

Class Formation at the Periphery: Salt Workers and the May Thirtieth Movement in Republican China

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Abstract How does working-class formation occur? Existing scholarship typically emphasizes either internal factors, such as workers' cultural traditions and collective agency, or external organizing efforts led by political parties. This article advances a third pathway by showing how non-labor social movements can catalyze working-class formation. Drawing on the case of salt workers in Republican China, I examine how the May Thirtieth Movement, a nationwide anti-imperialist patriotic movement, accelerated the emergence of class consciousness and worker organization among a peripheral labor group. I show that the movement operated through two mechanisms. First, it introduced anti-imperialist nationalism as a new mobilizing ideology that drew salt workers into political struggle and opened space for the diffusion of radical labor ideas. Second, it expanded the capacity and willingness of political parties to organize workers, facilitating the rapid emergence of unions and worker associations. By highlighting the catalytic role of non-labor movements, this article broadens existing explanations of working-class formation and offers a new perspective on how peripheral workers become incorporated into class politics.

Keywords class formation, labor politics, nationalist movement, Republican China

Introduction

In the winter of 1913, the second year of the Republic of China, a salt reclamation company in Nantong, Jiangsu, known locally as the Bai Company, quickly consolidated control over salt production. Local salt workers labored day and night but earned only meager wages and fell into poverty. Three years later, the company seized land previously used by nearby workers and farmers to grow grain and converted it to cotton cultivation. This further deprived them of food supplies and provoked widespread anger.

In response, Wang Nunu, a female leader among the salt workers, together with fellow workers Zhu Zhaoxiang, Tang Liujin, and He Zuqing, took off their waist belts, tied them to bamboo poles, and waved them high, calling on the angry salt workers and farmers to confront the Bai Company together. The protest failed, and the leaders were whipped by company managers. Enraged workers then set fire to the company and killed two managers. Afterwards, Wang Nunu and the three other leaders were sentenced to death. This is the folk story known as “Wang Nunu Burns Jinling Dang”¹. Although folkloric details may not fully correspond to historical events, local records confirm that salt workers in the region used arson as a form of resistance against exploitation².

This rarely mentioned instance of resistance serves as a vivid reminder that salt workers in early twentieth-century China did not remain silent in the face of exploitation and oppression. They engaged in spontaneous and sometimes violent resistance. Yet their actions targeted immediate economic grievances rather than broader political goals. More than a decade later, however, salt worker resistance took a different form. In the winter of 1927, more than two thousand salt workers in the Xiba area of Huai’an organized a strike and march demanding not only higher wages but also the right to form labor unions, opposition to tax increases, and an end to beatings and exploitation³. Workers now articulated claims for organization and collective rights, indicating that their struggles had moved beyond isolated economic disputes.

¹ Haimen County Historical and Cultural Materials Working Committee, ed. 1986. *Haimen County Historical and Cultural Materials*, Vol. 5. Internal materials. p. 60

² Nantong Salt Industry Gazetteer Compilation Committee. 2012. *Nantong Salt Industry Gazetteer*. Nanjing: Phoenix Publishing House. p. 458

³ Huai’an Salt Industry Compilation Committee. 2013. *Huai’an Salt Industry Gazetteer*, Beijing: Fangzhi Press. p. 480

The emergence of political demands and organizational consciousness in the second salt workers' protest signaled their development toward what Marx (2021) called "a class for itself." The contrast between the two protests raises the central question of this article: how did class formation among salt workers in Republican China occur? This article draws on Katznelson's (1986) definition of class formation: the working class forms when workers become aware of their position within the social structure and develop both the willingness and the capacity to act to influence that position.

China's salt industry has an ancient history, with salt governance holding a central position in state administration during the Ming and Qing dynasties. Beginning in the late Qing period, that is, the second half of the nineteenth century, the government gradually relaxed its regulation over private participation in the production, purchase, and transportation of salt. By the Republican period, private enterprises in the salt industry were developing rapidly. The rise of salt production companies and the expansion of transportation networks caused more and more salt industry laborers to lose their means of production and become wage workers relying on the sale of their labor. Thus, from the perspective of objective economic foundations and production relations, salt workers became part of the working class. However, workers' class consciousness did not emerge immediately.

How does class consciousness arise? One important answer from existing research is through workers' traditional culture, where they draw on cultural resources to reflect upon their new class experiences and thus form class consciousness. This has been demonstrated for nineteenth-century British workers (Thompson 1966), urban artisans in France before the Revolution (Sewell 1986), and even Shanghai artisans in the early Republican China (Perry 1993:46-47), among other cases. Nevertheless, although Republican-era salt workers utilized traditional culture to establish a certain degree of solidarity, such connections also constrained their development toward fuller class unity. Thus, relying on traditional cultural resources alone was not sufficient.

A second answer in existing research is the intervention of external leftist organizers and intellectuals, who bring to workers a deeper political consciousness to overthrow capitalist society or, in other words, socialist consciousness (Kautsky 1910; Lenin 1935). Yet no matter whether it was the southern unions organized by Sun Yat-sen and others after the 1911

Revolution, or the worker mobilization initiated by the early Chinese Communist Party in Beijing, Shanghai, Hankou, and other places (Deng 1949:9-21), almost none managed to make contact with salt workers. It can be said that prior to the mid-1920s, the influence of worker organizers on salt workers' class formation was minimal.

Through analyzing local salt industry gazetteers, histories of resistance, Republican-era newspapers, and archival materials from various parts of China, I introduce a third answer and argue that the May Thirtieth Movement, a massive anti-imperialist patriotic movement that occurred in the mid-1920s, was a necessary condition for class formation among salt workers. Two mechanisms underpinned this process. First, the May Thirtieth Movement introduced salt workers to anti-imperialist patriotic nationalism as a new ideology of struggle. This enabled salt workers' struggles, for the first time, to move beyond immediate economic demands and to adopt macro-political goals. The rapid and sudden spread of nationalism also opened space for the advancement of other radical ideologies, including Marxism, and therefore laid a foundation for later worker organization. Second, the May Thirtieth Movement strengthened the capacity of the political party rooted in worker organization while prompting the nationalist-oriented party to recognize workers as a force that could be incorporated. Hence, both types of parties invested greater efforts in organizing and mobilizing workers after the May Thirtieth Movement. Salt workers were thereby able to establish contact with labor organizers they had previously been unable to reach, leading to the development of both class consciousness and worker organizations.

In the following sections of empirical analysis, I first explore the influence of the salt workers' traditional cultural resources on their solidarity during the Republican era, as well as the overall situation of Chinese worker organizations and mobilization before the May Thirtieth Movement, uncovering why these two aspects alone were insufficient for class formation among salt workers. I then clarify the impacts and transformations brought by the May Thirtieth Movement, including the emergence of new ideologies in salt worker resistance and the creation and growth of modern organizations for struggle among salt workers. The salt-worker case employed in this article highlights the role of non-labor social movements in promoting working class formation. Especially for workers in marginal positions, other types of social movement

can mobilize their participation in political struggle, which in turn feeds back into the process of labor struggle and class formation.

Literature Review

How can we explain the formation of the working class? In classical Marxist theory, working-class formation requires workers to move beyond their objective conditions and structural position to develop a shared understanding of common interests, a transition Marx describes as moving from a “class in itself” to a “class for itself” (Marx 1963; Marx 2021). Marx, however, does not explain how this transition occurs or what mechanisms drive it. Existing scholarship has generally offered two explanations. One emphasizes workers’ agency, arguing that class formation develops largely from within the working class itself. The other highlights the role of external organizations, particularly political parties, in shaping working-class formation. In the following subsections, I first review these two approaches. I then propose a third explanation, suggesting that other types of social movements may also influence working-class formation. To develop this perspective, I engage with theoretical discussions of “event” in historical sociology, which provide the conceptual foundation for the empirical analysis that follows.

The Internal Path of Working-Class Formation: Free Agency from Structure

British historian E. P. Thompson, in his study of the formation of the English working class, pioneers an approach that emphasizes historical experience and socio-cultural processes, arguing that workers’ own cultural traditions constituted a key resource upon which they drew in the process of class formation. For Thompson, the key to the formation of the working class is the emergence of class consciousness. Only when workers realize their common interests as a group—and recognize that their interests are opposed to those of rulers and employers (Thompson 1966:11, 194)—does the working class truly come into being.

To explain the emergence of class consciousness, Thompson first introduces the concept of “class experience,” positioning it as the intermediary between economic base and superstructure (Thompson 1966:9; Thompson 1978:98). According to Thompson, class experience is determined by relations of production yet transcends narrow economic meanings, including broader social, political institutions and practices, and attempts to incorporate the

complex or even contradictory experiences that subjects may encounter (Liu 2014:14-15). Class consciousness, then, is the result of reflecting on past class experience through the lens of culture, which includes “traditions, value-systems, ideas, and institutional forms” (Thompson 1966:10). Thus, Thompson argues, to investigate working-class formation, one must consider inherited cultural traditions. In this framework, class consciousness is not automatically produced by objective class structure. Instead, it is a historical achievement attained by workers through cultural reflection and agency (Sewell 1990; Fantasia 1995). Thompson’s model places particular emphasis on workers as conscious historical agents, asserting that agency resides in individuals rather than in the abstract concept of class (Thompson 1965); class consciousness emerges organically from within the workers themselves, rather than being externally imposed.

