the other twenty-seven, and both had finished junior college (*dazhuan*).[49] The candidate that ended up winning the election, Zhang Huaiyi, had been the vice director of the factory's planning department. Moreover, he had been sent by the factory leadership to attend a training course in Beijing organized by the Ministry of Textile Industry *specifically for factory directors* well before the election was held.[50] It was highly likely that this cadre had been put on the factory's "third brigade" list – a list of young cadres identified by the leadership as suitable for future promotion to key leadership posts – for quite some time.

What transpired at the Wuhan Textile Dyeing Factory followed the standard procedure recommended by Wuhan's municipal leadership. In April 1984, Sun Wenying outlined the following procedure as the "best practice":

> The procedure for such elections should be: first, the enterprise-level Party committee holds a mass meeting to communicate to workers the situation of

dynamics were largely dominated by military rule and factional conflicts. See Andreas, *Disenfranchised*, pp. 132–140.

[48]WMA, XX000057–WS03–230–5 (May 1984).

[49]WMA, XX000091–WS03–99–3 (28 July 1984).

[50]WMA, XX000091–WS03–99–4 (15 September 1984).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020859025000094 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> the enterprise and eligibility criteria for candidates, and to mobilize workers to self-nominate and nominate others; the nominees then give speeches and answer questions; the enterprise-level Party committee and upper-level Party authority carefully investigate these nominees to generate a certain number of final candidates; the SWC discusses these candidates and holds a vote; finally, the candidate who receives more than half of the votes is elected.[51]

Since enterprise-level SWCs were supposed to play a crucial role in the electoral processes, a few words on their constitution and powers are in order. By the early 1980s, most public enterprises across urban China had established or reinstated functional SWCs. Promoted on a wide scale in the 1950s but left to fall by the wayside during the Cultural Revolution, SWCs were seen by the post-Mao Party leadership as a key element in the much-needed institutional rebuilding inside China's factories in the late 1970s. Their restoration was officially mandated by the Provisional Regulations on SWCs in State-Managed Industrial Enterprises ratified by the Party's Central Committee and the State Council in 1981 as well as the 1982 Constitution. It was stipulated that frontline workers should comprise at least sixty per cent of all SWC delegates in a factory (with cadres and technical staff populating the rest); that quotas of SWC delegates should be allocated to each workshop, office, work section, and even small production team, enabling workers in each respective unit to directly elect their SWC delegates every two years; and that nobody should be appointed a SWC delegate without such election. It was not entirely clear whether grassroots practices strictly adhered to such official guidelines – there is abundant evidence pointing to both directions. But given that frontline workers did account for the bulk of SWC delegates and that such workers could not help but become closely embedded with their coworkers through everyday interactions on the shop floor, it was undeniable that factory-level SWCs had to maintain some accountability to the entire workforce, even if some elections of SWC delegates might not have been democratic. (The same cannot be said about the presidiums of SWCs, however, which tended to be dominated by leadership cadres.)

In practice, SWCs across the country were able to exercise decision-making and managerial powers most prominently regarding those distributional issues relevant to workers' immediate material interests, such as housing allocation, wage and bonus adjustments, and hiring opportunities for workers' children.[52] Wuhan's Municipal Federation of Trade Unions reported in May 1984 that "as of now, most enterprises in our city have empowered their SWCs to decide on the uses of collective welfare funds, and almost all enterprises tasked their SWCs to come up with housing allocation plans".[53] SWCs' powers did occasionally go beyond distributional issues, though. In Wuhan's Red Flag Paper Mill, SWC deputies once found the factory director's proposed production target to be excessively high, and advised him to lower it by thirty tons.[54] However, it was exactly such multifaceted

[51]WMA, XX000005–WS01–10–2.

[52]Andreas, *Disenfranchised*, ch. 7; Zhang, *Whither Socialism?*, ch. 3.

[53]WMA, XX000091–WS03–88–2.

