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Introduction

In 1867, the first rickshaw was thrown together in Japan by an American Baptist missionary, Jonathan Goble (1827–96). A cycle transport balanced on two wheels and pulled by the strength of one person, the rickshaw found its way to Hong Kong in 1874, only several years after its invention (Hongkong Times January 23, 1874). In the nearby city of Canton, the rickshaw was tried out for public transport at least as far back as 1906, when a road connecting the city proper with the eastern suburb some miles away was constructed to completion (Wah Tsz Yat Po March 29, 1906). Since then, profound changes have taken place in the region’s socio-economic landscape. Today, rickshaws have disappeared under the effect of urban sprawl, but a century ago they were everyday transport. A stroll around town at all hours of the day and night would prove their popularity, their number on the rise, reaching 3,411 in Hong Kong and 3,600 in Canton in 1924 respectively (Hongkong Administration Report 1924, K–9; GZSSZGB January 1, 1924, 8–10).

This book is an exposition and analysis of the history of those plying rickshaws for hire. It is at the same time a study of the development of the Chinese community and the relationship between people, and between society and state. Hong Kong and Canton are selected for consideration, partly because rickshaws were more densely utilized in these two cities than anywhere in the delta of the Pearl River. Also, the critical mass of pullers therein had a lot in common. They shared in a regional cultural paradigm, in particular concerning a historic pattern of native-place and speech-group alignment. Important, too, is the fact that Hong Kong and Canton were two very different, yet interwoven, metropolises in China’s southern frontier. As Canton is just eighty miles northwest of Hong Kong, and it takes only an hour’s travel by train to go from one place to another, the twin cities have frequent contact of various sorts. This interconnectedness makes them an ideal pair for comparison.

There existed, without being immediately apparent, a noticeable level of rickshaw activism, in ways we never thought possible. Although in many cases it was less advanced in leadership and organization, it came to the forefront of the public domain, perhaps most spectacularly in Hong Kong in 1884 and in
Canton in 1927, when the pullers clashed with the state authorities in one of the most violent insurrections ever recorded. In asserting and defending their interests in the workplace, like any other social group in the city, rickshaw pullers were capable of effective mobilization for the attainment of common goals. If it is recognized that at least a sizable number of pullers did play an active role in urban social movements, then one thing that is obviously missing is a nuanced account of the circumstances that drove them in that direction. The crucial question is not only what happened as such, but rather why and for what. Exactly how labor organization emerged, on what scale and in what forms, is unquestionably worth exploring.

In undertaking a study of this nature, the genesis of mobilization has of necessity to be dealt with. We have occasion to elucidate the subcultures of the pullers, but for the present, a few of their characteristics are worth attention. Although the pullers (most often of rural origin) met with an initial uprooting from their home, they were not cut off from the traditional safety nets that they could resort to in times of need or trouble. In the urban milieu, they pursued new goals by renewing old contacts and making new ones. This pattern of urban assimilation involved a network of kin/quasi-kin loyalties, which interacted with other factors to deal with the problems arising from the urban workplace. An illustration of this is Canton in the mid-1920s, when political activists enlisted their kin by manipulating dialect, home place, and boarding-house bases of joint action. Similarly, the Hong Kong pullers, on their own initiative, formed a union on a native-place basis in the late 1930s, in protest of an increase of vehicle rent and lodging charges.

Low skilled yet partially self-employed, the pullers relied on entrepreneurial flair and physical stamina to ply for business, thus bridging the culture of hawkers and pure physical labor. Without owning the rickshaws they drew, they were “proletarian” — let us provisionally retain this term established by usage — in the true sense of lacking possession of the means of their livelihood. It follows from this analysis that they had the objective conditions conducive to radical mass movement. Yet, as most pullers had been tenant farmers deprived of their traditional means of living because of misfortunes, land hunger, and/or banditry, they had little or no prior experience with modern wage-work and were far from being part of the progressive working class. They were therefore proletariat and yet very non-proletariat, such that neat and exact definitions and delineations are difficult and elusive. Perhaps no other occupation has such stark duality. No wonder just such enigmatic and peripheral — if that is the word — yet centrally important people need to be given much more proportionality.

