

Learning to Labour in China

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Abstract

This article offers analysis of the Chinese reception and adoption of Paul Willis's landmark book, *Learning to Labour*. Specifically, we recount the early introduction and translation of the book to Chinese readers and catalogue the ways in which *Learning to Labour* has been fruitfully applied in China, while highlighting some shortcomings in terms of the generalized Chinese interpretation of the text in translation. Despite these potential shortcomings and gaps in translation, we note the influence of *Learning to Labour* and its author Paul Willis on the growing interest in and commitment to ethnographic work in China and discuss its potential for increased application and relevance moving forward.

Keywords

Learning to Labour, cultural production, class, class reproduction, distinction, China, sociology of China, sociology of education, social theory, Paul Willis

Introduction

A brief history of the last 40 years

The publication of this special issue coincides not only with the 40th anniversary of Willis's landmark analysis of cultural production and class formation in working-class British schools, but also with the 40th anniversary of the resumption of the *Gaokao*,¹ the Chinese college entry exam, as part of a series of policies that brought an end to the suspension of secondary and post-secondary education in China

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during the Cultural Revolution. At the same time, this era has been one of rebirth for sociology in China, following the reestablishment of the Chinese Sociological Association in 1979, which had been banned since 1952 when Mao's government decried sociology as a 'bourgeois' threat to socialism (Bian and Zhang, 2008). This timeframe has also largely overlapped with a period of economic liberalizations and political reforms known as the 'Reform and Opening Up';² as such, the era itself is often referred to as the 'Reform Era'. Though this era has seen a massive increase in wealth accumulation across most segments of Chinese society, this accumulation has been lopsided both socially and geographically, leading to spiralling inequality. The beginning of the Reform and Opening Up marked the end of an era of economically destructive and culturally repressive policies that, in pursuit of the establishment of a classless society, violently upended social class hierarchies viewed as vestiges of imperial and feudal oppression. This new shift further disrupted newer class structures privileging those with working-class family backgrounds – especially workers, soldiers and 'peasants' – that had begun to take shape under Mao's earlier post-revolutionary social and economic reforms.

This current Reform Era began at a time when the country had been reduced to such a state of poverty that inequality was, at least temporarily, at its historical nadir (Li, 2013; Lin and Wu, 2010). It has thus been one of social sorting and class crystallization emergent from the now discarded but once violently pursued Maoist vision of a classless society. The massive social and cultural upheaval of the era has been experienced as a double dislocation, a boomerang journey of cultural disorientation and class reorganization coming on the heels of another significant, if countervailing, period of economic and cultural upheaval in the period that preceded it from 1949 to 1976, which itself encompassed the violent double act drama of political revolution (1949) and reform, and the purges and class struggle of its denouement in the Cultural Revolution (roughly 1966 to 1976). And yet, although China's last four decades may seem tame in comparison with the three that preceded them, in terms of social change and class reproduction at least, they have been, by some measures, even more dislocating.

It is all the more fitting, then, that we examine the relevance of *Learning to Labour* in China over this time period. Willis's seminal text examines schooling as a driver of class reproduction in late-industrial England, and offers an ethnographic lens into the complexities of class and culture and the roles they played in the establishment of institutionalized inequality during the industrial era in England, at a time of grave economic uncertainty as this period was drawing to a close. Meanwhile, the 40 years since its original publication have seen the same processes of industrialization transplanted from developed nations like England to fast industrializing nations like China, with benefits for many, but also sometimes catastrophic social consequences in terms of growing inequality realized in the form of economic distinction and class disambiguation – a related but contextually distinct process to the one that played out over several centuries of industrialization in the West – magnified exponentially by China's massive scale and turbocharged by the social and bureaucratic technologies of globalization. As industrial economic

growth begins to slow at last after 40 years, sparking new cultural and economic anxieties, *Learning to Labour* is all the more relevant as a potential window into China's current historical moment, and a useful lens onto the current state of Chinese schooling especially. The book is gaining increasing recognition in China as a text useful to help scholars better understand the cultural, social and economic ramifications of educational policy decisions made over the last 40 years. Contemporary China, likewise, offers new relevance and possibilities for scholarly engagement with Willis's now classic text.

