

Book Review

China at Work: A labour process perspective on the transformation of work and employment in China

Mingwei Liu and Chris Smith (eds.)

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China at Work contributes to a continuing exploration of the changing state of Chinese labour with an overall emphasis of labour process perspectives. It includes case studies and theorisations of work and employment in China and attempts to grasp the causations, processes and implications of the recent events in the country and beyond. Building on existing literature regarding familiar cases and issues such as Foxconn, Honda, auto workers' strikes, union elections and Wal-Mart, the book reviews the new developments, whilst omitting the issue of the development of labour in non-government organizations (NGOs).

The book's preface addresses the centrality of class for labour relations inquiry in general, and comparative labour studies in particular. Although many chapters of the book are not based on class analysis, some cases do engage with contemporary labour process literature and frameworks. In Chapter 1 the editors provide a helpful summary of current Labour Process research in China. They also critically review the application of Burawoy's framework in studying Chinese labour in recent years, and the 'subjugation thesis' that may offer new insight for readers and labour process scholars.

The book contains four parts, each dealing with a particular theme ranging from workplace practices, labour market institutions, worker resistance and Multi-National Corporations

(MNCs). The focus of the book is in Part I that centre upon the dynamic changes at China's workplaces with the first three chapters investigating labour regime changes in state-owned enterprises (SOEs). Referring to Burawoy's factory regime frameworks, these chapters explore employee participation in an iron and steel company, reviewing shop-floor labour politics in a shipbuilding firm, and the dualistic form of labour in a heavy machinery company. The modelling of 'control and consent', 'disorganised despotism' and 'dualism labour regime' demonstrates the diversity of SOE labour management and the challenge for labour working in the public sector. Reforming SOEs in the 1980s and 1990s led to widespread worker lay-off problems and generated research interest. The chapters in Part 1 exemplify the new, diversified labour management strategies adopted as a consequence of the marketisation reforms and decentralised decision making.

The next three chapters survey the impact of labour market flexibility on employment relations in the private sector. In Chapter 5, Zheng's study reveals Japanese subsidiaries' identify a core-peripheral employment policy that differs from the low labour cost model commonly seen in previous literature. In Chapter 6, Fan investigates the 'informal sector' of the garment industry, workers' gendered structural and association power, though the chapter should explain how self-organised workers are able to lodge collective resistance against employers. Describing the precariousness of agency workers in Chapter 7, Liu and Ouyang make a well-timed contribution to the study of call centres. The final chapter in Part I by Kim introduces the use of a peculiar dormitory system in a Korean investors' garment factory, featuring hierarchical dwelling conditions, intermediary management agency and high levels of disciplinary power used to control labour subjectivity and highlighting the brutality of exploitation in the 21st century.

Part II starts with Zhang's examination of labour substitution and upgrading strategies used by garment employers to respond to labour shortage, though the impact of these methods on recruitment and retention needs to be further explored. In Chapter 10, Wang and Liu analyse two auto firms' collective consultation systems and expose the impact of organisational politics on the process and outcome of substantive workplace collective consultation. Unlike the Japanese subsidiary case-study in Chapter 5, this study identified how the worker's 'fight to control' between Chinese and Japanese partners assisted worker gains, despite the absence of employee mobilisation and union representation. Drawing on two cases of recent workplace union elections in Chapter 11, Chan and Hui evaluate the theoretical challenges for contemporary labour process commentators with regard to issues of class struggle and hegemony and despotic regimes.

Part III provides two slightly different perspectives, examining labour activists, with Li and Liu assessing a rare, unique case of a union-led shop-floor labour movement in Chapter 12 and in Chapter 13 Deng provides an optimistic depiction of strike-driven collective bargaining that assists workers to build up a progressive awareness and workplace militancy.

Part IV contains two interesting pieces examining overseas Chinese firms. Andrijasevic and Sacchetto introduce labour management practices in Foxconn's European assembly lines, and highlight the essentiality of local workforce character, union politics and state intervention in shaping the company's labour-capital relations. In Chapter 15, Smith and Zheng review literature in labour management in overseas Chinese firms and advocate a new research agenda in this new field of study. They conceptualise the diversified investment and its influence on labour relocation in the context of China's expansion in the global market.

Given the challenges of conducting empirical study in labour-related issues in China and the party-state's recent hard stance over labour NGOs, this book is a valuable research update. As most chapters demonstrate a developing consensus that the labour process theory is of great importance for conceptualising Chinese labour process perspectives. The book could have looked beyond the Chinese context but the authors do succeed in analysing models by established labour process commentators, whose frameworks and ideas are revisited, compared or contested. This book demonstrates the need for more differentiated theoretical and methodological approaches used to document and review the transformation of work and employment in the world's largest labour market.