

INTRODUCTION

This book seeks to connect two narratives that have remained largely separate in the historiography of modern China: the narrative of Chinese nationalism and the narrative of the labor movement. Its subject is the development of national identity among workers in Shanghai and the part that workers played in the nationalist movement from around 1895, when foreigners were first officially allowed to set up factories on Chinese soil, to April 1927, the high point of the revolution to reunify the country, when Chiang Kai-shek, commander-in-chief of the Guomindang's National Revolutionary Army, struck against the Communist-controlled labor unions. Shanghai provides an ideal vantage point from which to study the interaction of labor and nationalism because the city was at the forefront of China's fluctuating nationalist movement throughout the period, especially in the years 1905, 1925, and 1927 (although less so in the 1911 Revolution and the May Fourth Movement of 1919). Moreover, as China's principal commercial and industrial center, Shanghai witnessed far more strike action than any other industrial region in this period—indeed it was the scene of the country's first general strike in June 1919. In recent years, a cluster of distinguished works on Shanghai labor has appeared that, despite their differing concerns, have demonstrated how riven the city's workers were by social divisions.¹ These works have challenged the thesis, once argued so eloquently by the doyen of Chinese labor history, Jean Chesneaux, that Chinese workers in this period evolved from being a class “in itself” to a “class for itself.”² Even as these studies have established how far Shanghai workers fell short of the ideal of a class-conscious proletariat, however, they have continued to be conceived within the paradigm of social class.³ By contrast this study removes the history of Shanghai labor from that paradigm and relocates it within a paradigm of nation formation. The nub of its argument is that insofar as a working-class movement came into existence in Shanghai, it did so not as the direct consequence of the

social changes induced by industrialization and urbanization—although these were its necessary preconditions—but rather as the by-product of the growth of nationalism, itself a response to the collapse of effective government and to the erosion of political sovereignty by the foreign powers. The massive wave of labor protest and organization that erupted in Shanghai in the years 1925 to 1927 was, therefore, principally an expression of militant nationalism rather than of class consciousness. This study argues, however, that through participation in the nationalist movement, elements of class identity did take root among Shanghai workers, albeit precariously, because the dominant idiom of national identity in these years, put into circulation by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), was one that was heavily inflected by a language of class.

There has been a wealth of writing on the theory of nationalism in the past two decades, relatively little of which is directly applicable to the Chinese case. One of the most influential paradigms is that which links the rise of the nation to socioeconomic modernization. Typical of this paradigm is the work of Ernest Gellner, which posits that industrial societies require a type of literate “high culture” that is best inculcated through a mass, standardized education system.⁴ China had had a standardized national culture for centuries, although not of the type that would meet the exigencies of industrialism as defined by Gellner. Nevertheless, the rise of a modern school system did have a bearing on the growth of nationalism. In 1902 the Qing government began to set up a hierarchy of local schools, and by the early years of the republic there were over 500 primary, secondary, and higher schools in Shanghai.⁵ By 1929–1930, there were 832 primary schools with 113,019 pupils (28.3 percent female), 123 secondary schools with 22,586 pupils (25.5 percent female), and 35 higher schools with 14,435 students (10.9 percent female).⁶ Students in modern schools were to be a key vector of nationalist ideology, especially among the city’s populace.⁷ Even so, Gellner’s insistence on the correlation of nationalism with industrialism and mass education is only of limited relevance to China, since it was still overwhelmingly agrarian and illiterate when the CCP took power in 1949. Another variant of the paradigm linking nationalism to socioeconomic modernization is the “communications” approach pioneered by Karl Deutsch, which sees the growth of the market, urbanization, the expansion of the role of the state, and the development of modern means of communication as the keys to bringing forth the nation as a “community of complementary habits and facilities of communication.”⁸ Again,

