The Conversation between Sisters and Dudes over Time and Space

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Abstract. The aim of this article is to correlate two cross-age groups of workers to refute the traditional viewpoints that the working class is united and unbreakable. The discussions centre on the stories of Chinese female workers who live in the period that before Chinese liberation and the British male workers who live in the gold age of industry. The two cross-age groups of workers are different in gender, age or state. The only same thing is their identity of workers. On the basis of previous researches, and using the theories of social gender and the consciousness of class to analyze these two groups. The conclusion is that they indeed revolt, but the process of their revolt is not the same as we think. There are more restrictions to prevent them from uniting, especially the effect of ideology.

1. Who are Sisters? Who are Dudes?

Explaining a problem is not as simple as we thought. To isolate us from the truth are some "justified" ideas. As a researcher, we must eliminate some potential assumptions that have been ideologically stereotyped. At this point, many researchers have made a model for us which have inspired the later researches.

Emily Hoenig questioned in her book whether the poverty of the workers and the degree of oppression were in direct relationship with the possibility of participation in collective protests. This question is fresh and it shocks me. We are used to the viewpoint that the workers unite together to revolt and they seem to unite a group for the same purpose and interests of the working class.

Mostly the children of workers will be workers too. Paul Willis refuted the view of regarding workers as a low IQ group in his article. Did workers’ children abandon themselves to vice? He questioned it and explored the reasons for why they volunteered to be workers.

1.1 Sisters

The subject in the book of Emily is female workers from Shanghai Cotton Mill before Chinese liberation (1919-1949)[5], which the author called "sisters". Cotton textile industry owns the most female workers in Shanghai. The cotton textile industry of Shanghai has experienced a period of prosperity. In 1938, the cotton industry, which had experienced the destruction of war, gradually cotton textile industry in Shanghai reached the heyday. During this period, a large number of female workers came into cotton mills. They were lower than the wages of men, which became the primary factor for mills to choose them. Most of the women who entered the cotton mill didn’t have much improvement in their lives, and different oppression and exploitation were rolling them over and over again in the turbulent years. In the beginning, they revolted as an individual or some small groups. Gradually they collectively struck to struggle. In my initial knowledge, this should be the female working class to revolt oppression and the performance of workers against exploitation. They should act like one person who behalf of the interests of workers. But Emily Hoenig found that this kind of collective revolt had complexity which was different from the usual class struggle. Sisters might struggle for personal self-protection, group loyalty or really for the interests of the working class, the author has challenged the traditional viewpoint in our minds “Is the working class really generate?”
1.2 Dudes

The other subject is the children and their fathers (male workers) in the British industrial areas in 1970s. In the book, the author calls the children "lads" which has certain demeaning implication. And it implies a joking meaning of the call. As the author study not only the children of the workers and in order to correspond to “sisters” in Emily's, I use a more appropriate call "dudes" to refer to male workers. The British industry developed in the 1970s, and the field survey of Willis also conducted in the British industrial area where the workers' houses were concentrated in the town of Hanmer. The majority of the workers’ descendants almost followed the footsteps of their parents. They went to the factory, sweated in the workshop to do physical work. Most people think it is a matter of course, and it’s the result of cultural reproduction, but Willis has entered the black box of school to explore how the reproduction generates. The anti-school culture and workshop culture made Willis discovered that the workers were not blindly controlled by the ruling class. They had learned some of the ruling class's lies, but they couldn’t break through their narrow vision because of the limitations and outside interference, thus they went into the vicious circle, they are continually workers in the reproduction.

These are the images of the "sisters" and "dudes" written by the two authors. The two groups of workers aren’t relevant with each other, but in my mind they often encounter. They seem to perform a similar story in different time and space. In fact, Emily Hoenig and Paul Willis have conveyed to us a thought: Does the consciousness of the working class really form? Is it really possible to form a united working class? Why can’t the consciousness of the working class flourish? I also read some other articles and I deeply feel the workers are active and initiative in the long history. They are in the reciprocating cycle where they constantly revolt, struggle, fail to fight and rise to revolt again. They have been writing their own story, the story of workers. But owing to some inside and outside restrictions, they can’t break the curse that they are always in the bottom of society. The stories of sisters and dudes reflect the fate of the working class vividly, and I link their stories to explore more about the restrictions and insights of the working class.

2. Invisible Hand – Social Gender

Social gender is an important and central concept. It’s widely used in the second wave of women's movements in the United States, which is relative to the physiological gender. It means that the differences between men and women are not naturally formed by the different physiological characteristics, but by the social culture, morality, customs which built on the identity of men and women and social expectations. It is the product of social construction which provides a series of norms of male and female characteristics and behavior, within the framework of this provision, a person’s social gender is determined [1]. In simple terms, social gender constructs a set of social norms that men and women should abide by and controls the minds of people in an ideological way, which make everyone has unintentionally accepted the norms of social gender. And social gender is closely linked to the meaning of patriarchy. Patriarchy can be described as "the power of man” in narrow sense, it refers to the male leadership at family. And it used to explain the succumbing of women in broad sense, which includes a whole system of order and norms in community and family. The concept of "patriarchy" is firstly applied to anthropology and sociology, which refers to "the domination of man with patriarchal power, the pattern of dominating all family members” [1]. The patriarchy is a kind of gender construction. It is also a concept which standardizes the gender relationship that man is superior to woman and stipulates the temperament of male and female. Thus it defines the gender roles of both sexes. And the stories of sisters and dudes are also deeply branded the mark of "social gender".