[54]WMA, XX000091–WS04–82–2. This anecdote is credible because the conventional official discourse at the time liked to demonstrate how SWCs displayed "mass initiative" (*qunzhong jijixing*) by ratcheting up

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020859025000094 Published online by Cambridge University Press

powers wielded by the SWCs that the FDRS reform in 1984–1985 sought to erode by concentrating managerial powers into the hands of factory directors. Some union cadres in Wuhan complained, for example, that as the FDRS was being rolled out in certain factories, SWCs' powers in these factories became as shaky as a "walking stick made of a single thread of straw".[55]

Consistent with the blueprint laid out above by Sun Wenying, it was extremely common for the enterprise-level Party committee or the supervising Party authority to set stringent eligibility criteria before calling for nominations and then to vet nominated candidates. Wuhan's First Bicycle Factory, with more than 1,000 employees, was an example. The enterprise-level Party committee stipulated that eligible candidates must possess educational credentials equivalent to junior college or above and must be forty-five years or younger.[56] In an act of purposeful steering, the Party committee distributed to every work section a pamphlet with information on all the twenty-nine individuals who received some tertiary education, in order to "adequately inform workers" as they contemplated whom to nominate.[57] After the period of open nomination returned twenty-seven candidates, the Party committee again stepped in to eliminate ten who "clearly failed to meet the eligibility criteria or committed serious mistakes during the Cultural Revolution".[58]

In addition to controlling the nomination processes, official authorities also sought to ensure the elections proceed in an "orderly" manner – that is, without workers' autonomous organizing or campaign activity. In the Wuhan Pharmaceutical Factory, the Party committee set the following terms before calling for workers to nominate candidates: "workers should fill out the nomination form carefully and thoughtfully, with independent thinking and full expression of one's wishes, but there must be no 'link-up' (*chuanlian*) activity and no campaigning for others' votes".[59] Similarly, the Party committee of the Wuhan Camera Factory laid out the following ground rules before launching the election: "the leadership of the Party should be upheld, no 'link-up' or 'Four Big Freedoms' should be allowed, and the interference of factionalism should be absolutely prevented".[60] The terms "link-up", "Four Big Freedoms", and "factionalism" were all associated with the specter of Maoist "big democracy", which provided workers with some freedom to openly express and organize and culminated in mass rebellions during the Cultural Revolution.[61] The appearance of these terms in these documents suggested that, for the official authorities, any autonomous organizing or campaigning among workers

production targets; in other words, there is no fathomable political reason to fabricate an "inconvenient" incident like this one.

[55]WMA, XX000091–WS04–82–1 (June 1984).

[56]Recall that, in the city-wide guidelines, the age limit for the factory director of a large enterprise like the First Bicycle Factory was "no more than fifty-five years old". The eligibility criterion set by the factory's Party committee was more restricting than the city-wide guidelines.

[57]WMA, XX000091–WS04–92–2 (28 May 1984).

[58]*Ibid.*

[59]WMA, XX000056–WS05–101–15 (25 September 1984).

[60]WMA, XX000185–WS01–275–4 (13 May 1984).

[61]Joel Andreas and Yige Dong, "The Brief, Tumultuous History of 'Big Democracy' in China's Factories", *Modern China*, 44 (2018), pp. 455–496.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020859025000094 Published online by Cambridge University Press

conjured up the image of political disorder and bottom-up unruliness during the Cultural Revolution decade.

Accidentally Emboldened: Workers' Reactions

An Unexpected Forum for Workers' Voices

Given such top-down interference by official authorities, Wuhan's workplace elections of factory directors could hardly be said to be genuinely democratic. Understandably, announcements of planned elections were often met with workers' disbelief, cynicism, and apathy. In the Wuhan Cloth Shoes Factory, some workers asked "what is the point of an election when the leaders have already decided on everything?"[62] Both the bureau of mechanical industry and the first bureau of light industry reported that a sizable number of workers saw these elections as mere formalities to confirm the candidates already picked by the leadership.[63] Workers in the Malleable Iron Factory even rumored that the upcoming election would be the parent company's scheme to get rid of a particular factory manager.[64] Rumors like this suggested that workers were trying to make sense on their own terms of an upcoming event the official framing of which they had little trust in.[65]

However, by involving ordinary workers in the formal processes and creating a façade of democracy, some of these elections did provide unexpected openings for workers to make their voices heard. Even the formalities of elections sometimes gave birth to opportunities for workers to take the issue of genuine democracy more seriously than the official authorities had intended. When workers did so, they set off chains of events no actors could fully control and ended up empowering themselves and their co-workers, often to the surprise of official authorities.