Chinese nationalism does not fit neatly into this perspective. On the one hand, neither market penetration nor urbanization were new developments, the former going back to the Ming dynasty, the latter to the Song dynasty; on the other, modern communications in the strict sense—railways, a road system, a national press—were still in an embryonic stage by the turn of the century. Nevertheless, new technologies such as the telegraph (and by 1910 there were 560 telegraph offices and 28,000 miles of overhead cable in China) did play a role in enabling the “nation”—initially, a small educated public—to address political issues simultaneously and to communicate its views to the government.⁹ In what is perhaps the most scintillating attempt to anchor the nation in the process of socioeconomic modernization, Benedict Anderson has built on the idea that new technologies generate new conceptions of simultaneity and community, arguing that the development of print as a commodity served to promote the nation as an “imagined community.”¹⁰ In China commercial printing had transformed popular culture as early as the Song and Yuan dynasties, yet there is little doubt that the emergence of newspapers, the increase in the number of publishing houses, and the growth of commercial fiction aimed at an urban lower-middle class did stimulate the growth of nationalist sentiment.¹¹ By the early years of the twentieth century, an estimated three hundred thousand people in Shanghai read newspapers, many of which were concerned to alert their readers to the plight of the nation.¹² Yet this was still only a minority of the city’s population. Over the following decades, it would not be through the printed word that the overwhelmingly illiterate populace would come to identify with the nation, but through speeches, symbols, images, and rituals. This suggests that the significance of print capitalism as the modality whereby the nation imagines itself as the subject of history should not be exaggerated.¹³

Of more value in explicating the Chinese case are the paradigms that link nationalism to the modernization of politics. The state-making paradigm, whose most impressive exponents are Charles Tilly and Michael Mann, posits the nation as the by-product of a process of state building, shaped by the exigencies of war, taxation, and capital accumulation.¹⁴ More particularly, John Breuilly suggests how the modern state, with its centralized bureaucracy and capacity to penetrate society, shapes attachment to and identification with the nation through mechanisms such as schools, courts, plebiscites, censuses, and maps.¹⁵ This perspective is illuminating because the process of state building had been underway since the last de-

cade of the Qing dynasty and was accelerated during the first years of the republic.¹⁶ Yet the more pertinent development in our period—one that haunted the imagination of contemporaries—was the breakdown of central government after the 1911 Revolution, particularly after 1916. Indeed even after Chiang Kai-shek reunified the country in 1927, attempts to project the power of the central state were consistently undercut by internal strife and external military pressure.¹⁷ Therefore, few of the institutions emphasized by Breuilly were effective before the 1930s. Nevertheless the desire to eliminate militarism and to consolidate a strong state power was a major driving force behind the nationalist movement, one that the Communists, in their obsession with anti-imperialism, tended to underestimate.

The theoretical paradigm into which the Chinese case fits most comfortably is that of anticolonial nationalism, which construes nationalism as the product of social and political changes set in motion by the foreign presence. China, of course, never became the colony of any single foreign power, and the retention of territorial sovereignty, along with its large size, were crucial factors in the nation's ability to contain western influence. Nevertheless treaty ports such as Shanghai were dominated by the foreign enclaves where the British and French governed, taxed, and policed the mainly Chinese populations. Most historians today, including some in the People's Republic of China (PRC), would agree that the empire's precipitous decline in the nineteenth century was brought about more by internal developments than by the intrusion of foreign powers, at least until the end of the century. They would contend that China's economic backwardness was more the product of factors such as the poverty of the rural market and the relative weakness of the bourgeoisie than of foreign imperialism.¹⁸ Although one should not minimize the distorting effects on China's economy of foreign control of the railways, mining rights, the customs, the salt administration, and the post office, foreign trade and investment did more overall to stimulate than retard modern economic development. Albert Feuerwerker has argued that the most devastating consequences of the foreign presence were not economic but political, cultural, and psychological, and that these consequences were manifest in the drastic impairment of political sovereignty, the trauma of military defeat, and the collapse of confidence in the Confucian tradition. The perception of economic exploitation at the hands of foreigners certainly stirred nationalist concern, but theories of imperialism that lay heavy stress on the economic depredations of colonialism are of limited analytical value. In a

