

SCIENTIFIC MANAGEMENT IN REPUBLICAN CHINA: HOW THE FUTURE WAS MADE PLANNABLE

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INTRODUCING THE TOPIC

The planned dissertation aims to revisit the economic and labor history of Republican China from the perspective of the future. Thematically, it focuses on the heterogeneous future-making practices within the context of the scientific management movement from the 1910s to 1940s. It understands scientific management as a future discourse, which enables its practitioners to manage contingency and transform the indeterminate future into a plannable future.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- 1) How did different social groups imagine what kind of future?
- 2) How did future discourses and practices shape work and labor relations?
- 3) How, and to what extent, was the future made plannable through scientific management in factories and in broader economic and societal contexts?



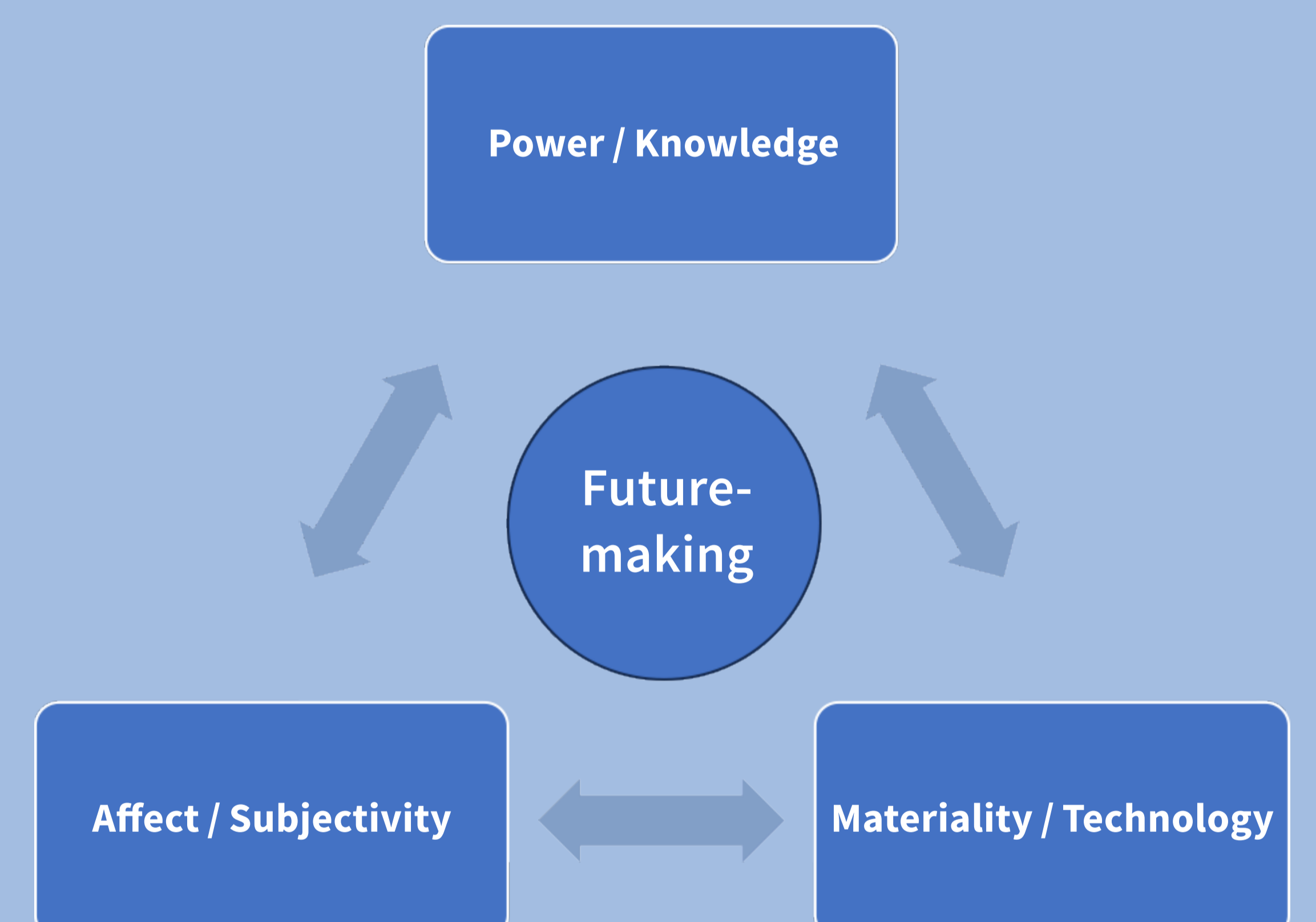
Yufeng 豫豐 cotton mill in Chongqing 1945.
Screenshot from a historical film retrievable from:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hUlf_x_TmI8

METHODOLOGY AND ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

In the rallying call of ‘history matters,’ conventional explanatory models tend to ignore the temporal dimension of the future. However, the future matters as much as the past.

