

Experiences Working in Guanghua Timber Mill During the Cultural Revolution

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Thirty years into the Reform and Opening Up, the mainstream narrative claims that the state-owned enterprises (SOEs) were breeding free riders by letting everyone "eat from the same pot", the workers were "treated the same, regardless of abilities". China's mainstream economists, instead, promote clear property rights, a system of supervision and material incentives, believing that Mao era SOEs lacked these three, so the workers became free riders and the enterprises' efficiency falls. Was this actually the case? This article provides one specific example, to help people understand in what circumstances did the workers thought about free riding, the goal of free riding and why did their need for free riding occurred.

Professor Fred Engst was a worker in the Guanghua timber mill in Beijing for 5 years, from 1969 to 1974, after leaving for America in 1974, he worked in a dozen of American factories for another decade. Fred Engst took his work habits developed in the state-owned factory to America, and ended being laughed at by his American colleagues for being a "dumb worker": First he didn't know how to free ride, second he didn't know how to deal with the foremen, after many experiences of job hunts and unemployment, he learned gradually how to "free ride" systematically, becoming a clever American worker. The silence of the American Civil Rights movement and the stimulation of China's Reform narratives gave Engst a strong desire to learn economics, he later got a

doctorate degree and teaches in a university. This article is formed from the interviewer Lao Tian compiling a discussion with Engst in Wuhan, plus later interviews in Beijing.

In 1968 the workers' and soldiers' propaganda teams entered the schools, an old worker specifically talked to me, saying that I shouldn't join the factional struggles. At the end of the year, the "Down to the countryside" campaign began, some people had backdoors and enlisted, most students were mobilised to go to the countryside, I was considered a graduate from junior high school in 1968, most of my classmates registered to go to Shanxi, Inner Mongolia, and a lot went to the Huanglin county in Shaanxi, but the directors of the school didn't allow me to go down to the countryside. I didn't think life in the countryside was hard, of course, the Caotan farm was better compared to most villages, so it was manageable, I didn't think about my careers going ahead, just that most of my classmates went, the land was vast, and there were many achievements to be made, so I wanted to go.

Some officials liked to be special, so they applied their own mindsets to others, thinking that others wanted to be special too, and was determined to not let me go to the countryside. The school didn't want me to go so I went to the district Revolutionary Committee, still, they didn't allow it, even the municipal Revolutionary Committee didn't allow it. This kind of "thinking for others" seemed common, rightists "think for others" according to their own mindsets and say Premier Zhou was sucking up to his superior and that Chairman Mao was obsessed with power. Later, my younger brother and sister

went down to the countryside, a pasture in Anhui, this was related to my long-term struggle, so the policy was a bit open for them.

In the end, I was allocated to the Guanghua timber mill, the factory was outside of the Guangqu gate, a central enterprise built in the early 50s, some 3000 people worked there, I started my work after 1968's Spring Festival. The head of the rebel faction in the factory was Liu Xichang, a member of the 9th Central Committee, but the rebel leaders who actually did anything were several intellectuals, Xie Fuzhi wanted to promote some old workers with good backgrounds into the Central Committee, and picked him. When I got to the factory Liu wasn't there anymore, later he fell with the Gang of Four, in the 1983 party purge, party members were required to enlist again, he didn't go, I heard he told others that he will only join the party once in his life, a man with some guts.