provocative reworking of the anticolonial paradigm, Partha Chatterjee contends that national liberation movements aspire to defend and regenerate an indigenous culture threatened by western imperialism, even as they seek to adapt that culture to meet the heteronomous requirements of progress and modernity.¹⁹ Once again, China does not quite fit this pattern because the majority of Chinese nationalists were animated neither by a strong impulse to defend indigenous culture nor by the iconoclastic anti-Confucianism of the New Culture Movement. Sun Yat-sen, for example, was proud of China's long history of civilization, but also castigated her people for their "slave mentality." The overriding concerns of nationalists were to preserve China as a state and to avoid "national extinction" (*wang-guo*). Although they recognized that China's problems had a cultural and social dimension, the root causes of her decline were political, bound up with such factors as the corruption of her rulers and the antiquated character of her institutions.

According to Elie Kedourie's rather jaundiced analysis of the dynamics of anticolonial nationalism, the imposition of colonial rule engenders a class of "marginal men" alienated from the condescending colonial order yet drawn toward western ideals of independence and self-reliance, who turn to messianic nationalism as a means to mobilize the masses and further their self-aggrandizement.²⁰ Insofar as the intelligentsia in China, as elsewhere, played a critical role in the generation of nationalism, Kedourie's perspective is of value. Modern political movements require the skills of oratory, propaganda, organization, and communication, which the intelligentsia possesses par excellence. In China, however, merchants, professionals, army officers, and even warlords and secret-society bosses at various times provided leadership to the nationalist movement.²¹ More generally, the period examined here sees a shift in the nature of the nationalist movement from being an elite movement to being a mass movement, a shift paralleled more or less simultaneously in India, Korea, and Vietnam. The literature on nationalism in general belittles the contributions made to nation formation by "subelites," such as students in the Chinese case, and particularly those of ordinary workers, traders, and peasants.

One of the most contentious issues in recent writing has been the relationship of ethnicity to nationalism.²² For theorists such as Gellner, Anderson, and Eric Hobsbawm, it is axiomatic that modern society alone can generate the type of political awareness in which the nation is imagined as an inherently limited and sovereign community.²³ This axiom has long

been challenged by writers such as Anthony Smith who, although recognizing that nationalism is a product of modernity, insists that national identity is constrained by its ethnic antecedents.²⁴ In the case of China, the world's longest enduring polity, there were plenty of ethnic idioms—distinctive cultural practices, myths of ancestry, historical memories, identifications with territory—that could be utilized by the new politics of nationalism to forge connections between the Han people, its territory, its culture, and the state. Such sentiments of “collective belonging which already existed and which could operate . . . potentially on the macro-political scale” may be called idioms of protonational identity.²⁵ They made the task of creating modern national identity easier by permitting nationalists selectively to rework myths of ancestry, traditional representations of foreigners, Han conceptions of ethnic distinctiveness, and the like, within the parameters set by the requirements of modern statehood.²⁶ So although national identity may be considered an “invention” involving the importation of many novel ideas and representations, it combined these with the selective reworking of long-standing ethnic idioms.

National identity may be defined as the way the national “we” is constructed. In her study of national identity in the United States and Australia, Lynn Spillman suggests that it has a double dimension: on the one hand, it is concerned with internal integration—with answering the question “what can we agree we share?”; and, on the other, with international position—with answering the question “what is our position in the world?”²⁷ This dual concern is reflected in the discourse of nationalism, which makes its case for nationhood both on claims of common descent, common culture, and social solidarity, and on claims to distinctiveness vis-à-vis other nations and to sovereignty within the world system of nation-states.²⁸ An important advance has been made in recent years by those theorists who insist that national identities—and also protonational identities—are never unitary or coherent. Prasenjit Duara has shown that in imperial China a “culturalist” and an “ethnocentric” construal of what it meant to be Chinese vied with one another, thus allowing people to imagine their relationship to the polity in different ways in different contexts. He makes the trenchant point that competing narratives of community mean that the nation is always an object of contestation as well as of loyalty.²⁹ Similarly, Katherine Verdery suggests that within nation-states, different social groups entertain different ideas about cultural patrimony, national character, or the nation's mission, and that the nation is a construct

