

# international comparison of the logic of worker control based on dependency

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## Abstract

Field research reveals that a “worker—lower-level contractor—higher-level contractor” organizational structure has been established in Wuxi City’s manufacturing factories in China, with close connections between workers and team leaders. Local governments are involved in the employment processes of these manufacturing factories but do not intervene in the operations of factories and team contractors with non-standard practices. In light of this field phenomenon, this study starts from the texts of Andrew Walder, comparing the relationships between team contractors and workers in late Qing and Republican China, China’s planned system period, and in factories in the United States, Japan, the United Kingdom, and the Soviet Union. This comparison aims to identify the uniqueness of the relationship between team contractors and workers in Wuxi. Furthermore, the study examines the control strategies of local Chinese governments over manufacturing enterprises and labor contractors from the perspective of township enterprises.

## 1. A Research Question Arising from Field Experience

This paper conducted field research on labor employment in the manufacturing sector of Wuxi City, Jiangsu Province in China, from 2018 to 2020. It was interestingly observed that these manufacturing factories delegated the power to recruit dispatched and outsourced labor to team contractors outside the factory. Large manufacturing enterprises could not rely on themselves to recruit and manage a large number of workers effectively, so team contractors took on the task instead of them. The team contractors could recruit the workers and even intervene in the factory production line to manage workers. At the same time, team contractors also took on the responsibilities of distributing wages, paying social security, providing some skill training, and social protection for workers. Therefore, workers were directly attached to team contractors rather

than to workshop leaders within the factory. Moreover, the hierarchy of team contractors was complex, with higher-level and lower-level contractors. Higher-level contractors were not responsible for directly contacting workers, but mainly the transportation of large numbers of workers and the docking with factories; While lower-level contractors were truly responsible for establishing contact with workers. During this paper's investigation, there were team contractors of hierarchical levels throughout Wuxi City, which not only maintained close relationships with factory managers but also had interactions and cooperation with government officials. To a certain extent, the government was involved in the local manufacturing labor force. However, based on considerations of stability and economic performance, the local government did not deal with some factories and team contractors operating irregularly. Therefore, the labor contractor industry is full of local protectionism and unspoken rules.

Inspired by the research of Andrew Walder, the paper wishes to explore the reasons of the phenomenon in the field. There are two main questions: Firstly, whether the relationship between team leaders and workers in Wuxi can be compared and sorted out from the experiences of different periods in China and other countries. Secondly, whether there is a theoretical explanatory path for the local government's governance logic towards manufacturing enterprises and team contractors. Based on this, the study mainly carries out two aspects of work:

(1) Taking Walder's (1996) *Communist Neo-Traditionalism* as the central text, the study firstly analyzes the relationship between team contractors and workers in Wuxi, and then compares the relationship between team contractors and workers from the late Qing Dynasty and the Republic of China period, the United States, Japan, the United Kingdom, and the Soviet Union. The reason for choosing these periods and countries is that Walder's research actually points to the possible existence of "labor contractors" phenomena in these times and countries, which can be compared with state-owned enterprises under the planned economy system.

(2) Regarding the logic of local government governance over manufacturing enterprises and team leaders, this paper attempts to provide an explanation from the perspective of township enterprises.

From the perspective of research innovation, current studies have only focused on the existence of such a multi-layered team contractor phenomenon in Chinese manufacturing factories (Wang&Bai,2007; So,2014; Liu,2016;Chan,2017; Feng,2019; Liu&Zhu, 2020;Pun et al.,2020; Zhu, 2021;Lan, 2022) , without sorting out and comparing the contractor-worker relationship in different countries in the early years. Moreover, there is a lack of consideration for the historical reasons behind the government's governance logic. Therefore, the research presented in this paper is an expansion and supplement.

## **2. The Relationship Between Team Contractors and Workers in Wuxi: A**

### **Comparison with Walder's Research**

#### **2.1 Comparison of Organizational Structures**

From the perspective of organizational structure, the relationship between team contractors and workers in Wuxi bears certain similarities to, as well as differences from, it in state-owned enterprises under the planned system.

Firstly, workshop leaders in Chinese factories lead what could be termed a "contract labor kingdom"; although they are not officially called team leaders, they play a role analogous to that of a team contractor. There is a structure in state-owned enterprises such as "workers - team leaders - workshop leaders," and a similar structure exists between team contractors and workers

in Wuxi, which is “worker—lower-level contractor—higher-level contractor”.

*“The low-level team contractor has a high-level team contractor above him. The higher-level team leader consolidates information, contacts the low-level team contractor to help recruit people from his hometown, and then once the high-level team contractor has finished the work, he could pass them up to the higher level! The even highest team contractors don't show their faces; they are at the top level and usually only deal with the small fry. They take people on and then pass them up, and the money distribution is also taken at each level.” (Team contractor interview, 20180715)*

Secondly, team leaders and workshop leaders in state-owned enterprises are within the factory, and team leaders are also workers. However, most team leaders in Wuxi exist outside the factory and are not workers; even if some team contractors intervene within the factory, they do not work on the production line.

Thirdly, in terms of functions performed, these team contractors in Wuxi bear responsibilities such as supervising workers, distributing wages, paying social security, and social protection, which is quite similar to the supervision by team leaders and workshop leaders, as well as their decision-making power in the distribution of wages and benefits. However, it should be noted that the so-called wage distribution by these team contractors in Wuxi is in cooperation with the current factory leaders, that is, it still requires team leaders and workshop leaders within the factory to assess the workers' performance to determine wages. These team contractors do not have the power to decide on wages; they only have the power to distribute them, and the supervision of workers still relies more on the team leaders within the factory. Similarly, these team contractors in Wuxi provide social protection for workers, which refers to preventing workers from being bullied within the factory, similar to the functions of gangs during the Republic of China period (mentioned below):

*“Do you see some big, burly team leaders? They are there to prevent troublemakers. Once they stand at the entrance, their presence is felt, and who would dare to cause trouble? They can also gather information and act as undercover agents. By comparing the influence of powerful team contractors, if you say you were brought in by a certain team contractor, the factory people won't dare to do anything to you. After all, the factory people also have to consider the team contractor's face. Those team contractors can even divide the workers in the factory, making workers who were not recruited by them listen to their commands.” (Team contractor interview, 20180811)*

To a certain extent, team leaders and workshop leaders in state-owned enterprises also have such functions, of course, relying on the workers' loyalty and performance.

