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Mao and the Workers

The Hunan Labor Movement,
1920-1923

Lynda Shaffer



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and the
workers



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*For my mother
and in memory of my father*



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**“And ye shall know the truth
and the truth shall make you free.”**

The Gospel of John
Chapter VIII, Verse 32



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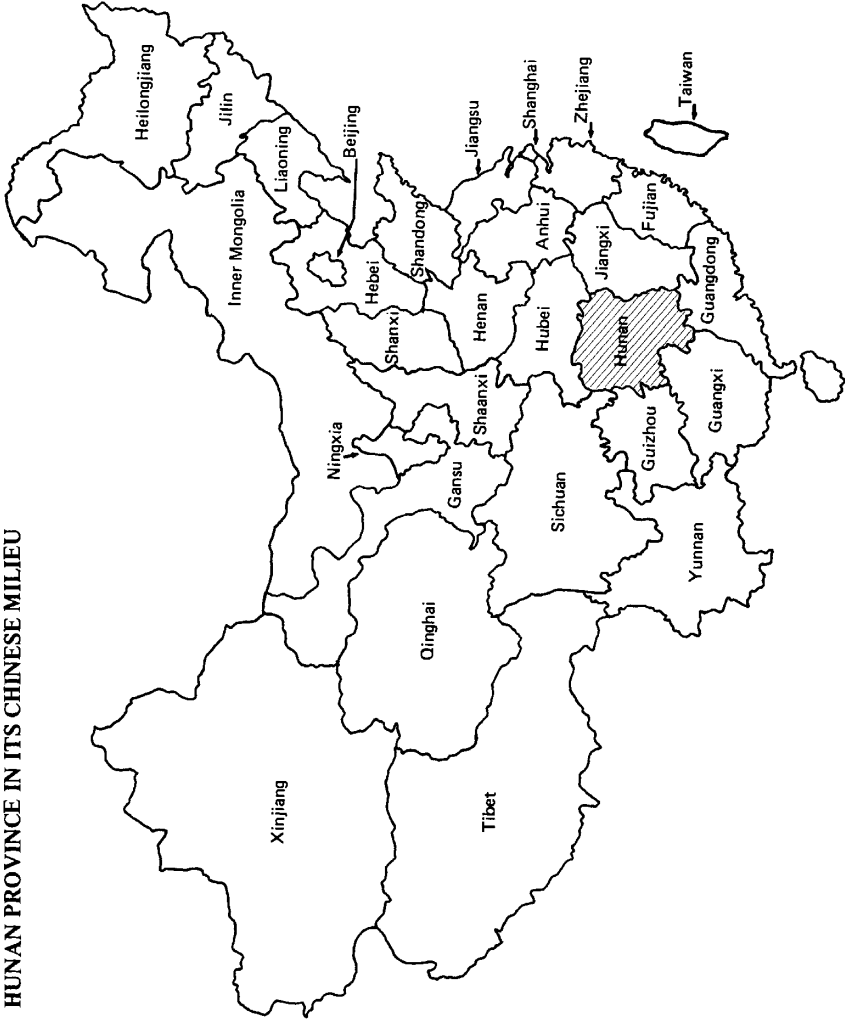
West who have helped me place the Chinese labor movement in a larger context, particularly James Allen and David Montgomery. My only regret in this regard is that I did not have the time — the years that it would have required — to develop the comparative approach to this topic that their comments and bibliographic suggestions would have allowed.

