

# **“Jasic Movement” Debate (China) - Pun Ngai’s response to criticism: “Don’t let them sacrifice in vain”**

Tuesday 10 March 2020, by [PUN Ngai](#), [Reignite](#) (Date first published: 16 May 2019).

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*The “Jasic Movement” describes the organizing attempts of labor activists at the company Jasic in Shenzhen. The labor dispute between Jasic workers and management led to dismissals and arrests of workers and activists in mid-2018.*

*After Maoist student groups organized support locally, many of them were arrested, too.*

*What followed was a wave of repression by China’s security forces against various groups of labor activists in the second half of 2018 and throughout 2019.*

*This interview with Pun Ngai on her role in the “Jasic Movement” was conducted on May 16, 2019, at Hong Kong University and published in Chinese by [reignitepress.com](#). Please, also read Chris Chan’s interview on the same subject. (0)*

**Reignite:** *Professor Pun Ngai, the reason for this interview is that there has been a wave of criticism against you and the “Jasic Movement” since the recent arrests of labor NGO activists. In fact, these criticisms started popping up last summer [2018], not long after the beginning of the movement.*

*These critical voices come from a wide political spectrum:*

- *Some have not supported the participants of the movement since it started, that is mainly people from outside leftist circles in mainland China [from Hong Kong and elsewhere]. They accuse you of being irresponsible and turning a blind eye toward the sacrifice made by others, because they think you have pushed and escalated the movement and dragged in many students.*
- *There are also Trotskyist critics, such as Qiu Huo (1) and Au Loong-yu (2). Their criticisms mainly regard the strategy of the struggle and the analysis of the current situation. They draw their conclusions from the historical critique of Trotskyists regarding Maoist voluntarism.*
- *Another critique from the [maoist] “Red China” online forum also points to the analysis of the current situation in China and the risky and wrong route the whole movement took.*

The criticisms from a wide range of backgrounds are directed at both the movement and you yourself.

What’s your response to the criticisms of your role in the movement?

We are also keen to have you respond to the criticism from leftist circles in mainland China against the “Jasic Movement.”

These are some of the issues this interview would like you to address, the accusations:

- (a) that you have taken advantage of the movement to bolster your academic career;
- (b) that you neglected your students' safety while directing them from a safe distance in Hong Kong;
- (c) that you and your students took actions without careful planning;
- and (d) that within a short period of time you exposed the movement and gave it high profile.

## **1. Taking advantage of the movement to bolster your own academic career?**

**Reignite:***First, let's talk about the doubts some people have regarding your connection to the "Jasic Movement." This criticism mainly comes from people with rather liberal positions and also from a smaller group of leftists. They criticize you for taking advantage of the labor and student movements to accumulate credit for your academic career.*

**Pun Ngai:**

There are many other criticisms to which I am more willing to respond. This particular one you mentioned is hurtful. If someone could take advantage of the "Jasic Movement," then why would I be the only one doing it? Why didn't anyone from the Chinese intellectual and activist circles come out to support the movement?

**Reignite:***Another implication of this criticism of taking advantage of the movement is that you have neither a deep connection with nor profound concerns for the movement. You are controlling the students to a large extent or simply trying to fan the flames. Would you, please, clarify your relationship to the "Jasic Movement"?*

**Pun Ngai:**

First, let's look at my personal history. I started working on labor issues twenty years ago. Some students were inspired after reading my books and listening to my lectures and started to take part in advocating labor rights.

- On one hand, we must acknowledge the subjectivity of those involved in the movement.
- On the other hand, **I supported their movement because I agreed with its direction.**

I am also in a politically risky position by providing my support when no one else would.

**Reignite:***You just mentioned, that if this is a movement that could be taken advantage of, then why no one else would support it. It might also be a political risk to support it. Would you explain what political risk you face?*

**Pun Ngai:**

The Extradition Law is currently a hot topic in Hong Kong. If the law passes, it will be obvious what political risks we are facing. With the Extradition Law, I would no longer be safe in Hong Kong.

**Reignite:***To many people, as a well-known scholar you enjoy many privileges. These privileges can protect you from political risks you might face in the university and in society.*

**Pun Ngai:**

I must admit that the university is a relatively safe space. It has more resources. It is a platform with suitable conditions to express one's opinions.

If we can make use of the platform and resources, then we should take a position in the university and do whatever we find meaningful.

I got to my position through my own as well as collective efforts. In turn, I serve the movement by making use of my position. I also wish that these types of positions would be more open and could be used by more people with aspirations. I consider myself a Chinese intellectual, and I believe my academic achievements should serve the society. If my only goal for spending so much time to write papers was to become a well-known scholar, then the work would be quite meaningless.

