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## **(De)mobilizing and (mis)representing ‘youth’ in the Chinese workplace: political dependency, generational subordination and corporatization in the Communist Youth League**

Abstract: The Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) youth organization, the Communist Youth League (CYL, League), has an extensive grassroots network and approximately twelve million members in public and partially state-owned sectors of the economy, as well as a political mandate to promote ‘youth’ interests at work. This article examines the League’s operation in the Chinese workplace by analyzing qualitative data collected during fieldwork in twelve different sites in Beijing and Zhejiang province. It was hypothesized that as League organizations are under pressure to represent youth-specific demands, their response would be similar to the Trade Unions, which try to simultaneously remain loyal to pro-management Party committees and act as grassroots channels for advocacy. The article finds that League cadres occupy junior positions in political, generational and workplace hierarchies resulting to their multifaceted subordination to more senior power holders present, namely the management, Party Committee and Union leadership. The institutionalized ‘juniority’ of cadres creates strong disincentives for pro-youth employee initiatives and leads to the disarticulation of a distinctive ‘youth’ agenda. This institutional ‘gap’ in workplace representation has direct implications both for the welfare of young employees and for the future of industrial relations in China.

Key words: China, Youth, Communist Youth League, Trade Union, Representation

## Introduction

Studies on Chinese Youth and the Communist Youth League (CYL, League) in both the Maoist and Reform eras have concentrated almost exclusively on the political socialisation of students and their attitudes towards the Communist regime (Pringsheim, 1964; Montaperto, 1977; Healy 1982; Liu, 1996; Rosen, 2004; Liu, 2006; Yan, 2014). The focus on students corresponds to trends in the membership composition of the CYL, as an increase of university students and a simultaneous decline in workers and peasants has been recorded in the last two decades (An et al., 2008:65-66), echoing the regime's emphasis on recruiting young scientists, engineers and intellectuals to drive economic development. Still, the League has more than 12 million members aged between 18 and 28<sup>1</sup> and an extensive organisational network in the public and the quasi-private sectors, while it also aspires to expand in private companies and Foreign Investment Enterprises (Ibid). Next to propaganda and political cooptation, the CYL's post-reform mission is to address the problems young people face in China today as a means of maintaining their loyalty to the regime. This challenge is best captured by the slogan 'Keep the Party at ease and the Youth Satisfied' (rang dang fangxin, rang qingnian manyi), which was introduced in 2003 by Hu Jintao. This article will answer a set of related questions that have been overlooked by researchers of both industrial relations and youth politics in the PRC: What is the role of the Communist Youth League in the Chinese workplace today? Is it in position to give 'voice' to young employees, possibly in cooperation with the Trade Union?

It was hypothesized that within an increasingly deregulated work environment, CYL cadres would be under pressure to represent a distinctive youth labor agenda to the management and

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<sup>1</sup> The CYL has approximately 85 million members (2016) and its official age range is 15 to 28.

the Workers Union. This paper discovers that although official pronouncements and legal documents at national and provincial level establish the CYL's mandate in promoting the welfare of young employees, League cadres operate in a context that is antithetical to assuming a pro-youth stance. Due to their young age and junior work position, League functionaries are unfavorably embedded in the political, generational and institutional hierarchies present in the workplace and, as a result, have to maintain a docile stance towards the management, the Party committee and the Union. The 'Building the League through Building the Party' (*dangjian dai tuanjian*) principle epitomizes the League's organizational dependency to the Party in all types of enterprises. League cadres are Party appointed, part-time and unsalaried, and they perceive League work as only an additional burden, without any concrete benefit. Lastly, the management's emphasis on 'labor peace' and the League's very low capacity for pro-youth intervention have resulted to the corporatization of its activities that seek to cultivate a pro-capital working culture and good corporate image rather than responding to bottom-up demands.

The data used in this paper was collected during fieldwork in twelve different public organizations and private companies in Beijing and Zhejiang province (industry, ownership, location and educational background of young employees presented in table 1). The shortlisting of sites followed three criteria. First, in order to avoid League committees that either existed on paper only or were dysfunctional due to financial and material shortages, I concentrated on affluent cities of Coastal China and in companies/organizations that had an active CYL presence. Second, I selected companies from the main industries (services, manufacturing, hospitality) of the areas visited, while the analogy between public and private organizations (8/4) reflects the more extensive presence of the League in the public sector. Third, the educational background of employees stood out early on as a possible variable

affecting the intensity of the League's work, with a clear bias against low-skilled workers in public and private companies alike. For this purpose, I included companies and organizations with different educational requirements from their employees, from elementary/secondary, to vocational and higher education degrees. As a visiting researcher in Peking University, I gained access to local CYL committees and organizations that met the aforementioned criteria.