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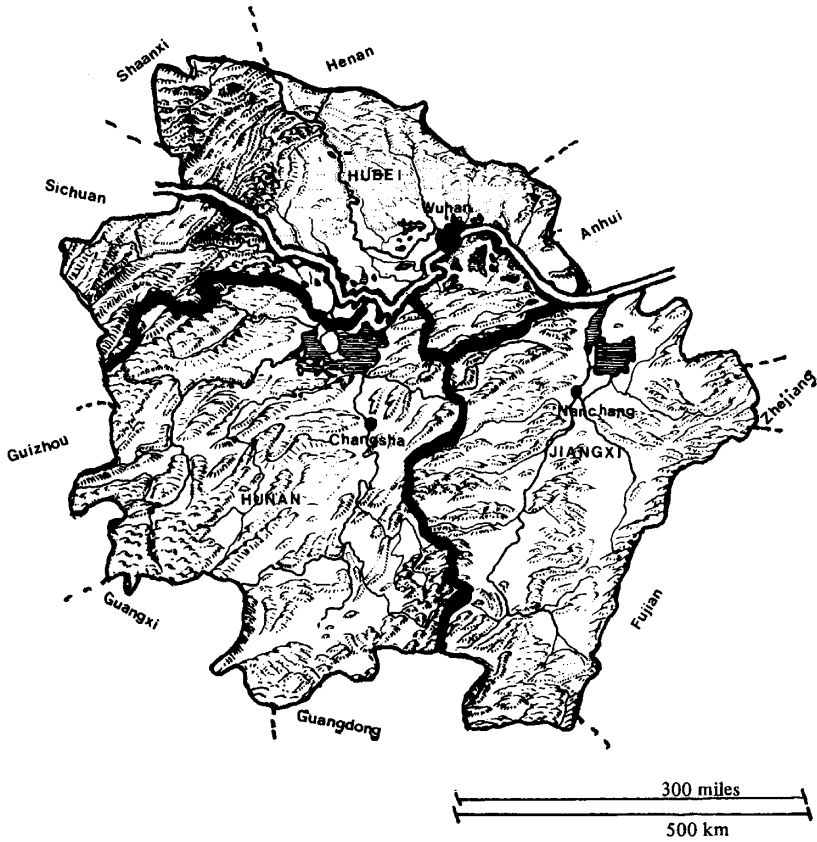
Most especially I would like to thank the historians and editors in the People's Republic of China who have assembled and published so much valuable material concerning the modern history of Chinese labor and Hunan Province. The book would have been impossible without their intellectual labors. And I must mention again, in this context, Jean Chesneaux, whose generosity with source materials was extraordinary. He willingly and expeditiously micro-filmed and mailed to me materials from his own collection on Chinese labor, materials which were otherwise unavailable outside of the People's Republic. And last, but not least, I would like to thank Douglas Merwin, the editor at M. E. Sharpe who has shepherded these pages through the process that turns a manuscript into a book, Carmelita Hinton who provided the calligraphy for the cover, Emily Saitta who prepared the index, and Joan DiCato and Mary-Ann Kazanjian who typed various parts of the manuscript.

