CHAPTER 4

Where Do We Belong? Selfhood and Menial Work in Sichuan Society

Academic approaches to both Sichuan popular traditions and labor conditions in the years preceding the Communist takeover have fallen victim to overly politicized interpretations. Too little effort has been spent on trying to understand the voices emerging from Sichuan popular culture; instead the focus has fallen on the exploitation inscribed in the class and institutional framework of the “old society.” Such narratives, mostly framed within a discourse of “speaking bitterness” (suku 訴苦), a broad notion describing the conditions of the working classes (workers, peasants, soldiers) in pre-Liberation times, underlined the exploitative nature of the mercantile-capitalist economy. Institutionalized class relations within Chinese society were seen as the main source of material hardship and spiritual misery experienced by the working classes. Consequently popular culture was a voice (or a scream) of suffering and a call for revolutionary change allowing these groups to regain their self-respect.1

Taking such a vantage point, however, would be highly misleading and counterproductive in our case. Relying on a ready-made interpretation of lower-class perceptions of their conditions within the workplace, and within society in general, makes it difficult to see in full the complicated nature of the workers’ view of their social conditions. The main aim of this chapter is to challenge such assumptions by exploring boatmen’s songs as representations of workers’ self-perception within late-nineteenth- and early-

1 “Speaking bitterness” was a project of recording and publishing oral narratives that expressed, on the one hand, the injustice and cruelty of the so called “old society” (jiushehui 舊社會, pre-1949), and on the other hand the happiness resulting from the gains of the revolution that had uprooted the old social order. Ann Anagnost stated that “[t]he narrative structure of ‘speaking bitterness’ provides a new frame for the reworking of consciousness in which the speaker comes to recognize himself or herself as a victim of an immoral system rather than a bearer of bad fate or personal shortcoming. In other words, one had to recognize one’s conditions of existence in terms of class antagonism.” Ann Anagnost, National Past-times: Narrative, Representation, and Power in Modern China (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), 29. This form of narrative is particularly vivid in the authoritative editions like Wenshi ziliao 文史資料 (Sources for Culture and History). For Sichuan, see Sichuan wenshi ziliao jicui 文史資料 (Sources for Culture and History).
twentieth-century Sichuan society. In my view, boatmen had a very critical view of their life and work conditions and did not remain entirely passive with respect to their reality. Relying on a rich textual tradition they projected their own misery in an exaggerated manner as people deprived of all social elements of humanness. At the same time, with sarcastic and even satirical words, they ridiculed their condition and the whole social order, producing an image in which all efforts at improving oneself are doomed to fail. While bemoaning and ridiculing their social standing, boatmen also expressed pride in their work and their group values based on brotherhood. This maneuver of turning what was unacceptable into what was respectable was possible due to the rich oral tradition thriving in late imperial China, which was also accessible to Eastern Sichuan boatmen. For example, stories of bandit heroes and knight-errants, whose life situation and moral values had drifted far from orthodox norms, gave boatmen enough intellectual ammunition to see themselves in a more positive light.

We can understand boatmen’s work songs through an idea developed by James C. Scott. Researching the discourses of marginalized groups, Scott introduced the term “hidden transcript” to refer to a “discourse that takes place ‘off-stage,’ beyond the direct observation of powerholders. . . . It consists of those offstage speeches, gestures, and practices that confirm, contradict, or inflect what appears in the public transcript.” The “public transcript,” conversely, is “the open interaction between subordinates and those who dominate.”

What is interesting about the boatmen’s haozi is, first, that while their content resembles the content of Scott’s “hidden transcripts,” work songs were uttered publically, right in the face of possible class oppressors. Second, by employing imagery derived from a well-known corpus of narratives, haozi expressed concerns broader than those pertaining only to Sichuan boatmen. At the same time, these concerns were quite standardized, and thus partially ranged outside of the narrow experience of the trackers or rowers. Third, partly due to their public character, haozi were not calls for change in the social standing of the boatmen, but rather declarations of how lowly this status was. Bemoaning the miserableness of life, however, brought with it some degree of acceptance and accommodation. In the following pages, we will see how this was done and what it meant.

3 Ibid., 2.
4 They were heard and known by anyone who ever sat in a boat in Sichuan. See Chapter 2.