There were a lot of formalities back then, like changing street names to a more revolutionary one, for example, the "Anti-Imperialist Boulevard", "Anti-Revisionist Boulevard", etc. The factory had a period of "early inform late report" and dancing the "loyalty dance", it was around July or August of 1969, so the weather wasn't too cold. Some people liked to dress themselves up with very revolutionary slogans and formalities, to show how revolutionary they were so that they could get some political capital. When we dance the "loyalty dance" everyone wasn't enthusiastic about it, but some of these "enthusiasts" had to do it, many were unsatisfied but wouldn't dare challenge them. These people were everywhere, I remember in junior high school a radio broadcaster misspoke and was caught by this kind of people, it wasn't enough for

them that she self-criticised, they were holding a struggle session against her, saying that she said it deliberately. Stuff like early inform and late report looked loyal and revolutionary on the surface, and no one dared to oppose it, but in private they thought it was boring, and these people were detracting from the real struggle. There was also a time where we would compare the size of our badge, there was even a trading market for badges in front of the main gate around the fences. Some people took aluminium alloy to make badges, and as a result, there weren't raw materials for planes, Chairman Mao had to step out and say "give me back my planes". Sometimes later, these "enthusiasts" saw that there weren't political benefits, so they lost their enthusiasm, "early inform" happened for about a month then stopped.

The content and method of struggle are themselves a reflection of the laws of class struggle, the goal of these people is to, first, gain political capital and, second, to attack others. The people who actually had historical problems were the ones who didn't cause trouble and worked hard, there was someone who served in the KMT military in the timber mill, he was struggled against in every campaign, the cadres liked to beat on dead tigers, in fact, they were disrupting the direction of the struggle, the people in power liked to do it a lot, it's a very devious scheme, the goal was to find a scapegoat, and protect themselves, this method of conducting class struggle was reflected in the internal logic of class struggle.

Besides these formalities in the short run, there were a lot of study sessions in the factory, learning about editorials, policies and documents, also attending the discussion

on the 4th NPC's Constitution, discussion on the 4th five-year plan, etc, I have experienced all these. Normally, studies began after day shifts ended, or before the night shifts began, it was carried out among a section or a team. I was there when they discuss the Constitution and the 4th five-year plan, in the discussion, we first talked about the general direction of development of the country during the five-year plan, then in the discussion we talked about how the potential of the factory can be expressed and how it would help with the overall national plan, in the discussion there was a clear feeling of Our factory was a part of the country, we didn't work for someone, the product and course of economic development didn't belong to anyone, it was closely connected to the interests of everyone in the country; When discussing the overall direction of the country, we talked about our factory and our own works, which part of the country needed development, what was missing in the production of our factory, the workers raised much good advice on technological advancements. There weren't much of a gap in people's wealth, so if the country grew, you would get a cut of the share, we felt like the prospects of development was connected to us.

I started in workshop 8, producing plastic veneer, with it, we could glue splinters together and glue an entire veneer on top to make it look nicer. the veneer was made with several layers of kraft paper glued together, put it in a hot press, then you controlled the pressure and temperature of the steam, you have to be familiar with the characteristics of the machine and know its temperaments well to control the time, it took about a few months to learn, unlike turners who would always have problems with familiarity. A few dozen minutes in the press, then the next one, 7 or 8 times a shift.

After one board was done you could go rest in another room, people chatted, some even sang model operas like the Red Lantern out loud, I miss that time a lot.

Studies were very important, there were sessions daily, 1 or 2 hours before work, workers with wife and children thought it was a burden and wanted to go home early. Workshop 8 was modified to produce fibreglass at the time, it was a military product, so me and my cousin, as well as another foreign-born Chinese, was transferred away, in 1970 we were at workshop 5. In workshop 5 the director told me that I can choose not to take part in the study session, I said I want to take part, he said again strongly that I can choose not to. This really pissed me off, they just didn't want foreigners to learn the documents issued by the Central Committee. After the 2nd session of the 9th NCCCP, Chairman Mao said we shouldn't be fooled by the likes of Chen Boda and encouraged us to read original works by Marx and Lenin and recommended 6 books, they still wouldn't let me take part, so I bought the books myself, recently I found the "Anti Duhring" I bought back then, all the lines in the book, I drew back then. I also bought Lenin's "Dialectical Materialism and Empirio-criticism", as well as "Capital", I didn't finish volume one, the studies at that time was connected to learning "one divided to two" and criticising "two into one" in my junior high school. Because the cadres didn't want me to learn, I was determined to do the opposite and learned it really hard myself. What I studied back then left a deep impression on me, after I went back to the US, the "poison" of Marxism-Leninism still couldn't be cleansed, the logic of capitalism just couldn't convince me. But everyone is different, my cousin Carma also learned it, but her thoughts transformed thoroughly after she went back to the US.

