

Colours of Money, Shades of Pride

HISTORICITIES AND MORAL POLITICS IN
INDUSTRIAL CONFLICTS IN HONG KONG

FRED Y. L. CHIU



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The image shows the Chinese characters for '香港大學' (Hong Kong University) rendered in a square word calligraphy style. Each character is contained within a square frame, and the overall composition is a vertical column of four squares. The characters are '香', '港', '大', and '學' from top to bottom.

Hong Kong University Press is honoured that Xu Bing, whose art explores the complex themes of language across cultures, has written the Press's name in his Square Word Calligraphy. This signals our commitment to cross-cultural thinking and the distinctive nature of our English-language books published in China.

“At first glance, Square Word Calligraphy appears to be nothing more unusual than Chinese characters, but in fact it is a new way of rendering English words in the format of a square so they resemble Chinese characters. Chinese viewers expect to be able to read Square Word Calligraphy but cannot. Western viewers, however are surprised to find they can read it. Delight erupts when meaning is unexpectedly revealed.”

— Britta Erickson, *The Art of Xu Bing*

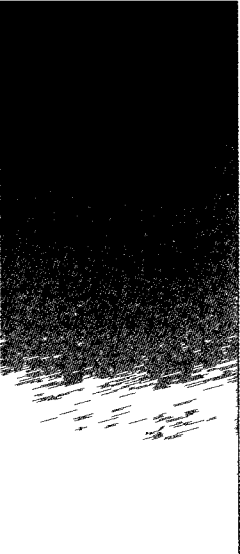


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Cast of Characters

Mr A	Mysterious contact person for JWM headquarters in Japan
Ah Lam	JWM third-floor worker
Amukas	Managing director of JWM head office in Japan
Ah Si	Protagonist of 'Ah Si Incident'
Ah Ton	Member of Labour and Resident Coalition (LRC), activist/self-proclaimed Trotskyite
Bai Sa-kuo	Editor of <i>Hong Kong Economic Journal</i> (HKEJ)
Banata	Vice-president, Japan Nationwide Council of Unions
Bao Yi-hai	Head of the LRC, a schoolteacher
Chan Mei-fon	JWM management spokeswoman, secretary of Beagos and Taylor (American public relations firm)
Chan, Peter	Reporter of <i>South China Morning Post</i> (SCMP)
Chen Siu-guan	JWM second-floor representative
Chen Yi-han	Public relations officer of the Japanese Consulate-General in Hong Kong

Chi-meí	JWM second-floor worker
Chichika	JWM Hong Kong shop-floor manager
Chien Fa-hin	JWM seventh-floor representative
Chien Fon-yí (Big Brother)	JWM second-floor representative
Chou Mei-Ying	Staff of Christian Labour Association (CLA)
Chu Chi-lin (Little Wife)	JWM second-floor representative
Chubiki	JWM Hong Kong managing director after sit-in
Chun Mai-ga	Officer of Labour Unions Registration Bureau
Dai-gau	JWM second-floor worker
Dai Fo-san	JWM second-floor worker
Dai Lin-wai	JWM seventh-floor workers' representative
Dai Yu-sí	Head of pro-Taiwan Confederation of Workers' Associations (CWA)
Dou Wan-min	Female chairperson of LRC
Du, Leonado	Hong Kong Government Secretary for District Administration
Fan Si-lai	Volunteer teacher in 'oral communication skills'
Fan yu-lin	Reporter for <i>Central Daily</i>
Fu Kwon-sin	Staff of the Central Kwai Chung Residents and Labour Service (CKRLS)
Fukkako Kosho	Women's Rights Committee of the Humanist Society of Hong Kong
Gu Lai-hap	Staff of Tsuen Wan Labour Service Centre (TWLSC)
Gum Fu-yan	Female JWM line leader
Ha-lan	JWM third-floor worker
Ho-chie	JWM second-floor worker
Hon Lai-fon	JWM seventh-floor representative
Hu Hon-chí	JWM seventh-floor representative
Hsiao Chia	JWM second-floor worker
Hui Bei-kwang	Secretary of the Federation of Hong Kong and Kowloon Trade Unions

Kau-fu (Uncle)	JWM second-floor worker
Kusara	JWM Japanese shop-floor manager
Ku Han-yim	Chairman of Federation of Labour Unions (FLU)
Lam Tu-pi	JWM's attorney
Lam Yi-kai	CKLRS's part-time staff; social work intern
Lai-fon	JWM third-floor worker
Lao Kan-kai	Director of TWLSC; member of Executive Committee
Lee Siu-ching	Chairman of FCSU
Ley, Mobark	JWM's attorney
Li-pui	Author of letter to the editor of <i>Express</i> (EX)
Liang Li-an	Reporter for <i>Hong Kong Standard</i> (HKS); article writer
Lin Yi-chin	Chief of staff of CKRLS; district board member
Li Nai-kuan	Director of TWLSC
Lo Man-sa	Director of CLA
Lo Un-pu	JWM second-floor workers' representative
Lu Mei-chin	JETCON worker; supporter
Lu Shan	JWM factory manager
Dr Luk Sa-bien	Lecturer in the Management Department at the University of Hong Kong
Luk Ga-yip	Chairman of Hong Kong News Reporters' Association; chief of the City Desk at the HKS
Ma Po-kwan	anthropologist/field researcher
Ma Siu-yim	JWM second-floor worker
Mao Si-hai	the Labour Bureau's chief labour relations director
Minika	JWM Hong Kong junior management staff
Mo Ku-sin	JWM shop-floor production manager
Mui Len-shu	JWM second-floor worker