Field research for this paper aimed at identifying the endemic structural and institutional dynamics that affect the work of League cadres vis-à-vis young employees. Fieldwork included semi-structured interviews with League cadres<sup>2</sup> and visits to League-run facilities (offices, recreation areas) and general amenities such as the canteen and dormitories for factory workers (where applicable). In most cases the interviews took place away from the sites visited. Interview questions would focus on three themes: a) the challenges young employees face, b) the work of the League committee in addressing them and c) the difficulties League cadres confront in their work. The examination of the CYL's challenges on the ground was further enriched by the insights of League functionaries in local, city/province and national levels, as well as from discussions with young employees and personal observation. In addition, the author reviewed printed material such as Party documents on youth work, company guidelines, announcements and annual reports on local League activities and training programs. Lastly, the qualitative findings of this chapter are supported by reports and surveys<sup>3</sup> conducted by the China Youth and Children Research Centre, the PRC's most authoritative research institute on youth affairs.

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<sup>2</sup> Fieldwork in China took place between 2009 and 2012. Full anonymity was offered to the interviewees in order to protect their identity. Their role in the League, occupation and interview date are recorded here under References. Out of 35 relevant interviews, 20 are quoted in this paper.

<sup>3</sup> The first report used here, 'The Blue Book of Chinese Youth Work' by (An et al, 2009), uses primary data by the Communist Youth League on organisational expansion of CYL branches, changes in membership composition, operation of local branches, finances and policies implemented in urban areas. The second, titled

[Table 1 here]

Before examining the League's organisation and activities in places of work, we need to address 1) the dynamics at play in work life and how they inform the characteristics of the constituency of young employees, and; 2) the League's mandate to represent. The paper will then continue with a consideration of organizational dependency in both political and generational terms, the corporatization of CYL activities and conclude with the League's involvement in employee welfare and representation.

### **Locating 'Youth' and the League in the Chinese workplace**

In educational institutions, the well delineated, in space and time, world of student life creates an empirical correspondence between a sub-group of young people and the CYL's officially defined constituency. But when we leave the school and university campus walls behind and move to a work environment, this correspondence fades out. Once the context of the subsidised student life is removed, the variation between workplaces, let alone that of experiences acquired, life courses, career paths and progress, locality and income, appear to disintegrate the common characteristics of a particular sub-group of young people. Students in different colleges and localities have more common experiences than, for example, a young nurse in a public hospital does with a young migrant worker, a young employee in a foreign IT firm with a young 'bao an' (security guard), a young entrepreneur with a young factory worker. Entry into work life tends to overshadow the social attributes of 'youth' as

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'Research report on the rights of modern Chinese youth' (Xi and Liu, 2009), is based on a nation-wide survey of 4650 people from 18-35 years old, 47% of which are League members and 77.9% have already entered employment.

full integration in the labour market is often used to locate its end as a life stage (Jones, 2009:84-6). How can youth at work be approached then? What characteristics do young employees share that require institutional representation?

A first approach is to examine ‘youth’ as part of the ongoing capital-labour antagonism in the context of hegemonic neo-liberalism. As the advancement of labour market deregulation in the last two decades has a distinctive generational dimension (Sukarieh and Tannock, 2015; Hodder and Kretson, 2015), there is an extensive range of issues regarding the employment conditions of young people in general, from which young Chinese employees are not immune: increasing deregulation of the labour market, more flexible and less secure employment conditions; low entry-level salaries; higher job insecurity as the young and less experienced are more vulnerable to redundancy schemes; the weakening of social security systems; and finally the decline of unionization and collective bargaining agreements. (ILO, 2011:3-5) Secondly, there are particular issues that Chinese employees are confronted with, such as the lack of affordable housing for public servants; the poor implementation of labour law for private sector employees; the exclusion of migrant workers from hukou-based social welfare schemes, as well as poor working and living conditions that lead to mental health problems, depression and suicide (Selden and Wu, 2011; Cheng and Smyth, 2013; Pun and Chan, 2013).

A second approach is to focus on those elements that differentiate “youth” against the “old” in a working environment. Bourdieu’s (1978) starting point in discussing youth is the arbitrary nature of old-young divisions, as “entirely variable and subject to manipulation”. He explains that this is essentially a power relation, a “struggle between the young and the old”, or, put differently, between newcomers and those established. This struggle often concerns