The average worker not only had to learn the original works, they also had to learn the documents, when they came back sometimes they say they learned about this or that document, but they wouldn't tell me. Many workers actually weren't enthusiastic about learning, but when it was organised they had to go, they were reluctant, some have some complaints as well, saying: "the nationalists taxed you a lot, but the communists have meetings a lot." Some people just wanted to go home when they were off work, but because they didn't want to study and attend meetings, they lost their positions as masters of society unknowingly, and now they are wage labourers. You didn't study early, so now you'll have to figure out how to liberate yourselves again.

Amongst the factory management, the Angang Constitution was talked about a lot, as I see it there were still imperfections, or else we wouldn't need the Cultural Revolution. There weren't enough changes in the ownership and the relationship between people, especially between the cadres and the masses, the Angang Constitution wasn't enough to rely on, how was the leadership selected, what was the position of the mass organizations, what were the uses and position of the big-character posters, these were unsolved in the Angang Constitution. Cadres joining the Revolutionary Committees in "triple combination" during the Cultural Revolution had to be recommended by the masses, inspected and agreed upon by the masses, the masses can criticise the cadres through debates or big-character posters, all these were not in the Angang Constitution.

In the five years being a worker in China, among the workers I know, not many hated the Cultural Revolution, on the other hand, many thought that only a mass campaign

like the Cultural Revolution can truly deal with bureaucratic corruption. During the Cultural Revolution, if the leadership wasn't popular, you wouldn't be able to lead anyone, it was difficult for cadres in the factory to corrupt, if you got caught by the masses, and a big-character poster was put up, you'd have a very hard time being an official. There were countless instances of peasant uprisings where the "lows" offended the "highs", but the Cultural Revolution was the first time in Chinese history where the "lows" offended the "highs" en masse in a mostly non-violent (in essence democratic) form, it was different from the rule of force of the previous ruling classes, it was a "struggle" with words, with reasoning-----to speak and air opinions loudly, big-character posters and big debates were the characteristics of the Cultural Revolution, only this can the rights of the workers to democratically manage industries and supervise directors be actualised. The workers back then had iron rice bowls, and they weren't afraid of the cadres, so they dared to raise their opinions, write big-character posters, even though the cadres didn't have many ways to punish the workers, but there weren't many free riders, production exceeded plans almost every year.

The Soviet "director responsibility system" was proposed by Lenin, they needed to struggle their way out from the state of anarchy, and the Angang Constitution was a great step up from the "director responsibility system" and the "Magnitogorsk Constitution", pulling the masses and cadres closer. In the Guanghai timber mill, mostly it was according to the Angang Constitution, cadres attended labour, workers attended management. In an American factory, the workers were very nervous when they saw their bosses, this was not the case in Guanghai, the workers did what they were doing

even when the cadres came, chat, read newspapers, some even asked the cadres: ah, haven't seen you in a while, meaning you're disconnected from the masses, the cadres would have to explain instead, why he didn't come down to the workshop, like admitting to a mistake. The workers weren't afraid of the cadres, instead, the cadres were a little afraid of the workers, afraid of their big-character poster. The workers not being afraid of the cadres, this was a true democracy. Workers in America were different, you have to work hard when the foremen came and if you don't work, you leave, the management is in total control of your job opportunity, that is a very great power.