Lynda Shaffer
Medford, Massachusetts
March 1982

HUNAN PROVINCE IN ITS CHINESE MILIEU



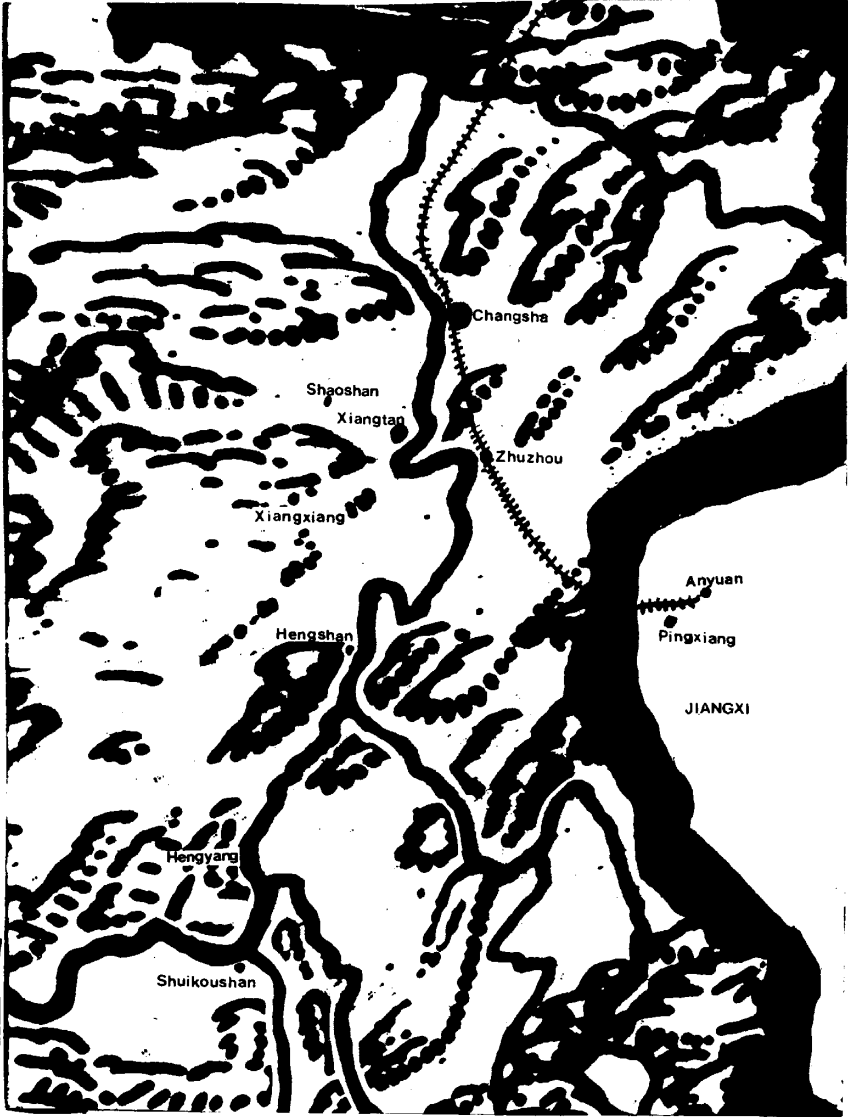
CENTRAL CHANGJIANG (YANGTZE) BASIN



On this map the size of the Changjiang (the Long River) as it flows through Hubei and loops down to form small pieces of the northern borders of Hunan and Jiangxi has been exaggerated in order to distinguish this major east-west trunk line from its many tributaries.

The metropolitan area of Wuhan, one of the largest industrial centers in China, is composed of three cities: Wuchang, the provincial capital of Hubei, on the southern bank of the Changjiang; and Hanyang and Hankou which are on the northern bank, where they are separated by the Han River as it flows into the Changjiang.

XIANG RIVER VALLEY, SELECTED SITES





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Introduction

Mao Zedong, a man whose name has become inseparably linked with peasant revolution, actually began his career as a Communist in an apparently orthodox way, as an organizer of urban labor. From late 1920 until the spring of 1923, for about two and one-half years, he led a remarkably successful effort to unionize the workers of Hunan, his home province. In July 1921 he became the head of the Hunan branch of the Communist-led Labor Secretariat, and by November 1922 he was the secretary-general of the newly created Hunan Federation of Labor Organizations. He abandoned these offices and the arena of urban labor in April 1923, only after Zhao Hengti, warlord and governor of Hunan, forced him to leave the province.

Historians generally have neglected Mao's career as a labor organizer, and to a lesser extent, the labor movement itself, perhaps because it was a peasant-based revolution that he led to power in 1949. Certainly it is true that the concentration of scholarly efforts on the revolution in the countryside has contributed a great deal to our understanding of the Communist success. And Mao's career as an organizer of the urban workers was a relatively short one. On the other hand, there is no reason to assume that the years Mao spent with the urban proletariat were of no consequence, that the events of these early and formative years had no significant impact on his ideas about Marxism and the Chinese revolution.