Ou Ho-chung	JWM business manager
Ou Yang-chung	Chairman of Hong Kong Teachers Union (HKTU)
Pei, Wendy	Reporter for SCMP
Po Lo-du	JWM most-hated foreman
Poon Ni-kwon	Director of TWLSC
Robinson, Mark	Director of the CFJP
Sa Mo-han	Mysterious middleman
Mrs Sheou	Woo Char-hwa's secretary
Shih Ding-yi	Labour organizer of CLA
Shita	JWM Hong Kong shop-floor manager
Sian Yun-chu	JETCON line leader
Sieu-pin	Member of LRC
Siu Fen-ni	JWM second-floor worker
Son Yan-min	Legislative Councillor, vice-president of FLU
Sisuno	JWM Hong Kong shop-floor manager
Smith, Warren	The Governor
Tosai	Deputy managing director of JWM Hong Kong
Tu Pi-sin	Director of Labour Relations of the Labour Bureau's Tsuen Wan branch
Father Wasini	Catholic priest
Wong Nieu-kwen	UMELCO member (industrialist)
Woo Char-hwa	JWM Hong Kong vice-general manager
Yang Lai-gau	TWLSC volunteer
Yen Chin-chih	TWLSC director/founding member; manager of government-subsidized youth centre
Yen Giu	Reporter for HKEJ
Yin-mei	JWM third-floor worker
Yin-yon	JWM second-floor worker
Yu-dan	JWM second-floor shop manager
Yue-mui	JWM second-floor worker



1

Introduction

During the first two weeks of June 1986, an unprecedented strike and sit-in broke out at the Japan Watch Multinational (JWM) in Hong Kong. It erupted spontaneously after thirty-six workers were fired on 31 May.

Or was it nineteen?

In the papers of 1 June, about two-thirds of the reports stated that thirty-six had been fired; the other third reported nineteen. By 4 June, some papers reported that seventeen more had been fired, bringing the total to thirty-six, but that only raised another question: Had they been fired on 31 May or later? And where did these conflicting reports come from anyway? Though I had been involved in the strike from the beginning, as a volunteer at the Tsuen Wan Labour Service Centre (hereafter, the Centre) and was an anthropology graduate student conducting research on factory work in Hong Kong, it was not until a series of interviews conducted long after the strike that I was able to solve the puzzle of the numbers.

By interviewing the journalists involved, I learned that those who had reported nineteen got their information from JWM management, while those who reported thirty-six got their number from the workers. Why the discrepancy? Some of the workers gave the following explanation.

Management had meticulously planned this ‘wholesale slaughter’ At a carefully selected moment, with videotaping teams in tow, a tactical firing team began handing out dismissal envelopes on the seventh floor, where the workers were least organized They planned on firing selected workers on the first, third, and sixth floors in sequence, finally ending on the second floor where the workers were best organized To prevent the workers from reacting, the firing team attempted to expel the workers from each floor before proceeding to the next However, one of the fired seventh-floor workers managed to wave her dismissal envelope in front of the momentarily open doors of the second floor This action alerted the second-floor workers, who stood up, looked at each other, rushed up the staircase, occupied the ‘office’, and began their sit-in and strike

Thus, the strike began before anyone on the second floor had actually been fired So how did the workers determine how many were being fired? It turns out that one of them had found dismissal envelopes addressed to seventeen second-floor workers hidden in a usually locked conference room Together with the nineteen already fired, that made thirty-six Despite the fact that they had never formally been fired, some of these seventeen workers decided to leak the number ‘thirty-six’ to the press in order to demonstrate the full extent of the management’s actions and thereby increase the sense of outrage and solidarity among the striking workers Management first tried to cover up their actions by only admitting to firing nineteen, but eventually decided to admit to the total of thirty-six

Much remains to be told about this incident — in which more than 300 female workers and their families, from the rural area of Pat Heung, were involved, and which accounted for more than 50 percent of the total annual working days lost to strikes in the enclave, according to the official record — but at the very least the journalistic version of it demonstrates that the ‘basic facts’ of the strike, as reported in the press, are anything but transparent The ‘fact’ of the number of workers fired was the result of the interplay between strategic constructions of reality on the part of some workers and certain factions within the management As an opening, this incident introduces both the central event which this book analyses — the

JWM strike — and, more importantly, my theoretical understanding that social ‘reality’ is continually constructed and reconstructed from multiple perspectives in a strategic, interactive, discursive process. This understanding is reflected in both the form and content of this book.

I present three genres of narrative about the strike: selective summaries of press reports, my ethnographic description, and the workers’ (and my own) reflexive consciousness as developed from later interviews. These three types of narrative are not three ‘reflections’ of a single ‘reality’, but are the very substance of that multiple and contradictory reality. The juxtaposition of these accounts is meant both to move the reader away from simplistic notions of linear history and to illustrate the importance of different forms of narrative in the process of social life. These three genres of narrative differ in both the positions from which they are constructed and the ‘event’ that they construct. A fuller explication of each, illuminating the theoretical issues involved, will follow. But let me begin with an introduction to my fieldwork itself.

Fieldwork as Personal Intellectual History

My research covered two time periods, September 1985 to June 1986 and September 1986 to May 1987. Each period involved two separate phases of inquiry.

The first phase

In the three months after my arrival in Hong Kong and before I had a chance to acquaint myself with the social context of work and employment, I carried out a series of sociological surveys. There were five major industrial districts — two on Hong Kong Island and three in Kowloon — and I initiated a first round of investigation in all five districts. With the surveys, abundant ‘data’ was collected, including data on social networks, wage histories, household budget accounts and family employment records. I was to use this extensive preliminary overview to locate and evaluate sites in which to

carry out further intensive fieldwork. Yet these sociometric/human-geographic findings turned out not to be helpful for me to secure a social context for engaging the field. It was only in Kwai Tsing, Kowloon, that I managed to build up a relationship with the local labour service groups that was sound enough for an ongoing interaction. Hence, the information from these surveys can best be considered as sociologically-tailored 'data' — of the nature of a pilot study — with only minimal utility for my anthropological project.

The second phase

Beginning in the first week of December 1985, a major industrial dispute broke out in a famous multinational corporation's offshore manufacturing unit in Kwai Tsing. This dispute, between the management and 300 female operators, stretched over a period of three months and involved a settlement amounting to HK\$5 million. Because of close contacts established with various local community and labour service organizations, I had the rare opportunity to carry out intensive participant observation among the workers during and after their various industrial actions. This experience readied me for a similar but more in-depth involvement with the JWM industrial dispute, mentioned above, that occurred sixteen weeks later.