Exceptionally rich material on the election held in the Wuhan Textile Dyeing Factory provides a glimpse into these dynamics. We have already seen in the previous section that, throughout the electoral process, the authorities held a tight grip over the screening of candidates. But workers did not stay passive. As the authorities were drafting the election timeline, some workers stepped up to demand "the right to self-nominate and asked that self-nomination be made more convenient".[66] The factory's Party committee and the SWC presidium quickly gave in to this demand. In addition, the enterprise leadership initially leaned against holding open Q&A sessions with final candidates, due to their fear that "the masses would throw tough questions at candidates and embarrass them".[67] But *workers'* demand pushed them to change their opinion as well. What transpired here was an

[62]WMA, XX000091–WS03–39–1 (22 January 1982).

[63]WMA, XX000053–WS03–59–9 (May 1984) and XX000058–WS05–43–13 (8 June 1984).

[64]WMA, XX000185–WS02–223–2 (26 June 1984).

[65]This finding is consistent with existing studies on the political role of rumors, which has been widely analyzed in the context of the French Revolution. See Arlette Farge and Jacques Revel, *The Vanishing Children of Paris: Rumor and Politics before the French Revolution* (Cambridge, MA, 1993); Lindsey Porter, *Popular Rumour in Revolutionary Paris, 1792–1994* (London, 2017); Timothy Tackett, *The Glory and the Sorrow: A Parisian and His World in the Age of the Revolution* (Oxford, 2021).

[66]WMA, XX000091–WS03–99–3.

[67]*Ibid.*

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020859025000094 Published online by Cambridge University Press

unusual instance in which workers' agency was recognized. From the leadership's perspective, the procedural concessions to workers seemed to beget no harm. Allowing worker's self-nomination and an open Q&A session with candidates did not threaten the authorities' power to screen nominees, decide on final candidates, and therefore control the electoral outcome. Moreover, these additional procedures served good publicity purposes as they were supposed to make the election *look* even more democratic in the eyes of both workers and the broader public. This was likely why the enterprise leadership conceded to workers' demands.

However, what happened during the window of open nomination caught the authorities off guard: "as the process of nomination and self-nomination unfolded, some self-nominees made too many promises on welfare and benefit issues. A certain minority of workers argued for the election of those candidates promising more housing, more vacations, shorter work shifts and larger bonuses."[68] Even though this report by the factory's union committee claimed that only a "minority" of workers got excited with the prospect of better welfare and greater benefits, another report by the factory's Party committee painted a more alarming picture: "when the electoral process entered the stage of self-nomination, a small number of people took advantage of the opportunity of self-nomination to make hefty promises on welfare and bonuses, creating a *tendency among workers* to support the election of those candidates promising housing, free gas and vacations".[69] Here, the word "tendency" (*qingxiang*) not only suggested the notable scale of workers' support already garnered by these self-nominees in a very short period of time, but also implied a *trend* where this support was increasing. From the perspective of the enterprise leadership, the self-nomination process was getting out of control. It provided a forum for workers to air a wide variety of material grievances by enabling workers to nominate themselves, make "hefty" promises, and seek support from other workers.

The enterprise leadership felt compelled to step in to demobilize such unruly voices and teach workers how to "correctly understand" what the election should be about. Educational sessions, political thought work, and propaganda outlets were the usual tools to which it resorted. Meanwhile, the leadership was also painfully aware that, without addressing the underlying material roots of workers' grievances, thought work alone could accomplish very little. In response, the factory's Party committee admitted that "workers' grievances were concentrated on too much overwork and our neglect of workers' livelihood issues" and correspondingly "adopted a measure to eliminate overwork by contracting out weekly production goals to each workshop and then organized tourist vacations for workers during holidays. The measures achieved immediate effect. In May, the production goal was met without a single day of overwork".[70] The factory's union committee corroborated that the problem of overwork, "which had remained long unresolved", was addressed thoroughly and almost overnight after workers' electoral activism emerged. In addition, workers were granted additional vacations, another issue brought up by those self-nominees

