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The World's Factory in Transition:
Diversifying Industrial Relations and Intensifying
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An Interdisciplinary Journal on Greater China

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*A Precarious Worker-Student Alliance in Xi's China**

Jenny Chan

Abstract

How did workers and students defend trade union rights at Jasic Technology based in Shenzhen beginning from summer 2018? When worker leaders faced managerial retaliation and police brutality, a group of young Maoists and Marxists composed primarily of Chinese university students and recent graduates, formed the Jasic Workers Support Group. As it evolved, the widening crackdown on left-wing student associations, labor rights groups, and social service organizations exemplified deepening state repression through 2019. The worker-student alliance as illustrated by the case of Jasic, while precarious and short-lived, reignited a century-long Chinese revolutionary legacy. It also offers a rare glimpse of a contemporary transnational labor and student network.

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In July 2018, the labor dispute at Shenzhen Jasic Technology became politically consequential. *Xinhua* alleged that it involved instigation of “an unregistered illegal organization” of Jasic workers into taking “radical actions.”¹ But it remained silent about growing public support by mainland Chinese university students and recent graduates for the arrested Jasic workers. The Jasic Workers Support Group, composed primarily of members of young Marxist and Maoist students, turned the party-state rhetoric on its head. The disparity between official class ideologies and the state’s actual practices has never been clearer.

How did the alliance between workers and students evolve in the unfolding Jasic labor struggle? Drawing on the open access database of the Jasic Workers Support Group,² and the author’s meetings with academics and activists from three Hong Kong registered organizations,³ this article details the development of the Jasic struggle for union rights between 2018 and 2019. It expands the scope of scholarly studies on grassroots worker leaders by examining the role of university student activists in labor insurgency.⁴ It assesses the implications of the high-profile protest for the prospect of building a stronger worker-student coalition and a global support network to advance the interests of the Chinese working class.

This essay begins with a review of the experience of student advocacy for the betterment of working people in China’s socioeconomic and political transformation. Then it delves into the thought and actions of the leading members of the Jasic Workers Support Group. A collection of written and oral testimonies illustrates their personal trajectories, explorations of Marxism and Maoism among other intellectual currents, and strategic responses to worker struggles. The social mobilization and countermobilization tactics demonstrate the severe restrictions on unionizing, student activism, and labor solidarity. Finally, the concluding section reflects upon the tightening grip of the Xi administration over civil society and the shrinking space in which networking between students and workers can take place.

1. Intellectuals in the Chinese Labor Movement

A hundred years ago, Chinese intellectuals looked to Russia’s Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 as a path toward national salvation. Some embraced Marxism to form the Communist Party in 1921. The membership of the Communist Party of China grew exponentially through the mid-1920s,

with workers calling for strikes, boycotts, and numerous militant actions in the cities. However, the alliance between the Communist Party and the Nationalist Party in the years 1924–1927 ended in a bloodbath with workers and Communists massacred in Shanghai and Canton (Guangzhou) and the survivors fleeing to join with rebellious peasants in the rural interior.⁵ Twenty years on, in a still predominantly agrarian economy, the Chinese Revolution of 1949 was based on the broad mobilization of the peasants, and a vision of “a highly egalitarian and participatory society.”⁶ Chairman Mao’s call for rebellions, disturbances, and even revolutions continued throughout his lifetime, resulting in the transfer of power from landlords and capitalists in the land reform and nationalization of the late 1940s and early 1950s. The leading cadres distrusted intellectuals, including teachers, technical and professional staff, and other members of the old elite classes.⁷ They also condemned temporary and contract workers fighting for better conditions for “economism” during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976).⁸

During the 1980s under China’s reform and opening, mobility of capital gradually increased in a market transition that encouraged international investment while permitting labor migration from the countryside to the cities to take jobs in rapidly expanding industries. With growing private sector competition, urban workers from state-owned and collective enterprises experienced heightened insecurity in successive waves of industrial restructuring. In spring 1989, against the backdrop of runaway inflation, protesting workers demanded price stabilization and livelihood security, taking aim at corrupt party cadres.⁹ Liberal intellectuals and university students, however, called for “privatization and the free market.”¹⁰ Despite eventual unity of hundreds of thousands of workers and students and citizens from all over the country, the military crackdown on Beijing’s prodemocracy movement and labor protests centered on Tiananmen Square was imminent.

In the aftermath of 4 June political upheaval, reform-minded leaders furthered economic liberalization. While state enterprises continued to dominate critical industries such as steel, oil, and banking, state-sector jobs as a share of urban employment fell sharply from “76 percent in 1995 to 41 percent in 2000 to only 27 percent in 2005.”¹¹ The welfare provisions for urban workers were also drastically reduced as housing, education, health care, and other services were privatized. Following large-scale layoffs of state workers from the late 1990s, workers staged waves of antiprivatization protests and demonstrations. But unions did

little to halt the decline of labor rights.¹² At the same time, the millions of rural migrant workers, previously long ignored by the All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU) until the early to mid-2000s,¹³ leveraged their familial and localistic networks as well as newly established urban and factory ties to stage numerous strikes and protests to defend their rights and interests in Guangdong and other provinces.¹⁴

Despite the strengthening of national labor laws and regulations during the 1990s and 2000s, working conditions remained very poor for many. From factories to offices and construction sites, as Anita Chan meticulously detailed in *China's Workers under Assault*, nonpayment or underpayment of wages and benefits, illegal dismissals, and occupational injuries and diseases were rampant.¹⁵ Patricia Chen and Mary Gallagher argue that the monopolization of "the space for representation" by the state-run union bureaucracy and the "atomizing effects of court procedures and legislation" have restrained the development of a Chinese labor movement.¹⁶ What we have seen is workers oscillating between judicial and extrajudicial tactics for resolving conflicts in order to pressure private capital and state enterprises, and to draw the attention of, and responses from, the government, the media, and the public. In times of crisis, some workers gained support from rights lawyers and nongovernmental organizations to make their claims.¹⁷