In late April 1986, I was performing my usual duties as a volunteer at the joint office of Central Kwai Chung Labour and Residents Services (CKLRS) and the Tsuen Wan Labour Service Centre (TWLSC, the Centre) when calls came in from operatives working at JWM. These calls marked the beginning of a landmark conflict between JWM and the workers. This conflict, unprecedented in recent Hong Kong history, culminated in a record thirteen-day strike and sit-in at the factory. As a volunteer at the Centre, I observed the two-week sit-in and participated in almost all activities organized by the struggling workers. Working as a record-keeper for the Centre and workers, I obtained multiple sets of notes taken by various participants, in addition to my own personal ethnographic records. The strike ended on 13 June 1986, and I left Hong Kong at the end of the same

month for my first report to my academic committee at the University of Chicago.

The third phase

In September 1986, I went back to Hong Kong with the idea of using the JWM strike as the major empirical focus of my fieldwork. I had originally planned to study the political culture of manufacturing production and reproduction in Hong Kong, with special emphasis on vertical and horizontal integration of the workforce. However, the situation on the ground dictated an alternative strategy. The multilayered crisis of an industrial dispute heightened the contradictions within various sites and presented unanticipated theoretico-ethnographic and politico-discursive challenges.

During my previous stay in Hong Kong I had lived through the crisis as an ethnographer and a somewhat 'gung-ho' unionist; but now I set out to perform a scholar's task. I began to collect every piece of published literature relating to the JWM case from nineteen newspapers, twelve periodicals, and five non-serial publications, as well as numerous internal communiques. In three months I managed to locate more than 300 separate pieces of printed material, from a diverse array of sources and political positions. What stunned me, as I gathered these accounts, was the degree to which the 'facts' not only contradicted each other in different written versions, but actually caused me to doubt whether they referred to the same 'event' I had experienced first-hand less than six months before! In the majority of cases, the materials simply denied the validity of my first-hand observations. It was virtually impossible to find a way to reconcile my personal records and memory with the published accounts at this 'factual' level.

The fourth phase

Faced with the above dilemma, I had to decide whether to give up the whole project or to dig further. I chose the latter and worked for six more months, carrying out intensive interviews with all the major actors involved

in the 'making' of this particular 'history': militant unionists, strike leaders, participating workers, Labour Bureau officers, news reporters, union leaders from the region, public relations executives of famous multinational corporations, and business attachés of foreign countries. I did not interview JWM management or their legal advisers, partly owing to difficulties in reaching them and partly by choice.

The majority of interviewees gave me more than one interview, allowing me to clarify statements and make sense of what individuals understood to have happened. Second and subsequent interviews usually proceeded in a more involved, reflexive, conscious and intimate fashion than the first, as I engaged the actors in a process of recreating the 'event' and making history from their respective stances, at the same time enabling the interviewees to reflect upon any discrepancies that had surfaced and on contradictions emerging from the narratives of others. Interviewees were also encouraged to justify or criticize themselves or anyone else, if they so desired.

As interview records accumulated, a more panoramic view than I had previously imagined began to come into focus, expanding the geographic area, numbers of people, and time-span under consideration. Newly emerging constructions of the 'event' rendered it an increasingly multi-dimensional 'panorama'.

The above chronology of my fieldwork, albeit a simplified one, indicates that during different phases I pursued different kinds of activity and obtained different kinds of information; accordingly, the accounts generated are of a diverse nature. These accounts forced me to initiate alternative readings and to engage in differentiated discourses, seeking various definite 'answers' by asking concrete questions arising from features of the accounts themselves. The questions asked in different phases were dictated by:

1. The roles I was playing, then and now;
2. The presumptions and assumptions embedded in the investigative strategies I employed; and
3. The methodological bias inherent in any defined set of investigative procedures and the extent to which it was recognized and problematized.

In other words, how one positions oneself preconditions the questions one can ask and the questions one asks preconditions the answers given. To transcend this limitation one must cultivate one's reflexivity, in terms of the nature of one's gaze and the positioning of one's perspective. The multi-genre narrative strategy I propose is important, for it can make transparent the hidden, and sensitize and problematize issues of gazes, perspectives and horizons.

However, these methodological truisms were by no means clear to me while I was wrapped up in the investigation of the one 'thing' — a strike — on which people merely had different perspectives. In other words, it was not until I gave up the effort of maintaining the fiction that 'it's all just one world out there and culture is about interpreting it differently' that I became aware of what I had been doing all along.

The trajectory of my own personal intellectual history has been a series of detours — a continual distancing of myself from socio-topographical feature-sorting, from historical developmental model-fitting and from economic-nomothetical law-finding, all of which lead to a dead end. What rescued me from this dead end were the resistances and counter-resistances that I began to glimpse in the fourth-phase interviews. This dialectic journey of knowing, bumpy as it was, eventually gave me a totally new sense of direction, revealing a fluctuating, unique scenario.

I came to see that, in the first phase of my project, I had been like a prospector carefully saving whatever his panning turned up, hoping it would all turn out to be gold. However, I was far from satisfied with merely sifting through 'useful data' in search of socially significant features, as this strategy would not serve my purpose, which was to enter the lifeworld of the people in the field situation.

I understood that the rich documentation I had collected on the JWM case during the third phase might be envied by many historians. To them, discrepancies are inevitable and can always be explained away; stories can always be constructed to neatly fulfil the requirements of model-fitting and law-finding. The predicament for an anthropologist, however, is that the discrepancies within what he has himself observed are no longer of, or in,

the 'materials', but are discrepancies in his very being. In effect, working against this predicament brought home to me the words and scholarly practice of Bernard Cohn and Greg Dening at a very basic and personal level (Cohn 1987; and Dening 1996).

The field in which I was working is a highly literate one. Written accounts of social process are constantly being constructed and reconstructed. Analytically, the accounts of the present investigation can be qualitatively differentiated according to:

1. The different social contexts to which they owe their existence;
2. The different forms they take as vehicles for information;
3. The different mediators through whom particular account-creating activities have been executed, including news reporters who showed up only once, and one who used her status as a unionist to infiltrate the strike line and monitor the workers for months for her boss, the chairman of the News Reporters' Association; and
4. The different ways and settings in which they have been generated, and the specific purpose or immediate political effect they are made to have.

Normally a certain amount of analytical deconstruction is required to make these determining features explicit. Only with such analysis can the role of differentially-positioned actors and their different assumptions, habits, and agendas be made clear. Despite the richness of the documentary record I collected in the first three phases of my project I could not see beyond the explicit content of records to the social processes by which they had been constructed. Hence my sense of contradiction.