## **2.2 Comparison of Dependency Relationships**

Walder's depiction of the dependency of workers on enterprises, team leaders, and workshop leaders in state-owned enterprises under the planned system is quite strong, because enterprises could provide various guarantees for workers, and team leaders and workshop leaders had decision-making power in the distribution of these materials. Workers had to gain recognition through good political performance and loyalty. By the 1980s, patriarchal governance became the core management method in Chinese factories. The provision of collective service facilities and other forms of welfare now constitute the core content of the patriarchal governance method in labor relations. At the same time, within the patriarchal governance, moral-political mobilization is no longer the core content, and political and work attitudes are no longer assessed by team discussions. Moreover, performance is no longer explicitly linked to wages and bonuses. Workers work more for their own material interests, and loyalty now points more to work achievements, which of course also includes loyalty to the Party (Walder, 1996: 255-257). Looking at the

current dependency relationships, Walder believes that the economic dependency on enterprises has weakened, but the Party's institutional capacity to place workers in a political dependency position has not changed. Workshop leaders still lead the “contract labor kingdom”. And the power of workshop leaders also has not decreased, although the exercise of power is no longer as arbitrary as in the past. In summary, during the period of patriarchal governance, the approach was to combine rewards and punishments, commanding people to obey on one hand and caring for their material lives on the other (Walder, 1996: 267).

Comparing with that, the dependency of workers on team contractors in Wuxi factories, this dependency relationship is unstable. Firstly, team contractors do not have direct control over the conditions for material benefits. Secondly, bonuses are directly related to the workers' productivity, so depending on team contractors does not bring direct benefits to the workers. However, the function of “social protection” may be a core demand for workers' dependency on team contractors. Especially, for these workers who come from other places to work in the factories, the social and emotional protection provided by team contractors may become the core of their connection. Of course, it is also necessary to note a condition: Walder analyzed formal employees in state-owned enterprises, while the author's investigation concerns outsourced and dispatched workers in the factories, who naturally have much higher mobility. This also indicates the instability of this dependency relationship.

The strategy of combining rewards and punishments in state-owned enterprises is also reflected in the strategies used by team leaders in Wuxi factories. On the one hand, team contractors manage workers by ensuring they obey the factory's commands, work stably within the factory, and avoid conflicts. On the other hand, team contractors show concern for the workers' material and emotional well-being; they can protect workers from bullying, and when workers face wage reductions due to work mistakes, team contractors can use their connections to intercede on the workers' behalf. Team contractors may also provide subsidies to workers themselves. Additionally, Walder mentioned that an amorphous bargaining model has emerged between enterprise departments and workers, which refers to raising issues not through formal interest demands. Workers' methods of dealing with management policies are passive resistance and covert rebellion. Enterprise management learns about the situation through reports from active members within the team leaders, and factory managers typically deal with workers in ways similar to formal organized negotiations, such as the excessive distribution of bonuses, which is a result of this informal bargaining (Walder, 1996: 268). In contrast, the team contractors in Wuxi factories have taken over the management baton, stepping in to mediate immediately when workers resist and developing close relationships with certain workers to gather information. More importantly, the way team contractors handle situations is highly similar, that is, by distributing more funds, most of which are provided by the team contractors themselves (not factory funds given to workers). By offering workers higher sums of money, they aim to reduce resistance. The continuation of this strategy is also a result of informal bargaining.

*“Most of the workers resist because of dissatisfaction with the money. Therefore, the contractors use their own money to appease them, which is a cashback rewards pattern in the market. In general, the more money given to the worker, the less trouble caused by them.” (Team contractor interview, 20180715)*

### **3. Comparison of the Relationship Between Team Leaders and Workers: Late Qing and Republic of China Period, United States, Japan, United Kingdom,**

## **Soviet Union**

Walder (1996) points out that the Chinese model has a tradition of workers' dependence on team leaders, and more importantly, after 1949, the dependence of workers in the process of China's industrialization was transformed into a comprehensive dependence on enterprises. Therefore, based on the study of the relationship between workers and team contractors in Wuxi, the author wishes to compare it with the dependence of workers on team leaders in China before and after 1949, as well as with the factories pattern in the United States, Japan, the United Kingdom, and the Soviet Union. Only by discovering the differences in the relationships between team leaders and workers in various countries can we gain a better insight into the special relationship between team contractors and workers in Wuxi factories at the current stage.

### **3.1 Team Leaders and Workers During the Late Qing Dynasty and the Republic of China Era**

Perry (2018) depicts the guilds and gangs in Shanghai during the late Qing Dynasty and the Republic of China era, which bears many similarities to Walder's portrayal of Chinese factories, hence a comparison is made.

#### **3.1.1 Organizational Structure: Guilds during the Late Qing Dynasty and State-Owned Enterprises**

State-owned enterprises share similar organizational structures with the craftsmen's guilds of the late Qing Dynasty: First, in terms of recruiting workers and providing long-term protection for them. Entry into the hometown-based craftsmen's guilds in Shanghai was typically based on regional and clan relationships, which were both deeply stimulated by the urban market and a manifestation of hometown sentiment, and also the foundation for collective action (Perry, 2018: 303). A significant advantage of joining a guild was the protection it offered to workers; members generally had to pay 15-30% of their wages as initiation fees and annual dues. The guild could ensure employment opportunities for its members and provide relief in times of birth, aging, illness, or death (Perry, 2018: 35); more importantly, the guild's influence could guarantee the privileged position of skilled workers in the Shanghai labor market (Perry, 2018: 37). It can be observed that state-owned enterprises also have similar characteristics; entry into the enterprise must be through the introduction of relatives or friends, and within the factory, it can provide workers with numerous benefits (wages, insurance, housing, children's security, etc.), which generally have long-term continuity, and the worker turnover rate is also low (Walder, 1996). Second, in terms of interpersonal relationship patterns. Those influential guilds would cultivate a "guild spirit", which involved rituals of apprenticeship. Generally, new apprentices had to go through a "worship master" ceremony, and the place where the ceremony was held had to be prepared with incense, candles, and a temporary altar. After lighting the incense, the apprentice would kowtow three times to the whitewashed wall to pay respects to the factory, and then kowtow three times to the master (Perry, 2018: 38). This religious ceremony emphasized the authority of the industry god and also shaped a close personal relationship between the master and the apprentice. The relationship, which is comparable to this is the relationship pattern, is between active workers and team leaders and workshop leaders in state-owned enterprises; their dependence does not need to be maintained through religious ceremonies, but the key elements that maintain the relationship are interest ties, political beliefs, and loyalty, which is how state-owned enterprises assert authority from the legitimate rule of the Communist Party (Perry, 2018: 303).