Less noted is that university students from a wide range of disciplines including law, history, anthropology, sociology, social work, gender studies, media and journalism, and medicine have long engaged with workers, particularly women migrants and injured laborers.¹⁸ Some interned at Hong Kong-sponsored worker centers or at mainland Chinese-run labor rights organizations to offer legal consultation, health checks, feminist awareness training, and other assistance programs to marginalized groups. Others undertook independent investigations and multimedia cultural projects with the goals not only to understand the society but to change it for the better. In the summer of 2008, for example, a group of students from several Chinese universities worked undercover in Coca-Cola bottling plants in Shanghai, Hangzhou, Guangzhou, Dongguan, and Huizhou and released a detailed report on labor conditions based on interviews and their own job experience. They worked alongside employees and a large number of subcontracted workers, who were recruited by and dispatched from agencies. The students' inquiry revealed that despite the Labor Contract Law that had come into force from January 2008, the dispatched workers were paid far

less for identical jobs than the direct hires, illustrating one of the deepening cleavages of the tiered employment structure. Placing a global corporation under intense scrutiny, the students shared their concern about “the ever-widening gap between the rich and the poor and the plight of workers in the age of globalization.”¹⁹

Examining areas besides manufacturing, in the run-up to the 2008 Beijing Olympics, a student-led Hard Hat Research Team in Beijing exposed the failure to provide employment contracts and social insurance benefits to construction workers. Through organizing photo exhibitions on university campuses, press releases, seminars, and conferences throughout the year, the research team pressed the state labor departments to monitor working conditions and violations of labor rights. A subgroup set up a charity, Love Save Pneumoconiosis, to raise funds for children whose parents had contracted the fatal disease pneumoconiosis while drilling and inhaling silica dust without adequate workplace safety protections. From Beijing to Shanghai, concerned students also reached out to Shanghai Disneyland construction site workers to disseminate legal and social service information.²⁰

It is illuminating to cast contemporary struggles in light of the linkages forged between workers and intellectuals in the course of China's pre-1949 revolution. In the May Fourth era of 1919–1927, students and teachers played active roles in the worker, peasant, and anti-imperialist upsurge that led to massive strikes and boycotts coinciding with the rapid growth of Communist movements.²¹ During the first decades of the People's Republic, from the 1950s to the 1970s, the Maoist state hailed workers as the masters of the nation and insisted that the organization of production must not be determined by the boss alone. As time passes, some older cohorts “accept Mao Zedong's theory on ‘continuing the revolution’” and “consider China's ‘reform and openness’ as ‘capitalist restoration,’” as explicated by Minqi Li.²² Young progressive students adopted a participatory method—to live, eat, and work with workers to find their new voices²³—echoing Mao's call to implement the “mass line.”²⁴

From about 2015, against the backdrop of a slowing Chinese economy, the government's security apparatus has repeatedly targeted feminists, human rights lawyers, and worker protesters as well as their support organizations, including those social media platforms created by university students.²⁵ Police have at times employed criminal charges and physical beatings to silence labor and social activism. Au Loong Yu

succinctly comments, “Though Xi Jinping continues to demand the people learn from Marxism-Leninism and Mao’s thought, the state continues to crack down on any independent and collective effort at seriously studying left classics—and to crack down even harder when these efforts carry an aspiration to sympathize with working people.”²⁶ Xi’s suppression of young Marxists, as we will see, has sparked growing anger from leftists on China’s political spectrum and in the international community.

2. Fighting for Union Rights

As worker protests became more and more widespread across the country over the past few decades, in 2018 a small group of employees at privately run Jasic, a welding equipment factory based in Pingshan district of Shenzhen city in South China, were determined to change their laboring lives by challenging oppressive practices. Jasic workers’ pent-up grievances centered on punitive fines and underpayment of social insurance and housing provident funds. Putting pressure on management, the aggrieved workers had petitioned the Labor Bureau and other government units in the past, and one worker was fired and blacklisted in May. Alarmed by the “wrongful dismissal,” in June, several workers sought help from the Pingshan District Federation of Trade Unions.

Article 10 of the Chinese Trade Union Law stipulates that all types of enterprises with 25 employees or more are to have “basic-level trade union committees” on the shop floor. The local union officials advised Jasic workers to inquire whether their coworkers were willing to set up a union under the framework of the ACFTU. By 12 July, the workers had successfully gathered 89 signatures, nearly 10 percent of the workforce calling for a union. Instead of heeding the workers’ call, Jasic senior management set up a preparatory committee to establish an Employee Congress (職工代表大會 *zhigong daibiao dahui*). But from Day 1 in September 2005 when the company was established and then expanded to Shenzhen Jasic Technology in 2010, it had never convened a congress of employees of this sort. Moreover, the fundamental rights to employee representation and collective bargaining were neither clearly defined nor publicly communicated.

For their part, Jasic executives accused the union initiators of “fighting” and “refusing to transfer to new posts” and dismissed them one after another. To workers’ surprise, rather than intervene to mediate the labor

dispute, the district-level trade union federation withdrew their original support for an enterprise union. Apparently, both Jasic management and government union officials shared a common interest in crushing worker efforts to mobilize their collective power. On 20 July 2018, acting alone, the seven dismissed workers protested outside the company gate to demand reinstatement. Police quickly arrived at the scene, beat them up, and detained them for 24 hours.²⁷

On 23 July the fired activists issued an open letter condemning the police use of excessive force during their detention and appealed for public support in front of the Yanziling Police Station. On 24 July they assembled outside the front entrance of the company, with support from friends and families. They sang "The Internationale" to boost morale, chanted slogans, and carried posters stating their demands. Through blogs and websites, they also posted their video to call for the right to unionize.²⁸ One worker wrote the Chinese lyrics to "The Internationale" in his notebook and underlined the words, "When everything belongs to the workers, we will no longer tolerate parasites" (一切歸勞動者所有，哪能容得寄生蟲 *yiqie gui laodongzhe souyou, naneng rongde jishengchong*).