Thus, during the last six months of my fieldwork, I spent hours talking, reviewing, discussing and reflecting with all the people involved in the making of a history which was only six months old, accumulating 200-plus hours of intensive, tape-recorded discourse and listening to, transcribing, comparing, double-checking and cross-checking the tapes. As this process progressed, new dimensions of the strike opened up.

In the process of retrospectively constructing a theorized history, my interviewees and I relived our lives as historical agents in an intense way. In doing so, we were able once again to transform the conditions of our existence, master them, and be transformed in relation to them. Past happenings were not only appropriated but interrogated. In addition, our presence in the intertextuality of 'now' and 'then' was closely scrutinized. Riding the vehicle of discourse, we shuttled once again through a time tunnel. As we progressed, we — mere nobodies to begin with — were mediated and transformed into significant historical actors, becoming conscious not only of how history had acted upon us, but also how we acted back upon it. The 'historicity' we thereby achieved provided us with empirical bases from which to call into doubt the bland cause-and-effect logic of the positivists, which tends to approach history as singular and total.

We further learned that an analysis of discursive position-making and position-taking in the thickness of concrete resistance and counter-resistance calls for an alternative mind-set. One must refuse to take the various agencies involved as having an *a priori* existence of a certain kind. One must refute the careless identification of 'functions' or chartering of 'needs' — concepts which have become habitual as the social-scientific world has attempted to suture the unsutureable: the social itself. In other words, what needs to be problematized are the statistical and nomothetic analyses that take individual actors as isomorphic units, and social scientific practices which leave the social relations of data collection and their consequences unquestioned.

Perhaps the thesis of 'the impossibility of the society' put forth by Laclau and Mouffe remains a novel idea, in some quarters, to this very day (Laclau and Mouffe 1985); but the time has come for it to become common-sense (i.e., good sense *à la* Gramsci 1989) for socially-conscientious minds to note that where there is an excess of meanings there is an excess of signs; where there is an excess of signifiers there is an excess of signifieds; where there is an excess of structures there is an excess of events; and, for that matter, where there is an excess of observers there is an excess of the observed.

These lessons, if pushed to their logical extreme, may actually lead to a total rejection of conventional sociological or ethnographic strategies and practices. Rather than reject anthropological research, however, it became more important to me that the hectic nineteen-month journey of my fieldwork had involved a double dialectic as well as a two-way process. As we worked, I was constantly transforming my research ‘subject’ (object!) and at the same time being transformed by ‘it’. This double movement acting upon me transformed my presumed identity — from ‘sociologist’ to ‘ethnographer’ to ‘historian’ and then (for lack of a better term) to ‘cultural critic’. During my transformation, the ‘observed’ also continued to escape the finitude of ‘structure’ and the discreteness of ‘events’. Time and again the process of finding a way to identify myself overlapped with a process of finding a way to know the ‘unknown’. This overlapping in effect completes what I mean by the dialectics of a double movement and two-way process. It is, I conclude, impossible to present the ‘known’ without involving the ‘knowing’, and vice versa. Since both the knowing and the known are plural, certain problems concerning the presentation of the narratives in this book must be addressed and resolved. At this moment, contrary to the ‘need to break with both the positions of the “native” and the “objective”’ (Bourdieu 1990b, 27), I have found it imperative to engage both.

Perceptive Basis for a Multi-Narrative Strategy

In the final six months of my fieldwork I repeatedly talked and listened to over 100 people. My knowledge of the JWM case became a pool of perspectives and perceptions of remarkably diverse content. Gradually, I slipped into an alarming state — that of a JWM expert. I became alert that effort must be made to prevent myself from playing God — the Know-All somewhere above. It took self-restraint and self-reflexivity to keep on monitoring myself in various field situations. It was important not to deny or evade my subjecthood and positioning — on the contrary, it was important to make them explicit and visible and, consequently, more accountable.

During the interviews, I constantly struggled with myself about whether

or not, and to what extent, to reveal myself and the knowledge I had accumulated. There was no ready-made formula except to learn through practice and mistakes.

Firstly, there is the relational (moral) dilemma one faces in the field: What responsibility does the information-taker have vis-à-vis the information-giver? What kind of reciprocity is involved? If the information you are going to get is deeply human and social, isn't it that everyone involved must be treated, first and foremost, as a human being engaged in a social relationship? If so, can one expect to be treated as a full human being if one fails honestly to reveal as much pertinent information as one knows? If you and your informant are on an unequal footing, how will this asymmetry affect the flow and quality of discourse? What kind of thing is he or she likely to say to you and what would you hope to expect from him/her? These are real questions, but their answers can be sought only in praxis, not in theory.

In my own research practice, I would make the first move by presenting to the interviewees the published materials I had collected in the form of a review, and ask for their comments. In most cases they listened carefully, with interest and curiosity, as if listening to some exciting story. As the discrepancies between journalists' versions and what the interviewees knew accumulated, they would begin to question, argue, deny and protest, sometimes vehemently. Quite often this would be a turning point in our relationship, leading to deeper engagement. Interviewees wanted to know more and clarify more and became, unavoidably, more responsive and responsible. Conversation became easier. At this stage I tried my best to keep my mouth shut for fear that any hint of subtle approval or disapproval would distort what might be revealed.

After this initial stage, the interviewee frequently inquired about the ethnographic records I had gathered. This information was used for comparison with what the interviewees themselves had experienced. Discussions tended to take the form of an ethnographic/historical reconstruction. I tried to keep my interventions to a minimum so as to let the interviewees' words and thoughts flow further. In the first interview,

with very little encouragement and direction, this process usually lasted more than one hour.

In most of the cases, there was an interval of at least two weeks before a second interview. The purpose of this delay was to allow the interviewee to reflect on our conversation and to give me a chance to transcribe the tapes. This would enable the second interview to reach a higher discursive level. The 'cooling-off' had a positive effect; it gave the interviewees a chance to rethink what they had said and what they had experienced. Some of them even read through copies of journalists' accounts photocopied from my collection, and some of them used this period to consult with acquaintances who were involved. Many interviewees became even more active interlocutors during this period.