If there is something exceptional about the pullers, was there anything unique and unusual about their styles of joint action and their relations with
state authorities? It will be observed that the pullers were vulnerable to the brutal acts of those in uniform and the competition of other means of conveyance, everything from cars to pedicabs. These facts remind us to think about how the workplace put the common people right in the midst of a volatile urban process, and how extensively and in what ways the shifts in the holders of political power came into play. The work presented here will, I think, lead towards a richer understanding of urban living through a comparative study of the historic pattern of adaptation into the urban workplace, the powers of the state, and the repertoire of mass activism. By glimpsing how certain "small potatoes" of the city population struggled against their adversities and became a political force to be reckoned with, this book will find much to disturb the prevailing wisdom of a familiar insurrection and the old paradigm of power relations imbedded in class or capital.

This book lets rickshaw pullers take center stage and explores the experiences of living that the pullers fell back on. As the pullers dealt with a clientele that comprised people from high to low classes, of both sexes and all ages and races, they offer an ideal locus for exploring the dynamics and politics occurring on the street. The pullers faced and felt, first-hand and very deeply, the consequence of changing customer tastes and the tyranny of the machine age that affected them financially, and the entry into their business from among the jobless. Partially self-employed or privately employed, they were subjected not just to patron-client and employer-employee problems but also to the directives and regulations of the state, and the state's main arm, the police. This book will produce a more complex and dynamic account of the labor world than the more conventional view of alienation and class stratification would suggest. Beyond the dualism of opposing class interests, there is a need to explore the ensemble of curiously ambivalent relationships, through an analysis of the defining characteristics of the urban workplace.

The choice of the book title is not without forethought. Again and again it will be found that there would seem to be an involuntary, even unwanted, element to the pullers' activism, as well as their position and participation in urban mass movements. Their collective shows of force were, if not a definite solution to, an authentic expression of their grievances against destitution — out of sheer economic necessity. Put differently, their preoccupation with problems of livelihood, income, and prices constituted a common dominator that led all other causes of protests by a wide margin. At various times, they were spurred into collective action that hardly escaped the eyes of the public but were simultaneously pushed into the quagmire of city politics, suffering great losses in the political storms. Possibly, they would have preferred leading quiet — almost anonymous — lives instead of undergoing the moments of cheers and tears and becoming victimized by the reshuffles of power, if they had a choice. Hence the title of this book, Reluctant Heroes.
Hong Kong and Canton are culturally close and yet conceptually very distinct. For all its fame (or notoriety) as a British crown colony won for mercantile interests, Hong Kong was a thriving yet comparatively stable entrepôt where colonial laissez-faire took root and flourished. However, the showcase image of perpetual prosperity and sustained stability reveals only half-truths. Social cohesion and material advancement were in danger of going up in flames, and the proliferation of fissures due to societal complexity could, and did, lead to civil unrest. Returning to the subject of this study, as time went by, when owners and contractors of rickshaws gradually lost their self-acclaimed legitimacy as protectors for the pullers, the pattern of strikes and boycotts of short duration was followed by the occurrence of more protracted maneuverings. To throw light on the way of life of colonial Hong Kong, one needs to examine the European ideas of law and order, racism and dogmatism, and a criminal justice system reinforced by the power of a non-native minority.

In the recent past, Canton was a base area of uprisings against the Qing Dynasty, the headquarters of the Northern Expedition, and the site of some of the largest strikes in the history of China. The warlord regimes in early Republican times were followed by the reforming and revolutionary government of Sun Yat Sen (孫逸仙, 1866–1925) which sought mass support through promised assistance to workers and peasants. Later, the Nationalist authorities tried to conciliate labor with certain compromises, proposals for reforms, and rules for interest groups. During the second half of the 1940s, the social control mechanism undermined the strength of unionism and eclipsed to some extent employer-employee conflicts. Since 1949, societal change has proceeded at a far greater rate than ever before. In this book, attention is given to how the factor of state intervention affected the situation, and I make comparisons across both space and time. As this book involves colonial Hong Kong, in contrast to national-cum-nationalistic Canton, the changing qualities of everyday life brought forth by political parameters cannot be overlooked.

Hong Kong was a British emporium gained through imperialist conquest, whereas Canton was a treaty port opened by force of arms to foreign trade and residence. An analysis of the two cities with such a marked presence of Westerners would almost immediately propel us into a reflection upon the all too familiar subject of China's intercourse with the West, which was something of a love-hate relationship. In this book, an emphasis is placed on what relationships there were between imported initiatives and local circumstances, and where treaty-port colonialists and capitalists (Chinese and Western) fitted in. These are important not only if one wishes to gain a more balanced perspective of the actual influence of foreignism; they also provide food for

thought on the relative influence of exogenous forces in contrast to native elements. It will be seen, on close examination, that certain foreigners — and Chinese — got involved in activities based on considerations that they believed to be beneficial to Chinese people rather than at their expense.