The problems in the factory were usually solved very quickly in the meetings, without the need to put up big-character posters. Many different opinions were raised, but there weren't many personal attacks, most people were reasonable. There was one very talkative colleague, jokes came out one by one, chatting with him would give you a happy day of work. Another was nicknamed "Big Stone", he was the kind that would have an opinion on everything, his head was full of ideas, the factory and workshop directors were really annoyed by him, whatever job the directors assigned him to he would have a difference of opinion, he also organised basketball matches outside of work, truly an activist. Once he suggested a lift to be installed at the heat press, to reduce the manual labour needed, the workshop director worked at that post in the past, and thought it was no big deal, and so wasn't too enthusiastic about it, because Big Stone raised it every time, his suggestion was passed in a meeting, so it had to be done his way. The workers were in high positions in society, they had the right to speak, the

cadres were low, it was considered a mistake if they were detached and wasn't one with the masses, inside the factory the cadres and workers were close, though it was not done according to any set rules, what was being done was the stuff in the Angang Constitution. With reasonable advice from the workers, the production process can be improved, the workers indeed felt like they were the owners of the enterprises, there was no need to set another set of rules, tying the workers down in a top-down fashion.

Some workers complained back then, saying that their wages stagnated, they also had complaints with the style of work of some leaders, despite these complaints, their work wasn't effected, if you watch them work they were still very serious. After all, working in a factory gave you ample opportunity to free ride, but not many took it, compared to the American workers, these workers in Guanghai were the "dumb" types, rarely used their opportunity to free ride. The most unreasonable were the shifts, day shift and night shifts swap every week when I finally got used to one it switched to the other. However, if the shifts swapped monthly, the habit would be more reinforced, and it would be harder to go back, there was only one workshop where a group of people only had night shifts. Large policy changes had to be debated on a large scale, many workers were used to the shifts, so when I proposed to change it, not many responded. Besides old habit, looking down from the top, there should be a rule to judge what was reasonable and what was not in a given time, this shows the difference between the individual and the big picture.

I never heard about the employees' representative congress, but there was a workers' representative congress formed from the unity of the rebel factions. In 1970 the 4th NPC was being prepared, our factory had discussions on the Constitution, attended People's Representative elections, back then whenever something big happened in national politics, mostly within workshops and teams, the small groups would compile their opinions. The meetings sometimes were formalities, sometimes there was a factory-wide meeting, the most often discussed topics were on welfare and canteens. Whenever the cadres did anything people disapprove of, came the big-character posters, there were no formal procedures, due to these hidden threats, the cadres didn't mess around, because the cadres and the masses were opposed to one another, there were many channels for opinions to be heard, and they were effective. When discussing the production plans, some things were obvious, the workers didn't know as much as the cadres on issues like technological advancements and personnel allocation, so if the workers thought it was reasonable they would simply agree. safety problems, like somewhere that always broke, and should be noticed, these and be raised during work, no need for very formal procedures.

The employment and wages were guaranteed, the cadres had power there, so there was little space to mess with people. When giving people a raise, it was not determined by the cadres, first, there would be a plan by the workshop, then it was discussed within the teams, it was discussed twice in both the workshop and the teams before the final decision, this discussion often got heated, egalitarianism among the workers was prominent, you got a raise last time, so it's my turn now, young ones with less burden

should step aside, for now, some old worker with a family should be considered, that sort of thing. Western companies also did this, calling it building team spirits, later when I worked in AT&A I found out something interesting, their raise was given like in Dazhai, "self-promotion and public discussion". If the workshop director ignored the workers' wishes and gave someone a raise anyways, we would have a hard time doing his job later, the workers were unhappy and they have many ways to resist, when you allocate jobs they would say "oh didn't you give so and so a raise? Go find him then." The cadres lacked a stick to deal with these workers, so if you were not popular, you really couldn't lead, doing anything or giving a raise had to be agreed by the majority, if there were only a few troublemakers no one would care. For the cadres, pissing off the majority to please the minority was definitely not worthwhile. Besides there were the big-character posters, the workers can speak whatever they wanted, the cadres couldn't retaliate. Back then workers didn't feel much pressure from the top, because the cadres weren't in control of the workers' lives, at best they could give them some hard times on raise and job allocation, it was small scale, not much interest was involved, so people were happy.

