

Construction of the Working Class Image in the Early Years of the People's Republic of China: A Study based on People's Daily (1949–1956)

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ABSTRACT

In the early period of the founding of the People's Republic of China, in response to the Party's strategic shift in work focus, the need to consolidate the leading position of the working class, and the stigmatization of the working class in international public opinion, People's Daily systematically constructed a multi-dimensional representation of the working class through structured news reporting. From three interrelated dimensions—its class foundation, its role in national leadership, and its international responsibility—the working class was represented as “the solid class foundation of the Party,” “the leading force in national construction,” and “the vanguard of the international proletariat.” This process of image construction not only promoted the social dissemination of mainstream ideology and strengthened the working class's status as the masters of the country, but also effectively stimulated its enthusiasm for production. It provided important support for social integration and national construction in the early years of the PRC, and accumulated valuable experience for the construction of the working class image in contemporary Party newspapers.

KEYWORDS

People's Daily; Working Class; Image Construction; Party Newspaper.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the period prior to the founding of the People's Republic of China, the working class was subjected to long-term exploitation and oppression and had almost no political voice. After the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, a fundamental transformation took place: the working class rose to become the leading class of the state, and its political and economic status was significantly enhanced. However, a new practical issue also emerged: how to enable workers to truly recognize themselves as “masters of the country.” This became a key problem that the Party and the state urgently needed to address.

At this historical turning point, People's Daily, as the official newspaper of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, undertook the important task of shaping a new image of the working class and disseminating mainstream ideological discourse.

2. HISTORICAL MOTIVATIONS FOR PEOPLE'S DAILY'S CONSTRUCTION OF THE WORKING CLASS IMAGE

2.1. Adapting to the Shift in the Party's Work Focus

In 1949, Mao Zedong, at the Second Plenary Session of the Seventh Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, proposed that the Party's work focus should shift from rural areas to urban areas, calling for the entire Party to strengthen urban governance and construction. ^[1]This shift represented not only an adjustment in political and economic structure, but also placed new requirements on news propaganda work.

In August of the same year, the Publicity Department of the CPC Central Committee issued the Directive on the Guiding Principles for Urban Party Newspapers, which explicitly stated that Party newspapers should primarily serve workers and peasants, deepen engagement at the grassroots level, reflect the daily lives of the masses, and establish closer ties with them.

During the same period, the Party began to take over and reform the existing bourgeois news institutions in urban areas, gradually establishing its dominant position in urban public discourse. In this historical process, People's Daily, as the official newspaper of the CPC Central Committee, gradually became an important platform for shaping the image of the working class.

2.2. Consolidating the Leading Position of the Working Class

Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping both emphasized that the working class should occupy a leading position in China's revolutionary process and national construction. Mao Zedong stated more directly that only when the proletariat assumes leadership responsibility can the Chinese revolution achieve its final victory.^[2]

However, after the founding of the People's Republic of China, certain cadres and members of the public still harbored doubts about the leadership role of the working class, and even some one-sided views emerged, such as the claim that "the working class has the most advantages in society."

In response to these issues, the Party and the state sought to strengthen ideological education and organizational development, reinforce the worker-peasant alliance, and gradually promote social recognition of the leading position of the working class. In this process, People's Daily systematically reported on workers' participation in political study, democratic reform, and production and construction activities, progressively dispelling social doubts and objectively consolidating the ideological foundation of the worker-peasant alliance.

2.3. Addressing the Challenge of International Stigmatization

In the early years of the founding of the People's Republic of China, Western countries represented by the United States engaged in the ideological construction and media dissemination of a distorted image of the new China, portraying it as a "totalitarian state" and deliberately misrepresenting the true nature of the working class.

American scholar Hans J. Morgenthau proposed the concept of "prestige policy," which suggests that a state can influence international perceptions by shaping its national image, without relying solely on military force. In response to such external public opinion pressure, the Party and the state incorporated the construction of a positive image of the working class into the broader strategy of national image building.