access to material resources, and is expressed in generational and hierarchical junior-senior divisions. For example, in interviews for this paper, young doctors and nurses complained about not having the same access to affordable ‘danwei’ (work unit) housing as their older colleagues; young public employees loathed those in their 40s and 50s for their relatively secure employment contracts; private sector employees questioned the worthiness and high benefits of older colleagues and managers, expressing their wish for more opportunities and faster advancement. In reverse, older employees face the threat of being sidelined by younger and more ambitious newcomers with more up to date skills and knowledge. Generational divisions are present even within organised labour, as Unions often prioritise the interests of older employees over those of younger ones (Wamba, 2002:80-81; Simms, 2011:14-15; Standing, 2011). In China, Chan and Unger (2009:11-12), in their examination of welfare provisions in a state-owned distillery, note how older employees and retirees were those who benefited the most from new housing and communal spaces for workers, in line with the enterprise’s emphasis on work-year seniority. Similarly, Cheng and Smyth (2013) recorded that young migrant workers are less likely to be unionized than older generations, which limits their institutional voice. The power relation between the old and the young is also evident in the case of the League’s operation in the Chinese workplace. The CCP, like communist parties elsewhere (McDougall, 2004; Neumann, 2011), has institutionalized ‘youth’ as a junior political identity that, as this paper will demonstrate, places its cadres in a position of multifaceted subordination and disempowerment. It is not attempted here to offer an exhaustive list of the challenges and problems that young employees face in China, but to establish that ‘youth’ in the workplace is accompanied by a distinctive agenda that on the one hand is shaped by the deregulation of employment and the retreat of welfarism, and on the other, by generational divisions and power relations within the labour force that have been accentuated by the dominant developmental paradigm and the country’s political system.

These two approaches demonstrate that ‘youth’, as ‘age’ more broadly, in the workplace is contentious and in need of representation.

What is the response of the CYL to this new reality? Unlike higher education institutions, where the League has ex officio a central position in grassroots organisation on campus and is in charge of political (Yan, 2014) and volunteer activities (Xu, 2012), its presence in the workplace is peripheral. The representation of workers’ interests is vested with the All China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU) an organisation that does not have a clear orientation in favour of labour in general (Howell, 2003; Chan and Zhu, 2005), let alone young workers in particular. Thus, the mounting challenges young employees face and the limited power of Union cadres create the conditions for the youth labour agenda to seek alternative channels for representation. In such conditions it was hypothesised that a) the League will be under pressure to promote this agenda through advocacy to Union and management and by engaging directly with young employees on welfare issues; and that b) this pressure would lead CYL cadres to become involved in the representation of young employees. Indeed, in the League Committee Work Handbook (Yang, 2009:260) we read :

The enterprise League branch must be concerned about the healthy growth of young employees, should reach out to them, listen attentively to their voices, understand their wishes (...); and protect and represent their reasonable demands and legitimate rights.

The League’s legitimate role in the representation of young employees in working spaces is recognised at national and provincial level. A 2006 joint circular by the CCP Central Committee Organisation Department, the CYL Central Committee and the State-Owned

Assets Supervision and Administration Commission Party Committee, titled “Further strengthen and improve the work of the Communist Youth League in State Owned Enterprises” (CYL Yearbook, 2006:360-365), offers directions on how to build representational capacity at the grassroots:

The League Committee Secretary can join the presidium of the workers’ congress, attend the Executive Council, as [his/her] participation involves the vital interests of young employees such as adjustment of wages, evaluation of professional titles etc. (...)

The enterprises when formulating and implementing decisions on major reform measures that involve the interests of young employees, should have a representative of the League and young employees, and listen extensively to their views. Young employees must occupy a certain proportion of representatives in the staff and workers’ representative congress of the enterprise. (...)

The document also addresses issues of organisational capacity that directly affect a League grassroots organization’s vitality. It first stipulates that it is the responsibility of the Party and management to provide the material conditions for the League to conduct its work (Ibid:362). For small-medium scale companies, the League can either set up an independent presence or conduct youth work through another department of the company (usually Human Resources) or the Union. The document also identifies a number of full time cadres that grassroots League organisations must have depending on the size of the host company (Ibid). It also stresses the importance of cadre training from the Party School and higher education institutions (Ibid:363).

These general provisions are repeated in local government official documents. For instance, a provincial level policy document, the “Key Provisions of the Shenzhen Municipal Government Implementing Regulations for the Trade Union Law of the People's Republic of China” (2008) stipulates that :

The trade union should establish a system of joint meetings with the Communist Youth League, Women's Federation, Disabled Persons' Federation and other social organizations at the same level in order to investigate and handle important issues affecting the interests of staff and workers. (paragraph 22)

Although these regulations are not legally binding, they introduce the League’s mandate as a representative of young employees. This is a recognition of the fact that the task of organisational expansion and standardisation of political work in enterprises relies on the simultaneous establishment and functioning of some channels for feedback and consultation. The League can disseminate views and policies and apply its normative and political influence to young employees only if it can offer in return, at the very least, a channel for advocacy. The first obstacle in achieving that is the negative effect of labour market deregulation on the League’s ability to retain its members.