The format of this book combines thematic and chronological approaches. Part One ("Across the Colonial Matrix") sets Hong Kong in its historical setting. The opening chapter plunges the reader headfirst into the immigrant and sojourning urban Chinese community in Hong Kong and the socio-economic accommodation of rural in-migrants to life in the urban workplace. Chapter 2 pieces together the multitude of environments of the workplace on the street, a contested social drama in which people from all walks of life came into play. Chapter 3 stands by itself as a historical and socio-structural analysis of the colonial way of life in the context of the European sense of mastery, the government rules and regulations placed on the residing Chinese, the administration of law and judicial penalties, racial prejudices, and stereotypes, thus bringing together many facets of the old colonial situation into a readable focus.

Part Two concerns itself with Republican Canton. Chapter 4 elucidates the mixture of new and old influences, the inhabitants and new constructions rapidly on the increase, and a new socio-political situation that meant greater opportunities for elite and mass participation in city politics. In chapter 5, we analyze the growing radicalization of rickshaw activism during the early and mid-1920s, on a scale and degree of militancy not seen in the past. This chapter explains how the pullers became politically engaged and produced the revolutionary epic of the short-lived Canton Soviet in 1927 — an experience both heroic and heart-rending for them. Chapter 6 delineates the impulses for and ultimate failure of rickshaw reforms under the auspices of the Canton administration up to 1938, an experience that impresses upon us the importance of favorable state intervention for major and rapid advance in reforms.

Part Three ("Within a Fast-Changing Context") examines a period when clouds hung over the fate of the rickshaw. Chapter 7 dwells on the efforts to lessen the sum of human misery in inter-war Hong Kong. In so doing, we shed some light on the priorities for governmental action. Chapter 8 gives an account of the wartime when the streets were, rather awkwardly, cleared of motor vehicles to the benefit of rickshaws. Chapter 9 deliberates on the repeated negotiations between pullers and owners for a settlement on the rickshaw rent question in post-war Hong Kong. Chapter 10, focusing on Canton, discusses the increasing use of pedicabs in place of rickshaws that had led, over a period of years, to a sharp reduction in the population of pullers. This book in conclusion places the subject of study into the wider theoretical debates of the social sciences and brings out broader issues whose significance extends far beyond Canton and Hong Kong.
Conclusion

WE END, as we began, with the historic pattern of urban assimilation that provides a gateway to a deeper understanding of Chinese life. During the period under study, the heterogeneity of the Chinese in Hong Kong and Canton was evidenced by the traditional kinship-based migration pattern, the subethnic differences, competition and exclusion that prevailed in certain occupations, and the areal concentration of members of the same hometown and speech groups. These factors meant little meaningful interaction among many different social types, despite years of coexistence. The close personal touch at home and workplace locales, such as the rudimentary gatherings in roadside stalls, provided not only the conditions for the emergence of a defensive cultural repertoire among the early immigrants but, more important still, a basis on which supportive networks developed. In an analysis of collective action and identity construction, Harrison White talks of the presumptive hypothesis of “catnet” that makes rapid and low-cost mobilization possible:

Given the catnet tendencies toward focusing and alignment of relations, it becomes easier and more common to perceive indirect relations with a wider segment of the population around. One reckons relations through clique memberships and the like, that is through the latent relationships, rather than tracing out some of the usually long chains of concrete ties that would be necessary to ‘reach’ most other persons in the system. The network comes to be projected in perception into a net among the clusters or cliques, with persons in a clique treated as equivalent unless there is some short actual path to a given one. (White 1992, 64)

The “catnet” situation seems pertinent in the subject matter with which this study is primarily concerned. Having left their rural homes to lead a floating life in the city, while maintaining their separate cultural identities, the rickshaw pullers saw the city not as a home but typically a place of sojourn away from home. They were particularly illuminating of the interaction of class, kinship, and dialect loyalties, which were (as are often the case) situationally and instrumentally selected for adoption as part of a survival strategy in daily social
transactions. Parochial outlooks, both symbolic and organizational, made for a situation in which the common descent collectivities generated narrowly defined identities and banded together for protecting their in-group interests. In cases of conflict and strife, they readily answered the call for mutual assistance.