[68]*Ibid.*
[69]WMA, XX000057–WS03–230–5. Emphasis added.
[70]*Ibid.*

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020859025000094 Published online by Cambridge University Press

making "hefty" promises. Plans were also being made to address several other issues including the improvement of the cafeteria, workers' needs for cultural and entertainment activities, and housing.[71]

After the factory's Party committee subdued workers' electoral organizing by promising to address their material grievances, the electoral process proceeded as planned. Workers' continued engagement with the process did show a considerable degree of concern with their factory's long-term development plan and financial soundness, after the factory leadership's response met their most pressing material needs. Based on workers' input, SWC delegates posed a list of questions to the two final candidates during a Q&A session styled as a town hall. The content of these questions illustrated a wide range of workers' priorities:

> How to speed up capital turnover? What new products are to be launched once the contracts on double-faced velvet and wide stamped corduroy are completed? How to reduce the waste of charcoal? How to address the dustiness of the flannel workshop, which negatively affects the quality of products and workers' health?[72]

Evidently, workers were not so short-sighted as to care only about their immediate personal interest.

To be sure, workers' unexpected electoral mobilization in this factory had no impact on the outcome of the election itself. As recounted in the previous section, those who ended up on the shortlist were the candidates deemed acceptable to the official authorities, and the one eventually elected had been placed on the "third brigade" list for quite some time and was heavily favored by the authorities to win. But the electoral process did provide a significant opening for workers to mobilize for a voice that threatened to disrupt the top-down grip over the election. In trying to reassert their control, the authorities were compelled to address the material grievances driving worker' mobilization. It could be argued that the election in the Wuhan Textile Dyeing Factory, without itself being democratically run, did produce democratic *implications* for workers.

Workers' endeavors to push the boundary of democratic practice beyond what the official authorities were willing to tolerate also emerged in the Wuhan Machine Tool Factory, even though the evidence is more scattered. A factory of 3,176 workers in total, it was the first large enterprise in Wuhan that ever held a factory director election, which did so in June 1982. When the news of a forthcoming election was announced, some workers felt energized. They argued that candidates that stand in the election should give campaign speeches in front of all workers before the votes are cast; others proposed that a ballot box be installed in front of the factory gate, so that all workers could cast a ballot.[73] Such measures, which were likely put forth by rank-and-file workers and would empower each one of the thousands of workers – not just SWC deputies – to participate in the election, were not something the official authority was prepared to consider. The factory's Party

[71]WMA, XX000091–WS03–99–3.
[72]WMA, XX000091–WS04–84–3 (22 June 1984).
[73]WMA, XX000091–WS03–38–6 (14 July 1982).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020859025000094 Published online by Cambridge University Press

committee – working directly under the instruction of the municipal Party committee over the course of the election – embarked on laborious "thought work" to disabuse workers of such ideas, labeling them as signs of "capitalistic democracy":

> Through concrete examples, we helped workers understand that even though capitalistic elections seem very democratic, candidates are actually controlled by and in service of groups of the wealthy; such elections are categorically different from socialist democracy.[74]

Such top-down intervention aroused the suspicion of at least one SWC delegate, who questioned how managed the factory's Party committee was about to make the election to be. This SWC delegate was so determined to find out the answer that, during the final election, they did not vote for any official candidates but wrote in the name of a machine operator instead. Their sole purpose was to see whether the Party committee would go so far as to fabricate the election results. When the official election results were announced, while the incumbent factory director won a landslide victory by receiving ninety-six per cent of the votes, the said machine operator indeed got one vote.[75] Even though the election in the Machine Tool Factory was largely a staged affair, the embarrassing existence of a single "protest vote" served as a reminder of how some workers were nevertheless serious about exerting their agency, refusing to be fooled around, and testing the actual limit of democracy.