**Reignite:** *You mean that the capital you already accumulated at the university was not accumulated for its own sake but for striving for the things you want to do?*

*Or could we say, that you weren't really interested in winning over that capital but it was largely given to you by the university structures?*

*Then what does getting such a university position have to do with what you do in the movement?*

**Pun Ngai:**

A position at the university corresponds to what Gramsci called a "war of position." In the context of a "popular front" or "mass line", the possibilities and activities of every position must be maximized. But among all battlefronts, I think the university is in most cases the least important one. Because of the structure of universities, we are easily detached from the concrete work at the front line and prone to use theories as a guidance, instead of drawing experiences and promoting movements from the real-life obstacles faced by movements. Therefore, I am more in favor of the method of dialectical materialism – the idea of "from the masses, to the masses."

Of course, the ideal would be to serve the people directly from within the masses. Unfortunately, I have not been able to do that and am still stuck in the ivory tower. I have always felt uneasy because of this.

## 2. Imposing your own ideas on students?

**Reignite:** *In your articles and during your talk in New York City last month [April 2019], you have pointed out that the "Jasic Movement" is a Maoist movement. We have seen some criticisms accusing you of imposing your own position on the students by framing it like that.*

**Pun Ngai:**

At the beginning, the media could, in fact, not comprehend why the students in the "Jasic Movement" could have become Maoists. They had no understanding of that phenomenon, so they were unwilling to label them as Maoist in their reports. So, media and readers had no way to understand this movement.

What I did and said was to clarify and explain the students' situation in the media, and I did not want to allow the media to conceal that the students are Maoists. **From the start, the students held up banners of Mao Zedong Thought**, but the media kept coming and asking me questions such as why are they Maoist, how to understand their Maoist positions, whether those banners were just a tactic, etc.

At first, the media could only see the banners of Mao Zedong Thought as some kind of tactic that used the revolutionary history of the Communist Party as a protective shield. However, the students kept coming out to claim that they are Maoists and it became clear that it was not just a tactic. Therefore, I explained to the media that **their method was not merely a tactic but a firm belief.**

My understanding of their belief is that **they have embraced Marxist thought in their Marxist Societies by reading "Capital" and other material** during their time at the universities.

After getting inside the factories and spending time with workers **they became genuine Maoists.** That is because revolutionary and cultural resources in China are largely using Mao's language, and

Mao's language is the language of the masses, a language workers can quickly digest and absorb. That is part of China's revolutionary history, and you cannot ignore the history when looking at the choices of the students and the workers' movement. The media and the majority of scholars have not sorted out the phenomenon of the Maoist activity of the students, and I provided some background and analysis.

At the conference organized by Cornell University [in New York City in April 2019], I proposed "three big returns":

- **firstly, a return to communism** because this movement is the first one in recent years with a clear goal beyond the mere defense of rights [weiquan] but one with communist proposals and demands;
- **secondly, a return to the connection of workers and students** that goes back to the history of the May Fourth Movement a hundred years ago;
- and, thirdly, **a return to Mao Zedong's mass line**.

On the basis of the student standpoints and the analysis of the movement, I proposed a debate on the Jasic case. Of course, I recognized their standpoint and the direction the movement was taking. Although regarding tactics there were many open points that had to be considered, the general direction was firm and innovative.

Therefore, as a teacher, I had to continue to speak out, on one hand, in order to support the students, on the other hand, I did understand their direction but for the long-term requirements of the movement I had to keep up the left-wing discourse.

### **3. Neglecting your students' safety while directing them from a safe distance in Hong Kong**

**Reignite:** *Some critics have different opinions regarding the point about you taking advantage of the movement.*

*They think that you have vocally expressed your support for the movement because you are situated in Hong Kong and don't have to face severe risks. Meanwhile, your vocal support put the students in the mainland at risk of being arrested. Have you ever considered the possible risk you are creating by your vocal support for the students?*

**Pun Ngai:**

My opinion is that if I was in Hong Kong and didn't voice my support, then no one else would voice their support for the movement either. Also, as I have just mentioned, it's not true that there are no political risks in Hong Kong. Students and workers have been relying on Twitter and the support group's website to voice their opinions.

However, **mainland scholars, NGOs, and art circles in mainland dare not say anything**. There is hardly any open support.

Moreover, if I could only comment on Hong Kong affairs while in Hong Kong and only on mainland affairs while in the mainland, then that would not be an internationalist position but even a stance taken by separatists, i. e., people who favor the separation of Hong Kong and mainland.