Despite internet censorship and surveillance, the Jasic workers' letter and videotaped speeches and songs began to draw wider attention. On 27 July, for the final attempt within the same week, the dismissed workers and their supporters, including former Jasic workers, family members, and a female university student jointly organized a protest outside the company. This time, the police detained 30 individuals on suspicion of "picking quarrels and provoking trouble" (尋釁滋事 *xunxin zishi*).²⁹ On the very next day, Wu Jingtang (吳敬堂), a veteran worker representative leading the antiprivatization struggle at the state-owned Tonghua Iron and Steel Factory ten years ago, responded by calling on his compatriots (同胞 *tongbao*) and comrades (同志 *tongzhi*) to converge on Shenzhen Jasic: "For an awakening of the working class, for Chairman Mao!" Wu's online statement showed his militance and courage to stand with Jasic "advanced workers" (先進工人 *xianjin gongren*). He called for uniting with them to "repel the arrogant flames of the bourgeois class" (打退資產階級的囂張氣焰 *datui zichanjieji de xiaozhang qiyan*).³⁰ Maoists and leftist intellectuals petitioned online in support of Jasic workers, notably those running Beijing's Utopia Bookstore and its affiliated website Utopia (烏有之鄉 *Wuyouzhixiang*),³¹ as well as editors of the Chinese Workers Research Network (中國工人研究網 *Zhongguo Gongren Yanjiu Wang*),³² the Mao Zedong Flag (毛澤東旗幟網 *Mao Zedong Qizhi Wang*),³³ and Red Reference (紅色參考 *Hongse*

Cankao),³⁴ among others. By the end of July, more than 2,000 signatories inside and outside China had joined the campaign.³⁵

3. Building an Alliance between Workers and Students

In Shenzhen, a number of recent graduates and university students emerged to become the hardcore supporters, whose lived experience of class and gender as well as their empathy for workers is pertinent to the linking up between worker and student activists.³⁶ Shen Mengyu (沈夢雨), a 25-year-old graduate with a master's degree from Sun Yat-sen University and a former elected worker representative of NHK Spring Precision Company, raised funds via her WeChat mobile payment account to hire lawyers to represent detained Jasic workers and to support their families at times of difficulty. She coordinated with students, workers from other factories, and older Maoists in support of the Jasic workers.

The momentum of student and labor activism was growing. On 29 July, Yue Xin (岳昕), a 22-year-old fresh graduate from Peking University, initiated a signature campaign to mobilize her peers to support Jasic workers. Inspired by the Peking University students, other students and their affiliated Marxist student organizations at Renmin University and Nanjing University, respectively, also took action. In Shanghai, a group of students and alumni proclaimed, "This is a glorious proletarian movement. Many people are participating and the impact is far reaching" (這是一場無產階級光輝的行動，參與眾多、影響深遠 *zheshi yichang wu chanjieji guanghui de xingdong, canyu zhongduo, yingxiang shenyuan*).³⁷

In this circumstance, the Jasic Workers Support Group was born, and embraced the spirit: "Fighting together, moving forward and back as one" (同戰鬥，共進退 *tong zhandou, gong jintui*)! They wore T-shirts with the slogan "Solidarity is power" (團結就是力量 *tuanjie jiushi lilian*). They identified with the detained Jasic worker leaders, whose photos were printed on the front of the T-shirt. Slogans on the back urged Jasic workers to stand upright, be their own master, and set up their union (佳士工人，頂天立地，當家作主，組建工會 *Jiashi gongren, dingtian lidi, dangjia zuozhu, zujian gonghui*). In public rallies, they held up Mao portraits when delivering speeches as they sought to renew Mao's struggle to eliminate capitalist exploitation and bureaucratic behavior. Their key messages were "Forming unions is not a crime," "Workers are not guilty," and "Return workers to me."³⁸ By early August, student activists from as many as 20 universities had built a national network to join the struggling Jasic workers.³⁹

4. Leadership and Organization

For almost two weeks, between 28 July and 11 August, Shen served as the key media spokesperson of the Jasic Workers Support Group. First-person testimonials gave a glimpse into her life.

Shen, the only child, was born to a well-off family in Changsha, the provincial capital of Hunan. She cultivated an independent mind for learning and an openness for gender rights and social equality. During her graduate studies at Sun Yat-sen University in Guangzhou, in 2014, she attended a talk by a visiting Peking University professor on Chinese rural migrants. It turned out to be life transforming. Worker suicides, benzene poisoning, leukemia, occupational deafness, miscarriages, and deadly industrial accidents were far more serious than she had realized. She began to talk to migrant families in densely populated urban villages and on construction sites near the university campus. That year, in April, she joined student protests to support the thousands of Yue Yuen athletic shoe factory workers fighting for their pensions and housing provident fund in Dongguan city, on the northern border of Guangzhou. A few months later, she took part in another rally, celebrating the hard-won success of sanitation workers' strike in the Guangzhou University Town. Upon graduation in 2015, she went to work at an auto parts factory in Huangpu district, Guangzhou. "Instead of following my classmates into an office job in a high-rise building after graduation," she wrote, "I entered the industrial district to become a worker. My career choice is deeply planted in my life's journey, my affection for the workers and understanding of their current conditions, and my belief that conditions must be changed."⁴⁰

Shen and her coworkers developed friendships on the factory floor and in the dormitory. Three years on, when the 2018 company annual wage and bonus consultation exercise commenced, she was elected as the worker representative. By carrying out an in-depth survey, she collected workers' opinions on wages and bonuses. But this aggregation of workers' demands was not at all welcomed by senior management, who fired her without giving any reason.

Shen filed a labor dispute for illegal termination of contract. While still handling her own legal case, she traveled to Shenzhen to support embattled Jasic workers and their supporters. On 28 July, she and 14 support group members petitioned the head of the Pingshan district government:

We hope that party secretary Tao Yongxin will immediately deal with this matter, urge the police to release the detainees immediately, severely punish those who beat up the workers, compensate them for their losses, and apologize! The Pingshan government and the trade union federation should strictly adhere to the directives from the central government, encourage and support workers to set up their unions to lawfully protect their rights, and facilitate workers and staff to actively participate in the enterprise.⁴¹

The core principle of worker participation in management was emphasized. In attempting to engage the local government in resolving the Jasic conflict, Shen and the delegates looked to the law as an instrument for defending worker rights.