In Hong Kong and Canton, where a sizeable portion of the population was migrants or transients during the period concerned, socio-cultural affinities brought together clanspeople of different life experiences and class origins. The multifaceted social and industrial life involved the owners/contractors of means of production, not just as bosses and brokers but also fellow regionals, negotiators with police authorities, and providers of dormitory accommodation, drugs, and loans as well. Thus the lords or headmen of the coolie working people defy easy categorization and cannot be adequately represented in a holistically positive or negative image, as they were simultaneously a source of protection and exploitation. A situation was thus frequently created in which class polarity, if any, did not harden into normal practice. Similarly, as in Singapore where the hegemony of rickshaw owners over the pullers remained strong, aggressive action against archaic management practices did not occur until 1938 in response to a rent increase (Warren 1986, 123–4).

The present study furnishes significant proof of the central importance of native-place and speech-group networks on the formation of an identity of camaraderie to make mobilization for collective action. These commonalities threaded through the assimilation into city life, the mobilization of rural immigrants, and the resolution of patron-client conflicts. The kinship ties found in expression in a diversity of domestic and non-domestic contexts, from labor recruitment to occupational specialization, from residential segregation to clandestine brotherhoods. If one were to relate these findings to the recent scholarship on Chinese urban and social history, for instance, the sojourning leaders and followers of the Heaven and Earth Society (Murray 1994, 178–9), and the even more marginalized people such as the sworn brothers of banditry (Billingsley 1988, 175–7), one might conclude that the sense or identity of mutual aid fraternity, based on dialect, place of origin, and kin/pseudo-kin ties, is perhaps the most important organizing factor at the grassroots level of the Chinese community, locally and in a broader context.

Right in the middle of the social milieu, the pullers took to the street in protest at different times, manifesting everything from peaceful petitions to walkouts, from anti-foreign boycotts to sympathy strikes, from acts of civil disobedience to a hopefully revolutionary insurrection. This noticeable level of activism sprang directly from the pullers’ harsh realities of daily life on the street, subjected not just to client-customer and employer-employee problems but also the directives and regulations of the state. Perhaps the worst oppressors (and targets of wrath) of the pullers were not the owners but the police, the gangsters,
and the culturally mixed clientele. Thus, the tentacles of overlap and interaction with the whole become much more important to the pullers' awakening process than class itself. Instead of portraying a dichotomous characterization defined in class entities, a dynamic view of the urban grassroots that accords due attention to their particular life situations and multilayered social relations must be more rewarding for an exploration of the petty urbanites.

In much of this book, an attempt is made to examine the historical development of the Chinese community. The activity, or rather inactivity, of the pullers in the course of social and economic change shows that any descriptive generalization about their history is likely to be accurate only for a certain period. From 1883 to 1926, the Hong Kong pullers launched collective protests on their own on no less than ten occasions, just like any other group. At any given time, their protests (or the lack thereof) provided a backdrop for observing legal and administrative frameworks of the day. Indeed, following the 1925–26 general strike, a repressive attitude toward organized labor set in, as evinced in the imminent enactment of the Illegal Strikes and Lock-outs Ordinance and the stricter enforcement of the Societies Ordinance. Between Marco Polo Bridge, 1937, and Pearl Harbor, 1941, and beyond, as the bosses/brokers gradually lost their self-acclaimed legitimacy as protectors for the pullers, the pattern of strike actions of short duration was followed by the occurrence of more protracted protests.

The foreign officials governing Hong Kong held a morally superior attitude toward the residing Chinese, trying to impose and enforce their views of how the people should behave. This "civilizing" mission often found form in unwelcome laws and regulations that were seen as an intrusion and would serve as a stimulus for belligerent mass sentiments. Similarly, as in quasi-colonial Shanghai, there were rickshaw protests motivated by opposition to licensing and traffic regulations in 1897 and 1917, and foreign police abuse in 1911 (Chesneaux 1968; Shen 1991). In British-ruled Singapore, there were owner-led strikes and riots against licensing regulations, owner liability for breaches of traffic rules and court penalties, in 1897, 1901 and 1903 respectively (Warren 1986, 85, 105–12). In Hong Kong, the only explicit cases of anti-government owner action were in 1928 and 1946 about off-street parking and mandatory re-registration.1 The colonial state, as a recipient of hostility from disparate sections of the population, inadvertently promoted a "rainbow" coalition in the form of petitions, strikes, or boycotts of a crippling kind.