### **Deregulated labour and League membership**

Members join the League in high school or at university where they are expected to participate in some of its activities. Upon leaving the structured environment of learning institutions, however, transferring CYL membership is a process that requires functioning

League organisations at both ends. In the public sector this requirement is often met. However, due to the low degree of League presence in private companies, approximately 2/3 of companies in China (Zheng, 2008:22), one in two League members<sup>4</sup> is actually “lost” on the way (table 2). Young rural immigrants in particular are impossible to trace as they usually work without contracts, in companies that hardly have an active Union, not to mention a League branch (Interviewees 1 and 2).

[Table 2 here]

Party and United Front organisations have presence in every level of government and all public organisations/companies. Workplace mobilization (*zuzhiqilai*) through this extensive organisational nexus has sought to “align the worker with CCP policy and ideology” (Bray, 2005:98), and is perhaps the most important legacy of the Maoist period. Today, despite a trend towards declining percentages of CYL members in the public sector due to a boost in student recruitment by the CCP, the former are increasing in absolute numbers and amount to a considerable 14.6% of the entire League membership. As a central CYL functionary commented (Interviewee 3), despite the private sector’s rapid expansion the only reliable “pools” of League membership today are the education system, the army and the public sector (Table 3).

[Table 3 here]

Political affiliation and type of employment also affect the CYL’s ability to attract members. During fieldwork in Beijing, I came across effectively paralysed branches in organisations

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<sup>4</sup> These figures do not include former members who joined the CCP.

where one would assume the CYL to be active: a state-controlled think tank; the cultural department of one of the most affluent districts; and even a League-run newspaper. This is because most of young employees are already Party members and are not obliged to participate in the League (Interviewee 4), creating frustration to cadres that watch membership declining. A branch secretary of the Beijing Water Department research Centre (WD), for example, noted that in two years there will be no members left other than three cadres (Interviewee 5). Thus, quite paradoxically, Party membership undermines the CYL's operation on the ground. The type of employment is another factor affecting the League's reach. The hospitals visited in Beijing (PH1, PH2) have active branches and a large number of members due to the annual flow of new graduates from nursing schools. In contrast, young employees in the provincial government-owned hotel (H) visited in Zhejiang City are temporary labourers and interns who do not participate in the League because of the short length of their employment, heavy workload and unstable shift schedule (Interviewee 6). Even in state-owned enterprises, the deregulation of labour has a negative impact on the League's ability to engage with young people. This is even more felt in the private sector.

Turning to the private sector, a distinction should be made between privatised (former state) companies, private companies, and Foreign Investment Enterprises (FIEs). Regarding the first, officially ceasing the operation of a League Branch is a process that may cause the local government's discontent (Interviewees 7,8,9), so privatised companies opt for maintaining League branches on paper only. The Factory (F) and the High-Tech company (HT) visited in Zhejiang City are a case in point, as they report membership figures of their branches annually<sup>5</sup> but hold no more than one activity per year. Secondly, in private companies League membership is even lower since there is no legal obligation to establish a CYL branch, as is

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<sup>5</sup> 70 members and 7 cadres, 10 members and 3 cadres respectively.

the case with Unions (Interviewee 9, 10). In this regard, the weak presence of the CCP and the Union in the private sector is indicative of the League's limited reach. Finally, the elitist self-image of the League as the organisation of 'advanced youth' and the perceived 'backwardness' of rural youth discourages expansion in companies employing migrant workers (Interviewee 2). As a Union cadre in CM factory commented, "for companies with educated employees the League is meaningful, but for uneducated workers it makes no sense" (Interviewee 10).

Those very few private companies that establish League branches, do so in order to maintain good relations with local authorities and comply to calls for intensification of political work and expansion of Party and United Front cells. The Property management company in Beijing for instance, established its League (and Women's Federation) branch in 2008, after a citywide organisational expansion drive by the CCP ahead of the Olympics. At that time, the government of Chaoyang district asked local private Chinese companies to establish League branches to mobilise volunteers (Interviewee 1, 11). Nevertheless, such examples of top-down pressure for setting up League cells are rare, and as one interviewee in Zhejiang commented, "the reason there is no functioning League organisation in our firm is that there is no pressure from the government for it" (Interviewee 10). Lastly, Foreign Investment Enterprises amount for a mere 0.8% of total League membership (table 3) and only a 0.4% in companies from Hong Kong and Taiwan. In theory, young employees can register under the League organisation of state-run Human Resources companies that provide personnel to FIEs. However, the League secretaries of two major HR companies in Beijing explained that their League organisations maintain no regular communication and have no capacity to reach out to private sector employees (Interviewees 12, 13).