Regarding the risks faced by the students, every article I have written has been a response to a particular event, such as arrests, and was not suddenly appearing when nothing happened and saying "They are doing a good job and need to keep going." That means, every time I spoke up was after someone was arrested. **From the beginning, the Jasic students called for more solidarity.**

They hoped that scholars and all kinds of non-state leftists from China and overseas would voice

their support. **They thought that if they show the banner of Mao Zedong many non-state leftists and academic leftists would back them, but in the end not many people came out.** There was some support from non-state leftists but many people withdrew not much later. The students continued to beg for support, so while facing risks they thought about them, got prepared, and actively demanded that other people support them. Unfortunately, **when the students faced arrests, all leftists changed their positions under new circumstances and were unwilling to support them or speak out for them. In the end, the students were isolated.** I cannot bear to see how the students sacrifice themselves in vain for their ideals and the movement and, therefore, threw caution to the wind.

To answer this question rather emotionally: At this time, when I think about the movement and our role in the movement, I often recall the Taiwanese singer and songwriter Lo Ta-yu's song "Orphan of Asia":

The orphan of Asia is crying in the wind,  
On his yellow face there is the red mud;  
In his black eyes there is a white terror,  
The western wind sings a sad song in the east.

The orphan of Asia is crying in the wind,  
Nobody wants to play a fair game with you;  
Everyone wants to grab your beloved toys,  
My dear child, why are you crying?

So many people are trying to solve the puzzles,  
And so many people are sighing at midnight;  
So many people are sweeping their tears in silence,  
Dearest mother, what truth is this?

#### **4. Joining the premature actions of the students, failing to prevent damage in time**

**Reignite:** *Many criticisms of the "Jasic Movement" are directed at the tactics and premature actions of the movement. They focus especially at the high-profile actions and support and the lack of damage prevention at the time when the movement was being harshly suppressed. For example, after some of the workers had been released last summer, the resistance seemed to get even louder and louder. This behavior then led to the arrest of even more participants. Some of that criticism is directed against you. You consistently and loudly voiced your support, and instead of helping the students to prevent damage and stopping them you joined in on the students naivety and premature actions.*

#### **Pun Ngai:**

The first attempts made by the leftist movement regarding Jasic were not at all successful but had a tragic end.

- Was it just because of the students' premature actions?

- Or was it because of the consumerist attitude everyone around had toward the movement?

Moreover, could it be that opportunistic behavior of those leftist celebrities from the mainland or the negative response of some of the leftist student organizations?

The non-state leftists' power was not that strong in mobilizing support for workers and students, so they were isolated and could not do anything else but wait for their arrest.

- **Of course, the students' inexperience and their overestimation of the non-state leftist support abilities also led to their failure.**
- **I am afraid that they do not bear the largest part of the responsibility, though, but rather those so-called leftists who buried their heads in the sand.**

I have never seen my position in this movement as that of a spiritual mentor or revolutionary mentor but as a loyal supporter and teacher who voices support for them. However, that doesn't mean that I do not have any criticism or self-reflection regarding the movement's current state.

To summarize all the criticisms, I think there are those regarding the goals and the tactics of the movement, and there is also the problem of democracy within the movement.

If you interpret the goal of the movement merely as organizing a trade union in a factory or as saving several arrested workers, then the goal does not have to be politicized, indeed, nor does **an entire student network have to be sacrificed.**

However, if the movement has already been stopped and defeated on each and every front-line, then – as a long-term goal of the movement – **we should on a strategic level transform the sacrifice of the workers and students into a left-wing discourse on worker-student cooperation. We should disseminate the information on this left-wing movement,** through international media, international supporters, and numerous discussions. In this regard, **“Jasic” is no doubt a success, since it is known as a left-wing movement both internationally and in the mainland. Nevertheless, the price has been hefty.**

***Reignite:**From the critics' point of view, even though you voiced your support after the arrests of the activists, your vocal support proposed a broader or more radical overall direction. Could you explain your considerations when formulating the discourse on the movement?*

**Pun Ngai:**

I did, indeed, raise the question of a broader overall direction of the movement when I voiced my support, but it was not directly connected to the continuous suppression of the movement and its participants.

What I did was increase the significance of the movement, raise the issues of the general left tendency of the movement and the direction of the worker-student cooperation. That general direction strengthened the legitimacy of the students' actions at the time.

You can say that the mainland students should have voiced their support and prepared for the price to pay for this movement. That was not because I was the leader or because I had any impact on giving any meaning to the movement. Of course, I did not ignore or violate their intentions when I voiced my support.

**Whether the students were acting prematurely depends on the assessment of the movement.**

**Today many people are pessimistic and think the movement suffered a disastrous loss and did not accomplish anything because of the large number of students' arrests, the suppression of the network of Marxist Societies, and the arrests of progressive labor NGO activists and others.**

I think that Jasic is an immature movement but one that is very significant. During the movement, workers and students received a full training but had to pay a price. The students had many chances to prevent damage but they didn't become opportunistic like some others.