#### **3.1.2 Factions in the Factory: Veteran Skilled Workers**

Walder (1996) mentions the factions within factories, where veteran skilled workers with

excellent technical skills have trained a large number of apprentices. These veteran workers, with their seniority and high level of skill, are the masters of many leaders, economically independent, and possess moral authority. They are emotionally connected with their apprentices, who are given face and respect, thus team leaders must also work with the veteran masters to gain cooperation. The apprenticeship system prevalent in the guilds has shaped the pride of skilled workers in their profession, making them more likely to make higher demands and exert influence on employers. Therefore, Perry (2018: 305) mentions that the most tense aspect in the old factories is the factional struggle, *“where there were quite a few activists before 1949, and there was a clear distinction between privileged workers and young workers. In these factories, as for the proud history of workers' strikes, only the veteran workers were qualified to boast. When the older generation of revolutionary heroes narrate their glorious experiences in the factory history room, the opposition between the two generations is inevitably generated.”* Thus, the social status of veteran skilled workers to some extent stems from the privileged status granted by the guilds at that time, so veteran skilled workers often have moral authority, and their apprentices will give them face, but this may also lead to factional tensions between veteran and young workers in state-owned enterprises.

### **3.1.3 The Dependency Relationship between Gangs and Workers**

The dependency of workers on teams and workshops by Walder, as well as the dependency of workers on contractors as observed in the author's investigation, can be traced back to the gangs of the Republic of China period. The dependency of workers on gangs and the significant functions and status of gangs are deeply reflected.

#### **(1) The Lifetime Connection between Non-Skilled Workers and Gangs**

For non-skilled workers, collective action was usually carried out through the form of gangs, and the control of gangs over non-skilled workers had a strong authoritarian character. For example, the initiation ceremony of the Green Gang and the apprenticeship ceremony of apprentices do not differ much in form from the guilds. However, what is different is that in the guilds, after the completion of a three-year apprenticeship, the apprentice maintained a more or less equal relationship with their former master. In contrast, in the gangs, non-skilled workers who join the gang through apprenticeship are equivalent to serving a life sentence, and the only way to escape is to return to their hometown. Non-skilled workers can only submit to the will of their master (Perry, 2018: 56).

#### **(2) The Foreman's Control over Recruitment, Supervision, and Strikes**

Regarding recruitment, entering the factory to work was generally controlled by the foremen of the gang. A textile worker recalled, *“For young people to get a job in the factory, they had to pass through three gates. First, from the countryside to the city, you needed a friend to accompany you. Second, after arriving in Shanghai, you had to get through the recruitment process. Third, once in the factory, to the other workers, you were a stranger. Moreover, the factory director and manager deliberately allowed various 'gangs' to exist among the workers in order to divide and exploit them. New workers were often beaten and not allowed to work. Helplessly, they had to turn to the friend who brought them to Shanghai. All the friend could do was to take you to see a certain gang leader. The gang leader would say, 'Don't be afraid, we are all family. Just treat everyone to a meal, and everything will be fine.' The new worker then had to pay this gang leader more than ten yuan and spend another five or six yuan to treat everyone to a meal. In addition, they had to pay five yuan to the recruiter. In this way, more than twenty yuan was spent. After joining the gang, you had to be in the gang for life.”* (Perry, 2018: 62-63) Thus, it can be seen that the entire process of entering the factory was controlled by the foremen, and new workers not only had to pay money but were also beaten, so they needed the protection of gang connections. It

can be observed that the factory employed a divide and rule strategy, that is, the factory director and manager deliberately allowed various “gangs” to exist among the workers in order to divide and exploit them. This strategy is quite similar to the divide and rule strategy described by Walder for workers. Both the factories of the Republic of China period and the state-owned enterprises of the planned system period continued to use this strategy, only one used gang division and the other used activist division.

After entering the factory, workshop foremen would monitor the workers’ performance, and they had the authority to punish and fine those who were lazy or violated regulations. These foremen had the function of controlling the workers’ words and deeds, which made them play a key role in suppressing or instigating workers’ strikes (Perry, 2018: 64). Moreover, these workshop foremen usually also had the power to dismiss workers, with a high degree of independence, and the control of higher authorities over them was limited (Perry, 2018: 169).

Regarding strikes, for example, the most common occurrence among dockworkers was disputes over territory, which usually took place under the leadership of foremen. Dockworkers typically had to hand over a certain percentage of their wages to the foremen. Those “gang leaders” often incited their subordinates to strike behind the scenes, demanding wage increases (Perry, 2018: 60).

Based on the foreman’s such power, workers need to develop personal relationships with the foreman, and workers must regularly give money and goods to the foreman to secure their jobs. Therefore, Walder’s analysis of the dependency relationship of state-owned enterprise workers can also be traced back to the control of workers by industries and guilds during the late Qing Dynasty and the Republic of China period. If viewed from the perspective of stability, this kind of worker dependency is even more stable than the dependency of workers on leaders in state-owned enterprises, because the workers require the protection of guilds and gangs, and once a worker joins a gang, it is difficult to break free from control; moreover, the dependency of workers on foremen is mostly personal, but in state-owned enterprises, workers are essentially dependent on the entire enterprise, whether it is dependence on team leaders, workshop leaders, or party organizations, it all stems from the benefits that the enterprise itself can provide, which is more like an organizational dependency. If viewed from the perspective of power, some foremen can control the workers’ words and deeds, have the power to hire and fire workers, and have a strong social influence, while workshop leaders in state-owned enterprises only have the power to hire and fire, and distribute rewards. If viewed from the perspective of patronage relationships, the protection of gangs for workers is about personal safety and jobs, while the protection of state-owned enterprises for workers is more reflected in economic benefits and social status. State-owned enterprises need the political beliefs and loyalty of workers to maintain, but the proportion maintained by guilds and gangs relying on geographical relationships and material incentives is much larger.

