

From analysis to action: Voices from left media in mainland China

Friday 13 November 2020, by [Blizzard](#), [Masses](#) (Date first published: 21 October 2020).

An interview with a volunteer at an independent left publication and organization in mainland China

In an age where young people have become increasingly trapped within the culture of consumerism, where the third film in the *Tiny Times* series [grossed](#) 5.2 billion *yuan* at the box offices in one year, where it feels impossible to talk about love beyond familial and interpersonal relationships, this leftist platform provides another vision of “love”: love for the land and for the people, love for disenfranchised communities. It transformed this “love” into reflection, criticism, and action, based on a firm analytical stance that focuses on political economy and the working class.

As a left media outlet, this platform has had to wrest discursive space from official state as well as liberal media, and fight for the right to interpret China’s past, present, and future. Within this narrowing space for free expression, how does an outlet like this begin to look for a community of readers and supporters? Social disparities and contradictions in China are stark: currently, the top 2% own 80% of the country’s riches, all the while workers’ mobilizations [number in the thousands](#) every year. 6 million people with [pneumoconiosis](#) are still waiting for access to a ventilator. And yet mainstream media’s portrayals of China and its fantasies of consumerism cannot be farther from the truth. In this political moment, our existence and voice along with those of other leftist outlets unite young people who have not yet succumbed to the “dark side.”

However, it is also not the case that left media doesn’t face its own latent set of problems. For example, young people who read and follow left media may simply consume such messages and the so-called alternative values they espouse. How can we prevent this kind of unidirectional, “media-to-reader” information economy from becoming another site of consumption? How can a left media outlet not only provide tools for social analysis, but also guide and mobilize people into action? What would such a leftist platform look like, and what ends can these outlets serve in anti-capitalist and anti-nationalist movements? These are the questions that we will explore together in this interview.

Voicing reflection and critique

Masses: What are the ideals and objectives of your platform? What kinds of difficulties have you encountered while establishing and operating this platform within China?

Blizzard: I think our platform offers critical interventions *from below*—from the standpoint of the grassroots and working class—targeting the issues Chinese youth would and should care about while taking care to remain action-oriented. The hope is that through this platform, our readers can follow the issues that ought to concern Chinese youth and, ultimately, through shifting public opinion and compelling organized action via other methods, to transform our society in pursuit of social justice and equality.

There are a lot of difficulties when it comes to cultivating this kind of platform for public opinion in

the mainland. The first is censorship and oppression by the government and capitalist interests, which is by now a sort of common sense. The editorial team has spent a lot of effort in figuring out ways around self-censorship: what the publication can or cannot write, how to convey the message, ways to disseminate articles, and so on. The second is that the editorial team is a “dilettante army” of sorts. In the early days, not a single person in the team had experience working in mainstream media organizations; now there are occasionally a couple of people who do, but even then are rather “amateurish.” Another problem that comes with running a platform as largely non-experts who dabble in multiple spaces is that our resources and capacity are often limited, so the number of people reading us—our “fanbase”—may ebb and flow. Our inability to recruit like-minded folks is also quite the headache.

Masses: Can you speak more about your operations and the kinds of issues you’re interested in?

Blizzard: Like most independent media nowadays, we take particularly contentious aspects of different news stories and introduce our own “hot takes,” presenting our perspectives and reasoning. We also write our own commentaries, which unlike news reports, are less descriptive and more polemical. We also publish articles introducing issues in critical theory, histories, and analyses on international social movements. Finally, we publish non-fiction features on any issue or any person, as long as they adopt a critical lens.

Masses: What do you think is different between left media outlets and ordinary media outlets? What is the importance of media to social movements?

Blizzard: The most important difference is of course the left position—we talk about class, gender, and political power. Naturally, this will distinguish our point of entry into the same questions from that of mainstream media outlets, as we focus on interventions and knowledges from below. I think that this is extremely important to any movement. The first step to any social movement is to initiate a social discourse, to raise people’s consciousness and increase awareness of what is happening around them, and to help them understand what’s going on. Furthermore, media can serve many functions in a social movement—as a record of unfolding history, a platform for the silenced, a means of connection and communication.

Masses: Mainstream media outlets have been growing increasingly aware of the impact that independent publications have on societal discourse, and you’ve experienced some instances of content theft from these larger outlets. What are your thoughts on that?

Blizzard: I think one of the main reasons they lifted our content was because people cared about the topics we’ve covered, such as the decreasing level of consumer spending amongst young people, “[female morality schools](#),” and the murder of [Jiang Ge](#). Another was that our perspective had been one that even mainstream outlets thought made sense and deserved to reach more people. The way we see it, people grabbing our content is actually fine—the more people reading our content, the better. Ideally they’d even pay us for it. At the end of the day, I think mainstream media should be welcome to circulate our work, but this doesn’t mean that we are shaping our editorial interests around their agenda or only working to capture their attention; we mainly still want to prioritize doing our own thing.

Left media outlets are not only publications, but organizing spaces

Masses: We understand left media outlets first and foremost as organizing spaces. What kind of internal political education activities has your organization engaged in?