Learning to Labour in the current policy context

Alongside massive political and economic changes, the last 40 years have seen a significant shift in discourse as well. Under Maoist high socialism, the articulation of class differences was at the forefront of not just scholarly but official and general public discourse, all while actual opportunities for economic and educational differentiation were increasingly minimal with most schools closed and China's economy in tatters by the end of the Cultural Revolution (Qu and Fan, 2011). Today, while inequality is at its highest point in modern Chinese history and differential access to schooling is a pressing public issue across segments of society, official discourse often plays down or ignores the complex class-based fracturing of Chinese society. This context makes *Learning to Labour* all the more necessary, yet complicates its reception politically. Likewise, while numerous Chinese policy papers and scholarly articles have turned their attention to unequal educational access (Gao and Deng, 2010; Hou, 2015; Li, 2014; Shi, 2015; Tang, 2015; Xiong, 2007; DP Yang, 2006; WW Yang, 2014; Yu, 2002; Zhang and LV, 2008; Zhu and Wang 2005), only a few have sought to draw direct connections between these issues and China's emergent class structure (Luo, 2009; Lv, 2006; Xiong, 2010a, 2010b; Xiong and Liu, 2013; Zhou, 2011a, 2011b).

China has undergone a dizzying period of cultural and economic upheaval since *Learning to Labour* was first published 40 years ago, one that is now beginning to crystalize into set pathways of class-based inequality. While such pathways are quite different and arguably less entrenched than in the careers of working-class Midland schoolboys that Willis chronicled in his book, the ethnographic analysis he employed in articulating the relationship between class, schooling, and culture is arguably as critical to understanding China's emergent class structure today as it was in England in the late 1970s. Chinese scholars are beginning to take note.

This paper chronicles some of these nascent efforts, charting the burgeoning influence of *Learning to Labour* in China, especially since its recent official translation into Mandarin for mainland Chinese publication (Willis, 2013), looking forward towards the most fruitful uses of the book and the broader Willisian analytical approach to come. Ideally this growing relevance and influence will not be unidirectional; the goal of this paper is not merely to highlight the ways in which a landmark example of Western cultural analysis can better inform Chinese ethnographic and cultural studies in education, but also the ways in

which China's increasingly rich ethnographic offerings can inform and broaden culturally narrow understandings of class, reproduction and cultural analysis within the Western canon.

Difficulties applying Willis's theories in China: A note about translation

To understand the influence of any Western work of contemporary cultural sociology in China, especially one concerned with the production or distinction of social classes, one must understand the complicated and sometimes paradoxical vocabulary of social class in China, as used and understood in both popular and academic discourse. The language of social class employed by academics in the West is somewhat specialized in terms of the influence of foundational sociologists like Marx and Weber, and the subsequent schools of thought emergent from their work. While the various specialized vocabularies emergent from these authors have spawned complex semantic and theoretical debates in terms of their usage and deployment – debates that are ongoing and unsettled in some cases, yet inextricable from the core discourses of the contemporary social sciences in many cases – the deployment of such language has for the most part evolved in a distinct sphere, or field, litigated and legislated by a professional class of academics in a way that isolates the conversation and even the very meanings of the words used from the general public.

To be sure, there are problematic aspects to the long evolutions of divergent vocabularies of class between professional and public discourse in the West, related to social closure and boundary maintenance and especially the continued linguistic and ontological distancing of scholars of the working class from their intended interlocutors. However, despite the hyper-specialized distinctions among academic fields and subfields related to these aforementioned debates, the professional value, or at least the practiced efficiency, of the continued deployment of such specialized vocabulary is the implicit understanding of, at least, a shared starting point of meaning or interpretation among peers, a presumed universal referent, obviating the need to continually re-legislate foundational concepts for the purposes of their empirical deployment.

When attempting to ascertain the received value of such works in translation, one naturally begins with the presumption that foreign readers are operating from the perspective of a similarly shared referent. However, even when the selected language shares a similar etymology, in this case the shared class-based vocabulary of Marx, one must still consider the potentially insurmountable distance such etymologies have travelled in terms of accumulated social and professional valences over years of contextual evolution. As such, one must also consider that while the philosophical vocabulary of Marx and his peers provided the seed of Western academic discourse on social class as practiced today, such language can barely be said to be relevant in public discussions of social class or related discourses within the non-academic subfields of the public sphere.