People's Daily presented the daily life of workers through authentic and systematic reporting, highlighting the working class's advanced nature, organizational strength, and constructive role. In

doing so, it not only served as an effective instrument for countering Western discourse but also operationalized the so-called “prestige policy” at the level of media practice.

3. THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE WORKING CLASS IMAGE IN PEOPLE’S DAILY

3.1. As the Class Foundation of the Party: Representation of Advanced Productive Forces

In the early years of the founding of the People’s Republic of China, many workers had a vague understanding of their class identity and lacked a clear sense of self-recognition. In response to this situation, People’s Daily focused on reporting the process of workers’ political awakening, aiming to construct an image of the working class characterized by a “class-based collective consciousness” and “high political awareness.”

In terms of class consciousness, the newspaper reported that workers systematically studied content such as the “history of social development,” “current political situation and policies,” “internationalism,” and “land reform policies.” Through such ideological education, workers gradually came to recognize themselves as masters of the country and understood the responsibilities they should bear in national affairs. They also strengthened their belief that they were willing to devote themselves fully to safeguarding their new life. This transformation in mindset marked a historical shift in their conception of labor value—from “working for others” to “contributing to the construction of the country and for themselves.”

In terms of political awareness, People’s Daily called for strengthening workers’ education and organizational development, emphasizing that workers should first recognize themselves as “the leading class of the new democratic society and an integral part of the masters of enterprises.” At the same time, the newspaper also reported exemplary cases in which workers consciously resisted lax working styles and actively opposed disciplinary violations. Through such reporting, People’s Daily disseminated a value orientation emphasizing discipline and order, and constructed a distinct image of the new Chinese working class as a force opposing disorder and indiscipline. To some extent, this reflected the role of the working class as a representative of advanced productive forces, embodying a sense of order and responsibility.

3.2. As the Leading Class of the State: The Backbone of Socialist Construction

In the process of socialist revolution and construction, the working class played a central role. People’s Daily constructed its image as the “leading class” primarily from three dimensions.

The first dimension concerns the identity of the working class as “masters of the country” during the process of taking over cities. The newspaper focused on workers’ concrete actions in safeguarding state property. In newly liberated areas, workers actively participated in anti-sabotage struggles and cooperated with the new regime in completing urban takeover and the appropriation of bureaucratic-capitalist enterprises. For instance, in January 1950, People’s Daily reported that workers at the Jiaozuo coal mine in Henan conducted a thorough investigation into acts of sabotage, demonstrating a high sense of responsibility toward state property. Likewise, the case of workers at the Yudian Textile Factory in Yunnan who risked their lives to protect the factory vividly illustrated an heroic and selfless “master of the country” posture.^[3]

The second dimension is the role of the working class as the “main force” in democratic reforms. In the early years of the PRC, the working class gradually established its image as a backbone force through ideological education, the strengthening of internal unity, and the abolition of feudal systems of oppression. Specifically, workers used institutions such as workers’ congresses and “complaint meetings” to clarify the boundary between friend and enemy, thereby strengthening class

consciousness and becoming an important force in maintaining the emerging social order. In terms of internal unity, workers at the Hangzhou Water Supply Plant exposed espionage plots and successfully eliminated factional divisions, achieving organizational cohesion. In abolishing old systems, truck workers of the Beijing Construction Engineering Company collectively exposed the exploitation and bribery practices of the feudal foreman Yang Weihuan, fully demonstrating their determination to dismantle feudal control structures.