Thompson’s exploration of worker agency has two main dimensions, each receiving attention from other theorists and researchers. The first concerns workers’ cultural traditions. When capitalist change threatens established lifestyles and customs, workers may resist to defend these traditions (Thompson 1966:203; Thompson 1991:9). Antonio Gramsci similarly argues that the proletariat emerged from preexisting social groups that carried their traditions and aspirations into the process of proletarianization (Camfield 2004). Sewell (1986) shows that long-standing social understandings of labor helped foster class consciousness among French urban craftsmen, while Mann (1973) suggests that different cultural contexts provide workers with distinct ideological resources. The second dimension is worker organization. Thompson argues that working-class formation depends not only on the growth of class consciousness but also on the development of political and industrial organizations (Thompson 1966:194). Other scholars likewise emphasize that sociocultural and political organizations shape the content and collective expression of class consciousness (Aminzade 1981:69; Fantasia 1988:10–11) and that the spread of class ideology requires organizations capable of sustaining it (Hobsbawm 2016).

After Thompson, scholars have continued to reject economic determinism in analyses of class formation. Examining eighteenth-century Austrian Lombardy, Riley (2003) demonstrates that despite substantial economic transformation, political society can exert an autonomous influence that obstructs class formation. In a similar Thompsonian vein, Koditschek (1990: 453–460) argues that in nineteenth-century Bradford, traditional values, communities, and solidarities persisted as workers entered urban environments and gradually formed a working class.

My empirical analysis likewise begins with workers' cultural traditions and organizational development, but I also highlight the limitations of relying solely on internal path to explain class formation. More broadly, this article draws on the socio-cultural approach to working-class formation started by E. P. Thompson. While the analysis does not focus exclusively on internal processes within the working class, it pays particular attention to the roles of consciousness, culture, and ideology in shaping the formation of the working class.

External Influences on Working-Class Formation: Party Organization

In addition to workers' spontaneous development of class consciousness through cultural traditions, external organization and mobilization have also been regarded as important drivers of working-class formation. Hobsbawm (2016:14–15) points out that every class has two levels of aspiration: one concerns concrete and immediate needs in everyday life, while the other relates to broader visions of the kind of society people wish to achieve. Literature emphasizing external influences argues that only under the leadership of external organizations can the working class develop demands and consciousness that transcend immediate interests. Such external organizations most often refer to political parties.

Regarding how political parties shape workers' consciousness, one line of argument holds that parties instill or transmit consciousness to workers. For Lenin (1935), workers' spontaneous struggles can generate only trade union consciousness, a form of class consciousness that leads workers to seek unionization, to recognize the need to struggle against factory owners, and to demand specific legislation from the state. A higher level of socialist consciousness, instead, entails the goal of overthrowing capitalism and pursuing a thorough transformation of society. Such consciousness, Lenin argues, must be introduced to the working class from outside. Kautsky (1910) similarly maintained that socialist consciousness does not emerge spontaneously from proletarian struggle but must be brought to the proletariat from without, a task he assigned to social democratic parties.

However, another line of argument highlights that the role of the party is not to instill consciousness but to educate and guide workers. Like Lenin and Kautsky, Luxemburg views the party as a strong political organization that the working class must possess, and one of its central tasks is to raise the socialist consciousness of the working class. But differently, Luxemburg argues that the class consciousness disseminated and instilled by the party is theoretical and

latent, and that it becomes actual only when workers themselves step onto the political stage and participate directly in political movements (Luxemburg 2007:160). A similarly strong emphasis on the party's educative and guiding role can be found in Gramsci. Reinterpreting Machiavelli's notion of the "modern Prince" for the twentieth century, Gramsci argues that the role of the Prince is now fulfilled by the political party. In order to develop the collective will it represents, the political party must be "directive and organizational, that is, educative and intellectual" (Gramsci 1971 [1992]: 16). In Gramsci's formulation, the proletarian party does not function as an agent that simply instills consciousness. Rather, it should guide processes of ideological transformation. Gramsci's path of treating the party as the organizer of collective will informed later theories of political articulation, which emphasize that political parties do not merely reflect social divisions but actively articulate and construct them (de Leon et al. 2009; de Leon et al. 2015:2, 21; Triplett 2022).

These theories that stress the role of external organization, especially political parties, in the formation of working-class consciousness are closely tied to practice and are rooted in concrete labor movements and revolutionary experiences. Yet empirical experience repeatedly brings to the fore a crucial issue: the heterogeneity of the working class. Luxemburg (2007:154-155) once notes that if the suffering of agricultural workers were neglected and organizing efforts focused merely on industrial workers, the German proletariat would never be fully mobilized. This observation reminds us that external organizational mobilization may not reach all groups within the working class simultaneously. It therefore underscores the importance of attending to workers who occupy non-central positions within labor organizations and movements. This study rethinks how external organizations shape working-class formation and its potential shortcomings by focusing on the class formation of workers located at the margins.

The Third Path: The Influence of Non-Labor Social Movements on Working-Class Formation

However, the consciousness and culture involved in the formation of the working class are not necessarily derived solely from the internal cultural traditions of workers or from organizations and collective actions directed specifically at workers. They can also originate from other kinds of social movements, an underdeveloped third explanatory path stressed by this article. Anderson (2016) notes that English workers' class consciousness was deeply influenced by the American

and French Revolutions, suggesting that class consciousness does not emerge entirely within the class itself. Sewell (1986) similarly shows how the French Revolution produced a new political language that was not initially about labor rights or directed at the proletariat. Yet workers appropriated and reinterpreted this language of liberty, expressing class consciousness through revolutionary discourse (Sewell 1986:59–60). In this sense, working-class formation can intertwine with other types of social movements that provide cultural and ideological resources for workers' collective identity.

Such movements may be especially significant where workers face multiple forms of oppression. Chakrabarty (1989) argues that in India and other Third World contexts, working-class struggles are multidimensional, involving demands for equality as well as struggles that exceed capitalist notions of equality. The more varied the forms of exploitation workers experience, the more likely they are to engage in diverse forms of collective struggle, which in turn can reshape the agenda of labor movements. A notable example is the influence of the *minjung* (“people”) movement in South Korea during the 1970s and 1980s on later labor mobilization and working-class formation. The concept of the “people,” rooted in nationalist and leftist discourse from the colonial and early postwar periods, facilitated broad mobilization of diverse social forces. Within this cultural and ideological framework, workers developed political consciousness and adopted an anti-hegemonic discourse that later informed labor politics and working-class contention (Koo 2001:142–143).

This case illustrates how concepts such as the “people,” rooted in earlier nationalist struggles, can shape the cultural resources available to workers. The position of the nation-state in the international order, and the social movements it inspires, can therefore influence the ideological tools through which workers interpret and organize their struggles. While existing scholarship has examined how the state shapes working-class formation (Hattam 1992; Katznelson 1986:30–31), the intersection between nationalist movements in colonized or semi-colonized societies and working-class formation remains underexamined. Studies of labor–nationalist interactions have mainly focused on workers' contributions to nationalist movements (Hodgkin 1957; Chalcraft 2005), paying far less attention to how nationalist movements reshape labor politics. Proposed mechanisms include elite provision of resources and organizational support (Barraclough 1967; Silver 2003) and the cultural framing of worker mobilization

(Chalcraft 2005). Yet the processes through which nationalist movements influence labor movements remain unclear, and the heterogeneity within labor movements—particularly the experiences of rural workers—has received limited attention (Beinin and Lockman 1988).

Therefore, this research aims to uncover the mechanisms through which nationalist movements, triggered by a state's position in the international order—more specifically, by the imperialist threats it faced—shaped processes of working-class formation. Also, while Koo focuses on the influence of the People's Movement on the Korean working class as a whole, this study centers on workers situated at the periphery within a single country, with particular attention to how nationwide mass movements influenced their trajectories of class formation.

“Event” in Historical Sociology

To examine the mechanisms through which nationalist movements shape the formation of the working class, this section briefly reviews the concept of the “event” in historical sociology and employs it as a theoretical tool for the analysis. Sewell's definition and discussion of the event constitute a foundational contribution to this literature. He argues that most happenings in everyday life merely reproduce existing social and cultural structures and do not bring about structural change, whereas events are rare occurrences among these numerous happenings that significantly transform structures (Sewell 2005:100). Events generate not only ruptures but also enduring chains of consequences and trigger structural transformations, including changes in cultural schemas, shifts in resources, and the emergence of new configurations of power (Sewell 2005:228). Sewell places particular emphasis on the relationship between events and structures. In his analysis of the taking of the Bastille in French history, he argues that accumulated structural dislocations in prerevolutionary France enabled the taking of the Bastille to become the opening moment of the French Revolution, while the taking of the Bastille in turn produced transformative rearticulations of structures (Sewell 2005:244–245). The taking of the Bastille qualifies as a historical event not only because it initiated structural change but also because it reconfigured French political culture and introduced new symbolic meanings (Sewell 2005:245). The capacity to produce significant and enduring effects on structures and cultural schemas lies at the core of Sewell's definition of the event (Sewell 1996).

In contrast to teleological temporality, the eventful temporality advocated by Sewell (1996) does not assign a predetermined end to the course of history. Structural forces only

partially shape the occurrence of historical events, while contingent choices and actions made during events ultimately set subsequent historical trajectories. In other words, once existing regulations are disrupted, rules cease to be fixed, thus opening a window for contingency. And then the making of contingent choices is an expression of actors' agency. Although Sewell reserves an important place for contingency and agency, he does not detach events entirely from structural constraints. This limitation has prompted further debates on the relationship between structure and agency (e.g., Steinmetz 2008; Ermakoff 2015). This article engages with Hirschman's (2021) reconceptualization of agency, which shifts attention not only to the occurrence of change but also to the rate of change. Hirschman argues that the speed at which change unfolds can shape historical outcomes in distinct ways, and that agency lies precisely in actors' capacity to influence this rate. Building on this insight, this article analyzes the impact of nationalist movements on the working-class formation.

