

“Jasic Movement” Debate (China) - Student activists who intervene in factories should adjust their steps once more

Monday 9 March 2020, by [CHAN Chris King-Chi](#), [Reignite](#) (Date first published: 22 May 2019).

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*This interview with Chris Chan on the “Jasic Movement” was conducted on May 22, 2019, at the Chinese University Hong Kong and published in Chinese by reignite
As another contribution to the debate, please, see the interview with Pun Ngai (0).*

What characterizes the “Jasic Movement” in your opinion?

Reignite: *Professor Chan, you have observed the “Jasic Movement” since its beginning last summer, and you have written two articles about it. We have also attended one of your talks on the “Jasic Movement” and think that you have been providing a precise analysis of different aspects of the movement.*

In your article from last August, “The structural contradictions of China’s trade union reform revealed during the Jasic incident,”[1] you discuss the issue of trade unionism.

Could you first further explain to us this aspect of Jasic, understood as a movement that demands the formation of a trade union?

Chris Chan:

After the events at Foxconn and the Honda factory strike in 2010, everyone had a better understanding of the trade union reform and more people demanded it.

It is not rare that workers call for the formation of a trade union. In the past, many similar incidents have attracted widespread attention and had some effect due to mass support. External intervention was mostly important after such incidents had happened, for instance, during the strike at Yue Yuen in Dongguan in 2014. There was support afterwards from many students and NGOs, but the workers’ struggle remained central. The regime would make some concessions to such mass incidents.

What makes this incident different from similar events in the past is that at Jasic 89 workers signed up, which is not that many in comparison, and, in addition, giving signatures is

not the same as going on strike. **So, the mass base was limited.**

Also, there was **little support from workers of other factories.**

- In 2015, after the relatively influential Yue Yuen strike in Dongguan, other strikes occurred in Jiangxi and Zhuhai with a similar set of demands, and they led to sympathetic responses among workers in other factories.

- After the Honda factory strike in 2010, there were strikes in at least 100 automobile parts factories.

- **By comparison, Jasic did not receive enough support from workers within and outside the factory.**

***Reignite:** Which is to say, from the outset, Jasic was about demanding the formation of a trade union. The conflicts between management and the workers from which this demand was coming are more or less the same as we have seen in other labor struggles: they all have economic demands at their base.*

Chris Chan:

Yes, but Jasic was not a major incident that was able to spark the anger of a large number of workers. To put it simply, **the mass base within the factory was inadequate.**

How can the political demands of the “Jasic Movement” be understood?

***Reignite:** Since 2000, have labor movements been relatively successful in achieving their economic and political demands? Would you consider the relatively successful Honda factory strike a movement that involved any political consciousness?*

Chris Chan:

It is debatable as to what can be considered “political.”

Some might say that if workers demand the formation of a trade union, then, they have political consciousness. Saying that is not wrong, but I think even if this is a kind of **political consciousness**, it is only **at a low-level**. They are **only asking for a democratic union and don’t demand that the state recognizes workers’ rights to organize**. Those are very different things. The Honda factory strike also had mainly economic demands. Some of the workers certainly had a higher level of political consciousness, but this was not a collective phenomenon.

***Reignite:** When the “Jasic Movement” started organizing a trade union it still clearly showed a socialist tendency. That had not happened before, right?*

Chris Chan:

As far as I understand, **it was the students and supporters from outside who formulated those kinds of “socialist” ideological positions**. Few front-line workers supported them. **There was a big distance between students and workers**, and they were not truly connected. As a result, we did not see many Jasic workers come out to support the students.

At the moment, there are only a few among the workers who have a trade union consciousness. For instance, demands for overtime payment and against wage reduction are something workers are generally more concerned about. If the factory management stops paying for overtime or holds back part of the wages, workers will surely be angry, but if the factory management refuses to allow workers to form a trade union, this will not invoke great anger from the majority of workers.

In the past, in cases where workers successfully organized a trade union, the demand for a trade union was brought forward together with other demands, and those other demands were seen to be more important. When the government handled collective disputes, it wanted to avoid further escalation and agreed to allow trade unions to be set up along with other concrete economic demands to appease the anger of the workers as fast as possible.

Was the mass base for organizing a trade union sufficient during the “Jasic Movement”?

Reignite: *If a movement needs a significant event to stir up workers' collective anger, was the dismissal and beating of Mi Jiuping and other workers after they demanded the formation of a trade union an important event?*

Chris Chan:

Was the mass base sufficient? If the mass base of a movement is strong and workers get dismissed, then other workers will support them through a strike or other means. (For example, **during the Honda factory strike**, management dismissed two worker activists, and that got other workers agitated.)