Blizzard: In our past political education initiatives, we had read Marx, Lenin, and Mao, basically

anti-colonial and Third World thinkers of all stripes. We mostly self-educated or educated one another, or invited guests (usually experienced, mainstream media professionals) to deliver lectures.

Masses: Apart from the nuts and bolts of operating a publication, did you do your own research?

Blizzard: On top of publishing articles, such as stories of sanitation workers and domestic workers, we sometimes did our own research, including a larger survey of workers with pneumoconiosis in Hunan. The point of that particular survey was to support these workers in defending their rights.

Masses: Which research project had the greatest impact on you?

Blizzard: The survey of workers with pneumoconiosis in Hunan definitely left a lasting impression on everyone. That research project allowed us to witness firsthand the daily reality of cruelty experienced by workers, kicked around and abused by the system on a regular basis—many of whom are teetering at the edge of death. Many such workers have built lavish, magnificent places in Shenzhen, for instance, with their bare hands—and yet their fate was simply to become totally dispensable, to be chucked away like a battery once depleted. Many students wanted to do something to help them.

Masses: What kinds of writers and readers did you hope to reach through your platform? How do you interact with them?

Blizzard: Mostly readers and writers whose views align with our platform's. We don't just work with the "Marxist-Leninist-Maoist" left (左派); in reality, we collaborate with people from across the entire left spectrum, and sometimes even liberals. In the past, many enthusiastic readers and writers would write for us, donate to us, or promote our work. We have also organized some events before, including salons, exhibitions, and performances.

Masses: Have you maintained a loyal readership? What do your readers talk about?

Blizzard: We used to have a loyal readership, and would sometimes organize group discussions on certain topics, like the news of the day. We also organized roundtables. For example, during one of our roundtables, we discussed how Papi Jiang's child took her husband's surname. Usually, the editorial board would set the topic, put out a notice promoting the event, and then set a time and ask readers to participate in the discussion.

Masses: At the time, did many people go to your salons?

Blizzard: The turnout wasn't bad, especially when we discussed academic concepts, or topical or timely subjects. The actual level of participation depended on the location: some locations could only host 50 people, others could host more.

The present, past, and future of independent left media

Masses: Would you consider this platform an explicitly leftist one? What are your thoughts on being a part of this left media landscape with its range of research initiatives and political praxes? What improvements do you think can be made?

Blizzard: It is definitely a leftist platform. I guess you could say that we have been a pioneering left media outlet targeting young people in mainland China, but that has also come with its own series of challenges. For instance, I feel like the platform is not sufficiently "down-to-earth"—our editorial board isn't familiar enough with our readership nor knowledgeable enough about the range of problems workers face. Moreover, it would have been better if we could have broken through the

fantasy of the idea that, as long as we engage in enough self-critique, we could somehow absolve ourselves of responsibility under the very structure we are trying to overturn.

Masses: Like you, *Masses* also hopes to be a leftist platform that engages constructively in both theory and praxis. Do you have any other thoughts that you'd like to share with us?

Blizzard: Since you guys are called "Masses," I hope you can mobilize more of your friends and comrades into action, and make your enemies' numbers dwindle over time. From masses to masses—be a media outlet of and for the many!

Epilogue

Many small-scale leftist platforms from mainland China have impacted a wide range of readers, who will go on to extend the dialogue to even more communities and movements, from workers' struggles to shared modes of praxis in civil society. One of these readers-turned-volunteers jokingly quipped that this experience in media has really done nothing for his *curriculum vitae*, and leaves us with this last remark:

"If I hadn't been a volunteer in the first place, I wouldn't be emailing you at one in the morning.

I wouldn't have gotten fired up watching the news every day. I wouldn't have developed a sense of right and wrong. I wouldn't have written my article. I simply cannot imagine myself without this outlet. This experience has enabled me to develop an unapologetic sense of moral responsibility—for me, this is simultaneously a form of self-indulgence, as well as a powerful reminder of the fact that perseverance does pay off.

It also allowed me to develop a warm circle of friends and comrades, and to know that I am not alone. It taught me to love them, because I know they are especially deserving of love."

Blizzard Masses

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P.S.

Original: 中国工人—中国工人, published in [Masses 中国](#)

Translators: Ah Boat, JP

Translator's note: [Masses 中国](#) is a youth platform born and reflective of our current epoch of upheaval. They are a group of anti-capitalist, anti-imperial, and anti-patriarchal youth working to dismantle all forms of oppression and exploitation. Focused on the exchange of ideas in social movements and civil society, *Masses 中国* amplifies first-person accounts of material conditions that dispossess and disempower workers, women, agricultural and rural laborers, and members of the "Global South." In addition to voicing dissent and launching critique, members are invested in multiple modes of textual production as political praxis toward a radical reimagining and transformative approach to social and political alternatives. As engaged young thinkers, *Masses 中国*

is well aware of the systemic privileges and material benefits they reap as part and parcel of the current knowledge economy of meritocracy and profit, and hope to use their limited power to stand with shared struggles across the world. Against a zeitgeist defined by structural indigence and proletarianization, *Masses* masses is committed to an internationalist politics in class struggle; there are no “Others” in revolution, only “us.”

In this interview, editors at *Masses* masses speak to Blizzard (pseudonym), a volunteer at a left media outlet (unspecified due to security concerns) in mainland China.

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