Much the opposite, however, is true in China. As a nominally socialist republic, common vocabulary related to economics and social class continues to be

grounded in language derived from readings of Marx in translation. Likewise, high school and university students of all disciplines continue to receive a steady exposure to Marx in required political study courses. And yet, just as the government continues to enshrine Marxism and its related vocabulary as an inviolable linguistic symbol of their historical legacy and current legitimacy, in practice this language has been divorced from empirical applications or evolved thinking related to ongoing debates about the nature of class and culture. Indeed, to attempt to make such distinctions can even be politically dangerous, as it threatens government hegemony over such narratives, and especially in the case of Marx, the very legitimacy of the ruling Communist Party itself as both sole heir and arbiter of this legacy and its associated meanings. Thus, the associated vocabulary of class and culture remains similarly trapped in amber, both in popular and academic contexts, as the theories and texts from which they are derived have become talismanic and unimpeachable, isolated from broader debates; likewise, these related vocabularies have been geographically isolated in translation, disconnected from their elastically evolved meanings as practiced in the Western academy. All of this is to illustrate that, because of significant political and historical differences, the language used by Paul Willis in his original manuscript, even when perfectly translated, may evoke completely different conceptual referents than he intended and thus be interpreted, understood and especially employed in a somewhat different manner than expected from those not reading the work in translation.

Thus, the reception and influence of works such as *Learning to Labour*, with their at least partial groundings in the evolved and elastic discourses of Marxism and neo-Marxism, and especially their professionalized deployment of related terms, must be considered in the context of their received translation. Translation is never perfect of course, but it is worth considering contemporary Chinese, especially as read by the contemporary mainland Chinese reader, as a uniquely problematic linguistic environment, where even the best possible semantic approximations of certain concepts relating to class and its effects on the production of culture – Willis's central concept – may evoke disparate, even conflicted meanings, in terms of the most likely interpretations and assumptions of Chinese readers, including researchers seeking to apply *Learning to Labour* to a Chinese context after reading it in translation. As such, we argue that the disparate political, cultural, linguistic and bureaucratic contexts that shape public policy debates and academic discourse relating to schooling in the People's Republic of China have led to difficulties for researchers interpreting, as well as applying, Willis's theories in China. One of the pivotal problems is the mis-adoption of the term 'class'.

We set out first in this paper to grapple with the difficulties analysts face when introducing and applying Willis's theories, discussing the sociological importance of the topic of class reproduction in research on contemporary China's educational system. We argue that most of the current work on this failed to resolve the concept of class, in terms of clearly defining the concept in sociological terms distinct from those absorbed via political rhetoric, properly operationalizing the term as a variable or ideal type for social research, or doing so in a way that is reconcilable with

the conception of class that Willis himself employed in *Learning to Labour*, thus making it somewhat difficult to assess their success in applying or critiquing his theories for use in the Chinese context.

Learning to Labour's Chinese reception

Three waves of reception

When discussing *Learning to Labour's* Chinese reception over the last 40 years, it is useful to organize our discussion in terms of three distinct eras of influence. The first wave is one of limited access and indirect influence, following the book's initial English-language publication, which nonetheless laid the groundwork for its eventual translation into Chinese. Early introduction of the book to Chinese readers mostly came by way of research and teaching by faculty members at China's various Normal Universities.³ Looking back at early publications citing *Learning to Labour*, the majority of these seem to represent sui generis discoveries, often by way of secondhand sources. Few of these authors engage at a deep theoretical level with the source material, or engage with each other in any sort of direct empirical or theoretical dialogue. As such, it is hard to chart a cohesive picture of *Learning to Labour's* early influence in China.

The second wave encompasses the broader spread of *Learning to Labour's* influence among other social science disciplines in China. The quality of engagement with *Learning to Labour* is much higher during this period, as researchers with greater exposure to the sorts of cultural analysis in which Willis himself was trained begin to engage with the book, a critical divergence from educational researchers likely attracted initially by the book's empirical focus. With a growing volume of interactions representing a more diverse set of theoretical and empirical interests, an emergent autonomous Chinese discourse on the book begins to take shape, beyond the isolated hub-and-spoke interactions of the preceding era, though such discourses remain clustered, largely isolated from each other both topically and theoretically.

The third, most recent, shortest but most significant wave – the current era – dates to the book's 2013 Chinese translation. This was followed shortly thereafter by Willis himself coming to China for a three-year appointment to the faculty of education at Beijing Normal University, where his influence spread further through a series of well-attended lectures and the mentorship of young researchers in his home department and beyond.

Wave one: Encounters in education studies

The first batch of scholars to introduce *Learning to Labour* within China mainly came from the related disciplines of pedagogy, or education studies, which is arguably broader, more inclusive and more influential field in China than in the West, owing to a preponderance of 'normal universities', including prestigious

national-level research institutions like Beijing Normal University, where Willis would go on to take a professorship following the Chinese publication of *Learning to Labour*.