In such a situation, the movement produces different results. During many strikes, it is not easy to know who the leaders are. However, in many cases research revealed that the strike leaders were mostly lower-rank supervisors or technicians. They were largely respected and trusted in the factory. Other workers would rather support them because they are their subordinates or come from the same hometown. The complex interpersonal relationships among workers allow some to become rather natural leaders. If these leaders get fired, this can lead to great anger among the workers and create a relatively strong mass base.

Reignite: *Forming a union is different from going on strike. A potent strike action needs to involve a lot of people. When, in a factory like Jasic with around 1,000 workers, 89 workers sign a petition to form a union, isn't that a big number?*

Let's compare it with university-based organizations. If you want to set up an organization in a university with 10,000 students, you don't need the support of all 10,000, you only need five. The main question is what kind of influence you have, small or large.

Chris Chan:

We can see that **almost all successful formations of trade unions were the result of large-scale struggles.**

Our staff union at the Chinese University of Hong Kong was set up easily as a result of a protest organized by many colleagues, during a time when the school was undertaking reform. There is a saying in Hong Kong, “intervene during a crisis”: that means, **the best time for setting up an organization is when a crisis is occurring.**

In the past, the Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions (HKCTU) would widely circulate their hot-line number. When a worker called and talked about some significant dispute in a company, HKCTU would go and organize a staff meeting and then set up a trade union. If there was no significant incident, even in Hong Kong with its freedom of association, forming a trade union was hard to accomplish.

Even in democratic countries, employers do not like trade unions and look for opportunities to suppress or divide them. Usually, if only a few people want to organize a trade union, then why would other people support them?

But if a factory wants to reduce wages suddenly - because everyone will be angry - that is an excellent opportunity. At that time, workers will be thinking about why it is that the boss can bully them like that, and then start to ponder whether it is because they do not have a trade union.

Apart from the insufficient support of workers, were the circumstances surrounding Jasic suitable at all?

Reignite: *Qui Huo (1bis), Au Loong-Yu (1.ter), and others criticized the students pointing out that they should not have blindly taken an economic struggle up to the level of a political struggle because the "Jasic Movement" lacked not only solid support among workers but also wider support in general. That is to say, because currently the whole labor movement and the social terrain are at a low point, they are not merely arguing that the students had no success in mobilizing the masses but that, basically, this is not an optimal time for any such activity.*

Chris Chan:

The number of labor-capital conflicts is still increasing now, such as the recent "996" dispute about working hours involving IT workers, the delivery workers' strike, and last year we also saw the large-scale strikes of truck drivers and crane operators. It is hard to say whether we are in a low point at the moment, so we mainly need to focus on the nature of the events.

During the years of Hu [Jintao] and Wen [Jiabao], the state was relatively weak, and there were, indeed, more political opportunities. Now the state is relatively strong, but the strong government still fears the masses. In terms of the movement's strategy there should still be room for compromise - unless the movement is very strong and even stronger than the government.

Could the "Workers' Congress" be of any use in such situations?

Reignite: *Some of the criticisms towards the "Jasic Movement" stated that the "Workers' Congress" could be used to express workers' power in the factory. These critics think that Jasic supporters only emphasized that trade unions reject the socialist nature of China because the participants and supporters of the movement are influenced by labor scholars who were taught in western universities and who have a different political agenda.[2]*

Chris Chan:

In the cases **I know, not one "Workers' Congress" in privately owned factories has had a huge impact.** One thing that can be said is that, after the strike wave in 2010, many automobile factories have reelected their trade union bodies and had collective negotiations. These trade union bodies play some role because if the bilateral talks between labor and management do not get anywhere workers will start a wildcat strike.

I do not have empirical research on state-owned enterprises, so I cannot say anything about them, but in foreign-owned and private-owned factories I did not see that the "Workers' Congress" had much impact.

In order to satisfy demands from above and following written regulations, many factories set up a "Workers' Congress" and a trade union body, but many are not been elected or the elections are just a facade. Most elections in these factories are done by raising hands and have no proper vote. The nomination of candidates is often secretly influenced by management.