The third dimension is the image of the working class as an “elder brother” in technological innovation. The working class not only occupied a leading position but also stood at the forefront of the industrial front, and was widely referred to in society as “laodage” (elder brother workers). This designation embodied qualities such as dedication to work, pursuit of excellence, hard work, and innovative spirit. According to reports at the time, workers actively engaged in cultural learning, with many recognizing that advancing industrialization required improving cultural literacy, and thus enthusiastically participated in literacy campaigns. Meanwhile, workers also made continuous efforts in technological innovation. For example, in 1954, workers in Anshan improved production processes and introduced new technologies, continuously breaking production quotas. In addition, workers and peasants maintained close solidarity. People’s Daily frequently employed vivid language, incorporating dialects, proverbs, and colloquial expressions to express the deep bond between workers and peasants. For instance, during a visit organized by the Nanzha Command Headquarters, many rural laborers remarked: “The workers, our elder brothers, are truly capable; we must learn from them.”

3.3. As the International Proletariat: A Defender of World Peace

Relying on the working class’s deep-rooted patriotic tradition and anti-imperialist struggle spirit, People’s Daily systematically constructed the international image of the working class from three dimensions: anti-aggression struggles, international worker solidarity, and the consolidation of the socialist camp.

In terms of anti-aggression, in November 1950, People’s Daily published a series of reports closely connected to everyday production and social life, highlighting the nationwide upsurge in the movement to resist U.S. aggression and aid Korea. At that time, workers, students, and medical professionals in Nanjing all expressed a strong willingness to participate in the War to Resist U.S. Aggression and Aid Korea and to defend the homeland. National model worker Ge Zengkai stated that they would extinguish imperialist aggression with the same determination as putting out a fire, and that all workers in his factory would devote maximum effort to supporting this anti-aggression war.

In terms of international working-class solidarity, after the founding of the PRC, Chinese trade unions continuously followed the development of workers’ movements in other countries and actively expanded channels of international friendship and exchange. In October 1952, Liu Ningyi, Vice Chairman of the All-China Federation of Trade Unions, stated in a congratulatory message on the seventh anniversary of the World Federation of Trade Unions that the Chinese working class would always stand under the banner of the WFTU, striving to strengthen global proletarian solidarity and to frustrate the attempts of U.S. imperialism to divide the international working-class movement.^[4]

In terms of the maintenance of the socialist camp, under the combined considerations of ideology and national security, the new China adopted a “leaning to one side” diplomatic strategy, firmly aligning itself with the socialist camp led by the Soviet Union. In November 1954, Guo Moruo emphasized at the commemorative conference for the 37th anniversary of the October Revolution that solidarity and cooperation between China, the Soviet Union, and other fraternal countries had effectively formed a strong barrier safeguarding world peace. Subsequently, workers across China expressed strong enthusiasm for learning from the Soviet Union. In a letter to Soviet workers, labor model Zeng Wenchang of Yunnan wrote that after finishing work, workers could listen simultaneously to

broadcasts from Moscow and Beijing via radio, which allowed them to directly experience the power of internationalist spirit.^[5]

4. PRACTICAL EFFECTS AND CONTEMPORARY IMPLICATIONS OF THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE WORKING CLASS IMAGE

4.1. Practical Effects

In the early years of the founding of the People's Republic of China, People's Daily, as the official newspaper of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, undertook important tasks such as disseminating the Party's guiding principles and policies, shaping a new national image, and consolidating social consensus. Through systematic and continuous reporting on workers' vivid practices in political participation, economic construction, and cultural learning, it played a significant role in the development of the new state during that period.

In terms of ideology, the newspaper integrated relatively abstract theoretical content into narratives of everyday life, gradually transforming it into spontaneous mass action, thereby providing an important ideological foundation for the establishment and consolidation of the socialist system. A 1953 report on workers in winter training in Northeast China noted that workers felt a strong sense of responsibility and believed that "the effectiveness of national construction depends on our efforts." Such expressions themselves constitute a concrete manifestation of class identification. In addition, reports on outstanding workers being admitted into the Communist Party closely linked Party ideology with exemplary working-class figures, making mainstream discourse more concrete and credible.^[6]