whose meaning shifts with the changing balance of social forces.³⁰ One of the arguments in this book is that in China in the republican period, class formed one fault line around which competing conceptions of the nation crystallized.

Sun Yat-sen delineated the five criteria of nationhood as blood lineage, language, custom, religion, and livelihood. Yet to think of the nation as an imagined community is to challenge Sun's notion that the nation is defined by objective attributes. The fact that the nation is not a reality "out there," however, but a human fiction imagined in different ways by different groups is not to discount that it may have real causes and real effects. In his stimulating study of the civil war of 1924, Arthur Waldron casts doubt on the "idea of nationalism as an animating and directing power" in China's history by arguing that nationalism was a consequence not a cause of the process of state building.³¹ In this book I heed his stricture, emphasizing the contingent rather than causal character of nationalism: nationalism as *explanandum* rather than *explanans*. At the same time I remain alert to the performative nature of nationalist discourse; that is, to its capacity to bring into being that which its ideology presupposes—namely the "nation" as a real, mobilized group.³² During the 1920s—and this is where I differ from Waldron—nationalism was transformed into an organized political force, and its institutions—the Guomindang (GMD), the National Revolutionary Army, the CCP—proved capable of transforming the balance of power within the country.

Surprisingly little attention has been paid by historians to the dynamics of popular nationalism in any country. Historians of China are no exception, although Chalmers Johnson's groundbreaking work generated a lively debate on the relation of peasants to nationalism following the Sino-Japanese War of 1937.³³ Generally, however, Chinese nationalism has been treated as an elite phenomenon.³⁴ Recently historians have begun to look beyond intellectuals and political parties: Bryna Goodman's work on native-place associations valuably shifts attention to merchants and professionals; and John Fitzgerald and Henrietta Harrison cast their social net wide in their innovative studies of the political culture of nationalism.³⁵ Nevertheless there are to date no studies that explore the dynamics of nationalism once it escapes the grip of the educated, the economically powerful, and the politically ambitious. This study seeks to fill that gap by exploring what the nation meant to the artisans, coolies, and factory workers of Shanghai and, to a lesser extent, to the thousands of shopkeepers and small traders

who intermingled with its workers. The central concern of this volume is to explore how, and to what extent, workers identified with the new conceptions of nation and class and to comprehend how these conceptions became meaningful for their understanding of who they were and of their place in the political and social order.

Workers' responses to the politics of nation and class were shaped by their inherited beliefs and dispositions, by their modes of articulating experience and of evaluating the social world, by their ingrained practices of forming social bonds, and by their taken-for-granted orientations toward social action.³⁶ New political ideals and practices were selected, appropriated, reworked, or rejected within the framework of their existing culture or, more correctly, of their subcultures, whether these were centered on particular regions, occupational crafts, or secret societies. This book seeks to bring out the ways in which existing solidarities and cultural dispositions shaped the relation of workers to the politics of nationalism and of class. It understands culture not as a unified and enduring system of symbols and meanings, nor as a discrete and bounded entity, but rather, following John Comaroff, as a "contested field of historically contrived, socially situated and relatively empowered, always evanescent signs and practices."³⁷ Because one could define the theme of this book as the dissemination of the social identities of nation and class, a word about the concept of identity is in order. It is obviously beyond the capacity of any historian to recover identity if it is conceived as something residing in the mind. I follow Michael Billig's enjoinder to think of identity not as a mental state but as "the embodied habits of social life."³⁸ Billig defines national identity as "forms of social life rather than internal psychological states" and suggests that "to have a national identity is to possess ways of talking about nationhood."³⁹ This orientation is akin to that of Paul Ricoeur, who sees identity as constituted by publicly available narratives that emplot the surrounding world in meaningful ways and provide roles into which individuals and groups can be slotted.⁴⁰ In the quest to discover if and how the imagined communities of nation and class took hold among Shanghai's workers, this book looks to find evidence of "ways of talking" and "embodied habits of social life." Changes in social structure enable and constrain processes of identity formation, exposing some groups more than others to experiences that challenge past identities; but identity formation is never a direct product of structural change, it is always constituted through discourse and collective action.

