上海紗廠女工

Sisters and Strangers

WOMEN IN THE SHANGHAI COTTON MILLS, 1919-1949

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CHAPTER FIVE

Contract Labor

In the early 1930's Xia Yan, one of the founders of the League of Left-Wing Writers, was living in the Yangshupu district of Shanghai. Some of his friends, intellectuals who were recruiting members for trade unions, used his house to change from their long Chinese gowns or Western suits to blue cotton workers' outfits on their way to meetings with the laborers. From these friends he learned of the living conditions of the many young women who were contract workers in the city's cotton mills. Unlike other women workers, who were relatively free once they passed the factory gates, these women appeared to be the prisoners of labor bosses who traveled to villages and purchased teenage girls from their parents. With an "X" or a thumbprint on a sheet of paper, the girl was contracted to work for the boss for a fixed number of years.

Xia Yan was appalled by what he heard about this contract labor system, and "in bitter indignation determined to expose this hell on earth." As he set about investigating the conditions of contract workers, he too shed his gown for workers' clothing. He went to work on the night shift in a mill for several weeks. A young woman who was a member of the Communist Youth League and worked in a Japanese mill collaborated with him, trying to talk to the contract laborers in her workshop and to find out more about the circumstances of their recruitment and their lives in Shanghai. Many of them suspected that someone so curious about their conditions must be a spy, and they refused to talk to her.

Attempts to visit contract laborers' living quarters were

even more frustrating: there were very strict rules, and visitors were rarely allowed beyond the "Japanese gendarmes and sentries and thugs employed by the labor contractors." Xia Yan successfully sneaked past the guards twice before they spotted him and brought his investigation to an end. In 1936, using the information he had gathered, Xia Yan wrote the short story "Contract Labor," the most detailed contemporary report about the contract labor system.[1]

Several others tried to investigate the system during the early 1930's, but they too found the secrecy surrounding the system difficult to penetrate. Cora Deng, "having been told more than once by workers how badly treated are the girls under contract labor," wanted very much to find out more about their predicament. Like Xia Yan, she found the police guarding their dormitories a formidable obstacle, but finally, "through a long list of personal relations," she managed to pay a visit to one of the contract labor dormitories. Even then she had to dress and arrange her hair as if she were an older peasant woman related to one of the contract laborers.[2]

Sociologist Chen Hansheng also attempted to study the contract labor system. In 1930, shortly after becoming a member of the Social Science Research Institute, he began an investigation of the system in the Japanese-run cotton mills of Shanghai. He had not worked on the project long when Chai Jiemin, then the head of the institute, instructed him to curtail the project because "there are people who oppose this work." Chen abandoned the research, left Shanghai, and set about studying the rural economy, the work for which he is better known.[3]

From then on, although the plight of contract laborers became a cause of social reformers and a rallying cry of Communist organizers, no one attempted to publish anything new about the system. Not until after Liberation, when there was a large-scale movement to document the pre-Liberation experiences of urban workers, did the contract labor system enjoy a revival in print. Xia Yan's story became a popular pamphlet; contract laborers were interviewed and their recollections compiled and issued in booklet form. The conditions under which contract laborers lived and worked even became the

theme of an opera and later of a movie. In these popular portrayals the contract labor system assumed legendary dimensions. The squalid existence of the contract laborer was often described as typical of the experience of Shanghai's pre-Liberation women cotton mill workers and cited as an illustration of the brutal conditions resulting from foreign domination of the cotton industry and of capitalists' inhuman exploitation of the workers.

An examination of the historical record, however, suggests that the contract labor system cannot be ascribed either to brutal capitalists or to imperialists. By reconstructing the system and then tracing its development during the first half of the twentieth century, with particular attention to the forces that gave rise to it in the Shanghai cotton mills, this chapter will show that the contract labor system was instead a product of the power of the Green Gang in Shanghai.

"Plucking Mulberry Leaves"

In Shanghai during the 1930's the business of buying and selling young girls was referred to colloquially as "plucking mulberry leaves." The men and women who engaged in this business—at times there were as many as 5,000 of them—were part of the underworld of hoodlums and gangsters who controlled commerce in everything from drugs, fish, vegetables, and night soil to human labor.[4] Those who plucked mulberry leaves could sell their harvest as prostitutes, servants, child brides, or child workers in the cotton mills.

The contractors who made a business of going to villages, buying peasant girls, and bringing them to Shanghai to work in cotton mills belonged to an intricate network of cliques. Commonly known as the Green Gang, this network controlled most of the social, economic, and legal institutions of Shanghai. Although almost all accounts refer to labor contractors as "Shanghai local hoodlums," very little is known about their social origins or the process through which they became contractors. Like the women they purchased, most were probably originally peasants who had come to work in Shanghai.[5]

Some found that buying and selling young girls was more lucrative than working as a coolie in Shanghai. In one case that reached the Shanghai courts, "a coolie confessed that, for a wage of twenty cents small money a day and his food, he was accustomed to prowl about the streets of Wusih and entice young children from their homes by offers of sweets and other delicacies. The children were then brought to the Shanghai market."[6] Other contractors were the husbands or wives of Number Ones. For instance, the husband of a woman called The Blind One, a Number One at a Yong An cotton mill, was a labor contractor; eventually she too became a contractor.[7] Contractors made more money than Number Ones. The more successful contractors also practiced usury and ran teahouses, bath houses, and hairdressing shops, and their appearance reflected their relative wealth. One labor contractor was described as "a man over thirty years of age, wearing a black silk jacket and a pair of black silk trousers, all padded with silk wool. He was tidy and clean and looked well fed."[8]

There has been no systematic study of the geographic origins of contract laborers, and since the system was often clandestine and obscure even to the mill management, there are not likely to be records that would make such a study possible. Still, some general comments can be made about recruitment patterns; for instance, there were areas where contractors did not go. Many of the areas that furnished large numbers of women workers (described in Chapter Three) were not sources of contract labor. There seem to have been no contract laborers from Wuxi, Changzhou, or Ningbo and very few from places such as Haimen that were just across the river from Shanghai. In the overwhelming majority of documented cases, the contractors went to one of five places: Yangzhou, Taizhou, Taixing (all in Subei), Shengxian, or Xinchang (both in the Shaoxing region).[9] These regions were poor enough that people were willing to sell their daughters, but they were not necessarily the poorest regions. Had there been a direct correlation between poverty level and recruitment, more contract laborers would have come from the Yancheng-Funing and Gaoyou-Xinghua areas. That this was

not so suggests that social connections, rather than economic considerations alone, determined the contractors' choice of recruiting centers.

We can only speculate about these social connections. If we assume, as most contemporary observers did, that most contractors were affiliated with the Green Gang, then the little that is known about the origins of the gang might help explain the areas they visited. We know, for example, that the Shaoxing, Yangzhou, and Taizhou areas were all centers of Green Gang activity during the late Qing dynasty. Furthermore, the gang boss who controlled the kidnapping racket in Shanghai, Gu Zhuxian, was himself from Subei.[10] In other words, the origins and the social networks of the gang seem to correlate with the favored regions for recruiting contract labor.

BUYING

The first step in the process was for a contractor to pay a visit to his or her home village. There the contractor looked for teenage girls, usually from fourteen to eighteen years old, who could be lured to Shanghai.[11] In some cases the contractor posted an announcement in the village and then signed contracts with those who responded. This was how one woman from a village near Xinchang was recruited. "In 1945 a labor contractor came to our village to look for workers," she recalled.

> It was the first time one had come. Afterwards there were more, but I was in the first batch. We had no idea if he came from one particular factory or where he came from. We just knew he was looking for workers. He was also from Zhejiang but not from our own village. He had connections with people at the village office. He had posted an announcement on a wall in the center of town [with] an address where you should go if you wanted to register. We couldn't read. Other people in our clan told me about the announcement. They said, "Your family is hard up. You can go register to work in Shanghai."[12]

More frequently, however, the contractor would talk to friends and relatives, determine which families were in particularly dire circumstances, and then pay them a visit. "The year

I was twelve a recruiter by the name of Gong came from Shanghai," one woman from Taixing recalled. "Every day he would be at houses of young girls, talking about how good their life in Shanghai could be."[13] Sometimes a child-daughter-in-law (*tongyangxi*, a girl whose parents had arranged a marriage for her and had then sent her to live with her fiancé's family) was sold to a contractor by her parents-in-law[14] (see Chapter Seven for a further discussion of the practice of *tongyangxi*).

The prospective recruit's family was promised that she would have meat and fish for dinner every day, a house to live in with other girls, a job, a chance to learn a skill, and a day off every week to see the skyscrapers, double-deck buses and other "strange, amusing, foreign sights of Shanghai."[15]

Aside from selling their daughters to labor contractors, a family's alternatives might have been few. Young girls could do farm work, such as tending cows and pigs or picking weeds, or they could either wash clothes for neighbors or do housework for the landlord, as their mothers did. It is doubtful that any of these was as lucrative as a wage-paying job in Shanghai.

Selling young women to contractors was not a completely new phenomenon, nor was it simply a result of industrialization. Instead it was an extension of the tradition of selling and indenturing women as future daughters-in-law, brides, or servants. Sue Gronewold's remarks about prostitution in China can be applied to contract labor as well: "a thriving market in women already existed and all women were to some extent regarded as merchandise."[16] In other words, although the contractor may have been a new figure in the rural social landscape, the practice of selling young girls was an old and familiar one.