Case Selection, Data, and Methods

Salt workers in Republican China provide a valuable case for studying the formation of the working class at the periphery. First, the Republican period (1912–1949)⁴ witnessed the rise of salt capitalists, especially in salt production, through two distinct patterns: dispossession of production means in the Lianghuai region and consolidation of production means in Zigong. In the late Qing and early Republican periods, Lianghuai—long a major salt-producing region encompassing Huainan and Huaibei—shifted from boiled salt production to solar salt production. During this transition, salt reclamation companies rapidly expanded and appropriated the production facilities previously used by salt workers. In Huainan alone, seventy-six such companies were established in the early Republican period⁵, and large numbers of dispossessed salt workers became wage laborers employed by these firms. By contrast, Zigong in Sichuan produced well salt. As state restrictions on private well operation loosened from the Qing period onward, private wells were developed either through individual ownership or pooled investment.

⁴ My main concern is the initial achievement of class formation among salt workers, which is why the empirical analysis of this article is concentrated on the 1920s.

⁵ Jiangsu Provincial Gazetteer Compilation Committee. 1997. *Jiangsu Provincial Gazetteer: Salt Industry*. Nanjing: Jiangsu Science and Technology Press. p. 34

By the late nineteenth century, wealthy salt merchants had begun consolidating the ownership of previously scattered wells. By the 1910s, some merchants controlled more than one hundred boiling furnaces and employed hundreds of thousands of workers⁶. Simultaneously, the development of the salt transportation business increased the number of employed salt transport workers, with large numbers of carters and porters working at docks and warehouses involved in the trade and transport of salt. In short, many salt producers and transporters became wage-dependent proletarians as the salt industrialists expanded their reach during the Republican era.

Second, salt workers in Republican China were subject to oppression from multiple domestic and foreign forces. Whether it was the collection of salt taxes, the bureaucrats managing daily salt affairs, or the salt police responsible for anti-smuggling and maintaining order, they often allied with feudal forces such as landlords and gentry to further exploit the salt workers. Furthermore, although imperialism did not directly affect the daily work and life of salt workers, Republican China was constantly surrounded and oppressed by imperialist powers, which made imperialist influence a part of the salt workers' class experience at that time. A crucial example was in 1913, when Yuan Shikai mortgaged the salt tax and tariffs to borrow money from banks in Britain, France, Germany, Japan, and Russia. Subsequently, the consortium from these countries substantially increased the tax rate through the salt tax auditing office⁷, placing a heavier tax burden on the salt workers. This multifaceted oppression meant that salt workers, in seeking their own liberation, had to participate in multi-dimensional struggles, increasing their likelihood of joining various types of social movements.

Additionally, except for the Sichuan Zigong area, which used machines for salt production⁸, salt in other regions was still produced through manual labor, meaning that most salt workers during the Republic were still craft workers. Their lives during this era were extremely impoverished, as they could barely meet basic needs, wore coarse clothing, subsisted on simple food, had generally very low levels of education, and lived mainly in remote salt-producing

⁶ Zigong Municipal Salt Administration. 1995. *Zigong Salt Industry Gazetteer*. Chengdu: Sichuan People's Publishing House. p. 141

⁷ Jiangsu Provincial Gazetteer Compilation Committee. *Jiangsu Provincial Gazetteer: Salt Industry*. p. 2

⁸ Zigong Municipal Salt Administration. 1995. *Zigong Salt Industry Gazetteer*. Chengdu: Sichuan People's Publishing House.

regions far from cities⁹. These characteristics indicate that salt workers at the time occupied a highly marginalized social position.

Therefore, the salt workers examined in this study occupied peripheral positions in several senses. First, in socio-economic terms, they were already in relatively disadvantaged circumstances within the working class of their own nation. Second, living under imperialist domination in a semi-colonial context, they also constituted a marginal group within the international working class. Finally, as the analysis below will show, they remained at the periphery within the workers' movements led by left-wing organizations at the time, receiving comparatively limited attention.

To fully explore the history of class formation among Republican-era salt workers, I mainly collected and analyzed five types of historical materials. The first type is local salt industry gazetteers compiled by various provinces, cities, and counties in China, most of which were published between the 1980s and the early 21st century and include large volumes of records about salt workers during the Republican period. The second type includes local Communist Party histories and chronicles of revolutionary struggles, published in cities and counties across China during the 1980s and 1990s, which contain numerous materials on salt worker resistance during the Republican era. For the first and second types of sources, most are secondary works that have been compiled by research teams based on primary materials.

The third type refer to the historical and cultural materials compiled by local committees of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) in the late twentieth century. These collections include oral histories and memoirs by salt workers and salt merchants who used to be in the Republican-era salt industry. The fourth type consists of newspapers from the Republican period, including *Si Wan Pao*, *The Eastern Times*, *The Republican Daily News*, *Central Daily News*, *Ta Kung Pao*, *Yi Shih Pao*, *The Tabloids*, *The China Press*, *The Shanghai Times*, *The Shanghai Evening Post & Mercury*, etc.; I have gathered all news reports related to salt workers from these publications. The fifth type comes from physical archives. I first visited the Second Historical Archives of China, which holds concentrated materials from the

⁹ Zhejiang Salt Industry Gazetteer Compilation Committee. 1996. *Zhejiang Salt Industry Gazetteer*. Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company; Guangdong Provincial Office of Local Gazetteers. 2006. *Guangdong Provincial Gazetteer: Salt Industry*. Guangzhou: Guangdong People's Publishing House.

Republican period, and then visited several local archives in Jiangsu, Zhejiang, Sichuan, and Guangdong, provinces that contained major salt production areas during the Republic, where I transcribed documents related to the lives and struggles of Republican-era salt workers. These three types of sources are primary materials, including manifestos issued during salt workers' actions, organizational regulations of salt workers' groups, and contemporaneous reports and memories on salt workers' resistance.

In analyzing the materials, I categorized them into the following themes: salt administration and salt production in the Republican era; salt workers' organizations, welfare, and daily life; salt workers' struggles; and anti-imperialist patriotic movements and political parties. These themes reveal both the objective class experiences and the development of organization, struggle, and subjective consciousness among salt workers. For my definition of class formation, in the Introduction I adopt the definition proposed by Katznelson (1986), which includes two dimensions: workers' class consciousness and their capacity for collective organization and action. This definition is consistent with Thompson's (2001:211) emphasis on examining both the growth of class consciousness and the development of workers' organizational forms. As for the meaning of class consciousness, I draw on the definition provided by Aminzade (1981:76), who defines it as workers' awareness of their shared interests, as well as their recognition of interests that stand in opposition to those of other classes. More specifically, in the empirical measurement used in this study, expressions opposing the bourgeoisie or defending the collective interests of salt workers, as reflected in workers' demands, declarations, slogans, and related materials, are treated as evidence of the emergence of class consciousness. The establishment of trade unions and other worker organizations formed to defend the rights and interests of salt workers is taken as evidence of the development of organizational capacity.

The Tradition and Constraints of Solidarity among Salt Workers

Tradition of Solidarity: Brotherhood under the Protection of Deities

Guilds, Secret Societies, and Sworn Brotherhoods

During the Republican period, salt workers were often not in an atomized or isolated state. Instead, they relied on organizations that had developed during the Qing dynasty to connect with one another. Among these, guilds were the most important type of organization. Within the guilds, ethical norms formed through members' mutual consensus governed behavior, maintaining the order of workers' daily labor and life. When labor disputes arose, the guilds naturally became the organizational networks that served as the foundation for salt workers' collective actions.

In Zigong, Sichuan, guilds among salt workers were once highly prevalent. Various guilds were organized according to specific trades and crafts, among which the most famous was the Yan Emperor Society (Yandi Hui), established as early as 1796 and composed mainly of salt-firing workers. The rules of the Yan Emperor Society included "Five Prohibitions" and "Three Restrictions," reflecting the code of conduct binding its members:

"The Five Prohibitions: 1. No non-member may serve as a master salt-firer; 2. No member may seize another's job; 3. New workers at the furnace must not meet with dismissed workers; 4. No theft; 5. No gambling, drinking of foreign liquor, excessive drunkenness, quarreling, or fighting.

The Three Restrictions: 1. No salt-firing beyond prescribed regulations; 2. No mining work; 3. No halting of production or suspension of boiling."¹⁰

As can be seen, these rules established workplace order among salt workers and fostered harmonious relations. Violating these regulations led to corresponding punishments, with the most severe being expulsion from the guild. Yet, although the guild forbade individuals from halting production, in practice it often organized and led strikes aimed at improving working conditions. For example, the 1919 strike launched by the Yan Emperor Society, in which salt-firing workers demanded higher wages¹¹. Besides the Yan Emperor Society, other guilds such as the Qiaosheng Society and the Shicheng Society also emerged in Zigong during the Republican period. They organized or planned salt workers' strikes, and for a time, guilds became the primary force mobilizing workers' resistance in the region.

¹⁰ Zigong Municipal Salt Administration. *Zigong Salt Industry Gazetteer*. p. 401

¹¹ *ibid.* p. 407

In addition to guilds based on trade and occupation, salt workers also joined secret societies founded on regional ties. Members of such societies came from various occupations within the same locality. Within these societies, members treated one another as brothers, forming close networks of support and protection. When their interests were harmed, they united to resist external enemies. For instance, the Hong Society (Hongbang) first appeared in the Shierwei area of Yangzhou, Jiangsu. It was originally founded during the Guangxu reign of the Qing dynasty by a private salt trader named Xu Baoshan, who organized armed resistance against government inspections of illegal salt trade. Later, Xu Baoshan was granted amnesty by the Qing government, and the Hong Society suffered a major setback, yet it survived and became active again in northern Yangzhou in the early Republican years¹². Originating from illicit salt trading, the Hong Society recruited many salt workers, who, through the society, formed brotherhood ties with other laborers and thus escaped isolation.