From a temporal perspective, future-orientedness constitutes a cornerstone of understanding modernity (Koselleck) and the dynamics of capitalism (Beckert). In terms of social analysis, imaginaries of the future play a crucial role in making sense of human action and social transformation.

If historical changes in actu are always already subject to the condition of uncertainty, bringing the future back into sociohistorical analysis can enable analysts to do better justice to historical realities as well as historical contingency.

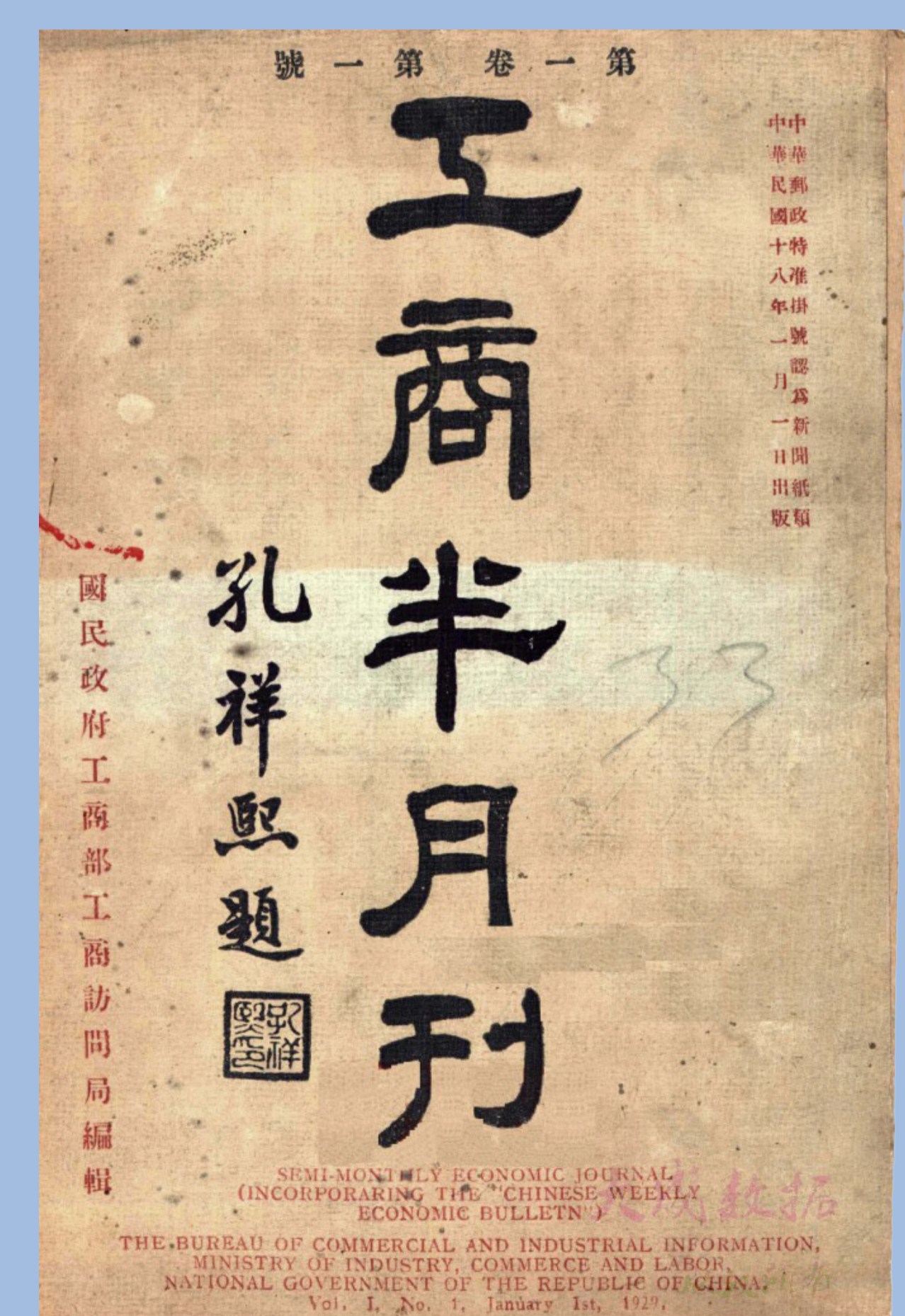


THESES AND HYPOTHESES

A central methodological premise is that the future, as a lived temporality, is always enacted in doing. The analytical attention is therefore shifted to the processes of how futures are made.

Another thesis is that future discourse and practice stand front and center in the economic and labor history of Republican China, whereas authors in this field have not paid enough attention to the role of the future.

In a time of ‘national crisis,’ scientific management not only provided its Chinese promoters with a pragmatic utopia of technological solutionism, but also equipped them with a set of future-making technologies including planning techniques, cost accounting, standardization, and economic incentivization.



The first issue of the Business and Industry
Semi-Monthly Journal, 1929

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