Instead, they consciously considered everything they could do and politicized the movement in August and the following months. **They openly showed the banner of left-wing worker-student cooperation and ideologically prepared the next stage of the struggle.**



## **5. Bringing even greater damage by connecting the movement to May Forth [1919] and June Forth [1989]**

***Reignite:** Finally, a new criticism is that you not only continue to speak out but also connect the development of the movement to those of May Fourth [1919] and June Fourth [1989]. That is taking another step in politicizing Jasic which increases the risk even more. Those criticisms point out that you raised your voice after every arrest, but that only lead to even more arrests. In the current situation, what motivated you to link Jasic to May Fourth and June Fourth?*

**Pun Ngai:**

In the past twenty to thirty years, many people have participated in working to improve labor rights, unfortunately with little success.

Before 2015, labor NGOs were more or less able to intervene in individual cases and collective actions.

However, after the repression in 2015, little space was left for such intervention in individual cases and collective actions. Therefore, most of those NGOs turned to work on women or children issues. I am not saying that women or children issues are not important, but many worker issues have still not been resolved. That does not reflect the reality that there is no progress in the labor-capital confrontation and collective labor incidents as the confrontation continues in the factories.

Recently, the conflict between China and the USA has deepened which has made the situation of workers even more difficult, and the labor-capital confrontation has intensified. However, there is no appropriate solution to the problems.

On that background, it was necessary that, after 2015, some force looks for an alternative.

Therefore, the Jasic students came up with radical means. The students, with those from the Marxist Societies as the leading example, chose to **go into the factories and follow the mass line**. That is also the Maoist form of self-transformation.

Can that movement not be linked to May Fourth [1919]?

By speaking about the workers' movement using communist ideas, May Fourth was the origin and cultural birth of the history of the Communist Party itself. **Connecting Jasic and May Fourth [1919] does not delegitimize the movement but, instead, enhances its legitimacy.**

**Therefore, I think it is correct to use that form of politicization: the connection of Jasic students and May Forth.** A hundred years have passed, history has completed a full circle, and we have returned to the starting point.

Regarding the connection between Jasic and June Fourth, when I was interviewed by Hong Kong media on the differences between the Jasic students and June Fourth students, the most recent arrests of the five NGO workers hadn't happened yet.

At that point, I felt that I had to take a position on the recent 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of June Fourth [1989]. I wanted to stress that the Jasic students have been more progressive than the June Fourth [1989] students. They didn't refer to some idea of Western democracy to solve a problem of political democracy. Instead, they took a Marxist standpoint and dealt with problems of economic and cultural democracy. They transcended those ideas of Western democracy the June Fourth students had.

I hoped to be able to use June Fourth to inspire those who had supported or participated in June Forth to support the isolated [Jasic] students, and I also wanted to stress how progressive they are.

***Reignite:** Then, do you think the latest arrests that happened in early May [2019] were related to your mentioning of June Fourth [1989] ?*

**Pun Ngai:**

Even if the interview was done beforehand, by the time the article in which I brought together Jasic and June Fourth was published, four NGO workers had already been arrested. Those arrests were not made because I made that statement.

In my opinion, you can divide the arrests during the past half year and more into three waves:

- first Jasic workers and students were arrested;
- the second wave hit workers of labor NGOs with records of collective actions and activists supporting workers suffering from silicosis;
- and the recent third wave hit workers of peripheral moderate social work structures.

**Those social workers did not participate in any activities of the “Jasic Movement.”** They all initially took part with us in the Foxconn inquiry, the construction work inquiry, and, to a certain extent, were inspired when I started following migrant worker issues.

After their graduation, they started working for officially registered NGOs. There is also one early editor of "Po Tu" who published left-wing opinions online.

So that third wave of suppression was a punitive response and retaliation to my statements. I had not anticipated that kind of retaliation, and it was a big setback for us.

Behind each successful movement are countless failures of our predecessors. The main point is whether we can take a lesson, learn from the experiences, and continue to go forward.

**Reignite:** *I think in this dialog we have addressed all the kinds of criticisms against you we had listed. Thank you very much for agreeing to the interview. We also hope that the interviews can help generate further discussions on the “Jasic Movement.”*

### Notes :

## 0. Chris Chan

[http://www.europe-solidaire.org/ecrire/?exec=article&id\\_article=52344](http://www.europe-solidaire.org/ecrire/?exec=article&id_article=52344)

## 1. Oui Huo

<https://matters.news/@1399068281/19>

□-zdpuB3LnMgxXViMcSTRSQC8WaN7NUVdW1XEM7AEsk4RE35qFc

## 2. Au Loong-Yu

<http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article47289>

<http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article47799>

**P.S.**

<https://www.gongchao.org/2020/01/17/jasic-movement-pun-ngais-response-to-criticism/>

<https://www.reignitepress.com/post/>

\* A selection of articles concerning “the Jasic Movement” is available on ESSF :

- in English <http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article52366>
- in French <http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article52387>