The second interview typically began with a brief recapitulation of what had happened during the first interview; new revelations sometimes burst out at this juncture. During this interview, I was aggressive and talkative. I interrogated the interviewees about the discrepancies in their previous interview, pushed for further justification of strong statements they may have made, and argued and reasoned regarding their judgements and choices. Through this approach, they were more convinced that I was not only interested in them and what they had to say, but also that I was at least as involved as they had been.

Subsequently — and especially when the interviewee held tightly to his or her version of events — I began to contribute information I had obtained from other sources or opposed parties. Heated debates, self-questioning and cross-questioning often resulted. Hidden theories and previously unacknowledged presumptions and assumptions were made explicit. The geographical framework expanded from the factory premises to the community at large, and then to the distant rural areas where most of the workers' leaders had their homes. Time horizons also expanded considerably, both backwards to the very beginning of the year of the events in question and even to several years before, and forward, right up to and including the present moment.

A new dimension of internal time/space unfolded as well. Against a

background of breathtaking depth and breadth, the hidden properties of a cumulative sediment of existing social relations became readily discernible. Layers and layers of intermingled social connections and interconnectedness emerged. Various events, alignments and actions could be clearly seen and were at the same time constantly crystallized, dissolved, defined and redefined. All kinds of ‘what if’ questions, hypotheses and guesswork, both of the past and of the present, were made available for open scrutiny — they ceased to be ‘counter-factual’, ‘un-factual’ or even ‘a-factual’, and constituted what one might call the ‘super-factual’, in the sense that they existed at the very Centre of rationales for social action. This most significant dimension of the social-world-in-the-making described in this study will, I trust, emerge as affirming the practice of alternative ethnography — as exemplified by Crapanzano’s *Waiting*; Kondo’s *Crafting Selves*, Tsing’s *In the Realm of the Diamond Queen* and Moeran’s *Okubo Diary* (Crapanzano 1985; Kondo 1990; Tsing 1993; Moeran 1985).

Three Genres of Narrative

Press narrative

This kind of discourse involves the multi-subjective narratives of more than fifty journalists concerning the JWM strike. The salient features of these stories, if submitted to careful scrutiny, are by no means simple. They are accounts created in a similar fashion but reported by unevenly qualified narrators. The engagement and commitment of these narrators to the particular event varied, but it was usually tenuous. Though some journalists followed the event from beginning to end, most had very casual or sporadic encounters with the strike.

But to say that reporters’ access to the event varied is not precise enough. There were at least two cases in which reporters were not there as journalists. They came as associates of their conservative professional associations, and used their press passes to spy on strike activities. These ‘reporters’ monitored levels of solidarity and amounts of material support pouring in from various

directions. Their low-profile surveillance resulted in the production of a few highly sensational feature stories which accused some intervening groups of being 'Trotskyists'. I also gathered evidence that a few journalists were, consciously or unconsciously, used by the workers as couriers. These incidents make us aware of the danger of accepting whatever one can get from the field or from documents as 'data', without rigorous scrutiny or further qualification.

Generally speaking, this first genre of narrative consists of published accounts constructed by multiple subjects called journalists, for consumption by 'the public'. Neither journalists nor the public were subjectively aware of having any real interests in this particular event. But this apparent neutrality does not guarantee freedom from value judgement. Both reporters and readers positioned themselves as total outsiders, who cared only about the superficial and externals of an 'event' which they carelessly constructed (produced) and carelessly took for granted (consumed). To know is an active process; limited efforts yield a limited return, and limited questions can only find limited answers.

An effort to know must begin somewhere and the superficial and external is not a bad place to begin, so long as one is aware of its place and also of one's own whereabouts. However, the voluminous press narrative, for reasons of space, cannot constitute a separate chapter in this book. Instead, a sampling of social discourses from the journalistic world explicitly referred to in other genres of narrative are presented in the Appendix (see pp. 385–422).

Ethnographic narrative

Based upon the blow-by-blow notes I took during my fieldwork, an ethnography has been constructed. To execute this task, I had to be both inside and outside of what I claim to have observed. When I felt too much 'in', I would move 'out', and vice versa. I hoped such a not-always-comfortable ethnographic distance would allow me to maintain both my sense of reality and my academic stance. What worried me was that a close

and emotional involvement in the strike might jeopardize my status as a researcher from overseas.

Having been both 'in' and 'out' of the JWM case results in a story different from the one the journalists told. Largely because of my inside position as a worker at the Centre, I detected a tremendous amount of time and space existing both between and inside those 'things' and 'events' — time and space absent in the journalists' accounts. The time/space configuration I faced was looser and more dispersed, at the same time, it was constituted by much denser and thicker content. Materials I gathered included my own notes, notes from two militant unionists who worked with the workers, and notes taken by different workers under various circumstances. Additional documents include working diaries, meeting minutes, announcements, news releases, songs and slogans, and photos and tape recordings of various occasions. These materials offered an 'empirical' basis from which I could construct an ethnographic description.

Through a somewhat comprehensive presentation, I try to give the reader a sense of the strike with all its diverse trajectories. However, I must make it clear at the outset that the moments I captured, like those a photographer records, were from the specific point and angle available to me. The on-the-spot decision of whether to 'click the shutter' and the later decision whether to make a 'print' from a particular 'negative', or even to 'enlarge' it, were all determined by my interests, as an ethnographer, in serving a particular mode of inquiry. Consequently, the temporal and spatial connectedness of this narrative is my own construct. Chapter 3, 'On Methodology and Procedures', gives a more detailed explanation of how I have constructed this space/time grid.

The purpose of my ethnography is to excavate a dense subterranean time/space for reflection and scrutiny. In my interviews with strike participants, I used the preliminary ethnographic narrative — which belonged to both myself and the interviewee and, in a sense, was jointly produced — as an empirical object for both of us to react to. These reactions flared spectacularly from time to time, at others constitutes flows of retrospective theorization and speculation. In the ethnographic narrative I

also attempt to provide the present reader with an empirical basis sound enough to enable a deeper deconstruction, as well as to invite the identification of problems.