The practices of building connections and brotherly bonds within guilds and societies also spread more widely. In places where neither guilds nor secret societies existed, salt workers forged solidarity through the more intimate practice of “sworn brotherhood” to jointly confront salt merchants and local authorities. The ritual of sworn brotherhood required participants to set up incense altars, burn incense and candles, and sometimes display scrolls depicting Liu Bei, Guan Yu, and Zhang Fei’s Oath of Brotherhood in the Peach Garden¹³. This “brotherly solidarity” was a spontaneously formed bond among salt workers in the Republican era, providing an organizational foundation for their collective actions and resistance. Consequently, salt workers’ struggles against salt capitalists and bureaucrats occurred frequently. In other words, they did not remain silent in the face of exploitation and oppression in their class experience.

Popular Religious Beliefs

Aside from “brotherly solidarity,” popular religious beliefs also added an extra cohesion to the unity among salt workers. In regions where guilds existed, each guild would enshrine a principal deity. The membership fees paid by salt workers were called “money for the deity,” and at fixed

¹² Yizheng City Gazetteer Compilation Committee. 1994. *Yizheng City Gazetteer*. Nanjing: Jiangsu Science and Technology Press. p. 668

¹³ *ibid.* p. 500

annual gatherings, members would also buy offerings to celebrate the deity. Popular religious beliefs provided the salt-worker guilds with a sacred source of legitimacy: the members of the guild were not only brothers united but also brothers protected under divine blessing.

Simultaneously, even in struggles spontaneously organized by salt workers without guild leadership, traces of popular religious beliefs did not disappear. In 1916, at the Fengjue Salt Yard in Nantong, Jiangsu, continuous rainfall interrupted salt-boiling production. The government's purchase price of salt remained unchanged while grain prices kept rising, and the salt workers' lives fell into extreme hardship. They thus decided to besiege the salt-yard office, demanding that the officials raise the purchase price of salt. One late night, several hundred salt workers "gathered in He Furnace Temple, took an oath of unity before the divine statue, ate unity noodles together, and then set out for Juegang"¹⁴. The temple became the initial gathering place of salt workers, and the local deities worshiped by the people played the role of consolidating the workers' solidarity.

Throughout the Republican period, popular religious beliefs often served as a spiritual pillar in the salt workers' resistance, giving them greater courage and confidence to confront their oppressors. Rituals and assemblies associated with popular religion enhanced solidarity among salt workers as well. Under the witness of the deities, the participating workers took oaths never to betray their brothers and became even more closely united.

Constraints of Solidarity: Organizational Boundaries and Immediate Demands

Closed Guilds and Mixed Secret Societies

Although guilds provided a foundation for salt workers' solidarity, they also displayed a closed nature. They often included only a portion of workers while excluding others, making it impossible for salt workers to build solidarity with a broader group of workers and thus preventing further advancement in their class formation.

Take, for example, the "Eighteen Guilds" (Shibabang) in the Shierwei area of Yizheng, Yangzhou. These were guilds of salt bag porters, and their division was based on the workers' native regions. For instance, the "Xiangxiang Salt Guild" was said to have been formed when,

¹⁴ Nantong Salt Industry Gazetteer Compilation Committee. *Nantong Salt Industry Gazetteer*. p. 459

after the defeat of the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom, Xiang Army soldiers changed occupations on the spot and became salt transport workers in the Huainan area (Wang 2011:373). The sense of “hometown,” which bound together workers within a guild, naturally also became a factor preventing salt workers from forming broader connections. Besides the clear boundaries among guilds within the same trade, there was also little interaction between guilds of different industries. During the late Qing and Republican periods in Huaiyin County, there were many guilds across various handicraft and service industries, with the number of guilds in the county reaching several dozen, but “they were not connected with one another and had no relations of subordination”¹⁵. Therefore, although guilds provided salt workers with a preexisting and perhaps long-lasting foundation for solidarity, such solidarity was highly fragmented and could not lead to an expansion of unity among salt workers themselves or between salt workers and workers in other trades.

By contrast, secret societies were sometimes able to engage in direct political confrontation and resist the ruling authorities, as in the case of the “Hong Society” mentioned earlier, which once became a political force the Qing government could not ignore. However, the limitation of secret societies in promoting class formation among salt workers lay in their heterogeneity: their members came from diverse occupations and social classes, making it difficult to form collective actions aimed at workers’ struggles. The “Qing Society” (also known as the “Green Gang”), which existed in the same area as the “Eighteen Guilds,” was precisely such a mixed organization. Many salt workers participated in the Qing Society, but its members also included soldiers, vagrants, and people from the commercial and intellectual worlds¹⁶. It was precisely because of this heterogeneity that salt workers were unable to form class-based solidarity within the secret societies and could not develop a consciousness of the working class.

Thus, both the closed guilds and the heterogeneous secret societies were insufficient to promote the class formation of salt workers. Though these traditional forms of organization broke the isolation of salt workers and established a certain degree of unity, they also limited the further development of that solidarity.

¹⁵ Huaiyin City Gazetteer Compilation Committee. 1995. *Huaiyin City Gazetteer*. Shanghai: Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences Press. p. 1400

¹⁶ Yizheng City Gazetteer Compilation Committee. *Yizheng City Gazetteer*. p. 668

Immediate Economic Demands and the Overthrow of Local Tyrants

On the existing basis of solidarity, salt workers spontaneously launched multiple collective resistance actions. They were neither blindly obedient nor atomized and isolated. However, during the period when only guilds and secret societies existed, the struggles of salt workers were focused solely on immediate demands, including immediate economic demands and resistance against certain corrupt bureaucrats or tyrannical landlords within the local gentry system. No struggle with broader or more ambitious political goals emerged at this stage.

Among the “Eighteen Guilds” (Shibabang), several had repeatedly organized or supported local salt workers’ struggles for wage increases. In June 1922, salt workers in the Sierwei area, where the “Eighteen Guilds” operated, initiated a wage-raising movement because their income could no longer sustain their basic livelihood. The salt porters of the “Eighteen Guilds” collectively joined the struggle. During the early stage of negotiation, conflicts broke out between salt merchants and salt workers, resulting in eight injuries, one of which was severe and life-threatening. The clash inflamed the workers’ anger, and thousands of salt workers joined in, forcing the closure of all local markets. Yet this intense struggle ended after about a week: the salt merchants agreed to raise workers’ wages by 600 wen per month, and the workers resumed their labor as usual¹⁷. Evidently, once the economic dispute was settled, the workers’ movement naturally subsided and did not expand toward other goals. From the founding of Republican China to the early 1920s, strikes and confrontations initiated by salt workers for economic demands were quite common¹⁸. Although many of these actions achieved certain results and temporarily alleviated immediate economic hardships, none led the workers toward political struggle.

Beyond economic reasons, the spontaneous resistances of salt workers in the early Republican period were also driven by a desire to overthrow corrupt officials and landlords who oppressed the common people and to defend their own sense of justice. In such actions, they often used slogans such as “eliminating violence for the people”, expressing a clear spirit of defying local tyrants and arbitrary power. In 1927, in Waisha, Chongming County of Jiangsu Province, a local landlord named Ding Shusheng colluded with the state-run Salt Bureau to

¹⁷ *Shibao*, June 8 and June 14, 1922.

¹⁸ *Xinwen Bao*, June 2, 1921; *Minguo Ribao*, September 7, 1923.

establish several official-salt shops. The authorities then compelled residents to buy official salt, and Ding made huge profits by selling it at high prices. As a consequence, many salt workers engaged in local earth salt production lost their livelihoods. Facing this, the salt workers united in armed resistance. Thousands of them surrounded and attacked Ding's salt shops, demolished dozens of Ding family storefronts, and even attempted to destroy Ding's residence. At that time, Ding had already summoned salt police to guard his home. In the fierce confrontation that followed, a salt worker named Cao Zhiwen shouted, "I, Cao Mazi, eliminate violence for the people, rebel against the salt tyrant, and make my name known across the world. It is worth dying for!"¹⁹

Such resistance against tyrants, which was composed of local officials, gentry, or landlords, was very common in popular uprisings of the feudal era. It reflected the people's awareness of their opposition to the abusers of public power. When justice could no longer be upheld through the existing bureaucratic system, they turned to resistance as a way to defend their own moral conception of fairness. But salt workers at that time did not extend their resistance beyond the immediate overthrow of individual local tyrants. Their struggles remained bound to immediate grievances. Once those were addressed, collective action naturally dissolved. In the case mentioned above that occurred at Waisha in Chongming, Cao Zhiwen and other salt workers were beaten to death during the protest. After Ding and the salt police compensated the families of the deceased and injured with a certain amount of relief payments, the incident was brought to an end²⁰. Taken together, during the Republican period, salt workers did not transition from spontaneous, internally driven struggles toward political movements.

Untouched: Modern Worker Mobilization and Salt Workers in Early Republican China

By the mid-1920s, when the May Thirtieth Movement erupted, various political forces had already begun to organize, mobilize, and educate the working class. As early as the 1910s, the Chinese Socialist Party organized by anarchists had initiated efforts to organize workers.

¹⁹ Nantong Salt Industry Gazetteer Compilation Committee. *Nantong Salt Industry Gazetteer*. p. 461–462

²⁰ *ibid.* p. 462

Between 1912 and 1920, the Beiyang government's Ministry of the Army once suppressed an attempt by the Chinese Socialist Party to organize a strike in a military arsenal. Mimeographed documents show that the authorities conducted strict investigations and arrests involving the Shanghai, Hanyang, and Dexian arsenals²¹. A 1924 report by the Beiyang government also noted that Jiang Kanghu, the leader of the Chinese Socialist Party, had organized workers in various trades in Beijing, spreading anarchist ideas among them, and once the number of participants reached a certain level, forming trade unions. At that time, a degree of organization had already taken shape among Beijing's painters²². These examples reveal that anarchists' early organizing efforts among workers took place primarily in urban centers, especially large cities.