Once the parents had agreed to sell their daughter, they signed a contract written on a sheet of white paper or on a small crumpled scrap.[17] A typical contract read as follows:

> The undersigned, X, because of present economic difficulties, on this day wishes to hire out his daughter, Y, to recruiting agent of the name Z, who will take her to work in a cotton mill in Shanghai. The

hiring payment will be [$30] for a period of three years. The money will be paid in three annual installments of [$10], to be paid in March of each year.

From the time she enters the factory, the girl will owe full obedience to the recruiting agent, and must not violate his instructions. In the event of her abscondence or death, the undersigned takes full responsibility. If she should fall ill, the recruiting agent will be responsible. Throughout the three-year contracted period, the girl will be clothed and fed by the recruiting agent. If any working time is lost, the girl will have to make it up at the end of the contracted period. After the contract expires, the recruiting agent has no further responsibility for the girl.

I hereby agree to this.[18]

Some contracts added a clause forbidding the use of the child for immoral purposes. One of the parents, who usually did not know how to read or write, would make either a thumbprint or an "X" at the bottom.[19]

Although a fee of $30 for three years seems to have been a fairly standard price, there were many variations in the terms of the contract, depending on the age of the girl. Girls were often divided into three types: old (paid as much as $50 for three years' work), medium ($40 for four years), and young ($30 for five years).[20] Sometimes contract conditions were negotiated, as the price of food at a market would be haggled over. "The contractor told my mother that he wanted to recruit me and that he would provide food and clothes," one woman remembered. "My mother agreed and said, 'For two years give me fifty dollars.' The contractor haggled: 'Fifty dollars for three years.'"[21] The agreed-upon price, called the family allowance, was rarely paid in full in advance. Usually it was divided into three payments, as set forth in the sample contract reprinted above, the first being the smallest and the last the largest, to ensure that the girl continued working for the duration of the contract. For the period of time contracted, the wages paid to the girl by the factory belonged to the contractor.[22]

For teenage girls who had lived all their lives on a farm or in a small town, the arrival of the contractor from Shanghai, the discussions that led eventually to a signed contract, and her

departure with the contractor for the city must often have seemed an extremely rapid sequence of events. "After we registered there wasn't much time," said the woman who had responded to an announcement posted in her village. "We had to leave within a week. The contractor didn't even look us over before we left. He just took whoever was willing to go. Fifteen of us came together."[23]

Some contractors brought groups of as few as ten girls to Shanghai; others recruited as many as a hundred at a time. Often a group consisted of girls from several neighboring villages. Since the contractor paid the cost of transportation to Shanghai, he or she naturally sought the cheapest means possible, for example, in the freight cars of a train or the cargo compartment of a boat. One woman later described her experience leaving the village: "The next day [the day after signing the contract] was the first time I ever left our village. I left dreaming I'd be able to eat. We got on a boat for Shanghai. There were eleven other girls with me. On the boat we twelve girls were in the cargo compartment. The recruiter, staying in a room above, would sometimes come to talk to us. But the farther we got, the less he had to say."[24]

SELLING

Because contractors were not employed by particular cotton mills, they did not always know in advance which mills would hire the girls they recruited. Upon arriving in Shanghai, contractors faced the urgent task of securing jobs for the contracted girls. Some notified the hiring agents at various mills and arranged for them to look the girls over and choose whomever they wanted. One girl described this process as follows: "When we first arrived in Shanghai we slept in an empty lot next to the train station. The boss went home. The next morning he came back. Then hiring agents from different mills came to look at us, and they would decide who they wanted."[25]

On other occasions a contractor, like an ordinary job seeker but on a grander scale, had to present a gift to a factory's Number One before securing work for the girls. The contractor sometimes deducted the price of the expensive gift from the amount of money owed the girls' parents.[26] On still other oc-

casions a contractor brought recruits to Japanese mills, where job seekers lined up at the factory gate each morning, and entered them into the lines. Girls under the supervision of a contractor might have had some advantage in getting jobs: the contractor would first fix their hair, dress them up in pretty clothes, and put rouge on their faces so that they would stand out in the crowd. A contractor might also give them high-heeled shoes so that they would appear tall enough to reach the bar at the gate that represented the minimum height requirement.[27] During their first few days in Shanghai, some girls were taken from mill to mill by the contractor in the hope that if one was not interested in hiring them, another would be.

But there were always some girls who were not hired. Since the contractor would have to send money to their families, simply abandoning them was not an attractive alternative. The contractor usually found some other employment for the girls. Some, rejected because they were too small, were kept by the contractor to be servants until they grew big enough to get a mill job. One girl who spent several years doing housework for the boss wrote the following melodramatic account of her daily chores:

> Every day at three o'clock in the morning the boss's wife would wake me up to draw the bellows and make the gruel for the morning shift of contract workers. If I'd do it too slowly, she would pull my hair or knock my head with her knuckles. After they had eaten, I would have to wash six or seven toilets and the high spittoon in the boss's house. Sometimes before I had finished, the boss's wife would yell at me to come wash diapers.
>
> At 6:00 A.M. I would go to the market with the boss's wife. I would walk behind her, carrying a basket. She would go from this stand to that one, buying the leftover vegetables that no one else wanted. Then when we got back I'd have to wash them. By this time it would be 9:00. . . . The night shift contract workers would have eaten and gone to sleep, but no one . . . paid attention to whether or not I had eaten. She'd tell me to just eat whatever was left in the tub.
>
> At lunch and dinner time the table in the boss's house would be full of meat and fish. I would have to stand beside the table and serve them food. Then I would go take care of the workers' food. Afterwards I would clean the dishes, and then I could eat whatever leftovers there were.
>
> After eating, the boss's wife had nothing to do, so she would just play mah-jongg all day. I would have to stand behind her and massage her back while she played. Sometimes she would play till eight or nine at night, but even when she'd go to bed my duties were not over. Until she fell asleep I would have to massage her legs and waist.
>
> Most nights I would not go back to the contract workers' room till eleven or twelve o'clock. Then I'd look for a place to sleep. Because there were not many plank beds, and lots of people, and because I was just a servant, I did not have a real place. I would just squeeze in between the other girls and use the corner of their quilt. Or, more often, because the girls would be so crowded and their quilts too small to cover them and me, I would just look for some empty space on the floor and spread out my cotton padded jacket to sleep. . . . Often I had no sooner found a place to sleep, closed my eyes and fallen asleep, than the old wife would call me to get up and start the fire.[28]

Since many of the household chores were done by the contracted girls who did have mill jobs, it was not necessary to keep more than one or two as house servants.

Another possibility was to try to get the unemployables other factory jobs, even if they paid less than mill work. Some contract workers, for example, were employed in silk filatures, but that work was seasonal. Once the season ended, so did the girls' wages, and the contractor had to look for a new way of employing them.[29]

A more common alternative was to send them to work as prostitutes. Like contract laborers, prostitutes were systematically recruited from the countryside, and there may not always have been a real distinction between the bosses who recruited prostitutes and those who recruited mill laborers. The distinction, if it existed, was further blurred because the people recruiting prostitutes often lured women to Shanghai on the pretext that they were taking them to work in the mills. The story of two such swindlers who recruited eight girls from a village near Shaoxing is typical of reports that appeared in the Shanghai newspapers throughout the early 1930's. Apparently the girls were told they would have jobs in cotton mills, but on arriving in Shanghai several were taken immediately to a brothel in the French Concession and sold as prostitutes. When the case went to court, one swindler was accused also of having arranged to sell one of the girls as a child bride.[30]

Local restaurants and teahouses were another place where

contractors might seek employment for the young girls they had purchased. It is not clear how widespread a practice this was; references are most numerous in connection with girls from Shengxian. This district, famous by the early 1930's for its peasant troupes that performed Shaoxing opera, was also a district that furnished many contract laborers. "Those who went to Shanghai to become female workers naturally had many opportunities to sing," one writer noted. "At first they would just sing for each other. When the labor contractor heard them he picked out the best of the young girls and took them to sing in restaurants where workers gathered."[31] As Shaoxing peasant operas became increasingly popular, contractors began to recruit girls specifically for performing in Shanghai restaurants, and later in theaters.

Since the people who contracted girls to work in cotton mills were all part of the underworld, it is not surprising that the "plucked mulberry leaves" were peddled from one enterprise to another. The brothel bosses, the teahouse owners, and the labor contractors were connected through their membership in the Green Gang.

"GUARANTEED RICE"

Inside the mill the contract laborers were treated like other workers. Because they had come directly from the countryside and had no prior experience working in a cotton mill, they began work on the same terms as apprentice workers and in fact were usually assigned to the machines reserved for training apprentices. Like apprentice workers, contract laborers underwent a period of training during which they were paid substantially less than skilled workers. The length of this training period varied. In some cases workers would "study till they mastered the technique" and then be eligible for higher wages. More commonly they were required to remain apprentices for six months, even though most could master the skills much sooner.[32]

One difference between contract laborers and the ordinary workers and apprentices hired directly by the mill was that contract laborers did not keep their wages. "When it was time to get paid, the Number One would give us a receipt, saying how much we should get," one woman explained. "Then we would go stand in line at a window and they would give us the money, which we would give to the boss."[33] In some of the more progressive mills, the factory would give its contract laborers two or three *jiao* at the end of the year for spending money.[34] But the biggest difference between the experience of a contract laborer and that of an ordinary woman worker was outside the factory. Every aspect of her life was controlled by the contractor. She had no options—she lived where the boss told her to live, she ate the food he or she provided, she left the dormitory only when the contractor allowed her to.