In the course of producing the ethnographic narrative, questions of a new sort constantly cropped up. The questions that emerged at this level were ones that the press reports did not allow, but were also conditioned by what had been made available. These questions concerned the *raison d'être* of categories that seemed to 'exist' and are the staple concerns of standard ethnography ('social structure' and 'culture' are examples), questions that circle around the notions of the 'function' of the entire 'event', seen as a whole with various 'parts'. Yet neither function nor event was easy to discern. An ethnographic operation required freezing processes into patterns, flattening diverse genres of narrative into a flat topographic representation, and fitting odd bits and pieces into a holistic picture analogous to a jigsaw puzzle. This is the work of an academic matchmaker, who tries to marry behaviour with the culture which supposedly underlies it, and attempts to pair event with structure, with the former supposedly parasitic on the latter. Understanding that these oppositions are but 'analogous expressions of the same misplaced concreteness' (Sahlins 1985, 156), we know that this social-scientific process can, at best, produce a mid-range hybrid of half-baked facts and models, and that the entities that emerge from it are but categories which are conventionally classified as social structure, cultural meaning, behavioural traits and value orientations.

During the inquiry I found that the question of industrial solidarity in the workplace was the wrong question to ask. My field information clearly indicated that the solidarity of the workers, especially among the struggling leaders, was not formed in the workplace, nor was it derived from working relations. Instead, the ethnographic account indicates the presence of a complicated process of transposing subtle socio-personal ties from rural domestic settlements to the urban production premises. The ties became meaningful in a situation of industrial conflict and were recognized by the parties involved only when they reflected upon it retrospectively.

Thus, I tried not to decipher the secret code of the 'rural-urban'

continuum and its cultural significance with conventional categories of social structure, kinship ties, value involutions or behavioural survivals — staple concerns of the ‘Chinese Anthropology’ of a modernist persuasion. Although I did not yet have a comprehensive framework as an alternative to these conventional conceptualizations, I was quite sure that my work would not be an empiricist labour history, nor would it be akin to a structural-functional approach to workers’ movements or social/societal movements (cf. Touraine 2000, 90–1; 2001, 34–5)

I now realize that the social ties mentioned above which were formed outside the workplace were not stable, nor were the roles and statuses of the people involved. These pre-existing relations-in-flux cannot be said to have provided a basis for industrial solidarity to emerge. It was not until the last phase of my fieldwork, when the group picked up the ethnographic account and subjected it to rigorous scrutiny, that these pre-existing relations really became comprehensible to me. It was in the process of re-examining the ethnographic record, both alone and with my interviewees, that I relearned what I had been doing all along — I had been quite irresponsible while I was indulged in my personal quest for an ethnography.

What was marvellous and exciting about doing fieldwork were the unexpected and unintended consequences of self-education. Since I was the document-creating agent, my transformation went hand in hand with the very process by which I handled and transformed whatever came to me. This was a process of being produced through production; the articulated subject’s subjectivity becoming deeper the more he submerged himself in broader and broader contexts of multiple subjectivities. This is precisely the importance of the next type of narrative.

Reflexive narratives of worker consciousness

This sort of narrative led me into a much more subjective realm. Of course, one cannot deny or totally discount the existence of ‘subjective’ elements in the previous exercises. In the ethnographic narrative, although a new dimension of time/space became available and new questions emerged from

both the density of the materials and from gaps and omissions in and among them, objective conditions and constraints — in socio-scientific terms — were invoked to account for them. These structures and functions were unable to explain, however, why such forces actually worked on the actors and actions involved.

The difficulties involved were more than technical and methodological. These 'structural' conditions and constraints invariably failed to account for anything concrete, because the categories employed were anything but actively constructed or theoretically generated by the narrators involved. The agents' own dynamic processes of discursive figuring were elided. This situation cannot be improved technically or methodologically in structural-functional ethnography because at the level of our second-genre narrative no clear agent exists. Rather, for this kind of social-science analysis, an agent becomes merely an 'individual' attached to a pre-existing framework. This particular 'individual' is taken either as a rural dweller, a female operative or an export-processing worker ... etc., but never as an agent in the making of her own history.

I prefer to define 'agent' as one who mediates her/his own existence in relation to a constructed context. S/he must actively address her/himself rather than be passively interpellated (Althusser 1971; Laclau 1977, 81–198; Chiu 1995, 1–45). In giving meaning to the emergent conditions of her/his existence, an agent transforms those conditions to make her/himself a being who can be properly addressed. To exist is to act. And to act goes far beyond answering summons under a bestowed name — it is a constant process of creating an active self as well as participating in the construction of a responsive world of which the agent is a part. Without or prior to this mediation, an agent does not exist. In other words, only in and through an active discursive construction and praxiological interpellation can a transformation take place which also changes a passive, non-reflective being into an agent, an active and consciously acting 'subject'. The perspective from which the agent conceives the formation of her/his very 'agenthood' is crucial to this process.

Nevertheless, this agenthood can not be recognized or acknowledged

except by those who are agents in the same sense. In other words, the agency of the workers was not possible for me to recognize or take into account in the second, ethnographic, genre precisely because I myself had not yet been transformed into an agent with respect to the situation in question. And it was not until I activated my own subjectivity and took action to re-mediate my existence *vis-à-vis* that of my interviewees that I was transformed into an agent for the situation and was able to appreciate their own particular agency

If what has been said sounds tautological, it is. Precisely because this third genre of narrative reflexivity is circular, it is impossible to understand from the perspective of linear-logical thinking. During the process of generating this reflexive narrative I became aware of innumerable degrees of interpellation and agenthood, genres of mediation and reflexivity, forms of participation and senses of solidarity, types of action and collective existence. All these had been articulated through numerous involvements, including position-forming, position-taking and adjustments in orienting and aiming.

This process of articulation and its intricacies is demonstrated in Chapters 7 to 8, through various 'episodes' which became available as informants and I plunged critically into the thickness of the *lifeworld* discourses. In effect, every single 'episode' refracted a set of problems, together with their possible outcomes, into many more problems, all of which could be seen to challenge the conventional wisdom of social science. These new perceptions also revealed a very different sense of historicity and required an entirely new perspective on my part. Gazing upon this newly available vision, points in time and space anchored not only single events but also served as interfaces for the immensely fluid, discretionary actions of multiple agents. Actions were taken according to each agent's situational position and perspective at a given point in time, and always involved possible alternatives, the perceptions and actions of other agents, and anticipations of the perceptions and actions of others.

