

May Day Means Pay Day for University Student Swindlers in Lanzhou, China

by Jerry Leonard and Xie Yingjun

In honor and remembrance of the May Fourth generation in China, 1919.

MAY DAY, or International Workers' Day, is a long-cherished and highly symbolic holiday for working people all over the world. The origins of the holiday date back to workers' struggles for egalitarianism and human dignity during the late nineteenth century. As capitalism continues to deepen into an everyday reality for all the world's peoples, however, the meaning of May Day becomes ever more perverted and twisted. In short, May Day increasingly becomes its opposite – turning into *Pay Day* for those whose sole objective in life is to “get rich” regardless of all consequences and at the expense of others.

Among the many great teachings put forward by Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Mao, they said in various ways that even the most rudimentary capitalistic forms of social organization give rise to capitalist “sprouts” in society and culture. What they meant was that the basic capitalist world outlook – greed, individualistic profit-motives, selfishness, trickery, lying, and so on – would have a tendency to “grow up” inside the minds of more and more people who could delude themselves into believing that it's basically alright (or even inevitable) to cheat and harm your fellow man, woman, or classmate, as the case may be.

Today May Day has become merely another time of struggle and vigilance for the majority of ordinary people; superficially it may be called a holiday, but in reality, at once deeper and more immediately, it is a continuation of the “rat race” of social relations within the capitalist-dominated world. This is especially true in China, where millions of ordinary workers and students always look forward to some holiday free time for good-hearted and much-deserved recreation and rest through travel excursions.

This is our story from China's northwestern Gansu Province on Sunday, April 29, the first full day of the May Day holiday in 2012.

We first learned of an interesting and modestly priced excursion while having lunch at the Northwest Normal University student canteen, located in the relatively quiet, suburban Anning section of Lanzhou. Instead of working through a big or official travel agency, it seemed that some students had themselves organized a one-day trip with various activities to Yong Jing County and the Liujiaxia Reservoir area (part of Linxia, or the Linxia Hui Autonomous Prefecture), about two hours southwest of Lanzhou. The price was only about 100 RMB, so we decided to go.

On the morning of Sunday, April 29, with excellent spring weather, all seemed fine as we made it to our tour bus at 7:30 in the morning and took our seats along with many others. Our bus was eventually filled with about 40 people, mostly students from Northwest Normal University, but also a few older couples like ourselves. We paid our fees to the friendly students who had apparently been enlisted to help out in the tour. Later we found that another full busload of students from Lanzhou Jiaotong University was also part of our tour group.

The ride from Lanzhou to Yong Jing County was quite pleasant, especially with the uniquely rocky, mountainous terrain as we entered the territory of Linxia. After around two

hours we finally arrived at what seemed to be our first tourist site, a well-known and reportedly beautiful hydro-electric power plant in Yong Jing, the Liujiaxia Dam. The facility is huge. As our buses pulled into the parking lot, it became clear that many other holiday tourists had also come to visit the Dam, learn about its advances in power production, and enjoy the natural beauty of its surrounding environment.

It was here, however, that the first signs of uncertainty in our tour began to appear. As everyone stretched their legs and began to breathe the fresh air, wondering when we would begin the tour, the two student leaders eventually announced that we were going somewhere else. No reasons were given, and most people probably believed, as we did, that we would return to this place later in the day. Thus, somewhat confused, everyone reboarded the buses, and we continued on the road for a while to another site in Yong Jing.

About twenty minutes later we arrived at a lakeside tourist area complete with a boat dock for taking visitors on tours up and down the river, vendors with fresh strawberries and tomatoes, and small-scale restaurants and other vendors preparing food. Here again everyone got off the bus and milled around in the big dirt parking lot for quite a while. At last we began walking to the lake area and, in various groups, boarded some of the small, open-air boats and took our tours of the gorgeous Taiji Lake. This was the high point of the trip and is certainly to be recommended. This river-like lake, snaking through the rocky mountain cliffs of Yong Jing, is beautifully greenish-blue, clean, and apparently unpolluted. The natural environment in this area is truly impressive.

The small boat cruise in the open air of Taiji Lake lasted around forty-five minutes to an hour. Upon returning to the dock area, we were then free to relax at the tables and chairs of the various vendors and have some lunch. Not surprisingly, of course the prices of the food and drinks were sky-high. A single container of instant noodles, for example, sold for 15 RMB, about five times the normal cost. The others in our tour were now going out for their boat rides. It was around noon, and we were told to gather back at the buses in the parking lot at 2:00.

Our group (two busloads) began to gather back at our buses at 2:00. Now the “tour” began to disintegrate for all to see. By this time it was getting to the warmest part of the day. Finally, after waiting quite a while for our two tour leaders to arrive, the bus driver opened the door of the bus. Everyone clearly anticipated that, once the leaders returned, we would leave this site and probably return to the big Liujiaxia Dam; thus, many of us boarded the bus. Inside the bus, however, it was even warmer and stuffier than outside, so within ten minutes we went outside again to stand around in the parking lot, merely waiting and wondering what was going on and what would happen next.