Some of the more prosperous contractors had their own dormitories. A contractor named Huang from Taixing reportedly had one house next to the Japanese-run Da Kang Cotton Mill in eastern Shanghai, where a hundred contracted girls lived, and another next to a Chinese-owned mill in western Shanghai, housing another sixty or seventy girls. He lived in a separate house next to the dormitory in east Shanghai, and one of his relatives managed the dorm in west Shanghai.[35]

Most contractors, however, rented rooms for their contract laborers from the mill owners. No sooner had mill owners begun constructing dormitories than the gang tapped this new source of income. A social worker who investigated the problems of housing for working women in 1933 noted that a large portion of company housing was "monopolized by those people who made a business of contract labor."[36] Contractors sometimes rented entire blocks of dormitory space. That was the case at the Japanese mill in Yangshupu that Xia Yan visited and later described:

> The compound is oblong, enclosed by a high red brick wall and intersected into two long narrow strips by a cement road. It is split up as neatly as a dovecote: eight rows on each side with five buildings in each, making altogether eighty two-story buildings. . . . These loft houses have no front entrance. Their front door is like an ordinary back door. Over each is a wooden slip three inches long on which are written in Japanese-style Chinese characters the name and place of origin of the contractor [who rented the rooms for his workers], like "Chen Dongtian, Taizhou," or "Xu Fuda, Yangzhou." Pasted on the doors are lucky tokens cut out of red paper, woodcuts to keep

away ghosts and evil spirits, or mottoes on faded red paper expressing such pious sentiments as "Virtue is its own reward" and "Honesty pays."[37]

The contractors paid about four or five dollars a month for one room, in which they could house anywhere from fifteen to forty girls. Two girls almost always shared a single sleeping space: a girl on day shift would sleep there at night, and a girl on night shift during the day. Cora Deng recorded her impressions of the inside of a contract laborers' dormitory:

> This particular contractor rented from his mill owner five ordinary two storey tenement houses where he managed to house his own family together with more than ninety contracted girls. The first house we visited had on the first floor a big sitting room which, clean, tidy and fairly well furnished, looked like a lower middle class living room. Being the contractor's private living quarters, naturally it is not open to the girls under contract for use. . . .
>
> [The contractor] took us to see the dormitories, but we were so carefully guided and shown, that we saw only, as I was told afterwards by a worker, the best part of his place. This particular dormitory is on the second floor of the second house. It is just a big room without partitions of any kind. On the floor there were two rows of sleeping places, four on each side. Each of them had some straw underneath a mat. Some had old rags as bedding while others did not even have rags. When he was asked whether some of the girls' bedding was taken out to be aired in the sunshine (it happened to be a very good sunny day) the contractor answered, "Some girls have taken out their bedding to be aired, but some, being used to sleep without any bedding in the country, can get along without any." There were eight sleeping places, but the people occupying them were sixteen in number, because two girls, one using it during the day and the other at night, shared one bed. . . .
>
> There was no furniture of any kind, not even broken stools or worn out tables. This explains why the floor was full of basins, bundles, and the wall was decorated with dresses, towels, shoes, stockings and what not, hanging all over the walls. One was impressed as being in the steerage of a boat![38]

A contractor usually hired thugs to guard the dormitories and to accompany the girls to and from the factory. For the most part the laborers were not allowed to leave the dormitory or factory premises except during the Spring Festival and on

specified days about once every two weeks. Even on those occasions they were accompanied.[39]

The contracts signed by the laborers' parents stipulated that the contractor assumed responsibility for providing the girls' food; in fact, the contract labor system took its popular name, *bao fan* ("guaranteed rice"), from this stipulation. But the less contractors spent on laborers' meals, the more profit they made, so they usually provided no more than the minimum level of subsistence. The only real meal the girls ate was lunch, which the contractor often sent to them at the mill. Lunch consisted of dry rice with vegetables on top—usually dried turnips and discarded vegetable leaves and stalks, as well as salted cabbage. The girls were treated to meat or fish only on holidays. Breakfast and dinner were a thin congee made from Indian rice and miscellaneous grains or leftovers such as soybean dregs. Xia Yan watched the girls prepare for breakfast: "After the mats and tattered bedding downstairs have been bundled out of the way, the girls take down two tables which have been hooked to the wall during the night. A dozen or more bowls and a handful of bamboo chopsticks are slapped down on these tables, and the girl doing duty as cook puts a tin bucket of thin, watery congee in the middle."[40]

Cooking was only one of many chores the contract laborers were expected to do when they were not at work. In addition to washing and mending their own clothes, which usually consisted of no more than two sets issued by the contractor, they had to wash and mend the clothes of the boss's family. They had to sweep the floors, empty and clean the wooden chamber pots, and take care of the boss's children.[41] If the boss was a man, they were sometimes expected to provide sexual services as well and were beaten if they did not comply. Cases of contract laborers being beaten and raped by their bosses appeared frequently in the Shanghai newspapers during the 1930's. The story of Tao Kougu, an eighteen-year-old girl from Taizhou, was typical of hundreds of others. She lived and worked in west Shanghai under contract to a 32-year-old man also from Taizhou. According to Tao, one morning she had not gone to work at the mill because her feet were swollen and sore. She was in the dormitory house resting. At 6:00 A.M. the contrac-

tor "burst into the room and forced me onto the bed, and then raped me. He covered my mouth so that I could not utter a sound. For the next two days he . . . would not let me go out anywhere. He raped me two more times after that."[42] Another article reporting a similar occurrence noted that "every day there are instances of arguments and fights between the labor bosses and recruited girls."[43]

Given this combination of inadequate food, crowded living quarters, and physical abuse, it is little wonder that contract laborers were frequently ill. The most common illnesses were tuberculosis, beriberi, and various skin diseases. Because there was no medical care, problems that were initially minor ones often became quite serious. "When we'd finish the day's work our feet would be swollen and we'd get big blisters," one woman recalled. "Even after several months they would not heal. There was nothing to do but use straw paper and cotton rags to bind them up. My feet still have scars. Of ten apprentices, nine had infected feet."[44]

Although the extremely poor health of these contract laborers usually passed unnoticed by the world outside their dormitories, the girls' illnesses sometimes attracted the attention of the mill managers, or even the local police. In 1939 the Shanghai police charged a contractor with mistreating a girl who was later found, in two independent medical examinations, to be suffering from chronic malnutrition and tubercular glands. She came to the attention of the police when she tried to escape from the contractor. According to the police report, "her contractor pursued her, overtook her on a wharf, and attempted to force her to return. She resisted, and in the struggle police attention was drawn to the incident. The man was charged under Article 286, Section 2, of the Chinese Criminal Code, 'for that on divers dates between October 1938 and July 1939, at XXX Cotton Mill Quarters, [he] did for the purpose of gain maltreat one named Tsu Mei Ying.'"[45]

Very few girls, however, were so fortunate as to attract official notice. If they were sick they usually continued to work, not only because the contractor forced them to do so, but because they would later have to make up any work days they missed. For every one day of work they missed, they had to

add two or three days of additional work at the end of the contract period; in rare cases they had to add as much as one month per day missed. Hence very few girls were freed from their contracts at the time originally specified. Many of those who had originally contracted for three years ended up working for four or five years before the contract was officially terminated.

Many girls, like Tsu Mei Ying, did try to escape before their contracts expired. Slipping past the thugs hired as guards was not easy, and even if a girl could manage to flee beyond the dormitory walls, there was a great likelihood that she would eventually be found. A girl who escaped successfully would immediately be blacklisted by her contractor, and since most contractors had *guanxi* with the Number Ones in the mills, it was not difficult to prevent her from being rehired.[46]

"TAKING RICE"

When the contract, including any extensions imposed, did finally expire, many girls still could not sever their ties to the contractor. Some stayed on under a slightly different arrangement called *dai fan*, or "taking rice." Under the *dai fan* system, which in theory was an improvement over the contract labor system, a worker was not bound by a contract and was entitled to keep her salary. From her monthly wages she paid the contractor a set amount, usually seven or eight dollars, for room and board. In reality, though, she continued to live, work, and eat under the same conditions as before.*

Considering the brutality to which contract laborers were subjected, it may seem peculiar that they stayed on after the requirements of their contracts had been fulfilled. Their alternatives, however, must have been few. At the time their commitment ended, though they had worked for three or more

*In some cases of "taking rice" the contractor went to villages and recruited women to come and work in Shanghai. Then the difference between "taking rice" and "eating guaranteed rice" was that no contract was signed and there was no period of contract. The contractor would simply promise the girl that if she came to Shanghai he or she would help her get a job, and that she would have room and board for $7 or $8 a month. "Chinese Labor and the Contract System," *People's Tribune*, 5 (1933), no. 3: 410; Sun Baoshan, "Shanghai fangzhichangde baoshenzhi gongren," *Huanian zhoukan* 1 (1932), no. 22: 466; Du Shipin, ed., *Shanghaishi daguan* (Shanghai, 1948), pt. 3, p. 65.

years, they had no money of their own. Most were still teenagers, and many had no relatives in Shanghai to turn to for help. If they wanted to continue working in Shanghai, staying on with the contractor might well have been the only arrangement they could afford.[47] Often, the contractors forced them to stay, presumably hoping to extract a portion of their salary for as long as possible. One woman remembered that "after seven years the boss said to me, 'If you want to keep working then you had best keep living with me and eat *dai fan*. You pay me eight dollars a month for food. If you don't live here, then you won't be able to work.' Having had seven years of experience, I knew that all the bosses collaborated . . . so I ended up being a *dai fan* at his house."[48] Many other women recalled being forced into a similar predicament.