To illustrate these inter/intra-subjective dimensions, the story I tell in the reflexive narrative is multi-stranded. Of course, no matter how much is

told, it can only be a partial story. The reason I have tried hard to tell as much as possible is really to convey how small and limited our knowledge really is. Through the process I have described it has become impossible to provide a neat, straightforward, single-stranded story. Such a story would be more consistent with history as it is usually recounted; but I am more concerned here with the historicity of action and the multiplicity and complexity of the agents who make their own histories.

In this book I want to build a discursive relation with the reader. Making sense of a story like the one told here requires a particular form of engagement. I hope that readers will come up with their own questions, some of which may not be answerable. Knowledge is never complete, and therefore the act of understanding requires activity more than contemplation (Volosinov 1973, 1987). In real-life struggles for survival and decency, the problem is not how much information is out there for us to 'recognize', but rather how we are to understand and act — under the pressure of being constantly acted upon — given our limited knowledge.

The theoretical consequences of this insight are serious. Praxiologically speaking, I have called into question the notion of deeper structural properties — a set of functional prerequisites — which are latent and only need to be 'discovered' through a process of model-fitting, feature-sorting and law-finding by social-scientific experts. In its place I have insisted on grounding our narratives in a particular notion of the agent. Agents are people who act consciously. They do not exist prior to mediation through both action and discourse that transforms them into conscious historical subjects. If this is correct, how can we posit 'actors', 'functions' or even 'structures' that condition behaviour prior to the behaviour taking place and before the one who behaves comes into existence? These entities are possible, but only theoretically. They become plausible only through the operation of post hoc reasoning — one that employs an *a posteriori* exercise to do an *a priori* job.

In contrast, my presentation seeks to demonstrate where certain approaches to industrial social relations have gone wrong. I argue that 'class', for example, is simply a reification of active historical struggle. People

working in an industrial setting do not automatically become members of a 'working class'. They must be involved in a dense and complicated oppositional social process. And if they (or rather, most of the time, only some of them) do become members of *a* working class (not *The Working Class*), they keep this status only through repeated reinforcement and only as the said social process (usually concrete struggle) that constitutes them as a class continues. To the extent that my material supports a theoretical claim, then, I would say that class exists while individual beings are interpellated and self-addressed, respectively and together, within a commonly shared context. Those who collectively construct a definite moral-political positioning and take up similar space in a political economy, taking action in solidarity, become a 'class'. At this moment, and only at this very moment, do we see the formation of workers into a working class. In our JWM strike case, 'class' was formed when the management carried out the 31 May 'slaughter' referred to at the beginning of this chapter, and this 'class' began to dissolve when some of the veteran workers' leaders decided to take their compensation and exit. In other words, a working class itself, as well as its consciousness, is produced and reproduced by its individual members, who share positions and actions in and through struggle. Therefore, a class theory outside an everyday-life context of conflict and compromise is a theory lacking in relevance — just another ahistorical and context-free mental exercise.

Nevertheless, I do not wish to suggest that no model — such as proletarianization, internal contradictions in a capitalist economy, or world crisis — can be right. What I am convinced of is that without accounting for or understanding the process in which the subjectivity of agents is formed, we will be left asking and failing to answer the same questions again and again. What is at stake is the mediation itself — the very materialization of a person into an agent, the making of individuals into socially meaningful subjects in socially significant actions. Existing theories that fail to address the problem involved in this construction amount to ungrounded speculation.

The Practice of Alterative Ethnography and Non-Foundational Social Analyses

As the product of intensive ethnograph-based study, this book relies both on narrating the experience and calls into question all foundational claims of narrational experience — i.e., politics, cultures, labour relations, gender divisions, various social analytic categories, and so on. To be able to do this, I cannot homogenize the texts. The multi-genre presentations and reflexive mode of writings are meant to be read as a methodological demonstration as well as an epistemological statement in their own right. But they also purport to show the necessary correspondences between form and content, between language and thought, and between signification practices and their resulting products.

An alterative ethnography — or an ‘experimental ethnography’ as Jean Camaroff calls it — is thus not a research project of labour history, nor an account of industrial relations. It certainly does not deal with issues of development, gender, or social differentiation . . . labour struggles in their conventional sense. For what such a project deems to be at stake is not the immediate (or remote) circumstantial conditions which can be seen to have ‘caused’ the industrial conflict. Instead, this project takes into consideration the overall politico-economic and ethico-cultural dimensions involved in over-determining and over-hegemonizing the commencement and the outcome of the dispute. An alterative ethnography of a strike and a critical theoretical analysis of the problem of working class solidarity, my account focuses upon factory shop-floor politics and politics outside the factory, as well as cultural politics, at a time when manufacturing and industrial activity were at their peak in Hong Kong.

Such an account, taking the interplay of social bodies and moral politics as its point of departure, should be able to make a unique resource for labour historians, social movement practitioners, feminist advocates and others; as well as for academic sociologists and anthropologists. Drawing on a long tradition of non-foundational writings in Marxist and non-Marxist literature and adopting discursive strategies of cultural studies, the richness of the

work should be able to persuade the careful reader that a non-foundational approach can hold promise for the future of radical social analysis.

In rethinking issues in ethnography writing, labour relation researches and the three world theories mentioned below, I use the tool of reflexive ethnography to expand the scopes of both cultural studies and political-economic discourses. By problematizing the historicities and moral politics involved in societal negotiations and compromises, my various accounts lay bare the blind spots embedded in theories of flexible accumulation, core/periphery relations, and world system(s). At the same time, these accounts provide me with rich and fluid spaces within which to substantiate the following enquiries.

- (1) The investigation of hidden layers of social relations and interactions among workers, which set the basic tone and form a base for their solidarity and collective action in times of crises.

This part deals with subterranean time and space in physical terms, as well as with that which exists in various agents' minds. Physically, I have had to expand the time span to include periods both before and after the sit-ins. Spatially, I have had to ignore the confines of the factory premises and reach out to the workers' rural residential communities. With regard to subjective time and space, I try to grasp the overall meaning and significance of various terms of connection. For instance, I have had to account for the fact that the group of leaders addressed each other in joking, fictive kinship terms both long before and after the industrial action took place. Predicating upon the rural upbringing of the majority of these women operatives, issues of generational transmission of work ethic, values and various cultural forms (cf. Willis 1977) and dynamics of day-to-day practices and resistances (cf. de Certeau 1984) can be further problematized. In engaging the Thompsonian thesis of the 'making' of the working class, I open up the essentialized and impacted language of a working woman's 'world', a language which hangs somewhere in the limbo between 'kinship' and 'class'.