### **3.2 Foremen and workers in American factories**

Edwards (1979) depicted in his book that American workers in the 19th to 20th centuries were under three control mechanisms: simple control, structural control, and bureaucratic control. Under these three controls, the relationships between foremen and workers were different, and the strategies that foremen imposed on workers were also inconsistent.

#### **3.2.1 Foremen and workers under simple control: A combination of incentives and sanctions**

In the nineteenth-century American factories, foremen and managers typically dominated the workplace, intervening in the labor process and employing various means such as admonishment, threats, rewards, and other incentives and sanctions to control the workers, making it difficult for

them to resist. This simple control system still exists in the small business sector of the American economy. Under this control, factory managers can easily determine whether workers have correctly completed their tasks, which also increases the pressure on foremen to make their subordinates work hard. Therefore, managers have sufficient understanding of the production process and can appropriately supervise it. Under this control, capitalists, which are the company owners, concentrate power, and frequent contact with them reduces the power disparity among workers, as all workers establish a direct relationship with the capitalists and can seek their help. Moreover, the foreman's orders are tentative because they also need to watch the capitalists' expressions.

### **3.2.2 Foremen and workers under structural control: Severe oppression**

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, the trend of economic resource concentration reduced the effectiveness of simple control. As production scales increased, companies greatly raised the required level of coordination, making control increasingly difficult. Moreover, as businesses began to employ thousands of workers, the distance between capitalists and workers expanded, so the intermediate space was filled with a large number of foremen and supervisors. Consequently, large enterprises developed a more effective form of control than simple control—structural control. Under this form of control, entrepreneurs and senior managers became increasingly detached from the daily activities of workers; they could not personally direct production and had to develop foremen.

At this time, the control by foremen developed to a certain height and was referred to as the “empire of the foreman”. The foreman’s power was quite extensive, including the authority to hire and fire, assess and reward, and punish workers, holding absolute power over their subordinates. This system increased unequal power relationships, and the foreman’s rule became a form of command rule. If workers could not accurately complete their tasks, they would be docked in pay, fired, or occasionally beaten. It can be said that the foreman's tyranny extended to almost every aspect of factory life, affecting all social relationships, and even “sexual relationships” and employment relationships might interact, with foremen using “sexual relationships” to decide which women were assigned to higher-paying jobs, which women had to sit on benches facing the wall, and which women needed to work overtime, etc. Therefore, workers had to maintain a good relationship with the foreman, otherwise, they would not receive many benefits and might even face punishment. Thus, structural control revealed to workers the oppressive nature of capitalist relationships, and this harsh oppression drove workers to resist. It can be seen that under simple control, the combination of incentives and sanctions between foreman and worker has completely turned into a relationship of oppression and being oppressed under structural control.

### **3.2.3 Foremen and Workers under Technological Control: Strict Surveillance**

At the beginning of the twentieth century, technological control in factories began to develop. This approach, which replaced human guidance and altered the rhythm of work with technology, also fundamentally changed the relationship between foremen and workers. After the introduction of (automation) technology, the number of foremen required to manage workers was significantly reduced, and foremen transformed into executors of technical instructions. On the assembly line, foremen monitor workers to ensure they complete tasks on time; they do not personally guide the workflow. The power of foremen to arbitrarily dismiss workers was also greatly diminished, but this necessitated more rigorous surveillance of workers. Because workers could not move freely in the production area, they were restricted and isolated by technical instructions, subjected to stricter surveillance, which made workers more isolated.

Comparing Walder's (1996) portrayal of the relationship between workers and workshop leaders



in Chinese state-owned enterprises, we can observe: First, foremen in American factories are more similar to workshop leaders in China, as Chinese workshop leaders are also vested with the power to reward, punish, and monitor workers. Second, workshop leaders in Chinese state-owned enterprises tend to adopt a strategy that combines kindness and severity, rather than relentless oppression, which aligns with simple control in American factories—corresponding to the control forms in small businesses in the United States. This precisely reflects the effectiveness and flexibility of the control system in Chinese factories. Walder analyzed the period of patriarchal rule in factories, stating: “On one hand, it commands people to obey and be loyal (which needs to be demonstrated through work performance or voluntary labor), and on the other hand, it continuously shows concern for the material well-being of workers (Walder, 1996: 267).”

### **3.3 Japanese Factory Foremen and Workers**

Gordon's (1985) analysis of Japanese heavy industry factories from the late 19th century to the early 20th century profoundly reveals the relationship between foremen and workers, which is strikingly similar to the team system and patriarchal rule in Chinese factories (Walder, 1996).

#### **3.3.1 The Relationship between Foremen and Workers under Indirect Management**

Between workers and factory supervisors, there exists a structural layer known as the master craftsmen. The types of master craftsmen are highly diverse. Some of them are independent contractors who sign contracts with large companies and secure work for their subordinates. Others are simply capable foremen who do not have the ability to coordinate the signing of employment contracts between the company and the workers but can exert influence on decisions such as hiring workers and setting wages. These foremen act similarly to employers, either hiring their own apprentices and subordinates or making hiring decisions on behalf of the company. They also bear certain responsibilities for training apprentices and new workers.

By the end of the 19th century, due to the lack of direct management capabilities and experience with workers, factory managers could only adopt strategies of indirect labor supervision, ceding control of the workplace to experienced master craftsmen. Companies that adopted indirect management strategies would secure orders for machinery and equipment, and then subcontract the work or parts of the work to various masters or foremen through competitive bidding. The successful bidders were responsible for organizing the work, paying workers from the agreed-upon bid price, and keeping the remainder as their profit.

However, managers still hoped to create a more systematic and direct model of labor supervision. Many enterprises began to establish a daily wage grade system in the 19th century, reminding workers that it was the company, not the master craftsmen, that evaluated their work and set their wages. Some companies tried to bypass the master craftsmen and directly sign long-term contracts with the workers chosen by them. But these measures did not establish a closer relationship between the workers and the company. These measures only partially limited the power of the master craftsmen, who still had the authority to decide on the wage levels, pay raises, cash rewards and punishments, and with which workers to sign long-term contracts. Therefore, indirect management remained the most common management method in Japanese heavy industry enterprises in the 19th century.