For example, when different departments require a representative, one workshop head will become

a candidate. In most ordinary factories, it works that way, and no one dares to challenge it. Could any single factory do it better? Certainly, but as a whole this only functions in writing. In 2010, Guangdong province selected ten factories for a pilot project of direct elections of trade union representatives where workers could vote and also participate in the nomination process. Looking at that scale, we can assume that the overwhelming majority of factories' "Workers' Congresses" and trade union bodies are not the result of proper election mechanisms. There are relatively good cases where the government says that a factory has done especially well, and scholars would study how well it was done, but those factories are simply exceptional.

Reignite: *Another question related to proponents of the trade union model is whether those NGO activists, who for nearly ten years now have joined collective actions and movement-type events and within them have pushed for organizing and union reform, should have worked towards independent unions or focused on the reelection of the unions within the system? Or does it not matter what kind of work they do, whether it be for independent unions or unions within the system?*

Chris Chan:

In theory, some people organize the fight from within the system of the All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU), and they organize a union within the existing framework. They believe that all "trade unions" will get incorporated by the ACFTU.

Others think that currently there is absolutely no space for independent trade unions and, even though they think the ACFTU has its defects, one can currently only progress on the grassroots level, train workers and let them learn step by step. The latter method seeks to challenge the existing union system through participation.

In practice, NGOs which once advocated independent unions, such as **China Labour Bulletin**, have, for the past few years, advocated ACFTU reform, pushed for collective bargaining, encouraged workers to participate in workplace-level union committees, and provided assistance for higher union ranks.

Recently, I have not heard of anyone trying to set up independent unions.

When students enter factories to organize, what kind of position should they take?

Reignite: *You have emphasized the difference between organizers who enter a factory and worker leaders who developed their skills while working in the factory.*

What position should those students who enter a factory to organize take?

How are they different from worker leaders?

Activists from outside lack, for instance, networks of people from the same home area and other social connections. So, do they need different methods?

Chris Chan:

Yes, they need to consider how to operate with the workers, how to contact, influence, and educate leaders among the workers. In fact, leaders already exist among workers but those types of leaders are not necessarily progressive, they are sometimes coopted by management.

When activists from outside become organizers, they should not necessarily become leaders, **they should cultivate and assist leaders who already exist among the masses** and should lift their ideological consciousness.

Activists from the outside have usually not been workers for a long time, they need a lot of patience and long-term commitment, only then can they win the workers' trust.

Reignite: *What do you say about the criticism that the intervention of the students was elitist? That type of criticism argues that the students as an external force were not able to comprehend the demands of the workers, their immediate emotions and motivations, and that the escalation of that struggle is the result of elitism.*

Chris Chan:

- **The workers are still mainly fighting an economic struggle**, their political consciousness is still weak or non-existent today.
- **The students have cultivated a relatively high political consciousness** through learning and attending university. **They are mostly interested in the political struggle.**
In addition, students rarely have workplace experiences, they don't understand the workers' struggle and the complex relations inside workplaces. Therefore, they feel this urge to radicalize the struggle.

The students certainly need to learn and improve through making different attempts. However, seen from a macro perspective, social progress partly depends on cooperation between the social elite and the lower levels, and it certainly depends on **finding appropriate forms of cooperation.**

If everything rests on the power that the masses at the bottom, but the direction is unclear, then things easily collapse. If the social elite has no power, though, they need to join forces with the masses but also have to cooperate with them organically, only then can they do better. I think you cannot simply refer to the students' status and class background and declare them to be elitist.

In this case, there was a large group of students, on the internet and at the scene where they formed a **support group**, and they came from many prestigious universities.

That is a very remarkable phenomenon that deserves support, and, at least, it is something that has not happened in the past ten years of the reform and opening period. This phenomenon shows a kind of emotion, the tactics were not thought through much, and various errors were made - all that is understandable. What is worth analyzing is why the students turned left-wing and became radicalized.

I do not think the students can simply be understood as part of the petty bourgeoisie.

- **Firstly**, we don't know what kind of work they will do in the future, but it is clear that on today's labor market, even if you went to a prestigious school, it does not mean that you will find good employment and will be able to become part of the urban middle class.

- **Secondly**, even if many of the students are from Beijing University, there are some who were not undergraduates there and could enter Beijing University only through their individual hard work. Some of them are from small places and a worker or peasant background, and that has an influence on how we determine their class status.

Among the young people who supported Jasic are some who are students, some are graduates, some are young workers from other factories. The educational level of this younger generation is relatively high, their class consciousness is rising, and their ideas have a left-wing tendency.

Why did the students choose this kind of organizing and tactic of struggle when setting up the "Jasic Movement"?

