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Meet the State Security:

Chinese Labour Activists and Their Controllers

Ivan Franceschini

Chinese labour NGOs have to deal with several state bodies. Still, given their reliance on foreign funding and the political sensitivity of labour issues in China, the agency they have the most dealings with is probably State Security, a secretive branch of the public security apparatus charged with protecting the country from domestic political threats. How do labour activists manage to navigate this challenging terrain?

A slightly different version of this essay will appear in Jane Golley and Luigi Tomba (eds.), *China Story Yearbook 2016: Control*, ANU Press, Canberra, 2017 (forthcoming).

O'Brien was a person who could be talked to. Perhaps one did not want to be loved so much as to be understood. O'Brien had tortured him to the edge of lunacy, and in a little while, it was certain, he would send him to his death. It made no difference. In some sense that went deeper than friendship, they were intimates: somewhere or other, although the actual words might never be spoken, there was a place where they could meet and talk.

George Orwell, 1984

Chinese labour NGOs have to deal with several state bodies. When they are properly registered as social organisations, they fall under the supervision of the departments of civil affairs; in carrying out activities among workers they often find themselves face to face with the police; in addressing workers' grievances they communicate with labour offices. Still, given their reliance on foreign funding and the political sensitivity of labour issues in China, the agency they have the most dealings with is probably the State Security (*guobao*), a secretive branch of the public

security apparatus charged with protecting the country from domestic political threats.

I still remember my first meeting with an agent of the State Security. It was back in December 2010 and I had gone to the office of a relatively little-known labour NGO in the suburbs of Shenzhen to interview some activist there. When I arrived, I found a plump, bespectacled man of around forty waiting for me. Nobody thought about introducing him and he definitely did not make an effort to make himself familiar: for me, he was only ‘Mister Wang’. Sitting in silence in a corner, he wrote down everything I was saying in a notebook. He was a very destabilising presence. Not only did I not know what I should say and what I should avoid, but I was also worried about the potential problems that I was causing for my hosts.

My second brush with the State Security came some time later, and it was much more worrying. While I was back in Italy for a few weeks, some *guobao* officials tracked down one of my former collaborators and interrogated him at length about my activities and whereabouts. I heard much later that they were particularly interested in how I spent money: did I often rent expensive cars? Did I throw money around? He protested that I was so stingy that I always insisted on taking a bus even when doing interviews in some faraway suburb—which was true—and the matter seemed to rest there. In fact, being a foreigner, I had little reason to fear the consequences of these encounters: at worst, they would deny me a visa, or expel me from the country. But that encounter made me wonder about those Chinese labour activists who have to deal with the security forces of the Chinese state on a regular basis. How do they navigate this challenging terrain and manage their affairs?

Sticks...

As with other civil society activists,

invitations to ‘have a cup of tea’ (*he cha*) with State Security officials are one of the most common occurrences in the life of a Chinese labour activist. These encounters generally do not entail physical violence, as they serve a twofold purpose. On the one hand, officials seek information about the activities of labour NGOs—such as recent contacts with foreigners and any new sources of funding. On the other, they use the meetings to warn, inform or remind activists about boundaries that they must not cross if they want to avoid severe repercussions. From this point of view, these gatherings can be considered mutually beneficial: the Chinese party-state gets to remind labour activists that they are under surveillance, while activists benefit from a direct line to the authorities and are able to avoid unnecessary risks. For instance, a labour activist in East China told me that when he set up his organisation ‘[the people from the State Security] came to me several times. First, they established a base line (*dixian*) and a framework (*kuangjia*), warning me to stay within these boundaries. They said that if I did that, all would be good, that I would even be helping the government and the country. If, on the contrary, I crossed that line, for instance by telling foreigners some things that I shouldn’t say about our country or our government... that would have meant real trouble.’

Still, promises are occasionally broken and these encounters do not always go so smoothly. The highest echelons of the party-state tend to consider labour NGOs to be covert agents of ‘hostile foreign forces’ eager to wreak havoc in China, a narrative that has gained much more currency under Xi Jinping. Agents of the State Security may also resort to psychological intimidation and other tactics to persuade labour activists to cease their work. In the past few years, *guobao* officials have repeatedly pressured landlords to evict NGOs from their premises. They have also liaised with other branches of the party-state—such as those in charge of family

planning, tax or social security bureaus, as well as universities, etc.—to harass the activists and their families. They have even intervened behind the scenes to freeze bank accounts or prevent people from leaving the country. As an activist in southern China told me in November 2014: ‘In the past, they didn’t provoke us, nor did we provoke them. Basically, what we had back then could not even be called repression. Usually, they just knew about the existence of our organisation and there were often people from the government who came to talk with us.... But these last few years have been quite different, they have started to harass us directly.’

