The classic statement on the emergence of the working class can be found in the work of K. Marx. While he held that an individual's position in the production process moulded life experiences, he also noted that social groups who merely occupied the same position in the economic structure of the society did not necessarily provide the objective basis for the formation of social class.

Thus he wrote of the mid-nineteenth century French peasantry:

The small-holding peasants form a vast mass, the members of which live in similar conditions, but their mode of production isolates them from one another, instead of bringing them into mutual intercourse... Insofar as millions of families live under economic conditions of existence that separate their mode of life, their interests and their culture from those of the other classes and put them in hostile opposition to the latter, they form a class. Insofar as there is merely a local interconnection among these small-holding peasants and the identity of interests begets no community, no national bond, and no political organization among them, they do not form a class.1

Unlike the peasants, however, the workers, according the Marx, enjoyed a favourable social setting for the development of an organized and socially-conscious class. They were concentrated in the large industrial towns, and the conditions of factory production brought them together in ways that made them aware of their common interests.

While Marx's thesis sounds reasonable enough, the work of social historians and ethnographers has thrown fresh light on the complexities of class formation. For instance, some sociologists have argued that for people living in poverty and under great tension — a case which was true for industrial workers during the early stages of industrialization — living and working in close contact would produce friction and conflict rather than cohesion and cooperation. Briefs summarized the argument as follows:
Workers' barracks have never been known to be havens of concord, nor have shops and factories. Even where men work side by side, perhaps on the same contract, there is no guarantee that they will do so in a friendly and cooperative spirit. Proletarian solidarity, we repeat, is not to be inferred from the mere fact that proletarians live and work in crowded quarters. On the contrary, such living tends to expose individual peculiarities and make them irritating in the extreme. On the other hand, some labour historians did not see wretchedness and class-feeling as being mutually exclusive. Kuczynski, for example, in his book on the rise of the working class, found demoralization and class-feeling existing side by side. He wrote:

...it was the new conditions of production, and the consequent general living standards which favoured the birth of — and we use the word advisedly — a class-feeling.

Class-feeling: not yet class-consciousness. Yet even this feeling was sufficient to permit the growth of ideas about organization for the workers to attain their goal; but also ideas about organization which concerned the nature of the new society to be created and how it was to work... that is one side: the self-awareness of coming to the working class. But the other side is what may be called the demoralization of the factory workers. To a certain extent everything conspired to demoralise the factory workers.

Apart from the economic material forces just considered, cultural factors have also been found to be important in cementing the solidarity of working class bonds. Indeed, in the extreme, some studies have shown that ancient religious practices flourished and even expanded in vigour and extent in eighteenth century Germany. Old drinking habits were carried over from the countryside and widely practised in the new urban industrial area to assuage the appalling conditions of working class life. In other cases village ties were tenaciously maintained to help cement bonds between first generation workers moving into industrial conurbations.

In this study on the formation of the industrial workforce in China, our major thesis is that kinship, territorial ties and personal relations were strongly maintained by workers after they moved from the village to the city and it is these traditional social bonds that first provided the foundation for indigenous labour organization in North China.

Origin of Workers

The question of the origin of Chinese workers has been fully studied by many Chinese historians and western scholars. Consistent findings seem to indicate that the Chinese workers were mostly of peasant origin. Thus Chesneaux, the noted advocate of this thesis, writes, “In the years immediately following the First World War, almost all Chinese industrial