## **“Building the League through building the Party”**

The CYL leadership structure in public and private companies closely follows the organisational chart of the host institution, and is organised in branches (*zhibu*, minimum requirement 3 League members), general branch (*zongzhibu*, in large organisations), and League Committee (*tuanwei*). As with the Unions, League branches report primarily to the Party organisation at the same level and, secondarily, to the League Committee in the level above, following the “Dual management” principle (Yang, 2009:125). The rationale that governs the Party-League relation at the Local level is expressed by the “Building the League through building the Party” principle (*dangjian dai tuanjian*), which is analyzed as (Yang, 2009, 79-80):

To have both a good team and especially a good leader

To have a group of League members who play an exemplary leading role

To have activities which match the youth characteristics of League members

To have an effective working system

To have the necessary funds and positioning for activities, that guarantee the normal development of work.

Essentially, the Party directs the League’s grassroots political work and expansion. But the single most important way available to the CCP to exercise control over League organisations in the various localities, and standardise their process in relation to ideological education and Party membership preparation, is through cadre appointment. League Committee secretaries are Party members appointed by the CCP Committee at the same level. These individuals’ involvement with the League is on a part-time basis, as they are full-time employees in their

respective companies/organisations (often working in the Human Resources department) and their average age is between mid 30s and early 40s. The Workers' Union can also be directly involved in the League's operation, particularly in companies with high employee turnover such as the factories (F, CM) and the hotel visited in Zhejiang City (Interviewees 6,9,10). In Beijing, the Workers Union of the water department research centre established a Youth Work Committee (*qingnian gongzuo weiyuanhui*) to cover (*fugai*) young employees regardless of political membership (Interviewee 5). Overall, the League Committee Secretary is primarily a Party or Union cadre, has a more senior position in workplace hierarchy and is therefore distanced from ordinary workers, a situation that has also been observed in the case of Union leadership (Baek, 2000:51). It should be noted, however, that the CYL Committee secretary is still considered junior to the local Union and Party heads. He or she does not enjoy the "deputy position treatment" (*fuzhidaiyu*) as the Union leader, whose status is equal to the deputy secretary of the Party or the deputy director of a factory (Ibid).

Ordinary cadres (including branch secretaries) are selected from the League's rank-and-file and their position is very indicative of the multifaceted subordination of Youth in the hierarchies of the workplace. League cadres are young and have limited work experience and social capital in their place of employment as they usually occupy entry-level positions. In addition, in China's political system, a role in the League is considered junior to the Party *and* the Union. Thus, the subordinate position of a young cadre who belongs to the generational cohort of 'newcomers' in the workplace, is further reinforced by a political arrangement that favours hierarchy over representation and places more senior, in age and career-wise, individuals in positions of political authority. As a result, cadres are mainly occupied with tasks assigned by the Party, the Union and the management, and this overshadows their capacity as representatives of young employees. The direction of League-

related work flows primarily towards these more senior organisations, rather than the immediate constituency. League cadres are considered a pool of free labour for the Party, Union and management, they meet whenever there is “work to be done” (Interviewees 14, 15) and are the first to be sent as ‘volunteers’ in activities and campaigns organised by local governments (Interviewees 6,14,16,17,18). As there is no provision for remuneration, stipends, or reduced time schedules for CYL cadres, League duties are considered an additional burden to their full-time work responsibilities, offering no concrete advantage:

It is not like the university where there is free time available. League work at the Hospital is a duty, not something that I am happy doing (Interviewee 14)

Actually, the reason why the League Branch in our company exists, is because it has to, there is no concrete meaning or function (Interviewee 18)

The selection method of normal cadres reflected company-specific conditions, such as the number of young employees and Party members available to assume roles in the League. In the two hospitals in Beijing, League Branches in different departments of the hospital elected their secretary every two years. The Party and League Committees’ involvement included the screening of candidates and affirmation of incumbents. In contrast, in the equally large Insurance Company in Zhejiang City, the rather active League Committee secretary was the only person involved in cadre selection. The two Human Resources companies in Beijing reported similar practices. In the Beijing water department research centre and the Zhejiang-based High-tech engineering company, the Party Committee directly appointed Branch secretaries. These top-down selection practices further enforce the weak potential of League cadres as representatives of young employees.

Finally, as League training concentrates on political theory and party politics, cadres receive no specialized instruction on how to address the issues faced by young employees. Cadres have identified this problem and suggested ways to renew training. A member of the National Railway League Committee, for instance, reported on the positive effects on cadres of “adventure-based education,” e.g., cooperative games, outdoor adventure, and trust and team-building activities (Xu, 2007:12-14). He argued that in the few branches where it was implemented as a means for instruction, adventure-based education methods raised the cadres’ enthusiasm, confidence and ability to take initiatives, improved their communication and teamwork attitude, and promoted notions of selflessness, contribution to the common good, and political education. But such initiatives remain of secondary importance to the CYL’s preoccupations.

