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# Workers at War: Labor in China's Arsenals, 1937-1953, by Joshua H. Howard

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woman who referred to her life as “one complete torture” (121), employed the form and language of time-honored ritual laments by characterizing themselves as unfortunates deserving of pity. Lamenters, argues Alexopoulos, both implicitly and explicitly counted on authorities to distinguish themselves from “the notorious ‘heartless bureaucrats’ of the old tsarist power structure”(124). In reality, Russian Orthodox traditions emphasizing compassion for the unfortunate may have been equally relevant, but in any case, the fact that a full ninety-three percent of these 500 outcasts were reinstated as citizens made it clear to Alexopoulos that the petitioners’ unusual discursive strategies worked.

Although it appeared that the lives of the disenfranchised took a turn for the better when, in celebration of socialism’s purported victory, the 1936 Stalin Constitution mandated their right to vote, this was not the case. At that point the Central Electoral Commission lost control over them and they fell under the jurisdiction of the judiciary, police, and secret police, whose members were busy bloodying their hands in the purges. The disenfranchised, with their questionable pasts, found themselves targeted with renewed vigor, and reinstatement became a vain hope. Guaranteeing their continued marginalization was the vetting faced by all citizens who applied for jobs, housing, and services: *de rigueur* among questions were those about social origins. A former person from whose 1937 diary Alexopoulos quotes had it right: “They will never allow us to be equal, and they never will believe that we’ve forgotten and forgiven everything. We’re damned, from now until the end of our lives”(177). As Alexopoulos argues, “An earlier policy of social engineering that involved the dual practices of purging alien elements and evaluating worthy citizens was replaced by a campaign of expulsion with almost no possibility of redemption”(184).

Alexopoulos’s monograph is a worthwhile contribution to recent social histories of the early Stalinist period. Unlike the more prominent victims of the regime’s first twenty years, the disenfranchised left few traces of themselves. By tapping their petitions for meaning and by assessing the regime’s response, Alexopoulos has not only resurrected a lost social group, but she has succeeded in showing how the Soviet fold expanded and retracted according to historical circumstances. As the regime cast out and reclaimed its own, its definition of those who belonged and, by extension, those who did not, came into sharper focus.

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**Joshua H. Howard, *Workers At War: Labor in China’sArsenals, 1937–1953.***  
Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2004. viii + 452 pp. \$70.00 cloth.

Joshua H. Howard’s fascinating book examines the experiences of Chinese arsenal workers in Chongqing, China’s wartime capital in three wars: the Anti-Japanese War, the Civil War, and class war from 1937 to 1953. Several clear and compelling arguments presented in Professor Howard’s study have brought new

approaches to the field of Chinese labor and new ways of seeing twentieth century China.

The author argues that ever since the Anti-Japanese War had forced the relocation of China's heavy industry to Chongqing, an unprecedented concentration of skilled and unskilled and migrant and local workers in the arsenals transformed the region not only into the center of China's defense industry but also the fertile breeding ground of working class consciousness. Wartime demand for labor and the unfair political, social and economic treatment labor received in the state controlled factory system enabled the arsenal workers, local and migrant alike, to see what they contributed to the nation did not match what they received in terms of social, economic, and political benefits from the state. This recognition, Professor Howard argues, prompted the development of a strong class-consciousness among the arsenal workers and "a complex amalgam of regional, national, and class-based identities"(10). During 1937–1953, arsenal workers acted in class ways, fighting military, political, and class wars against foreign invaders, state and political parties' control, and unfair mental and their manual labor division. By recognizing the formation and development of working class consciousness and their multiple identities, Professor Howard's book challenges the previous studies that stress the particularity, regional identity, and class fragmentation of Chinese labor.

Howard's study integrates the unexplored triumvirate of labor, wars, and political movements in modern Chinese history. By weaving arsenal workers' experience into China's social and political fabric, in this study Chinese labor is placed in the context of local and national history and interacted with larger political and social forces. In his treatment, the class formation of China's arsenal workers was multidimensional and did not simply stem from everyday work and life experiences. It included workers' mediated experiences with labor activists and underground Communists, their desire for "greater social status and political freedom"(6), and their participation in political movements during the Anti-Japanese and Civil wars and the early 1950s. Workers were both subjects and agents of history and their political actions reflected as well as shaped the China's history before and during the early People's Republic.

The study of urban and working-class experience from 1937–1953 also challenges existing scholarship on the Chinese revolution, which has mainly focused on rural China and on the efforts of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to win over the Chinese peasants. His study demonstrates that the CCP's effort in winning the support of working-class people (not just intellectuals) in the Guomindang (GMD) controlled urban sector was equally important to the CCP's victory in 1949. He points out that working-class people's alienation in the arsenals that were controlled by the GMD state and their desire for and political activism directed at a better economic life, greater social status, and more political freedom paved the way for labor mobilization by the CCP.

This study opens a new window to show that modern Chinese state-building and the Chinese revolution cohere as a historical process in which both the CCP and the GMD made important contributions. Instead of giving credit to the

CCP, the victor of the 1949 revolution only, Howard's book confirms what Esherick suggests: "GMD rule was as much the precursor of the Chinese Revolution as its political enemy" (Joseph W. Esherick, "Ten Theses on the Chinese Revolution," *Modern China* 21 1 [January 1995]: 4). During the war years, the GMD made as much intensive effort in politicizing, mobilizing, and indoctrinating arsenal workers as the CCP did in the late 1940s and early 1950s. It also provides one more concrete example in demonstrating that many of the post-1949 Chinese Communist government's industrial welfare policies and practices, for example, medical care, retirement pensions, and housing allocation, as well as its social organization of the work unit system in mainland China, have origins dating back to pre-1949 GMD system (363).

In his study Howard demonstrates that during the war years because the defense industry was the backbone of Nationalist military and state power the class-conscious arsenal workers became a political force to be reckoned with by both the CCP and the GMD. His analysis places the workers' interaction with the two political parties into the discourse of Chinese revolution. He believes that workers' gradual alienation in the GMD controlled arsenals caused the Nationalist state to lose legitimacy and provided opportunity for the workers' aspirations to converge with the CCP program and movements, essentially integrated into the revolution. Alternatively, the rise of a class-conscious working class as a political force in wartime China can be seen as an indicator of the plural nature of wartime Chinese politics in which multiple political forces were at work. It offers us an opportunity to see "the role of total warfare rather than total revolution as the agency of enduring social change. Above all, it challenges a simple minded opposition between the Nationalists and the Communists, thereby sketching the outlines of an alternative historical narrative that breaks the constraints of the revolutionary chronology" (Wen-hsin Yeh, ed., *Becoming Chinese: Passage to Modernity and Beyond* [Berkeley, 2000] 11).

*Workers at War* is a finely researched and richly documented book based on extensive archive research and oral interviews. The inclusion of oral interviews adds a human dimension by giving emotional depth and personal voices to the study of Chinese labor and its role in structural reform, party politics, and radical movement. His skillful documentary research of using many unexplored archives, local, national, and international sources, his integration of social and political theories, and his adoption of interdisciplinary approaches make his book an exemplary work of scholarship.

With the current resurgence of labor unrest in China, it is obvious that Chinese workers are still at war. Howard's historical analyses of structural reform and the relations of state and working-class people amidst internal and external pressures in the defense industry during the late Republican and early People's Republican period will undoubtedly help us better understand current events.

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