Social identities are the stuff of politics, as much as conflicts over who gets what, and when and how. In thinking about the relationship of identity to politics, the concept of social movement is useful. A social movement is defined by a sense of collective purpose and by loosely “political” objectives that bring it into interaction with other differentially empowered actors.⁴¹ Whereas the older literature on social movements was grounded in a problematic of resource mobilization that stressed strategic-instrumental rationality,⁴² recent approaches have focused on how social identities and interests get defined and interpreted in the process of collective action.⁴³ This book follows these approaches by investigating how the nationalist and labor movements came to define and act on the social order through forms of collective action such as strikes, boycotts, demonstrations, or violent confrontations with armed forces. An examination of the participation of workers in the key political conflicts of this period—the 1905 boycott against the United States, the 1911 Revolution to overthrow the Qing dynasty, the May Fourth Movement of 1919, the May Thirtieth Movement of 1925, and the armed uprisings of 1926–1927—is crucial in assessing how far workers came to identify with the narratives of nation and class that constructed the social and political world in historically novel ways.

I treat nation and class as discourses, that is, as fields of symbolic practice that organize and construe the world in certain ways. My approach loosely follows Michel Foucault in conceiving discourse as a particular system of language imbricated by social practice, but it gives more emphasis to the role of human agency in creating, sustaining, and utilizing discourses for specific ends.⁴⁴ Chapters 6 and 10 look specifically at the linguistic dimension of the discourses of class and of anti-imperialist nationalism, but in general class and nation are treated not only as complexes of ideas and representations but also as fields of practice that can encompass forms of organization, collective action, and sociability. A discursive approach to class assumes that there is no pre-given relationship between class as structural fact and class as social identity; so that even when industrial capitalism has reconfigured social relationships along class lines, there is no reason why class should become the dominant mode of representing and experiencing social reality.⁴⁵ This is not to deny the “objective” existence of class as a structure that determines life chances and access to resources. In this sense, class had a devastating impact on the lives of Shanghai workers, whether in terms of diet, life expectancy, propensity to disease, or hours spent in dead-

ening toil. Yet this study is concerned not with these oppressive facts of life—which have been admirably explored by some of the historians discussed later in this introduction—but rather with the processes by which they took on social meaning and, by extension, came to generate social movements and to influence wider struggles for power. If a discursive approach tends to equate nation and class conceptually by treating both as constructed social identities, this “objective” dimension of class is a reminder of the difference in epistemological status between the two categories, because class, unlike nation, can exist even when it is not culturally signified.