In the next two weeks the district government did not reply. By then the Support Group of some 40 to 50 people, which had been renting accommodations near the Jasic facility, were forced to move, as police pressured the landlord to evict them. On 11 August, Shen was seized by three unidentified men believed to be from the public security forces and forcibly bundled into an unmarked car at around 7.00 p.m.⁴² A sense of fear over Shen's disappearance lingered but the will to persist remained strong in the autonomous organization. The student leaders declared, "We cannot let our firewood collectors freeze in the snow. We cannot leave our freedom pathfinders stuck in the thorns." Their passionate call to "Return Mengyu" also referenced the next group of leaders.⁴³

5. Confronting the Chinese State

In the face of police repression, the student and worker organizers demonstrated exceptional courage. On 12 August, seven workers who were just released on bail sent an open letter to Shenzhen city government.⁴⁴ From the district to the next higher level, they demanded unconditional release of *all* Jasic workers and their supporters, including a nursing mother. In addition, they called for disciplinary actions against the police and thugs. Above all, they reiterated the lawful protection of union rights.

Outside the police station, Yue, the Peking University representative delivered a public speech to point out the inseparable ties between students and workers: "Today's students are the workers of tomorrow. Workers have children, who will become students. Every one of us—as a laborer—should unite in solidarity."⁴⁵ Yue, raised in an intellectual family in Beijing, had long immersed herself in Marxism and world

revolutionary history. More recently in April 2018, during her fourth and final year of studies, emboldened by the global #MeToo movement, she demanded that her university release information about a decades-old case of alleged rape and subsequent suicide of a female student.⁴⁶ Her courageous act received much support from her peers, particularly when she was pressured by university officials to delete the relevant posts from her social media sites.

From early August, Yue had been welcoming new blood from Peking University, Beijing Foreign Studies University, Nankai University, Nanjing University of Chinese Medicine, and other universities, even when some supporters were intercepted on their way to Shenzhen and sent home by their university advisors and parents. On 14 August, the students issued a joint declaration, quoting reformist thinker Liang Qichao.⁴⁷ In *Ode to Young China*, published at the dawn of the 20th century, Liang exclaimed, “When the youth are strong, the country will be strong” (少年強則國強 *shaonian qiang ze guo qiang*).

Yue, emblematic of this young generation, set an example for strengthening the nation. On 19 August, as there was no reply from the Shenzhen authorities, she directly addressed President Xi in an open statement, citing official discourse with an emphasis on “rule of law” (依法治國 *yifa zhiguo*): “We support the call for rule of law in our nation in order to advance social fairness and justice and maintain the party’s reputation!” The party’s “concept of governance” (執政理念 *zhizheng linian*), as Yue made clear in her eloquent statement, should guarantee “the leading position of the working class.”⁴⁸

As a matter of fact, Article 1 of the Constitution states that the People’s Republic of China is a socialist state under the people’s democratic dictatorship led by the working class and based on the alliance of workers and peasants. When the legal rights and interests of the Jasic workers were grossly violated, Yue, along with her fellows, felt obligated to stand in solidarity with them.

In addition to Yue, Zheng Yongming (鄭永明) arrived at Shenzhen Jasic in early August. Zheng, born in a poverty-stricken Jiangxi village in 1994, graduated from Nanjing Agricultural University in 2016. Later, while working in Guangzhou, he formed a Marxist reading group with students and like-minded people at Guangdong University of Technology. On 15 November 2017, local police detained the reading group members for interrogation, accusing them of “gathering a crowd to disrupt public order” (聚眾擾亂公共場所秩序 *juzhong raoluan gonggongchangsuo zhixu*).

That evening, the group discussed topics including the 1989 democratic movement in Tiananmen Square and the censorship imposed by the regime. Although Zheng was not present, as the “mastermind” of the campus-based reading group, he was arrested and detained for a month. No evidence of subversion was found, however, and the charge against the “Eight Young Leftists” (左翼八青年 *zuoyi ba qingnian*), including Zheng, was dropped.⁴⁹

Upon release in January 2018, Zheng declared in an open letter, “I was born the son of workers and peasants and I will always be their son! My preferred way of life would be to continue to help workers and peasants, who are the same as my parents.”⁵⁰ He lived by his words and continued to disseminate Marxist thoughts. *The Communist Manifesto*, published in 1848 by Marx and Engels, closes with a call to action: “The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains. They have a world to win. Working men of all countries, unite!”⁵¹ One hundred seventy years on, from Europe to Russia to China and the rest of world, the proletariat has risen to fight against inequality through class war. Zheng and his friends drew inspiration from the classic text, reflected on class struggles, and created the new media platform Epoch Pioneer (時代先鋒 *Shidai Xianfeng*).⁵²

On the 200th anniversary of Karl Marx’s birth, in May, Zheng and ten other commentators (including three members of the original reading group) coproduced a video to narrate the legacy of Marx and published it online. With the soundtrack of “The Internationale,” they closed the video by singing the revolutionary anthem in Mandarin, vowing to achieve human emancipation, liberation, and freedom. They shared the key message, “Today, taking action is the best way to commemorate Marx.”⁵³ That action centers on class struggle against the oppressor by the oppressed.

In delivering an outdoor public talk, Zheng showed a strong sense of justice and unflagging support for the workers. In his understanding, “Jasic workers were beaten by the black-hearted boss, divided, and sacked.”⁵⁴ Through a series of advocacy activities on the streets—an integral part of the organized effort to reach out to the wider public at the community level—the Support Group carried on a protracted fight for the cause of Jasic workers.

6. Petitioning Beijing

For nearly a month, the workers and students pooled their meager resources to help each other. Neither President Xi nor any other

government delegate had responded to them. On 22 August, a subgroup decided to take the issues to the union headquarters in Beijing. They hoped that intervention from top-ranking union leaders, while long overdue, might redress the power imbalance between Jasic workers and management. Gu Jiayue (顧佳悅), a 25-year-old female graduate from Peking University medical school, was deeply involved in the movement.

