

Book review

The Emerging Industrial Relations of China

William Brown and Chang Kai (eds.)

Cambridge University Press, 2018, 250 pp., £22.99

Scholarly discussions of contemporary Chinese industrial relations (IR) have become relatively less substantive. This is in line with what has been happening recently in China's workplaces – fewer high profile work stoppages and the gradual improvement of migrant workers' terms and conditions in urban factories. With authorities tightening the control of autonomous worker resistance and non-government labour organizations, there is less excitement about IR in the world's largest emerging economy. Yet serious studies, such as *The Emerging Industrial Relations of China*, are a constant reminder that, first, investigations of China are still at an early stage and, second, more researchers are emerging to survey the country's changing economy and its impact on work and employment.

This edited collection is a credible attempt to bring together the major IR issues in China: efforts at conceptualization and practical implications, interactions of the actors in IR, and comparative understanding of these matters. William Brown and Chang Kai are leading authorities in IR research in the UK and China, respectively, and their collaboration takes the exploration of China's IR stimulatingly forward. As expected, the book embodies a variety of explanations and discussions nurturing an insightful understanding of the trajectory of IR policies and practices in China.

The heart of the book is analyzing the emergence of collective IR in China. A pluralist

approach fosters a sensible and pragmatic explanation of the uniqueness of Chinese IR that has a progressive, collective orientation. This is the central element of Brown's opening analysis which identifies the key features of China's IR system. While his starting points, in Chapter 1, are primarily based on traditional and contemporary western literature, the emphasis is quite focused on the regulation and resolution of workplace conflict, a crucial aspect of any IR system. For Brown, different countries have developed various forms of collective bargaining and collective consultation, which have undergone "repeated change". As Chapter 2 summarizes, there is a transition of Chinese IR from an individual to a collective model, adjusted by market-directed reforms. Recognizing the tension between unions and workers, here the discussion links the collectivization tendency with recent labour unrest and policy refinement, as well as the prospect of developing workplace procedures.

Chang Kai and Chang Cheng discuss, separately, the historical, contemporary, and diverse development of Chinese trade unionism, with an overview of the co-existence of top-down and bottom-up models of union organizing. Responding to multiple tensions from workers' rising demands, a vibrant market economy, and government pressure, Chinese unions need to make strategic moves that can improve their relations with members and other IR actors. Yet achieving "harmonious labour relations" and union legitimacy is a challenging task, although, as the latter author claims, it is less difficult for unions to be pragmatically flexible.

Wen Xiaoyi examines Chinese employers' tactics towards IR, with helpful insight into the development of employers' associations – emerging organizations expressing their resistance against institutionalized collective bargaining. Tu Wei reiterates the essence of collective IR for shaping the changing roles of both central and local government, while theoretical evaluation is given to assess the prospect of labour policy changes in the near future. This is

followed by an optimistic explanation of the “collective consultation” system, the Chinese way of collective negotiation, by Lee Xiaotian. Enterprise-level and sectoral bargaining experiences, together with government-orchestrated models, seem to suggest further developments in wage consultation. Such an approach is deployed by Zhan Jing, who sees positive signs for greater employee participation at the workplace.

The next two chapters are more theoretical, covering strikes and post-socialist IR models. Reviewing the institutional constraints to, and the diverging arguments about, conflict and its resolution in China, Meng Quan raises the question of how to evaluate the reconstruction of IR and the changing power relationship. Tim Pringle’s international comparison offers a distinctive perspective to rethink the implications of Chinese unions in the context of the country’s transition to a market economy.

Central to the book’s thesis are the authors’ efforts to dismiss the suitability of solely using the western academic IR tradition to portray China. The book’s emphasis on the government’s increased policy attention to minimum labour standards, as opposed to “the global trend of allowing businesses to adopt a more autocratic individualistic approach to labour”, helps it to stand out from the crowd. The book would have benefited from additional discussion of dispute resolution and the impact of recent government efforts to stabilize the IR environment. New forms of employment, particularly platform work and digital labour, could have also been featured here. But these comments should not stop students of IR from treating the book an essential read and a crucial reference. The uniqueness of Chinese IR, as the concluding chapter puts it, is the country’s unmatched changes – the enormous pace of marketization, the rapid transformation of the labour force, and the dynamics of employer–employee interaction intertwined with transitional state capitalism. The book should be

applauded for its theoretical and practical significance because to make sense of such a vast and diverse country is never easy, and to postulate an analytical framework is an even more challenging task.