Not only the women who had been recruited from the countryside and had served as contract laborers had a *dai fan* arrangement. Many young, single women workers already in the city eventually contracted for room and board with labor contractors, probably because they offered the cheapest arrangement available. Furthermore, since the contractor and the boarders in most boarding places all came from the same village, some girls might have perceived the arrangement as a kind of surrogate family. Finally, because contractors controlled much of the job market and factory housing, there might have been little choice for girls who wanted to get work in the mills. One woman tells of coming to Shanghai to work:

> I heard other people say that if you were starving in the village the only thing to do was to go to Shanghai and look for work. That way you could not only solve the problem of supporting yourself, but also send money home to support your family. This possibility stuck in my mind until finally I was able to get the introduction of someone from the same village to come to Shanghai and work in a cotton mill. I roomed and boarded at his place. There were many other girls like me boarding there. Probably all were introduced into the factory by him, since he was a labor boss in the cotton mill.[49]

Once a young woman began boarding at a contractor's house, several conditions made it difficult to move elsewhere. If the girl had just arrived in Shanghai and had never worked in a mill, she had to work first as an apprentice for several months. During this time she earned only a few dollars a month, and she consequently could not pay the eight dollars charged for room and board. The contractor would lend her the money but would charge a high interest rate, refusing to let her leave until she had repaid her debt.[50] Another problem was that without the contractor's continuing assistance, she might lose her job. This was especially true of people who were simultaneously foremen or Number Ones and keepers of boarding establishments. One woman who had wanted to leave a boarding establishment remarked, "But if you don't eat his rice, then you won't have any work. There are already too many unemployed people in this society—so where else would I go to get work?"[51]

One should not conclude that being contracted from the village or entering a boarding establishment once in Shanghai was always tantamount to life imprisonment. Most contemporary accounts, as well as the recollections of contract laborers compiled after Liberation, describe the most extreme cases of victimization by the contractors. For at least some women, the job introductions and the inexpensive room and board provided by contractors from their native villages were a source of support when they arrived in Shanghai and had no one else to turn to. Some girls depended on a contractor for no more than a temporary arrangement, one they abandoned once they had begun to develop a network of relationships of their own in the city.*

PROFITS

Whether operating a *bao fan* or a *dai fan* system, the labor contractors made a handsome profit from their business of plucking mulberry leaves. A contractor operating a *bao fan* system would pay about $5 a month for food and rent for one girl. The girl, once her apprenticeship was over, would earn a minimum of $12 a month; in one year the contractor would earn $84, and in three years $252. Subtracting $10 for expenses incurred in the process of recruiting and the $35 (more or less) paid to the parents, at the end of three years the contractor

*For instance, one woman originally from a village near Shengxian described coming to Shanghai in 1945 and boarding at first with a boss—also a Zhejiang native—at the Shen Xin No. 9 Mill. After six months, when she began to receive full wages, she went to live with a co-worker from the same village. Interview with Zhang Xiaomei, Shanghai, Feb. 25, 1981.

could have accumulated $207 for a single girl. And since most contractors had from ten to one hundred laborers, the contract labor business was indeed lucrative. In three years a contractor who had ten girls could make $2,070, whereas an ordinary foreman in a mill would have earned only about $1,080—just about half as much.* As a report of the Shanghai Municipal Council concluded, "if the contractor has from eight to ten girls, his or her living is by no means unsatisfactory for an unskilled and unlettered person." Or as Sun Baoshan put it, "No wonder many contractors have two or more wives!"

Many accounts of the contract labor system brand it one of the many ways the "capitalists even more severely exploited the workers." But though the system was clearly profitable for the labor contractors, it was not so obviously beneficial to the mill owners and managers. There is no evidence that contract laborers were any cheaper than other women workers from the mill owners' point of view. While contract laborers were being trained they could be paid the reduced wages of apprentices or child workers, but once they qualified for the wages due a skilled worker, it was obviously in the interest of the contractor to press for that amount since his or her income depended on it. Furthermore, how productive could the contract laborers have been? If most contract laborers lived and worked under conditions at all resembling the ones outlined above, then one can imagine them to have been weak, if not downright ill, and probably less efficient than other workers in the mill.

It appears that the mill owners perceived this to be the case. In the mid-1930's there were frequently conflicts between mill owners and contractors, conflicts that usually focused on the contract laborers' health. Contract laborers often arrived at the factory workshop either pathetically ill or bruised from beatings. The Number Ones sometimes tried to persuade the contracted girls to request several days of sick leave, but the girls knew that they would have to make up any lost time. Xia Yan told of a letter to the editor of a Shanghai newspaper written by a man who, having nothing better to do one day in October 1935, dropped in to listen to court trials in Caojiadu. That particular day there was a case concerning a contract laborer from a cotton mill who had been accused by her contractor of stealing gold earrings and some clothing, and then fleeing. In the course of the trial some extenuating circumstances emerged: the previous month the contractor had demanded that she have sexual relations with him, and when she refused he beat her until her eyes were swollen shut. At work the mill managers told her to take sick leave and go home, but the contractor did not agree.[52] According to the young mill worker with whom Xia Yan discussed the problems of contract laborers, cases like this were fairly typical.

In the late 1930's one large cotton mill studied the work efficiencies of three types of women workers: those who lived with their own families, those who lived on their own in factory dorms, and those controlled by contractors. Based on the results of the study, the general manager realized that "the contract system is not good, producing as it does apathetic, lethargic workers." He subsequently took measures to limit the number of contract laborers and insisted that the contractors pay for the laborers under their control to eat in the factory dining room, "where good food is available at reasonable cost." The Industrial Section of the Shanghai Municipal Council even concluded that "self-interest on the part of management of this mill will ultimately drive out the system."[53] If the mill owners were as disenchanted with the contract labor system as these accounts suggest, one cannot help wondering how the system originally got a foothold in the cotton mills and why it continued for so long.

Many contemporary observers attributed the development of the contract labor system to Japanese mill owners. In Cora Deng's account of a visit to a contract laborers' dormitory, she described the system as one peculiar to Shanghai's Japanese mills; articles with titles such as "Contract Labor in the Japanese Cotton Mills in Shanghai" appeared in newspapers and magazines. Several factory engineers, looking back at the sys-

*These figures are approximate, based on several different estimates of the expenses incurred by a contractor. Of course the amount paid to the contract worker in the form of wages was important in determining how much the contractor earned. Since contract workers worked in different departments and in different mills, there was a great deal of variation. See Shanghai Municipal Council, *Annual Report, 1938* (Shanghai, 1938), p. 41; Sun Baoshan, "Shanghai fangzhichangde baoshenzi gongren," *Huanian zhoukan* 1 (1932), no. 22: 431; Shanghai shehui kexueyuan, jingji yanjiuso, *Yongan fangzhi yinran gongsi* (Beijing, 1964), p. 90.

tem, commented, "Contract labor—oh, that was something they used in the Japanese mills," or words to that effect.[54]

If the system had been confined to the Japanese mills, then the explanation offered by many historians might suffice. The Japanese, they said, unfamiliar with Chinese language and customs, had no choice but to depend on local hoodlums to recruit their labor, and so long as production continued they did not care how the workers were treated.[55] Unfortunately, the matter is not as simple as this version suggests. There are no systematic records indicating the number of contract workers at particular mills at particular times. Nonetheless, the scattered data available make one point clear: the contract labor system was by no means confined to the Japanese-owned mills. To be sure, large numbers of contract laborers worked at Japanese mills such as Nei Wai and Da Kang, but there were also contract workers at the British mills during the 1930's, particularly the Yi He Mill. Most striking is the evidence of contract labor at Chinese-owned mills, both at the Shen Xin mills, considered to have the most backward management techniques, and at the Yong An mills, considered to be the most modern. Some observers claimed that the Chinese-owned Shen Xin Number Nine Mill at one point had more contract laborers than any other Shanghai mill: 1,200 of 3,000 workers were said to be contract laborers in 1936.[56] Could it be, as some have suggested, that the contract system started in the foreign-owned mills and spread to the Chinese ones?

Traditions: Foreign and Chinese

To understand the extent to which the nationality of mill owners determined the patterns of the contract labor system's development, we must look at the traditions that might have given rise to the system in the first place.

FOREIGN

Because so many accounts of the contract labor system attribute its origins to the Japanese,[57] we begin by asking what might have prompted the Japanese to adopt this system in Shanghai. There was in fact a history of contract labor in the Japanese domestic cotton industry, but the question remains whether the Japanese capitalists who established factories in Shanghai considered this a system worth copying. What we know of the history of the contract labor system in Japan suggests that they probably did not.

The contract labor system began in Japan in the 1890's, when the rapid expansion of the cotton industry created a severe labor shortage. The mills no longer could rely on people who lived nearby but instead had to begin a recruitment program. "As its demand for labor skyrocketed," wrote Takejiro Shindo,* "the cotton industry was compelled to initiate serious efforts for the procurement of labor by appointing recruiting agents to work exclusively for channeling female operatives into the mills."[58] It was not easy to convince the parents of a teenage girl to allow her to leave the village and go to work in an urban factory. Mill owners therefore found it advantageous to employ recruiting agents who had come from those villages themselves and not only were familiar with rural conditions and peasants' attitudes but also had networks of relatives and friends to draw on.