After the founding of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in the early 1920s, it quickly began organizing workers as well, initially in Changxindian (Beijing) and Xiaoshadu (Shanghai). In 1921, the CCP established a Workers' Night School in Changxindian, offering day classes for workers' children and evening classes mainly for young workers. The real purpose of these schools was to build unions. In the winter of 1921, the Changxindian Workers' Club was founded, which was essentially another name for a labor union (Chen 1926; Deng 1949:15–16). The Workers' Club strengthened solidarity among workers and soon gained influence among northern railway workers, leading to the emergence of union organizations at several stations. In Shanghai's Xiaoshadu, where many cotton mills were concentrated, the CCP likewise began its organizing through workers' schools and then advanced toward broader labor organizing (Deng 1949:17).

In 1921, the CCP established the Secretariat of Labor Unions to coordinate and lead the labor movement. From 1921 to 1922, branches were set up in Wuhan, Changsha, Guangzhou, Jinan, Qingdao, Tianjin, Chongqing, and Anyuan, organizing railway, textile, dock, and mine workers (Luo 1981:3; Department of CCP History, Renmin University of China 1986). Early CCP efforts thus concentrated on workers in urban and industrialized areas, particularly factories and transport sectors. Meanwhile, industries more prone to strikes, such as coal mining and railways, clearly received greater organizational attention and resources (Perry 2012).

²¹ The Second Historical Archives of China, ed. 1981. *Chinese Anarchism and the Chinese Socialist Party*. Nanjing: Jiangsu People's Publishing House. p. 77

²² The Second Historical Archives of China, ed. 1981. *Chinese Anarchism and the Chinese Socialist Party*. p. 210–211

Nevertheless, most salt workers during the Republican era were not urban factory workers. Salt producers mostly lived on the rural fringes near salt fields, often intermingled with peasant populations. Records of salt workers dealing with landlords and gentry also show their residence in rural regions²³. This distance from urban centers made it difficult for salt workers to come into contact with labor organizers or the modern ideas of struggle they propagated. Salt workers thus remained on the periphery of early modern labor mobilization in Republican China.

Of course, labor organizers and political parties also sought to mobilize workers indirectly through propaganda journals. After its founding, the CCP published several workers' newspapers: "The Laborer" in Shanghai, "The Voice of Labor" (Laodong yin, later renamed Ren sheng) in Beijing, and "The Sound of Labor" in Guangzhou—all weeklies (Deng 1949:14). These publications theoretically provided workers with opportunities to learn about and absorb the philosophy of labor struggle, even if they could not directly engage with organizers. But the circulation of such journals was limited among illiterate, impoverished workers. The CCP's official newspaper *Guide* (Xiangdao) once received a letter from a reader bluntly stating that the paper was not for the proletariat, because the poor could neither afford nor understand it: "They are shocked even at the price of a piece of tofu—how could they buy Guide? ... Your writing is too difficult... Words like 'Lenin,' 'Marx,' 'reality,' 'feudalism,' 'warlord'—they truly can't understand them." (Wang 2010:66)

Salt workers in the Republican era lived in similarly harsh conditions and had little access to education. A 1922 investigation into their lives described their misery as follows: "(Salt workers) eat coarse rice, with few vegetables or meat. Their side dishes are cabbage and amaranth roots. They live in huts of straw and reeds, barely sheltering from the wind and rain."²⁴ Regarding literacy, survey data from the 1940s indicate that more than 70 percent of salt workers in Sichuan during the Republican period were illiterate, while those who were literate had, at most, a primary-school level of education²⁵. The illiteracy rate among salt workers in northern

²³ Nantong Salt Industry Gazetteer Compilation Committee. *Nantong Salt Industry Gazetteer*. p. 462–463

²⁴ Zhejiang General Gazetteer Compilation Committee. 2017. *Zhejiang General Gazetteer: Salt Industry*. p. 401

²⁵ Sichuan Provincial Gazetteer Compilation Committee. 1995. *Sichuan Provincial Gazetteer: Salt Industry*. Chengdu: Sichuan Science and Technology Press. p. 237

Jiangsu was even higher, reaching 97 percent²⁶. Under such conditions, it was unrealistic for salt workers to access modern labor ideologies through written media.

Hence, early Republican labor mobilization hardly reached the vast population of salt workers, and the propaganda disseminated through print had little effect due to their economic and educational circumstances. If this situation had persisted, the process of class formation among salt workers would have remained extremely slow. However, the outbreak of the May Thirtieth Movement altered this trajectory.

Ideological Event: The May Thirtieth Movement and Anti-Imperialist Patriotic Solidarity

The May Thirtieth Movement and Nationalist Mobilization

An important event that accelerated the broad masses of salt workers toward political struggle was the May Thirtieth Movement. This movement, characterized by its clear anti-imperialist and patriotic nature, sparked widespread resistance among workers and peasants across the nation, with salt workers in many regions actively participating. The spark that ignited the movement occurred in Shanghai on May 15, 1925. On that day, at the Japanese-owned Naigai Cotton Mill, Chinese workers clashed with Japanese capitalists and foremen. In the confrontation, the workers' leader Gu Zhenghong was killed, several others were seriously injured on the spot, and dozens sustained minor injuries (Ren and Zhang 1985:53–56).

News of the tragedy quickly spread throughout Shanghai. The city's workers launched a general strike against Japanese imperialism, and by the end of May, “the anti-imperialist movement had expanded from workers to students, from opposition to the imperialist massacre of workers to resistance against the oppression of imperialist powers in the concessions” (Fu 1985:73). On May 30, more than three thousand students and workers marched and delivered speeches in the concessions²⁷, with the largest demonstration taking place along Nanjing Road,

²⁶ Jiangsu Provincial Gazetteer Compilation Committee. *Jiangsu Provincial Gazetteer: Salt Industry*. p. 281

²⁷ The term “concessions” refers to leased territories in Shanghai occupied by Britain, France, and other foreign powers from the nineteenth century onward through unequal treaties. By the mid to late nineteenth century, these concessions had developed independent municipal institutions and armed police forces and, in administrative terms,

where participants distributed leaflets proclaiming “Down with Imperialism” (Fu 1985:80–82). However, the police stations soon mobilized large forces to suppress the protest. Under the orders of a British police inspector, they opened fire on the demonstrators, killing thirteen and wounding many others (Fu 1985:83–86). After the “May Thirtieth” massacre, Shanghai was engulfed in a surge of anti-imperialist struggle. The “three strikes” movement—student strikes, worker strikes, and merchant boycotts—was launched on a citywide scale (Ren and Zhang 1985:78), and the intensity of the struggle grew sharply.

When news of the May Thirtieth Incident spread nationwide, workers and peasants across the country expressed solidarity with the Shanghai workers and successively launched anti-imperialist and patriotic protests. According to contemporary social statistics compiled by Republican-era scholars, numerous strikes were organized nationwide in support of the May Thirtieth Movement, all explicitly framed in patriotic terms. Between 1918 and 1925, there were 39 recorded patriotic strikes unrelated to the May Thirtieth Movement, but including those connected to it, the number soared to 173 (Chen 1926). Clearly, the May Thirtieth Movement powerfully propelled workers into anti-imperialist and patriotic struggles.

Not only workers but also peasants joined the mobilization to support their compatriots who had fallen in Shanghai and to express their resolve to resist imperialism. Less than a week after the massacre, in early June, the Peasants’ Association of Zhongshan County in Guangdong issued a declaration of solidarity:

“We earnestly call upon our compatriots to unite in support, to join the revolutionary front, and to fight both imperialists and their warlord collaborators, so that the liberation of the Chinese nation may be achieved. Tens of thousands of peasants in our county are willing to provide full support, determined to ensure victory.”²⁸

Similar declarations soon appeared from peasant associations and groups in other regions, all proclaiming their commitment to the anti-imperialist and patriotic struggle. Many industrial and commercial figures also supported the movement by closing shops, donating funds, and

closely resembled autonomous cities, functioning as “states within a state” that were entirely removed from the administrative authority of the Chinese government (Fei 1992:1–20).

²⁸ The Second Historical Archives of China, ed. 1985. *The May Thirtieth Movement and the Canton–Hong Kong Strike*. Nanjing: Jiangsu Ancient Books Publishing House. p. 11–12 This book collects and displays the original contents of the declaration.

launching “boycott foreign goods” and “promote domestic goods” campaigns. Altogether, “around twelve million people nationwide directly participated in this movement” (Liu and Tang 1998: vol. 3,134).

The reason the May Thirtieth Incident was able to spread so rapidly and widely, extending its influence even to marginal workers and peasants who had been little touched by earlier left-wing mobilizations, was first and foremost related to its modes of dissemination. News of the May Thirtieth Incident was often spread orally. This was especially important among groups with low literacy rates, for whom word-of-mouth communication played a crucial role. A small number of people who learned of the events early on would vividly recount them to those around them, and abstract terms such as “imperialism” became easier to understand because they were explained through concrete cases. Taking workers at Shanghai cigarette factories as an example, after the incident a few workers who were among the first to learn what had happened described the events to their fellow workers. In passing on the news, they jumped onto stools and loudly announced it to workers who were gathered outside the factory buildings eating their lunch (Perry 1993: 148).

Second, in the months following the May Thirtieth Incident, large numbers of organizers carried out intensive propaganda and mobilization work. Some even traveled to rural areas to give speeches, while locally educated groups such as students also actively participated in public speaking in their home areas. Early CCP women organizers stationed in Shanghai, for instance, led women workers to nearby rural areas around Shanghai to give speeches and raise funds after the May Thirtieth Incident. Records of their interactions with peasants show that this kind of mobilization was unfamiliar to them, and that it was the May Thirtieth Incident that led them to go directly among peasants for the first time (Perry 1993: 149–150). As the discussion below of the mobilization of salt workers during the May Thirtieth Incident will show as well, those engaged in speech-making and propaganda included not only Communist Party members but also many local teachers and students, therefore greatly expanding the likelihood that workers and peasants in rural areas would hear such speeches in a quite short period of time.