Amongst the colleagues at the time, most of the old workers were thankful for the socialist system, they thought that without socialism there wouldn't be them, so they invested their lives on work, some workers in Guanghua came from the villages, compared to the villages it was much better and they were satisfied. One of my colleagues was from a village in Hebei, he went back home every two weeks, with two bags of sawdust on his bicycle, he rode more than 100 Li to bring those back home as

fuel, this person was transferred from a brick factory in the countryside, he did this all year, and did care much about what happened in the factory beside his assigned job, his thoughts wandered outside of our circles, in his own world. Another was nicknamed the "Little Lazy Bun", he was so passive, besides his assigned duties he never helped anyone, others would give you a hand when they finished and you were still busy, then we could rest together. Lazy Bun was the extreme minority, he wouldn't cause any trouble, just wouldn't help anyone, so others didn't help him, he isolated himself and lost face, others looked down on him and gave him the nickname. It wasn't official, but this kind of "peer pressure" was powerful. He was from a small owner's background, so he was resistant to the new system, people born in a freelancer family were also more passive, they also wondered outside of people from their age.

Besides work conditions and income, the pursuit of the meaning in life was also very important, my parents left America for Yanan, living and working conditions were much worse compared to America, but they thought building a career and living in poverty was meaningful, it was a life worth chasing after. My father was responsible for breeding the farm's cows, my mother used her knowledge in physics to improve agricultural tools and design cowsheds, I was born in Beijing, raised in a state-owned farm in Xi'an. My father often said that we eat to live, not live to eat.

Levelling in the factory started with the apprentice worker, two years later it was level one, then level two, with a monthly income of 38.61 Yuan, this was upgraded per two years, for level three you had to wait for an opportunity. Back then Lei Feng's spirit of

being a screw in society was promoted, I was prepared to be a screw of society forever when I was a worker, and I was contempt with it, putting all my hearts and minds on production, see if there was any technology that could be improved, working on those machines every day, looking and observing everywhere, once I noticed the steel foundation of the heat press was broken and in need of repairs. I thought about being a technician and climbing the ladder only after I got to America. I didn't think much in Guanghua, about my prospects, and what I needed to do next, I just thought about doing my job well, the thought of going to university didn't even come to mind. Material things were not many back then, differences were not pronounced, maybe there were people who wanted more power, but whether it was the workers or the cadres calling the shot was still up for debates.

In the early 80s, there was this saying in the Reform narrative of "eating from a big pot breeds free riders", actually me and my colleagues didn't know how to free ride in the Mao era, I learned in after I got to America. Looking back workers under Mao was actually quite "dumb", thinking that our work was not for the profits of the capitalists, but for the country and ourselves, so there was spontaneity when we work, we didn't need the cadres to force us or watch us. Real workers who were on the frontlines have a sense of accomplishment for their work, they have connections with their products. Living, eating and working with the workers back then, people's relationships were good, it was warm and really makes you nostalgic, we ate in the canteens, lived in the dorms, and studied together. I missed home when I got to the US, not just my parent but also the workers in Guanghua, even in my dreams.

There were problems with Guanghai's management, like discrimination against female workers, this usually wasn't visible in the short-run, after I got back from America after a while, many of my male colleagues got a raise, females who started work the same time was still on the frontlines, in the end, all but one male worker got a promotion, but only one female did, and that was due to marital connections---She was married to a factory level cadre. Some of the reasons were personal, women did much of the household labour, and so wasn't active in the factory, but a few of the female workers were really good at talking, even the cadres didn't mess with them, others could unite with people, and had abilities, but they just weren't given promotions. They didn't cause trouble to become cadres, some were just "nit-pickers", giving no quarters when they criticise the cadre. Traditional values were indeed deep-rooted, the men looked down on women, thought they talked too much and were too nit-picky, even thought they were shrews.

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