1. See Wah Tsz Yat Po, July 20, 1928, for the owners' request for space wherein their rickshaws could be parked off-street at night and taken out in the morning. See Hwa Shiang Pao, September 20, 1946, for a description of the owners' request for additional rickshaw licenses.
Formerly, Hong Kong was a British crown colony where the foreign section of the population was accorded special privileges. Yet, the influence of homegrown forces cannot be underestimated. Indeed, the cultural and institutional influences were overwhelmingly Chinese and deeply rooted in Chinese historical reality. Taking the rickshaw trade as an example, we see that it operated for decades solely and characteristically with Chinese capital, Chinese labor, and Chinese management. At no time was there a rickshaw firm, either directly or indirectly, owned or capitalized by Westerners, either with a view to obtaining finance or a market for the trade. Presumably, foreign investors far outstripped their Chinese counterparts in areas where they could expect to secure for themselves some competitive advantages, such as access to overseas markets or technological information. In any case, even if they invested in Chinese trades, they hardly became directly involved in actual transactions and partook of profits and, rather, would have had to rely on their native intermediaries such as compradors. An editorial comment of a Hong Kong daily, as early as 1926, is worthy of our attention:

The lying charge is frequently made that foreigners exploit Chinese labour. In actual fact, the employees of foreigners enjoy conditions that are comparatively princely. The contrasts can be observed in Hong-kong. A foreigner's houseboy earns about $25 per month, plus squeeze. His fellow in Chinese employ is lucky if he gets $10 per month. The same contrasts are to be seen in commercial concerns, banks, etc. (South China Morning Post December 11, 1926)

There is no doubt an element of truth in this observation, though anything close to a conclusive statement of the full picture would have to await further research. In a city as varied as Hong Kong, where the gap between the labor aristocracy and the lowest elements of the job market could be as great as that between Chinese and Europeans, one must be circumspect when making generalizations. However, it appears justifiable to say that members of the foreign mercantile community were not the only capitalists who made money out of misfortune. If they did so, their Chinese counterparts could be just as ghoulish, taking unfair advantage of their privilege to pay themselves as much as they could get away with.

The largely missionary-led efforts intent on improving the lot of the Hong Kong pullers in the late 1920s and 1930s seemed minor compared with the mounting magnitude of the problem. Bishop Valtorta and a few clergy pumped much aid into poverty-alleviation works, finding only later that they could never mean more than a partial solution to the problems of the rickshaw trade. In Shanghai, too, the Municipal Council's attempts to produce comfortable and clean rickshaws with contented coolies were stoutly and successfully resisted
by the owners and intermediaries with Green Gang connections (Wright 1991, 76–111; Roux 1993, 86–98). And in Tianjin, existing literature reveals neither government reform initiatives nor pullers' protests against police or owner abuses, unfortunately because of powerful gangster control (Hershatter 1986, 130). From another area, but also relevant, studies of mobilization have shown that the state always makes its choices about, if not between, tolerance and repression:

Governments respond selectively to different sorts of groups, and to different sorts of actions. Sometimes the discriminations are fine indeed: the same government which smiles on church services bringing together a thousand people assembled to pray for salvation shoots without hesitation into a crowd of a thousand workers assembled to pray for justice. (Tilly 1978, 106)

Although the colonial officials in Hong Kong, and those at Home, had the resources and determination tocurtail the buying and selling of mui-tsai (indentured girls) for prostitution and other vices, they did not as yet have the same degree of interest in applying the same policy concern to rickshaw reforms. In this way, they did not play an otherwise potentially more positive role. Thus it is not an over-statement to claim that rickshaw reform initiatives crumbled not because there was too much foreign influence but in part perhaps because there was not enough of it.