According to the database CNKI,⁴ the earliest mention of *Learning to Labour* in Chinese academic literature appears in Xiaojie Tang's (1998) 'An Analysis of Western "Hidden Curriculum" Research' in *The Journal of East China Normal University*. Drawing on his early graduate school research, Tang explores the question, 'What is learned in school?' Much as Willis identified the key role of schools as sites of both curricular and extracurricular training for future class positions, Tang defines 'hidden curriculums' as sources of 'concomitant learning by the acquired experiences of students at school which shaped one's attitude, moral habits and life dreams', critical components of the Chinese schooling experience, stretching across two dimensions in his research. One of these hidden dimensions is curricular – the drafting of teaching materials and the manipulations of knowledge towards political ends. However, he focuses on an extracurricular or cultural dimension of learning as well, drawing inspiration from *Learning to Labour*.

While structural functionalism was arguably dominant in educational research about socialization and schooling outcomes at the time, Tang cites Willis's work among a number of 'radical' culturalist approaches offering important and useful alternatives to understanding the relationship between meaning making and outcomes in student careers as a necessary departure for researchers truly hoping to understand the role of culture in education. This call would only begin to be seriously taken up years later with the emergence of ethnography as a primary tool of educational researchers in China. Tang suggests that what Willis describes witnessing in Hammertown is conceptually, if not contextually – like many Chinese researchers, Tang worries that the vast differences in historical and cultural context delimit the usefulness of *Learning to Labour* as an empirically applicable lens on Chinese schooling – analogous to an entire extracurricular dimension of learning largely being ignored by Chinese educational researchers fixated on the positivistic assessment of school curriculums and learning materials. Indeed, in the type of policy-oriented search for progress and improvement – in this case to curriculums and learning materials – that has dominated much of Chinese social science research in the reform era (under the influence and in service of official narratives that privilege 'development', especially economic development, above all else), researchers had developed such a narrow vision of the empirical that they were completely ignoring an entire dimension of education beneath the surface, the 'hidden curriculum' of normative cultural learning, in Tang's words. In contrast to the structural functionalists especially, Willisian ethnography, with its burrowing empirical drill, offered a new technology for unlocking the rich veins of empirical data hidden beneath the surface of the sorts of materials focused on by most contemporaneous Chinese analysis.

Tang's paper is similar to many of the other early encounters with *Learning to Labour* from within education studies in terms of limited empirical and ethnographic scope (see Kang, 1997; Luo, 2003; Zhou, 2004). Yet, in engaging with

Willis theoretically, especially his deep interest in cultural forms, many of these authors confront the limits of the prevailing armchair empiricism to answer the sorts of questions Willis asks. In this sense, despite sometimes limited engagement with the text, these earliest encounters with *Learning to Labour*, along with other important ethnographic texts, were the seed sowing of an eventual flowering of ethnographic approaches in China, especially within the field of education studies, as well as the development of a much greater interest in culture as an irrefutable empirical form.

Wave two: Beyond pedagogy

Prior to *Learning to Labour*'s translation into Chinese, the first time many Chinese students of sociology learned of Paul Willis was through another work in translation, the Chinese publication of Anthony Giddens's *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration* (1998 [1984]). As Giddens notes, although *Learning to Labour* is the product of concentrated research efforts within a small, culturally and contextually bounded field site – a perceived stumbling block for many early Chinese encounters with *Learning to Labour*, especially among educational researchers convinced that the contextual differences between England and China were too great to overcome – ‘research is both compelling in its detail and suggestive in drawing implications that range far beyond the context in which the study was actually carried out’ (Giddens, 1984: 189). Chinese researchers beyond the field of pedagogy soon began to take note of Willis's work, considering its potential theoretical resonance and methodological applications to the exegesis of Chinese social worlds and subcultures.

Anthropologist Yinggui Huang (2002) briefly interprets *Learning to Labour* from the perspective of anthropology in his article ‘The Out Loon of Human Beings, Meaning and Society’. Huang singles out *Learning to Labour* as compelling, ‘significant research’ that offers a model approach for the importance of working from the ground up to understand class consciousness beginning from the interpretation of individual perspectives. Meanwhile, other social scientists began to argue that the contextual and structural distance between Willis's ethnographic world and China were not so great as previously assumed. In a review of *Learning to Labour* published in *Sociological Study*, China's most influential sociology journal, Peng Lv (2006) connects Willis's account of ‘opposition to the authority and rejection of conformity’ at British working-class schools to a growing Chinese underclass, making an early case for *Learning to Labour*'s empirical relevance to contemporary China, whereas many other researchers had suggested its methodological applications while remaining conflicted about its empirical relevance under the influence of a pernicious chauvinism regarding Chinese culture as and history as unique that unfortunately continues to constrain dialogue between the Chinese and Western social sciences to this day.

