Voices of Xiagang: Naming, Blaming, and Framing

Eva P.W. Hung and Stephen W.K. Chiu

I was laid off in 1994. I had worked for this paper-making enterprise for more than twenty years. We made toilet paper. The enterprise was originally doing very well in the 80s. And then a new manager came in the late ‘80s. Once he landed here he immediately went into a joint operation with a small enterprise in Shunyi and paid 400,000 yuan to renovate the factory. At about the same time, he sent three trucks of toilet paper to a buyer in Shenzhen. That was worth some 540,000 yuan. But the buyer disappeared once he got the load. So our manager traveled to Shenzhen to find him. Of course the buyer was nowhere to be found. On his way back the manager went to Yunnan to visit his relatives. And from there he couldn’t buy a plane ticket back to Beijing, so he simply stayed in the hotel until he got one. He refused to travel even with a train sleeper! When he came back he simply said that the money was lost. “Well, the first load was the tuition fee; and the second load was to buy a lesson.” So there went the 540,000 yuan. Together with the 400,000 yuan investment to Shunyi that amounted to almost one million. And the operation in Shunyi was closed after a year. It was too expensive to maintain... Why did the enterprise collapse? We workers did nothing wrong. It’s all because of the leaders. What’s the fault with us workers? All we did was to do what we were told. I would say workers are always good workers. If nothing went wrong we could all get bonuses or the like. And what about the manager? He sent three trucks of papers and lost that 540,000 yuan. He didn’t bear any responsibility but merely said that that was a lesson to learn. And then he was simply transferred to somewhere else. So this is communism. The capitalists would not run things like this... Now I am getting old and I’m physically unfit. There are not many jobs I could do. So I am not earning any money.
And now the Communists say, here is 40,000 yuan and you are on your own. But for God’s sake, for all these years I was not working for the Nationalists or the Japanese. I was working for the Chinese Communist Party! And it’s been more than twenty years! How could they just throw us away like this and ask us to be on our own? I swear, when I am so frail and am about to die, I’ll crawl my way to Zhongnanhai and die right in front of it.

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“We workers did nothing wrong.” When asked how they understood their layoff experience and why the enterprise collapsed, this comment popped up most frequently from the xiagang workers that we talked to. In their view, workers are always good workers. They worked diligently for the enterprise and did what they were told to do. As they characterized themselves, they were always laolaoshishi, that is, honest and simple-minded. If the enterprise collapsed, the fault did not lie with workers because they merely worked according to orders from above. If there was overstaffing in the enterprise, that also had nothing to do with the workers. As they said, “a stone falling down from the sky could kill nine and a half managers” (tiānshàng diāoxià yīkē shìtóu, keyì zǎi jùgè bān jīnglì). It was the administrative ranks that were bloated, not the rank and file of workers. They therefore rejected vehemently the official discourse of jìnyuán zèngxiǎo, that is, to retrench staff and to enhance efficiency, in the restructuring of state enterprises. But it was indeed the workers who bore the brunt of this policy. A deep sense of unfairness resulted. Apparently, workers’ understanding of xiagang was and is vastly different from the state discourse.

According to the sociologist C. Wright Mills, ordinary people often feel trapped in their private lives, but they are not always able to relate their “private troubles” to the “public issues” of the time: “They do not possess the quality of mind essential to grasp the interplay of man and society, of biography and history, of self and world.” The sociological imagination, on the other hand, is “a quality of mind that will help them to use information and to reason in order to achieve lucid summations of what is going on in the world and of what may be happening within themselves.” In this chapter, our purpose is exactly to find out how ordinary workers in contemporary China comprehend their private troubles. We are not, however, prepared to dismiss their reckonings as merely a result of being trapped in some taken-for-granted reality and, therefore, in some sense less authentic or valuable than sociological or social–scientific reasoning. Certainly we are going to find out that their visions are limited in one sense, but the way they present their points of view do offer an important way of understanding the dramatic social changes unleashed by market reforms.