

# China: The Peking University Marxist Society and Student Activists

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The canteens at Peking University offer dishes from China's many culinary traditions: vegetable noodles spiced with chilli and Sichuan peppercorns, whole carp braised in soy sauce, fried chicken wings, pork dumplings, hot-sour soup with ho-fun, buns warm from the steamer, pancakes warm from the griddle, bitter melon fried with egg, potato strips sautéed in rice vinegar, cold red cabbage, dragon fruit, watermelon, strawberries, soya milk, green tea ice lollies with red bean. It's hard to spend more than the equivalent of about £2. There aren't always seats, but there is always a huge vat of free soup next to the chopsticks.

As you leave, a steely-faced woman empties your bowl into a wheelie bin. She's there when you arrive. And long after you've gone. According to a report published by the Peking University Marxist Society, canteen staff work up to 14 hours a day, six days a week, with one day off taken as two half-days. According to the report, they are not paid for all the hours they work, and, in at least three canteens, the majority of workers have no social insurance (it is the employer's responsibility to ensure all employees are covered). Most of them come from the surrounding provinces and moved to Beijing looking for work. They live in group dormitories underground.

The report, which examined workers' pay and living conditions across the university, can still be read on the PKU Marxist Society's public WeChat (mainland China's most popular social media, messaging and payment app). But the letter posted by the head of the society on 20 September, after it had been unable to find a faculty adviser willing to support its registration for the new semester, is no longer available. The letter cited the report as an example of the society's contribution to campus life, and referred to its active support for workers' rights on campus. As well as canteen staff, the PKU Marxists have supported the construction workers who staged a protest in 2015 to demand unpaid wages. But as they noted, it isn't only university staff who have to deal with unfair labour conditions: 'If the situation is like this even within the walls of a university, how ruthless must the outside world appear when its mask of compassion and harmony is removed.'

A group of fifty Marxist student activists were detained in August after demonstrating in support of migrant workers at the Jasic Technology factory in Shenzhen, where there had been protests when several workers were detained and beaten after campaigning to set up a union independent of the All-China Federation of Trade Unions, which has close ties to the Communist Party and to which all unions must be affiliated. The employees complained of poor working conditions and low wages, which weren't always paid in full; they also said that the company had not paid the proper amount into their social insurance schemes. Among those arrested were students and recent alumni from PKU, Nanjing University and Renmin University. On 1 November, two Nanjing University students were assaulted by plainclothes policemen who were breaking up a demonstration of more than a hundred students protesting against their university's refusal to recognise its Marxist Society. (The intimidation of students led Cornell to end its relationship with Renmin at the end of October.) The PKU Marxist Society in the end succeeded in reregistering for the new semester, but when students formed a group to investigate the disappearance of 22 student activists from five cities over one weekend in mid-November, they were called to a meeting with their parents and told they shouldn't pursue the matter. Friends tell me there has been a discernible difference in the atmosphere on

campus since, and security has increased.

The crackdown on migrant workers and their student allies is not surprising. The China Labour Bulletin, a labour rights organisation based in Hong Kong, lists nearly three thousand instances of collective action taken by workers in China since January 2017. If this were to coalesce into a movement, the consequences would be enormous. According to the National Bureau of Statistics roughly 287 million rural migrants were living and working in Chinese cities in 2017. The country's rapid economic growth since the 1980s has to a large degree depended on their labour. But they have received scant reward. Rural migrants have limited access to public resources in cities because their household registration (*hukou*) ties them to the place of their or their parents' birth. Their children cannot easily access state education in cities and frequently end up in overcrowded and unregulated private schools. Migrants are barred from public housing and can't afford high private rents, with the result that many of them end up in substandard (and sometimes subterranean) accommodation provided by their employer. I once worked at an English language school where five teaching assistants slept in a room I had originally taken for a cupboard. Others live on the outskirts of cities in unsafe structures from which they are periodically evicted by demolition squads; in 2017 a fire broke out in a migrant settlement in Beijing, killing 19 people.

The government is well aware of migrant workers' dissatisfaction and has implemented a series of reforms to the *hukou* system over the past 15 years. In 2003 it ended its policy of detaining and repatriating migrant workers to their original place of residence after a public outcry at the death of 27-year-old Sun Zhigang, who was killed by police in Guangzhou after failing to produce the correct papers. Since 2014, the government has made it far easier to register for a *hukou* in a small or medium-sized city. The Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security reported that the number of migrant workers with basic medical insurance at the end of 2017 was 62 million, an increase of nearly 24.6 per cent since 2012. Even so, the proportion of migrant workers with basic medical cover remains under 22 per cent (the government doesn't supply this statistic). While it might be easier to get an urban *hukou* than it used to be, it usually only applies in urban areas in the province where you already live. Population caps have recently been set for Beijing and Shanghai (at 23 and 25 million respectively), which will result in more large-scale demolition of migrant housing. If you get an urban *hukou*, it requires you to give up your rural land rights, leaving more land available for sale to private companies, further fracturing struggling rural communities.

The Chinese Communist Party has always pushed a narrative of progress. The statistic it highlights most often is the number of people lifted out of poverty. Its achievement here is not insignificant: the number of people living in extreme poverty fell from 66.6 per cent in 1990 to 0.7 per cent in 2015, according to the World Bank. But bringing people above the poverty line to work inhumane hours for subsistence wages with no social security, all in the service of corporate profit, doesn't seem like the mission of a revolutionary Marxist organisation. And it isn't just students and workers who are unhappy with this situation, but intellectuals and party members too.

Among those protesting in Shenzhen in August were Maoists from the internet forum Utopia, all of whom are CCP members and retired cadres. Utopia is a platform for China's New Left, which emerged when the events of 1989 quashed hopes of reform along liberal democratic lines. The New Left is unambiguously anti-capitalist and ambivalently pro-Mao. The Utopia website recommends articles by New Left Chinese intellectuals, as well as publishing its own content. On its homepage when I last visited were links to articles by academics from Renmin University, the Southwestern University of Finance and Economics, Tianjin Normal University, Northeast Forestry University and Beihang University. There is the potential here for a very broad alliance, composed of workers, students, intellectuals and disillusioned party members. This, along with the destabilising effects of a widespread migrant workers' movement, is enough to make the CCP nervous. It has reacted in exactly the way one would expect - with blunt force - but I suspect it is particularly afraid of vocal

Marxist resistance. Posters proclaiming the nation's commitment to socialist values are everywhere; commemorating Marx's bicentenary last year, Xi Jinping said that 'Marx's theories still twinkle with the dazzling light of truth!' Marxist critiques are unsettling because they point to the inequities in Chinese society, while remaining within the state's ideological framework.

The students know exactly what they are doing. In a manifesto posted on WeChat on 9 December, and swiftly removed by the censors, the PKU Marxist Society stated that university bureaucrats were 'not fellow wayfarers on our journey to study Marxist-Leninism and serve the masses'. (The president of the university is appointed by the CCP Central Committee.) The 20 September letter mentioned both Marx's birthday and PKU's long history of Marxist activism (many of the founding members of the CCP worked at the university, including Mao, who was a librarian's assistant there). Their report on the living and working conditions of university staff approaches Mao's suggestion that 'knowledge of any kind is inseparable from direct experience' when it states that 'it is only through practice that you can produce genuine knowledge.' The report repeatedly shows how the conditions of workers fail to meet the standards required by existing labour laws. There shouldn't be anything revolutionary about what they are saying. Yet there is.

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