Wave three: Willis learns to labour in China

By the second decade of the 20th century, a renewed interest in class and culture, as well as their intersection, had begun to take hold within the Chinese social sciences, leading to increased demand for translations of prominent foreign texts dealing with these subjects, including *Learning to Labour*, which was officially translated and published for the mainland Chinese market in 2013. Willis himself wrote the foreword for this edition; translators Shu Mi and Minhua Ling are both young scholars engaged in the study of adolescent subcultures (see Ling, 2015). Interest in these topics and in *Learning to Labour* continued to build, including a prominent conference held in honour of the book's Chinese publication by Tsinghua University's sociology department in 2013. Willis himself spoke at the conference and several of the most well received papers presented were later published in the *China Book Review* (Fu, 2013; Hu, 2013; Lv, 2013; Ning, 2013; Qin, 2013; Yang, 2013; Zhang and Zhang, 2013).

Willis moved to China the following year for a three-year appointment as a professor in Beijing Normal University's department of educational research. While in residence at BNU, Willis delivered a series of annual lectures, taught graduate-level courses on ethnography, and began work on a manuscript (currently under review) on public education in China and the role of China's college entrance exam as a key driver of class reproduction. Additionally, he attracted a following of a number of interested students from various institutions around Beijing, leading to the creation of an informal salon over which he presided, helping to foster interest in the practice of ethnography among a number of rising scholars, further extending his pedagogic influence beyond the campus of his home institution, BNU.

Learning to Labour in contemporary China: Applications for current and continued empirical research

The emergent literature of Chinese empirical research directly informed by *Learning to Labour* has grown most prolifically around a specific area of topical overlap: variations of anti-schooling subcultures (Peng, 1998), including adolescents in junior high (Huang, 2007, Zhao, 2015) and senior high school (Jing, 2012); youth in secondary vocational schools (Wang, 2011) and universities (Wang, 2007); even teachers (Liang, 2006; Li, 2010), and administrators (Zhang, 2012) as well. More recently, these efforts have branched into thematically and empirically related social worlds with less direct structural analogues to the English Midlands' educational environment in which Willis's theories were initially embedded. Indeed, many of these sites are unique to the diverse structural and social landscape of contemporary China. Such divergent empirical foci include the 'left-behind children' of migrant worker parents⁵ (Li, 2016), as well as the children of less enfranchised ethnic minority groups (Ma and Yuan, 2016).

While early ethnographic forays into China's varied counter-school cultures represent an important shift in attitude towards acknowledging the widespread cultural and educational disenfranchisement of numerous groups in China, and are indispensable sources for future research in their accumulation of first-hand empirical data regardless of their varied levels of engagement with *Learning to Labour*, many of these works exhibit a problematic interpretive gap between these authors and the Willisian spirit of the original text, in terms of their more pejorative framing of, and empirical orientation towards, specific subcultures, especially the ways in which the authors of these works operationalize culture and problematize the lives of some of their subjects.

Many of these works have a tendency to stigmatize counter-school cultures definitionally, viewing them as 'negative' sub-cultures and tangles of pathology (Hu, 2007; Shi, 2007) to be unravelled and excised so they can no longer constrain the development of more 'positive' mainstream cultures. Rather than celebrate the ways in which economically and existentially disenfranchised groups use cultural production to forge autonomous identities in the face of mainstream contempt and disregard, as Willis does, many Chinese investigators approach such counter-school cultures from the perspective of diagnostic agents in service of a dominant narrative in which 'development' is the ultimate utility – the goal of its maximization an a priori assumption – whereby any sort of counter-hegemonic attitude or sub-culture is thereby definitionally conceived of as a blight inhibiting 'development', a symptom, therefore, in need of treatment. Likewise, few even acknowledge such 'attitudes' as distinct cultures, since to do so would be to challenge certain problematic but officially sanctioned ideals about the monolithic nature of Chinese culture, and specifically its values or goal orientation in which contemporary Chinese culture is conceived of as an aggregate of individuals working in service of the sacrosanct goals of personal and national development and prosperity. Those that do go so far as to identify countervailing attitudes among students as distinct cultures or subcultures still typically do so within a framework of cataloguing pathology so that it can be corrected or solved (see Zhou, 2006). For many, especially in earlier examples of engagement, the perceived value of *Learning to Labour* lies merely in its use as a diagnostic guide or case study, helping to identify symptoms of some seemingly foreign pathology, but not as any sort of invitation to reflexivity or reconsideration of the sorts of interpretive hegemonies in which the authors' viewpoints are grounded.