In this way there developed a group of men and women who made a living by recruiting female laborers from the countryside and selling them to factories desperate for workers. These contractors, often people with criminal records, were also involved in recruiting prostitutes, geisha, and teahouse girls. Like the contractors of Shanghai they often lured women to the city by promising high wages and boasting of the luxurious life of the city, and then housed them in dormitories, restricted their activities, and frequently forced them to work as waitresses or to perform "demoralizing acts."

By the early twentieth century the system was in such ill repute throughout the Japanese countryside that contractors were hard pressed to persuade women to go with them. Commenting on the system in 1925, Shunzo Yoshisake wrote:

> The irresponsible promises of the recruiting agents, given simply to entice the women to work, the disagreeable manner of their persistent attempts to persuade them, their violent and insulting acts, and other injustices have had a decidedly negative influence. Again, the country folk see many sudden changes in their friends and receive

*Shindo was a former chairman of the board of directors of the Toyo Spinning Co. of Japan, which owned several mills in Shanghai.

bitter disillusionments; they hear of the risks to life and health in factory work; an innocent country girl, who left home full of health and vigour, soon returns with wrecked health and haggard face, or news comes of her utter moral ruin and degradation.[59]

The situation was so extreme that in 1926 one village formed a union of men and women workers, headed by the mayor, to maintain certain standards of working conditions for the women who were recruited from that village to work in urban factories.[60]

By the 1920's the problem had become so acute that legislation was enacted to control the abuses of the recruiting system. The Regulations Concerning the Recruitment of Workers, passed in December 1924, required licensing of all people engaged in recruiting workers and guaranteed that "in the case of women workers their chastity is protected, while in the case of men . . . their freedom and security should be ensured."[61] This law apparently brought the system under control.

The history of imperialism abounds with examples of factory owners leaving areas where laws have been enacted that require them to treat workers according to certain standards, leading to a rise in the cost of labor. The absence of enforceable labor laws in China and the low cost of labor must certainly have appealed to Japanese investors, but these factors would account for the importation of the contract labor system only if it had truly proved profitable. But the Japanese contract labor system was clearly not one that had achieved unqualified success. Furthermore, though there is ample evidence of contract labor in Shanghai's Japanese-owned mills by the 1930's, there is no record of Japanese mills using this system during their early years in Shanghai. In other words, although a contract labor system existed in Japan, it does not appear that Japanese managers used this system when they first opened mills in Shanghai.

CHINESE

During their early years of operation in Shanghai, it appears that Japanese mill owners, like their British and Chinese counterparts, adopted recruiting systems shaped primarily by traditions prevalent in China. A cluster of related hiring systems developed, with names sometimes so similar that they have been mistaken for one another. Moreover, the contract labor system itself did not exist in the Shanghai mills until the late 1920's, although earlier recruiting systems included parts of it.

The system most often confused with the contract labor system (*baoshenzhi*) is the contract work system (*baogongzhi*). The contract work system, which had existed long before the contract labor system, continued to exist alongside and sometimes in conjunction with it. In the contract work system the owner and the manager of an enterprise relinquished all decisions concerning production to a foreman, who was paid a flat fee for producing a certain amount of the finished product. The foreman determined how many workers should be hired and how much they should be paid, but he usually hired several subordinate foremen to handle the recruitment of workers. Much has been written about the use of this system in the Chinese mining industry.[62] In Shanghai the system was most prevalent at the docks, where all workers were hired by contractors who paid the workers only 20-40 percent of the rate paid by the shipping firm;[63] it was also used by the Shanghai Public Works Department, the French Tramway Company, and some oil and tobacco companies.

Shanghai's cotton mills used the contract work system extensively from an early time. In 1916 an observer from the United States Department of Commerce, Ralph Odell, described in his survey of China's cotton mills a typical contract work system in use at the International Cotton Manufacturing Company, originally a German enterprise. He noted that all the workers at this mill were employed and paid by a contractor, who was in turn paid by the manager according to the number of pieces produced.[64] At times some Chinese-owned mills, such as the Heng Feng Cotton Mill and several of the Shen Xin mills, also used the contract work system.[65]

This system was distinct from, but compatible with, the contract labor system. A contract labor system could be used within the contract work system; that is, the subordinate foremen who actually recruited the workers could go to villages, sign contracts with parents of teenagers, and put the girls to work in the mills. Or the subordinate foremen might have had

connections with a person engaged in such a business. But just as frequently, the workers were recruited by advertisement, or lived in the Shanghai suburbs and were not provided room and board by the foremen. Most important, this system was instituted by the mill management.

Managers of mills that did not use the contract work system sometimes appointed their own recruiting agents. Before the 1930's these agents sometimes brought women from other places to work in Shanghai mills under conditions similar to those of the later contract labor system; however, the recruiters were members of the mill staff, not local hoodlums. One such case, which appeared in the Changsha and Shanghai newspapers in 1920, involved the Hou Sheng Mill, owned by a Chinese capitalist originally from Hunan. According to an interview with a Mr. Huang, the foreman responsible for hiring female workers, the general manager had requested that 50 jobs be reserved for women to be recruited from Hunan, where "due to repeated military engagements and inflation . . . people's lives were rough."

The women who were recruited did not necessarily sign a contract, but they were expected to work for three years because, as Huang explained, the mill had "invested" in these women. When the women left Hunan each was given a leather suitcase, a washbasin, and a basket. "The factory had to pay for all of this," the foreman explained. "We must insist that the women work for three years before leaving. Otherwise we fear that they do not really want to work for us, but only want to use this as a pretext to find other means of earning a living." During the three years they worked, the women were paid eight dollars a month from which five dollars was deducted for room and board. They were housed in a dormitory constructed especially for them. At the end of three years those who wanted to continue working could do so; those who wanted to leave could leave.[66]

Insofar as the women were recruited from outside Shanghai and were brought to the city with the understanding that they would work for three years, their situation resembled the guaranteed-rice system, but insofar as they were paid a monthly wage that they were entitled to keep (minus a fixed amount for room and board), it approximated the taking-rice arrangement. Nevertheless, this instance of recruiting 50 women from Hunan, intended as a trial to determine the suitability of Hunan women for mill work, was initiated and executed by the mill manager. The women were beholden to the factory managers, not to local racketeers.

Similarities may also be seen in the *yangchenggong*, or apprentice, system. The purpose of the training bureaus created during the 1920's, when women workers were replacing male workers in many operations, was to provide very young girls with several years of training before they were put to work.[67] In this system mill agents went to villages, usually not too far from Shanghai, and recruited teenage girls. Before final acceptance into the training program, the recruits were required to pass a very simple literacy test, a physical exam, and a dexterity test, and then to provide a guarantee that they would remain at the mill for three years. During that time they were housed in factory dormitories. The Nei Wai mills recruited a group of these girls in 1923, as did the Yong An mills in 1925.[68]

As with the contract work system, contract labor could have been grafted onto the apprentice system: local labor contractors could have made deals with the mill agents responsible for finding and hiring the apprentices. There is little evidence that this occurred, although it is difficult to rule out the possibility entirely since in post-1949 historiography the terms "contract labor system" and "apprentice system" are often confused or used interchangeably. The confusion was perhaps generated not only because the systems are similar, but also because during the 1930's and 1940's what was referred to by the locals of Yangshupu as contract labor (*baoshengong*) was called trained labor (*yangchenggong*) by the workers of Xiaoshadu. Many post-1949 accounts of the labor movement describing attacks on the contract labor system during the May Thirtieth Movement, in light of sources from that era, seem actually to have been referring to attacks on the apprentice system. The workers attacked the apprentice system because many of their jobs were threatened by these young trainees.

The Green Gang and the Contract Labor System

Although there were several systems that resembled contract labor, on close scrutiny there is no direct evidence that the contract labor system existed before 1928, either in foreign- or in Chinese-owned mills. The system is not mentioned in contemporary newspaper or magazine accounts describing work conditions and strikes, although if it had existed at that time, there are several documents and publications in which we might expect reports to appear. *New Youth*'s 1920 special labor issue included articles discussing every imaginable aspect of labor problems, yet not once did it refer to the contract labor system. References to contract labor were similarly absent from the report of the Child Labor Commission of 1924, Tang Hai's and Udaka Yasushi's studies of China's labor problems, both written in 1925, and the works of other major Chinese observers of labor problems, such as Chen Da and Ma Zhaojun.[69] Finally, although the description of the contract labor system above is drawn from many different sources, most of them either were written during the 1930's or are recollections of women who worked in cotton mills at that time. It is of course possible that the contract labor system existed all along but did not strike these observers as something unusual enough to deserve special discussion or a name of its own. Or perhaps there was a contract labor system but it involved only a small number of workers.

In 1930, however, the system became a newsworthy phenomenon. It was extensive and distinct enough to be given the name *baoshenzhi*, which had not appeared before, and extraordinary enough to attract the attention of social scientists such as Chen Hansheng, who organized a team of researchers in that year to investigate the system. There was a sudden proliferation of articles in the daily papers about girls from villages struck by flood or famine being bound by contracts signed by their parents, who received a pittance for the promise of three years of their daughters' labor. The fate of these girls once they arrived in the city was as newsworthy as the conditions under which they were recruited, not only because they were sent to

live and work in the squalid conditions described above. What many reporters found most distressing was that, subsequent to their arrival in Shanghai, these girls frequently lost their virginity, because they either were raped by the contractors themselves or were passed on to other hoodlums.