Gu is an urban resident from a middle-class family in Beijing. She is also a devoted Marxist. In *Capital*, Marx writes, "Capital comes dripping from head to toe, from every pore, with blood and dirt."⁵⁵ In Gu's perceptive reading, she visualized the charcoaled bodies of 87 young workers who were burned alive with searing pain in a bloodbath at the Zhili toy factory fire in Shenzhen in 1993.⁵⁶ Through the analytical lens of social class, she cast her eyes on the weak, poor, and sick. On campus she showed special care to low-paid manual workers with chronic illness and repetitive stress injury. By running the Sunshine and Love Clinic project, she and fellow classmates offered healthcare advice to canteen workers and cleaners, visited them at the dormitories, and helped them buy medicine. Gu affectionately called them sisters, brothers, aunts, and uncles, as if they belonged to one big family.⁵⁷ In and through these daily services, she followed Chairman Mao's call to "serve the people."⁵⁸

After graduation in 2016, rather than pursue a career in medicine, Gu dedicated herself to writing and editing. Like Zheng, her friend who co-organized the university reading group during off-work hours, she as one of the eight "wanted" leftists was forced to hide from the police in November and December 2017. In January 2018, she wrote a poem titled "Dear Fellow Travelers" (致同路人 *Zhi Tongluren*) with the following opening lines: "Thinking about my comrades, as my feet and hands (思我同志，如足如手 *siwo tongzhi, ruzu rushou*); Thinking about my workers and peasants, with care and protection (念我工農，誰護誰佑 *nianwo gongnong, shuihu shuiyou*)."⁵⁹ Gu's comrades were a source of love and strength. And she was prepared to stand by workers and peasants, declaring in an open statement: "I don't care about my increasingly narrowing career path because the road of Marxism will become increasingly wider."⁶⁰

Day in and out, Gu campaigned online and offline to free Jasic workers, of whom 14 were still being detained. Despite the mounting pressure, the ACFTU refused to meet with Gu and worker delegates. Conspicuous by his silence concerning policies to safeguard worker rights has been Wang Dongming, the Beijing-based trade union federation chairperson who assumed office in March 2018. The result, with respect

to Jasic's labor struggle, is to tacitly endorse company and state control over workers. In fact, the days of the Support Group were numbered.

7. Taking Aim at Labor Activists and Student Organizations

At about 5:00 a.m. on 24 August, riot police armed with shields and helmets stormed the rental apartment where approximately 50 Support Group members were staying in Huizhou city, adjacent to Shenzhen. The same morning, in Beijing, several other members were also taken away by the police, their smartphones and laptops confiscated. The coordinated crackdown showed the determination of the Xi administration to crack down on a "political force,"⁶¹ in this case, one of workers and students.

While many were soon released after a brief detention, at least two undergraduate students from Renmin University, who initiated the university-based online signature campaign in support of the Jasic protest, were punished. Specifically, a cross-departmental government monitoring team consisting of university cadres frequently brought in parents to pressure them to conduct "thought work" (思想工作 *sixiang gongzuo*) with blacklisted students.⁶² The main accusation concerned the "illegal activities" of the Support Group funded by "overseas forces" (境外勢力 *jingwai shili*). The activist students felt coerced to comply with the university code of conduct to not "make trouble" or risk not being allowed to graduate.⁶³

Tightening the grip on students and cultivating an ethos of obedience to the Communist Party, when the fall semester began, several top universities suppressed a number of Marxist student organizations, as discussed below. In the process, the faculty prevented or canceled student activities, deleted posts on online campus bulletin boards, and blocked information about the arrest of Jasic workers and supporting students and alumni. Refusing to yield, the left-wing student societies waged a months-long "defensive war" (高校社團保衛戰 *gaoxiao shetuan baoweizhan*) against the repression, firing back against allegations of organizing unlawful activities.

Despite fierce opposition from students, at Peking University the authorities thoroughly "restructured" the Marxism Association (北京大學馬克思主義學會 *Beijing Daxue Makesizhuiyi Xuehui*) with 32 all new members in December 2018. The case of Peking University was not an isolated one. Beijing Language and Culture University's New New Youth

Society (北京語言大學新新青年社團 *Beijing Yuyan Daxue Xin Xinqingnian Shetuan*) was forcibly closed on 7 January 2019. Renmin University of China's New Light Civilians' Development Association (中國人民大學新光平民發展協會 *Zhongguo Renmin Daxue Xinguang Pingmin Fazhan Xiehui*) was deregistered on 21 January 2019. Nanjing University's Marxism Society (南京大學馬克思主義閱讀研究社 *Nanjing Daxue Make-sizhuyi Yuedu Yanjiushe*) ceased operations on 27 March 2019. In effect, these systematic attacks have turned the campuses into tightly guarded ideological prisons.

Government officials also shut down labor rights organizations that were charged with backing Jasic workers. In Pingshan district of Shenzhen, for example, at least two groups, namely Migrant Workers' Center (打工者中心 *Dagongzhe Zhongxin*),⁶⁴ and Qingying Dreamworks Social Worker Center (青鷹夢工場 *Qingying Menggongchang*),⁶⁵ were closed down. At the former, Fu Changguo (付常國), the principal staff member who was accused of "inciting" the Jasic protests, was detained for more than a year beginning on 10 August 2018 before being finally released.⁶⁶ At the latter, six staff members including Peking University alumnus He Pengchao (賀鵬超) were detained in November 2018, denied access to lawyers and families, and have been seen only in video "confessions."⁶⁷ Along with four core organizers of Shen, Yue, Zheng, and Gu, the six Qingying Center social workers were forced to testify that they broke the law. Between January and March 2019, during the second semester, national security officers showed the videos to targeted student activists in an attempt to intimidate them. Will China's stability maintenance agents achieve their goals?

8. Assessing the Limits and Prospects of Building a Worker-Student Alliance

The "8.24 crackdown" of the Jasic movement in 2018, and its fallout in 2019, was the largest repressive action since December 2015 (when more than two dozen labor activists were rounded up by the authorities in Guangdong province).⁶⁸ In retrospect, when the Jasic worker leaders were laid off, no strike occurred, limiting the opportunities to educate, agitate, and organize at the workplace level.⁶⁹ Whereas public concern from older and younger activists as well as university student associations could help, moral support alone could not sustain the development of a cross-class justice movement. From a social movement perspective, what is needed

is a stronger connection between “external pressure” and “local mobilization,” which is critical to success in mobilizing and empowering workers to build their unions or other forms of organization.⁷⁰

The Chinese state touts Marxist discourse and rule of law in speeches, while restrictions on workers’ collective rights remain very strict. In some workplaces in Guangdong, markedly after waves of strikes in the aftermath of the 2008 global financial crisis, officials had tried to facilitate labor dispute resolution and collective bargaining over wages to restore industrial peace and economic production. Such party-state-led crisis management resulted in modest economic gains for aggrieved workers.⁷¹ In a cautiously optimistic assessment, Ching Kwan Lee highlights that the trade union federation’s “local experiments in some locales may plant the seeds for the creation of an institutional ally for worker mobilizations in the future.”⁷² Unfortunately, the pro-labor approach of individual union officials is *not* consistent across enterprises, sectors, or regions.