An exploration of the simultaneous development and mutual interaction of national and class identities may seem odd to those who understand the two identities to be mutually exclusive. Michael Mann defines a nation as “an extensive cross-class community affirming its distinct ethnic identity and history and claiming its own state,” and Tom Nairn characterizes nationalism as the creation of a “militant, inter-class community rendered strongly (if mythically) aware of its own separate destiny vis-à-vis the outside forces of domination.”⁴⁶ Both definitions assume, incidentally, that national identities are singular rather than plural, but more pertinently, that the creation of the nation involves the subsuming of class differences in a larger identification with a national community. Historically, of course, class has frequently functioned to undermine national unity, but there are many instances where they have reinforced one another, not least because labor movements have generally pursued their interests through the structures of the nation-state.⁴⁷ From the time of the May Thirtieth Movement in 1925, class did become a fault line around which rival definitions of the nation competed, but in the dominant idiom of class-inflected anti-imperialism promoted by the CCP, national and class identities tended to be mutually constitutive because discursive mechanisms functioned to link the treatment of the Chinese nation at the hands of the foreign powers to the treatment of workers at the hands of capitalists, mechanisms such as that which likened the treatment of both to that of “cattle and horses.”⁴⁸ Thus the title of the book.⁴⁹

The subject of Chinese labor has generated a fecund historiography in recent times. It is now more than thirty-five years since Jean Chesneaux published his superb history of the labor movement in China during the 1920s. His broad argument is that in the period between the May Fourth Movement of 1919 and the reunification of China in 1927, the proletariat

acquired maturity as a class, pursuing ever broader and more organized strikes and moving into a position of leadership in the political struggles against “feudalism” and imperialism.⁵⁰ Chesneaux is alert to the circumstantial factors that facilitated the political mobilization of workers in this period, but for him the history of labor is ultimately separate from the history of the nationalist movement because China replicated a universal narrative of class formation in which class becomes salient as a direct consequence of industrialization and urbanization. From the 1970s a new generation of scholars, working mainly in the United States, launched a powerful critique of Chesneaux’s account of a working class gradually acquiring unity and class consciousness. Influenced by the “new labor history,” with its focus on shop-floor relations and workers’ culture, this cohort demonstrated that Chinese workers were profoundly divided by the particularisms of native place, gender, craft, secret-society affiliation, and clientelist networks.⁵¹ This perspective profoundly transformed our understanding of Chinese labor. One of the most imaginative contributions to this new approach was made by Emily Honig, whose study of women cotton workers in Shanghai deftly evokes the texture of their lives both inside and outside of work. She argues that “differences in local dialects, as well as job and residential segregation, kept women of different geographical origins separate from and antagonistic toward one another” and shows how such divisions were played on by foreign imperialism and by the secret societies.⁵² Honig further suggests that until 1949 women workers displayed little inclination to become involved in the labor movement or to identify with the politics of class.⁵³ The present study evaluates women workers’ capacity for militant collective action more positively than Honig, but it echoes her stress on the ubiquity of division. In an outstanding study of strikes in Shanghai, Elizabeth Perry probed the tight-knit solidarities of skill, native place, and gender among Shanghai workers, and showed with great insight how such solidarities could generate labor militancy, albeit usually on a sectional rather than class-wide basis.⁵⁴ Her study has fundamentally shaped the way in which I think about workers’ social identities, although I take a different approach in seeking to explain how a precarious political unity could be forged in spite of deep sectional solidarities.

The most recent works on Shanghai labor are two rich and fine-grained volumes by Alain Roux that explore the conditions and social relations of cotton workers, silk weavers, coolies, and mechanics in the 1930s and provide a sophisticated and comprehensive account of labor militancy. Like his

American counterparts, Roux emphasizes the severe limitations placed on class-based collective action by the divisions of skill, gender, and native place: “We have not encountered the working class, at least not if one ascribes to this term the meaning of a coherent force, conscious of having its own future, organized within structures that it has itself created to promote its interests and capable when the occasion arises of carrying out an effective strike action.”⁵⁵ Although it is a fair summary of the author’s findings, I cite this passage because it invokes criteria for determining the existence of a working class that seem to me to be too exacting. On this definition, it would be hard to argue that a working class existed in Asia and Africa, or even the United States. Nevertheless working-class conflicts and identities have not been absent from these regions in the twentieth century; rather they have been more ephemeral, less deeply rooted, and less politically influential than Roux’s ideal type suggests. This implies that we should bring a less stringent criterion to bear when seeking to register elements of class within labor protest. In fact, Roux himself does this in an exemplary fashion when he writes of Shanghai workers in the 1930s: “Arising during a crisis and strengthened by a clearly perceived awareness of its strength during collective action, the class tends, as soon as the crisis has passed, to dissolve into its pre-existing solidarities [*une cohérence antérieure*] which group workers vertically rather than horizontally, according to native-place, guild or other structures of association.”⁵⁶ This captures the evanescent quality of much class-based collective action, not only in China but in many parts of the world, and suggests that the labor movement in China may have been closer to a global norm than some suppose.