#### **3.3.2 The Relationship between Foremen and Workers under Direct Management**

By the early 20th century, the system of indirect management began to be replaced by direct management, as technological and organizational reforms led to direct supervision of workshop operations by managers. Once expensive machinery was installed and small teams of 5 to 15 people were organized to perform clearly defined tasks, smooth coordination between teams and workshops was required. This still relied on the considerable experience of foremen and workers, their technical skills and judgment, as well as their cooperation among the small teams, and the

managers also had to follow the advice of experienced team leaders.

The original intention of Japan's direct management policy was to limit the power of master craftsmen and incorporate privileged foremen into the company, who would manage their subordinates but follow the company's directives. As foremen, they retained authority and discretion. Managers hoped to expand their authority within the company, so they strictly managed workers, encouraged efficiency, and at the same time provided benefits to workers, including pensions and severance pay, attendance awards, and long-service awards, etc. Training programs were also a means of attracting skilled workers to establish a more direct and dependent relationship with the company. Therefore, this was a form of patriarchal governance.

At the same time, managers also strengthened the connection between foremen and management personnel. For example, in 1902, Shibaura established a hiking club for management and foremen, and the company began to provide them with certain forms of corporate welfare with the aim of fostering loyalty among the foremen. However, such incentives actually increased the difference between the foremen (who were also workers by origin) and the permanent workers under their management, leading to tension in their relationships. But in summary, foremen, who possessed technical skills accumulated through long-term experience, still maintained considerable authority in the factory.

When comparing the relationship between workers and leaders in Chinese state-owned enterprises, it can be observed that: First, under indirect management in Japanese factories, the power of masters/foremen is considerable, with the authority to decide on wage levels, which is similar to the workshop leaders in Chinese factories. Second, under direct management in Japanese factories, the power of masters/foremen is reduced; these foremen possess a certain level of technical experience and authority, and their opinions are needed to a certain extent to coordinate activities in the workshop, similar to team leaders in Chinese factories. Third, the management of Japanese companies adopts a patriarchal governance approach, with strict management of workers but also providing benefits to foster loyalty; at the same time, the management also needs to cultivate the loyalty of foremen. Therefore, there is a relationship of obedience and loyalty between foremen and workers, but also subtle differentiation and contradictions, which is quite similar to the patriarchal ruling methods adopted in Chinese state-owned enterprises (Walder, 1996).

### **3.4 The Relationship between Foremen and Workers in British Factories**

Melling (1980) offers a unique analysis of the relationship between foremen and workers in British factories. Between 1880 and 1914, in the engineering and shipbuilding industries in the UK, foremen were key figures whose functions shifted from craft work to coordination tasks. These foremen had close ties with various industries and possessed more comprehensive professional knowledge and skills. In both industries, there emerged frontline supervisors and departments below the level of foremen. Therefore, in shipbuilding companies, there were factory managers, while foremen were responsible for specific crafts, directed the work of particular groups, and worked alongside group workers using tools. Under the apprenticeship system, foremen were both the main labor recruiters and the supervisors of apprentices, and held significant identity influence, such as being seen as spokespeople for the industry and agents of the employers in the shipbuilding industry. On many occasions, workers privately consulted with foremen on common trade issues without the knowledge of the employers.

Additionally, in shipyards, foremen can summon crews working in specific areas and resolve any disputes between workers and crews during contract work periods, while also influencing the wage interests of their subordinates. However, foremen would get involved in disputes, with the most significant form of involvement being a direct challenge to the discipline and authority of

the management department. Therefore, the management sought to diminish the power of the foremen and attempted to exclude them from the trade unions.

Therefore, during this period, British foremen had significant influence and control over workers, possessing both experience and knowledge as well as a network of connections. They were able to resolve relationship disputes and affect workers' wage interests. This power seemed similar to the power of foremen during the late Qing Dynasty and the Republic of China period, with a complex network of relationships and the authority to hire and fire workers, but British foremen had higher technical experience.

### **3.5 The Relationship between Foremen and Workers in Soviet Factories**

Siegelbaum's (1992) research reveals the relationship between foremen and workers in Soviet factories. Generally speaking, from the beginning of industrialization, Soviet foremen were subordinate to workshop supervisors and exercised comprehensive supervision over manual laborers. Although foremen enjoyed extensive discretionary power, they were also subject to constraints from managers and bureaucratic procedures. In the early 1930s, the number of foremen grew rapidly, and their origins included promotions through study, professional education, and experience. Most foremen had considerable production experience rather than formal professional education. Moreover, the position of foreman in the Soviet Union was often not a final appointment; foremen could still move up to positions such as workshop supervisors.

Up until the mid-20th century, Soviet foremen retained most of the power they had at the beginning of industrialization. There were three reasons for this: First, through the mobilization of collectivization, the pool of skilled and experienced workers became increasingly scarce. Experienced foremen could ensure the training of workers and smooth relations with new laborers, thereby raising the status of the foremen. This also meant that foremen remained the deciders of worker promotions, determining who was qualified to acquire skills, responsible for interpreting what constituted skill, and grading worker performance. Second, foremen could mediate the relationship between workers and managers, leaving a significant margin of maneuver for their actions. Foremen held considerable power, and although there were checks and balances, due to the high mobility of the workforce and the ever-present discontent among workers towards their bosses, foremen had the flexibility to manipulate power. Third, ideologically, foremen were more aligned with the interests of the regime. Foremen possessed several qualities that appealed to the political leadership: they came from the correct class, perpetuated certain masculine traits (brashness), which became a distinctive feature of Soviet (male) culture. Additionally, foremen played a role in setting norms and enforcing labor discipline, so the party consolidated the authority of the management in the workshops by promoting foremen (Siegelbaum, 1992).