Thus, although there might well have been recruitment from the villages before the 1930's, it had taken on a new aspect by that time. A woman worker was no longer simply a laborer recruited by someone who provided a mill with workers and perhaps worked as a foreman himself. She was now the possession of a contractor who was part of a criminal network of racketeers. This meant, for example, that it was easy to blackmail girls who tried to escape and to sell girls not marketable in mills as maids or as prostitutes. The contractors now were part of, and had *guanxi* with, an extensive network of mulberry leaf pluckers.

Before 1930 there were capitalists who needed workers, there were foremen and forewomen who often did the work of recruiting, and there were women who left their villages to work in the Shanghai mills. But what was significantly different during the 1930's was the underworld element: the emergence of the contract labor system coincides almost exactly with a radical increase in the power and scope of activities of the Green Gang. The story of contract labor is therefore not simply a story of impoverished peasants, wealthy capitalists, and imperialists but is just as much a story of the Green Gang of Shanghai and how it cornered the cotton mills' labor market.

THE GREEN GANG

The Green Gang is perhaps the most elusive element in the political and social history of Shanghai. On the one hand it is described as omnipotent; on the other hand, it appears only between the lines in accounts of industrial development. The Shanghai Green Gang has been described as embodying "the characteristics of the Society of December Tenth as utilized by Louis Bonaparte, the Russian Black Hundred, and the modern Chicago variety of racketeers and criminal gunmen."[70] The gang boasted members from all echelons of Shanghai society.

At the top level were the so-called Big Three: Du Yuesheng, Huang Jinrong (called Pockmarked Huang), and Zhang Xiaolin. The rank and file, numbering as many as 20,000 in the early 1930's, included many politicians, GMD labor leaders, degree holders, journalists, policemen, and military officers, as well as most factory foremen and labor contractors. A history of the relationship of the Green Gang to the financial and political institutions of Shanghai is beyond the scope of this study. What concerns us here is when and how the gang came to play a powerful role in one of Shanghai's largest industries, not only among workers and foremen but among owners and managers as well.

In this context the events of 1925-27 may be particularly significant. Following the May Thirtieth Movement an increasing number of workers joined the radical Shanghai General Union. They engaged in continual strikes, demanding an ever-expanding list of improvements in their work conditions, from a minimum wage and a paid day off every week to freedom of speech and of association. The power of the labor movement was dramatically displayed during three uprisings in 1926-27, when workers battled to seize control of Shanghai from the warlords. The first two failed, but by March 1927, after the third, workers controlled the Chinese-owned parts of Shanghai and had established a provisional municipal government.

Alarmed by these events, the Shanghai business community turned to Chiang Kai-shek for assistance in opposing the labor movement. That the capitalists forged close connections with the GMD is only part of the story of the struggle to quell the workers' movement during the late 1920's. GMD officers and soldiers did not hunt down labor leaders and worker activists, or infiltrate the unions. The GMD turned these jobs over to the Green Gang, headed by Du Yuesheng. Virtually no other group could undermine the power held by the Communists in Shanghai at that time. Shanghai's treaty port status partially accounted for this predicament: Chinese troops and police were not allowed to enter the foreign concessions, where most mills were located. Even if the official institutions had had the organizational strength to contend with the CCP, foreign domination would have rendered them impotent. In this context an organization such as the Green Gang could assume wide-ranging powers.[71]

Delegated the job of destroying the Communist-led labor movement, Du Yuesheng created the Society for Common Progress. "Located in the French Concession, the association mobilized and equipped thousands of gang members. At a given signal these men rushed out of their sanctuary and overwhelmed the Communist workers. . . . By its intervention, [Du's] group managed to redraw the political map."[72] From 1927 on, the Green Gang became a political power that all contenders had to take seriously.

As most studies have lamented, the gang was extremely effective in destroying the labor movement. But they did not do this job for free: the mill owners became vulnerable to the gang's determination to claim a share of the profits to be made from industrial development. This sense of vulnerability was expressed by a mill engineer, speaking of the early 1930's:

> At that time, when capitalists opened factories, they hoped that there wouldn't be strikes or anything in the factory. . . . All the guards at the factory gates were gang members. When you wanted guards, you would contact the gang, and they would send people. That way the gates were secured, and if there were any problems or disputes with workers, we'd go get these "old heads" at the gate. And if we did not use them, then they would come and damage the factory.[73]

If the mill owners did not comply with the gang's demands to control certain aspects of mill operations, it was not simply two or three dissatisfied gate guards who came and attacked the factory. Those guards could mobilize the forces of a massive network to do more than slight damage to a factory.

Damaging the physical plant was only one of many techniques used by the gang to keep the mill owners in line; attacking, kidnapping, or even murdering those who offended them was not unheard of. The fate of a certain Yih Dai-mien might have been a lesson to others. Yih, from a family of compradores, was the insurance department compradore of Probst, Hanbury and Company. In 1929 he had "recently become a joint manager of the Oriental Cotton Mill and had made dras-

tic changes in the management of this mill," when the following account of his murder appeared in the *North-China Herald*:

> Another grave outrage took place early on May 31 in Avenue Road when three men shot and killed in cold blood . . . Mr. Yih Dai-mien who had just left his residence, 85 Carter Road, in his motor car. The compradore, who, it is thought, was perhaps kidnapped for revenge, put up a strenuous resistance within 500 yards of the house. Deserted by his chauffeur, who jumped from the car when the shooting began, he struggled against three armed men, until so weakened by the loss of blood occasioned by his wounds, he sank to the floor of the car. The gang, not wishing to have a wounded man on their hands, deserted the car and their victim.[74]

The report did not specify what Yih had done to offend the gang. But it is possible to speculate: in the late 1920's instituting reforms in mill management almost always meant replacing labor bosses and foremen, who had local influence but no training, with professional engineers who were usually graduates of schools such as the Nantong Textile Institute. When these professionals began work in the mills, they encountered fierce resistance, most often manifested as threats, beatings, and other intimidation.[75]

Demanding control of the labor market was only one issue in the use of violence against capitalists during the late 1920's. Parks Coble's study of Shanghai capitalists documents the Green Gang's reign of terror over Shanghai capitalists, beginning in 1928. Chiang Kai-shek, desperate to raise funds for his government, enlisted the assistance of the Green Gang to extract money from the capitalists. Kidnapping wealthy businessmen or their family members and holding them for ransom became a routine affair in the 1930's.[76]

THE SYSTEM EXPOSED

In January 1932 the problem of contract labor briefly commanded the attention of more than just the readers of newspaper crime pages and industrial engineers plagued by the problems of developing a modern and efficient work force. As one editor commented, "It was not until two days ago that *baoshenzhi*, this new term, became known in local society. Actually it has a history of more than one year, but those who are

immersed in Shanghai's pleasure world of music and women never paid any attention to this evil system."[77] Hundreds of contract laborers emerged from semicovert imprisonment into the limelight. Their working and living conditions, as well as the realization that they were village girls who had been bought by contractors, scandalized Shanghai.

When the Japanese attacked Shanghai in 1932, labor contractors were in a precarious position. Many had houses in Zhabei, the area most severely damaged in the attack, and they were forced to flee to the International Settlement. Furthermore, many Japanese mills stopped production, putting large numbers of contracted girls out of work. Unlike other unemployed workers, who had to fend for themselves during times of unemployment, contract laborers were still entitled to housing and food provided by the contractors, even though they were not receiving wages. The contractors found a way out of their predicament by taking advantage of the refugee relief agencies set up in the International Settlement to deal with the thousands of people rendered homeless by the Japanese attack. Apparently the managers of the relief agencies quickly discovered this situation, and when they began to investigate, found more than a thousand contract laborers scattered in various refugee camps. As soon as the factories reopened, the labor bosses showed up to reclaim their contracted laborers and put them back to work in the mills. "The first step," one writer proclaimed, "is to notify the relief agencies not to let people come and take these children away. We must think of a method to rescue them from the contractors."[78]

Ironically, though the events of 1932 led to the exposure of the contract labor system, they also contributed to its expansion. At the time of the Japanese attack in January, thousands of women workers fled the city and returned to their home villages. When the cotton mills began to resume production in the spring, the contractors had an opportunity to secure control over even more workers than before. In addition to trying to reclaim the women they had deposited in the refugee camps, they could go to the countryside and bring back more workers. That the political situation, particularly the anti-Japanese boycott, may even have made dependence on labor contractors

necessary for Japanese-owned mills to resume operation is suggested by a report about the partial reopening of thirteen Japanese mills in April 1932:

> According to the local Chinese papers it is reported "that the Japanese cotton mills have provided 20 foremen with huge sums of money to proceed secretly to Taishing, Yangchow and other inland places to recruit laborers. Our workers should not be allowed to work with the Japanese at the present moment when the whole nation is unanimously resisting Japan. . . . We therefore request that the various *hsien* governments be instructed to prohibit strictly such labor conscription to avoid all pernicious consequences."[79]

It was just after the Japanese attack that Xia Yan was able to work in a mill himself, and his observations attest to the increase in the number of contract laborers. "Whereas the number of workers has diminished," he wrote, "the percentage of contract labor in the total work force has shot up. Thus twenty-four out of thirty-two girls working at the drawing frame of a mill in Yangshupu are contract labor."[80] Indeed, there is dramatic statistical evidence of the expansion of the contract labor system during the thirties. When Sun Baoshan conducted his survey in 1932, he estimated that in all Shanghai mills there were approximately ten thousand contract laborers.[81] By 1937 an investigation conducted by the YWCA concluded that there were some 70,000-80,000 contract laborers in the city's mills.[82]