"A Grand Festival of the Working Class"

Among enterprises of all types, the level of rank-and-file enthusiasm for and engagement with the electoral processes was generally the highest in factories whose economic performance had been the poorest.[76] This was not because elections in such factories were substantively more democratic, but because elections in these factories had higher stakes – workers cared deeply about whether elections could install factory directors who were capable of improving their enterprises' performance. The aforementioned First Bicycle Factory, which had generated deficits for several years in a row, was a case in point. Whereas the electoral process there was managed by the official authority in a quite standard fashion, workers' responses were overall more engaged. Those who were apathetic or skeptical certainly existed,[77] but many others were hopeful. Some workers were even quoted as saying, "if whomever is elected could turn the deficits around, each of us would commit to donating one *yuan* from the first month's bonus and using the collected money to reward this person".[78]

When the list of final candidates was shortened to four, the candidates were invited to give speeches and address questions from the audience at a town-hall meeting. Even

[74]WMA, XX000091–WS04–22–4 (26 August 1982).

[75]WMA, XX000091–WS03–38–6.

[76]Recall that in 1984, Wuhan's municipal Party committee explicitly stipulated that such enterprises should be prioritized for implementing workplace elections of factory directors.

[77]WMA, XX000091–WS04–92–2.

[78]WMA, XX000005–WS01–57–6 (24 May 1984).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020859025000094 Published online by Cambridge University Press

though only cadres and SWC deputies were asked to attend, many rank-and-file workers showed up as well. The questions posed to the candidates there reflected diverse analyses of why the enterprise had been underperforming:

> What are your plans to open up new outlets for our products? What are the concrete ways to improve the quality of oil paint? … How to gather more information about the market? What are your long-term plans? What is to be done about the redundancies in the bureaucratic structure of divisions and offices?[79]

When the SWC convened to conduct the final election on 18 May 1984, hundreds of ordinary workers surrounded the meeting hall in order to receive live updates. The SWC presidium then decided to set up a broadcasting loudspeaker on the factory's basketball court, so that all workers could hear what was going on inside the meeting hall. When the election results were certified, the lighting of many firecrackers could be heard around the factory. It was unclear whether workers bought and lit firecrackers spontaneously or whether the overseeing authority arranged such a celebratory scene. Regardless, the festive dimension of the electoral process mattered for the affect it produced. It signified hope, a clean break with the past, and a new beginning. Indeed, numerous reports described the election days inside factories as "a grand festival of the working class" (*gongren jieji de shengda jieri*), suggesting that the festiveness of the occasions was an important part of how officials and cadres defined the elections as success.

Workers' enthusiasm also manifested in striking ways in the Wuhan Head Factory of Chemical Additives, another factory that had been struggling economically. The challenges besetting this factory seemed so dire that, in the first few days after the election call was announced, nobody who met the eligibility criteria was willing to nominate themselves as a candidate. Facing such an impasse, workers decided to take matters into their own hands, creatively. Fifty-five workers from the fourth workshop posted a notice in front of the factory's office building, declaring that they were willing to collect funds among themselves to reward those self-nominees who made it to the final round – the person elected would receive two hundred yuan, and the other self-nominated final candidates would receive one hundred yuan each. These financial incentives were effective: the following day, seven individuals with college or associate degrees came forward. After the election concluded, workers indeed made good on their promises and delivered the said bonuses to the elected factory director and the other candidate who advanced to the last round. Instead of pocketing the money, the awardees decided to use it to set up a "factory director's fellowship" to honor those workers and staff who contributed to technological upgrading and new product development.[80]

Surprisingly Contested Elections

In some factories – particularly small- and medium-sized ones – the elections even produced outcomes that the official authorities failed to control or predict. Even

[79]WMA, XX000091–WS04–92–2.

[80]WMA, XX000091–WS04–104–2 (18 February 1985) and XX000246–WS01–22–2 (March 1985).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020859025000094 Published online by Cambridge University Press

though the official authorities could do everything within their powers to vet nominees and campaign for their favored candidates, when it was the turn for workers or SWC delegates to actually exercise their voting power in the final election, their behaviors sometimes left the official authorities stunned. The Oriental Instrument Factory, with 328 employees, held the election of its factory director in May 1984. In the beginning, the authorities stipulated eligibility criteria for candidates in a way similar to what was described in previous sections. They then held a nomination vote among seventy cadres and "backbone" (*gugan*) workers who they themselves handpicked. The three candidates who garnered most votes and satisfied the eligibility criteria then moved on to the final round of the election. Because the factory was small, all workers – unlike large factories where only SWC deputies could vote – had a vote in the final election.[81] Zhang Liangxin, formerly the factory's vice director, was favored by the authorities to win. The report from the liaison team sent by the overseeing company to steer the election in the factory explicitly stated that, according to their examination and feedback from others, "Zhang Liangxin possessed the necessary clarity, vision and toughness to lead the factory management. He was also the one receiving the highest number of votes in the nomination vote. Before the election, Zhang was widely regarded as the candidate most likely to win. Some even wrote notes to him before the election, reassuring him that there was no need to be nervous and advising him on what to do after getting elected".[82]

