I have been using generic terms such as “the people” and “social,” which are at the same time candid class terms in Chinese political discourse for a threefold reason. First, their actual referents and symbolic signification are historically derived from the Chinese revolution, which was both national and class liberating in nature. Second, while creating a common constituency, the revolution was predominantly based on and powered by the laboring classes with an elaborated self-identity of “worker-peasant alliance.” Third, due to uneven development conditioned by global capitalism, oppressed and especially revolutionary nations necessarily acquire a “class” position. In formulating the revolutionary strategy, the opening passage of a 1927 article by Mao is classic: “Who are our enemies? Who are our friends? This is the foremost question of the revolution.” Mao went on to delineate class identifications and relations of Chinese society in the immediate context of China’s great revolutionary mobilization of 1924–27.¹ This primacy of the friend-enemy antithesis is a political sine qua non in the concept of an oppressed people in uprising, typified by “we the people” declared in the wars and struggles for democracy.² Later, on the eve of the founding of the People’s Republic, Mao specified the class structure and basis for the new regime: “Who are the people? At the present stage in China, they are the working class, the peasantry, the urban petty bourgeoisie and the national bourgeoisie.”³ The
“people” in the Chinese communist vocabulary (as in that of the East European people’s republics) signalled a wider, popular front style politics distinguishable from the Soviet model of “proletarian” revolution and dictatorship. 

Class and class relations and their ideological construction and destruction have undergone a sea change in China since around 1949, through a sequence of socioeconomic and political upheavals and transformations. The economic reform in particular has involved restoration of certain prerevolutionary class and social relations as well as creation of new ones in response to the global capitalist integration—the emergence of a bureaucratic bourgeoisie from within the party ranks (Chapter 3), for instance. However, as noted, class identities cannot be fixed at the points of production or distribution but are formed and transformed also through political, ideological, and cultural processes. Class is not a positivist category about sociological stratification, and class consciousness develops only through intensified politics. The largely abandoned language of “class” and “the people” in public discourse under a reform regime that denounced ideology is ironically only a sign of the severity of class exploitation and social polarization. The degradation of workers, peasants, and the common people, who had been glorified in the socialist tradition, is too threatening to the nominally communist state. The fact that these two notions have been up and down side by side throughout the history of the PRC is a confirmation of their shared connotation.

In the reformed social structure, most notable is the drastic decline of the state-sector working class caused by deindustrialization in the “rust belt” of old industrial centers and, especially, by privatization of SOEs. This has been paralleled by the development of a new private-sector working class during industrialization in the “sun belt” of the coastal south (Lee 2007). Catalyzing these changes in social contract is the sweeping commodification of labor, along with the “informalization” and “casualization” of employment followed by loss of job security and fringe benefits for