Before the liberation of Chinese, female workers came into the industrial market early, how did they get a job? In Emily's article, we can learn some of their access to the factory, such as they might be indentured labor, bought by the contractor or captured by the Green Gang. Others might
be introduced by hometown’s friends or supervisors. But they must send gifts for the supervisors. Here we see only the way they step out their home, but don’t understand what this "step" means for them. In the words of Lisa Rofel, we seem to have a glimpse of the meaning of this step. Stepping out their home to the factory means they are from the "inside" to the "outside", means that they break the norms at that time [2]. The meaning of social gender and the meaning of inside and outside in space combine with each other. Working outside is the exclusive right of man, if woman work outside the home, she’s exposed in the eyes of men, so female workers were described as "old shoes". The norms of social gender standardize everything that makes both men and women agree with the social gender norms. So, going out to work is a shame for the female workers at that time, they didn’t want to recall the past memories. The identity of worker brought them contempt and demeaning, thus they even didn’t want to admit they belong the workers and the consciousness of the working class became impossible to generate and flourish. As mentioned in Emily’s book, many female workers who got married or had children won’t go back to work in the factory, which shows their eager to tear off the shame label as "workers".

British male workers are different with Chinese female workers we have studied above in this social gender framework, they are male and in leadership. They should have been the dominant side and hold the initiative. However, they had the same result in forming a united working class, because the social gender norms weaken and separate the whole working class. The lads didn’t respect their mothers as respecting their fathers and showed disdain for the female image represented by their mothers. As for their girlfriends, they asked her to obey them to reflect status and superiority of man. Women in the working class symbolized the sense of inferiority in their minds and should be subservient to men. What is more interesting is that they combine the mental labor with patriarchy. The separation of labor for mental and physical labor was combined with social gender, and they regarded sweating and enduring the pain at the workshop as masculinity. They were proud of this and didn’t feel that they were exploited by the capitalist class. And mental labor for them, such as the clerk sitting in the office, was more like the work for woman. Thus, physical labor was associated with the superiority of man, while mental work was associated with the inferiority of woman. Physical labor is especially full of male characteristics and temperament in their minds [3]. The result of this was, as mentioned above, the whole working class was divided into estranged groups, male workers, female workers, physical workers, and mental workers, not a whole working class.

Under the domination of social gender, the consciousness of the working class was weakened and separated in these two groups. They were both restricted by the patriarchy-dominate norms, the subordinate female workers and the dominant male workers haven’t benefited from it neither.

3. Their Strangers

The social gender discussed above has already revealed some factors of separation of the working class. Sisters, dudes or other groups of workers aren’t united. In contrast, they are more like numerous fragments. The whole working class is like a ceramic with crack, and it seems to be whole, however a soft blow will make it smash.

3.1 Strangers inside Workers

Shanghai cotton mills workers mostly from the southern Jiangnan district, northern Jiangsu and local Shanghai. Female workers of Jiangnan district are slightly more educated, and have better textile technology. In contrast, women from northern Jiangsu are poor in material and textile technology. So in the factory they were excluded and despised by female workers from other region. This kind of "distinction" dues to the region, it gradually spread to all aspects of life, including dialect, diet and even dressing (Wearing red and green clothes is the symbol of northern Jiangsu women, and women from Jiangnan district wear blue and black more). Region distinguishes female workers. Sometimes, the contradictions between them even lead to abusing or physical
insult. Regional factor made female workers divided into some small groups. They were strangers for each other. Female workers established sisterhood in order to protect themselves which based on their hometown or regional identity. They helped and protected each other, which showed they were loyal for the sisterhood. But women outside the sisterhood were still "strangers" for them.

In addition, this separation is also reflected in the gender, as mentioned above, I have clearly expressed that the distinction between men and women is deep-rooted for female workers. Moreover, when many cotton mills of Shanghai cost replaced the male workers for female workers in order to reduce, which made a large number of men unemployed. So the female workers squeezed male workers out of mills. There might be an opposite relationship between them. Maybe female workers never thought that they were in the same class with male workers because the social gender norms, so male workers were also strangers to them.

The separation between dudes and other groups is more apparent. Under the control of the norms of social gender, it not only split themselves with female workers but also separated them with mental workers. These were explained in the previous chapter. In addition, they were also separated with other racial workers. Racial discrimination made them look down on other ethnic worker groups and their offspring. Moreover, the masculinity that was originally applied to them was no longer applicable to other races. Other racial workers were often harder and did more physical work, but the dudes didn’t think they were manly. Instead, they regarded their work as dirty and bad, just like "livestock" works. And they weren’t willing to do the same work with them. Racial discrimination made the dudes and other racial groups of workers to separate.