The prevailing wisdom regarding Mao's ideas during these years is that nationalism, not a class-conscious Marxism, was the fundamental inspiration behind his revolutionary urge, both before and after his experience with the unions. Stuart Schram, one of the most respected biographers of Mao, has suggested that he was so indifferent to the Marxist notion of class that he was willing to hand over the leadership of the nationalist stage of the revolution

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to the merchants in 1923, only months after he had left Hunan and its labor movement (Schram, 1966: 73-74). While this study hopes to put that notion to rest, it is true that after leaving Hunan Mao never again devoted his energies to the labor movement, even though he went from Hunan to Shanghai, the largest concentration of workers inside the Great Wall. But, one cannot know what sort of Marxist or labor leader he was or understand why he subsequently became an organizer for the Nationalist-Communist alliance or why he eventually turned to peasant organizing in 1925 without making a serious examination of the labor movement that he left behind.

Not only has Mao's involvement in the movement been overlooked, but the labor movement itself, this apparently orthodox beginning of the Chinese Communist revolution, has been neglected. In the 1920s and 1930s a few reformers and revolutionaries attempted to explain the rapid and explosive take-off of the modern workers' movement, but until recently only one Western academic had turned his attention to the question of the role of the proletariat in this revolution: Jean Chesneaux, who published Le Mouvement Ouvrier Chinois de 1919 à 1927 in 1962.¹

In this seminal work Chesneaux described China's workers and the significant political role that their unions played in the series of events that brought Chiang Kai-shek and the Nationalist Party to power in 1927. Labor unrest surfaced in 1918 and 1919 and surged in January 1922 with the declaration of the Nationalist-led Hong Kong seamen's strike. The seamen touched off a national strike wave that lasted about thirteen months and was characterized mainly by economic demands and an insistence on the right to unionize. This strike wave surprised and alarmed the more comfortable residents of China. In February 1923 one British editor lamented, "Chinese labor, that hitherto docile beast, is learning striking and sabotage" (China Advertiser clipping, in U.S. Government: RG 84, Vol. 32). And one American consul concluded:

Unmistakable evidences of Bolshevik handicraft are everywhere apparent, and instead of the workers themselves taking the lead, we find that the various strikes have been engineered by young students having no particular experience in the industry in which the strike is called (Huston, 1923: p. A).

This strike wave dissipated only after the warlord Wu Peifu crushed the northern railroad unions in February 1923. After a

two-year pause, the May Thirtieth Movement of 1925, an anti-imperialist, highly nationalistic movement, set off another strike wave which continued through the Northern Expedition of 1926-27, a military campaign which sought to defeat the regional warlords and unify the country. This second, more explicitly political upsurge culminated in the workers' seizure of Shanghai in March 1927, after which they threw open the city gates and cheered the entry of Chiang Kai-shek and the armies of the Northern Expedition. Indeed, Chesneaux suggested that it was the extensive and intensely fought political struggle waged by the workers that made possible the success of the Expedition and the Nationalist Party's rise to power. And it was Chiang's subsequent destruction of the Communist unions in April 1927 that ended the open and radical phase of China's modern labor movement.

The most obvious questions regarding this movement are how the workers in a country that was so overwhelmingly peasant could play such a significant role in Chinese politics, and why they would follow the lead of Communist revolutionaries. Chesneaux estimated that there were in China in 1919 about one and a half million modern workers (Chesneaux, 1968: 42). Since China's total population at that time was thought to be approaching 500 million, these workers, as defined by Chesneaux, constituted less than three-tenths of one percent of the population. He believed that the reason so few could accomplish so much was that these modern workers were concentrated in large enough numbers in certain strategic places. There were pockets of modern workers already laboring under conditions that Marx believed to be alienating and conducive to revolution. Even though these pockets were not characteristic of the country as a whole, they were able to provide the energy for the movement (Chesneaux, 1968: 47).

Chesneaux's observation that the modern workers were concentrated in strategic places is, no doubt, true. The difficulty with his analysis lies in his assumption that the only potentially revolutionary workers were those already working under what appeared to be the most modern conditions and in its corollary that the energy behind the movement had to have come from these workers. This assumption, given the high level of labor activity which had to be explained, led Chesneaux to define the concept of modern worker in the broadest possible fashion, in fact, so broadly that the definition loses significance. On the other hand, his definition was not so broad as to include all those who were active in the

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workers' movement, since he did omit from consideration those who remained enmeshed in some forms of preindustrial labor organizations. Thus his definition minimizes the number of potentially revolutionary workers and obscures some of the most important factors that produced this movement.

