

**Double Movement under State Socialism:
The Political Life of “Shengchan” and “Shenghuo” in China (1949-1992)**

Yige Dong

Abstract (474 words)

A growing body of scholarship on “primitive socialist accumulation” has shown that despite their claimed radical departure from capitalism, historical communist regimes shared the same feature of their antithesis. While upholding values that protected “the social”—a source of legitimacy of the revolution—these communist states oftentimes pushed for rapid industrial accumulation at the cost of livelihoods of the masses. The People’s Republic of China (PRC) under state socialism (1949-1992) was no exception. However, instead of industrial production taking precedence over social redistribution all the time, the relationship between the two has undergone volatile changes in tandem with the country’s tumultuous political economy.

Combining national level data and local cases, this paper traces the political life of the two categories, that is, industrial production (*shengchan*) and workers’ livelihood (*shenghuo*), from the founding of the PRC to the final years of state socialism. While both terms referred to economic activities in pre-industrial contexts, they started to carry new meanings in the first decades of the twentieth century when China was embarking on its initial capitalist industrialization. Whereas the connotation of *shengchan* expanded from agricultural production to the industrial sector, the meaning of *shenghuo* gradually transformed from “means of living” to “ways of living” or “life.” Then, during the first years after the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) took power and attempted to monopolize industrial production, it juxtaposed the two categories, aligned them with industrial production and social reproduction respectively, and ultimately institutionalized the binary through building the *danwei* system—an idiosyncratic enterprise model where the employer took charge of both production and workers’ welfare services and social life.

Over the years, rather than crystallizing a hierarchical relationship between *shengchan* and *shenghuo*, the party-state enacted these categories according to its ever-changing agenda. When seeking popular support from the masses, the state emphasized the importance of *shenghuo*, reminding people that the party was the sole agent capable of bringing about a new and better life for everyone. However, when mass demands for improved quality of life seemed to spiral out of control, the party-state quickly applied the brakes, arguing that “a good life would not be possible without hard work in the first place.” These pendular shifts in the party’s rhetoric occurred during each round of economic campaigns from the 1950s to the 1980s.

Interpreting and reinterpreting these terms and negotiating their boundaries with the state, the masses further legitimized their demands for a better quality of life against the backdrop of extreme scarcity under Mao’s reign. By the mid-1980s, the tension between *shengchan* and *shenghuo* reached a peak. State-led market reforms prioritized accumulation more than ever, while the masses harbored unprecedented enthusiasm for material and social benefits. This unintended chasm ultimately paved the way for deeper crises within the socialist labor system and defined new forms of social inequalities as China transitioned to capitalism in the 1990s.