In this perspective, there are many scattered small groups in the whole working class, they don’t agree with each other, and don’t have the same values and full cohesion. They are strangers for each other, let alone unite to revolt exploitation.

3.2 Strangers outside Workers

There are small groups in the workers who are "strangers" to each other, besides, outside the workers, oppressors and exploiters are "unidentified strangers" for sisters and dudes. Or simply, they don’t understand where their sufferings come from and can’t find the opponent who really oppress and exploit them.

For the sisters, they were exploited by the contractors, the Green Gang, the factory owners and supervisors. However, these people didn’t belong to the same class. For example, the factory owners belong to capitalist class. The supervisors belong to the groups of female workers. There was no place in them that looked similar in wearing or wealthy, but they both exploited the female workers.

And the dudes, as the second chapter said, they regarded the hard work as a manifestation of masculinity. The patience for hard work and the increase in working hours reflected that they were manly. Thus they didn’t think this was a kind of exploitation, but a self-proof of masculinity. The exploiter for them was just a work provider. Besides, competition between male workers made them regarded others as strangers, so the unity of the male workers was also destroyed.

The strangers outside sisters and dudes distract their attention so that they can’t find the opponent object correctly. Even they don’t feel they are exploited.

4. Insight and Revolt

An individual must be regarded as an active subject and he can act in purposeful and reflective behavior. Individual initiative shows that people are influenced by the social and cultural structure but they can affect the social and cultural structure in turn. It’s the ability to change individual choice or behavior, individual initiative is changing from time to time, before and after [4]. As I said in the beginning, sisters and dudes didn’t accept the fate all the way, they were actors with initiative. At the bottom of society they have to bear many injustice, oppression and exploitation, but they try to struggle for better life.
Sisters faced a lot of oppression, the factory owners extended their work time, contractors exploited their wages, and even on the way to work there would be ruffian robbery and sexual abuse. They didn’t submit to these. At the work time, they found opportunities to shirk work, such as going to toilet as an excuse to leave the machine, letting other sisters who wanted to facilitate technology replaced her to work. The establishment of the Sisterhood ensured their personal safety, and in the mill they also cared about each other. On the other hand, by allowing female workers to enter the community party’s evening school, members of sisterhoods learned knowledge of exploiting and the consciousness of the working class, some of them became the basis of community party’s members. Indeed, the real consciousness of working class generated in part of female workers’ minds after the education. And some of them become the main force in the subsequent strikes.

In the reproduction of school education, the dudes have already had insight into the school culture and the ideology of the ruling class. They saw through the "diploma" was the guise of the ruling class and the middle class. They wanted to maintain their status under the guise of "education can create upward mobility opportunities". This opportunity would only open to the minority of the working class. With institutionalized diplomas and knowledge, class society is legitimized, which fulfills the reproduction of classes [3]. Moreover, they understood the commitment that the effort could change their fate which schools told them only aimed for the individual flow. For the entire working class, it didn’t produce qualitative change because of this kind of individual upward flow. This was a reason for the "anti-school culture" of the working class children. In addition, they also recognized the true meaning of the general abstract labor. The work is quantified, paid in time. Within fixed time, the capacity of the work can be determined by the factory owners or company bosses. They were exploiting your time from you, and the dudes were no longer interested in the specific form of works and were no longer interested in the professional guidance advocated by the school culture, since all the work was almost indistinguishable to them.

Things are not being as they appear. These revolts and insights make us see we can’t understand sisters and dudes mechanically. Many researchers may ignore their initiative. They also interact with the situation they face. Though they look like submitting to the fact, they don’t always accept everything as we think. Just as the anti-school culture of lads, if we don’t learn and study it, we would miss this important part - they also have such insight in the process of reproduction of the working class.

5. Conclusion: the Land They Can’t Escape from

I have to say that the revolt and insight indeed play a role. Through the strike, sisters got better treatment. Through the insight, dudes let the ruling class aware of the workers had "threat" to their ruling, so that their government won’t have been so stable. However, as the former mentioned, we knew the separation of the working class. They were like blue birds with shackles, they could have flew to the higher sky, but they were destined to back to the land.

What is this shackle? Perhaps it’s the limitation in their minds, such as regional discrimination. Maybe it’s the restriction from the land they live, such as norms of social gender. Most importantly, ideology of the ruling class is ubiquitous, which erodes their thoughts from every corner, and they can’t resist. Paul Willis used ideology as the “inside interlocutor” in workers’ hearts, which lead the thoughts of them. No matter how they did, ideology has already made effects in their deep minds. Indeed, they can’ break through the shackles and escape from this land. There are always restrictions in the development of the working class to prevent them unite.

Sisters and dudes are representatives of the workers group, the conversation between them made us understand their helpless and initiative. Probably they will never escape from this land, but they haven’t given up the revolt until now, so that they can leave deep imprinting in this land.
6. References