This mode of dissemination, which was broad in its target audience, concentrated in time, and heavily reliant on oral transmission, distinguished the May Thirtieth Incident from earlier labor mobilizations. It generated a form of comprehensive political mobilizing power by

providing a common objective that drew people from different classes, including workers and peasants, into participation in political movements. Additionally, it successfully extended its reach to workers in a wide range of circumstances: even labor groups that had previously occupied a relatively marginal position within the modern workers' movement were drawn into the opening of political struggle through their support for the May Thirtieth Movement.

Here, I borrow Sewell's (2005) concept of "event" to define the May Thirtieth Movement as an *Ideological Event*. Unlike events that emphasize structural transformations, ideological events highlight the impact of events on the ideological perspective, without necessarily producing significant changes in political or economic structures. In fact, anti-imperialist and anti-colonial nationalist ideas had long circulated among Chinese intellectuals. Whether it was the learning and exploration of other global cases by late Qing intellectuals in the last decade of the dynasty (Karl 2002:197), or the consciousness among early Republican Chinese intellectuals about how imperialism penetrated the Chinese economy through the development of capitalism (Dirlik 1978:72), both reflected anti-imperialist nationalist thought. From the late nineteenth to the early twentieth century, Chinese intellectual explorations and articulations of nationalism were rich and diverse. They even included visionary projects aimed at transforming the world as a whole. These projects went beyond a form of nationalism centered solely on the nation itself and instead revealed a more complex conception of national consciousness (Dirlik 1991:56).

However, the various versions of nationalism articulated or embraced by intellectuals rarely circulated among workers and peasants. Instead, workers and peasants tended to develop nationalist sentiments and consciousness primarily through their own lived experiences of direct imperialist oppression. For many workers whose everyday activities did not involve direct contact with imperialist forces, nationalism did not become a goal of their struggles from the beginning of the Republican period until the May Thirtieth Movement. The May Thirtieth Movement constituted an ideological event because it facilitated the rapid diffusion of anti-imperialist patriotism as a militant ideology. On the one hand, it updated the cultural repertoire of workers' struggles, particularly for workers situated at the margins, by introducing goals beyond immediate economic demands. On the other hand, building on Hirschman's (2021) emphasis on the rate of change, it greatly accelerated workers' transition toward modern forms of political

struggle. The following subsection elaborates in detail on the impact of the May Thirtieth Movement on salt workers' conceptions of struggle.

Confronting Anti-Imperialist Patriotism: The New Ideology of Salt Workers' Struggles

Before the May Thirtieth Movement, the struggles of salt workers were focused almost entirely on immediate demands, without any broader political goals. After the May Thirtieth Incident, salt workers across various regions were exposed to anti-imperialist and patriotic ideas through speeches and propaganda related to the movement, and they joined collective actions in support of it. These collective struggles, for the first time, gave their resistance causes that went beyond immediate economic disputes.

In June 1925, news of the May Thirtieth Massacre quickly reached Yuyao, Zhejiang, not far from Shanghai. Local students organized demonstrations and gave public speeches, distributing leaflets that spread anti-imperialist ideas. Around the same time, the Yuyao Salt Field established a "Salt Field Relief Committee for the Shanghai Incident," which raised funds among salt workers to support the Shanghai workers' strike. The total amount collected reached about 1,600 yuan²⁹. Over the following month, speeches, marches, and campaigns to boycott British and Japanese goods continued to unfold in Yuyao. By the end of June, the Yuyao Relief Committee mobilized a large parade involving workers, peasants, merchants, students, and people from all walks of life³⁰. Some of the participants carried small flags bearing slogans such as "Recover national sovereignty" and "Economic boycott."

Similarly, in the Cixi Salt Field, also in Zhejiang, a "Relief Committee for the Shanghai Incident" was established. Together with the Cixi County Elementary School Federation, the Cibei Elementary School Federation, and the Northern Yuyao Relief Committee, they collectively raised nearly 5,000 yuan to support the striking workers in Shanghai³¹. In August of the same year, in the Zigong Salt Field of Sichuan, more than ten thousand people took to the streets in demonstration, and over two thousand later gathered at Huguang Temple to establish

²⁹ Office of the Yuyao Municipal CCP Committee's Party History Research Committee. 1990. *Chronicle of Major Events in the History of the Communist Party of China in Yuyao*. [internal materials] p. 6

³⁰ *ibid.* p. 7-8

³¹ Office of the CCP Cixi Municipal Party History Materials Collection and Research Committee. 1990. *Chronology of Major Events in CCP Cixi Party History, 1923–1949* [internal materials]. p. 2

the “Zigong May Thirtieth Massacre Relief Committee”³². Anti-imperialist thought thus spread widely throughout the Zigong salt region. In the salt area of Huaiyin, Jiangsu, a mass assembly of tens of thousands of citizens was held to report on the May Thirtieth Massacre. Soon afterward, CCP political activist Yun Daiying delivered a speech at the Xiba Salt Merchants’ Public Elementary School, where the children of salt industry employees studied, calling on industrial, commercial, and educational circles in Huaiyin to support the Shanghai workers’ strike³³.

The May Thirtieth Movement facilitated the spread of anti-imperialist patriotic nationalism among large numbers of salt industry workers, bringing them into direct engagement with anti-imperialist and patriotic political struggle. Furthermore, during the Republican period, foreign capital and foreign businesses were relatively scarce in the salt industry. Consequently, salt workers’ daily labor and immediate class experience rarely involved direct contact with imperialism, making it unlikely for anti-imperialist political goals to emerge organically from within their ranks. Yet this does not mean that imperialism had no effect on their labor and lives. From as early as the Yuan Shikai government, salt taxes were pledged as collateral for foreign debts, meaning that salt workers also suffered intensified exploitation under imperialist pressure³⁴.

Moreover, the May Thirtieth Movement functioned as an ideological event in that its circulation created an opportunity for the propagation of other radical ideologies, including Marxism. As salt workers were drawn into radical mobilization, CCP organizers simultaneously took advantage of the moment to disseminate their own doctrines. Local CCP historical materials record that Yun Daiying, an early CCP member, promoted Marxism while delivering a speech at the Xiba Salt Affairs School³⁵. The complete text of that speech is unavailable, but Yun’s lecture manuscript from a political training course he delivered the following year suggests that he placed strong emphasis on the importance of using moments such as the May Thirtieth

³² CCP Zigong Municipal Party History Working Committee. 1985. *An Overview of Underground CCP Organizations in Zigong (1926–1949)* [internal materials]. p. 3

³³ Office of the CCP Huaiyin County Party History. 1987. *Chronology of Major Revolutionary Struggles in Huaiyin County (1919–1948)* [internal materials]. p. 5-6

³⁴ Jiangsu Provincial Gazetteer Compilation Committee. *Jiangsu Provincial Gazetteer: Salt Industry*. p. 2

³⁵ Office of the CCP Huaiyin County Party History. 1987. *Chronology of Major Revolutionary Struggles in Huaiyin County (1919–1948)* [internal materials]. p. 5

Movement to expand the CCP's mobilizational boundaries³⁶. Within one to two years after Yun's speech, Marxism continued to circulate in the same region, including through the appearance of Communist leaflets³⁷. Another example can be found in 1925, when CCP member He Yulin arrived in Zigong with the intention of organizing and mobilizing salt workers. He opened a "Life Hospital" locally, using the medical practice as a cover. After news of the May Thirtieth Massacre reached Zigong, He immediately organized protest marches and related activities, and amid this wave of protest He continued to promote CCP ideas among salt workers. In less than a year, He succeeded in establishing a Communist Youth League organization in the area³⁸.

In conclusion, the first way in which the anti-imperialist nationalist movement affected the formation of the salt worker class lay in the ideological realm. It not only introduced nationalism as a consciousness of struggle among salt workers, but also created space for the dissemination of radical ideologies directly oriented toward worker organization and mobilization, loosening a social terrain in which such ideologies had previously found no foothold. What impact did the May Thirtieth Movement have on the organizational development of salt workers? The following section will examine this question in greater detail.

From an Ideological Event to the Class Formation of Salt Workers

Emergence of Workers: Political Forces Take Labor Seriously

For the CCP, which had long emphasized labor organization and mobilization, the May Thirtieth Movement ignited popular enthusiasm for political struggle, providing a precious chance to expand their forces. In the first half of 1925, the CCP had gradually organized trade unions in Shanghai, but prior to May Thirtieth, there were only around twenty embryonic organizations with fewer than 20,000 members, making them relatively weak (Deng 1949:185). Within a single day after the May Thirtieth Massacre, representatives from these unions held a joint meeting and decided to establish the Shanghai General Union. On the afternoon of June 1, the Shanghai

³⁶ Shanghai Municipal Archives, ed. 1991. *The May Thirtieth Movement*, Vol. 1, Shanghai: Shanghai People's Press, p. 236–254

³⁷ Office of the CCP Huaiyin County Party History. *Chronology of Major Revolutionary Struggles in Huaiyin County (1919–1948)* [internal materials]. p. 6-7

³⁸ CCP Zigong Municipal Party History Work Committee. 1985. *Overview of Underground CCP Organizations in Zigong* [internal materials]. p. 2-3

General Union issued its declaration for a citywide strike (Liu and Tang 1998: vol. 3, 113–114). During this strike, and by June 5, just a few days later, more than 170 unions were operating under the Shanghai General Union, mobilizing over 200,000 striking workers (Deng 1949:185), a tenfold increase from the previous number. The May Thirtieth Movement rapidly advanced the CCP's labor organization efforts, allowing it to accumulate extensive experience in organizing workers and train more labor organizers who could be dispatched nationwide. This laid the groundwork for potential contact between salt workers and CCP members.