This is not to say that *Learning to Labour* and the works influenced by it have not sparked any sort of productive dialogue in China. Among researchers of 'counter-school cultures', the work of Xiao Zhou, a sociologist at the influential Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, has been particularly well received – Zhou's work has the highest impact factor of any studies of 'counter-school' cultures in CNKI – leading to numerous follow-up studies, and encouraging further engagement with *Learning to Labour*. Drawing off fieldwork in Beijing, Zhou (2011a) presents the reader with a comparison between 'lads' in Willis's book and migrant students in the author's field site. Zhou begins with the very similar lifestyle and

behaviours the two authors' subjects exhibit, but comes to the conclusion that the 'counter-school' culture of Chinese migrant students is primarily one of ambivalence and anomie, as opposed to the outright defiance of and opposition to authority and dominant culture that Willis observes. Xiao Zhou interviews 20 students who refuse to study and finds that at the same time they are skipping school and 'making trouble', they nonetheless admire 'good students' who perform well and manage to 'succeed' or successfully conform to mainstream ideals. They do not frame their own lack of success as a conscious rejection of mainstream ideals, or even a response to a system that has failed them, but as a failure of the self, born of and reinforcing a sense of anomie and despair.

Like the lads of Hammertown, students at Zhou's migrant school despise the authority of their teachers and principals, devalue schooling in general, and primarily seek to build their self-esteem independently through extracurricular pursuits such as smoking, playing cards, reading novels or teasing the teachers during class time. As with the lads in *Learning to Labour*, most of them end up in the same professions as their parents, reproducing social class. The prevailing 'counter-school' culture in migrant schools and the mechanism of class reinforcement mirrors Willis's analysis of class reproduction in working-class British schools. Yet, whereas Willis catalogues the seemingly indelible pathways etched over generations of class sorting in late industrial Britain, Zhou's (2011a, 2011b) ethnographic work highlights a critical moment of crystallization, as class pathways are just beginning to set after years of social churn. Indeed, most of these students are the children of first-generation migrant labourers, whose decision to leave farming in order to better monetize their physical capital represents a brief forward step in terms of economic and class mobility, the forward momentum of this difficult but optimistic journey plateauing, dishearteningly, one generation later in the institutional morass of their children's segregated schooling experience.

Other scholars such as Yihan Xiong (2008, 2010a) and Chunwen Xiong and his students (including the second author), who have carried out a cumulative 10-year fieldwork in Beijing migrant schools (Xiong et al., 2013, 2014; Xiong and Liu, 2014), reaffirmed the findings of Zhou (2011a, 2011b) that 'counter school' cultures in China are primarily defined by apathy and indifference rather than outright defiance of mainstream norms, or the explicit rejection of schooling as an oppressive institution, as in *Learning to Labour*. For migrant children, counter-school cultures develop more as a vent of frustration for perceived failures to assimilate into an educational culture of achievement, rather than the manifestation of outright hostility to authority.

On first glance, Willis's lads and migrant and minority students interviewed by Chinese researchers appear to share a similar anti-school culture and a similar career trajectory in terms of following their parents. Yet, in response to a survey he conducted, none of Zhou's migrant students answered that they 'want to be a worker'. The mechanism of reproduction is therefore somewhat different from Willis's lads, who aspire to working-class jobs partly out of a rejection of mainstream success that has previously rejected them. Both Zhou and Xiong et al.'s

respondents alike are candid and despondent in their recognition of their limited career options and the endpoint of generational mobility it appears to represent. They are 'afraid of doing their fathers' jobs for a lifetime' and dream instead of being 'an official', 'a boss', 'a scientist', 'a celebrity' (Zhou, 2011a, 2011b). They harbour deep angst over the likely reality, instead, of generational reproduction, by which they will end up as labourers like their parents, or potentially even worse off.