Reignite: *The main criticism regarding the mass base and the objective conditions is that the students led a relatively high-profile struggle but miscalculated the balance of class power. That is, they overestimated the mass support and underestimated the repressive forces.*

The overestimation of mass support is something that could be looked at more, but isn't it a reasonable criticism that they underestimated the repressive forces?

Chris Chan:

NGO activists couldn't do it this way, but students are not the same, they are fearless and straight-forward. Looking at the context in which they grew up, **these post-1990s students did not experience the most brutal events in China, so it is understandable that they carry out radical actions.** We have to consider their positions from the context of their upbringing.

According to reports, in August, teachers and parents came to persuade the students to return to the universities but the students refused. Some teachers are more experienced and have supported the students for a long time, but there is also a **generational gap**. Different life experiences lead to different decisions.

However, when considering strategy, one has to think about the costs as well as the gains - all that has to be considered. **Everyone has to learn from experience. We should learn from this experience and adjust the steps.**

***Reignite:** When the Jasic students called for support at the beginning, the responses included not just support, but also critique. However, the students had to cope with emergencies every day, and in such a situation it was difficult to distinguish between reasonable and irrelevant criticisms. As a result, outside criticisms were rejected. One aspect of this is the Maoist way of organizing, another aspect is the extremely tense situation.*

Chris Chan:

I don't know much about their internal situation, but using common sense, there must be some people who influence the decision-making process. We still don't know their context, though, and it is hard to say how they made decisions.

I think that currently both the Maoists as well as the left in a border sense are weak.

If you want to mobilize intellectuals to support a workers' struggle, you need to use concrete demands to include intellectuals from different factions. The issue is not about whether or not this is on the path towards communism, and the concrete goals - for instance, that the workers want to set up a trade union and demand the release of workers and students - are all reasonable and legitimate. It does not matter which faction or persons as long as they show support.

Of course, it is no problem that the movement has a left-wing core and a suitable left-wing leadership, but **the goals of the action need to be clear and relatively easy to reach so that the government is more likely to make concessions.** One successful example is the case of eight young people at the beginning of 2018.[3] At the time, many intellectuals showed support so that the government did not continue to go after them.

When slogans are too ideologically charged it is not good for getting broader support; and if the action is politically charged, then the government might not be able to make concessions as that would mean challenging the overarching system.

***Reignite:** Do you think it is possible to understand the actions of the Jasic students as a kind of media campaign in order to show off their strength?*

It seems, those students thought that they were a step ahead of society and hoped that through that movement more people would catch up. But now we can see that neither workers nor intellectuals did catch up, and it seems only Pun Ngai did.

Chris Chan:

I observed it from the outside. Compared with the issue around the eight young people, I think, the discourse of the “Jasic Movement” was not open enough. If it had been a bit more open, for instance, when expressing and underling the concrete goals of organizing a trade union and the release of the workers, there would probably have been support by domestic and overseas intellectuals (especially domestic support as the overseas impact was limited).

As the language was too politicized and ideological, though, domestic intellectuals – for the sake of their own safety or because of doubt regarding the direction of the movement – did not come out in support.

In my opinion, the movement in China and future changes should be led by forces from within China and all representative leaders should come from within China. Hong Kong people could, of course, play an important supporting role, but our relatively privileged position means that our judgments and decisions are different from those of people from China.

***Reignite:** Thinking about the strategy of the “Jasic Movement” during the struggle and the conditions of organizing, this also concerns our own interest in a critique of the movement itself. If I were to make an ideological critique, for instance, as a liberal, then I would consider a Maoist movement as awful, no matter what it is like, and would think it should not happen. As a liberal, I could voice critique when the movement is in progress as I would have no sympathy for the movement anyway.*

However, if the critique comes from within the Left, then another method is needed.

What do you think? When external observers are discussing the movement, how should that be done?

Chris Chan:

It is clear that there are different positions on the political direction of the movement, but if these criticisms, after being voiced, have a negative effect on the whole movement, such as bringing about major splits, would it not be possible to **wait for the end of the movement and voice those criticisms then**? If the movement is still ongoing, would it be best to **voice criticisms just internally**?

Moreover, the situation in China is different from that in Hong Kong and Taiwan. If you voice criticisms while a movement is still unfolding in China, then you could not only harm the movement but also expose personal networks which can have serious consequences.

How could the “Jasic Movement” win wider public support?

***Reignite:** You mentioned your analysis of the left-wing turn of students in recent years. In your opinion, is the left-wing turn among a wave of students connected to the reemergence of class discourses in intellectual circles in recent years – for instance, in sociology, literary studies, and cultural studies?*

Chris Chan:

The revival of the class discourse that inspires the young students is the result of changes across the political and economic situation.