Unlike the CCP, which was explicitly based on the working class, the Kuomintang (KMT) (Nationalist Party) in the Republican era never clearly defined its class foundation, generally using terms like “people” or “masses” to indicate whom the party sought to represent. In the KMT's First National Congress declaration, terms such as “the majority of the populace” and “common citizens” were used, encompassing a broad spectrum and not limited to workers and peasants (Wang 2010:158–159). Without a worker-based class foundation, the KMT was not as actively invested in organizing labor as the CCP. However, the May Thirtieth Movement and subsequent solidarity actions demonstrated the power of workers' political engagement, which aligned with the KMT's goals for the National Revolution, prompting the party to increase its investment in labor organization.

The most prominent example is the support and facilitation of the KMT by the Guangzhou-Hong Kong General Strike. Following the May Thirtieth Massacre in June 1925, workers in Guangzhou and Hong Kong launched a strike lasting 16 months. This strike aimed to respond to the Shanghai mass movement and resist imperialist actions (Liu and Tang 1998: vol. 3, 215–219). At that time, Guangdong was politically fragmented and surrounded by competing warlords. It was only with the support of over 100,000 striking workers that the KMT was able to successfully establish the National Government in Guangzhou. These workers also played a critical role in the KMT-organized Northern and Southern Expeditions of the National Revolutionary Army against warlord forces (Deng 1949:233–234; China Revolution Museum 1987:7–12). Actually, the weakness of the Southern Revolutionary Army was concerning for the KMT then. In August 1923, Chiang Kai-shek explicitly pointed out that the Southern Revolutionary Army was weak and heavily constrained by southern warlords (Yang 2016).

Therefore, the collective power that workers displayed through strikes became a resource that the KMT aspired to incorporate into its revolutionary project.

Recognizing the need for the political support workers could bring about (Chen 1926), the KMT offered continuous material assistance to the Guangzhou-Hong Kong General Strike. The Ministry of Finance of the National Government allocated 10,000 yuan per month to the strike committee (Deng 1949:240). In September 1926, after the All-China Federation of Trade Unions petitioned the Nationalist Government for additional funding, the then Minister of Finance, Song Ziwen, replied with a letter approving an additional subsidy of 500 yuan³⁹. Through this process of political interdependence, the Nationalist Party gradually grew more confident that workers could advance the goals of its nationalist movement and consequently intensified its efforts to organize labor. This pattern resembles many other cases in which nationalist movements intersected with labor mobilization: non-working-class leaders of nationalist movements, recognizing the mobilizational power of workers, consciously sought to draw labor into nationalist struggles (e.g., Chalcraft 2005).

The autonomous political power that workers exhibited during the May Thirtieth Movement greatly enhanced the capacity and willingness of different political forces to organize labor. Parties grounded in the working class expanded their pool of organizers and gained richer, more diverse experience in mobilization. Parties not based on the working class began to recognize the importance of labor for the success of their nationalist projects and extended their efforts to organize workers. It was in this context that salt workers were gradually brought into organized labor.

The Appearance of Modern Salt Workers' Organizations

Let us return to the strike case mentioned in the Introduction and examine it once again in detail. In November 1927, over two thousand salt workers in Xiba, Huaiyin, Jiangsu, took to the streets and went on strike, demanding “higher wages for workers, the organization of workers’ unions, and opposing increased taxes, beatings, and the selling out of the masses”⁴⁰. This was the first

³⁹ The Second Historical Archives of China, ed. *The May Thirtieth Movement and the Canton–Hong Kong Strike*. The original letter from the All-China Federation of Trade Unions and the reply from Song Ziwen are collected in this book.

⁴⁰ Huai'an Salt Industry Compilation Committee. *Huai'an Salt Industry Gazetteer*. p. 480

time that local salt workers had explicitly called for the establishment of a union, placing this demand alongside economic claims such as wage increases as key objectives of their collective struggle.

Although there is no concrete evidence that this particular strike was led by any specific organization, in the same month “He Mengxiong, a special commissioner of the Jiangsu Provincial Committee of the CCP, together with Zhao Bukun and others, went to Wangying and Xiba in Huaiyin to conduct revolutionary activities among salt workers and develop local organizations”⁴¹. The CCP’s Special Committee on the Huai Salt Region afterwards established party branches in Xiba, Banpu, Yancheng, and Lianshui⁴². In the spring and summer of 1929, the CCP Huai Salt Special Committee again sent members to Xiba to “mobilize salt workers to fight for wage increases and to train union leaders to raise their political awareness.” Over two thousand salt workers joined this strike as well, during which they raised the slogan “Workers should organize their own unions”⁴³. Xiba in Huaiyin, the site where Yun Daiying delivered his speech during the May Thirtieth period, soon saw the development of modern salt worker organizations.

Following the May Thirtieth Movement, Zhejiang Province also experienced a peak in union formation. Salt workers were part of this surge. In 1925, the CCP’s Hangzhou branch dispatched party member Cen Lushou to the Yuyao salt fields to carry out organizational work. In February 1926, under Cen’s leadership, over four hundred salt transport workers demanded wage increases. When salt merchants refused, they went on strike and forced an increase in salt freight rates. After the victory, they established a union for ox-cart workers⁴⁴.

A year later, in March 1927, salt workers in Yuyao established a salt workers’ association. Nearly twenty thousand salt workers gathered from all directions at Baidichang in Andong to attend its founding assembly⁴⁵. Under the main association, seven branches were established,

⁴¹ Office of the CCP Huaiyin County Party History. *Chronology of Major Revolutionary Struggles in Huaiyin County (1919–1948)* [internal materials]. p. 7

⁴² Huai’an Salt Industry Compilation Committee. *Huai’an Salt Industry Gazetteer*. p. 480

⁴³ Office of the CCP Huaiyin County Party History. *Chronology of Major Revolutionary Struggles in Huaiyin County (1919–1948)* [internal materials]. p. 13-14

⁴⁴ Office of the CCP Cixi Municipal Party History Materials Collection and Research Committee. 1990. *Chronology of Major Events in CCP Cixi Party History, 1923–1949* [internal materials]. p. 2-3

⁴⁵ Office of the CCP Yuyao Municipal Party History Materials Collection and Research Committee. 1990. *Chronology of Major Events in CCP Yuyao Party History, 1919–1949* [internal materials]. p. 15

enrolling more than twenty thousand members in total. In the following month, the movement to establish Salt-worker Associations continued to spread across Zhejiang. In Daishan, over ten thousand salt workers participated in founding a salt-worker association, then marched in protest, forcing the official bureaus to raise the price of purchased salt from 0.827 to 0.986 silver dollars per dan⁴⁶. In Qushan, over eight thousand salt workers attended the founding meeting of their association, where anger ran so high that a notorious salt boss was beaten to death on the spot⁴⁷. Notably, CCP organizers were involved in the planning and mobilization behind these associations. From unions to salt workers' associations, organized salt-worker movements in Zhejiang flourished significantly after the May Thirtieth Movement.

In Zigong, another major salt-producing center, there were also new developments in workers' organization following the May Thirtieth Movement. After He Yulin had laid a certain foundation, in the summer of 1926, the CCP Chongqing Committee sent two party members to the Zigong salt fields, who recruited local members and formally established the "Special Branch Committee of the Chinese Communist Party in Ziliujing" (abbreviated as the CCP Ziliujing Special Branch)⁴⁸. Under its leadership, by early 1927, salt workers in Zigong had organized more than twenty unions. In the first month of that year, they decided to launch a general strike involving over twenty thousand workers. Demonstrators carrying red triangular flags marched and shouted slogans such as "Down with capitalist exploitation! Raise wages! Improve living conditions!" surrounding the Salt Merchants' Association and other offices⁴⁹. The strike lasted three days and ended in victory, as salt merchants agreed to all union demands.

This spirit of collective struggle persisted into 1928. Early that year, when salt capitalists dismissed union activists and arrested worker representatives, more than twenty thousand steam-engine and well-drilling workers launched another massive strike. The movement drew widespread sympathy from other workers and students, who responded with strikes of their

⁴⁶ Zhejiang Salt Industry Gazetteer Compilation Committee. 1996. *Zhejiang Salt Industry Gazetteer*. Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company. p. 436

⁴⁷ *ibid.*

⁴⁸ CCP Zigong Municipal Party History Work Committee. 1985. *Overview of Underground CCP Organizations in Zigong* [internal materials]. p. 4

⁴⁹ Sichuan Provincial Gazetteer Compilation Committee. 1995. *Sichuan Provincial Gazetteer: Salt Industry*. Chengdu: Sichuan Science and Technology Press. p. 274

own⁵⁰. The consecutive successes of these union-led struggles marked a new stage in the collective organization and unity of Zigong salt workers.

Across these regions, after the May Thirtieth Movement, the number of CCP organizers increased dramatically, and their activities extended deep into salt-producing areas, where they directly engaged with salt workers. Salt-worker struggles under these conditions differed sharply from the earlier guild-based or secret-society resistance: they now carried distinctly political meanings, identified bureaucrats and capitalists as class enemies, and demanded self-organized and self-managed unions. Particularly noteworthy is that salt workers in some regions, like Zigong in Sichuan Province and Cixi in Zhejiang Province, under CCP leadership, explicitly adopted the slogan “Down with the capitalists,” reflecting an emerging class consciousness⁵¹.