Such work offers a snapshot of the processes underlying the institutionalization of class reproduction in educational settings as it unfolds in real time. This research highlights not just the empirical relevance of *Learning to Labour* as a useful analytical window on contemporary China, but also the unique empirical opportunity available to those studying contemporary China to truly understanding theoretical models of class reproduction as they unfold from their moments of origin, which, in his empirical work on England, Willis could only address cross-sectionally through an examination of its generational aftereffects, historically isolated from the empirical origins of such processes by numerous generations. Comparatively, the seeming acceleration of time during late modernity and the attendant rapidity of economic changes in China over the last several generations present certain research opportunities that must be pursued. This is not to be interpreted as a China-as-empirical-time-machine hypothesis, or misconstrued as an endorsement of any sort of teleological model of development by which developing China is presented as currently experiencing some identical moment to one experienced earlier by developed countries such as England. Rather, this observation is merely intended to emphasize the authors' call for the continued ethnographic study of China, by foreign and Chinese researchers alike, to build on the notable efforts begun earlier this century, not least because of emergent opportunities for longitudinal analysis in the study of class reproduction and differentiation that were not afforded to Willis during his time conducting the research that would later become *Learning to Labour*. Contemporary China offers a potentially enlightening empirical window on the ways in which the mechanisms of class reproduction outlined in Willis's work actually take shape and come into existence. Indeed, we are still at a moment when the drying clay of China's institutional pathways of inequality have not yet fully hardened, and the possibility to not just understand their formation but to actively alter and shape these pathways at a policy level is potentially reinvigorating for *Learning to Labour* as an urgent and potentially transformative text to be read by scholars and policy-makers focused on this massive and rapidly changing country, critical especially to those social scientists and policy-makers intrigued by the potential for intervention.

Discussion

As early as the 1980s, *Learning to Labour* was introduced into China, initially in the field of pedagogy before its influence gradually expanded to sociology, cultural studies, and other related social science disciplines. In 2013, the Chinese publication of *Learning to Labour* spurred yet another wave of scholarly interest.

From 2014 to 2017, Willis was employed by Beijing Normal University, which helped to further grow *Learning to Labour*'s reputation as a result of his influence and popularity as an engaged scholar, lecturer and mentor within the Chinese academic community. It is easy to be discouraged in attempting to look for connections between worlds as seemingly distant as contemporary China and the English Midlands of 40 years ago, as many Chinese scholars were upon their first encounters with *Learning to Labour*. Perhaps only the discouragingly universal reality of certain groups of young people left behind or pushed to the margins by state institutions jumps out to the casual reader on their first encounter with the book. Willis himself remarked upon the overwhelming size and scope of China, on his difficulty in pursuing ethnographic truth in such a seemingly vast and foreign place after he first arrived (Willis, 2017).

However, Willis, while ever clear-eyed in his interpretation of hard and even discouraging social truths, is not a scholar whose work or approach is categorized by discouragement or pessimism. To the contrary, *Learning to Labour* is a work of driving curiosity, and ultimately optimism. As such, his comments about China's vast size and theoretical complexity must *not* be read in a tone of discouragement but of wonder, admonishment even, an invitation to make such unknowns known, to extend our understanding of contemporary China through a greater research commitment, especially by ethnographers, both Chinese and foreign. As this project continues to expand, so too does our understanding of *Learning to Labour* and the broader Willisian methodological and theoretical approach.

Learning to Labour is not out of date or overly distant from contemporary China; its growing relevance and readership there today is a promising sign of the continued (re-)development of Chinese sociology, so that *Learning to Labour* will continue to remain a relevant text, while the boundaries of its interpretive context continue to expand. The book's popularity and influence is growing alongside a renewed generational commitment to ethnography and cultural analysis in China, and perhaps *Learning to Labour* will eventually come to be read as a foundational text in this burgeoning movement. Hopefully, a continued presence will lead to closer readings of the text that further influence and shape the theoretical frameworks and orientations of Chinese social researchers, especially those focused on disenfranchised groups in China.

As we have pointed out, there are notable divergences from Willis among Chinese ethnographers of the underclass, in terms of interpretive orientation. Willis's account of the lads' oppositional-culture-as-struggle, and especially the resultant production of material culture, is one of not just advocacy but acknowledgement, even celebration. His work is not just sympathetic but *empathetic* – as all great ethnography should aim to be – to the plight of disenfranchised working-class youths; he is critical of an oppressive institutionalized academic system and its imposed structural constraints that have enabled the reproduction of class position through cultural production and the establishment of a distinct subculture, but he is never critical of the subculture itself, let alone its cultural output. For Willis, class