The election day was a momentous event in the factory, and workers understood that stakes were high. An internal report compiled by the Wuhan municipal Party committee's department of economic work detailed that "on the election day, 21 May, all workers arrived on time except for those on duty, on medical leave or on early retirement. Even a retired worker, upon learning of the election, hurried to the factory and pleaded to attend the candidates' speeches and cast a ballot. Another worker, who couldn't participate in person because she was on call, asked her mother who also works in the factory to cast a ballot on her behalf".[83] After workers' votes were all counted, an astonishing outcome emerged: Xiang Zuojian, the factory's incumbent vice Party secretary, beat Zhang 144 to eighty. The liaison team's report acknowledged that this outcome rather accurately reflected rank-and-file workers' sentiment:

> As the candidates made pre-election speeches, it was Xiang Zuojian who grabbed workers' hearts. Even though his speech was 80-minute long, it was filled with rounds after rounds of applause. We [the liaison team] attributed his appeal to three reasons. First, he made specific arrangements for each of the 328 workers in the factory and made everyone see a future with security. Second, he proposed to try everything possible to reclaim the salesroom at Liuduqiao which the overseeing company had arbitrarily reassigned to other uses, and to ask the overseeing company to help evict the electroplating workshop [of the

[81]WMA, XX000185–WS02–315–2.
[82]*Ibid.*
[83]WMA, XX000005–WS01–55–2 (11 June 1984).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020859025000094 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> Wuhan Instrument and Electroplating Factory] which had occupied the Oriental's factory building, so that the Oriental could have more space to expand production.[84] This garnered particularly enthusiastic applause. Third, he promised to repay all the debts the factory owed to its workers by 1 October, followed by another round of applause.[85]

Moreover, workers also held sharply divergent opinions on Xiang's and Zhang's personality and managerial styles: "according to the masses, [Xiang's] finest quality is his honesty, sincerity and kind-heartedness […] Workers were deeply moved when talking about how he made special efforts to care for a retired worker and his mentally ill daughter".[86] In contrast, some workers resented Zhang's punishingly strict approach. A woman worker from the instrument workshop, for example, complained that she "would rather go crazy than vote for Zhang. He disciplined us even for things as small as doing some knitting during work".[87] Therefore, at least among the final candidates that stood in the Oriental's election, the one with more genuine rank-and-file support prevailed over the one favored by the official authorities. Faced with this disappointment, the liaison team went on to question whether workplace elections were really the correct approach to leadership selection, noting that "the true reformer, the entrepreneurial who is not afraid of taking on resistant interests, is usually not likely to receive support from most people in an election".[88]

Even though there are no comparably detailed records on elections in other Wuhan factories, it is clear that elections that ended up being contested in ways that went beyond what the overseeing authorities could have anticipated were not rare happenstances. In the Wuhan Typewriter Factory, between two candidates that stood in the final election, the factory's Party committee favored the incumbent vice director and thought the other candidate, a twenty-seven-year-old graduate with a college degree, was not "mature enough".[89] Most rank-and-file workers, however, favored the twenty-seven-year-old, finding his approach to management to be more "visionary" and "adventurous".[90] Once SWC delegates convened to vote, the vote count failed to produce a winner, with the two candidates garnering eighteen votes each! Such unanticipated contentiousness signaled that whatever attempts by the factory's Party committee to impose its will on the SWC delegates had clearly failed, and dissuaded the Party officials from making further interventions on behalf of their favored candidate. Instead, they agreed to hold a run-off in which all workers – not just SWC deputies – were allowed to vote, and the twenty-seven-year-old was eventually elected.[91] Remarkably, the electoral process in the

[84]The reassignment of the Liuduqiao salesroom to other uses and the occupation by the Wuhan Instrument and Electroplating Factory of the Oriental's factory building had made the Oriental's workers very angry. See WMA, XX000185–WS02–363–9 (14 May 1984).