With regard to the leadership status and "master of the country" image of the working class, People's Daily closely followed the dynamics of mass movements and presented the workers' advanced nature, organizational strength, and spirit of dedication from multiple perspectives, objectively narrowing the distance between workers and peasants. A model peasant worker in Hebei Province, Zhang Xishun, once remarked after visiting a factory: "I originally thought agricultural labor in hot weather was already hard enough, but I did not expect that the workers, our elder brothers, work even harder." Such sincere admiration from peasant representatives was highly persuasive and, to a considerable extent, confirmed the leading position of the working class.^[7]

In terms of enhancing production enthusiasm, the working class, as the main force of China's industrialization, bore a glorious historical mission. People's Daily extensively reported on the advanced deeds of national model workers, setting exemplary figures for the broader society. The two National Model Workers' Conferences in 1950 and 1956 comprehensively demonstrated model workers' high sense of responsibility, strong technical competence, and spirit of dedication. These reports greatly inspired workers across the country, encouraging them to transform their political enthusiasm into concrete actions for the construction of the new China in a master-of-the-country posture.

4.2. Contemporary Implications

Looking back, the successful experience accumulated by People's Daily in the early years of the founding of the People's Republic of China offers important implications for Party newspapers in the new era.

First, it is necessary to strengthen guiding capacity and credibility. In the new era, Party newspapers should center on economic development, clearly and persuasively articulate the prospects of national development, and adapt their discourse system to changes in the media landscape by integrating news reporting with Marxist theoretical guidance, thereby avoiding formulaic or empty rhetoric. At the same time, the essence of Party newspapers lies in embodying the "people-centered spirit." They

should genuinely pay attention to workers' practical concerns in employment, vocational training, and income distribution, rather than treating them as a "silent majority." By promoting model worker spirit and craftsmanship spirit, workers' sense of ownership can be stimulated, enabling them to recognize their central role in national development.

Second, it is necessary to enhance communicative appeal. While "Party media bear the surname of the Party" is a fundamental principle, such appeal cannot rely solely on slogan-based expression. While People's Daily must reflect the will of the Party and safeguard the authority of the Party Central Committee, it must also ensure that workers can read and understand its content. Journalists should be equipped with Marxist theory and improve their political literacy, helping workers distinguish right from wrong in a complex public opinion environment and consciously resist erroneous ideological trends. Party newspapers should not only dare to criticize incorrect viewpoints but also be skilled in conducting public opinion supervision in a constructive rather than purely critical manner.

Third, it is necessary to enhance communication capacity. As the contemporary public opinion environment and media landscape undergo profound changes, Party newspapers must follow the laws of communication and pursue reform and innovation. The core is to implement the principle of "three closenesses" (to reality, to life, and to the masses) and design reports according to the requirements of the times and central tasks. It is particularly noteworthy that in the internet era, the working class is no longer merely a passive information receiver; it has also become an active participant in communication. Therefore, it is important to smooth communication channels, strengthen interaction with workers, and make use of new media tools such as short videos and live streaming to tell vivid stories of grassroots workers, enabling workers to speak for themselves and to present the spiritual outlook of industrial workers in the new era.

5. CONCLUSION

In the early years of the founding of the People's Republic of China, People's Daily's construction of the working class image can be understood as an important historical practice through which the Party and the state consolidated political power and fostered social consensus via media discourse during a critical period of transformation. A review of this history reveals that the shaping of class imagery in the media was not an isolated cultural phenomenon; rather, it was closely intertwined with national development strategies.

Specifically, People's Daily embedded the individual practices of the working class into the broader narrative of national construction, thereby transforming the relatively abstract political concept of the "leading class" into concrete, observable, and imitable actions. In this way, the dissemination of ideology was effectively materialized and grounded in everyday social experience.

From a contemporary perspective, the construction of the working class image in the new era cannot be detached from the broader context of national development. How to activate the core value of labor through media discourse, and how to continuously highlight the historical agency of the working class amid technological innovation and social transformation, remains an important issue worthy of sustained attention.

From a long-term perspective, it is necessary to continuously study and reflect on the representation of the working class and fully leverage its role in shaping social consensus and supporting national development.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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