To sum up, “building the League through building the Party” is an organizational principle that maintains a hierarchical and highly dependent pattern of work that limits the space for pro-youth stance of cadres on the ground. League cadres are subordinated to the hierarchies of the workplace, where the priorities of the Party Committee, the Union and the management ultimately define youth work. We will now turn to the core of the League’s grassroots activities and examine how the above characteristics limit intensity and scope, as well as any prospects for innovation and renewal.

### **Corporatization of activities**

The frequency and intensity of the League’s core political activities (propaganda and Party membership preparation) is very limited when compared to universities, where the CCP aims

to attract a large percentage of students in its ranks. In the public sector, the majority of new public servants are university graduates (often already Party members) and the League organises membership preparation sessions in conjuncture with the Party Committee. In private companies (including ex-public), preparation and training for Party membership is primarily a personal pursuit, in cooperation with CCP cadres in the company (Interviewee 9) or local government (Interviewee 11). Propaganda and dissemination of CCP policies is carried out through traditional (posters and leaflets) and online means (company website and social media). The frequency of political study sessions varies not only between the public and the private sector but also within public sector organisations (table 4).

[Table 4 here]

Since the Mao era, League propaganda aimed at boosting productivity through the use of role models (notably Lei Feng, Zhang Haidi, Wang Jingxi, Jiao Yulu). A present-day example is the establishment of a ceremony squad of model workers by the China Railway League Committee (under the Ministry of Railways), called the Qinghai-Tibet Railway Construction Pioneer Force (Qingzang tielu jianshe qingnian tujidui). This squad was used in the inaugurations of new stations (Tielu Gongqingtuan, 2002:106). During interviews, cadres described the use of models and propaganda activities as having an “encouraging effect” (guli zuoyong), especially among young employees. Indeed, there is a growing awareness among Party officials and company managers of the CYL’s potential in cultivating an enterprise culture of committed and disciplined labour. For example, Lu Hao, the former First secretary of the CYL Central Committee, characteristically noted (2007 CYL Yearbook, 2008:70):

(...) first, with the precondition of assisting the operation and management of an enterprise, we must identify the link between serving both the enterprise and the youth (...). The enterprise is a typical economic organisation, and its profits determine directly its survival and development, as well as the realisation of the interests of young employees. Therefore, we must make our priority serving the enterprise's production and management, lead young employees to work hard, and assist the enterprise to generate profits. Regarding this issue, the League organisations in enterprises had many breakthroughs, such as implementing the 'Youth Job Experts', and 'Mark of Civilisation' campaigns; assisting employees to improve their abilities; cultivating professionalism; carrying out cultural activities; and helping the enterprise to strengthen its cohesion.

Developing a similar narrative, a document titled 'The effect of the League in building a corporate culture', which has been disseminated amongst grassroots League organizations in corporations, outlines their tasks as follows: 1) to build a corporate identity of dedication, "to sacrifice and give up some pleasure today for the enterprise's development"; 2) to raise the young workers' self-esteem, foster their creativity and sense of belonging; 3) to create a strong learning atmosphere, and: 4) to establish a good corporate image (Zhu, 2009)). Likewise, Wal-Mart League branches are described as "encouraging members to play an exemplary role in doing a good job that will assist business development" (Jeffries, 2012:369). Such descriptions embellish official documents, pamphlets and even MBA theses, pointing to the corporatisation of League activities in the new economic environment. This is a fine example of how institutions are renegotiated and made to serve new ends while maintaining their original form relatively unchanged.

## *Corporate Social Responsibility*

Perhaps the finest example of the corporatization of the League's work since the reforms, is its involvement in Corporate Social Responsibility. In the Mao era, being a volunteer (*zhiyuanzhe*) was associated with the revolutionary virtues of selflessness and devotion to socialism. In the 1950s the regime sent "volunteer" soldiers to Korea (*Chaoxian zhiyuanjun*) to fight off American imperialism; and also "volunteer" youths to remote areas of China to reclaim wasteland for agriculture (*qingnian zhiyuan kenhuang huodong*) (Rohlf, 2003). In addition, the official discourse on volunteering permeated the normative training of youths through iconic figures and role models. Today, nationwide and local volunteering projects are a major component of the League's work, its self-perception and public image. Next to carrying out its own initiatives, the League also co-opts and promotes the work of volunteer organisations (Xu, 2012:105-6). By doing so, the CYL has positioned itself as a key actor in China's volunteering sector.