After the global economic crisis in 2008, everybody could see that **Marxist political economy is able to explain** many of the issues and show a way out. Purely cultural, post-colonial, gender, and post-modernist discourses could not explain that.

However, let’s not be too optimistic about academia. Figures like Trump and others are not at all concerned with economic globalization, and what the USA is doing presently is going against

neoliberal thought.

However, neoliberalism still dominates in the universities, which is to say that the system of knowledge production has a class character.

***Reignite:** In many faculties in major Chinese universities, like sociology, Chinese language, and foreign languages, the curriculum and literature includes western Marxism, but why are the students still influenced by orthodox Marxism?*

Chris Chan:

These groups of students absorbed Marxism through the Marxist Societies in the universities, and Marxist Societies are strongly **influenced by the academic orthodox Marxism** that is represented by both textbooks and teachers. Chinese academic orthodox Marxism is **Marxist-Leninist-Maoist**. Other than that, some traditional left-wing groups following the Marxist-Leninist-Maoist line have organized students and let them investigate state-owned enterprises during the summer vacation, and that slowly developed into support for the workers' struggle.

Cultural Marxist thought is not that politicized, and the teachers will not guide students to undertake workers' inquiries etc.

What has to slowly change in the future is that, as some liberals have turned left-wing, **Maoists might also slowly change. Many people call themselves Maoist, but that can mean very different things.**

***Reignite:** In your article which discusses whether the "Jasic Movement" represents a trend in China which is similar to that in the 1980s movement in South Korea where students entered factories ("Could the butterfly effect initiated by the workers' movement in South Korea in the 1980s happen in China, too?"),[4] you argue that the big difference between South Korea in the 1980s and today's China lies in the fact that the students in South Korea got relatively wide support from the community, for instance, from many priests, journalists, etc.*

Chris Chan:

In South Korea, it started with the democracy movement, and during the democracy movement there was already a lot of public support. After the democracy movement was suppressed, activists among the students were looking for a new way out and **turned left-wing**.

So, initially they had a democratic consciousness, then they were **influenced by Marxism and thought they needed to enter the factories**.

Moreover, the South Korean students were exposed to different currents of Marxism, different variations, and certainly Maoism also had an impact in South Korea.

China's historical background is different, however, and left-wing students first get exposed to Maoism. Among Chinese intellectuals, Maoism has little support.

***Reignite:** Does that mean that in South Korea in the 1980s, students who were connected to workers' struggles gained wider support because they had already gained wider support during the earlier democracy movement?*

Chris Chan:

In today's China, does that kind of base not exist at all? I think, it might gradually evolve.

- For instance, **initially, leftists in Beijing were only concerned with workers of state-owned enterprises, and later they developed more and more interest in rural migrant workers in the south.**

- **Those who are more concerned about rural migrant workers are mostly liberals, for**

instance, **some university teachers and students**. They support the labor NGOs and workers' rights **as part of the civil society**. **Human rights lawyers** might also support the workers' rights movement as they are concerned about legal and human rights.

- There are many intellectuals and social groups who are very concerned about justice. It is important to look at **how left-wing students and intellectuals keep communicating and linking up with them**.

***Reignite:** You gave a very structured analysis of the movement's mass base and the relation between students and workers that inspired us a lot. Thank you again for allowing us to interview you!*

Notes:

0. Interview with Pun Ngai

<https://www.gongchao.org/2020/01/17/jasic-movement-pun-ngais-response-to-criticism/>

<http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article52352>

<https://www.reignitepress.com/post/aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa>

1. <https://theinitium.com/article/20180831-opinion-chenjingci-trade-union-js>

1.bis Qui Huo

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<http://zdpuB3LnMgxXViMcSTRSQC8WaN7NUVdW1XEM7AEsk4RE35qFc>

1.ter Au Loong-Yu

<http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article47289>

<http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article47799>

2. <https://course5293.wordpress.com/2018/09/19/aaaaaaaaaa>

3. <https://s3.amazonaws.com/letscorp-archive/archives/128317>

4. <https://theinitium.com/article/20181015-opinion-leftwinginchina-korea-comparison>

P.S.

<https://www.gongchao.org/2020/01/18/jasic-movement-debate-chris-chan/>

<https://www.reignitepress.com/post/aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa>

* A selection of articles concerning "the Jasic Movement" is available on ESSF :

- in English <http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article52366>

- in French <http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article52387>