As had happened five years earlier, when the Japanese attacked Shanghai in 1937 the factories had no sooner shut their doors than the contractors sent the girls to refugee camps. One woman, after visiting a refugee house, wrote:

> All the refugees there are women and children. You can go and have a look. Whether they are yellow-faced young mothers still breast-feeding their infants, or sickly older women whose hair is already very thin, or malnourished pale young girls—as soon as you ask them you will find out that they are all women workers who, under enemy fire, have fled from the Japanese cotton mills.
>
> Among these people there is a group of young girls who are 12 or 13 to about 17 years old. They especially attract people's attention. Some look like their hands have never been washed. Some have bound feet. At a glance one can tell that they have only recently come from the village to the city. If you try to talk to them they won't open their mouths. They are afraid you are going to trick them. These girls are all contract laborers.[83]

This time the Shanghai Municipal Council was alarmed by the condition of these young women, conducted investigations of its own, and ultimately concluded that

> there is nothing contrary to law in an entrepreneur undertaking to obtain work for another and being remunerated for this service. The custom is widespread in China. There is, however, something which calls for the attention of authorities when large groups of girls are removed from country surroundings and from the home of their parents (even if at the instigation of parents), and are placed in the control of another who profits unduly out of the work of the girls. Mill managers may not be aware that some of their employees are in the hands of middlemen. Entrepreneurs who go to the country often do so as an enterprise of their own. Though mill managers may not be a direct party to the poor conditions of lodging and poor food to which the girls are subject, they must nevertheless be aware of these. Whether the responsibility for conditions lies with the contractor or the mill management, it is obvious that a large group of adolescents are in a situation where they need the protection and supervision of authorities.[84]

During this time several women's organizations sponsored a meeting to develop a plan for rescuing those contract laborers who were at least temporarily free of their bosses. They first requested that all relief agencies investigate the numbers of contract laborers in the refugee houses, stressing that the girls should not be sent back to their villages because the bosses might come for them or their parents might sell them again. They proposed that the contract laborers be identified and then be gathered together in several refugee houses reserved especially for them, where they could be taken care of and provided some education. Those who attended this meeting even envisioned sending these girls, "who have neither family responsibilities nor the demands of rich material life," to the interior to do organizational work against the Japanese invaders.[85]

On a more sober note the members of the women's organizations realized that implementing these plans might be difficult. Housing, feeding, and educating the contract laborers

would require a large amount of money, which could not be obtained by soliciting contributions from a few people. More important was the fact that the contractors, even though they might have temporarily relinquished control over the girls owing to the circumstances of war, still wielded tremendous influence in the lower echelons of Shanghai society. Although the outbreak of hostilities may have been a temporary blow to the hoodlums operating in the cotton industry, their colleagues were making inroads in other sectors. News reports in late 1937 condemned the resurgence of racketeering along the Shanghai waterfront since the beginning of war and expressed concern that gangsters were expanding their sphere of influence to the Shanghai Municipal Council's pontoons along the Bund. "Here by duress," one article noted, "they have gained a monopoly on the wharf coolie labor market and are charging exorbitant rates for working cargo. The danger of violence has frightened away other coolie labor."[86] No one expected the labor bosses to readily give up their power; nor did anyone doubt that they would strongly resist any attempts to eliminate their influence in the mills.

THE MILL OWNERS ATTACK

The Shanghai Municipal Council and women's organizations were not the only ones trying to eliminate the contractors. In many cases the mill managers themselves sought to make the most of the retreat of the contractors to undermine their power. The best-publicized campaign by the managers against them took place at the British-owned mills, which had reputedly had one of the largest concentrations of contract laborers. The managers had actually succeeded in replacing the contract system with "direct employment" in the spring of 1937 at the smallest of their mills. The procedure had not been easy: their initial efforts resulted in two successive strikes. The workers, who appeared to be striking against the elimination of the contract system, were presumably induced to strike by the bribes or threats of the contractors. Ultimately the company succeeded in replacing the contractors with a labor manager it hired to take direct responsibility for hiring workers.[87]

Successfully instituting a modern, professional management system did not necessarily ensure that the labor bosses would be kept at bay. "Even where it would appear that a more modern arrangement exists," Eleanor Hinder wrote in 1942,

> where there is a personnel department with an employment manager directly in the employ of the company, the management may not be a completely free agent in the handling of its affairs. A "gang" may influence the relations between the employer and his workers. There may be in the district a gang leader, a *lao tou-zi*, or "old head," with considerable authority. If there is a difference between the management and the workers, the management may have to accept the mediation of the *lao tou-zi*, who may even be responsible for having fostered the dispute. Moreover the management may have to employ workers whom the *lao tou-zi* sees fit to recommend. The *lao tou-zi* may be powerful within a trade instead of a district. For example, the real employment manager of several large textile mills in the Settlement is stated to be one *lao tou-zi*. The personnel managers and even the management of these enterprises appear to bow to the influence of this powerful "boss."[88]

Under these circumstances, it did not seem to matter that a mill ostensibly employed its workers through a contract work (*baogongzhi*) system or a modern personnel department; nor did it seem to matter whether the factory was owned by Chinese, Japanese, or British capitalists. They all used contract laborers at certain times. The only difference was whether or not the management knew about the system. When all hiring and firing and wage paying was in the hands of a foreman, the managers might not have known. When it was under the direction of a personnel department, they probably did know but were powerless to eradicate the system.

The contract labor system appears to have been at its zenith in the years before the War of Resistance, but as long as the gang continued to wield power, the system could not be destroyed. No investigations of the contract labor system were conducted between 1937 and Liberation, and there are absolutely no figures suggesting the numbers of women workers still owned by the bosses after this date. But reports of scattered cases continued to appear. The recollections of contract laborers published after Liberation include accounts of women recruited in the late thirties and early forties. The Japanese invasion certainly produced circumstances conducive to the persistence of the system—poverty, the destruction of the

outlying areas, and thousands of orphans left to the care of whoever would take them. An overwhelming majority of cases turned over by the police to the Child Protection Section of the Shanghai Municipal Council were those of orphaned children with nearly identical histories: "Parents died in the war. The child was taken by a neighbor and sold."[89]

There are accounts of women contracted even after the war. That these were not merely isolated cases is suggested by a general survey of Shanghai's social conditions published in 1948. The section about women laborers consists of little besides a discussion of the contract labor system, which appeared to be operating exactly as it had in the thirties. "This kind of contract labor system for women workers, all the way up to the present, has continued to exist," the 1948 survey reported. "But because the factory authorities and unions are trying to make reforms, the number of women involved is beginning to gradually decrease."[90]

Regardless of the descriptions by earlier writers, then, contract labor is not a system that was prevalent in the early twenties before being destroyed during the workers' uprisings of 1925-27, to reappear only occasionally. It can be seen as a product of the May Thirtieth Movement but, again, not for the reasons that others have suggested. Although mill managers may have sought to undermine the labor movement by employing these well-controlled workers, the significance in this context of the workers' movement, beginning May 30, 1925, is that mill owners opted for an alliance with the Green Gang in order to control the workers. As a result the gang emerged with unprecedented power.

This power developed just when mill owners were trying desperately to eliminate outdated management systems (see Chapter Four); it was an era when trade journals seemed obsessed with introducing the modern management techniques being used in the United States and Japan. Yet the managers were in the stranglehold of the gang, to whom they remained indebted. The contractors, at the height of their power controlling as much as two-thirds of the female cotton mill workforce, made the development of a free labor market unimagin-

able. The capitalists were no more free to buy the labor they chose than the workers were to sell it.

The significance of the contract labor system hence is not that it represents a system of extraordinary exploitation resulting from foreign domination of the cotton industry. Rather it represents the vulnerability of both women workers and mill owners, Chinese as well as foreign, to the Shanghai Green Gang.

7. Interview with Gu Lianying, Shanghai, Apr. 24, 1980.
8. Interview with He Ningzhen, Shanghai, May 6, 1981.
9. Interview with Gu Lianying. The YWCA schools were one of the few institutions that brought together women from different places. In the schools, Jiangnan, Shanghai, and Subei women not only attended class but also participated together in discussions, outings, meetings, singing, and drama.
10. Interview with retired mill workers, Shanghai No. 2 Textile Mill, Oct. 25, 1980.
11. *North-China Herald*, Nov. 3, 1928.
12. *Shen Bao*, Jan. 4, 1930.
13. Interview with Gu Lianying.
14. Ibid.
15. Interviews with Xu Shumei; Zhu Fanu, Shanghai, Oct. 11, 1982; and Xi Peiyu, Shanghai, Sept. 20, 1982.
16. SSKJY, *Rongjia*, vol. 1, p. 139.
17. Interview with Zhu Fanu.
18. Morris, pp. 135-36.
19. For a description of earlier attempts to implement this system, see SSKJY, *Rongjia*, vol. 1, p. 336, and *Yongan*, p. 91.
20. Zhongguo fangzhi, *Diliu chang lukan*, p. 253.
21. Interview with retired mill managers at Putuo District Federation of Industry and Commerce.
22. For example, at the Shanghai No. 1 Mill, of the 102 apprentices recruited in the first group, 12 percent were from Shanghai, 28 percent from Yancheng, 12 percent from Wuxi, and 12 percent from Wujin. See Zhongguo fangzhi, *Shanghai diyi chang*, p. 91.
23. Interview with Xu Hongmei.
24. "Women zai gongchang" (We Are in the Factory), *Funu*, 3 (1947), no. 10: 17.
25. Ibid.
26. Zhongguo fangzhi, *Diliu chang gaikuang*.
27. Interview with Li Youying, Shanghai, Nov. 20, 1980.
28. Ibid.
29. Zhongguo fangzhi, *Diliu chang lukan*.
30. Ibid.
31. "Women zai gongchang" (We Are in the Factory), *Funu*, 3 (1947), no. 10: 17.
32. Interview with Li Youying.
33. Zhongguo fangzhi, *Diliu chang lukan*, p. 263.
34. Ibid.
35. Interview with Yan Ke.