By now it had become apparent that the main leader of the tour was a student from Northwest Normal who wore a brightly-colored flannel shirt (*xianyan chenshan*), so we began to refer to him as Bright Shirt. We’ll refer to him here as Xianyan (Bright); *xian* can also mean freshness and first. His steadfast assistant was also a student from Northwest Normal and had distinguished himself very early on by his unusually stylish-looking gray jacket (*huise jiake*), so we referred to him as Grey Jacket. We’ll refer to him here as Huise (Gray), keeping in mind as well that gray in English can suggest a dubious quality.

Eventually Xianyan and Huise informed the crowd, rather subtly and sheepishly, that in fact there was no plan to go on from here to tour the Dam. Instead, they suggested, we

would walk around the nearby manmade ponds to take in the scenery, in particular, according to Xianyan, the lovely lotus flowers growing in and around the ponds. This news came across as a complete shock. We had all seen the ponds as we entered this tourist site anyway, and so it was very clear that no one really had any interest in walking around them.

At the same time, the real question on everyone's mind was whether there was any real tour activity planned for the rest of the day. It became obvious very quickly that there was not. Rather than go meandering around the ponds, what many of us began to demand at this point was that they simply take us back to Lanzhou. Stop the farce, we thought, and take us home already! It was obvious that the "tour" was effectively finished, so at least we could enjoy the mountainous scenery on the ride home.

This idea was dismissed and ignored by the two leaders. They seemed to insist that we all proceed to walk around the ponds like a big family of happy ducks. Although the sense of confrontation had clearly risen sharply during this parking lot scene, gradually the crowd began to trail off toward the ponds, in search of Xianyan's lotus flowers.

A curious thing should be noted at this point. Realizing now that neither Xianyan nor Huise had any real plans at all for the rest of our trip, who exactly gave voice to the frustration, rising anger, opposition, and alternative? Not the male students, that's for sure. By and large the only voices of opposition to the leaders' lack of planning came from the female students alone. We also took part in raising questions to the tour leaders, but this evolving and strange development was unmistakable. The females in our group tended to be much more involved in lively and heated discussions among themselves about what was happening, and they were also far more vocal and animated in questioning and challenging the two young male leaders. In clear contrast, the young male students were remarkably passive and silent – in a word, really quite docile, and this only became more and more obvious as the day dragged on. They were, so it seemed, truly the little ducks that the leaders wanted.

As we all trailed along the sides of the narrow roadways surrounding the ponds, the next significant revelation was that there were no lotus flowers blooming whatsoever. When this was recognized, it only added to the growing feelings of contempt for the tour leaders; yet it was also a source of bitter laughter throughout the group, since this made it even more clear that Xianyan and Huise didn't really know what they were talking about. Their appeal to the lotus flower was *fangzhi* or fake, not altogether unlike the infamous pork-filled dumplings sold in China a few years ago, for which the pork filling was actually cardboard. This was our collective lotus flower awakening, so to speak.

After walking quite aimlessly among the ponds for a while, finally the entire entourage, with the "leaders" at the front, came to the end of short, muddy dirt road which was also a small parking area – there was a sense of being out in the middle of nowhere. Here again the confrontation with the leaders reached a new high. It was as if literally we had come to the end of the road, and they clearly had no answers as to what we were doing in the first place.

Interesting discussion and "alternatives" began to emerge at this point. It was suggested, only half jokingly, that our two leaders might like to personally go into one of the ponds right beside where we were standing. We could all "help" them, and maybe they could find a precious lotus flower for themselves! Also the argument was put forward in no

uncertain terms that they return at least half of our tour fees. They were also ridiculed as *er bai wu* – a humorous idiomatic expression meaning silly people, thoughtless, dull or even stupid. This again provoked bitter laughter, and all of these ideas struck fear into the leaders. Xianyan, cell phone in hand, became so frightened that he gradually edged away from the crowd and walked away, heading back in the direction of the buses. We were left then with Huise, who was completely at a loss as to what to do next. Eventually everyone began walking back to the bus parking lot.



Anti-Lotus Flower: our group walks back along a dirt road toward the parking lot, 3:11 P.M.

Back at the buses, this time Xianyan cleverly avoided any further hostilities by passing the word that we would now proceed on for a stop at the “town square” of Yong Jing County Town. This again, it was patently obvious, cost the organizers not a single yuan; that is to say, it wouldn’t cut into their profit margin. In any case, while the prospect of visiting Yong Jing Square brought no real enthusiasm, at least this would mean that we would actually be traveling on the buses again with the hope of simply going home to Lanzhou.