Alongside the CCP, the KMT also promoted the organization of unions, including salt-worker unions, after the May Thirtieth Movement. In 1927, the KMT’s Preparatory Office of the Zhejiang Provincial Federation of Salt Industry Unions sent three representatives to investigate working conditions at the Yuyao salt fields, establishing a general union with seven branches and more than sixty thousand registered members⁵². Salt workers in Yuyao were organized by both the CCP and the KMT in this period. Compared with CCP-led unions, those organized by the KMT tended to appeal to the government for redress and sometimes sought to restrain the escalation of worker militancy. Nonetheless, by confronting capitalists and defending workers’ rights, these unions also helped workers recognize their shared class interests in opposition to those of the bourgeoisie.

Under the influence of the May Thirtieth Movement, the rapid growth of labor organizations, the expansion of the ranks of worker organizers, and the spread of workers’ ideologies together enabled the salt workers to become organized participants in this broader labor movement. The formation of unions distinct from traditional guilds and associations, along with the clear articulation of anti-capitalist demands and rhetoric, signaled a crucial step in the formation of a salt-worker class.

⁵⁰ *ibid.*

⁵¹ *ibid.*; Office of the CCP Cixi Municipal Party History Materials Collection and Research Committee. *Chronology of Major Events in CCP Cixi Party History, 1923–1949* [internal materials]. p. 12

⁵² *Shenbao*, November 7, 1927.

The Lasting Influence of Labor Organizations on Salt Workers

As the examples above show, the modern organizations that emerged among salt workers after the May Thirtieth Movement were still heavily dependent on the presence of external organizers. But the situation was not entirely so. In some regions, even without direct organizational leadership from outside forces, salt workers were deeply inspired by the wave of labor mobilization that arose during and after the wake of the May Thirtieth Movement. They spontaneously united around the struggle against capitalists and for their shared interests. The discourse they employed in their self-organized struggles was no longer confined to immediate demands but was instead connected to broader revolutionary currents. A 1930 manifesto by salt workers in Fujian vividly illustrates this shift:

“The shareholders of the [salt] companies and their brokers have grown rich from squeezing our earnings, living in tall houses and keeping many concubines, while we, who toil all year round, can scarcely survive... Last year, when the revolutionary army entered Fujian and the cry of liberation for workers and peasants spread throughout the province, we salt workers also united to organize a union. Having been driven to destitution by the companies and brokers, we immediately petitioned the Political Council after founding our union, demanding the abolition of the contractor system and the restoration of free government monopoly... —Jointly issued by the salt workers of Qianxia Saltworks, Putian”⁵³.

This statement shows how the Fujian salt workers were influenced by the advance of the National Revolutionary Army and the broader tide of workers’ and peasants’ liberation. They explicitly identified the capitalists of the salt industry as their class enemies and consciously organized unions on their own initiative, while also calling for broader solidarity and external support. Compared with earlier spontaneous salt-worker protests, this marked a fundamental change in awareness and a clear expression of class consciousness.

Moreover, the experiences, ideas, and repertoires of struggle acquired through engagement with external labor movements after the May Thirtieth Movement continued to shape later salt-worker resistance. Even when leftist organizers and parties were suppressed or

⁵³ *Salt Administration Journal*, 1930, No.50.

forced into retreat, the class consciousness and organizational foundations already established among salt workers often persisted, allowing the process of class formation to continue.

The CCP had been the leading force in organizing salt workers after the May Thirtieth Movement, but this momentum was soon interrupted. In April 1927, the KMT launched a nationwide “anti-Communist purge,” forcing many newly formed salt-worker organizations under CCP leadership to disband⁵⁴. Nonetheless, the CCP’s organizational work in the brief period between the May Thirtieth Movement and the purge left a lasting imprint on Zhejiang’s salt workers. The subsequent unity between different types of salt laborers repeatedly reflected this legacy. In 1935, salt merchants at the Yuyao salt fields in Zhejiang announced that they would purchase salt at only 60 percent of the standard price, prompting widespread resistance from production workers. Transport workers also joined the strike in solidarity, forging a united front across different worker groups⁵⁵. The struggle lasted for eight months and ended in victory. Building on the organizational mobilization sparked by the May Thirtieth Movement, salt workers continued to forge connections across workplaces and occupations. These connections were no longer through guild structures but through collective actions that transcended occupational and regional divisions.

On the KMT side, the party’s approach to mass organization changed significantly in 1928 and 1929. In February 1928, the Second Central Executive Committee abolished the five departments for peasants, workers, merchants, youth, and women. Subsequent meetings, especially the Second Fifth Plenary Session in August 1928 and the Third National Congress in March 1929, formally reoriented the party’s policy from encouraging to “restraining, preventing, and prohibiting mass movements,” while reorganizing and tightening control over popular organizations (Wang 2010:152). As a result, labor unions established by the KMT received diminishing official support. Even so, some KMT-affiliated unions continued to organize workers to defend their class interests, and their organizational foundations did not entirely collapse (Wang 2010:165–166). In the salt industry, KMT-led unions in the 1930s still worked to secure benefits for workers and at times cooperated with salt workers’ guilds in joint actions. In

⁵⁴ Zhejiang Salt Industry Gazetteer Compilation Committee. 1996. *Zhejiang Salt Industry Gazetteer*. Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company. p. 436

⁵⁵ Zhejiang General Gazetteer Compilation Committee. 2017. *Zhejiang General Gazetteer: Salt Industry*. Hangzhou: Zhejiang People’s Publishing House. p. 415

June 1934, for example, representatives of the eighteen guilds in the Shierwei area joined forces with the chief officer of the local Salt Transport Union to petition the government's Salt Transport Office in Yangzhou, proposing what they viewed as fairer policies for sail and steamboat transport⁵⁶.

In addition, the fact that most salt workers lived in rural areas far from the cities, as previously noted, once placed them at the margins of worker mobilization. However, when leftist forces were suppressed and forced to diminish or go underground, this same characteristic enabled salt workers to continue maintaining contact with leftist organizers. After the “purge of Communists” in 1927, Communist Party organizers in major cities suffered heavy losses, and subsequently, the KMT conducted systematic surveillance and arrests of Communist Party members in urban factories, making it extremely difficult for the CCP to continue contacting urban factory workers (Hershatter 1986:223). Nevertheless, even under such circumstances, underground CCP members remained in contact with salt workers in the countryside. In 1928, amid the aftermath of the purge, several underground CCP members successfully traveled to the Xiangyang village near Nantong to lead salt worker protests⁵⁷. This shows that the marginality and invisibility of salt workers sometimes helped them maintain long-term connections with modern labor organizations and political parties.

Conclusion

The rise of salt reclamation companies and the development of transportation enterprises in Republican China led to an increasing number of salt workers losing their means of production and becoming employed laborers. In this context, how did the salt workers develop class consciousness and form a working class? Although culturally traditional forms of unity somewhat facilitated the workers' struggles amid emerging class experiences, they also restricted the salt workers' ability to progress toward class solidarity. Meanwhile, political parties' organizational efforts in the early years of Republican China had little impact on salt workers. The primary reason was that these efforts were concentrated in urban areas and industries like

⁵⁶ *Shenbao*, June 5, 1934.

⁵⁷ Nantong Salt Industry Gazetteer Compilation Committee. *Nantong Salt Industry Gazetteer*. p. 462

railroads and mining, failing to cover the large number of salt workers engaged in handicraft production in rural areas. Consequently, the progress of class formation among salt workers at that time was slow and even stagnant.

This article highlights a key factor accelerating this process: the May Thirtieth Movement, a nationwide anti-imperialist patriotic movement. Drawing on Sewell's (2005) concept of the "event," I describe the May Thirtieth Movement as an "ideological event" because it diffused anti-imperialist nationalism as a powerful ideological force among workers and peasants, encouraging political participation. For urban workers in major cities, this influence was less transformative, as they already had access to similar ideas and had participated in political movements earlier. For salt workers, however, the movement proved decisive. It opened the door to political participation, shifting their demands beyond economic disputes toward political goals. By expressing solidarity with workers in Shanghai, salt workers also extended their collective identity beyond traditional guild boundaries. This moment of politicization enabled the spread of more radical ideas about worker organization, laying the groundwork for subsequent mobilization.

Secondly, the movement led different political forces to recognize the importance of worker mobilization. For the CCP, which had long treated the working class as its social base, the movement strengthened its organizational capacity by expanding the number of worker organizers and its national reach. For the KMT, whose foundation did not originally rest on labor, workers' mobilizing power revealed that incorporating labor could advance its nationalist project. As a result, the party increased material and organizational support for worker mobilization and trade union formation. With assistance from external organizers, salt workers began forming unions and other modern organizations. During this period, explicit expressions of class consciousness appeared in their resistance, marking a key milestone in their class formation.

The case of Republican-era salt workers shows that social movements not centered on labor can nevertheless facilitate working-class formation, particularly for workers facing multiple forms of oppression. Struggles directed at other targets, such as imperialism, can create opportunities for working-class formation along two dimensions: consciousness and organization. At the level of consciousness, other movements may introduce new concepts,

cultural frames, and ideologies that expand workers' goals and draw them into broader political struggles. Organizationally, participation in other movements can generate experience and strengthen mobilizing capacity among both workers and external organizers, helping overcome barriers and accelerate the creation of worker-centered organizations. These effects are often contingent, emerging during mobilization rather than through deliberate design.

These intersections also invite reconsideration of core and periphery in labor history. If we examine marginal workers, working-class formation must be understood as plural rather than singular. Social movements likely influence workers in core sectors differently from those at the periphery. Core workers were already primary targets of mobilization, limiting the additional impact of external movements on their agendas. Peripheral workers, instead, could gain access to discourses and resources previously beyond their reach, making such movements far more consequential. This returns us to the diversity of working-class formation emphasized by E. P. Thompson (1966): the history of working-class formation cannot be captured solely through the experiences of a few major industries, and the overlooked histories of marginal workers may reveal forms of agency embedded in the deeper layers of the past.

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