During the period in question, the form of pullers' protests taken depended very largely on the circumstance pertaining to the regional milieu, varying with time and place. Although Hong Kong was sensitive to the trammels of Chinese politics and not unproductive of community conflicts, it was in no way as politically turbulent as Canton. From the early to mid-1920s, the Canton pullers not only followed the general pattern of the civic strife but also played an active and centrally important role as the vanguard of a Communist insurgency. They reached the extreme of radical action in a frontal attack on police stations, on a scale never before seen, out of revenge for the abuses to which they were vulnerable. In contrast, in Italy, Germany, and France, the mobilization of new émigrés during the rebellious century of 1830–1930 was rendered extremely difficult by the absence of communication, organization, and leadership:

There is no tendency for recent migrants to Italian, German, and French cities to become exceptionally involved in movements of protest or in collective violence; on the contrary, we have some small indications of their underinvolvement. . . . Communication, organization, and leadership take a long time to build up. (Charles, Louise, and Richard Tilly 1975, 269)
In early republican Canton, the pullers who had come directly from the rural villages might be predicted, at first glance, to be the less likely to get immediately involved in any significant movement of collective protest. The initial, albeit important, work to ameliorate the pullers’ misery was not started by the Communists, the Nationalists, or any other political group, but by foreign Shameenese and missionaries who made it their business to minister to the poor. Indeed, the pullers of rural origins were notably free of outside political leadership up to the May Fourth period. Shortly thereafter, however, the pullers became the mainstay and flagship segment of the urban movement and repeatedly stood up to the police and politicians of the Guomindang and warlord governments who used to push them around — actions beyond our wildest imagination. Put differently, the pullers had, during the early and mid-1920s, achieved what few thought possible. A plausible explanation of the Canton phenomenon is certainly called for.

Throughout this enquiry, one has been especially struck by the role of historic ties of dialect and clan groupings in reducing the atomizing effects of rural-urban migration and facilitating the formation of new organizational nexuses. Residential proximity, clan assistance in job search, and other aspects of urban assimilation accentuated the ease of communication and organization among the rural in-migrants who were otherwise total strangers. It was these supportive networks of kin/quasi-kin personal connections that many déclassé émigrés found themselves lacking. The Communists supplied the kind of leadership the pullers needed that would enhance their capability to make an impressive involvement in the political process. Blessed as they were with the right conditions for radical mass action, the South China émigrés skipped the stage of taking a long time to embrace collective action of a partisan and revolutionary nature. In a synthesis of mobilization models, Anthony Oberschall takes note of the possibility that a conflict group escapes the cost of starting at “zero mobilization”:

Groups may already be organized in such a way that substantial amounts of individual resources are routinely allocated through existing associations and leadership for group ends. As the opportunity arises, existing leadership and organizations can then rapidly commit mobilized resources to new group goals, and can expand the reach of their mobilizing effort at low costs by making use of existing networks among group members. (Oberschall 1993, 58)

The empirical material that I have gathered in my research bears testimony to the existing leadership and organization among the Canton pullers, whose political showing in the early to mid-1920s certainly did not begin from “zero mobilization.” Their early socialization in the metaphorical notions of kinship
and common dialect/homeplace origin, well entrenched prior to their migration to the city, served to reinforce communal cohesion so effectively. Indeed, were it not for these traditional security nets, which the Communist activists consciously utilized, the pullers' political action would probably not have had such rapid results. It is almost certain that the pullers' militant action and belligerent mood, if not given a political coherency and strategy, would have been of limited character; conversely, it could be developed into direct action breaking into open rebellion.

A bottom-up perspective leads one to remedy the interpretative imbalance arising from the top-down approaches to the study of the Canton Insurrection, which have centered on the notions of "proletarian hegemony" and "leftist putchism." In short, one must look to the fabric of everyday life for an understanding of the pullers' political involvement. It was the show of anger against buses and police, apart from the success of an organizing elite per se, which gave force to their dormant inclination to riot. Although street conflicts formed an indispensable precondition of revolutionary movement, the latter was not a natural outcome of the former but rather required for its emergence the impulse of labor organizers. This observation does not mean to deprecate the Party's ability to mobilize; rather the opposite. It is suggested that the pullers' heavy involvement in the Canton Insurrection was due to the Party's organizational prowess for overt protests. It is only with these considerations in mind that the political emergence of the pullers, which at first sight seems puzzling, can make sense.

Viewed from this perspective, it comes as no surprise that the pullers became an element to be reckoned with in the urban revolutionary movement before they could be included in the category of industrial proletariat. Although in most instances they were unskilled and less formally organized than many other social types, they demonstrated time and again that they, too, were capable of collective action and making the public and even the state an unwilling victim. "Still," it has been said, "the backbone of committed constituents for the revolutionary labor movement remained the more favored workers — white-collar employees and factory artisans in particular" (Perry 1993, 129). One is tempted to say, however, that this diagnostic statement reveals at most a half-truth. The Canton pullers, although predominantly illiterate and downtrodden, were by no means poor material for radical action. In South China, where modern factories were relatively few in number and various forms of heavy manual labor were a way of life in public places, others who worked on the street are certain to attract more attention in the future.