Twenty minutes later we pulled up to the side of a road at the “town square” of Yong Jing, a large, concrete-paved open space which was virtually empty except for a line of local vendors selling mostly women’s clothing, hats, socks, underwear and such. Essentially we had been brought here to “shop” since there wasn’t much else to see or do. One of the female students on our bus expressed the general feeling of frustration and dissatisfaction: “It’s just a small town.”

Here it also became clear that our two busloads were in fact only part of a seven bus train, as all of them lined up along the roadside, each bus filled with students from Northwest Normal University, Lanzhou Jiaotong University, and some other training schools from our

home area. After a while, many of us, but not all, began to walk around outside. Soon we got wind of a shocking rumor from the other buses that the leaders were trying to collect their full tour fees from students who hadn't yet paid, and indeed that if they didn't pay-up, the leaders had warned that we wouldn't leave the square. Many felt, however, that in fact they *shouldn't* pay, and then we'd see what Xianyan and Huise would do; the spectacle could easily attract media attention. With all these rumors and opinions circulating, the roadside at Yong Jing town square quickly became yet another scene of intense verbal confrontation between tired and disgruntled students and the two leaders.



5:00 P.M. by the roadside near Yong Jing County Town Square. Xianyan is pictured on the right, Huise to his immediate right, and the young student “salesman” wears the white tanktop as co-author Xie Yingjun talks with them.

The full capacity of each tour bus was around 40 passengers, so how had the bright-minded capitalist sprouts managed to rope seven busloads into their university-based enterprise? The students of course already knew pretty well how this was done, but it became clear for all when another young male student came forward to put on further apologies for the whole debacle. It turned out that he had been one of the many student “salesmen” enlisted by Xianyan to advertise and peddle seats for the excursion among their classmates; like a mini-pyramid operation, these sales agents would receive a fraction of the fee for each tourist they were able to recruit.

This basic organizational scheme is in fact quite common on university campuses, but it typically has to do with specialized, extracurricular training classes which at least have some semblance of educational purpose. Having sold out his own classmates for a “tour” he likely never understood in the first place, this student salesman looked pathetic as he continued to pander to the inexcusable actions and motives of the lead swindlers Xianyang and Huise.

Had a legitimate “business license” been obtained from the local Public Security Bureau? Very unlikely. The likes of Xianyan and Huise see their schools and their classmates as their “free market.” In any event, Xianyan and Huise, themselves looking increasingly

exhausted and demoralized by the complete meltdown of their venture, did collect the remainder of their “take” from the other tourists, although some managed to negotiate (more likely demand) a reduced fee.

After lingering around the buses at the town square for about forty-five minutes, at last, to everyone’s great relief, our train departed for Lanzhou. It was now about 5:00 in the evening. Due to several long, crawling traffic jams along the way, which were so thick that they even blocked riders on sport bicycles, we didn’t arrive back home until around 8:30. Before walking back to their campuses, however, the students succeeded in surrounding *en masse* Xianyan and Huise, refusing to allow them to escape before refunding 15 yuan to each person. It was a relatively small but very meaningful collective victory for the students who had been preyed upon by their own classmates, especially significant for the poorer students who study to become teachers at Northwest Normal. The next day, we also received our small but symbolic refunds, along with profuse apologies and urgent pleas that the grand ripoff not be made public or reported to their school.

It is an old yet still instructive idea that the university is a microcosm of society. In Gansu Province, one of China’s more economically depressed and isolated areas, and particularly at Northwest Normal University in Lanzhou, where the tuition is relatively low, this is an idea worthy of serious reflection. Let’s suppose that today there are in fact two “schools” within a university. One school is for those who study, read books, and think – among other things, they think about how they will soon influence and take an active role, perhaps even a leading role, in the shaping of their society. The other school is composed of *fangzhi* (fake) students such as Xianyan and Huise, for whom the school environment represents their “free market,” their nursery school for capitalistic experiments, and where they can prey upon their fellows who would otherwise trust them.

In telling our story, it isn’t our intention to make a mountain out of a molehill. But still, perhaps, the molehill reflects the mountain in certain ways. Is this mountain (or molehill) not the capitalist system insofar as it has penetrated and infected the university? We hope that through such experiences, and especially through deep critical reflection upon them, these two “schools” of the contemporary university will *learn* from one another – and find out who they really are, what they stand for, and what they want and need of the future society. What do you want, and what do you not want? What do the people need and what don’t they need? Where do you stand, and what can you do?

Shall the two schools contend? This is the legacy of May Day as well as the May Fourth generation of 1919 in China.

~ May 4, 2012, Lanzhou

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Taiji Lake, near the Liujiaxia Reservoir in Linxia.



A boat captain secures his vessel at the Taiji Lake Wharf.