Are the prospects for Chinese labor activism bleak? In a bold assessment, scholar-activist Pun Ngai sees that the younger generation is actively exploring “which way China should go,” involving a challenge to “the neoliberal capitalist society” and an attempt to build “a truly socialist society.”⁷³ In 2019, as the centenary of May Fourth and the International Labor Day of 1 May approached, six Peking University students (who had campaigned in solidarity with Jasic workers) announced their plan to work on the assembly line alongside factory workers. They were detained by the police, harassed, and beaten, before finally being released. Undeterred, they issued the “May Fourth Manifesto” under the name of Young Pioneers, explaining, “Today’s youth should not only dare to fight against authoritarian power. More importantly, they should also dare to unite with the broadest masses of workers and peasants, to fight on the front-line of their struggles.”⁷⁴

To look ahead, in a more connected world of global education, faculty and students can contribute to raising labor and human rights standards in China and far beyond. As early as October 2018, Cornell University’s School of Industrial and Labor Relations suspended its academic exchange programs with Renmin University in protest against the harsh punishment of students supporting the fledgling Jasic labor activism.⁷⁵ Similarly, in February 2019, the University of Nottingham UCU (University and College Union) expressed serious concerns about the detention of students over the Jasic struggle, and sought to protect the right to freedom of thought of students and staff at the university’s

campus based in Ningbo city in Zhejiang province of eastern China.⁷⁶ In addition, concerned academics have called on the Chinese government and its trade union bureaucracy to better protect workers' and human rights. Noam Chomsky and other prominent signatories took the lead in calling for a boycott of China's World Congress on Marxism and similar conferences that might be held in China in the future.⁷⁷ In a broader context, the Jasic conflagration offers insight into a developing transnational labor and student movement.

9. Conclusion

The alliance between students and workers is precarious in the face of unconstrained state power. As the Xi regime seeks to tighten its grip on civil society by deploying significant coercion to combat worker challenges, scholars in China and abroad share a pessimistic outlook on the possibility of realizing workers' associational rights.⁷⁸ Grassroots labor organizing has possibly been driven underground, if not totally uprooted.⁷⁹ As of May 2019, the authorities had widened the net in an ongoing crackdown on more mild social-service-oriented individuals and organizations.⁸⁰ Kevin Lin argues that "the increasing arbitrariness in the widening repression is underlined by a decisive turn from punitive—where people are arrested as a response to their specific actions—to preemptive, where arrested activists may not be currently or recently engaged in any activism on a significant scale."⁸¹ But the preemptive repression has met with new rounds of countermobilization.⁸²

Historically, in China and in the world, analysts have seen that an alliance between workers and students can be a powerful force for change. At its initial stage of export-led industrialization, South Korea's ruling elites adhered to a model of political exclusion and repressed independent labor and peasant organizations. In November 1970, 23-year-old textile worker Chun Tae-il poured gasoline on himself and set himself ablaze in the hope of rallying fellow workers to demand that the Park Chung-hee dictatorship protect worker rights. His suicide inspired the participation of students and students-turned-workers in unionizing.⁸³ In a new millennium, with labor market liberalization in South Korea, the United States, and other Southeast Asian countries, state and employer offensives against organized labor and student activism have often provoked resistance and new strategies of organizing.⁸⁴ Today, building upon a century-old tradition of Chinese intellectuals joining with workers

in labor movements, a cohort of young student leaders has emerged, striving to improve both the economic and political rights of workers in the long run.

Notes

- 1 "Investigation on So-Called Worker Incidents in Shenzhen," *Xinhua*, 25 August 2018, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-08/25/c_137416700.htm.
- 2 Jasic Workers Support Group's website: <https://jiashigrsyt1.github.io/>; and Jasic Workers Support Group's twitter @jasic_worker (formerly @jasic-workers): https://mobile.twitter.com/jasic_worker. See also a one-hour documentary on Jasic Workers Support Group titled "I Am with Us" (*Wo he Women*, 2018), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NXNBfeu1Omg&feature=youtu.be>.
- 3 For protection of key informants, the identities of the three Hong Kong labor rights organizations are kept strictly confidential.
- 4 Jeffrey Becker, *Social Ties, Resources, and Migrant Labor Contention in Contemporary China: From Peasants to Protesters* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2014); Parry P. Leung, *Labor Activists and the New Working Class in China* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).
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- 6 Mark Selden, "Mao Zedong and the Political Economy of Chinese Development," *China Report*, Vol. 24, No. 2 (1988), p. 125.
- 7 Joel Andreas and Yige Dong, "The Brief, Tumultuous History of 'Big Democracy' in China's Factories," *Modern China*, Vol. 44, No. 5 (2018), pp. 455–496.
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- 11 Albert Park and Fang Cai, "The Informalization of the Chinese Labor Market," in *From Iron Rice Bowl to Informalization: Markets, Workers, and the State in a Changing China*, edited by Sarosh Kuruvilla, Ching Kwan Lee, and Mary E. Gallagher (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011), p. 17.