Therefore, the characteristics of foremen in Soviet factories were similar to those in American factories, possessing a relatively broad discretion. At the same time, the Soviet Union placed great emphasis on foremen with technical experience. Coupled with a shortage of labor, Soviet foremen retained most of the power they had at the beginning of industrialization, and they also had opportunities for upward mobility. If we compare the worker relationships in the workshops of Chinese factories, we can see that, structurally, Soviet foremen, because they were subordinate to workshop supervisors, were more like team leaders, although the Soviet workshops were the most grassroots units, to some extent, foremen played a role similar to that of team leaders in Chinese factories. In terms of power, the power of Soviet foremen was clearly higher than that of Chinese team leaders, as they had the authority to promote workers, instruct workers, and set standards. Another similarity is that the party needed to cultivate relationships with foremen and team leaders to establish its authoritative image in the workshops.

## 4 The Logic of Government Governance of Enterprises and contractors: A

### Possible Explanation from Township and Village Enterprises

The area of the factories I investigated is Wuxi, and given its special location in southern Jiangsu, this paper attempted to use township and village enterprises to explain the current local government's governance logic towards Wuxi's factories. The sources of analysis here mainly include texts by Qingsong Lin, Jean Oi, and Tiejun Wen.

#### 4.1 Research Sources on Township and Village Enterprises

##### 4.1.1 Analysis by Qingsong Lin

Qingsong Lin's (1989) *China's Rural Industry: Structure, Development, and Reform* serves as a source of analysis. Based on surveys conducted between 1984 and 1986, the scale and number of township and village enterprises in Wuxi were substantial, accounting for 74% of the total number of such enterprises and an equally significant share in total output value. In terms of industrial enterprises at the rural and village levels, heavy industry in Wuxi constituted 75% of the total industrial output value. Moreover, machinery manufacturing was the largest industry, representing 49% of the total industrial output value. Regarding ownership, rural and village enterprises dominated in Wuxi, making up 36% of the total number of township and village enterprises in 1985 and nearly 96% of the total output value. The development model of Wuxi's township and village enterprises stems from its advanced manufacturing sector and a solid foundation in both agriculture and industry. High agricultural yields provided raw materials for many township and village enterprises in the food processing and textile industries. The advanced industrial development in the surrounding areas allowed township and village enterprises to undertake processing for large state-owned or collective manufacturers. Moreover, the region has accumulated a wealth of technical and managerial experience over the years, which can be leveraged to support the development of township and village industrial enterprises (Lin, 1989: 89).

Simultaneously, it depends on the strategy adopted by the Wuxi government, where the collective economy has a strong foundation. The county government exercises strong leadership over township and village enterprises and emphasizes the development of rural collective enterprises. The government's strategy is to suppress the development of township and village enterprises below the village level in order to maintain the supply of raw materials and energy, and to protect rural enterprises from competitive threats. Private enterprises, though recognized, are restrained in their development due to government restrictions on obtaining loans, investment factors, and a harsh environment along with other regulatory policies (Lin, 1989: 96). Wuxi represents an extreme case of local government intervention. The local authority emphasizes the development of rural collective enterprises and acts as the initial provider of funds, a risk-sharing entity, and a supervisor engaged in the appointment of managers and the allocation of workers. Due to favorable conditions in Wuxi County (proximity to Shanghai, possession of skilled labor, and an industrial tradition, etc.), its system operates well (Lin, 1989: 99).

The high level of involvement of Wuxi County's rural government in enterprises actually stems from the originally strong foundation of collective enterprises in Wuxi. By the 1970s, rural industry had become the main part of the collective economy, and the transfer of rural labor force had reached a relatively high level before the implementation of the contracting system. This regional characteristic allowed Wuxi's existing collective economy and the power structure of the rural government to be preserved amidst rural reforms centered around land contracting. At the same time, since Wuxi's township and village enterprises had entered a stage of rapid

development in the early 1980s, the planned economic system of the time made it necessary for these enterprises to have a high degree of dependence on the rural government. In this way, the characteristic of high involvement of Wuxi County's rural government in the development of township and village enterprises was formed. The high level of involvement of Wuxi County's rural government in enterprises determined the strong control behavior of community leaders towards enterprises, with the community government focusing on controlling the development of enterprises (Lin, 1989: 264-66).

#### **4.1.2 Jean Oi's Analysis**

Jean Oi's (1992) concept of "local state corporatism" provides a useful analytical framework: the significant increase in collective industrial output in rural China from 1978 to 1988 was largely the result of the corporatization of local governments. Financial reforms granted local governments the right to increase their revenues and created strong incentives for local officials to pursue local economic development. In this process, local governments have taken on many characteristics of commercial companies, with officials acting as the board of directors. This merger of the state and the economy is a feature of a new institutional development known as local state corporatism. Of course, Oi's examination primarily focuses on counties in Shandong and Tianjin.

Oi emphasizes that due to the reform of the financial system, local officials have shifted resources and efforts from agriculture to more profitable enterprises. A potential source of this shift is the promotion of the private sector's development and the generation of revenue through taxation. The most profitable and least politically problematic strategy for them is the development of township and village enterprises. Local governments can legally impose non-tax fees, and the income from township and village enterprises, aside from serving as a foundation for industrial expansion, has also been a source of funding for public services and subsidies for other less profitable economic sectors. Local governments with township and village enterprises are most likely to become strong and effective. For township and village enterprises, especially those at the village level, the total income is directly or indirectly controlled by local officials, who impose strict limits on the amounts available for worker welfare and bonuses, with the majority of profits required to be reinvested.

Oi argues that the behavior of local governments cannot be simply attributed to rent-seeking and suggests analyzing local governments as if they were corporations. Extracting profits from enterprises is one of the most important mechanisms for local governments to operate as companies. Local governments can act as corporations to decide how to use the profits from various businesses and how to redistribute the income. The most critical aspects include the selection of management personnel, control over the allocation of scarce production inputs, provision of services, and control over investment and credit decisions. For instance, those who lease collective factories rely on higher executive management—sometimes local officials who also serve as chairpersons of village enterprises—to make key decisions. When factory managers propose recommendations on personnel and other matters, the implementation of these plans requires official approval. Thus, local officials are seen to take on the role of entrepreneurs, selectively allocating scarce resources to shape local economic growth patterns.