Since China had few large-scale, highly mechanized factories, Chesneaux fell back on one single criterion to delineate the modern working class, to decide which workers were modern and which were not. Otherwise, even his pockets of proletariat would have shrunk to miniscule proportions. What mattered, he suggested, was simply the workers' relationship to the means of production, to the product, and to the employer. Workers qualified as members of the working class if they "no longer owned the instruments of production or the products of their labor," and if they "were in complete subjection to their employers" (Chesneaux, 1968: 24).

Exactly what "complete subjection to the employer" means is not spelled out, but one assumes that he was referring to the absence of paternalistic relationships and the system of obligations that characterized labor-management relations in preindustrial enterprises. Or, to quote Marx, he was referring to those "feudal, patriarchal, idyllic relations" which the bourgeoisie "has pitilessly torn asunder," the "motley feudal ties that bound man to his natural superiors." Under industrial capitalism, there is "no other nexus between man and man than naked self-interest, then callous cash-payment" (Marx and Engels, 1951: 35).

Using this definition, the most politically significant group of urban workers that Chesneaux chose to exclude were those who pursued the "petty urban trades" and the craftsmen. Even though they were active participants in the same movement as the modern workers,

... they were involved in a system of production or of services that belonged to the past, they tended to look toward the past, and were not really part of the new forces in Chinese society. They were allies of the labor movement rather than an integral part of it (Chesneaux, 1968: 25).

Essentially, they were excluded because they were guild members, and guilds belonged to the past. Chesneaux assumed that guild members still were enmeshed in preindustrial relationships that did not enmesh other workers, or were of a significantly different

sort than the preindustrial relationships that did characterize the employer-employee relationship of many other workers. They were not modern; therefore the conditions of their employment precluded them from becoming an integral part of the labor movement.

Chesneaux also obscured the significant role of traditional workers enmeshed in preindustrial labor organizations by including two large and significant groups of such workers in his modern working class, where they do not belong according to his own definition. These were the miners and such transport workers as porters and ricksha pullers. True, they were not guild members, for guilds were generally limited to skilled craftsmen, but they did belong to contract labor gangs or regional associations, both of which were characterized by obligations and expectations that were no more, or no less, modern than those of the guilds. Chesneaux chose to include the miners and transport workers, for "no history of the Chinese labor movement would be complete" without them (Chesneaux, 1968: 24), but empirically, the same would seem to apply to guild members. The theoretical lines that Chesneaux draws are difficult to maintain, and the inclusion of one group and exclusion of another seems quite arbitrary when one looks closely at the personal relationships between employer and employee. Furthermore, as Chesneaux admitted, there does not seem to have been any significant difference in the role they played in the movement (Chesneaux, 1968: 24-25).

The problematic nature of Chesneaux's explanation for a significant Communist-led labor movement becomes most apparent when one looks closely at the movement in Hunan, with which Mao was involved. By March 1923, over 28,000 workers belonged to the nineteen unions that made up the Communist-led Hunan Federation of Labor Organizations ("Shengxian xia zhi Hunan," 1923: 74-77). In just four months, from September to December 1922, at least nine of these nineteen unions had gone out on strike not only for higher wages, but also for the right to unionize.² And yet if one examines these unions in terms of their qualifications for an orthodox Marxist labor movement, they fail. They were not the stuff of orthodox revolution. At least 13,500, or 48 percent, of them were miners who belonged to preindustrial contract labor gangs. The second largest group were the 8,100 craftsmen, about 30 percent of the total, most of whom had been guild members before they unionized. These 2,000 construction workers, 1,500 tailors, 300 lithographers, 500 barbers,