- 12 Ching Kwan Lee, *Against the Law: Labor Protests in China's Rustbelt and Sunbelt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007); Dorothy J. Solinger, *States' Gains, Labor's Losses: China, France, and Mexico Choose Global Liaisons, 1980–2000* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009); Stephen E. Phillion, *Workers' Democracy in China's Transition from State Socialism* (New York: Routledge, 2009); Xi Chen, *Social Protest and Contentious Authoritarianism in China* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012).
- 13 Chinese rural migrant workers were not eligible for official trade union membership till the early to mid-2000s. Against the backdrop of restructuring urban enterprise restructuring, bankruptcy, and loss of members, the All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU) has extended its reach to the fast-growing non-state sector in an attempt to strengthen its power and finance. However, workers' participation in trade union decision-making processes remains severely restricted. See Tim Pringle, *Trade Unions in China: The Challenge of Labour Unrest* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011).
- 14 Chris King-chi Chan, *The Challenge of Labour in China: Strikes and the Changing Labour Regime in Global Factories* (London: Routledge, 2010).
- 15 Anita Chan, *China's Workers under Assault: The Exploitation of Labor in a Globalizing Economy* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2001).
- 16 Patricia Chen and Mary Gallagher, "Mobilization without Movement: How the Chinese State 'Fixed' Labor Insurgency," *ILR Review*, Vol. 71, No. 5 (2018), pp. 1029 and 1033.
- 17 Mary E. Gallagher, *Authoritarian Legality in China: Law, Workers, and the State* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017); Jenny Chan and Mark Selden, "Labor Legislation, Workers, and the Chinese State," in *Handbook of Protest and Resistance in China*, edited by Teresa Wright (Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar, 2019), pp. 105–118; Jenny Chan, "State and Labor in China, 1978–2018," *Journal of Labor and Society*, Vol. 22, No. 2 (2019), pp. 461–475; Elaine Sio-ieng Hui, "Labor-Related Civil Society Actors in China: A Gramscian Analysis," *Theory and Society*, First Online, 8 January 2020, <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11186-019-09372-2>.
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 - 22 Minqi Li, *China and the 21st Century Crisis* (London: Pluto Press, 2016), p. 34.
 - 23 Pun Ngai, Shen Yuan, Guo Yuhua, Lu Huilin, Jenny Chan, and Mark Selden, “Worker-Intellectual Unity: Trans-border Sociological Intervention in Foxconn,” *Current Sociology*, Vol. 62, No. 2 (2014), pp. 209–222.
 - 24 The “mass line” (*qunzhong luxian*)—“from the masses to the masses”—is the organizational method developed by Mao Zedong (1893–1976) and the Communist Party during the Chinese Revolution. The key elements of the mass line are consulting the masses, interpreting their demands and ideas within the framework of Marxism-Leninism, and then leading the masses in actions to achieve the demands and ultimately the revolutionary goal. See Lin Chun, “Mass Line,” in *Afterlives of Chinese Communism: Political Concepts from Mao to Xi*, edited by Christian Sorace, Ivan Franceschini, and Nicholas Loubere (Canberra: Australian National University Press and Verso, 2019), pp. 121–126.
 - 25 Diana Fu and Greg Distelhorst, “Grassroots Participation and Repression under Hu Jintao and Xi Jinping,” *China Journal*, Vol. 79 (January 2018), pp. 100–122; Ivan Franceschini and Elisa Nesossi, “State Repression of Chinese Labor NGOs: A Chilling Effect?,” *China Journal*, Vol. 80 (July 2018), pp. 111–129; Ivan Franceschini and Kevin Lin, “Labour NGOs in China: From Legal Mobilisation to Collective Struggle (and Back?),” *China Perspectives*, No. 2019/1 (2019), pp. 75–84; Manfred Elfstrom, “A Tale of Two Deltas: Labour Politics in Jiangsu and Guangdong,” *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, Vol. 57, No. 2 (2019), pp. 247–274.
 - 26 Au Loong Yu, “The Jasic Struggle in China’s Political Context,” *New Politics*, Vol. 17, No. 2, Whole No. 66 (Winter 2019), p. 91.
 - 27 Together with Yu Juncong, whose contract was terminated by Shenzhen Jasic Technology Company on 11 May 2018, the six Jasic employees included Mi Jiuping, Liu Penghua, Song Yao, Kuang Hengshu, Zhang Baoyan, and Chen Zhongge. These seven workers initiated the call for respect for trade union rights.
 - 28 “We Want a Real Trade Union; Jasic Workers in Struggle,” narrated in Mandarin with Chinese and English subtitles, July 2018, <https://www.facebook.com/HKSACOM/videos/2192080450820624/>.

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- 31 Utopia (<http://www.wyzxwk.com/>), on- and offline, was created in 2003 by scholar Han Deqiang and his students in Beijing.
- 32 Chinese Workers Research Network, later renamed Red China, was launched in 2005.
- 33 The Mao Zedong Flag website was launched in 2003 by marginalized party leftists who condemned the party's policy of allowing capitalists to join its ranks in 2001.
- 34 Red Reference publishes articles to support students and factory workers. It also runs a Maoist website but is censored and hacked.
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- 37 Four students and alumni from Shanghai sent a letter to the workers of Guangzhou NHK Spring Precision Company and Shenzhen Jasic Technology Company on 1 August 2018. The letter is on file with the author.
- 38 Shen Mengyu spoke for the Jasic worker protesters, 29 July 2018, narrated in Mandarin, <https://streamable.com/3gvwr>.
- 39 By early August 2018, in the first wave of student mobilization, support statements from 20 universities nationwide were circulated online, only to be quickly removed. They included Beijing Language and Culture University, Donghua University, Harbin Institute of Technology, Heilongjiang University, Jiangxi Normal University, Lanzhou University, Nanjing University, Ningxia University, Northwest University of Politics and Law, Peking University, Renmin University of China, Shanghai Jiaotong University, Shanghai University, Sun Yat-sen University, Tsinghua University, University of Science and Technology Beijing, University of Shanghai for Science and Technology, Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University, Xinyang Normal University, and Zhejiang University of Technology.