Naturally, Walder (1995) has conducted a similar analysis: local officials can manage state-owned enterprises as if they were corporations, with the relationship between the government and enterprises being akin to that within an industrial company, where the government acts like the chairman of the board, and enterprise managers are similar to workshop leaders. Based on this, he proposed the theory of "local government as manufacturer", suggesting that the lower the level of government was, the higher the fiscal incentives would be.

### **4.1.3 Tiejun Wen's Analysis**

Tiejun Wen (2010) believes that what truly propelled the southern Jiangsu region into the process of original accumulation of rural industrialization was the local government corporatism engendered by the fiscal system of “revenue retention and full proportion allocation” first implemented by the central government in Jiangsu in 1977. After the fiscal system reform, local governments were not only incentivized by budgetary revenue but also by non-budgetary revenue. The personal incentive mechanisms for local government officials mainly included performance assessments, various benefits obtained from the development of township and village enterprises, and government luxury consumption. In the performance assessment of local governments, the primary indicator was the pursuit of maximizing economic output. Therefore, under a system where economic output serves as the sole criterion for official performance evaluation, local governments with corporatist characteristics often place great emphasis on indicators such as the local economic output and economic growth rate in national and provincial rankings. This is because these indicators are directly related to the officials’ honor, status, and promotion.

The strong involvement of the local government in southern Jiangsu in the development of the township economy not only supports the development of township and village enterprises at the policy level but also actively participates in the factor allocation and production and operational activities of the enterprises. Therefore, the local government in southern Jiangsu has made an extremely important contribution to the growth of township and village enterprises, typically by concentrating the limited social surplus to establish these enterprises and implement capable management practices. At the same time, the local government also helps township and village enterprises to mitigate political and market risks.

### **4.2 A Possible Explanation for Wuxi Government's Industrial Governance**

From the analyses of Qingsong Lin, Jean Oi, and Wen Tiejun, it can be seen that the success of township and village enterprises in southern Jiangsu is inseparable from the strong intervention and support of the local government. Local governments operate township and village enterprises like companies, pursuing higher economic revenue and local economic development. At the same time, local governments have increased control over these enterprises, with many decisions requiring government approval for implementation. They help township and village enterprises to mitigate risks, leading to the formation of local protectionism and shaping the enterprises’ dependence on local governments. Therefore, township and village enterprises in the southern Jiangsu region are an important path in shaping local industrial development. In the logic of the Wuxi government's governance of local industrial enterprises, some patterns are similar, such as the frequent intervention of local governments in the manufacturing industry’s labor force, maintaining good contacts with enterprises and contractors. Of course, the government's control over enterprises is not as strong as it was during the era of township enterprises. As long as it is based on stability, the government will not intervene too strongly in enterprises' labor policies, and there is also a strong tendency towards local protectionism. The economic performance of local enterprises is also related to the performance of the local government. Although township enterprises are completely different from the manufacturing enterprises studied, and the rise of southern Jiangsu's township enterprises is also related to the fiscal system reform, township enterprises have shaped the original accumulation of industrial capital in the southern Jiangsu region and are an important historical path for industrial development. We can also see that the logic of local government governance has many similarities with the governance of township enterprises at that time. To a certain extent, the logic of southern Jiangsu local governments in governing industry is also continuing, it's just that the control is not as strong. Based on the contribution of township enterprises to the industrial development of Wuxi (southern Jiangsu),

and the similarity in the logic of local government governance of industry, to a certain extent, the current logic of Wuxi's governance of the manufacturing industry can be traced back to the explanation of township enterprises.

Additionally, it can be observed that Wuxi's heavy industry, especially machinery manufacturing, has always accounted for a significant share and possesses a very strong industrial tradition. The strong industrial status of Wuxi continues to this day.

Of course, such an analysis is macroscopic and can only explain that the logic behind the current governance of industrial enterprises by Wuxi's local government can be traced back to the governance of township and village enterprises. However, the logic behind the local government's governance of contractors and the roots behind the governance logic for different industrial enterprises require further examination and analysis. One speculation is that the logic of Wuxi's local government in governing contractors (the labor market) — not intervening strongly and cooperating — is related to the logic of governing manufacturing enterprises. This is because these contractors are responsible for supplying and managing workers for the enterprises. Without these contractors, those manufacturing enterprises might not be able to operate effectively, which would result in losses for the manufacturing enterprises and consequently for Wuxi's local economy. Therefore, the local government does not overly interfere with the operations of the contractors:

*“The government cannot bear the losses of enterprises; our enterprises carry very heavy burdens. If workers run off to other places, that would be difficult to handle. Regarding social security contributions, we cannot possibly visit each unit one by one at the social security center or the tax department to check; time does not permit it, and we also have special inspections to conduct.”* (Interview with a government official, 20180725)

Moreover, it is also based on considerations of stability maintenance:

*“Why do factories need us? We can take on risks for them. If something happens to the workers, we have to go and deal with it; we have to compensate the workers for the majority of the money. We usually need to help workers with many things; wherever there is a conflict, we have to go and resolve it. If things get out of hand, it becomes difficult for the government to manage. We have on-site personnel in enterprises, taking on risks for them, helping enterprises to appease employees. We need to chat with employees regularly, understand the sources of their dissatisfaction and conflicts, and be vigilant to prevent them from gathering together for activities. The government fears group activities the most. In fact, we are also taking on risks for the government.”* (Interview with a foreman, 20181210)

It is precisely because of such attitudes from the government that there is a large number of contractors in Wuxi, with a complex network, which is also related to the complex and diverse industrial structure of the locality.

## **5 Conclusion and discussion**

Through field research, it was found that a “worker—low-level contractor—high-level contractor” organizational structure has formed in Wuxi's manufacturing factories, with close connections between workers and contractors. The local government has intervened in the labor processes of manufacturing factories, but based on stability maintenance and economic logic, it does not address the operations of non-compliant factories and workers. In response to this field phenomenon, the study attempts to draw from Walder's texts to compare the relationships between contractors and workers in the late Qing Dynasty and the Republic of China period, during China's planned economy, and in factories in the United States, Japan, the United Kingdom, and the Soviet Union, in order to uncover the uniqueness of the relationship between

contractors and workers in Wuxi. Furthermore, regarding the logic of local government governance of manufacturing enterprises and contractors, the study seeks to provide an explanation from the perspective of township and village enterprises.