300 writing brush makers, 200 cobblers, 300 teashop employees, and 3,000 potters should not, according to Chesneaux, receive consideration. He would, however, have included the 200 ore-boat workers and the 1,850 ricksha pullers since they were part of the transportation sector. On the other hand, there were some modern workers: 1,250 railroad employees, 350 lead-type printers, 1,500 mint employees, 100 workers at the electric generating plant, 300 at the lead-smelting plant, and 1,500 spinners ("Shengxian xia zhi Hunan," 1923: 74-77).³ But if one were to apply strictly even the one criterion of the worker's relationship to his employer, 85 percent of the membership in Communist-led unions in Hunan would have to be excluded from consideration. This obviously is absurd. There simply is no justification for demoting them to the category of "allies" (Chesneaux, 1968: 25); in Hunan, at least, traditional workers were the core of the Communist-led movement. And, since the core of the Hunanese movement was still enmeshed in traditional structures, it follows that most of the energy behind the labor movement could not have come from the sorts of contradictions between employers and employees that Marx suggested might bring about a proletarian revolution in an advanced industrial country. This is not to say, however, that there is no Marxist explanation for the movement, only that the explanation is not orthodox. By focusing attention on the traditional workers, it may be possible to provide a more convincing explanation of why this movement ignited so quickly and spread so rapidly.

An analysis of these strikes also allows one, in a limited way, to make some tentative suggestions about why the workers' movement suffered such a severe setback in 1927, and why it was that, in the end, China's peasants became the main force of the revolution. There has been a tendency in the literature in recent years not only to downplay the importance of the mass movements in the Northern Expedition,⁴ but also to blame the defeat of the labor movement in 1927 on internal weaknesses. What is implied in this literature is that the labor movement might have survived had the unions been better organized and relied less on bourgeois allies. One historian of Hunanese politics has even suggested that the labor movement in Hunan in the 1920s was a creature of elite politics: that it succeeded when there was elite support for it and failed when that support was withdrawn (McDonald, 1978: 5, 195, 200, 206, 258). Hopefully, an analysis of these Hunanese unions will dispel such notions and suggest an alternative ex-

planation for the disaster of 1927.

Chapters 1 and 2 of this study are designed to provide the background necessary for an analysis of the Communist-led labor movement in Hunan. In order to understand the peculiarities of this province, one must examine its recent history and particularly the political role of its intellectual elite and Mao's own development in contact with that elite. Furthermore, the Communist movement in Hunan drew on several other movements, at least in the beginning, and thus a discussion of the mass education movement and the anarchist-led labor movement provide a necessary backdrop for the Communist movement.

Chapters 3 through 6 analyze four out of the nine strikes which characterized the unionization process that occurred in Hunan in 1922 and 1923. The most compelling reason for choosing the strikes of the Anyuan Railroad Workers and Miners' Club, the Construction Workers' Union, the Lead-type Compositors and Printers' Union, and the Shuikoushan Lead and Zinc Miners' Club is simply that there is more information about them.⁵ These were all important strikes, particularly the one among the workers at Anyuan and the one among the construction workers in Changsha. These two were the first highly successful strikes involving large numbers of workers in the Hunan area, and thus they had a considerable demonstration effect. The printers' strike, while it involved only a small number of workers, was important in terms of the relative literacy of the workers and the leadership role they played in the Hunan Federation of Labor Organizations. The Shuikoushan strike also involved several thousand workers and is interesting because it spawned a peasant union in 1923, the first in Hunan. With the exception of the Anyuan strike, which actually took place in Jiangxi Province, all of these strikes were singled out by the American like consul in charge in Changsha as "of a serious nature" (Meinhardt, 1923a: 8504).

These four strikes were also the most successful of the nine in Hunan during this period ("Shengxian xia zhi Hunan," 1923: 76-77),⁶ which is probably the major reason that there is more information about them. By using these four, the early success of the movement, undoubtedly, will be somewhat overdrawn. Ideally, a study of a less successful strike, such as the tailors' strike, would be extremely useful in determining the variables of success or failure, but there is relatively little information about it.⁷ Although it is certainly not ideal, it is possible to mark out the key factors that contributed to