While life for Chinese labour activists has never been easy, 2016 has been a horrible year for Chinese labour NGOs. As regular readers of *Made in China* will surely know, the latest wave of repression started in December 2015, when the Chinese authorities rounded up dozens of labour activists in Guangdong and then charged five of them for ‘gathering a crowd to disrupt public order’ and ‘embezzlement’. This coincided with a particularly difficult time for Chinese civil society, with the closure of many NGOs working on social issues and the arrest or outright disappearance of several public interest lawyers. On that occasion, the party-state singled out Zeng Feiyang, leader of a pioneering labour NGO in Guangzhou, targeting him in an unprecedented campaign to smear his reputation in the national media. A series of **devastating reports** accused Zeng of embezzling funding illegally obtained from foreigners and of acting out of personal greed, without any regard for the actual interests of the workers. To further destroy his credibility, he was also accused of several instances of sexual misconduct.

Zeng pleaded guilty and was sentenced to three years of imprisonment—suspended for four years—for ‘gathering a crowd to disrupt public order’, while two of his colleagues received prison sentences of eighteen months—suspended for two years—for the same crime. Meng Han, another activist in the

same organisation, refused to cooperate. Only after the repeated harassment of his parents, did he finally capitulate and plead guilty, and was sentenced to twenty-one months in jail. Zeng’s admission of guilt at the trial was quoted in full by the **Chinese media**: ‘I apologise for the losses that my criminal actions have caused to companies, society, and workers, and I express deep sorrow for the enormous wounds that I have inflicted on my family. I hope that everybody will take me as a warning and that they will not be fooled by any foreign organisation, [keeping in mind] that they must resort to legal means and channels to protect their rights and interests.’

...and Carrots

The relationship between labour activists and their controllers is not always so thorny. I still remember my surprise when, about five years ago, an activist I used to know quite well told me that while he was recovering from surgery, the State Security official in charge of his surveillance had visited him in the hospital. Wishing him a speedy recovery, the *guobao* had brought flowers and they had engaged in amicable conversation. The activist explained that, since this official had been his ‘supervisor’ for quite some time, they had almost become friends, regularly exchanging greetings and wishes on all major Chinese festivals.

Such ambiguous feelings are not so surprising considering that some activists are supervised by the same officials for years. These relationships may also offer some perks. As one activist in southern China recently told me: ‘We can say that they are old acquaintances... On the surface they are friendly, but in fact we don’t really know what they think about us, we just tell them what we have to... Sometimes they also offer us some gifts [like shopping coupons], which obviously we don’t accept... But it seems that in recent years they have become poorer, they

don't have as much money as before.'

In some cases, less scrupulous activists have exploited their connections to the State Security as leverage in their relationship with foreign donors. In 2009 and 2010, I was working as a manager on a project in partnership with a local labour NGO that turned out to be quite notorious for its record of fake activities and inflated invoices. When I refused to reimburse an obviously dodgy expenditure, the leader of the NGO hinted that he would say something rather unpleasant about me in his next meeting with the authorities. On another occasion, someone who had been fired from the same organisation decided to seek compensation directly from the foreign donor, threatening to talk with his 'friends' in the security apparatus if he did not get what he wanted.

Peter Dahlin, a Swedish citizen, confessing to inciting opposition to the government on the Chinese national television.

What next?

Control over NGOs is increasing, and so is repression, and this extends to foreigners who are involved with them. In the past couple of years, a few expats in China with ties to foreign and local NGOs have been detained, with one of them—**Peter Dahlin**, a Swedish citizen—even being paraded on national television in early 2016 to confess to

inciting 'opposition to the government'. But it is Chinese activists who bear the brunt of the ire of the party-state. Labour activists, as well as human rights lawyers, are among those most at risk in the current political climate. Even more worrying than brutal repression is the recent adoption of a whole series of new laws and regulations aimed at bringing civil society under control. Most notably among these is the new Foreign NGOs Law, effective from 1 January 2017, which basically cuts off any access to financial support from abroad for NGOs active in sensitive fields.

Almost all the labour activists that I have encountered in the past few months say that they are willing to keep up the fight, undeterred. At the same time, however, they cannot help but wonder how they will be able to survive as their sources of financial support quickly dry up, and even finding enough money to pay their staff or the rent has become problematic. A few months ago, for the first time in many years of regular encounters with labour activists, I was asked by the leader of a once-prominent NGO now in serious financial troubles to help by sending some funding—'really, any amount counts'—to an account opened under the name of one of his friends. If this is going to be the 'new normal' under Xi Jinping's tenure, then activists might start reminiscing about the golden age when the most that State Security did was to invite you for a cup of tea.

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