The research findings indicate: First, the relationship between contractors and workers in Wuxi is characterized by low dependency, primarily because contractors do not have the authority to hire, fire, or promote salary increases. However, the social protection functions provided by contractors become a key element for workers to rely on, which is similar to the role of foremen during the late Qing Dynasty and the Republic of China period. At the same time, contractors have employed a paternalistic governance approach that combines kindness and severity, using the distribution of bonuses to counteract workers' informal bargaining, a strategy that can also be traced back to state-owned enterprises, and a similar paternalistic management strategy has been continued in Japanese factories. Second, the logic of Wuxi local government's governance of industrial enterprises and contractors can be traced back to the period of township and village enterprises, characterized by high levels of government intervention, local protectionism, and the pursuit of economic profit by the government. The distinct feature of "local government as manufacturer" in the southern Jiangsu region has continued to the present, prompting government involvement in industrial enterprises, but with less control than during the township and village enterprise period. Coupled with the inherent manufacturing industrial tradition in the Wuxi area, this has formed the governance logic of Wuxi local government.

Taking Walder's research on state-owned enterprises as a starting point and comparing the relationships between foremen and workers in different countries, it can be observed that: in terms of organizational structure, the relationship between team leaders, workshop leaders, and workers in Chinese state-owned enterprises is more similar to that between foremen and workers in Soviet factories; in terms of governance methods, the paternalistic strategy of combining kindness and severity in Chinese factories is more similar to Japanese management strategies; in terms of power, the power of Chinese team leaders and workshop leaders is similar to that of foremen in the United States, the Soviet Union, Japan, and the United Kingdom, all of whom possess considerable power; in terms of social influence, the influence of Chinese team leaders and workshop leaders is not as extensive as that of foremen during the late Qing Dynasty and the Republic of China period, nor as significant as that of foremen in British factories.

Table 5-1 Comprehensive Comparison of the Relationship between Foreman and Workers

	Title/Position	Role and Authority	Technical Ability	Worker Dependency
Late Qing Dynasty and Republic of China Period	Foreman, both inside and outside the factory (guilds, associations)	Controlling workers' speech and actions, hiring and firing, social protection	Strong in technology within the guild; weak in technology within the gang	Strong (once joined, it is difficult to leave the gang)
State-owned Enterprises under Planned System	Team leader, workshop leader, within the factory	Team leader's recommendation; workshop leader decides on welfare and salary distribution	Team leader has relatively strong technical skills; workshop leader has weak technical skills	Strong (low mobility due to economic welfare)
United States	Foreman, within	Hiring and firing,	Has certain	Strong



	the factory	oppression, and surveillance of workers	technical abilities	
Japan	Foreman/Master, both inside and outside the factory	Determining wage levels, coordinating activities	Possesses technical abilities	Strong
United Kingdom	Foreman, within the factory	Hiring and firing workers, with social influence	Strong technical abilities	Strong
Soviet Union	Foreman, within the workshop (with upward mobility)	Promoting and instructing workers	Has technical abilities	Strong
Wuxi Factories	Contractor (intermediary), both inside and outside the factory	Distributing wages, social and emotional protection	Lacks technical abilities	Strong

The chart above provides a comprehensive comparison of the relationship between foremen and workers. It is divided into the foreman's title/position, the role and authority, the technical ability, and worker dependency. During the late Qing Dynasty and the Republic of China period, foremen were present both inside and outside the factory, existing in both guilds and gangs, and they had the power to control workers' speech and actions, hire and fire, and provide social protection. As for the technical ability of foremen, those in guilds had strong skills, but those in gangs had weak skills, mainly because non-technical workers joined gangs. Under such circumstances, worker dependency was high, for example, once a worker joined a gang, it was difficult to break free from their control.

In state-owned enterprises under a planned system, team leaders and workshop leaders can be regarded as foremen. For instance, team leaders have the power to make recommendations, and workshop leaders have the authority to decide on the distribution of financial benefits, so workers have a strong dependency on these individuals. Generally speaking, team leaders, who work alongside workers, possess strong job skills, but workshop leaders do not work on the production line and many are not from a working background, hence their technical abilities are weaker.

In American factories, foremen are within the factory and have the power to hire and fire, oppress, and monitor workers. They also possess a certain level of technical ability, and under such conditions, workers have a high degree of dependency. In Japanese factories, foremen/masters exist both inside and outside the factory; they can determine workers' salary levels and coordinate activities, and they have technical ability, so workers' dependency is relatively strong. In British factories, foremen are within the factory, have the power to hire and fire workers, and have social influence. They possess strong technical ability hence workers' dependency is also high. In Soviet factories, foremen are within the workshop and can usually continue to move up the ranks. They can promote and instruct workers, and the Soviet Union placed a great emphasis on experience and technical skills, so these foremen usually had good experience and technical ability. Workers' dependency on foremen was high, but workers' mobility was also high.

In the Wuxi factories investigated by the author, contractors are positioned both inside and outside the factory. They have functions such as distributing wages and providing social

protection (but they do not have the power to determine wages). These contractors typically lack technical skills, which results in a low level of worker dependency on them, and the worker mobility is also quite high. Therefore, the contractors here are more similar to those of the late Qing Dynasty and the Republic of China period, providing functions on the work process and social protection level for workers. The technical ability of the contractors is also not high. However, during the late Qing Dynasty and the Republic of China period, foremen had greater power and a closer dependency with workers. Of course, this close connection was based on a combination of factors such as geographical origin, religion, and the power held by the foremen. The scope for further expansion of this study lies in: First, conducting a more detailed chronological analysis of the relationship between foremen/contractors and workers, especially examining the changes in this relationship since 1949 in our country. In this study, Walder's research serves as a core reference point, comparing the relationship between workers and team leaders, workshop leaders in the factory at that time, but it is yet to explore whether there were contractors outside the factory and what roles they played. So, what has been the relationship between foremen and workers after the 1980s, and what roles have foremen played? Second, the analysis here focuses on the general logic of local government governance over industrial enterprises. A more detailed observation and analysis are needed, which could zoom in on a single manufacturing factory to see how its managers govern and what kind of interactive game process they have with the local government. This would enable a better analysis of the government's governance logic.

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