In public organisations and companies, the majority of volunteer and CSR work is part of large-scale projects and campaigns initiated by local or national level authorities. Such examples include mobilizing volunteers for the 2008 Olympics, the parade for the 60th anniversary of the PRC in 2009, and the 2010 Shanghai World Expo; sending young graduates (the 'Go West Project', *Xibu Jihua*), medical and teaching personnel to impoverished western regions; supporting 'Project Hope' (*Xiwang Gongcheng*) through donations; environmental actions such as the 'Protecting Mother River' project, a nationwide campaign for mass re-forestation and conservation of rivers, lakes and wetlands; and implementing the 'Learn to queue up campaign' in Beijing (Interviewees 11,14,18,19). The Beijing Water Department League Committee, has created a "Water Conservation and

Protection Volunteers” corps to disseminate water conservation practices in urban communities (Interviewee 5). Other examples include public lectures organised by hospitals on the prevention and treatment of various diseases (Interviewees 14, 15) and the dissemination of information about passenger safety by the Railway League Committee (Xu, 2003:104-5). In return, the League rewards organizations that participate in such activities with honorary titles such as the ‘Mark of Civilisation’ (wenming hao).

In the private sector, including FIEs, League related SCR activities include donations and participation in volunteer projects that corporate image. Amway China, for example, has established the Amway Volunteers and the Amway Volunteer Education Aid Program, and cooperates with the China Youth Development Fund (CYL-supported) and the Volunteers Association (CYL-established) through donations and sponsorships. Private companies with more modest means, such as those visited during fieldwork, occasionally participate in volunteer activities of local and national authorities. Overall, the frame of reference for the League’s volunteer activities is shaped by the more senior organisations present in the workplace and beyond.

### **Serving and representing young employees**

The League’s recreational activities promote values such as teamwork, loyalty to the company, vitality and creativity and include sports competitions, dinners and karaoke nights, visits to museums and parks, excursions, horse riding, climbing, calligraphy and painting classes. The frequency of the above, depends on the enthusiasm of the Committee secretary, the time available to devote to such events, and the financial support of the management or the Union. The Union cadre who acts as League secretary of the factory (F) in Zhejiang City

explained that the management is supportive of sports competitions because they train the workers' physique and discipline (Interviewee 9). Still, due to time pressure, very few recreational activities actually take place with League committees in the sites visited organizing one to two recreational activities per year.

The League's role in welfare is also marginal and indirect. Issues of administration and welfare (housing, health, canteen food, etc.) lay within the duties of the local workers Union or the human resources department of the danwei, with no CYL involvement. A Union cadre in charge of League affairs in the CM2 factory visited argued very eloquently that the biggest problem in regard to young workers is bridging "ideal" (lixiang) with "reality" (xianshi), which she explained as the younger workers' desire (kewang) for better life, salaries and working conditions. The League's role, she continued, is to carry out "psychological intervention" (xinli ganyu), small-scale activities and socializing events in order to allow workers to "psychologically adjust" with reality (Interviewee 20). However, even after the first wave of Foxconn suicides, when workers' mental health attracted considerable media attention, Union and League cadres in the sites visited had received no relevant training.

Another aspect of the League's indirect involvement in the field of young employees' welfare is finding a spouse. The CYL, as the Komsomol in the former Soviet Union, has been at the forefront of disseminating the official views on love and sex to young people (Gooderham, 1982). The League Committee Work Handbook (Yang, 2009), identifies moral education on courtship and love, marriage and family affairs as a task of grassroots organizations. The Handbook offers detailed descriptions of how each stage from courtship to making a family should be conducted, echoing Party-defined working class morality, traditional norms, and Marxist feminism. Despite the liberalisation of sexuality in the PRC since the 1980s, finding

a spouse is still a challenge, especially for migrant employees. League organisations occasionally arrange social gatherings and partner-finding events, and two Committee secretaries boasted about their role in successful matches (Interviewees 6,17). But the League cannot escape from its own elitist self-perception as cadres revealed eugenic concerns when explaining that dating events are open only to white-collar employees in order to bring ‘advanced youths’ together to form families (Interviewees 6,15,18). On the other hand, factory cadres mentioned that the management does not encourage such events, citing time constraints as the main reason. As labour relations in the PRC are loosely regulated, even personal life choices of workers such as marriage and childbirth are vulnerable to profit calculations by the employer, especially for female workers. Overall, the CYL is peripheral even in seemingly uncontroversial aspects of young employees’ welfare.

The League’s low capacity for responsiveness is also evident in the functioning of feedback mechanisms, which include meetings, surveys and personal contact. The effectiveness of these channels depends entirely on the goodwill and industriousness of cadres, who operate in a context of dependency and juniority that are antithetical to autonomous and purposeful action. After all, the political subordination of League cadres to the Party Secretary reinforces their junior position in generational and workplace hierarchy terms and diminishes their ability to negotiate with the Union and the management. Characteristically, in only two of the twelve work units visited did League functionaries note that young employees raise issues during the meetings<sup>6</sup> (Interviewees 9,17). Surveys by local governments have little value for representation, as they inquire about strictly organisational issues (length, type of membership and participation of event etc) and are completed by the League committee secretary (Interviewees 6, 17). In a similar manner, questionnaires uploaded by League

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<sup>6</sup> These include accommodation problems, quality of food and prices in the canteen, over-time work, professional and ethical matters.

organisations on the company's website were often used as examples of the League's inclusiveness and consultative character. These questionnaires have little value, as their content and distribution method is similar to unsophisticated online 'polls' on current affairs. Lastly, some League functionaries attributed their own lack of representation capacity to the young people's preference in dealing with problems through personal means and the assistance of friends and family rather than seeking organisational support. As various interviewees commented, in the very few instances (table 5) that young employees seek the assistance of a League cadre, a good interpersonal relation is more likely to be the underlying factor.