[85]WMA, XX000185–WS02–315–2.

[86]*Ibid.*

[87]*Ibid.*

[88]*Ibid.*

[89]WMA, XX000058–WS05–43–13. Interestingly, the incumbent vice director of the Wuhan Typewriter Factory was the only woman candidate across all elections of factory directors in Wuhan.

[90]*Ibid.*

[91]*Ibid.*

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020859025000094 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Typewriter Factory not only returned a director with majority support among workers, but even compelled the Party committee to expand the very scope of democratic participation.

Something almost as dramatic happened in the Wuhan Malleable Iron Factory, an enterprise with a total of 507 workers. After final candidates were narrowed down to two and the candidates starred in a speech and Q&A session, SWC deputies congregated on 6 June 1984 to cast their votes through secret ballot. Song Wenlong, the incumbent factory director, emerged victorious by receiving thirty-three votes out of sixty-four attending SWC deputies – exceeding the fifty per cent threshold merely by one vote.[92] The lack of a resounding victory in this case was nothing less than humiliating, given reports on numerous other cases, which documented that, when incumbent factory directors ran and made it to the final round, they were usually favored by the overseeing authorities and went on to win by overwhelming margins. The bare majority in Song Wenlong's case, in comparison, could be effectively read as a vote of no confidence. Song himself admitted that the alarming results of the election "greatly stirred up" his thought, forcing him to rethink his managerial approach, which had primarily aimed to maintain the status quo.[93]

Inspiration for Workers' Post-election Activism

Even though Wuhan's municipal authorities intended workplace elections of factory directors to facilitate subsequent power centralization under the FDRS, in some factories the exact opposite happened. The very experience of going through an election – however managed the process was – endowed workers with the confidence, rhetorical resources, and institutional memory to push back against the factory director's subsequent attempts to centralize power.

The Wuhan Rubber Factory, with 1,234 employees, was one of the fifty enterprises selected to kickstart the electoral processes in late April 1984. The nomination process was heavily managed. Not only did the factory's Party committee set stringent eligibility criteria and vet candidates, it also actively campaigned for its favored candidate (who went on to win the election) during factory-wide nomination votes.[94] On the other hand, in a nod to democratic formalities, the Party committee did arrange a "campaign speech and Q&A" session with the final candidates before SWC delegates cast ballots in the final election.[95] The "campaign speech and Q&A" session was well-attended by workers but merely meant to be a festive and ceremonial proceeding endowing the electoral outcome with democratic legitimacy. However, this event turned out to nurture workers' sense that they, rather than the factory director, were supposed to be the ultimate masters of their enterprise.

Immediately after the election was concluded, the FDRS was rolled out in the factory in early June 1984. Managerial powers were centralized in the hands of the elected factory director, Wang Tingquan. In Wang's own account, he felt

[92]WMA, XX000185–WS02–223–2.
[93]*Ibid.*
[94]WMA, XX000056–WS05–98–2 (28 June 1984).
[95]*Ibid.*

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020859025000094 Published online by Cambridge University Press

sufficiently emboldened by the FDRS that he "forcefully pushed forward a series of reforms in the factory, driven by my own volition and after consultation with only the deputy directors and the Party secretary".[96] Wang's drastic, autocratically imposed measures targeted workers' healthcare benefits, sick leaves, and subsidies on vocational education. These triggered simmering discontent among workers, which reached a volcanic point in August 1984, when a recently enacted and flawed contracting plan led to wage decreases for workers in the inner tube workshop. The reason for the wage decreases was a deterioration in product quality, but workers in the workshop felt that it was not of their doing. According to Wang's account, something extraordinary followed:

> combined with previous reform measures on labor protection, welfare and benefits, [the wage decreases] caused some workers to publicly advocate for a vote of no confidence to recall me as the factory director. Workers also asked me to bring a tape recorder so that I could revisit the promises made during my pre-election campaign speech. The situation became a huge turmoil (*xuanran dabo*).[97]