- (2) The deconstruction of the structure of moral politics embedded in economic struggles.

I assess the impact of managerial manipulation of rewards — in our case, the ‘privatization’ of work benefits and related arbitrary differential treatments — upon the self-identification of the worker’s social existence, as well as its effect on the construction of *we/they* relations. Special emphasis is placed on the morality of money-taking and money-giving. My case clearly indicates that it is not always true that the issue in dispute simply concerns the quantity of money. In this case it involved heated argumentation about ‘what kind of money are we talking about?’ With a value context which is by all means socially defined and culturally informed, money is never either purely transparent or colourless. Who gives what to whom for what? How is it done? When is it done? Who gets it and who doesn’t? What is the justification for being treated differently and why? All these issues are at stake, not just how much money is involved.

To be able to understand these issues I look into the capitalist uses (politics) of manipulating social insecurity (cf. Marglin 1976), on the one hand, while on the other I highlight the significance of practices concerned with women’s labour-returns (paid or unpaid) and their effect on sustaining livelihoods: certain practices lessen the necessity of the contribution of female labour power, thereby enabling struggles to be more concerned with moral issues.

- (3) The analysis of discursive position-making, and the position-making of various agencies involved.

I do not take the various agencies involved as having a *priori* existence of any certain kind; neither do I posit functions or needs dictated by charters, but specify circumstances and conditions under which agencies appropriate specific signs and images to themselves. I also specify those circumstances and conditions under which agencies assign or superimpose particular signs and images on their adversaries. By so doing, I hope to make transparent

the cultural dynamic inherent in specific strategy formations and its related ideological interpolations. This theme can best be demonstrated by our case, in which the cultural image of 'benevolent boss as benevolent king' became strategically available for both workers and management to appropriate and re-appropriate in their ideological war.

In a nutshell, the problematic of agenthood involves an appreciation of the ways ideologies, movements and subjectivities interact. Given the fluidity of the field site, it is important to be sensitive to the interactions between observer and observed. Only certain styles of writing are capable of conveying the reflexivities generated, which include the authors' own experience in coming to terms with the issues of praxis, narration, collective construction, humour, messiness and frustration. Here is precisely the place where questions of genre and narrative collide/collude with those of construction and self-criticism.

At a parallel yet different level the same principles apply with regard to the interplay of social bodies and moral politics. At this collective level in-depth analysis takes a form akin to the discourse analysis of cultural politics and the sociological intervention of new social movements (cf. Hall and Jacques 1983, 1989; Touraine, Wieviorka and Dubet 1987).

Following this line of inquiry, I learned that a 'cultural rationale' is not something existing *a priori* which has created and can therefore explain social actions. On the contrary, it is something created and reproduced and, therefore, to be explained (cf. Volosinov 1973). This theoretical orientation is in sharp contrast to some prevailing practices in sinology, which tend to reify various aspects of Confucian discourses and, in one way or another, press them into a thin base to support an explanation of 'economic miracles'. I recount the 'boss-as-king' phenomenon mentioned above to illustrate this.

At various points during the period of the workers' sit-in, their leadership actively sought to augment their bargaining power by appealing for support from their MNC's (multinational corporation's) overseas top management. They cabled directly to the managing director to solicit his personal attention, and then waited attentively for his intervention. At first glance, scholars may find this a manifestation of the Chinese worker's deeply-

embedded 'sense of authority', as trickled down through thousands of years of Confucian teachings; others might take it as evidence of the 'false consciousness' of a nascent proletariat which isn't even aware of its own class position in a capitalist division of labour. These two positions, based upon radically different presumptions, actually share the same mixture of methodologies — a kind of hybrid exercise of socio-topographical feature-sorting, historico-developmental, model-fitting and economic-nomothetical law-finding.

An anthropological reading of the records of hundreds of hours of remarkably articulate discussions among the workers themselves, however, calls for an alternative approach. From the perspective of discourse analysis, I found that the workers carefully thought through, and consciously selected, their plan of action. They emphasized particular aspects of a conventional 'authoritative image' of the 'other' as a strategic act to serve their interests as they understood them. The workers' image of their top authority was meant to be imposed upon the managing director of the head office, who was actually their opponent — i.e., they did it to exert pressure upon an adversary, not because they believed in the image themselves. This transposition had multifaceted objectives: to add weight to their struggle and their self-importance, to ward off pressures from the local management, to boost morale among fellow workers, to create pretexts for seeking international support, to warn of a possible upgrading of action, to mobilize public opinion, and so on. The concrete operation of these tactics and the reactions they invited are too complicated to discuss in detail here. Couching the discourse entirely in the familiar Chinese moralistic idiom finally entangled the top management in it and confined the power of the image. Soon, both sides began to compete in borrowing from the same ideological arsenal, both to support arguments and to justify positions — waving their weapons under the shadow of the biggest statue, the most powerful hegemonic icon available: Confucius.

In other words, the 'cultural image' of the boss as benevolent king — a morally-sanctioned, socially-constructed image — became available for the adversaries to appropriate and re-appropriate in their ideological war. In

this context, the image itself in reality turns out to be a rather empty, fluid one — like that of a cup, the contents of which change as different things are poured in and out.

It is precisely this contentless form that made it valuable and indispensable for both opponents. From the workers' point of view, once the MNC accepted the 'Confucian' image, it would be difficult for them (as well as for governmental agents, who could be made to carry the same image) to reduce or dismiss the event as a simple 'economic issue'. Whatever economic concessions the MNC made would reinforce the management's moral predicament. This in fact happened, when the JWM managing director came to Hong Kong and finally decided to sack the workers' leaders while simultaneously pacifying other striking workers.

Small as my ethnographic cases may be, under close scrutiny, they reveal much more complicated and dynamic processes than does present scholarship on industrial conflicts, sinology and labour history. I would suggest that no social action — or inaction — is comprehensible without taking into account the reasoning of those who are involved, which is invariably both economic and ideological, practical and cultural, utilitarian and moralistic, at the same time.