CHAPTER 5

1. Xia, pp. 42-48.
2. Cora Deng, "Contract Labour Dormitory," p. 1.

3. Chen Hansheng.
4. Xue, pp. 172-74. Xue notes that the business of marketing young boys was referred to as "moving stones."
5. See, for example, Shan, pp. 22-23.
6. *North-China Herald*, Mar. 20, 1935.
7. SSKJY, *Yongan*, p. 87.
8. Cora Deng, "Contract Labour Dormitory," p. 3.
9. Xia, pp. 30-32. Also see SSKJY, *Rongjia*, vol. 1, p. 578; SSKJY, *Yongan*, pp. 88-89; *Shen Bao*, May 12 and 22, 1930.
10. Xu and Wang; Cole.
11. Of the 27 contracted girls whose cases were investigated by the Shanghai Municipal Council in 1937, "the majority—22—were in age between 15 and 19 years when they commenced work; two were between 10 and 14 years, and there were three above 19 years." Shanghai Municipal Council, *1938*, p. 41. This distribution is corroborated by Xia and by the oral histories in *Baoshengongde xueleichou*. Also see *Baoshengongde chouhen*.
12. Interview with Zhang Xiaomei, Shanghai, Feb. 25, 1981.
13. *Baoshengongde xueleichou*, pp. 44-45.
14. Zhu and Mei, pt. 2, p. 118.
15. Xia, pp. 44-45; *Baoshengongde xueleichou*.
16. Gronewold, p. 37.
17. Xu Xingzhi, "Baohuoxiade baoshengong" (Contract Labor Under Fire), *Zhanshi helian xunkan* (1937), no. 4: 140.
18. SSKJY, *Rongjia*, vol. 1, p. 581. A similar contract is reproduced in Simine Wang, p. 18.
19. *Baoshengongde chouhen*, p. 39.
20. SSKJY, *Yongan*, p. 88. Of the 27 girls investigated by the Shanghai Municipal Council in its 1937 study, 24 had contracts of two years, and 3 had contracts of three years. Payments ranged from $25 to $45. Shanghai Municipal Council, *1938*, p. 41.
21. SSKJY, *Rongjia*, vol. 1, p. 243.
22. Shanghai Municipal Council, *1938*, p. 41; Sun Baoshan, p. 431.
23. Interview with Zhang Xiaomei.
24. *Baoshengongde chouhen*, p. 39.
25. Interview with Zhang Xiaomei.
26. *Baoshengongde xueleichou*, p. 44.
27. *Baoshengongde chouhen*, pp. 12-13, 40.
28. *Baoshengongde xueleichou*, p. 44.
29. Jiu Zhongguode, p. 171.
30. *Shen Bao*, Apr. 28, 1930.
31. Shan, pp. 22-23.
32. SSKJY, *Rongjia*, vol. 1, p. 577; *Pengyou*, 1 (1938), no. 6: 2; "Shachang gongrenzhongde baoshenzhi" (Contract Labor Among Cotton Mill Workers), *Fangzhi zhoukan*, 2 (1932), no. 19: 472-73. Although it has often been asserted that contract workers were paid as much as 40 percent less than other workers, there is no evidence that this was the case.
33. *Baoshengongde xueleichou*, p. 51.

34. SSKJY, *Rongjia*, vol. 1, p. 597.
35. *Baoshengongde xueleichou*, p. 47.
36. Zhong, p. 45.
37. Xia, pp. 2-5.
38. Cora Deng, "Contract Labour Dormitory," p. 3.
39. Sun Baoshan, p. 469; Cora Deng, "Contract Labour Dormitory," p. 2; SSKJY, *Rongjia*, vol. 1, p. 578.
40. Xia, p. 50; Sun Baoshan, p. 431; Shanghai Municipal Council, *1938*, pp. 41-42. At the Shen Xin No. 9 Textile Mill, the management required after 1937 that contract workers eat lunch at the mill cafeteria for *yangcheng-gong*. It cost $4 per person per month. See Zhu Bangxing et al., p. 79.
41. *Pengyou*, 1 (1938), no. 6: 2.
42. *Shen Bao*, July 15, 1934. In this case the contractor was taken to court by the girl's uncle and charged with having violated Section 240 of the legal code, which made the use of force to destroy the virginity of a girl who had not yet completed puberty a crime.
43. *Shen Bao*, Aug. 26, 1930.
44. SSKJY, *Rongjia*, vol. 1, p. 577-78.
45. Shanghai Municipal Council, *1939*, p. 58.
46. Sun Baoshan, p. 469.
47. Shanghai Municipal Council, *1938*, pp. 41-42.
48. *Baoshengongde xueleichou*, p. 59.
49. "Wode baofan shenghuo" (My Life as a Contract Worker), *Nu qingnian yuekan*, 15 (1934), no. 4: 23-24.
50. "Chinese Labor and the Contract System," *People's Tribune*, 5 (1933), no. 8: 410. Also see Sun Baoshan, p. 469.
51. Interview with Zhang Xiaomei.
52. Xia, pp. 33-34.
53. Shanghai Municipal Council, *1939*, p. 58. Unfortunately the details of this study are not available.
54. Interview with He Zhiguang; Cora Deng, "Contract Labour Dormitory," p. 1; Sun Baoshan, p. 470.
55. Luo Chuanhua, p. 271.
56. SSKJY, *Rongjia*, vol. 1, pp. 576, 579-80; *Jiu Zhongguode*, p. 171.
57. Cora Deng, "Contract Labour Dormitory," p. 4.
58. Shindo, p. 42.
59. Shunzo, p. 498.
60. Ibid.
61. Ibid., p. 491.
62. Torgasheff; also see Wright.
63. "Contract System for Chinese Dockers," ILO China correspondent, Monthly Report, Nov. 1932 (ILO Archives, Geneva).
64. Odell, pp. 163-64. When, after World War I, ICMC was bought by the British firm Arnhold Brothers Co. and became the Oriental Cotton Spinning and Weaving Co., a similar system of contract work was employed. "In the Oriental Cotton Mill we use a labor contractor," the director of the mill wrote to the British consul in 1925. "This contractor employs a number of Number One women, who have charge of a number of frames and who engage the necessary labor." See H. Arnhold to Consul Brenan, Aug. 4, 1925, in Great Britain Foreign Office, pp. 20-21.
65. SSKJY, *Hengfeng*, p. 7.
66. *Xin qingnian*, 7 (1920), no. 6: 1-41.
67. This system did not become widespread until after World War II, when almost all cotton mills in Shanghai set up worker training bureaus for young women workers (see Chapter Four). In the mid-1920's several such bureaus were established. These fledgling institutions resembled neither the training bureaus of a later date nor the contract labor system, although all three are often perceived, erroneously, as one phenomenon.
68. SSKJY, *Yongan*, p. 91; materials provided by the Institute for Historical Research, Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences.
69. Tang Hai; Udaka; Chen Da; RSCLC; and Ma Zhaojun.
70. Isaacs, *Five Years*, p. 93.
71. Y. C. Wang, pp. 433-35.
72. Ibid.
73. Interview with He Zhiguang.
74. *North-China Herald*, Feb. 16, 1929.
75. Interview with Chen Shulu, Shanghai, Nov. 19, 1980.
76. Coble.
77. "Shachang gongrenzhong zhi baoshenzhi" (The Contract Labor System Among Cotton Mill Workers), *Fangzhi zhoukan*, 2 (1932), no. 19: 472.
78. Ibid., pp. 472-73.
79. *North-China Herald*, Apr. 12, 1932. At this point these mills were only employing 3,000 out of the normal 25,000 hands.
80. Xia, p. 21.
81. Sun Baoshan, p. 472. The authors of *Jiu Zhongguode* estimate that at the time of the Japanese attack in 1932, half the 48,000 workers in Japanese-owned mills were contract workers. That would amount to 24,000 workers in the Japanese mills alone (over twice the estimate made by Sun for all the mills). No source is given for this figure.
82. "Baoshenzhixia zhi Shanghai ri shachang nugong" (Women Workers Under the Contract Labor System in the Japanese Cotton Mills in Shanghai), *Guoji laogong tongxun*, 4 (1937), no. 7: 54-55.
83. "Shourongsuolide baoshengong" (Contract Workers in the Refugee Houses), *Zhanshi funu* (1937), no. 2: 2.
84. Shanghai Municipal Council, *1938*, p. 40.
85. Wang Ruyi, "Zai wei baoshengong hujiu" (A Further Appeal for Contract Workers), *Zhanshi funu* (1937), no. 7: 2-3.
86. *North-China Herald*, Nov. 10, 1937.
87. Ibid.
88. Hinder, p. 30.
89. Shanghai Municipal Council, *1939*, p. 54.
90. Du, pt. 3, p. 75.

CHAPTER 6

1. The description of this exhibit is based on a personal visit and on the exhibit's display labels, reprinted in SSKLY, *Wusa yundong*, pp. 212-31.
2. See, for example, *Zui ede jiu shehui*; *Jiu Zhongguode*.