It is astounding that workers not only tried to hold Wang accountable to his pre-election campaign speech, but they also explicitly brought up the idea of a recall vote. Both lines of action were necessarily inspired by workers' experiences with the election itself: it is hard to imagine that workers would have felt so angered at the factory director's betrayal of his own promises and felt justified to push for a recall vote if there had not been an election in the first place. A report written by the factory's union committee, separate from Wang's report, painted an even more startling picture. It stated that workers' discontent was so strong that "there was a real possibility for production to halt" – in other words, a strike was impending.[98] Beset by this potentially explosive situation, Wang Tingquan quickly withdrew the wage decreases alongside some of the most resented initiatives cutting workers' welfare and benefits, therefore enabling the tension to de-escalate. In the summer of 1984, workers' activism in the Wuhan Rubber Factory was able to beat back unpopular reforms imposed by the factory director and thus effectively curb his power amid the nationwide FDRS drive to increase managerial despotism. However managed the election in this factory was, the ceremonial upholding of the façade of democracy led workers to themselves develop a sense of confidence and a real commitment to democracy, which emboldened them to challenge the elected factory director's expansive exercise of power.

Conclusion

In 1984–1985, Wuhan's municipal leadership promoted workplace elections of factory directors on a massive scale. According to official discourse, these elections were supposed to facilitate the replacement of incumbent factory directors with more

[96]WMA, XX000091–WS03–99–5 (20 November 1984).
[97]*Ibid.*
[98]*Ibid.*

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020859025000094 Published online by Cambridge University Press

"capable" (that is, younger and more educated) ones, and to smoothen the subsequent centralization of power in their hands as the FDRS was ushered in. However, things did not work out on the shop floor as intended. Despite official authorities' lack of any genuine commitment to workers' democracy and their numerous efforts to manage electoral processes and outcomes, these elections did provide many workers with the institutional space, organizing opportunities and confidence to mobilize in order to make demands on the enterprise leadership, air grievances, assert their agency and even resist their factory directors' power centralization. Even the façade of democracy had an emboldening effect on workers, who then sought to transform the appearance into reality.

By shedding light on the nuanced historicity of China's 1980s and helping us rethink the very meaning of workplace democracy, the story told in this paper also contributes important context to a better understanding of China's transformed approach to industrial governance in the 1990s and after. The kind of unintended consequences seen in Wuhan between 1984 and 1985 were not rare occurrences in China's early post-Mao era. As overlapping and inconsistent reforms were rolled out across China's urban factories, the interstitial spaces they created provided ample opportunities for workers to inventively take advantage of the reforms to address their own needs. Such dynamics, as illuminated in this study, generated unexpected consequences not foreseen by any single policy and became obstacles for the continued rollout or deepening of many reform agendas. This was an important part of why, towards the end of the 1980s, we often heard policymakers lament that industrial reform had been failing, unable to generate desirable results, or even made things worse.[99]

In response to these disappointments, the Party-state radically shifted course in the 1990s. It no longer sought to continue with incremental reforms within the basic parameters of socialist production relations, but instead launched sweeping waves of privatization and restructuring of public enterprises, resulting in massive layoffs, terminations of job security, and drastic cutbacks in welfare entitlements. In a manner of brutal repression, the Party-state effectively decimated the socialist working class.[100] The era of unintended consequences was now over, because the agents who made these unintended consequences happen no longer existed. Workers laboring under China's newly consolidated capitalism no longer possessed the political space or institutional resources to contest or creatively appropriate top-down policy measures as their socialist predecessors used to do. This shift of the Party-state's reform strategy was part and parcel of how China's political economy was fundamentally reconfigured in the post-Mao era.

[99]See, for example, numerous policy speeches compiled in *Marching through the Storms* [zai fenglang zhong qianjin] (1988) edited by Fang Weizhong.

[100]William Hurst, *The Chinese Worker after Socialism* (New York, NY, 2009); Ching Kwan Lee, *Against the Law: Labor Protests in China's Rustbelt and Sunbelt* (Berkeley, CA, 2007).

Cite this article: Yueran Zhang. Accidentally Emboldened: Industrial Workers between Democracy and Despotism on the Shop Floor in Wuhan, China (1984–1985). *International Review of Social History* (2025), pp. 1–25. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020859025000094