consciousness and cultural production are almost always a thing to be celebrated, a defiant response by the downtrodden to the existential threat of disenfranchisement, an affirmation of worth and existence, never symptoms of disorder in need of a cure, as they are occasionally framed in Chinese social research. Like the most arresting ethnographies, especially of the disenfranchised, *Learning to Labour* is a work of existential affirmation, a struggle to see and acknowledge a group as it struggles to be seen and acknowledged. Such subtle distinctions are mostly still lacking in the related Chinese literature, which in their policy-solution orientation are generally sympathetic to the plight of disenfranchised student groups but not often empathetic enough in their efforts to address culture on its own terms, through the eyes and voices of those studied. Bridging this gap will require further dialogue between researchers in China and foundational texts like *Learning to Labour*, which will hopefully emerge from a deeper Chinese commitment to ethnographic work, as a greater volume of research coalesces, and the attendant methodological and empirical accretion eventually yield more nuanced publications that more sensitively, empathetically and reflexively examine the cultural production and autonomy of underrepresented groups, spotlighting and celebrating the flexibility and creativity of its subjects, rather than attempting to solve such 'problems' of production out of existence.

Conclusion

As we have seen from this paper, the re-emergence of Chinese sociology is a relatively recent phenomenon, and a broad scholastic dedication to ethnographic methods is even more recent. Scholars have undertaken this critical project with enthusiasm, however, and the influence of researchers from the field of education on this project begat the early influence of *Learning to Labour*, from which point its influence has steadily spread across fields within the Chinese academy. Hopefully, this influence will continue to grow and expand alongside this vital ethnographic awakening. Though some gaps in understanding remain between Willis's intentions in his original publication and the way his work has sometimes been interpreted and applied by researchers in China, such gaps will surely continue to narrow as the book's influence expands and more and more researchers turn fresh eyes to the text and to the vast and varied social worlds of contemporary China. Major commitments to fieldwork exploring this extraordinary complexity of Chinese society are already underway, yielding an increasingly significant store of valuable empirical data. Hopefully, new research on cultural production especially will spark scholarly interest and engagement moving forward. As of now, we are only at the beginning stages of this emergent project, and have yet to truly see just how much *Learning to Labour* has to offer China, and how much China has to offer *Learning to Labour*.

Author(s) Note

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Notes

1. Gaokao refers to the National College Entrance Examination (NCEE in the following text) in China. It began in 1952 and is held in mainland China every 8 and 9 June. During the Cultural Revolution from 1966 to 1976, the annual NCEE was abolished in favour of an 'up to the mountains and down to the countryside' policy of enrolment based on students' *chengfen* (family and political background) rather than academic achievements, before most colleges were ultimately shuttered during the Cultural Revolution.
2. The resumption of Gaokao with its focus on academic achievement in 1977 came alongside a number of other economic liberalizations and are collectively known as the Open Door policies, while the period of their enactment is referred to as the Reform and Opening Up, signifying the turn of government policy from 'taking class struggle as the guiding principle' to its current more neoliberal orientation of 'emphasizing economic development' (Kipnis, 2007).
3. It should be noted that China's Normal Universities, dedicated to the holistic study of education across numerous subfields, include a number of prestigious provincial and national level institutions, and as such, faculties in education command an outsized level of influence within the social sciences in China as compared to the West.
4. CNKI is short for China National Knowledge Infrastructure. The official website of CNKI is <http://www.cnki.net/>
5. There are about 61,025,500 left-behind children in rural places and 35,810,000 migrant children across the country, according to the Six National Population Census of the People's Republic of China (PRC in the following text) in 2010 (Yang, 2017), and they are 'created' due to soaring urbanization and the Hukou system in China. Hukou, or the system of household registration, classifies a person according to his/her rural/urban residency status. The Chinese government gives huge regional priority when allocating resources, such as education, health care, etc., thus opening up a wide gap between rural

and urban places. Children without the local Hukou (i.e. a certain province) cannot take the NCEE even if enrolled in a city school for over 10 years. Since the test papers are different from province to province, it results in a big disadvantage when one studies in the city and takes the NCEE somewhere else (especially a rural place). In addition, the soaring urbanization attracts peasants working in the city, forming the large category of 'migrant workers' in China, approximately 277,470,000 in 2015, according to the National Bureau of Statistics of the PRC's data online. All these give birth to 'left-behind children' and 'migrant children'. The former indicates kids under 17 who stayed at home and are separated from their parents for over four months each year (Pan and Ye, 2009). The latter refers to kids enrolled in schools without a local Hukou and who have to go back to their hometown to take the NCEE when they finish high school.

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