- 40 Shen Mengyu's testimonial titled "Unregretted Choice," cross-posted on the Jasic Workers Support Group's website, 8 September 2018, <https://jiashigrsyt1.github.io/myyhs/>.
- 41 Jasic Workers Support Group's open letter to Shenzhen Pingshan District Party Secretary Tao Yongxin, 28 July 2018, <http://redchinacn.net/portal.php?mod=view&aid=36236&page=1>.
- 42 Sue-Lin Wong and Christian Shepherd, "China's Student Activists Cast Rare Light on Brewing Labor Unrest," Reuters, 15 August 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-labour-protests-insight/chinas-student-activists-cast-rare-light-on-brewing-labor-unrest-idUSKBN1L0060>.
- 43 Jasic Workers Support Group, "I Am in Every Corner of the World, Calling Out to Rescue Mengyu and Little Hu!," 14 August 2018, <https://jiashigrsyt1.github.io/myhd01/>.
- 44 Jasic Workers Support Group's open letter to Shenzhen municipal government party chief and municipal people's congress, 12 August 2018, <https://jiashigrsyt1.github.io/szsrd/>.
- 45 Yue Xin spoke out to support the Jasic workers on 6 August 2018, narrated in Mandarin, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pHjyf2cpMtk>.
- 46 Peking University student Gao Yan killed herself after allegedly being raped by a professor in 1998. Twenty years later, her suicide ignited a debate about sexual assault and the need for setting up an effective mechanism to prevent it from happening on campus during China's fledgling #MeToo movement in spring 2018.
- 47 Jasic Workers Support Group, "Joint Statement from Universities of Beijing, Nanjing and Hunan," 14 August 2018, <https://jiashigrsyt1.github.io/3xsy/>.
- 48 Jasic Workers Support Group, "Open Letter from Support Group Representative Yue Xin to CPC Central Committee and General Secretary Xi Jinping," 19 August 2018, <https://jiashigrsyt1.github.io/gkx03/>.
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- 50 Zheng Yongming's testimonial, 17 January 2018, <http://www.hongtutiao.net/pinglun/2018-01-17/21095.html>.
- 51 Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (1848; London: Penguin, 2002), p. 258.
- 52 In April 2018, Epoch Pioneer issued a call for papers titled "Karl Marx in Struggle Is a Real Karl Marx!," cross-posted on *RedChinaCn.Net*: <http://www.redchinacn.org/portal.php?mod=view&aid=35202>. The twitter of Epoch Pioneer (@epochpioneer01) was discontinued on 31 August 2018 following the Jasic crackdown.

- 53 Epoch Pioneer's video is titled "Hello, Karl Marx!—Commemorating the 200th Anniversary of the Birth of Karl Marx." The commentators, in the order of appearance, include freelance journalist Song Yangbiao, The Mao Zedong Flag website editor in chief Shi Mai, Tsinghua University professor Li Dingkai, a male worker surnamed Xu, Beijing Xingzai Renjian Culture and Development Center director Li Dajun, graduate of Peking University Zhang Yunfan, graduate of Peking University Gu Jiayue, graduate of Nanjing Agricultural University Zheng Yongming, graduate of University of Science and Technology Beijing Xu Zhongliang, researcher of Chinese Academy of Sciences Yang Tie, and researcher of Chinese Academy of Sciences Wang Chaohui. The video was uploaded to YouTube on 5 May 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cetap_lvIQ0.
- 54 Zheng Yongming's public speech, 13 August 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G58y2WU5BBc>.
- 55 Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, Vol. 1, translated by Ben Fowkes (1867; London: Penguin, 1990), p. 926.
- 56 Gu Jiayue's testimonial titled "Why Am I So Left" is cross-posted on the Jasic Workers Support Group's website, <https://manjiangbitou.github.io/wwszmzm01/>.
- 57 Jasic Workers Support Group, "Doctor Sunshine, Healing the Nation: My Senior Classmate Gu Jiayue," 31 October 2018, <https://jiashigrsyt1.github.io/ygyz/>.
- 58 "Wei renmin fuwu" (Serve the people) originated from Mao Zedong's tribute to a soldier during the revolutionary warfare in the mountainous communist base in Yan'an in 1944. In the socialist history of China, "serve the people" embodies a social ideal and an ethical demand of selflessness and sacrifice. See Rebecca E. Karl, "Serve the People," in Sorace, Franceschini, and Loubere, *Afterlives of Chinese Communism*, pp. 247–250.
- 59 Gu Jiayue's poem is cross-posted on the Jasic Workers Support Group's website, <https://jiashigrsyt1.github.io/gjyzb/>.
- 60 Gu Jiayue's declaration is cross-posted on the Jasic Workers Support Group's website, <https://jiashigrsyt1.github.io/gjyzb/>.
- 61 Yu Jincui, "Rational Solution Needs to Be Explored to Sort Out Capital-Labor Relations," *Global Times*, 1 January 2019, <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1134217.shtml>.
- 62 "Thought work" or "thought reform" is integral to Maoist class politics and Chinese governance. For decades the ideological remolding programs were centered on eliminating bourgeois and petty-bourgeois thought and deed. Some intellectuals had acquired awakening and liberating experiences while learning from and working with the laboring masses. Progressiveness aside, the programs implemented with political education, self-criticism, and other coercive practices. See Timothy Cheek, "Thought Reform," in Sorace, Franceschini, and Loubere, *Afterlives of Chinese Communism*, pp. 287–292.

- 63 "Relational repression" is a strategy for controlling protest. By pressuring the families, relatives, friends, and significant others of target protesters, the authorities manipulate "social ties" and "feelings of affection" to defuse collective protest before escalation. This labor-intensive process of "stability maintenance" involves an irreducible amount of psychological pressure inflicted on those seeking justice. See Kevin J. O'Brien and Yanhua Deng, "Preventing Protest One Person at a Time: Psychological Coercion and Relational Repression in China," *The China Review*, Vol. 17, No. 2 (2017), pp. 179–201.
- 64 The Migrant Workers' Center is funded by the Hong Kong-based organization Worker Empowerment.
- 65 The Qingying Dreamworks Social Worker Center is a registered social organization in Shenzhen, Guangdong.
- 66 Worker Empowerment, "Statement—1 Year since the Arrest of Fu Changguo," 12 August 2019, <http://www.workerempowerment.org/en/statements/382#more-382>.
- 67 Pak Yiu, "Student Labour Activists Say Chinese Police Stepping Up Use of Video 'Confessions,'" *AFP*, 3 March 2019, <https://www.hongkongfp.com/2019/03/03/student-labour-activists-say-chinese-police-stepping-use-video-confessions/>.
- 68 "Lest We Forget: The Missing Chinese Activists of 2019," *Made in China*, 23 December 2019, <https://madeinchinajournal.com/2019/12/23/lest-we-forget/>.
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