This volume is based on a wide range of periodical and archival sources (principally the files of the Shanghai municipal police), plus the valuable, but somewhat selective, collections of documents published in the PRC on the key turning points in the nationalist movement. Particularly detailed in their coverage of nationalist and labor affairs are the newspapers *Shibao* (Eastern times), a constitutionalist newspaper founded in 1904; *Shenbao* (Shanghai times), originally founded in 1872 by Frederick Major but under full Chinese management from 1912; and *Minguo ribao* (Republican daily), initially published to oppose President Yuan Shikai but becoming the organ of the GMD in 1916. Of central importance in reconstructing the discourse of class were the labor journals, beginning with *Minsheng* (People’s voice) in 1914, but especially those published by the CCP, such as

Laodongjie (Labor world), *Laodong zhoukan* (Labor weekly), and *Rexue ribao* (Hot-blooded daily). As this list implies, the research is heavily reliant on what observers—whether the police of the International Settlement or sympathetic journalists—believed workers were thinking and doing; or in the case of the Communist press, on what radical intellectuals would have liked them to think and do. The overwhelming majority of workers, being illiterate and powerless, left little direct expression of their thoughts and feelings.⁵⁷ Strikers, of course, raise demands in abundance, and when thousands go on strike in support of them it is reasonable to suppose that many identify with those demands, even if some, possibly many, struck unwillingly. Similarly, when a leaflet is put out by a strike committee, it can be inferred that it expresses widely held beliefs, although we can be sure that the average illiterate striker would not have expressed her or his views in the same way as the leaflet. Again, when a speaker is listened to with rapt attention by a crowd, it can be assumed that he or she is putting into words sentiments that find ready endorsement. In addition, we can seek to decipher the meanings inscribed within forms of collective action—a boycott of foreign goods, a demonstration, the trial of a “running dog”—and thus read them as evidence of the identifications they both reflect and create. At the same time, we need to bear in mind that people participate in collective action for all kinds of reasons—out of a burning sense of injustice, out of fear, conformism, or simply a desire to have some fun. During the anti-American boycott of 1905, the press carried reports of mass meetings attended by thousands of people, yet a thinly fictionalized account by Bao Tianxiao of a boycott meeting at the Zhangyuan park is a reminder that many came simply to “see the fun,” that the audience was so noisy that the speaker could not be heard, and that everyone applauded even when they had not heard a word of the speech.⁵⁸ Similarly, when Elizabeth Perry asked a woman who had worked in the packing department at British-American Tobacco (BAT) about her participation in the May Thirtieth Movement strike of 1925, she replied: “I didn’t understand much about strikes. . . . When people marched I just followed them. . . . During the four-month strike, we received quite a bit of strike pay. We thought: ‘Here we are getting money without even working.’ We didn’t understand anything else.”⁵⁹ As these examples suggest, the danger of inferring motivations from collective action is that one chooses the interpretation that fits one’s prejudices. In order to try to circumvent this problem, I have con-

centrated on tracing the processes whereby subject-positions, or “ways of talking” in Billig’s formulation (such as the “awoken” patriot, the class-conscious worker, and so forth), were put into circulation and then sought for evidence of workers identifying with them. It is by no means an unproblematic methodology, but wherever possible, I have followed Brecht’s injunction to “watch the people’s mouth.”