The republican rickshaw activism generally increased with the post-May Fourth enlargement of the new civic politics, and ultimately these extreme actions were in significant part a product of the new claimants to power directing
the urban masses in a manner to enhance their position and influence. In both Canton and Beijing, for instance, we see the most radical actions taking place in 1927 and 1929 respectively: a communist-led armed insurrection and a tramcar-wrecking riot premeditated by union activists (Strand 1989, 239–83). In Shanghai, in 1927 a rickshaw union was formed in conjunction with the leftist GMD liberation of the Chinese sector; yet as the rightists subsequently utilized the gangster underworld to clamp down on organized labor, the rickshaw union was quickly dissolved (Li 1997, 21–7). The irony was made even more bitter as the pullers were faced with the choice of obtaining situational gains and rendering themselves vulnerable to political repression at various intervals. And this further suggests that the title of this book is, if anything, more relevant than ever.

Post-1927 Canton experienced a different situation. Politically, the new civic leaders who had directed the masses to usurp power from the ruling elements went out the window following the Nationalist accession to state power. The more stringent labor legislation and social control within Chinese society, together with the spread of motor traffic and the endless supply of surplus labor, engendered the pullers' increased vulnerability in relation to the state, the bosses, and the brokers. Although the Canton pullers' grievances against falling income and living standards never disappeared, during the 1930s, the GMD authorities tried to co-opt or channel tensions through state-sponsored unionism and advise the rickshaw union on how it should develop. The impulse towards unionism came not from organized labor but rather from the "interference" of meddling politicians and bureaucrats who saw the need to end social unrest and gave priority to class reconciliation. In Hong Kong, where the colonial state remained true to a laissez-faire tradition in its social policy, such partial state accommodation simply did not occur.

In leaving little space for the public sphere, the GMD authorities determined two trends of development in a way detrimental to all vestiges of civil autonomy. First, as a general rule, independent voluntary organizations and the private sector lost much of their clout in domestic politics. The rightists' attempts to eliminate dissent, made possible by the resurgence of state power, led to a downgrading of the adversarial role of the trade union and its manipulation as a tool for keeping order within the social system. The rickshaw union formed in Canton in 1936, patronized by government-picked representatives from the Labor Training Bureau and scrutinized by the Canton branch of the GMD, served as the embodiment of an official concern for social-political stability. It was designed as an obedient instrument the government needed to direct the pullers' grievances toward the "right path." It would be too much to expect this quasi-governmental union to push the state to change policies, and union activism certainly was no automatic panacea for the problems inherent in the trade.
Second, at a more general level, this study points out the need for state intervention in any type of significant social reform. In this light, we can perhaps see why the long-awaited rickshaw ownership scheme ended in failure. Financial and political limitations made impossible the implementation of reforms in any radical manner. The rickshaw union formed in Canton in 1936 was actually at best quasi-autonomous, although at times it showed an inclination towards the autonomous articulation of pullers’ interests. The union was an intention of the state, its effectiveness left to the goodwill of the party and government agencies of the Nationalist authorities. Although it might be a way of giving advice to the ruling class, it was impaired as a means of mobilization antipathetic to government decision and policy. Unless the initiative and full cooperation of the bureaucratic state was assured, rickshaw reforms were doomed to failure. Eventually, the progress of reforms aimed at helping the pullers to get out of poverty was cut short by the war of resistance against Japan.

Once we accept that social reforms became enmeshed with and predicated upon the intervention, or the lack thereof, of the state machinery, the demise of the Canton rickshaw becomes more understandable. As we saw in chapter 10, the pullers were not only victimized by transport technology but also were a target of rhetorical denunciation. The imposition of state corporatism during the second half or so of the 1940s involved the replacement of rickshaws by pedicabs. This deliberately eliminated rickshaws, which otherwise could have lingered on, operating a lower rate than pedicabs because the capital cost of manufacturing the rickshaws had already been amortized. Another turning point came with the establishment of the People’s Republic, which displayed a degree of state intrusion into everyday life never before seen. Now that the rickshaw was stigmatized as an epitome of capitalist exploitation of the treaty-port era, the rickshaw rapidly passed out of existence in the 1950s, and with it a long-forgotten occupational category.
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