However, instances of representation do occur. In a rare case of advocacy in welfare, cadres raised the issue of accommodation shortages for young personnel with hospital authorities (PH2) and the Haidian district League Committee (Interviewee 15). Also, a factory cadre in Zhejiang presented the problem of low entry-level salaries to the Union, resulting in a small readjustment and obtained Union funding to construct a volleyball court for workers (Interviewee 9). These examples are indicative of the potential importance of cadre initiative but, overall, League grassroots organisations demonstrate very poor capacity for responsiveness. In a survey administered by the China Youth and Children Research Centre, young employees were asked to identify their preferred course of action for rights protection in the workplace, as well as to evaluate the outcome of these actions (table 5).

[Table 5 here]

The League was chosen by a mere 3.5 percent of respondents, slightly higher than the option "resort to violence" (3.3). Another finding of the survey is an overall distancing of employees

from mass organisations in the workplace, and a relatively high preference for silence and passivity. Similarly, in the 2010 Annual Report on Social Development of Beijing, Party and League organizations rank in the last place as the employees preferred channel of assistance, 9.1% and 5.1% respectively (2010:30). The findings show that the League's claim to represent young employees in the workplace remains highly unsubstantiated. This is consistent with other studies that identify the League's weak capacity in acting as a channel for the bottom-up articulation of interests and views of young people in general (Ngai et al, 2001; Liu 2006; Yan 2014).

## **Conclusion**

The transition to market economy has created challenges for young people that are in few spaces felt as strongly as in the workplace. Working rights are outbalanced by the developmental priorities and strategies of a country that has built a large part of its wealth on the competitive 'advantage' of cheap and disciplined labour. In this context, the League's rhetoric exhibits contradictory characteristics: as a 'school of communism' it offers normative incentives through a flowery language on socialist selflessness in an economic context that promotes material ones, and combines communist symbolism with the glorification of market reforms, its labour-capital relations and ethics. As an organization aspiring to reach out to young people, the League emerges as even more paradoxical since its presence is felt more in public organisations than in the expanding private sector that employs large numbers of young workers, especially in construction and manufacturing. Overall, the League's ability to engage young employees and contribute to their welfare is weak, rendering the CYL increasingly irrelevant in places of work. Active League branches

promote the normativisation of current industrial relations and participate in building a positive corporate public image through social responsibility events.

The above findings are explained through a set of endemic factors that influence the CYL's organisational capacity and representative functions. First, the League depends entirely on the Party for its existence and operation at the grassroots level. As the central state does not fund youth work in local areas, it is unimaginable that the extensive organisational network of the League in the various localities could be maintained and expanded without the CCP. But "building the League through building the Party" prevents the League from developing its own autonomous work direction. All grassroots League organisations visited exhibited low to non-existent ability in keeping members involved, training cadres in youth affairs and deciding on activities and internal processes. Second, CYL cadres are integrated in the workplace hierarchy in junior positions, which further enforces subordination to the more senior power holders in generational, institutional and political terms. Occasionally, individuals with a higher post at the workplace, who also act as CYL Committee Secretaries, may take initiative to promote what they perceive as the interests of young employees. As a rule of thumb however, cadres exhibit very limited initiative for advocacy in favour of their young colleagues. The only channel available is to influence the agenda of the Union and enlist its support on issues directly affecting young employees' welfare. But in addition to dependency and juniority, the effectiveness of this channel is contingent upon the existence of an active Union and the willingness of its cadres to endorse such demands and negotiate with the management. These conditions are often not met.

To conclude, the institutionalization of a pro-youth orientation is very unlikely to occur in a context where market, generational and political dynamics integrate and subordinate League

functionaries as junior cadres in workplace hierarchies. In the Reform era, despite the lofty rhetoric of ‘keeping the youth satisfied’ and an explicit, albeit legally weak, mandate to promote the interests of young employees, the Communist Youth League has not managed to position itself as their institutional voice. As such, the Communist Youth League will continue to be irrelevant in the Chinese workplace, neither ‘Communist’, nor pro-‘Youth’, but also without the inclusive and participatory character of a ‘League’.

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